

# Book Review – A People Divided, Judaism in Contemporary America

Compared to Christians (two billion), Muslims (1.5 billion), Hindus (1 billion), and Buddhists (0.5 billion), Jews are a small people group (6.7 million) and Judaism is a tiny religion. The impact of the Jewish people and the Jewish religion in history has been tremendous over the millennia; far out of proportion to its size. Jack Wertheimer's *A People Divided – Judaism in Contemporary America*, describes the Jewish experience in the United States in the late 1900s. Wertheimer is a Professor of American Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and is exceedingly qualified to write this book. The book itself won the 1993-1994 National Jewish Book Award.

The biggest flaw in *A People Divided – Judaism in Contemporary America* is that it is badly out of date. Written 23 years ago (1993), the reader cannot help but wonder how much of what he is learning has changed. The most obvious example is the section on Reconstructionist Jews. Wertheimer cites the National Jewish Population Survey of 1990 when he writes that 1% of all Jews are reconstructionists.<sup>1</sup> A similar survey from Pew in 2013 had reconstructionists and renewalists at 6%, a big change.<sup>2</sup> With such turbulence in the Jewish experience over the past 20 years, *A People Divided – Judaism in Contemporary America* is too old to be trusted.

Wertheimer begins by describing the Jews in America in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a ghastly time, with the greatest disaster in the history of the Jewish people, the Holocaust, having just recently ended. It was also a glorious time, because for the first time in two thousand years, the Jews had a state of their own. After the war Jews primarily emigrated to two places, Israel and America. It was such a consolidation that today, far more Jews are in Israel or the US than in any other location. Coming off these momentous changes in world Jewry, the 1950s were relatively quiet with the Jewish community in the US.

This all changed in the 1960s. The birth control pills, the Women's Rights Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War wracked all parts of American society, and the Jews were no exception. The percentage of Jews in the liberal Reform movement grew while that in the ultraconservative Orthodox camp declined. The moderate Conservative Judaism prospered, and the radical Reconstructionists advanced. Increasing levels of education were associated with poorer religious participation.<sup>3</sup> Inter-marriage, Jews marrying non-Jews, became more common, and Jewish religious participation declined. The combination of Jews leaving Judaism by choice, those leaving through marriage, and those simply being so assimilated into American life that they neglected their ancestral religion prompted worries of whether Judaism in America would even survive.

Simultaneously, American culture became more individualistic, and religion followed suit. People adopted a pick and choose mentality about religion, the underlying assumption being that since they were the masters of their own lives, they could do whatever they wanted. Doctrine and authority were out, while experience and "authenticity" were in. Women gained political power, the homosexual movement advanced, and Jews grew more liberal politically. Social and political activism became the rage. Some synagogues even became atheist.

A funny thing happened, though – the conservatives came back. Perhaps as a reaction to seismic changes in US culture, Orthodox Judaism (as well as Evangelical Christianity) exploded during the 1970s and 1980s. While the Baby Boomer and Generation X cohorts eschewed traditional religion, the youngest cohorts began returning to it. The Havurah movement promised a more intimate communal experience

*A People Divided – Judaism in Contemporary America* provides a summary of each branch of Judaism. The Reformed branch started liberal and became more liberal. Reformed leaders reinstated the right for adherents to participate in traditional rituals that had previously been banned, but this was a bow to individualism, not a recognition of

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided – Judaism in Contemporary America*, Brandeis University Press, Hanover NH, 1993, 162.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>, accessed 28 Aug 2016

<sup>3</sup> Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided – Judaism in Contemporary America*, Brandeis University Press, Hanover NH, 1993, 27.

traditional truth. The biggest question Reformed Jews ask is “Are there any limits at all?” If not, “what makes a Jew?” The Orthodox branch has been increasingly assertive with its growing popularity. Religious traditions seem to matter with other sources of stability, job, family, and community falling away. However, assertiveness too often results in division, and modern Orthodoxy is no exception. The Conservative Branch of Judaism has tried to hold the middle ground, but as America becomes ever more fractious, Conservatives find themselves attacked by the left and the right. The center-left has moved into the Reformed camp and the center-right has moved into the Orthodox camp. Just as in US politics, Jewish religiosity is growing apart. The Reconstructionist branch is as liberal as ever, showing the Reformed Jews a vivid example of radical progressivism.

Wertheimer examined the question of whether Orthodox Jews would join Christians in the American “culture war”, but he decided they would not. Orthodox Jews, he suggested, were more interested in survival than in the right political ordering of American society. However, the denominations of Judaism are growing further apart. Orthodox Jews often will not recognize baptisms, marriages, or other ceremonies officiated by Reformed or Conservative rabbis. The Orthodox and the others often publicly excoriate each other. One Orthodox rabbi infamously said “in principal it is forbidden to save the life of a Reform or Conservative Jew on the Sabbath, or to save a Gentile’s life.”<sup>4</sup> Even the Protestants in America don’t hate each other that much.

Finally, Wertheimer does an excellent job describing the relationship between Jews in Israel and those in the US. Israeli Jews, constantly fighting for national and personal survival in a sea of hostility, are largely Orthodox. American Jews, safe, prosperous and influential, are more often Reformed. Consequently, Israeli Jews have close ties to their Orthodox co-religionists in America. Liberal American Jews, by contrast, have trouble even supporting their Israeli brethren.

Overall, Wertheimer’s *A People Divided – Judaism in Contemporary America* is a good book and has good information. However, it is desperately in need of updating. His comments about the relationship between branches of Judaism in America and the Jews in Israel were true in 1990, but the reader cannot know how much they remain true today.

#### Questions

1. What are the current relationships between the various branches of Judaism in America? Are they getting along better or are they as divided as ever?
2. Is the Jewish community growing or shrinking, both numerically and in religious practice?
3. How can Christians reach Jews for Christ? How can they work with them for common political goals?

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided – Judaism in Contemporary America*, Brandeis University Press, Hanover NH, 1993, 175