

Ascription, Choice, and the Construction of Religious Identities in the Contemporary United States

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Within the past 15 years, sociological studies of religion have emphasized the chosen, achieved nature of religious identities and have deemphasized ascription or tribalism as the basis of Americans' construction of religious selves. The accounts many people develop in narrating their religious life experiences, however, often combine notions of ascription and achievement in ways scholars have not clearly conceptualized. This article develops an approach to religious identity that shows how, rather than being treated as a dichotomy, the concepts of ascription and achievement are integrated in nuanced ways in the narratives of religious identity told by first-generation immigrant Thai Buddhists and third-generation Jews, two groups with strong inherited religious identities. The comparison between Jews and Buddhists shows how members of both groups blend the concepts of ascription and achievement in similar and different ways, particularly around practice, regardless of their participation in religious organizations.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between identity and modernity has been a central sociological problem since the development of the discipline of sociology. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim (1933) expressed his concern with how, in a modern society where people have emerged as individuals who are no longer held together by the mechanical bonds of solidarity found in a traditional society, individuals are united into a coherent social order. Tonnies's concepts of *gemeinschaft* and *gessellschaft* reflected a similar dichotomy between modern and traditional notions of social organization, as did Georg Simmel's writings about the distinction between the individualism of modernity and the medieval affiliations with the group that "absorbed the whole man" (Simmel 1955:149; Tonnies 1963). One popular description of the changing nature of identity over time posits that in premodern societies, identities were largely a matter of ascription and that the hallmark of modernity is that identities became the result of choices that are performed and enacted and thus more of an "achievement."

That ascription and achievement are two distinct ways of constructing identities or aspects of identities was notably asserted by Linton (1936) in articulating types of statuses in his classic work, *The Study of Man*. Similarly, Talcott Parson's work on pattern variables highlights the distinction between ascription and achievement as one of the five dichotomies individuals use to orient themselves in the social world. Ascribed characteristics, Parsons argued, were those people believed and acted as if were fixed, immutable, or inherited, whereas achieved characteristics had to be performed to be recognized: "Achievement-oriented roles are those that place the accent on the performances of the incumbent, ascribed roles, in his qualities or attributes independently of any specifically expected performances" (Parsons 1982:111).

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Much discourse within the sociology of religion also maintains a distinction between these modes of religious identity, with the current trend arguing that religion in the United States has dramatically changed from being based in ascription to being more a matter of personal choice. Berger's (1969) classic work *The Sacred Canopy* posits that religion in modern societies is a matter of individual choice and that this ability to choose would inevitably and inexorably weaken traditional religious commitments. Warner's (1993) "new paradigm" article heralds the triumphalism of Americans' freedom of religious choice, asserting, "religion need not represent something in which people are primordially rooted. Religious affiliation in the United States is not tribal." Warner also challenges Berger's assumption that the element of choice weakens religious commitment. In fact, Warner asserts, it might well strengthen it, since the very act of choosing a religion and its beliefs and practices, when an individual knows there are various competing alternatives, adds agency and meaning to the commitment.¹ Roof (1993) and Wuthnow (1998) similarly emphasize the idea of religion as a matter of choice when each writes about contemporary Americans as seekers who are searching for individualized meanings that they often cannot find in their inherited traditions. In making their choices, these seekers engage in practices through which they enact their freely chosen religious commitments and identities, thereby moving beyond the limits of ascription.

In this article, we complicate the notion that ascription and achievement are conceptually distinct, dichotomous ways of constructing religious identities.² Although choice is portrayed as a central characteristic of religion in contemporary America by Wuthnow, Roof, Bellah et al. (1985), and others, the respondents they quote, and others, go beyond what these authors conclude by clearly combining ideas of ascription and achievement in their narratives of religious identity. Rather than seeing their religious identities as either ascribed as a result of birth *or* achieved as a result of conscious choices they make and practices they perform to enact these identities, respondents often fall along a continuum between these two conceptual categories, and most incorporate both elements into their accounts of their religious identities. The theoretical goal of this article is to explore this continuum to show how sociologists of religion can provide greater conceptual and theoretical clarity to questions of religious identity by analyzing the multiple ways individuals' religious narratives do not simply emphasize choice but rather combine notions of ascription and achievement in making sense of their identities. Particularly in the American context, in which a large number of people are born within religious traditions, this lack of conceptual clarity can easily render invisible individuals' attachment to and emphasis on the ascribed nature of the religion in which they were born, even as they talk about their choices regarding practice.

This article furthers existing theoretical discussions of ascription and achievement or choice by actually analyzing how the concepts are present in the narratives people in contemporary U.S. society construct to express and enact their religious identities. Specifically, we examine people within two minority immigrant religious traditions, Judaism and Buddhism. Although a few of the people interviewed articulated their religious identities exclusively in terms of ascription or achievement, the majority combined notions of ascription and achievement in talking about how they understand their religious identities. We analyze the ways in which people combined these ideas, offering a more nuanced analytic way of thinking about how the concepts of ascription and achievement constitute accounts or vocabularies of motive that Americans evoke in various ways in their discourses about religion.

A serendipitous occurrence led us to work together and analyze the questions of ascription and choice in religious identity through a comparative study of third-generation Jews and first-generation Thai Buddhist immigrants. We had been working independently on larger studies of our respective groups, Cadge on the Buddhists and Davidman on the Jews. But presentations on the same panel at a professional conference in 2002 led us to realize that, although the groups were distinct, we were working on similar analytic issues. Our respondents were often using combinations of the concepts of innate religious/ethnic identities and practice as a way to achieve these identities in their narratives. The groups certainly differ from one another in that our samples

fall into different generations after immigration and have reverse relationships to organized religious bodies—the Jews are in their second and third generations in the United States and do not belong to synagogues whereas the Thai Buddhists are in their first generation in America and regularly attend the same Thai Buddhist temple. Nevertheless, we recognized some very basic similarities between both groups that convinced us that comparing them would be fruitful: both traditions emphasize birth as well as religious practices, and members of both groups told narratives that suggested that achievement and ascription are often blended into individuals' accounts of their religious identities. That members of such seemingly distinct traditions told narratives with similar combinations of emphases serves to further our argument about the need to pay attention to both inherited tradition and choice in analyzing religious narratives. The comparison allows us to see more ways that the themes of ascription and achievement are used in relation to tradition, ethnicity, community, and practice in people's accounts of their religious identities than we could see in one tradition alone.

We want to clarify that within this article we use the concept of “ascription,” “essential,” or “inherent” as an analytic category to refer to those aspects of religious identity that our respondents believed were *essential and unchangeable* because of the circumstances of their birth. We use the terms “achievement,” “choice,” “practice,” and “performance” to refer analytically to those things people *do* in order to create a sense of religious identity. Following in the symbolic interaction tradition, we see religious identities as not simply inherent in the person but rather *enacted*, or *performed*, much in the way that Candace West and Don Zimmerman see gender (a feature many see as biologically innate and immutable) as a matter of performance, as they argue in their essay “Doing Gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987).

BACKGROUND

In addition to their presence in recent research in the sociology of religion generally, the concepts of ascription and achievement are present in research about Judaism and Buddhism in the United States more specifically. Among sociological analyses of contemporary Jews, for example, many researchers argue that the particular components of Jewish identities in modern U.S. society are largely a matter of individual choice: people choose among groups or affiliations, decide which practices and rituals to maintain, and, of course, decide whether to affiliate or to practice at all (Davidman 1991; Heilman 1990; Prell 1989). In their recent study of moderately affiliated U.S. Jews, Cohen and Eisen (2000:35) found that their respondents, like many of their contemporaries in the United States, emphasized the notion that their identities are very much the creation of their own multidimensional individual choices, even though most also identified as Jewish through birth.³ The tension between the seemingly competing claims—that these individuals see their religion as both a matter of choice *and* a matter of birth—is fascinating. Cohen and Eisen, however, did not investigate the nature and meaning of this tension between claims that one is Jewish from birth and that there is *no* choice about it, and that one has to choose certain practices in order to be Jewish. In her book, *Hidden Heritage*, Jacobs (2002) struggles with these same issues in regard to the Crypto-Jews, who may or may not be technically Jewish from birth (their mothers may not be born to Jewish mothers), but who do claim a Jewish ancestry and recognize that they are making choices about whether to practice and which rituals to embrace. Davidman's current research builds on this work by deeply interrogating the double-edged nature of accounts that emphasize both choice and immutability.

Recent research about Buddhism in America also focuses on identity, though the primary emphasis of these studies has been on identifying who is a Buddhist and how to count Buddhists rather than on asking how Buddhists understand their own religious identities in the American context (Baumann 1997; Prebish 1999; Tweed 1999). Research about how Buddhists actually construct their identities has tended to focus more on convert or white Buddhists than on Asian Buddhists (Coleman 2001). Among Asian Buddhists, researchers often describe religion

and ethnicity as intertwined and rarely empirically examine how people construct their own religious and/or ethnic identities. Many studies of Asian Buddhists equate religious and ethnic identities (Smith-Hefner 1999; VanEsterik 1999, 1992). Other studies suggest that some Asian Buddhists in America view religion and ethnicity as separate aspects of identity. Studies such as Chen's (forthcoming) analysis of first-generation Taiwanese Christians and Buddhists in America suggest that some Asian Buddhists view their religious identities as chosen after they arrive in the United States. Chen's work further shows that Taiwanese Buddhists, as well as Christians, describe conversion experiences in the United States through which they develop different kinds of Buddhist identities than they had in Taiwan.

METHODS

To examine the concepts of ascription and achievement in people's narratives of religious identification in the contemporary United States, we studied people who were Jews or Thai Buddhists from birth. We focused primarily on how people understood and articulated their religious identities, although issues of ethnic identification are centrally related to religious identification for many people, as will become evident. Our sample included second- and third-generation Jews and first-generation Thai Buddhists for two reasons, one purely pragmatic: these are the generations of adult Jews and Thai Buddhists in the majority right now, given the different time periods in which each group arrived in the United States. Second, the generational range of the sample allowed us to maximize the range of different ways in which people who have remained within the traditions of their birth approach the concepts of ascription and choice. This comparison is particularly instructive because the comparison is between Jews who are native born and not involved in religious organizations and Thai Buddhists who are foreign born and involved in a religious organization in the United States. These differences are, of course, important, but must be viewed in the context of the groups' similarities: both groups have strongly inherited religious identities and both are in the United States. To gather information, Davidman conducted formal open-ended interviews with 30 Jews, and Cadge conducted interviews with 25 Thai Buddhists, as well as informal interviews with an additional 35 Thai Buddhists. Among other topics, our questions sought to ascertain whether our respondents saw their religious identities as ascribed or achieved or some combination of the two.

During the fall of 2001, Davidman conducted the interviews with Jews in a major northeastern city. These respondents were located through advertisements in two major newspapers within a radius of 50 miles. The advertisements, which appeared on two different days in both papers, read: "Jewish Cultural Study. If you are Jewish and do not belong to a synagogue, I would like to interview you for a book on the subject. All interviews will be anonymous and confidential. Please call Professor Davidman [at office phone number]." Davidman deliberately chose Jews who did not have an institutional home in order to explore whether and how those without institutionally provided scripts rely on their own resources to articulate what it means to them to be Jewish. Davidman received over 50 calls in response to the advertisements. Thirty of these callers were selected in order to produce a sample that had an equal number of women and men, and spanned an age range of 30–70. Davidman excluded from the sample people who did not yet have children because this group is much less likely to have joined synagogues than Jews who have children whom they want to socialize as Jews (see Cohen and Eisen 2000:45). The interview questions were extensive and addressed family histories in terms of immigration, levels of religious observance across the generations, the respondent's own religious upbringing and education, their sense of the precise nature of Judaism (religion, ethnicity, family tradition, and culture), their current identification and its basis, practices, and the Jewish socialization of their children.⁴

Cadge conducted the interviews with Thai Buddhists between January and September 2001. All of the Buddhists interviewed were first-generation Thai immigrants who are involved with a Thai Buddhist temple in the suburbs of a large northeastern city (a different city, however, than the

Jews). The majority of immigrants at the temple came to the United States from Thailand, a country in which the vast majority of people are Buddhist and where Buddhism, as the state religion, receives government support for its temples and monasteries. The voluntary nature of religious membership in the United States, which was new to immigrants from Thailand, demanded some adaptation from them after their move. This temple was founded in 1985 and is led by five Thai monks who were born and trained in Thailand. Services are held in Thai, though the majority of people who attend the temple speak English fluently. The people interviewed range in age from their mid 20s to mid 60s and represent a cross-section of those who are involved with the temple. More women than men attend the temple, so more women than men were interviewed. Open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted with all of the individuals, and included questions about why and how respondents came to the United States, decided to attend the temple, their religious upbringing, identification, education and socialization of their children, and the ways they understand religion to influence various parts of their lives. In addition to these open-ended interviews, a number of shorter, more informal interviews took place at the temple while Cadge participated in all aspects of temple life.⁵ Although the backgrounds and ways of identifying the Jews and the Buddhists described here were quite different, commonalities and differences in their ways of constructing religious identities in the United States are instructive for theoretical considerations of religious identity.

FINDINGS

Two Typical Narratives

Before presenting our more general findings, it is helpful to hear the voices of two people we interviewed that are most representative of the kinds of stories we heard.

Along with the majority of Jews interviewed, Lisa,⁶ a 40-year-old woman, used both the language of ascription and choice in her narrative. Lisa grew up in New York City and had little formal religious education, but nonetheless has always considered herself Jewish. As a child, Lisa did not question her background because it was all she knew, but as she got older, she says, she started “seeking,” and has chosen to get more interested and involved with certain aspects of Judaism. She remembered:

as a young adult, wanting to connect more and understand more, and I think trying to figure out if I should be religious or how And I think more recently it's no, I'm not really religious, but there's something here and it's something that's really important to me and how can I connect to that.

Lisa talks about Judaism as a culture, heritage, and ethnic category, although not necessarily a religious one, that she was born into. Her background and birth are a part of her and her worldview. She commented:

I think I see being Jewish as a . . . it's something I've been born into so it's who I am as a person . . . whether it's a race or culture, and it's something very special. We joke about being the chosen people, but I feel lucky to be Jewish, because I feel like we have this really rich history and it's not been an easy history and certainly my family has been touched by that [a reference to the Holocaust] . . . it has enabled us to be deeper and I guess richer, and it's definitely given meaning to my life. Not on a religious level but of how I see the world.

Lisa clearly has a strong intellectual and emotional understanding of herself as Jewish, although she was not brought up with any formal Jewish observance. In her adult life, however, she sought a community and a set of religious practices that would help her enact her Jewish identity. She located a Jewish environmentalist group that would help her combine her interests in Judaism and social work. Within this context, Lisa developed a bricolage of religious practices

that took elements from environmentalism and linked them to Judaism as a way to construct her individual identification as a Jew.

In her search to find a community and to understand the Jewish part of her, Lisa also chose to begin to partake in rituals and holidays by doing what was meaningful to her, and therefore making them her own. Lisa was never able to find a temple that “felt right,” so instead she adapted her practice to her own wants and needs.

And we [her group of Jewish environmentalists] started having our own Seders and celebrating Rosh Hashanah and having dinners and then inviting people and sort of creating it for ourselves and choosing the parts that made sense to us. We connected these practices to environmental issues by emphasizing the connections between the natural cycles of the year and how the holidays fit into the cycle. So there was that, and then the more I did that, the more I got interested in Judaism.

Lisa and the members of the community she found took the traditions of standard, widely observed holidays and practiced them in a way that made the group’s values a priority. Furthermore, Lisa found a way to make their interest in social action fit in with her Jewish identity, such that both were enriched and legitimized. “And that was why what we created at our house was so special, because it gave us a chance to reflect on things, but in a way that felt comfortable to us.”

In her narrative, Lisa combined ideas of ascription and achievement. She understands herself as Jewish by birth—a connection she describes as more “cultural” or “ethnic” than religious—and also by way of choices she made about specific communal practices outside of traditional Jewish institutions. In joining a Jewish environmental group and beginning ritual practices in her home, Lisa’s narrative reflected a combination of her sense of herself as Jewish from birth with a selection of traditional and improvised ritual practices she finds meaningful. Lisa is just one example of someone deciding to explore her background in an attempt to “find how to fit it into our lives,” and she, like many others, combines the categories of ascription and choice in so doing.

Kanyā, a Thai Buddhist woman in her 40s, also combined notions of ascription and achievement, in similar and slightly different ways than Lisa and the other Jews interviewed. Kanyā first described her religious identity as Buddhist by speaking about a course on non-Western religions that she enrolled in after arriving in the United States. She expected the course to be “an easy A” but when the professor started to teach about the Buddha as a “rich landlord,” she thought he was wrong and started to challenge him. In response, she started to reflect on her own experience and religious identity and explained:

When we grow up in Thailand, we are born into Buddhism, it is the religion we grow up with . . . I did my research in this class and I studied and, my god, you know, I realized I took my religion for granted. There are a lot of things we can do and practice to help us understand why we are believing in Buddhism.

Although she saw herself as a Buddhist because she was born into a Buddhist family in Thailand, Kanyā realized through her studies in this class that there was much more to Buddhism than what she remembered from her childhood; and she wanted her identity to reflect some of those intricacies.

As a result, Kanyā made a series of choices to practice Buddhism through communal gatherings, rituals, and individual practices. She explained:

I came here to the temple to do the landscaping and devote myself to my religion—to be a part of it. And for seven years now I have been practicing my religion. I am more and more into it.

Kanyā prepares and offers food to the monks at the temple, helps to organize festivals, and participates in chanting and meditation gatherings that take place at the temple regularly. Her focus in her interview on landscaping in addition to these other practices, however, is interesting because it is something she does alone, rather than in a group, and only one of several ways she

spends time at the temple. Kanyā spoke later in the interview about how she meditates while she does the landscaping and connected this meditation practice to the individual religious practices she does daily in her home. Her focus on the landscaping in addition to communal rituals, then, reflects Kanyā's commitment to individual religious practices, especially meditation and chanting, which is where she, along with many others, believes the deepest kind of Buddhist practice actually begins.

Kanyā's understanding of herself as Buddhist shifted in the United States from a perspective based only on her birth to a religious identity based both on her birth and on the choices she made to maintain religious practices at home and at the temple. She believes all Thai Buddhists in the United States go through this shift, in varying degrees, with different amounts of emphasis on individual and communal practices. She explained:

When we [Thai people] are homesick, when we go to different country, the first thing we look for is a Thai temple—to see a statue of the Buddha it makes a feeling of home (patting her heart) . . . of warmth and security. And that's why Thai people like to come to the temple because of that.

In Thailand people can be Buddhists based on their birth alone regardless of their participation in a temple. In contrast, Buddhist culture is not ubiquitous in the United States, nor is it apparent in key elements of American culture. Thus Kanyā and others chose to attend a Buddhist temple in order to quell feelings of homesickness or aloneness. Furthermore, as Kanyā demonstrated by patting her heart (often understood in Thai culture as the center of the person), these practices are a part of being a Buddhist, of feeling “warmth,” “security,” and a sense of being a whole individual. This feeling of “home” comes, in varying degrees for different people, from the individual and communal rituals in which they participate in the United States. Although Kanyā's ways of describing the ideas of ascription and achievement in her own life and in other Thai Buddhists' identities include a traditional religious institution and varying degrees of individual and communal religious practices, they share with Lisa's narrative an emphasis on both birth and choice, and a focus on sets of practices done in community with others in the United States. Further, both Lisa's and Kanyā's stories offer examples of individuals who sought practices that would help them “achieve” their ascribed identities.

Religion as Both Ascribed and Achieved: Buddhists

Despite their differences in tradition and generation in the United States, the majority of Jews and Buddhists interviewed in these projects, like Lisa and Kanyā, viewed their identities as ascribed or given at birth *and* also achieved as a result of choices they made and the practices they performed to enact their religious traditions. We focus here on these people and on the themes that emerge from how they combine ascription and achievement in their religious identities.

Before examining these themes, it is analytically helpful to consider briefly how the few people who did not combine ideas of ascription and achievement described their religious identities. A few Buddhists described their religious identities only in ascribed terms and generally viewed their religious and ethnicity identities as one and the same. For example, Dr. Chan, a Thai doctor in his 50s, said he was born as a Buddhist, has always been Buddhist, and is still Buddhist. Dr. Chan spoke for himself and his wife when he said: “We are born with Buddhism. My parents always went to the temple like we do.” He did not see any difference between the temple his parents went to in Thailand and the temple he goes to; and he believes his three children were born Buddhists and will always be Buddhists, regardless of any specific practices they do or do not enact. While Dr. Chan's understanding of Buddhism may have changed over time, he describes his sense of himself as a Buddhist as stable from birth. He does not view his Buddhist identity as directly relating to or contingent upon any distinctly Buddhist practices such

as chanting or meditating at home, or communities in which he might participate in through visiting the temple. Rather, Dr. Chan's perception of his identity as a Buddhist, as both a religious and an ethnic identity, is best exemplified in the traditional Thai saying, "to be Thai is to be Buddhist." That is to say, he regards his religious and ethnic identities as inextricable. While some of the other Buddhists interviewed separate the two, recognizing that some Thai people are not Buddhists and many Buddhists in the United States are not Thai, Dr. Chan and other Thai Buddhists who see their identities primarily through the lens of ascription do not make these conceptual distinctions.

Unlike Dr. Chan, the majority of the Jews and Buddhists who were interviewed derive their sense of self both from the ascribed religious traditions of their birth and the identities they have achieved or chosen to adopt as adults in the United States. In describing how they learned about Buddhism and came to the temple, many of the Buddhist interviewees shared very similar stories of being born as Buddhists in Thailand but not knowing much about Buddhism or practicing it initially in the United States. After living in the United States for a period of time, many of the people at the Buddhist temple realized they were not "real Buddhists" and did things to become what they call "real Buddhists" or, as observers might refer to them, "practicing Buddhists." The stories they tell about being Buddhist illustrate a movement from an ascribed or birth Buddhist identity alone to an ascribed *and* achieved Buddhist identity that results both from their birth and from choices they have made concerning their practice and community. While still Buddhist, these achieved religious identities mean something very different to the people interviewed than do the Buddhist identities of their birth.⁷ Practitioners further view these identities as religious and distinct from, though related to, their ethnic identities in complicated ways.

Dr. Malin, a Thai woman in her 50s, was born into a Buddhist family in Thailand and came to the United States in 1972. "When you are born into a Buddhist family you just learn," she explained. Her mother went to the temple and cooked for the monks on a regular basis. When she left home to come to the United States around age 20, she said,

I was not very serious about Buddhism. And then I skipped twenty years before I became a real Buddhist again. In between I was in Oklahoma where there was no temple. You don't need a temple to practice. You can pray in front of the Buddha at your house, I sometimes did that.

Mai also describes herself as "born as a Buddhist," but after living in the United States for six years she realized, "I took it [Buddhism] for granted because I was born with it. I was not really paying full attention." She got involved with the temple and now says, "I can tell you now that what I thought I knew was not true. Now I know more than I thought I knew. Not a lot but somehow I corrected my understanding since I was little."

Phæm told a similar story: "We were born as Buddhists. My family always believed in Buddhism even though I went to boarding school in England and I had to go to church and things like that. In your heart you know you are still Buddhist." She lived in the United States for 16 years with a non-Thai American husband and it was not until her sister, a devout Buddhist, came to visit from Thailand and took her to the temple that she began to construct an achieved Buddhist identity. "My sister came and she said, 'it's time to go to the temple.' I didn't want to go but I did." She continued to go after her sister returned home, and said, "I learned so much about how to be a Buddhist." Although each of these women saw themselves as Buddhist based on their birth in Buddhist families in Thailand, each distinguished between her ascribed Buddhist identity and the Buddhist identity she chose, becoming "real Buddhists" based on their choices to adopt particular practices; for them it was generally practices based on participation in communal gatherings and rituals at the temple.

In addition to focusing on practices at the temple, some of the Buddhists interviewed emphasized the importance of education or learning as a kind of practice that either led them to reconceptualize both their religious and ethnic identities or led them to the temple where these

changes took place. Like Kanyā described earlier, these people learned about Buddhism in college in the United States, which made them realize that it was “theirs,” but they did not know much about it. Nōi went to college in the United States 20 years ago and took a religion course in which she was asked about Buddhism.

I didn't know anything. I knew three things—to do good, not to do evil, and to purify your mind. And I thought, I have to learn about this from a *farang* [foreigner]. So I started to learn. I came to the temple and I started to learn about Buddhism.

Starting to learn but not wanting to learn about Buddhism from a non-Thai clearly instigated Nōi's first visit to the temple, pointing to the link between religious and ethnic identity for Thai Buddhists in their first generation in the United States. Through this first class and over many years at the temple, Nōi developed a better sense of herself both as Buddhist and as Thai, identities that for her are distinct but overlapping.

The movement from ascribed religious identities alone to ascribed and achieved or chosen religious identities among the Buddhists is not confined to the first generation. Chāt, a 25-year-old second-generation Thai, considered himself only minimally a Buddhist when he was growing up. “When I was a kid, I didn't believe any of that stuff they said at the temple. I heard that this happened or that happened in the Buddha's life and I said, that's a lie, I didn't see that.” In college he studied religions, a pursuit that led him to try the meditation taught at the temple where he had grown up. Now he is a serious meditation practitioner and has taught some of his friends how to meditate. He still considers himself a Buddhist based on his birth, but also emphasizes the choices he made to practice meditation that led him to be Buddhist in a qualitatively different way.

For the Buddhists described here, Buddhist practices, broadly defined, were central to the process by which they formed their current identities. For some people, these practices were related to the learning about Buddhism they did either at the temple or in academic classes about Buddhism in the United States. As a result of beginning to attend the temple or taking these classes, many of the people interviewed also began daily Buddhist practices in their homes like lighting candles or incense, chanting, or meditating, in addition to the communal practices they participated in at the temple. Although these practices generally resemble each other there is, of course, variation in how people interpret them and in the importance they place on them. At one extreme, people like Dr. Chan, quoted above, think Buddhist practices have nothing to do with his Buddhist identity. At the other extreme are people like Kop and Sam who view practices that are more involved than participating in ceremonies in the temple or chanting and meditating at home as central to what it means to be a Buddhist in the United States.

Both Kop and Sam were born as Buddhists in Thailand but felt that they needed to do much more to be Buddhists in the United States. Both returned to Thailand, at different times, to study at temples and monasteries there. Sam explained:

From what I understand, we were born with Buddhism. Sometimes people don't realize, they don't study, because they were born with it. They just ignore. It's like me. I was there before and I understand it. I said to myself, before I say I don't believe [in Buddhism], why don't I at least go in there [Thailand] and learn. I am lucky because I had a chance to go back to Thailand, to become a monk, and to study. That's when I started to understand a lot of things.

Although he was born as a Buddhist, it was not until Sam spent several weeks as a temporary monk in Thailand and began a series of practices there that he returned to the United States as a lay person and began to see himself as a “real” or a practicing Buddhist. In addition to attending the temple, his practices involve meditation and chanting as well as trying to follow the eightfold path and trying to “see that if something is good we do it and if something is not good we don't.” He has stopped fishing and eating seafood and meat because of the Buddha's teachings and tries

to carry out the eight precepts on Buddha days. "I try to change my behavior . . . It takes a long time before you can see the result."

While Sam's sense of himself as a Buddhist changed as a result of his practices in Thailand and the United States, shifts in Kop's religious and ethnic identities were evident in his narrative as a result of his Buddhist education in Thailand. Kop was born as a Buddhist and came to the United States in 1971. Several years later he had a revelation that "to be Thai is not necessarily to be Buddhist." In other words, he saw questions of religious and ethnic affiliation as separate for the first time. Sam explained, emphasizing the central importance of practice in his understanding of what it means to be a Buddhist.

In fact, many Thais like to think they are Buddhists but from my observations many of them are not really Buddhists. To me it isn't just what they say but rather from their actions which are driven by their true understanding of what Buddhism is.

Reflecting on himself he said that he used to think he was a Buddhist because he was a Thai, but then he realized that he needed more education and specific practices in order to really be a Buddhist. He returned to Thailand where he became a monk for a short period of time to learn. He now explains:

It's really through vipassana meditation that I learned about Buddhism . . . Going to the Buddhist temples doesn't make a person a Buddhist. People are not really Buddhists until they really understand the Buddha's teachings and use them in their everyday lives.

Kop's approach to religious and ethnic identity is revealing on a number of levels. First, Kop separates religious and ethnic identity, realizing that for him, being Thai does not automatically make him a Buddhist. Second, he, like many of the others quoted, sees practice as central to being or becoming a "real Buddhist" in the United States. Unlike most others, however, learning about Buddhism or going to the temple are not adequate practices. For Kop, the practices central to being Buddhist are rooted in personal vipassana meditation practice, which enables people to truly understand the Buddha's teachings and use them in their own lives. Finally, although he does not think communal religious practice (i.e., going to the temple) makes someone a Buddhist, it is still important to him, evident in the central role he plays in almost every activity at the temple.

Most of the Buddhists interviewed combine ideas about being Buddhist based on their birth with ideas based on Buddhist practices, defined in a fairly narrow range of ways, in comparison to the Jews described here. It is in and through this learning and practices ranging from personal meditation practice to participation in communal rituals at the temple that people see themselves making choices to practice Buddhism and be Buddhist in ways that are distinct from their birth. Different people interviewed have various ideas about the relationship between religious and ethnic identities ranging from Dr. Chan's belief that they are one and the same to Sam's clear distinctions between the two. Living in the United States leads most Thai Buddhists to make a distinction between their religious and ethnic identities and to see them as overlapping in varying degrees.

Religion as Both Ascribed and Achieved: Jews

Like some of the Thais, a few of the Jewish people interviewed also saw ascription or birth as the primary reason they view themselves as Jewish. However, in contrast to the Buddhists who emphasized ascription, and who saw it as a religion that is inseparable from their nationality ("to be Thai is to be Buddhist"), those Jews whose sole identification was ascriptive did not see Judaism as a religion or a nationality but rather as a cultural, ethnic, and historical identity. For

Davidman's respondents, their Jewishness is a matter of birth and does not necessarily involve practicing any of the rituals of Jewish religion or adhering to any of the religious tenets. Beth, for example, a serious student of yoga and meditation, stated that these are her spiritual practices and that she observes no Jewish laws or customs. Nevertheless, she fiercely proclaimed, "I was born a Jew and I'll die a Jew"—it is a simple fact of ascription.

Similarly, Michael, an attorney in his late 40s, is an atheist. Nevertheless, he identifies as a cultural Jew from birth:

If I identify with any group, it's the Jewish people. I'm not ashamed to be Jewish. I'm not ashamed to have been raised Jewish. I'm very proud of all of those things. I just don't believe in the religious portion of it.

He and his family do not participate in any Jewish rituals or practices. Nevertheless, he has raised his son to be knowledgeable about being Jewish and about Jewish history because, as he said, "if Hitler or someone like that should arise in the United States, then he should know what he's being persecuted for." From this remark and others like it, it becomes obvious that for some American Jews, their identity is based on an intense awareness that whether or not they identify with Judaism, Jews have been, and may well again be, persecuted simply because they were born Jewish. For these Jews, Judaism, which is clearly ascribed, is also a matter of ethnic identification by others, an identity that can be thrust upon one without regard to their religious practices or lack thereof. Several respondents used the long and bitter history of anti-Semitism to explain why they were educating their children to be aware that they are Jews—"because if I don't tell them, someone else may, and under terrible circumstances," as Michael said.

In contrast to those few Jews who saw Jewishness as merely ascriptive, the large majority of the Jews interviewed described their Jewish identities as related both to their birth and to choices they made as adults. The structure of their narratives differed, however, from those of Buddhists who similarly saw the mutual interplay of birth and choice in forming their religious identities. While the Buddhists in this group said that adopting particular Buddhist practices—such as chanting, meditating, or going to the temple—was clearly necessary for them to "be/become" "real Buddhists," the Jews interviewed felt that ascription is central to their identity. Although they make choices about how to enact these identities, there are no particular observances or practices that must be observed in order for a Jew by birth to identify as Jewish. They described how they adopted and adapted various rituals and traditions as frameworks for creating their own ways of giving meaning to their Judaism. The examples that follow are all about practice because the Jewish tradition emphasizes practice as the primary way of living a Jewish life; belief has been far less emphasized over the millennia in the Jewish religion. Further, those interviewed did not talk at all about beliefs but rather elaborated on their practices. This difference between the Buddhists and the Jews in our studies meaningfully adds to the ways we can theorize ascription and achievement; by looking across traditions we can see whether any given religion ritual practice is seen as a necessary component in achieving religious identities.

Given that some form of practices was a part of how nearly all Jewish respondents enacted and achieved their identities as Jews, we can view these practices along a continuum, beginning with those that are closest to standard, traditional Jewish practices. Among the more customary practices are those that people quite fondly related as having learned in their families. Friday night dinners and Passover Seders were most commonly mentioned in this category. Two quotations will illustrate: Joshua, a 32-year-old administrator, stated:

What was pretty evident as we became older and busy, was the one time you could count on us being together was Friday night for Kiddush, and to have Mom's homemade challah (special bread) and have dinner together. Now, I still like having a Friday night meal with my family, but we've made it into pizza night, because we are too tired to cook by then.

Elaine, an author in her 40s, expressed a similar sentiment with regard to Passover:

To me Judaism is a lot about family and it's very important to me to be with family members. It doesn't always even have to be my parents or my brothers the way it was when I was growing up. It could be my uncle or whatever. I've missed very few Passovers with my family. I love the seder and its rituals and the way we'll slow down long enough to do most of them.

Both of these interviewees highlighted the opportunity these traditional Jewish occasions provided for them to come together as families and to have enough time and space to share and enjoy each other's company. Such practices continue the historical notion that Friday night is traditionally very important in the Jewish religion, but instead of observing it in the standard religious way (with blessings over candles, wine, and challah), they reinvent the evening to satisfy their own contemporary familial needs. These practices are consistent with Robert Bellah et al.'s idea that Americans want to participate in a "community of memory" (Bellah et al. 1985). For the Jewish respondents, however, this community is a historical and cultural one rather than a contemporary religious one to which they belong.

In general, the Jewish respondents were most likely to take on those Jewish practices that particularly involved memory, family, and historical and cultural traditions, rather than those associated with commandments by God. Respondents mentioned practices such as reading Jewish literature, learning a bit of the Jewish language, songs and music, telling their children Jewish stories, and displaying Jewish objects in their homes. Jill, who is a 32-year-old mother of one daughter, said that she sings Jewish songs to her little girl "just because . . . just some songs I like." When Davidman asked her which songs, she replied:

Oh, I don't know, one called Adon Olam [a traditional prayer from the Saturday services], I don't even know them by name . . . different parts of Saturday morning services that stay with me, just songs that I remember. And just because they have a lullaby effect, I would sing them to her when I was putting her down when she was little. I'll sing them and it reminds me that I'm connected to this larger body, although I don't have the beliefs, I'm connecting to that culture of the Jewish people.

Although the language of these songs is that of prayer, she sings them not out of a belief in God or a notion that she is commanded by her birth to do so. Rather, she has the sense that these songs connect her to the Jewish people across time and space. Jill takes comfort and pride in Jewish ethnicity, culture, and history, despite the fact that she has not sought out a synagogue and does not obey Jewish laws and commandments.

Along the continuum of Jewish practices recounted in Davidman's interviews are those that veer away from the standard, customary, familiar rituals that interviewees learned growing up. Unlike the Buddhists, however, who believe that participating in activities at a temple is a crucial dimension of their religious identities, the "unsynagogued" Jews suggested that their participation in a temple was far less crucial than finding meanings to their Jewish identities, as well as being able to perform their identities in ways that feel sincere to them. They construct new ways of being Jewish by picking and choosing from the repertoire available in the contemporary American spiritual marketplace—such as New Age and Eastern religious traditions—and constructing a connection between the chosen practice(s) and traditional aspects of Judaism. Their search for a meaningful spiritual expression that they do not find in Judaism, combined with their desire to nevertheless "be" Jewish, leads them to construct connections between their new practices and Jewish tradition. The result is often a bricolage of practices and meanings that melds their history/heritage with modernity and creates new ways of being Jewish that negotiate between the traditional practices and new and personalized rituals.

Cynthia, a divorced schoolteacher in her early 40s, provides an interesting example of such religious bricolage. In response to Davidman's question asking whether there are any rituals, of any kind, that are important in her life, she said:

Well, right now I am doing, I don't know if you've heard of the book, *The Artists' Way*—it's a book to kind of help unblock your creativity and one of the things that they recommend that you do is morning pages. That when you get up in the morning you write three, nonstop sort of stream of consciousness . . . it's like a brain dump, to get all that stuff that's on your mind out onto the page and I've been doing that, it's kind of odd, I started doing that and then I was reading the book about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and somewhere in the book they talked about at the beginning of the month before Rosh Hashanah how religious men would get up at midnight and start to pray because that's when their minds would be the most clear. And I realized as I was reading that I had kind of started my morning papers on the first day of that month . . . It is a very weird coincidence and doing them has really made me see a lot more coincidence in my life, and I don't mean necessarily I believe it's coincidence. And that I continue to do this daily, it's like the Jewish morning prayers.

Here, she describes an example of a daily ritual practice that she links with Jewish memory and ritual although it does not derive from a specifically Jewish source.

Sheryl described as a particularly meaningful and significant Yom Kippur the year when she climbed up a mountain and achieved a spiritual experience through that route. Although her performance of a Yom Kippur observance was highly idiosyncratic, she nevertheless felt that a Rabbi's validation was quite important to her:

I actually ran into Rabbi Mann [a pseudonym for the rabbi of the local Reform temple] one day in the supermarket and I worked in a retirement community and one of the residents there had given me these tickets for the high holy days and must have mentioned to the rabbi that he had done it. It was around the time I was taking a Basic Judaism class taught by this rabbi and when I saw him he said, I half expected to see you for Rosh Hashana and I said, rabbi, I did something better and I don't mean to insult you . . . but I went with a friend of mine who is also a nonpracticing Jew and we climbed Mount Liberty in New Hampshire and it had been the first snowfall so, and it was 32 degrees so as we walked through the forest the branches were covered with ice and sun was hitting it and it was like walking through a forest of diamonds. It was completely sparkling the entire time. And as we came out onto the ledge the sky was bright blue and the valley or whatever, still had all the colors so it was yellow and orange and um . . . my friend and I burst into tears, it was just . . . it's the time I have a sense that there is something that is so big and so good, you know, and that sense that is renewed every weekend I go and . . . the birds, it's just an incredible experience always and it's what fills me and renews me and I come off the mountain and people say, oh you sound inspired and it's truly inspirational. And that . . . I think, I guess I think if religion were going to play a role in my life, that's what it would need to bring to me and I think there are pieces of Judaism as I understand it that sort of fit with how I think, like should be lived, which probably helps to keep that connection. So the rabbi said, "I don't think I can do better than that. And so you have my blessing to do that on any high holiday that you want." Which I thought was pretty neat.

It is significant that although Sheryl invented her own, New Age-y version of Yom Kippur observance, she nevertheless told me that the rabbi approved of her choice. The rabbi was still important to her in legitimating that her practice was indeed "Jewish."

Sheryl, who resembled Lisa in her connection of Judaism to an appreciation for the environment, found meaning in her Judaism through a link to nature and created practices that enacted their connections to nature and provided for them a traditional Jewish holiday for the context. Sheryl's description of her experience of "something that is so big and so good" seems to suggest a spirituality that in some ways mimics Jill's suggestion that her singing linked her to a larger body of Jews. These performances of Jewish identity do not arise out of, or find their meaning in, a religious conviction or compulsion, but, rather, in a quest to tie Judaism into the *self* through experiences that, though not traditionally Jewish in and of themselves, can be interpreted to reflect Jewish meaning.

Cynthia's and Sheryl's examples point to the central role interpretation plays in defining what constitutes religious, in this case, Jewish, practices. Unlike the Buddhists, who tend to follow a general set of practices that include chanting, meditating, and making offerings to the monks as they learn at their temple, these respondents clearly pick and choose the rituals they practice, and the ways they choose to perform their Judaism, most likely because they are not involved with religious organizations. In all cases, their ritual performances involve cultural bricolage, reflecting contemporary Jews' freedom to choose practices from the broad Jewish cultural smorgasbord.

They combine Jewish practices with other forms of cultural practices and construct interesting linkages to traditional Judaism. They modify old rituals and invent new ones, all in the ways in which sociologists of religion identify as characteristic of the exercise of choice in contemporary religious identities. It is not surprising that it is the Jews who have been in the United States for several generations and have decided not to be involved with synagogues, who assemble a cultural bricolage rather than the Buddhists who, in their first generation, are still trying to build their religious tradition institutionally in the United States. This comparison shows us that the common ways in which notions of ascription and achievement are woven through the Jews' and Buddhists' narratives are influenced by the amount of time (whether in years or generations) they have been in the United States.

CONCLUSIONS

The Thai Buddhist immigrants and unsynagogued Jews described here rely on the ideas both of ascription and achievement or choice in the complicated narratives they tell about being and performing their identities as Buddhists and Jews in the contemporary United States. This study clearly shows that many individuals who remain within the religious (and ethnic) traditions of their birth use a mixed language of ascription and choice related to practice to explain what their identities are, if they see them primarily as religious or as ethnic identities, and how they came to see their identities this way. While social scientists have used the concepts of ascription and achievement in a dichotomous way to understand religious identity, they have not fully theorized how the concepts are often combined in individuals' narratives. Both Thai Buddhists and Jews clearly are aware that their religious or ethnic identities are a matter of birth; nevertheless, they almost all also emphasized that they needed to choose to enact religious or cultural practices in order to actually be or feel themselves to be members of their communities in the United States. Of note is the fact that individuals' own senses of personal membership, rather than external recognition of membership by others, were at the center of their conceptions.

Despite their different generations, histories in the United States, teachings and practices, and organizational memberships or the lack thereof, the fact that Thai Buddhists and Jews in the United States both combine themes of ascription and achievement in their religious identities suggests that both birth and choice are central components of how people who stay within the religious traditions of their birth understand themselves in the pluralistic American religious context. This analysis also suggests that groups with strong histories of attributed religious identities will tend to abandon pure ascription to describe themselves through a combination of the categories of ascription and achievement based in practices as they are in the United States for longer periods.

In addition to the similarities evident in the intertwining of ascription and achievement in the narratives the Jews and the Buddhists told about their religious identities, the differences between their narratives are also telling. The Jews in this study were much more likely to equate their religious and ethnic identities than were the Buddhists, perhaps because they are not involved in synagogues, perhaps because they are in their second and third generations in the United States rather than their first generation, or perhaps because the Jewish tradition has tended to emphasize a common ethnic heritage. The Jews interviewed were also more open than were the Buddhists about the different kinds of practices through which they could enact or perform their religious identities. This may, again, be because the Jews are not members of synagogues or it may suggest more broadly that as a religious tradition becomes more established in the United States over a generation or two, people born in the tradition become more open to other traditions and others' ways of practicing and constructing their own tradition outside of particular religious institutions. Despite their openness to other traditions, however, it is interesting to note that the Jews, probably because of their unique history, hung on to their identities as Jews even when they were not believers and did not choose to affiliate.

The multilayered sense of identity evident among Jews and Buddhists—that it is innate and inherent and simultaneously continually chosen, enacted, and performed—shows that sociologists of religion need to allow for the conceptual space and overlap between ascription and achievement by examining the mixed vocabulary used in actual narratives of religious identities and the relationship between religious and ethnic identification. The differences in the ways that Jews and Buddhists combined these concepts is telling, and it is necessary to concede that the ways in which members of religious and ethnic communities construct their identities change over time. As such, the extent to which the differences between these Jewish and Buddhist narratives result from their traditions as opposed to their generations requires further study of Jews, Buddhists, and/or members of other religious traditions that historically are in the same generation in the United States. Further study in a range of religious traditions is needed to determine whether these results are particular to Jews and Buddhists or are common to the narratives others who were born into religious traditions in the United States construct about their religious identities.

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NOTES

1. Others have also argued that religion in premodern times was not as uniformly observed as Berger posits it to be. See, for example, Douglas (1982) or Neitz (1987).
2. This approach follows roughly Burawoy's (1998) extended case method, particularly as conceptualized by Eliasoph and Lichterman (1999). Rather than beginning with a specific theory, however, we start from a broader understanding of how sociologists of religion have conceptualized religious identity in the past 15 years and point to the insufficiencies of these approaches before developing a more nuanced theoretical approach.
3. Moderately affiliated Jews are defined as those who belong to some major Jewish institution (such as a synagogue, a Jewish federation, or a Jewish community center) but are not very actively involved in it.
4. Although individuals who answer ads are not representative of anyone other than those who feel they have something they would especially like to say on the subject, such individuals nevertheless provide narratives that can suggest insights about others in similar situations. The interviewees emphasized various reasons for not belonging to synagogues, especially that they hated the emphasis on money (i.e., dues and donations) in synagogues, which they see as having become "heartless businesses"; that they find service "boring"; that they do not respect the rabbis in their communities; that they find no meaning in synagogue attendance, especially in the worship services; and also that they are not "joiners" and do not typically belong to groups.
5. See Cadge (2005) for more information.
6. Pseudonyms used were selected to be as close as possible to the racial and ethnic background of the people they name. The Jews had typical English names, reflecting the amount of time their families had been in the United States. Thai people have given names and also nicknames, some Thai and some more traditionally American. Most people at the temple go by their nicknames so we refer to them here by pseudonyms that best represent their nicknames.
7. In the past, some researchers would have argued that practitioners at the Buddhist temple are engaging in a kind of conversion called regeneration in which a belief system is taken seriously that was previously abandoned (Clark 1929; Lang and Lang 1961; Nock 1933). Rather than calling these identities achieved we thought about calling them activated ascribed identities but this phrase does not really fit because it suggests that people start to emphasize their birth identities—deciding now that they are Buddhists because they were born as Buddhists—which is not what they actually do.

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