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## Religion and Secularism

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### 10. Secular Judaism

#### Construction, Contraction, or Contradiction

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#### Abstract

By substantive percentages, Jews by religion are the most secular of American religious groups. This is amply demonstrated through the presentation and analysis of relevant poll data. At the same time, significant questions remain unaddressed: How do we determine the number and identity of American Jews? What are American Jews describing when they self-identify as secular and/or designate others as religious? Is it possible to be both a secularist/humanist and a Jew by religion? If so, are the universal and particularistic elements compatible that characterize each? How much of Jewish ritual and practice do secular Jews practice? How do they reconcile their understanding of such activities with a humanistic vision? These are questions that this paper addresses, making use of data provided both by adherents of secular Judaism and those who study them.

Keywords: Jews, Judaism, American Jews and Judaism, secular Jews and Judaism, humanist Jews and Judaism

## Introduction

Few groups have been more polled, surveyed, or analyzed than American Jews. Many of these efforts have been internally organized by Jewish non-profits; Jews are also included among others under a religious and/or ethnic and/or cultural category. No matter who sponsors such surveys or what statistics they generate, Jews are preternaturally consumed with the results, with some decrying the loss of traditional values and others valuing gains in relevance and diversity.

Even in such a crowded field, some polls or surveys stand out. One of these, the American Jewish Identity Survey of 2001, is the source for much of the data I discuss in this paper (for full description of survey methods, etc., see Mayer et al.).

More than any other survey before or since, this poll provides the most substantial figures for the connections between secularism and religion among American Jews. If the expression “secular Jews” sounds more familiar than, say, “secular Methodists,” “secular Mormons,” or “secular Muslims,” this survey gathers together the data to support what might otherwise be seen as a hunch, intuition, or stereotype. There can be no doubt about it: Jews are by far the most secular religious grouping in the United States.

As we will see, the interpretation of these figures is far more contentious than their tabulation. Who is a Jew? What does it mean to be secular? Is a high percentage of secular individuals good or bad for Jews and Judaism? I think it is safe to say that no other group has wrestled so intensely, at communal and academic levels, with these issues than American Jews. Within the context of this paper, I will eschew evaluation in favor of reasoned and reasonable description.

## Secular Jews by Religion

One of the first sections of the Survey is titled “Outlook of Jews by Religion and Adherents of Selected Other Religious Groups.” The outlook scale provides four categories: Secular, Somewhat Secular, Somewhat Religious, Religious. The survey provides no definition or description for any of these terms. It is safe, I think, to assume that individuals surveyed determined on their own what these terms meant and which category best described them.

There are thirteen “selected other religious groups,” representing a range of Christian and non-Christian religions. Numerically, the smallest is Seventh Day Adventists with 724,000; the largest is (Roman) Catholic at just under 51,000,000 adherents. The third largest grouping on the list, after Catholics and Baptists, is actually “no religion (non-Jews),” coming in at 28,361,000.

The reason for the parenthetical (non-Jews) in this large grouping is clear when we see that American Jews are subdivided into “Jews by Religion,” numbering just under 3,000,000, and “Jews of no Religion,” the number of whom stands at a bit over 1,000,000. An explanatory note about this last category states: “Jews of No Religion includes people who are Jewish by virtue of parentage or upbringing, but when asked about their religion, they answer ‘none.’” We might assume that all “Jews of No Religion,” along with “no religion (non-Jews),” would self-identify as secular. However, this does not turn out to be the case.

In terms of self-identification as “secular” or “somewhat secular,” Jews by religion was the only denominational group to have double digits in both categories: 27 and 17 respectively, for a total of 44% Secular (or somewhat Secular Jews). Second among American denominational groups are Buddhists (7 + 15 = 22%). Among other groups, Episcopalians were the most secular Protestants (7 + 8 = 15%); Methodists were characteristic of low Protestants (1 + 5 = 6%); Catholics were 6 “secular” and 7 “somewhat secular,” totaling 13%; Muslims were 9 for both “secular” and “somewhat secular,” totaling 18%. In all cases, these numbers were specifically for American adherents of these religious groupings.

### Multiple Meanings of Secular

But what does “secular” mean, especially in connection with American Jews? There are three likely reasons why American Jews by religion would self-identify as secular (Berlinerblau 2012b). First are nonbelievers and skeptics; in other words, atheists and agnostics who identify themselves with Judaism or as Jewish. (Since these individuals are included within the category of “American Jews by Religion,” this connection with Jews and/or Judaism is crucial here.) They can certainly find a spiritual, I mean secular, godfather in the seventeenth-century thinker Baruch Spinoza. There are organizations with which these individuals can affiliate, such as the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO), seminaries such as the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, and major funders like the Posen Foundation. Or they could identify with the three major branches of non-traditional Judaism (moving right to left): Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. Or, like the majority of American Jews overall, they might not belong to any synagogue or parallel institution.

Other Jews might identify as secular to distinguish themselves from Orthodox Jews. In this case, secular Judaism equals non-Orthodox Judaism. This understanding of “secular” is quite likely, given the general equation in “Jew talk” between religious and Orthodox. I am against this equation, preferring the term “(ritually or rabbinically) traditional” to “religious.” The widespread formulation equates “religion” and “ritual,” which I think is wrong-headed. Right- or wrong-headed, when most Jews see or hear the term “religious,” they think “Orthodox” – and if they are not, they might select an alternative designation: here it is “secular.”

The third use of secular among American Jews comes close to the understanding espoused by Protestant thinkers like Roger Williams, political philosophers like John Locke, and founders of the United States like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Here the secular Jewish American is “a person who displays a thoroughgoing skepticism about any and all entanglements between Church and State” (Berlinerblau 2012b). This is certainly in line with the vast majority of non-traditional American Jews from the time of Franklin Roosevelt on. Jewish organizations that have taken the lead as committed separatists include the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and the especially active American Jewish Congress (which unfortunately was badly Madoff-ed).

American Jews in general are decreasingly at the forefront of this type of “secular” activity, given the increased number of Orthodox Jews and their increasingly high-profile involvement as proponents of conservative politics at all levels. The decrease is also due to the dying off of several generations of American schoolteachers, lawyers, community leaders, and politicians who were uniquely vibrant, or just plain doggedly loud, in their support of separation of

Church and State. As a not-unrelated observation, the same sort of “secular-religious” controversies are playing out in Israel with the unique intensity that everything and everyone takes on in that country.

If I had been asked to participate in the survey, with these four options (and no others), I would have checked off the “somewhat religious” option, which – at 42% – was the most popular response (44% of American Jews who are secular combines “secular” and “somewhat secular”). I do not consider myself an atheist or skeptic, and I am not Orthodox or traditional in my religious observance. Therefore, if for no other reason, I am “somewhat religious” by default. But I also think it is an appropriate and accurate appraisal for me, especially because my strong support for the separation of Church and State does not lead me to self-identify as “secular.”

### Characteristics of Secular Jews

Is there any way to know what motivates the almost 3,000,000 American “Jews by Religion” in terms of their self-identification? Or the additional 1,000,000 American “Jews of No Religion,” for whom the percentage of “secular” was 52% and “somewhat secular” was 12%, yielding a total of 64%, a number that sometimes appears in discussions of American Jews as a whole.

Let us return to the 3,000,000 “Jews by Religion,” of whom I am one. Without conducting extensive and intensive interviews with each of them, we can still reach a few more or less definitive conclusions about the make-up of groups along the continuum from “secular” to “religious.” Let us first explore a central matter of theology: Belief that “God exists”: 94% of American Jews who self-identify as “religious” affirm this is true; “somewhat religious” comes in just slightly below this figure at 90%; then 55% for both “somewhat secular” and “secular” Jews. For me, the most salient observation is that the majority of “secular” Jews believe in the existence of God. Therefore, any equation, at least for American Jews, of “secular” and “atheist” is minimally facile, maximally misleading (Jacobs). So, for example, I point to the problematic nature of this statement: “Secular Judaism describes the modern advent of the non-religious Jew, who engages in cultural practices and family customs but is not religious, and probably not even theistic” (Crabtree).

In terms of overall observance, no Jewish group approaches Protestant or Catholic percentages in terms of affiliation with a synagogue or church, respectively. Moving again from “religious” through to “secular,” the percentages for American Jews predictably diminish from 69% to 59% to 39% to 21%. Both ends of this continuum may hold surprises for the researcher: about 3 in 10 “religious” Jews do not affiliate with a synagogue; about 2 in 10 “secular” Jews do. Since, as we’ll see momentarily, there are synagogues or parallel institutions structured for “secular” or “humanistic” Jews, the 20% figure here is subject to several possible interpretations – not surprising for a general area (“secular Jews or Judaism”) that seems ambiguous at almost every turn.

### Organizational Structure of American Humanistic Judaism

It is not easy, perhaps not even possible, to estimate the total number of American Jews who self-identify as secular or humanistic. The Society for Humanistic Judaism, which was founded by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine in 1973, lists thirty communities, most (but not all) of

which contain a synagogue, throughout North America. In their names, many of the synagogues combine Hebrew with the designation, in English, “Humanistic Judaism.” So, for example, there is Adat Chaverim, Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Encino, California; Beth Ami, Colorado Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Boulder; and Or Emet, Minnesota Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Minneapolis. In the United States, such communities are found in Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington. From a perusal of this listing, it includes almost all major centers of American Jews (with the exception of Philadelphia and Atlanta, among a few others), as well as some liberal states that are not home to large numbers of Jews. In addition, the Society has an ecclesiastical assembly of rabbis et al., and another association of lay leaders.

From these data, we might think, we could extrapolate some approximate number of American secular or Humanistic Jews. So, there are more or less thirty synagogues, with an average of, say, 200 members each, giving us a total of 6,000. Alas, it does not work that way. As we just saw, a large percent of secular Jews do not affiliate. Moreover, the term “members,” as in synagogue “members,” generally refers to family units, not individuals. In addition, some percentage of secular Jews who do affiliate are members of “mainstream” congregations. Beyond the numbers, my sense is that secular Judaism is not a major concern of most Jews as individuals, although I do not pretend to have looked closely at its links with local Jewish federations, etc.

### **Secular Judaism as Humanistic**

There are other ways to look at secularism. Among these is the virtual equation of secularism with humanism (Rosenfeld). In this sense, the secularist or humanist seeks to answer the same sorts of ultimate questions that theists do: for example, what constitutes a life well lived. For the secularist or humanist, of course, theistic or supernatural answers are not valid. Which is very different from saying that secularists or humanists have no answers to these sorts of ultimate questions.

Along these lines, the secularist/humanist often frames both questions and answers in universal, rather than particularistic terms. And yet “Jewish secularism” privileges the history, contemporary experiences, and rituals/rites of one group. In other words, one may identify as Jewish (which secular or humanist Jews do) or one may identify as a humanist (which secular or humanist Jews do) (Berlinerblau 2012a). Thus the question arises: Is secular Judaism a coherent system? Does this make sense to the outside observer and/or the inside practitioner? In accordance with some views, it does not – and does not need to. All systems of belief and practice encompass contradictory elements that adherents learn to live with.

But this is not necessarily the case, especially when Judaism, or the Jewish experience, can be viewed as a model through which humans have flourished in the face of horrific obstacles. It naturally entails particularistic elements, but rather than being ends unto themselves, they point to lessons from which all humanity can learn. While it would be possible for Judaism to serve something of this purpose if it were relegated to museum exhibits or anthropological tomes, it is far more powerful as a living reality.

### Celebrating and Commemorating as a Secular Jew

What is it then that secular/humanistic Jews do that makes them both secular/humanistic and Jewish (Goldstein)? Most decidedly, they do not abandon the rich annual cycle of holidays or the celebration of milestones within the life of individuals. As the Society for Humanistic Judaism puts it: “Jewish holidays are celebrations and expressions of Jewish identity. They provide a link with Jewish history and bind the Jewish people to each other. Holidays were created by human beings . . . Holidays consist of layers of development. At first, holidays begin as a response to nature and the environment. Religious figures added a divine layer as a way to elevate it to the realm of the supernatural. Yet, the human themes were not obliterated. Today, it is often those themes to which Humanistic Jews return to observe the holiday.”

In a sense, then, the secular celebration of these holidays strips away later, theological accretions and allows individuals access to these observances in their earlier, more authentic – and more human – manifestations. Thus, the central prayer for secular/humanistic Jews is not the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one”), but instead this decidedly non-theistic affirmation: “Where is my light? My light is within me. Where is my hope? My hope is within me. Where is my strength? My strength is within me, and in you” (Society for Humanistic Judaism).

As an example of an annual holiday, let us look at Sukkot. From the biblical perspective, Sukkot commemorates God’s presence with the Israelites during the forty years of wandering after the Exodus. The *sukkah* is a temporary booth, similar to the portable structures the Israelites lived in while in the wilderness. It is widely acknowledged that the celebration of this “historical” event was intentionally timed to coincide with the fall harvest. The decoration of *sukkot* with fruits and vegetables recalls this connection.

For the secular Jew, it is this connection with agriculture, a human development, that lies at the heart of the festival. As in other Jewish communities, secular Jews come together as individuals or families to build the *sukkah*. They come together for meals in the *sukkah*. At the end of the holiday, they take it down. The bounty and beauty of nature, as well as the transitoriness of human life, are all acknowledged by the secularist without appeal to a deity or to a specific historical event. It is not the goal of secular Jews to boast of such a holiday as superior to anyone else’s, but there is the active affirmation that maintaining these experiences is valuable in one way for those who identify as Jewish and in other ways for those who do not. As an aside, I observe that here humanistic Jews missed a golden opportunity because the biblical book read on this holiday is Qohelet (Ecclesiastes or the Preacher), which can be fairly evaluated as the skeptic’s favorite book of the Bible (Golin).

In terms of life cycle events, humanistic Jews see themselves as actively engaging in Judaism throughout their lives by celebrating the cycle of life within a Jewish context (Society for Humanistic Judaism). Humanistic rabbis and other religious leaders participate in birth celebrations for females and males (which may or may not feature circumcision), coming of age ceremonies for girls (*bat mitzvah*) as well as for boys (*bar mitzvah*), weddings and commitment ceremonies, intermarriage and co-officiated intermarriage ceremonies, same-sex marriage ceremonies, divorce, and funeral and memorial services and customs, including interment of cremated remains.

While in a general sense, these activities parallel those in what I will call “mainstream” Judaism, there is at least one that is distinctive among secular/humanistic Jews: adoption to humanistic Judaism or what others might call conversion. Humanistic Jews use the term “adopted” rather than “converted” because they believe that the person wishing to be Jewish is adopting both Judaism and their community and that the community adopts those desiring to be part of the Jewish people.

There does not seem to be any period of study or specific rituals associated with the process of adoption. A course of self-study is recommended and provided, but not required. A certificate is offered and a Hebrew name given if desired. Basically, humanistic rabbis speak of “assisting” and “encouraging” anyone seeking to embrace Jewish identity. This stands in contrast to the traditional Jewish practice of discouraging converts.

### Conclusion

To a considerable degree then, secular Jews affirm the value of Judaism, as they understand it. For everyone, Jewish or not, secular Judaism enhances the opportunities for humans to flourish – on their own terms and without appeal to any divine or transcendent being. Within the United States, secular Judaism has waxed and waned. At this point, it has established all of the institutions that characterize American Jewish life. Also, as is true for other forms of American Judaism, it has experienced and partially overcome often-heated exchanges between different perspectives.

From this analysis, it is possible to discern elements of construction, contraction, and contradiction. No matter what anyone else may think: from their perspective, secular Jews and secular Judaism are here to stay.

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