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American Jews Show Steady Numbers but Growing Diverse and Secular *Trinity Professors to Discuss Landmark Religion Study in Israel*

Two Trinity professors, Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, will present the findings from their groundbreaking American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) at a conference in Jerusalem on August 6. The survey concluded that the proportion of American Jews who identify themselves as religious has dropped by more than 20 percent over the past two decades, while the cultural Jewish population has nearly doubled.

“I attribute the shift to a combination of disaffection from Judaism and intermarriage,” said Barry Kosmin, who co-directed the 2008 ARIS at Trinity College in Hartford. “Since 1990, half of all marrying American Jews have married non-Jews, with the result that there are two new mixed households for every homogeneous Jewish one.”

The 2008 ARIS is the third such survey conducted by Kosmin, Research Professor of Public Policy and Law. Since 1990, when the first of the landmark surveys was taken, the “Jewish by religion” population has lost 750,000, while the “ethnic-cultural Jewish” population has gained a half million,” Kosmin said. As a whole, the American Jewish population has remained relatively stable over the past two decades. It was 5.5 million in 1990 and is estimated to be between 5.2 and 5.4 million today. However, its composition has changed.

On August 6, Kosmin and fellow co-director of ARIS, Ariela Keysar, will present papers describing the new profile of the American Jewish population at the 15th World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. With a nationally representative sample of 54,000 U.S. telephone respondents in total, the profile is based on interviews with nearly 1,000 self-identifying Jews.

The sub-population of American Jews by religion (including children) is 3.3 to 3.4 million people, Kosmin said. Roughly one-quarter of these consider themselves Orthodox, with the balance divided between Conservative and Reform. Cultural Jews (Jews who identify by ethnicity alone) have grown from 20 percent to 37 percent of the American Jewish population. This parallels the increase during the same period of Americans who say they have no religion. Between 1990 and 2008, these “Nones” increased their share of the U.S. adult population from 8 percent to 15 percent.

The weakening in religious outlook is common even among those who identify themselves religiously as Jews. Of this group, 44 percent claim to have a secular worldview. “Over half of American Jews claim they have a secular outlook,” Keysar said. “Most of them see no contradiction between adhering to a religion and having a secular orientation.”

Kosmin demonstrates that one consequence of the high numbers of mixed marriages is that the population with some Jewish ancestry but following another religion tends to expand geometrically. The population of recent Jewish parentage following other religions (JOR) is estimated at around 2.5 million persons. In addition non-Jewish adults living in households with Core Jewish or Jewish origin individuals number around 2.2 million. The “Extended Jewish population” in the U.S. -- the number of eligible Americans under the State of Israel’s “Law of Return” -- which was estimated at 8 million people in 1990, is currently estimated to number over 10 million persons.

Another consequence of the intermarriage rate was uncovered by Kosmin and Keysar in the 2001 survey, when all respondents were asked a detailed question on parentage. The total number of adults identified as Jewish on the traditional Orthodox matrilineal (*halakhic*) basis in 2001 was then estimated as 3.6 million. However, around 500,000 of these adults who had a Jewish mother followed another religion, overwhelmingly a branch of Christianity.

ARIS 2008 reveals that the two main centers of the world’s Jewish population today, the U.S. and Israel, are equal in size. Kosmin concludes that American Jews are becoming more diverse in terms of forms of Jewish identification as well as in ancestry and ethnic origin as a result of social processes such as secularization, conversion, adoptions, intermarriage and migration.

Kosmin and Keysar are director and associate director, respectively, of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College.

For more information about the study, please contact Kosmin in Israel at 011-972-57494-6367 or at barry.kosmin@trincoll.edu. Or you can contact Keysar at 011-972-2-5337147 or 011-972-2-5663213 or at ariela.keysar@trincoll.edu. For copies of the presentations that Kosmin and Keysar will deliver in Jerusalem, please contact Michele Jacklin at 860-297-4285 or at michele.jacklin@trincoll.edu.

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