
Social Conversion and Group Definition in Jewish Copenhagen

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Studies of religious conversion have often focused on conversion's experiential dimensions. Scholars have produced rich analyses of what goes on in the minds of converts (e.g., James 1929; Lofland and Stark 1965; Rambo 1993; Snow and Phillips 1980), as well as of the social texts and circumstances that shape the conversion process (e.g., Cohen 1986; Finn 1997; Hefner 1993; Whitehead 1987). Much less has been said about conversion as a social event, a phenomenon with meanings and consequences for the social groups within which they occur. Conversion to a religion is an irreducibly social act; one does not merely join a faith, but one enters into a set of new relationships with members of a religious community. Conversion, therefore, changes not only the individual, but also the groups that must assimilate or give up the convert. In addition, it raises a set of questions that the communities must address—how to socialize the new convert, how to establish the authenticity of conversion, which internal factions the new convert will support or undermine, and so on. Answers to these questions affect the internal politics, social organization, and self-understanding of religious groups. These social dimensions of conversion have not been a focus of anthropological research (though see Hefner 1993: 27–31; Viswanathan 1998).

Some of the most sensitive questions surrounding conversion relate to definitions of religious community. Conversion suggests ideas about the nature of group and other, and especially about the boundaries between the two. For groups assimilating converts, therefore, conversion creates an occasion for debating and negotiating the contours of community. Even in relatively cohesive groups, differences exist on such issues, and these oppositions affect attitudes toward taking in new members. Conversion is not merely a site of celebration and a reinforcement of group beliefs, but also a site of conflict,

a point at which competing notions of group and other directly confront one another. In groups for which boundaries are highly contested, where factions have deep and enduring antagonisms over what the group should be and whom it should include, conversion can become one of the most inflammatory and divisive moments in community life. The intensity of conflict will be greater, and the position of the convert more fraught, the more disagreement and ambivalence attend the definition of the group's nature and boundaries (cf. Barth 1969; Cohen 1985).

This chapter looks at these dynamics in a group for which the nature of community is highly contested and in which conversion is a site of continual dispute and political tension: the Jewish community of Copenhagen, Denmark, where I have conducted fieldwork since 1996. Within this group, the vast majority of conversions are social conversions, stemming in one way or another from mixed marriages. The experiences of those of who seek to convert to Judaism become points of conflict over the nature of Jewish community, authority, and religiosity. This conflict makes conversion one of the most explosive issues in congregational politics, and it subjects those who have gone through it to ongoing suspicion and scrutiny. This chapter discusses the forms these conflicts take, and it suggests some implications for our understanding of the social aspects of conversion more generally.

BACKGROUND

The Jews of Copenhagen comprise the oldest and best-established minority group in the small Scandinavian nation of Denmark.¹ The community dates back to the early seventeenth century, when Jewish merchants from Germany and Holland first began settling in the capital. Isolated and alien in its early years, the community began to integrate with the larger society around 1800, and its members achieved full citizenship in 1814. In the years since, Copenhagen's Jews have created a substantial institutional and cultural tradition in the city. Their institutions include a stately synagogue in the center of town, a large administration building near Christiansborg Palace, an active Jewish school, and such institutional adjuncts as day care centers, kosher delicatessens, alternative synagogues, and a museum. Jews also operate a wide variety of voluntary associations, including cultural societies, journals, social clubs, Zionist associations, musical societies, and youth groups. The size of the community has varied over the decades, hovering between 5,000 and 7,000 for much of the twentieth century; membership has fallen in recent years, but the group still represents one of the most active and engaged religious groups in contemporary Scandinavia.

Most of this activity falls under the authority of a single official organization, the Jewish Community of Copenhagen (*Det Mosaiske Troessamfund*, or MT). The MT owns and operates the main synagogue, as well as most of the other Jewish institutions in the city. It also funds and provides offices for most of the Jewish voluntary associations. The MT bills itself as an inclusive organization, a “unity congregation,” and it tries as far as possible to include all Jews within its borders. Doing so can be difficult; the Jewish community in Copenhagen is deeply fragmented, and factions built around religious and social differences have existed since its inception. Some of these differences derive from the waves of immigration that have brought Jews to Denmark over the centuries, as newly arriving groups have found themselves at odds with the established communities. Other differences relate to disagreements over ritual practice, with an Orthodox minority struggling bitterly with the more religiously liberal majority. Still others derive from arguments over the meaning of “Jewishness,” language, the community’s relationship to Israel, issues in Danish politics, and a host of other issues. Such divisions color almost all Jewish activity in Copenhagen, including the politics and administration of the MT itself. The MT has endured nonetheless, in large part due to its flexible approach to defining Jewish activity and practice. It funds groups with very different outlooks on Judaism, and it allows any Jewish resident of Denmark to join or run for office. Likewise, it maintains strictly Orthodox ritual practice within the synagogue, for the stated purpose of allowing members of all branches of Judaism to participate. As a result, although not all Danish Jews belong to the MT, none dispute its centrality to Jewish life in the city.

One distinctive feature of the Jewish world in Denmark is its deep engagement with the surrounding culture. Danish Jews encounter very few barriers to full participation in the larger society; the anti-Semitism so endemic to much of European culture has never gained a strong foothold in Denmark, and in recent decades it has disappeared almost entirely. This acceptance found dramatic expression in 1943, when thousands of resistance members and ordinary Danes combined to rescue almost the entire Jewish community from the occupying Nazis.² For their part, most Jews have entered deeply and enthusiastically into Danish culture. They dress, talk, and act entirely like other Danes. They work in regular Danish occupations and have contributed important figures to Danish politics, media, and popular culture. Because they are so few in number, most Jews live their daily lives in non-Jewish settings. Most Jewish children attend regular Danish schools for much of their education, most adults have largely non-Jewish social circles, and almost all Jews work in non-Jewish workplaces. For most members of the MT, therefore, Danish identity is as central to self-perception as Jewish identity.

Bringing these two identities together can be a difficult task (Buckser 2000). Danish Jews tend to think of Jewishness in primordial terms, as something inscribed in the body and blood as well as in heritage and religion. Most feel that Jews have a distinctive manner and appearance, even if they cannot say exactly what those are. At the same time, however, most Jews identify heavily with Danish culture, a culture that tends to stress homogeneity and belonging and to stigmatize difference. Danish popular culture defines Danish commonality through some of the same practices that Jewish culture uses to define Jewish distinctiveness, including foodways, affective style, humor, and tradition (see Buckser 1999; Jokinen 1994; Knudsen 1996). Being a Danish Jew, therefore, requires the combination of two distinctive and often contradictory identities. Many of my informants describe the process as difficult, unending, and emotionally painful. Their resolutions vary with their particular circumstances, and they entail a variety of understandings of what Jewishness and Danishness consist of. Decisions about what it is to be a Jew, and by extension what is meant by Jewish community, are not arrived at by community consensus but through a profoundly individual project of reconciling two dimensions of self that stand in fundamental conflict.

These circumstances make the precise boundaries of the Jewish community extremely difficult to establish. Who is a Jew? Who should decide who counts and does not count? Are some Jews more real, more authentic, closer to a primordial essence than others? Danish Jews answer these questions in widely differing ways. Some disagreements run along factional lines—liberal Jews, for example, tend to favor a more inclusive definition of Jewry, but the more Orthodox favor a narrower one—but others do not. As noted, the MT has survived by avoiding these questions as much as possible, by taking a “big tent” approach that allows a variety of different understandings of Judaism to participate and interact. With its Orthodox ritual and inclusive membership, the MT allows the meaning of Jewishness to be resolved at an individual—not a community—level.

CONVERSION IN JEWISH COPENHAGEN

The flexibility of the MT is tested when it faces the problem of conversion. Conversion is an unavoidably communal issue; it implies not merely a change in one person’s self-identification, but also the ratification and recognition of that change by the wider community. The issue carries a particular importance in Denmark because it arises so often there. In comparison to other world religions, Judaism does not generally seek converts, and indeed it tends to discourage them. For much of Jewish history, conversion to Judaism has

been relatively rare and has had little social impact. In Denmark, however, the close engagement of Jews with the surrounding culture has made conversion a much more important issue. This is not because Danes have been widely attracted to Judaism—few Danes have any detailed knowledge of Jewish beliefs or practices—but because Jews have intermarried with non-Jewish Danes at extremely high rates. Most estimates put the current rate of mixed marriages in the Jewish community at 75 percent or higher. This pattern is not new. Although intermarriage rates have risen and fallen repeatedly over the past 200 years, such unions have made up a significant portion of the total since the early 1800s (see, for example, Arnheim 1950a; Arnheim 1950b; Arnheim 1950c; Balslev 1932). For most of its modern history, and increasingly over the last several decades, intermarriage has constituted a basic feature of the social world of Danish Jewry.

By some standards, Copenhagen Jews treat intermarriage quite leniently. Intermarried Jews remain part of their families of origin and the MT. They are not regarded as having left Judaism except on the very rare occasions when they explicitly do so. The Orthodox interpretation of Jewish law, however, imposes constraints on the recognition of mixed marriages. Partners must have a civil wedding, not a religious one, and they may not conduct it in the synagogue. A non-Jewish spouse may not be buried in the Jewish cemetery or participate in certain Jewish social activities. Perhaps most importantly, traditional Jewish law, known as *halakhah*, reckons Jewish descent through the maternal line; accordingly, if a man intermarries, the MT will not regard his children as Jewish. (Judaism has no particular term for such children; for convenience, I will call them “patrilineal Jews.”) These problems make conversion an appealing prospect for many intermarrying couples, as well as for some children of intermarried Jewish men. Most Jewish marriages, therefore, raise the issue of conversion, either for their participants or their offspring, and decisions about conversion touch almost every Jewish family.

It is possible, of course, to convert out of strictly religious motives, without Jewish ancestry or plans for a Jewish marriage. But such instances are rare, and they tend to be regarded with suspicion by members of the community. In most cases, conversion is not a matter of religious insight, a validation of a transformation of consciousness, but a means of reckoning with the consequences of a particular social action.

The question of conversion can raise a variety of questions involving differing notions of ethnicity, religiosity, and the connection of the Jewish community to the larger world. Here, I focus on two: the questions of the definition of community raised by conversions at marriage, and the issues of authority that attend the conversion of patrilineal Jews.

Marriage Conversion and the Meaning of Jewishness

Anna Jensen, now a 28-year-old psychology student in Copenhagen, was a 20-year-old undergraduate when she began dating a Jewish boy named Oskar Goldschmidt. Anna did not regard herself as religious, having seldom attended church since her confirmation; Oskar, likewise, seldom attended religious services, and he regarded himself as an atheist. During a year-long stay in Israel as a teenager, however, Oskar had become deeply conscious of his Jewish identity, and at age 20 he was actively involved in Jewish youth and sports associations. When the couple began discussing future possibilities of marriage and children, Oskar expressed concern about the difficulties of a mixed marriage. He was very anxious that his children be Jewish, and he wanted his sons to identify with the Jewish traditions and social networks that meant so much to him. He therefore asked Anna if she would consider converting. The idea struck her as strange at first—she associated conversion with a kind of religious experience that was utterly foreign to her—but as she learned more about it, she found the prospect appealing. Converting would give her and Oskar something in common, an ability to participate together in Jewish rituals and keeping a Jewish home. It would mean a great deal to Oskar and to his parents. She didn't foresee any problem with her own family, none of whom were religious. Indeed, they, like her, saw something vaguely exciting in the distinctiveness of a Jewish identity, something temptingly unusual amidst the bland homogeneity of Danish culture. She found the exotic and intricate requirements of Jewish ritual practice fascinating, a puzzle of sorts, to work out in the process of daily life. As their marriage approached, conversion appeared to her as a straightforward and interesting way of solidifying her relationship with Oskar and the identities of their children.

For the Jewish community, by contrast, Anna's conversion and others like it raised some very difficult questions. Was this kind of motivation a sufficient justification for conversion? Could anyone convert to Judaism who fell in love with a Jew, or did there have to be some sort of independent interest in being Jewish? Could a convert be accepted who had expressed neither belief nor interest in the tenets of Jewish theology? If the answer was yes, what sort of requirements should be expected of such a convert? Surely, she would have to commit to living as a Jew—but what does living as a Jew involve, and how could her sincerity be proven? And what would happen if her marriage to Oskar were to fail, as so many marriages do? Answering such questions is a subject of serious dispute among the city's Jews, as it has been for the past century.

Answers tend to fall into two categories. One position sets high barriers to conversion. Conversion, it is argued, should be restricted to those who possess a deep connection to Jewish religion and culture, not to those who find

it a convenient way to simplify a marriage. People like Anna should be required to show a spiritual interest in Judaism over a long period of time and to undergo extensive instruction in Jewish life and ritual before being considered as candidates for conversion. Intermarriage is, after all, a serious transgression of Jewish law, and allowing easy conversions amounts to condoning it. Moreover, a marriage convert like Anna cannot be expected to become truly Jewish. She may call herself a Jew, and she may observe some of the rituals, but she will remain at heart a gentile. She will raise her children with Danish customs and a Danish worldview, not Jewish ones. Though the conversion will make them halakhic Jews, it will not make them spiritual Jews, and they are likely to shed their Judaism when they grow up. If she and Oskar divorce, experience suggests that she will return with the children to the family and church of her childhood. This view of conversion finds its strongest support among the deeply religious members of the MT, many of whom have close connections to Orthodox Jewish communities elsewhere in Europe. In many cases, they turn to such communities for spouses for their own children. Better to find a real Jewish spouse in London or Antwerp, they argue, and maintain the traditions and beliefs of Judaism than to pick a convenient Danish wife and call her a Jew.

The second position finds its strongest adherents among the less observant, Danish-identified members of the congregation and argues that the Orthodox approach is unrealistic. As noted, Danish Jews intermarry at extraordinarily high rates, and one cannot expect the situation to change; the decision to be made is not whether intermarriage should occur, but how to deal with it after it has occurred. In that context, an easier and even routine conversion offers the best possibility for maintaining Jewish community and culture. Anna's ability to pass on Jewish tradition may be limited, but conversion can only increase her knowledge of Jewish tradition. Surely, she would not raise better Jews if she were still a Christian. Her conversion also admits her children to Jewish education and rituals. And if she is not a perfectly observant Jew, how many Jews are? Most Danish Jews are very lax in synagogue attendance, kosher housekeeping, and other forms of Jewish religiosity. Converts, who consciously commit to a Jewish life, arguably practice better Judaism than the majority of the congregation. If Jews worry that converts are insufficiently committed, that they will return to Christianity in the event of a divorce, then they should make converts more welcome. Rather than keeping people like Anna outside the community, the argument goes, Jews should pull them in.

The differences between these two positions reflect a deeper split in the constitution of the Danish Jewish community itself. On the one hand, the community is built upon a structure of law, ritual, and ideology derived from a pre-modern tradition (cf. Di Bella, chapter 7); *halakhah* and much of Orthodox

theology were formulated before 1800, when Jews constituted an organic and largely self-contained community. To be a Jew, according to this body of law, is to be part of such a working social entity. In daily life, however, Danish Jews experience Jewishness in the context of late modern ethnicity, a type of ethnic affiliation Herbert Gans (1979) describes as “symbolic ethnicity.” Today, Jews are integrated into a number of communities, through occupation, interests, and family, none of which constitutes more than a small portion of their world. Ethnicity in such a context is not so much a connection to social entity as a feature of self, defined individually in the context of a largely Danish social experience. As Jews work out individual resolutions to the problem of Jewish identity, they tend to use one or the other of these contexts for defining the Jewish community to which they belong. The most Orthodox turn to halakhic model, examining conversion in the light of its effects on an integrated and distinct Jewish society. Their opponents, on the other hand, turn to the symbolic model and focus on conversion’s effects on the fragmented social world of the individual.

Opposition emerges in the ways in which people on the two sides articulate issues of conversion. When I asked Orthodox members about cases like Anna’s, they responded in terms of the meaning of Jewishness and the Jewish community. Jewishness, I was often told, is not something one just puts on like a suit of clothes; it requires a commitment to be a Jew, to follow Jewish law, and to regard the Jewish community as one’s home and reference group. Orthodox members took care to distance themselves from particular cases—“Mejnar is a nice man,” an ultra-orthodox leader told me about one case, “I don’t have any problem with him. But one has to think about what being Jewish means.” Liberals, by contrast, usually focused on the specific case at hand, emphasizing the hardship or emotional hurt imposed by a stringent policy toward conversion. Was it fair, they asked, that this or that person who was willing to contribute to the Jewish community was turned away? What is, for the Orthodox, a question of community definition is for the liberals a question of individual pragmatics—how to deal with the given fact of intermarriage in a world defined by immersion in Danish society.

Fortunately for Anna, her conversion took place during the last years of Rabbi Bent Melchior’s tenure. This was one of the easier periods in which to convert in Denmark, and her conversion went very smoothly. Melchior required her to attend conversion classes for almost a year, together with Oskar. There she learned the basic information necessary for leading a Jewish life: the ritual calendar, the logistics of kosher housekeeping, the rules of the Sabbath, the format of the Jewish service, and so on. Anna then underwent a conversion ceremony, complete with immersion in a ritual bath. She became a Jew; in fact, she became quite an observant Jew, considerably more reli-

giously active than Oskar, who told me that he finds some of her scrupulous ritual observance annoying. He's glad that she's Jewish now and thinks it will make things easier for their children when they have some, but it's been hard giving up roast pork.

Descent Conversion and the Construction of Authority

Conflicts over conversion entail not only definitions of community, but also constructions of authority. They involve not only concerns about what the Jewish community should be, but also who should be allowed to make that decision. These questions emerge with particular force in the other main occasion for conversion in Denmark, that involving patrilineal Jews. Although precise statistics are difficult to establish, clearly only a minority of non-Jewish spouses convert. For the majority, the issue of conversion moves into the next generation, to the children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers. Such individuals face a very different sort of transformation than Anna. For those who seek conversion, the process represents a formalization of a Jewish identity, not its creation; they decide to convert because they consider themselves Jewish, not because they wish to become Jewish. Often, they have a thorough Jewish education and extensive Jewish social networks, and in most cases they have a more conscious commitment to the community than the majority of its members. From a halakhic standpoint, however, they have no more claim to Jewish identity than any other Dane, and the rabbi often requires them to undergo a lengthy conversion process. Conversion thus privileges formal MT institutions over personal experience in establishing Jewish identity, a distribution of power that raises opposition and resentment from many of those affected by it.

This dynamic is characterized by Esther Herzog, a 26-year-old bank administrator who converted in 1996. Esther's parents divorced when she was 10 years old, and afterward she lived with her non-Jewish mother. Her relationship with her father was somewhat distant, especially after he moved back to his native Israel a few years later. Esther grew up with connections to Judaism, however, and her mother had tried to foster Esther's Jewish interests after the divorce. She sent Esther to the Jewish school for several years and encouraged her to socialize with Jews. On her graduation from gymnasium, Esther lived with her father in Israel for about six months. She looks back fondly on that time and says that she often considers moving to Israel permanently. On her return to Copenhagen, she decided that Jewishness was her true identity. She went to the rabbi and told him that she wanted to convert. She expected the rabbi to welcome her immediately and was shocked and hurt when he did not. Rather, the rabbi suggested that she begin going to

services for a while and get involved in Jewish activities, and he would let her know when he thought she was ready. She followed his advice, throwing herself headlong into the Jewish world. She attended services, observed holidays, and joined a youth group and a Zionist organization. She checked in with the rabbi occasionally, making sure he knew of her involvement, but he remained noncommittal about admitting her to conversion. He hinted that it would help matters if she had a Jewish boyfriend, a suggestion that led to several short and unhappy romances. After almost a year of anxiety, the rabbi finally decided to admit her to conversion instruction, and within a few months she was formally converted.

The conversion process brought Esther face-to-face with the dual nature of Jewish identity in Copenhagen. To be a Jew is both to belong to a particular community and to hold a particular understanding of self. Like most Copenhagen Jews, Esther thought of Jewishness primarily in terms of personal ethnic identification; she regarded herself as a Jew because she felt Jewish, irrespective of her tenuous ties to Jewish worship or her distance from Jewish community. The MT, by contrast, regarded such feelings as irrelevant. Jewish identity, in its view, depended not on the subjective assessments of individuals but on a common religious and legal framework. For Esther, conversion represented the primacy of this community law over individual experience. The rabbi who required it, who set the conditions upon which Esther could “really” be a Jew, embodied the power of the group to shape personal identity.

Esther resented this power enormously. Her bitterness over the ordeal, even several years later, is plainly evident. She was angry at being forced to attend services, at having to make a show for the rabbi to prove her own identity. The anxious waiting period and the possibility of rejection struck her as a cruel means of forcing her to acknowledge the rabbi’s power over her. It felt arbitrary and archaic, she says, and she says it showed how out of touch the community was with contemporary Jewish life. Even their criteria seemed sexist and absurd. Why should she need to go through all this, she asked, just because her mother, not her father, was a non-Jew? Esther’s ire has led to active involvement in the MT, where she champions the cause of mixed couples and women in committee work and community journals.

I met similar reactions to the conversion process not only among patrilineal converts but also among many other liberal Jews. The notion that a set of arcane traditional laws should determine who is a Jew, rather than the felt experience of living people, clashed with liberal understandings of the nature of Jewish ethnic identity in contemporary Denmark. In cases like Anna’s, these understandings have led to calls for easier access to conversion; in cases like Esther’s, they have led to anger at the authority structure of the congregation.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CONVERSION

In a fragmented community like that of the Copenhagen Jews, many congregational disagreements lie simmering for years. The group has survived in large part by avoiding outright confrontations, letting a variety of viewpoints on Jewishness and Jewish religiosity coexist alongside one another. Issues of conversion, however, require clear choices. The community, through its representatives, must make an unambiguous statement of who does and who does not belong, and it must apply that statement to specific individuals seeking entry to the group. Such decisions have concrete and immediate consequences. Individuals may or may not be allowed to marry in the synagogue, to circumcise their sons, or to send their children to Jewish institutions. Such consequences touch not only the individuals but also larger family and social networks. As a result, conversion presents one of the most politically fraught moments in the life of the Jewish community—a moment in which the congregation must declare its position on the nature of Jewishness—and the answer will have a widespread effect.

This situation imbues conversion with both danger and possibility for a religious leader. As in most Jewish communities, the Chief Rabbi of Copenhagen holds final authority over the conduct of ritual in Denmark; since he alone is able to perform the conversion ceremony, he decides who will be allowed to convert and the terms under which they can do so. In some cases, his decisions have unleashed revolts within the congregation. In 1903, for example, the traditionalist Rabbi Tobias Lewenstein decided to change the conditions by which patrilineal Jews could enter the community. Earlier rabbis had routinely converted patrilineal Jews as long as they had been raised as Jews. Lewenstein tightened requirements sharply, demanding that converts be raised in kosher homes and attend religious school throughout childhood. His action provoked an outcry from congregational liberals, who after an extended, public, and very bitter battle, had him dismissed from office. A reverse case occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, when the liberal Bent Melchior earned the enmity of traditionalists through what they saw as his rubber-stamp approach to conversion. In 1981, by aligning with another disaffected group, the traditionalists managed to terminate Melchior's contract. The current rabbi, Bent Lexner, has pushed his congregation in a more Orthodox direction and has worked hard to woo liberals to his position. Although many of those I interviewed liked him very much, his restrictive views on conversion remain a powerful barrier to their supporting him. The intensity of feelings surrounding conversion make it a recurring danger to the political tenure of rabbis.

At the same time, conversion policies also can be a source of strength. Lewenstein's stance on conversion made him a hero to the congregation's

traditionalist wing. After his dismissal from the MT, supporters established a second synagogue for him to lead, a synagogue that remains in operation today. Likewise, although Melchior's conversion policy made him enemies among the Orthodox, it also made him friends among liberals. After the board terminated his contract in 1981, an energetic campaign by these supporters managed to replace the board and reinstate Melchior in 1982. When carefully managed, conversion policy can provide a source of allies as well as antagonists, and most rabbis tread a delicate line on the subject.

The political valence of conversion also touches the lives of converts. Intense feelings surrounding the process have led a number of converts to become more active in congregational affairs. Converts like Esther, for example, frequently appear in the leadership of the congregation, especially in its social clubs and intellectual societies. Tensions surrounding conversion also shape their perception by other Jews in daily life. A number of converts told me of a lingering sense of illegitimacy, a feeling—in many cases quite justified—that other Jews regard them as frauds or interlopers. Esther complained that she constantly had to prove her Jewishness, and it was never enough; through a snide reference here or a cryptic comment there, people in the MT repeatedly cast doubt on whether she was a genuine Jew. As a result, she says that she has to follow Jewish law with far greater care than would a born Jew. Most Jews can eat a nonkosher meal, work on Saturday, or go out with a non-Jewish man, and no one thinks anything of it. But if Esther does these things, people will question the sincerity of her conversion. Jewishness is a conscious identity she has deliberately chosen, but it is one in which she never feels entirely secure.

Conversion, in this sense, does not make one a regular Jew. It makes one a convert, a distinctive status that carries ongoing symbolic and practical consequences. Converts exemplify basic conflicts in the construction of Jewish identity: individual versus group, choice versus obligation, objective law versus subjective experience. Conversions thus become not merely evanescent rites of passage but permanent features of the self.

CONCLUSION

The association of religious conversion with theological insight has deep roots in the Western Christian tradition. It stands at the center of the tradition's key narratives, including the cathartic transformations of saints like Paul and Augustine. In such stories, conversion involves a fresh vision of the truth, a realization that the new religion represents a higher understanding of

the world. Such conversions are echoed in Protestant revival movements and in "born-again" churches, where even longtime members seek to experience a new consciousness of the meaning of their faith. This notion also informs much of the social scientific work on conversion, which has focused on the processes through which radical changes in religious worldviews take place. While acknowledging the influence of social dynamics on conversion, scholars have trained their gaze largely where Christianity has trained it: on changes in belief and experience of the world that Christian conversion demands. Like born-again Christians, they have tended to overlook conversions that lack that sort of change; they have regarded them as less than "true" conversions and classified them as political or social rather than religious phenomena. Consequently, they have said relatively little about the effects of such conversions on either the experience of converts or on the religious communities that they join.

Yet the social and experiential correlates of social conversion are no less complex or wide-ranging than conversions motivated by belief. In Copenhagen, conversions lay bare a variety of tensions concerning the nature of Jewish identity, authority, and religiosity, and they force individuals to come to terms with their own views on these issues. Converts provide a focus for community debate as well as symbols of ambivalence and tension afterward. The nature of these conflicts reflects the particular social and cultural position of Jews in contemporary Denmark; the organizational stresses surrounding the incorporation of the community into the modern state, and the stresses involved in secularization, push the debate over conversion in a specific direction and place specific actors on either side of the issue. In other groups, conversion reflects different strains on social organization or the construction of identity. But even in groups that value belief-conversion more than the Danish Jews, and even in groups that deny the validity of purely social conversion, the social dimension of conversion offers a revealing window into group ideas about identity and community.

We should not assume, moreover, that social conversions are somehow less authentic or less complete than those based on religious inspiration. Membership in a religious community derives from more than a set of beliefs; it also involves a set of relationships with other members, a set of practices and habits, and a set of aesthetic orientations and discursive styles (Hefner 1993: 27–28). Converts are able to assimilate such elements without the corresponding beliefs, and indeed these elements may provide a better index of a person's conversion. During the partition of the Indian subcontinent, for example, social workers often met fierce resistance when they tried to return women who had been forcibly converted to Islam to their original Hindu

homes (Menon and Basin 1993; Viswanathan 1998: xii–xiv). Having married Muslim men, raised Muslim children, and lived Muslim lives, they had effectively become Muslims, whatever their religious beliefs or the circumstances of their conversion. The social and practical dimensions of conversion, that is, had significance beyond and above that of faith. A similar case could be made for converts in Jewish Copenhagen. Orthodox Judaism places greater weight on practice than on belief; although it is good to believe in God, it is essential to carry out the commandments of *halakhah*. An atheist can be a perfectly observant Jew, and indeed many are. To evaluate the completeness of a conversion on the extent to which it is rooted in faith, therefore, rather than on the extent to which a convert is immersed in Jewish practice and social networks, is to impose a false standard of authenticity.

Indeed, it might well reverse the real situation on the ground. I did meet a religiously inspired convert in Copenhagen, a pleasant young woman who had fallen in love with Judaism while on a visit to an Israeli kibbutz. She had studied the Jewish scriptures intensively and could discuss Jewish theology with considerable sophistication. She was, above all, forthright concerning her belief in God and the divine foundations of Jewish ritual. Her belief was obviously a comfort to her, and it justified an impressively stringent regime of ritual practice. However, her belief did not make her more authentically Jewish than other converts I met. If anything, it made her less so. Most Copenhagen Jews do not walk about in a state of theological certitude; like most other Danes, they have serious doubts about the existence of God and balance their interest in religious observance against their participation in a decidedly secularized culture. Their attitude toward religion is ridden with ambivalence and skepticism, making the observance of *halakhah* a complicated decision. Arguably, it is not the true believer but someone like Esther who is closer to the Jewish experience. Brought into the group by family connections, conflicted about her own beliefs and identity, unsure of her place in the community and angry at its leadership, Esther may little resemble the classic picture of the successful convert—but she certainly exemplifies the experience of a great many of the Copenhagen Jews.

NOTES

1. For general historical studies of the Danish Jews, see Bamberger (1983), Borchsenius (1968) and Feigenberg (1984). For a discussion of the contemporary community, see Buckser (1999a, 1999b, 2000).

2. For studies of this event, see Buckser (2001), Sode-Madsen (1993), Goldberger (1987), and Yahil (1969).

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