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## Book review: Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews, by Lynn Davidman.

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#### BOOK REVIEW

### *Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews,* by Lynn Davidman.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 253 pp.

\$27.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780199380503.

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Lynn Davidman begins *Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews* with a powerful story from her own life. She, like the respondents whose interviews provide the data for the book, chose to leave the Hasidic Jewish community in which she was raised. Davidman uses her own story and the stories of others to shine a light on an understudied religious community. In doing so, she richly illustrates a complex definition of what religion is: a combination of shared rituals and embodied practices, in addition to prescribed beliefs. This is why leaving religion involves more than losing faith. As Davidman argues, leaving ultra-Orthodox Judaism requires significant bodily transformations that affect the mundane and day-to-day (like getting dressed or preparing a meal) as much as life's monumental occasions (like a wedding or birth of a child).

The book is organized chronologically, taking the reader on a journey that reflects patterns in the life course of the ex-Hasidic Jews in her study. Throughout, Davidman uses imagery of Peter Berger's "sacred canopy" (that which secures a religious community and separates it from outsiders) to describe a series of gradual but ever-growing rips that ultimately culminate in believers who leave Orthodoxy. These rips begin early, when children are first exposed to secular friends and media or when a child realizes the imperfection of her family who doesn't uphold all religious laws (*Halacha*). Davidman describes the significance her respondents ascribe to their first transgression, when they purposefully and often excitedly decide to break a rule—for example, Shlomo, who tried to hide his side curls (*peyos*, prescribed for boys and men in his Hasidic community) to fit in with his peers.

Early experiences like Shlomo's often culminate in what Davidman names "passing," or the ability to effectively navigate within both ultra-Orthodox communities and the outside secular world. Eventually these starkly different performances contributed to anxiety and doubt for these respondents and led to "exit strategies," wherein her respondents chose to leave their Hasidic communities. Yet, as Davidman points out in the conclusion of her book, Hasidic beliefs and practices continue to influence the lives of both women and men long after they leave.

In a religious tradition rooted in "essentialist, permanent differences in women's and men's physical, intellectual, and moral qualities" (p. 169), it is no surprise that gender divides the experiences of Davidman's informants as they lived within and exited their Hasidic communities. Women and men followed distinct and separate paths to "stepping out" of religion. Whereas women drew from real-life experiences of gender inequality (such as remembering a husband's pressure to have sex), men tended to cognitively question their once taken-for-granted religious practices and beliefs. One surprising finding is that although men had more power within their religious communities, men were also more confined to these communities, which made it harder to find time to spend outside them. Religious women had more freedom because less was expected of them.

Davidman is committed to narrative analysis as a type of qualitative methodology, which she distinguishes from other interview analyses: "interview narratives that emerged from informants' conversations reflect their engagement with a particular person (i.e., me) and in a distinct place and time" (p. 207). As such, she frequently refers to her interview respondents as "conversation partners" and uses "we" and phrases like "my respondents and me" to describe the shared experiences between the people she interviewed and herself. Though some may feel that Davidman's voice throughout the book lessens its scholarly quality, I found it a commendable example of reflexive qualitative analysis.

Though Davidman's rich vignettes from her "conversation partners" are powerful, I found it troubling how little the reader learns about her overall sample. The book presents conflicting numbers of her total interview respondents (38 on p. 20; 40 on p. 7 and p. 207) and their age range (20 to 50 on p. 7; 25 to 45 on p. 20). Throughout the book, Davidman notes how gender divides the experiences of the ultra-Orthodox, but the book lacks a gender breakdown of her sample. Further, I was left wondering if any other identity markers may have shaped the experiences of her respondents. How might location (urban versus rural), age, or social class influence their stories? Though Davidman suggests that the differing context is the reason she excludes from this book 40 interviews with ex-Hasidic Jews living in Israel, she does not offer a clear description of how context differs within her American sample.

If the book's rich descriptions are its strength, a lack of sociological theory is a weakness. Davidman engages with Goffman's concepts of performativity and front/back stage as well as concepts coined by Durkheim related to ritual and "collective effervescence" to interpret the narratives presented in her book but does little to extrapolate this analysis to broader implications for sociology. For scholars who do not share an interest in Orthodox Jewish communities, they would have to make connections themselves to common themes among other kinds of "defectors." One attempt at these connections was Davidman's persistent analogy to LGBTQ coming-out stories, but I found this to be superficial and distracting given the clinical and outdated description she presents. One area where I wish she would have developed a theoretical discussion is around her use of the term "passing," or how her respondents deftly navigated multiple and varying social settings.

Davidman's book presents a moving portrait of what it is like to leave Hasidic Judaism. It is a book that is felt and will surely find a place among readers in Jewish studies and those interested in conservative or Orthodox religious communities.