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6. Half Jewish, Just Jewish, and the Oddities of Religious Identification

Sarah Imhoff, Indiana University

Abstract

Drawing on recent sociological studies, this article shows the complexity of Jewish identifications in the United States. It discusses five criteria for identifying who is a Jew: halakhah, Reform and Reconstructionist criteria, certain strands of Christian theology, ethnicity or race, and genetics. Then it shows how, when American Jews think about their own Jewishness, they slide among these criteria, notwithstanding the contradictions among them. Studying American Jews, then, shows the ways that religion, ethnicity, race, and genetics are profoundly but often invisibly entangled. It concludes by suggesting that attention to this entanglement will help illuminate not only Jews but many others in the American religious landscape.

Keywords: Judaism, race, ethnicity, United States, genetics

Introduction

In 2013 the Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life released the results of a poll of American Jews. In order to determine if the person who answered the phone was eligible for the survey, they did not just ask: “Are you Jewish?” A peek at the results suggests why that question would have yielded uneven, and perhaps unrepresentative, results. While 78% of Jews answered that they are “Jewish by religion,” 22% of American Jews self-identified as having no religion (Pew Research Center). In addition to religious and non-religious Jews, the poll also interviewed people it categorized as “non-Jewish people of Jewish background” and those with “Jewish affinity.” The first group was raised Jewish or had a Jewish parent but no longer consider themselves Jewish. The second, “Jewish affinity,” included those who were not raised Jewish, have no Jewish parents, and do not identify themselves as practitioners of Judaism. The survey wanted to catch all manners of Jewish identification – the religious Jews, the “just Jewish,” the “half-Jewish,” and those with “Jewish affinity.” So the question “Are you Jewish?” is complicated.

The survey showed not only diverse modes of identification across categories of Jewishness, but within them. Even those who identified with Judaism as their religion had varying ideas of what it means to be Jewish. Most (68%) said that a person could disbelieve God’s existence and still be Jewish.¹ A substantial minority (34%) even said that one could believe that Jesus was the messiah and still be Jewish. When asked about what was an essential part of being Jewish, the largest percentage of Jewish respondents (by religion and of no religion) said remembering the Holocaust (73%), followed by leading an ethical life (69%), and much farther down the list, even below having a good sense of humor (42%), was observing Jewish law (19%). So who are Jews, the “half-Jewish,” the “just Jewish,” and the people who believe Jesus was the messiah? What factors determine who is a Jew in America? And what can this tell us about American religion more broadly? If we want to understand religious identifications, we will also need to think about ethnic and racial identifications. Studying American Jews suggests the ways that religion, ethnicity, race, and genetics are profoundly but often invisibly entangled.

Who is a Jew? Some Criteria

It is popular to tell the story of Jewish history like this: once upon a time, everyone knew who was Jewish and who was not. Yes, some people converted, and some Jews occasionally passed as non-Jews, but the lines between Jew and non-Jew were visible, and everyone agreed on where those lines were. Then came emancipation and its unfortunate companions, assimilation and intermarriage, and things began to get messier. Some people converted for reasons of social gain or for love. Some Jews married non-Jews, and then some people had one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish parent. These individual actions changed the face of Jewish communal identity. They made the borders of the Jewish community permeable and made deciding who is a Jew a thorny matter. Today’s intermarriages, assimilation, and the thorniness of deciding who is a Jew conclude this narrative of decline.

¹ This is not, in itself, surprising. There is a long tradition of Jewish atheists and secularists. For one version of this history, see Biale.

This story is too simple on many fronts. Rabbinic sources, for instance, refer to the “god-fearers” or *yirei shamaim*, who are sometimes interpreted as non-Jews who nevertheless worshipped the Jewish god and lived with Jewish communities. Jewish-Christian synagogues in Palestine in the first two centuries of the Common Era served as the worship sites for Jews who believed Jesus was the messiah (on the slow and incomplete separation of early Christianity from rabbinic Judaism, see Boyarin). During the Inquisition and following, Jews who converted to Christianity existed in a quasi-Jewish, quasi-Christian social and theological limbo. The Church constantly worried that they were “Judaizing,” that is, converting and then continuing to practice Judaism in private. Jewish communities rarely required returners to “convert back,” which also suggests that they thought that Jewishness was not erased by conversion to Christianity.² Even Jews in the Pale of Settlement – where the *shtetlach* are often considered, in the words of Jewish historian Maurice Samuels, “an impregnable citadel of Jewishness” – interacted with their non-Jewish neighbors frequently and substantially (137; for a more realistic version of life in *shtetlach* in the Pale, see Veidlinger). And yet the story’s general plot line (from certainty about Jewishness to uncertainty) and characters (emancipation, assimilation, and intermarriage) persist in both popular and academic accounts of Jewish history and sociology (see, e.g., the work of Cohen and Wertheimer).

One part of this story is certainly correct: deciding who is a Jew today is not an easy task. Below I briefly discuss five different ways of deciding Jewishness, though these ways are not mutually exclusive and most Jews slide among them unconsciously when they think about what it means to be Jewish. First, I discuss halakhah, or Jewish law. Then I consider another religious rubric: that of the Reform and Reconstructionist movements, which do not consider halakhah binding. Next, I consider what seems like an outlier, Christian theological ideas about Jesus and spiritual descent. Then I move from religiously inflected criteria to the scientific discourse of genetics and its similarity to racial ideas about Jewishness. Finally, I discuss broader ideas of descent, and what Americans tend to think of as ethnicity. All together, these criteria will create a complex intertwined picture of identification, one that suggests that categories of race, ethnicity, genetics, and religion in the United States are profoundly entangled.

In many ways, halakhah offers one of the most straightforward accounts of who is a Jew. If a person is born to a Jewish mother, or if he or she completes a halakhically sanctioned conversion, then that person is a Jew. The religious and ethnic background of the father is immaterial. Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, Jews follow this criteria, and most other Jews recognize halakhah as at least one way of having Jewish identity. But even this definition has become more complicated with assisted reproductive technologies (ART).³ In the case of surrogacy, for instance, who needs to be Jewish for the child to be considered Jewish? The mother who carries the baby, the mother who provides the egg, or both? Because Jewish law is often decided when individual people bring cases to individual

² “Converting back” is meaningless under halakhah. If someone is born Jewish, she is always halakhically Jewish, even if she converts to another religion. For one particularly subtle reading of these complicated issues, see Yovel.

³ For one of the most analytically rich treatments of ART and Jewish law, see Kahn. With the speed of biological advances, however, newer scholarly material deals with more contemporary questions.

rabbis, and because none of those halakhic decisions are necessarily binding on others, at least one rabbinic opinion claims each of these three answers. While the case of surrogacy does not directly affect the majority of Jews, it raises questions about where, precisely, Jewish identity comes from. If it comes from the mother, is it from her genetic material? Is it from the nourishment of her body? Is it because the fetus is formed within her body, which is seen as a Jewish environment? These questions demonstrate not only that halakhically deciding who is a Jew is contested, but also that matters of reproductive science and genetics affect halakhic decisions.

Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism have rejected halakhah as binding, though they still recognize that some aspects hold traditional or ethical value. Reconstructionist Judaism, for instance, explains that today's Jews are living in a "post-halakhic age" where "the past has a vote but not a veto" (Jewish Reconstructionist Communities; see Cohen on "post-halakhic Judaism"). Both of these theologically liberal movements have espoused policies of "patrilineal descent," which means that a child who is born to at least one Jewish parent – either mother or father – and raised Jewish is a Jew. Though they advertise this less, as do Conservative and Orthodox Judaism, both movements also still tend to consider people born to Jewish mothers as Jewish regardless of Judaism's absence or presence in the home as long as they have not declared a different religious affiliation. In these religious movements, then, parentage is important but not paramount. Raising children in a household where Judaism is present trumps the necessity of a mother's Jewishness. But being Jewish nevertheless holds onto some sense of descent: if neither parent was Jewish by birth or conversion, no amount of Judaism in the household would make a child Jewish. Even these religious criteria for Jewishness, then, maintain the foundational importance of lineage and genealogy.

The third religious category for thinking about Jewishness is an unexpected one: the Jewishness of Jesus. Some of the Pew Forum respondents, primarily those in the "Jewish background" or "Jewish affinity" categories, consider themselves Jewish or partially Jewish not *despite* their Christianity, but precisely *because of* it. Nearly one-third (31%) of the people with "Jewish affinity," most of whom identified as Christian, said they are Jewish because Jesus was Jewish (see Kaell). We might ask: are these people *really* Jewish? If we follow the official word of most Jewish organizations, the answer is a resounding no. Jews for Jesus and other messianic Jewish movements have long drawn the ire of traditional Jews. *Commentary*, an American Jewish political journal, recently noted the "visceral distaste that the overwhelming majority of Jews have for the Messianics" (Tobin). The Pew poll suggested a greater degree of openness to the possibility of Jewishness coinciding with believing Jesus is the messiah.

There are two different groups of people under consideration here: one, people who were ethnically or religiously Jewish and then converted to Christianity (or Messianic Judaism, which relies on Christian theology); and two, people who have no Jewish parents or ethnic ties but believe because of their closeness with the Jewish Jesus that they are Jewish. The former group, oddly enough, would still be considered Jewish by most Orthodox Jews because they were halakhically Jewish. Errant Jews, yes, but Jews nonetheless. Moreover, the surprisingly large number of Jewish respondents who said that a person could believe that Jesus is the messiah and still be Jewish (34%) suggests that this is more widespread than

Orthodox adherence to halakhah. The study shows that only 10% of American Jews are Orthodox, so many non-Orthodox Jews must be included in the 34% who agreed that being a Jew can be consistent with considering Jesus the messiah. Christians in the latter group are unlikely to be considered Jewish by official organizations and individuals alike. While they might be useful political allies on issues about Israel, their philosemitism is received as suspect by most mainstream Jews.

This religious category of Christian theology also draws our attention to a question begged by these first three religious criteria for Jewishness: who gets to decide on a person's "real" religion. If self-description is the final word on religious affiliation, then some evangelical Christians are also Jews, but this would be strange because other Jews and Jewish communities do not recognize them as such. If, instead, the word of certain official Jewish religious declarations is authoritative, the picture is different but not simple. Rabbis and more traditional community members sometimes practice gatekeeping and policing of boundaries.⁴ For instance, most Orthodox authorities refuse to recognize Reform and Conservative conversions and, by extension, the children of women who converted. Moreover, Horace Kallen's quip that you can change a lot of things about yourself, but you "cannot change your grandfather" points to the ways that others may see a racial or ethnic identity even if the person herself does not choose it.

Since the late 1990s, genetics has been another way of thinking and talking about Jewish identity. As I have argued elsewhere, the popular discourse around genetics employs a racialist notion of Jewishness.⁵ Critical race theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah defines racialism as the idea that there are "heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, which allow us to divide them into a small set of races, in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race" (13). While the language of genetics picks up on traditional language of bloodlines, descent, and peoplehood, it also brings the element of apparent scientific objectivity. With the rapidly increasing accessibility of personal genetic testing, and the growing popularity of television programs such as the BBC's "Who Do You Think You Are?" and PBS's "Finding Your Roots," many people have begun to think about their DNA as holding some essential part of their identities (see Moore).⁶ Jews are especially interested in genetics for a number of reasons, one of which is higher rate of particular genetic diseases in Ashkenazi populations. Because of this, genetic testing has been far more

⁴ Israel provides a complex comparative example. Israel created a list of approved Orthodox rabbis and accepts conversions only from those rabbis; this is a form of gatekeeping. Anyone who converts with another rabbi is not, according to the Israeli rabbinate, Jewish. However, Israel's Ministry of the Interior considers non-Orthodox converts as legitimate Jews under the law of return and citizenship laws. See Angel; Waxman.

⁵ I follow theorist Appiah in his use of "racialism" to describe "heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, which allow us to divide them into a small set of races, in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race" (13).

⁶ This is not only a British and American phenomenon, but the legal and political construction of Jewishness in Israel is sufficiently different to warrant a separate discussion. In 2013, the Israeli government told a young Russian woman that she would have to take a DNA test to prove that she was Jewish in order to go on a Taglit/Birthright Israel trip (see Zeiger).

popular in American Jewish populations than in other Jewish population, but there are cultural and religious reasons too: a theological commitment to peoplehood (for some Jews) makes the idea of a scientifically verifiable connection among Jews appealing, and genetics can provide information about lost relatives, because of migration, persecution, and the Holocaust.

Can genetics give us an objective and true answer about who is Jewish? Many people talk as if it does. When some non-Jews receive their personal DNA results that say they have “Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry,” they sometimes say, “My test says I’m Jewish,” or, in the case of one woman, “I recently discovered I was 47.1% As[h]kenazi”(Moore). When scientists discovered that some members of the South African Lemba tribe had the Cohen Modal Haplotype, sometimes called “the Cohen gene,” people used this as an argument that they were, in fact, Jewish (Parfitt and Egorova). Americans, especially those of Mexican descent, who wonder if they have forcibly converted ancestors (*anusim*) sometimes do DNA tests to discover whether they are “really” Jewish (see Kelly). After discovering their roots, or their “true identity,” as some of them put it, many of these people begin to incorporate Jewish religious practices into their lives. Neither scientists nor laypeople can use DNA to determine which Jewish men are actually Cohanim: only about half of self-identified Cohanim have the CMH marker, and some non-Jews do too. Because there are no genetic markers unique to Jews, no one can use a person’s DNA to determine whether she or he is Jewish. And yet, popular understandings of genetics still shape discussion of who is a Jew.

Adjacent to genetics, though hardly identical, is a broader sense of relatedness that some call “ethnicity.” There is a complex scholarly literature on what exactly ethnicity means, and what it means to be ethnically Jewish. In brief, it is a highly contested category with shifting meaning. For our purposes, let us agree to Omi and Winant’s explanation of the rise of ethnicity. They call it “a liberal challenge to religious and biologicistic accounts of race. It operated on cultural territory, between the parameters of assimilation and pluralism . . . and religious differences were minimized” (30). “Ethnicity,” then, began as a word to do the work of racial and religious identification while avoiding the explicit evocation of religion or race. Even when the term does not explicitly evoke race or religion, however, ethnicity still contains strands of both of these modes of identification. The lines between race and ethnicity are ideological, historically contingent, and fuzzy at best. Jews as a group illustrate the fuzziness of these parameters of ethnicity. As the Pew Poll made clear, people with one Jewish parent, a Jewish step-parent or grandparent, or even a Jewish spouse can and do claim Jewish identity through ideas about Jewish culture, food, music, language, and rituals. These ethnic ties can be about blood ties or genetics, and they can also be about the values and culture one lives with in an everyday sense.⁷

⁷ Halakhah parental criteria and ethnicity-based criteria for Jewishness suggest that ancestors matter, and Jewish ancestors – especially maternal ones – matter for Jewish identity. The importance of ancestors points toward a related concept: the complex theological idea of Jewish peoplehood. The concept of peoplehood roughly claims that there is a Jewish people, and the religious account of peoplehood is that whether or not those Jews are good Jews, whether or not they practice, they are bound together with one another and in a relationship to God. Peoplehood is thus closely tied to ideas about Jews as God’s “chosen people.” Chosenness has become a sticky wicket for many liberal and secular Jews because, in some interpretations, it implies Jewish superiority. In

Who is a Jew, then? Well, it depends on halakhah, parents, theology, genetics, and ethnicity. Any of these might give us different answers.

How Do We Make Sense of These Criteria?

As much as I have tried to separate these five criteria for analytical purposes, they are nevertheless utterly entangled. Religion, ethnicity, race, and genetics inform one another in messy and complicated ways that do not allow the embrace of one and rejection of all the others. We cannot simply declare that, henceforth, Jewishness will be decided according to genetics, for example. Converts, adoptees, and their descendants would no longer be considered Jewish, despite participation in Jewish religious communities. No one should declare a practicing Christian to be Jewish against her own will or sense of self, merely because her maternal great, great grandmother was Jewish. Nor will the criteria of religious belief, practice, belonging, or some combination thereof suffice. There is a long American tradition of atheistic Jews who nonetheless strongly identify with their Jewishness. Some even serve as icons of Jewish culture and thereby represent Jewishness to both Jewish and non-Jewish publics. Religious criteria of belief or practice alone would declare them non-Jews. If we hope to maintain any sense of Jewishness that is recognizable to either or both Jews and non-Jews, then we will have to contend with all of these complex and even contradictory definitions of Jewishness. Perhaps we should just throw up our hands and declare our acquiescence to the traditional story: defining Jewishness is hopeless, and our task now is to lament this state of affairs and pine for the return of strong and uncontested Jewish identity.

Declaring defeat would be short-sighted for two reasons. First, human phenomena still demand analysis, even, or perhaps especially, when they are messy. We can still learn something even when religious people and communities are not entirely consistent or coherent in their claims about themselves. We can embrace a messy, multi-faceted, and sometimes contradictory definition. Indeed, when it comes to identity, Americans do this all the time. Second, we can learn something more about the American religious landscape by looking at this particular (and particularly messy) case of Jews in the United States.

In order to understand this messiness, it will help to understand how American Jews imagine their own lives and relationships to Judaism and Jewishness. One colloquialism of identification, which did not appear on the Pew Poll but is a common descriptor for adult children of intermarriage, is “half Jewish.” For those who define Jewishness halakhically, this is nonsense. One either is a Jew, or is not. But for those who think of Jewishness as based on descent, or even for those whose parents included two sets of religious practices in their upbringing, fractional Jewishness resonates. “Interfaith Family,” says the mission statement of an online community, “supports interfaith families exploring Jewish life.” It offers resources for celebrating both Hanukkah and Christmas, for instance, and advice on seeking rabbis for lifecycle events (www.interfaithfamily.com). The Half-Jewish Network, founded in 2005, explicitly welcomes “biracial, multiracial and mixed heritage adult children and other descendants of intermarriages . . . ‘DNA half-Jewish people,’ who have learned that they

cultures that celebrate multiculturalism and diversity as values, these kinds of claims to chosenness can seem chauvinistic.

have partial Jewish ancestry from genealogical searches and DNA tests . . . adult adoptees, stepchildren and other non-biological descendants of intermarriages” (half-jewish.net). The Half-Jewish Network notes the way that these Jewishly identified people are sometimes sidelined from institutional Jewish life and seeks to remedy that alienation.

Jewcy.com, a website curating and commenting on contemporary Jewish culture, also promotes an expansive view of who and what counts as Jewish. In response to a lachrymose narrative of the prospects of contemporary Jewry, a *Jewcy* editor wrote: “At *Jewcy* we’ve half-jokingly referred to ourselves as part of the first generation of Jewish-American mongrels, or Frankenjews. The majority of *Jewcy*’s staff is the product of intermarriage. To a one, we regard the traditional Jewish revulsion toward exogamy as an anachronistic holdover from premodern life. Needless to say, we are [dubious of] halakhic Jewishness” (Kurtzman).⁸ And yet the members of the *Jewcy* staff nevertheless identify as Jewish. Their Jewishness is not defined strictly by halakhah or by the Reform or Reconstructionist movements. It embraces the idea of Jewishness by descent, but its idea of descent is loose and refuses any notion of purity of bloodlines or ancestry.

In other spaces, some Jews refer to themselves as “just Jewish” – that is, they may or may not be religious, but they do not identify denominationally. They might belong to a *havurah*, or an independent *minyan*, two kinds of non-congregational modes of engaging Jewish ritual life. Some others describe themselves as secular or atheists, but identify with the idea of Jewishness.

What does being Jewish mean for atheists, for “half-Jews,” or for “FrankenJews”? Descent matters. Being Jewish is inherited, in their view, though it can be inherited in fractional parts, and through food, music, language, and non-religious traditions. Jewishness is about religion, in some ways. And it is about descent, ethnicity, or even race, in some ways. Here lies the challenge: it is often impossible to pull those modes of identification apart. They inform one another, challenge one another, reinforce one another, and slide into one another. “Can You Pass Down Cultural Judaism Without the Faith?” asked a recent Jewish Daily, *Forward* advice column. Answers included both yes and no, but all suggested that the lines between religion and culture (presumably meaning whichever Jewish-related food, language, music, or practices that are deemed *not* religious) were blurry. Even the dichotomy of religion and culture, where “culture” means that which is not religious, demonstrates the difficulty in separating modes of identification. Foods like *hamantaschen* – traditional cookies for the Jewish holiday of Purim – are religion for some and ethnic culture for others.

Most Jewish commenters, unlike those at *Jewcy* or the Half-Jewish Network, see the move away from endogamy and synagogue membership as a decline. They worry that

⁸ Interestingly, Kurtzman nevertheless affirms the standard narrative of Jewish history, in which now is the first moment in time that Jews have struggled with Jewish identity: “For most of Jewish history, peoplehood was straightforward. In most places and most times, Jews retained their separateness in every respect: Economically, linguistically, and socially, they were a distinct people in lands not their own. And this separateness was reinforced by a religion that instructed them that they possessed an exclusive covenant with a deity who favored them above all others. Their nationhood was both sacred and real. Today, all of this is gone.”

intermarriages produce fewer Jewish children and that the Jewish communal future looks dim. Sociologist Jack Wertheimer, for instance, deemed intermarriage “a disaster for the Jewish people” and called partial Jewish identity a “heartbreaking reflection of what intermarriage has wrought.” Unless Jews commit to being Jews and only Jews, culturally and religiously, Wertheimer argues, the Jewish community is doomed to decline. But not all scholars agree. For instance, Keren McGinity suggests that intermarriages may produce more Jewishly-identified children than observers imagine, and Shaul Magid has argued that these partial and creative modes of Jewish identification are the future of American Jewry. American Jewish communities and the scholars who study them have begun to observe the growing complexity of Jewish identifications but do not agree about whether it is good, bad, or a neutral inevitability.

The messiness of Jewish identifications can help us think about other American religious groups. It suggests that, for them too, race and religion are entangled. If a scholar says she researches race and religion, her description might evoke images of ethnographic studies of the Black church, or Latino Catholic practices, or histories like clergy involvement in Civil Rights, or colonial encounters between white Europeans and Native American. These are all spaces where scholars “see” race. They involve people of color. But race and religion are profoundly entangled even when we do not “see” race. These ideas about defining Jewishness certainly have implications for people of color, but they also show the ways that race thinking interacts with religion, even for people who look white, and in spaces where most observers are not accustomed to “seeing” race.

The Larger Significance for American Religion

Race and religion are not interdependent in the same ways for each group in the United States. Nor is the particular structure of their relationship predictable from the outset for any given group. Studying Jews cannot, then, tell us everything about the structure or the mutual constructions of race and religion in general. These examples represent gestures toward promising avenues of research, rather than fully formed analyses in their own right. And yet, as these examples will suggest, the intertwined modes of Jewish identification point to broader entanglements in the relationships of race, ethnicity, genetics, and religion.

Though the United States has a long history of assumptions about race and religion,⁹ reactions after September 2011 highlighted the entanglements of race and religion. When the American Sikh, Balbir Singh Sodhi, was murdered on September 12, 2011, it had nothing to do with his Sikhness. It had to do with the conflation of race (brown skin) and religion (visible through head coverings, however different Sikh men’s and Muslim men’s are in reality). Other men of color murdered that day included Adel Karas, an Egyptian American and Coptic Christian; Surjit Singh Samra, a Sikh Indian American; and Vasudev Patel, a Hindu Indian American (see Muneer). In each of these cases, the perpetrators took what Americans often take to be outward signs of race – skin color and or linguistic accent – as signs of religious identification and/or geographic origin. The conflation of race and religion

⁹ White Americans have assumed, for instance, that Blacks were naturally emotional and had a simplified Christianity, and that Native Americans were child-like nature-worshippers (see Evans on African Americans and Christianization).

was an error in the perpetrators' perception; this is part of what makes entanglement so clear in these cases. These murders point to the question of who defines identity. Even if one is mis-identified as Muslim, that does not protect one from the very real violence that can (and did) accompany such a perception. In this sense, religious identifications, whether correct or incorrect, can depend on one's physical appearance, actions, and community affiliation, as well as the way others interpolate that person's appearance, actions, and community.¹⁰

The interdependence of race, ethnicity, and religion need not entail the threat of physical violence, of course. To take another example, scholars have noted how Native American identifications are constructed at the intersection of the contested categories of genetics, race, and ancestry (Tallbear). Other scholars show how group membership and ancestry work to what counts as religious practice under the law – which often determines who counts as Native American (McNally). Scholarly literature suggests how deeply ancestry, race, and religion are intertwined for cultural constructions of Native Americans.

Even for those who seem white, race and religion are not always easily separated. The common sociological categories of “mainline Protestant,” “Evangelical,” and “Black Protestant” suggest that the implicit race of “Protestant” is white. Respondents or churches, depending on the survey (and there are countless surveys that use these designations), are divided into these mutually exclusive categories.¹¹ Thus, if one is labeled “Black Protestant,” she is not included in the category “mainline Protestant” or “Evangelical.” “Black Protestant” is the marked category, whereas “Evangelical” and “mainline Protestant” go unmarked. In the United States, white is the unmarked racial category. Americans “see” race when we see people of color, but do not see race when considering “white” people. This Black/white division implies (incorrectly) that those who identify as mainline Protestant or Evangelical are white, when in fact, significant numbers of Protestants and Evangelicals are Latino, Asian, and other people of color. The sociological categories “Catholic” and “Latino Catholic” similarly imply that “Catholic” means the unmarked category of white, non-Latino, whereas “Latino Catholic” is the marked racial category (see, e.g., Skirbekk, Kaufmann and Goujon).

In the case of Mormons and Mormon culture, “race” as a category operates less visibly. However, the strong interest in genealogy, personal DNA testing, ancestors, and the eternity of the family all point toward the complex relationship of religion and descent, and biological-relation-based constructions of the self. While race, in the sense of phenotype and skin color, is no longer an official theological dividing line, lineage continues to play a significant role in Mormon identifications in both theological and sociological senses (Mauss).

Defining Jewishness in the United States is a distinctly difficult project. Perhaps it is even impossible. But that very impossibility points to a broader consideration of the ways that race, genetics, ethnicity, and religion are entangled in the construction of both individual

¹⁰ Here I borrow Judith Butler's reading of Althusser's notion of interpellations (121-23).

¹¹ Many, perhaps even most, sociological surveys use these categories. To take just one instance, the Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey uses this three-part division for Protestants (Pew Research Center 2015). Sociologists of American religion also use this classification (see, e.g., Brian Steensland and colleagues).

and communal identity. In this sense, studying American Jews teaches a larger lesson about identifications in the American religious landscape. It suggests some of the ways that we have overlooked the entanglements of these categories and how scholars might move forward in asking questions about how and where religious and racial identity is formed.

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