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Conversion and Church Membership

A man wanting to marry a Jewess is willing to go through conversion and join the Jewish congregation, but wishes nevertheless to remain a member of the Christian congregation. What should be the attitude of the Jewish congregation? (From Rabbi S. Andhil Fineberg, Mount Vernon, New York)

The very fact that such a question arises every now and then these days is an evidence of the modern mood in which sharp distinction between religious groups and traditions tends to grow vague. We Jews, for example, are now accustomed to the thought of having a Jew belong to three or four congregations, each of a different attitude in Judaism. In many cities a man will belong to an Orthodox, a Modern Orthodox, a Conservative, and a Reform congregation. This practice is deemed quite proper and often even praiseworthy.

Yet the idea would have been ludicrous a generation or two ago. The responsa of the rabbis of Hungary and Galicia discuss whether Orthodox Jews should associate with the Reformers even in charity, or even whether Orthodox should associate with what might today be called semi-modern Orthodox, the group known in Hungary for historical reasons as the "Status Quo." These "Status Quo"

organizations were strictly Orthodox, but the question arose whether one could eat of the Shechita of the Status Quo Shochet. Possibly it is to the good that the sense of denominational separation has weakened among the Jews. But should we likewise consider it praiseworthy if religious separateness ceases to be sharp between Jews and Christians? And could we contemplate, without disapproval, Jews and Christians belonging to each others' congregations as well as to their own?

Obviously there is a difference between crossing lines that separate Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism, and crossing lines that separate Judaism and Christianity. Jewish life is undergoing constant change in America. Families have roots in many types of Jewish congregations. The difference in observance is getting less, but between Jews and Christians, although social contacts may increase, the basic theological difference is unshaken. If, as we must assume, belonging to a congregation means accepting its teaching, then a Jew cannot belong to a Christian congregation. Christian congregations are trinitarian and Jewish law prohibits a Jew from adding other divine personages to God in his prayers. Likewise, Christians cannot be part of a Jewish religious community and still be Christians, because they would then have to deny the role of Jesus as Christ.

But it happens that in our present social conditions people contribute to many congregations whose doctrines they do not accept. This is due to our praiseworthy American mood of interdenominational charity. It is therefore quite conceivable that a Christian would want to make a donation to a synagogue, and this is quite in accordance with Jewish law (see *Reform Jewish Practice*, II, 45 ff.). He

might consider his dues as merely a charitable contribution. This is, of course, a possibility, but it certainly implies a confusion of theologies.

However, since the case you mention involves the Christian's making himself eligible to be married by a rabbi, then he means his membership in the Jewish congregation to be an evidence of conversion. Conversion is something absolute in the eyes of Jewish law. It is so absolute that the law in the Talmud (as codified in the Shulchan Aruch, Yore Deah 268 : 9) says that a proselyte is like a newborn babe. He has not even any relatives left in his former life. This is, of course, an overstatement which the law itself modifies. But it means that the division must be clean-cut. (By the way, I am certain that this is the essential meaning of the two or three statements in the Gospels when Jesus speaks to those who would join his movement. He says: "Unless ye are like little children, ye cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." He meant: "Give up all your past and be born anew." This was the classic Jewish concept of conversion.) The man of whom you speak cannot, therefore, either by logic or by the spirit of the law, continue his old affiliations together with the new.

Besides, the Talmudic law questions the validity of any conversion entered into merely for the purpose of marriage; it questions its sincerity. If the man involved refuses to give up Christianity, then his acceptance of Judaism cannot possibly be wholehearted or sincere and he cannot be accepted as a proselyte.

So, in spite of the general blurring of boundaries (which is part of the spirit of the age and which also has its good side), nevertheless, on the basis of both common sense and the Jewish law, which requires in conversion a clean-cut

separation and unquestionable sincerity, such an arrangement as suggested is utterly unacceptable under Jewish law and tradition.

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Converting a Married Woman

A Jewish man marries a Catholic girl in another country in a Catholic marriage ceremony. Later they come to the rabbi. The woman wants to be converted to Judaism and they want to be married as Jews and fledge to live as Jews. Is there any objection to the rabbi converting the wife and remarrying the couple who had been married previously by a Catholic marriage?

There is, of course, considerable Orthodox objection to converting to Judaism any non-Jewish woman who has lived with a Jewish man in marriage or common-law marriage or civil marriage, but this objection is not always heeded, and it is certainly the attitude of the Central Conference of American Rabbis to convert women married to Jews.

As for the status of the Catholic marriage, it is clear that