

Wanted: Converts to Judaism

Efforts to discourage intermarriage have failed. It's time to bring more non-Jews into the faith.

By

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The revelation this summer that the mother of the late Cardinal John Joseph O'Connor was Jewish—indeed, that his grandfather was a rabbi—is a reminder that throughout history men and women have (either by force or voluntarily) left Judaism. Cardinal O'Connor's mother turns out to have been among them. Conversion to Judaism has been much less common, meanwhile, in part because the tradition has often not done much to encourage it. That must change. Why? Because Judaism needs more Jews, and has a lot to offer them.

For decades Jews have been vexed by the question of intermarriage. According to a report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released last year, almost half of married Jews in America have a non-Jewish spouse, a trend of intermarriage in line with that of the larger society. At the same time, according to earlier Pew reports, religious switching and the movement away from religion altogether are both at an all time-high in the U.S. Forty-four percent of Americans do not currently belong to the faith in which they were raised, the Pew Research Center reported in 2009. As of 2012, the fastest-growing faith community by far was "none."

This presents the Jewish community (and others too) with an unprecedented challenge—but also, perhaps, with a unique opportunity. I believe that Jewish institutions and their rabbis should actively encourage non-Jewish family members in our midst to take the next step and formally commit to Judaism.

To some this may seem a surprising idea. It is well known that Judaism has not been a proselytizing faith. Historically, Jewish authorities were wary of potential converts. The rabbis sought to make sure that converts were motivated solely by devotion to the God of Israel and the desire to join the people of Israel. Conversion purely for the sake of marriage was disallowed.

Today, the great majority of Americans believe that people not of their faith can go to heaven and engage in authentic worship of God—an unprecedented degree of tolerance that is likely both a cause and effect of the high rate of movement among faiths. In other words, people are not converting for the sake of achieving salvation. Given that a third of Americans are married to someone of another faith, few people seem compelled to convert purely for the sake of matrimony either.

Converts, like other members of American religious communities, are in search of salvation in the here and now: They desire meaning profound enough to live for, ethics and values to live by, causes and communities larger than themselves, and truths to hold on to in a fast-changing and frenetic world. Converts testify to the special joy that comes of fulfilling responsibilities undertaken voluntarily and of the added strength brought to their families by shared conviction born of love.

At a time when religion—like nearly everything else in our culture—is a choice more than an obligation we are born into, stepping into age-old rituals and walking well-trodden paths are gifts appreciated as never before. Converts to Judaism have committed to a process of learning and living that culminates in a religious ceremony where immersion into an ancient ritual bath creates a new religious identity. These have been essential elements for conversion for more than 2,000 years.

In our day, the process of conversion involves serious adult study of Judaism and active participation in Jewish life, including holiday observances and life-cycle celebrations. The experience challenges converts to explain to themselves (and others) why they are decisively adopting a new faith rather than remaining on the margins.

We should help them to make this move. I am asking the rabbis of the Conservative movement to use every means to explicitly and strongly advocate for conversion, bringing potential converts close and actively making the case for them to commit to Judaism. I am asking Jewish leaders to provide the funding needed for programs, courses and initiatives that will place conversion at the center of Jewish consciousness and the community's agenda.

The biblical character of Ruth, the most-famous convert in Jewish tradition, finds community, meaning and direction by entering deeply into her new identity. "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God shall be my God" (Ruth 1:16).

In the tapestry of American religious life, the time has come for Judaism to ask people to move away from the sidelines and commit.

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