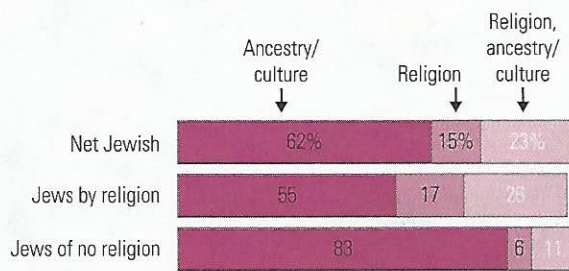


Figure 14.3 Being Jewish: Is it More About Culture and Ancestry than Religion?

% saying being Jewish is mainly a matter of...



NOTE: "Ancestry/culture" is the net percentage saying that being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry, mainly a matter of culture or volunteering that it is both ancestry and culture. "Religion, ancestry/culture" is the percentage volunteering that being Jewish is a matter of both religion and either ancestry or culture, or all three of these.

SOURCE: Pew Research Center (2013).

becoming Conservative, 17 percent becoming Reform, and 12 percent becoming secular Jews (Amont 2005). Figure 14.3 highlights data from a survey that asked respondents to consider whether being Jewish was more about religion or culture and ancestry.

New Religious Movements

14.2.4 Identify who is drawn to emerging new religions.

One segment of organized religion that depends almost entirely on converts are the **new religious movements**, an umbrella term for new religions and offshoots of "foreign" religions that have a foothold in the United States. Examples may be found in Table 14.1 and include such religions as Wicca, Scientology, the Moonies (the Unification Church), various Buddhist or Hindu sects, and so forth. Some would include as new religious movements the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other relatively new versions of religious doctrine, although both the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses have been around since the nineteenth century.

Who is drawn to these new religions? Rodney Stark has studied a number of new religious movements and concludes that "people must have a degree of privilege to have the sophistication needed to understand new religions and to recognize a need for them. This is not to say that the most privileged will be most prone to embrace new religious movements, but only that converts will be from the more, rather than the less, privileged classes" (Stark 1996:39). He points out that Christianity was once just such a movement—a Jewish "Jesus cult"—and its converts tended to suffer from "relative deprivation"—that is, resentment among the somewhat privileged that they actually deserved even more privilege and respect.

On the other hand, Stark argues, sect movements that seek to purify existing traditions, that is, to make them more like the "old-time," "true," "essential," or "authentic" version of the religion, appeal to the lower classes. Stark also asserts irreligious people are the most likely to join new religious movements and concludes that this reflects a deep desire for some spiritual connection among those who do not accept traditional faiths.

One striking aspect of the new religious movements is that they appeal disproportionately to women. Some of these groups, like Wicca (a neopagan cult with female goddesses), are explicitly aimed at women. But many other new religions seem attractive to women. In Stark's research on early Christianity, women were more likely to convert. It was also probably true of the beginnings of Islam. In more modern and radical cults, consider the following data: 73 people were killed in the showdown between the U.S. government and the Branch Davidian cult in Waco, Texas, and 45 of them (62 percent) were female; in the 1979 mass suicide at Jonestown, Guyana, by the members of the People's Temple cult, an American religious group, 66 percent were women.

Why do more women than men take up new religions? Perhaps because they are treated so badly by the old religions. Unsurprisingly, most religious traditions support, or even mandate, traditional gender roles. They bar women from most positions of authority, restrict their dress, and sometimes blame them for the evils in the world (Eve in the major monotheistic traditions, Pandora in Greek mythology, Izanami in the Shinto creation story). Until very recently, almost all priests, ministers, rabbis, imams, monks, gurus, shamans, and other such higher functionaries of the religious establishments were male. All of Jesus's disciples were male. Women often had to sit in separate sections of the church or synagogue or mosque. They could not lead prayers, and because most were illiterate they were not even able to read the prayers.

Some new religions seem to be better for women. As a striking example, consider the beginnings of Islam. Most Westerners seem to think of Islam as backward in its treatment of women. In fact, Mohammad prescribed a liberating revolution for women in the context of his time. In the Arab world before Islam, women were chattel, the property of their fathers and then of their husbands and then of anyone their husbands gave them to. They had no rights. Mohammad gave them rights of protection, divorce, and property, among other advances. Similarly, early Christianity gave women the right to not be killed having unsafe abortions they didn't want, not to be treated as chattel, or not to be left to die from exposure because their father wanted a son, among others. All of these were common practices in the Roman paganism of the time.