



# Abandoning Judaism: A life history perspective on disaffiliation and conversion to Christianity among prewar Amsterdam Jews

Peter Tammes

*Institute for History, Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands*

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## ABSTRACT

This study is framed by an assimilation perspective and examines the impacts of the religious contexts to which Jews were exposed and of institutional barriers on the likelihood that prewar Amsterdam Jews would abandon Judaism. To conduct a case-control study, samples taken from the German registration list of Amsterdam Jews in 1941 included 717 Jewish descendants born in Amsterdam between 1883 and 1922 of whom 293 did not belong to Jewish congregations. The collected data from the Registry allow us to analyze their life histories on religious affiliation from birth until 1940 using logistic regression. In the religious contexts, factors that impact the likelihood to leave Judaism include the religion of the parents and of the spouse, the death of the father, and the percentage of religious nonbelievers. As for institutional barriers, racial anti-Semitism, Catholic anti-Jewish sentiments, and the rate of intermarried Jews affect a Jew's predilection for abandoning Judaism. These effects differ when research subjects are divided into those who converted to Christianity and those who became religiously unaffiliated. While a higher percentage of religious nonbelievers and a higher rate of intermarried Jews during adolescence especially increased the probability of becoming religiously unaffiliated, a higher rate of intermarried Jews at any given time especially decreased the probability of becoming religiously unaffiliated. Whereas this latter effect might indicate that religious boundaries blurred, the former effects might indicate that Jews shared the process of church leaving in the Dutch society. Furthermore, these findings indicate that becoming religiously unaffiliated showed to be partly a different path of assimilation than conversion to Christianity.

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## 1. Introduction

The first Jews who settled permanently in Amsterdam at the beginning of the 17th century were Conversos and descendants of Conversos who had experienced forced conversion to Catholicism in Spain and Portugal. After they settled, these so-called Sephardim returned to open practice of Judaism (Kaplan, 1981). A few decades later, Ashkenazi Jews from Poland and the German states increasingly settled in the same Amsterdam district as the earlier arrived Sephardim and established their own

synagogue. Although the two Jewish communities arose during the same period, the Ashkenazim soon outnumbered the Sephardim.

In the 18th century, many in the Jewish community, especially among the Ashkenazim, grappled with poverty (Reijnders, 1969). Those who could not afford to pay membership were not allowed to enter the synagogues. The official representatives of the Jewish community did not assist in registering newborns of these non-paying members as Jewish with the local authorities. Thus, these newborns may not have been registered as Jewish, though it is clear that they were not converted to Christianity (Nusteling, 1985). Only a couple of Jews actively converted to Christianity during that century (Zwarts, 1929).

E-mail address: [p.tammes@hetnet.nl](mailto:p.tammes@hetnet.nl).

After Jews were granted full civic rights in 1796, rabbis and parnassim, the board members of the Jewish community, feared that this legal emancipation would lead to Jewish assimilation into Dutch society, resulting in Jews abandoning Judaism. Because non-paying members were not allowed to enter synagogues in the 18th century, the poor generally did not attend synagogues. In the beginning of the 19th century, the parnassim arranged for free seats in synagogues for the poorest Jews during high feast-days (Reijnders, 1969). A group of Jews, however, did convert to Christianity for economic reasons in the first half of the 19th century (Zwarts, 1929). For a group of well-to-do upper-class Jews who had connections with Gentiles, the final step in their joining the Dutch upper class completely was the abandonment of Judaism (Zwarts, 1929). Another group who left Judaism were Sephardic families of noble birth who converted to Christianity through baptism or interreligious marriage (Da Silva Rosa, 1925).

Among those of noble Sephardic descent were Isaïc da Costa and Abraham Capadose, who converted with the help of the Réveil movement. The Réveil movement, which represented Orthodox Protestantism within the context of the State Church, started actively trying to convert Dutch Jews in the beginning of the 19th century (Van Klinken, 2001). The London Society, which aimed to promote Christianity in Jewish communities, also sent missionaries to Amsterdam and Rotterdam to convert Jews, but they were unsuccessful. A missionary from the Free Scottish Church was physically attacked in 1849 while preaching in the Jewish district of Amsterdam on Sabbath (Fuks-Mansfeld, 1995). Attempts to convert Dutch Jews to Protestantism, however, continued during the 19th and 20th century (Van Klinken, 2001).

Apart from the actions of individual priests, a Catholic organization aimed at conversion of Jews did not exist. Mutual distaste of Jews and Catholics had dominated their relationship for ages (Fuks-Mansfeld, 1995). The Catholic church, however, did not remain completely passive in attempting to convert Jews. Indirect proselytizing occurred in the 20th century, Catholics prayed for the conversion of Jews and stories and legends in Catholic weeklies concerning conversion of Jews to Catholicism served to emphasize the superiority of Catholicism over Judaism and perhaps to support those who had converted (Poorthuis & Saleminck, 2006).

More important than proselytizing, according to Kruijt (1939), was the gradual process of Jewish assimilation from the second half of the 19th century onward. Among other things, this assimilation led Jews to move out of the original Jewish district to more remote parts of Amsterdam, resulting in physical distance from the center of the Jewish community. As socialism became popular among Jews, these Jews did not necessarily convert to Christianity but dropped their religious affiliation altogether. Even more important was the increase in interreligious marriages among Jews, beginning at the start of the 20th century. Not only might the Jewish spouse swap his or her religion to that of the Gentile spouse, the children born to these interreligious couples might maintain no ties to the Jewish community. Some scholars, like Gans (1985) and

Lucassen (1994), saw leaving Judaism as an advanced step in the process of assimilation. By focusing on the abandonment of Judaism in pre-WWII Amsterdam, this study expands on what we know about the process of Jewish assimilation in the Netherlands.

### 1.1. Aim and research question

In their overview of Dutch Jewry from 1870 to 1940, Blom and Cahen (1995) note that at one extreme, Jews during this period might become totally immersed in Dutch society, with a resulting loss of their Jewish identity. Alternatively, Jews could choose to maintain and hold on to their own orthodox tradition. Between these poles were many variations and combinations of affiliation, both with groups from Dutch society and with Jewish traditions and origins. Blom and Cahen do not indicate, however, who among Jews were more likely to assimilate into Dutch society and who more likely to choose to maintain the orthodox tradition. The research question in this study is then: who was more likely to abandon Judaism, and what made those who did leave Judaism more likely to convert to Christianity or to become religiously unaffiliated?

This study's aim is to expand on what we know about the process of Jewish assimilation by using a life history approach, following individual life courses of a sample of about seven hundred Jews born in Amsterdam between 1883 and 1922. Earlier studies have demonstrated that such an approach is most appropriate to model time-related transitions and possible causes in, for example, the probability of leaving a faith or becoming a nonmember in the post-war Netherlands (e.g. De Graaf, Need, & Ultee, 2004; Need & De Graaf, 1996; Te Grotenhuis & Scheepers, 2001). The data collected in the Amsterdam register make it possible to determine the chronological order in which Jews left Judaism relative to other lifecycle events. These data are analyzed using a discrete time event history model to test hypotheses on assimilation.

## 2. Assimilation theory and the abandonment of Judaism

Conversion to Christianity in the Netherlands has not received much attention as a step in the process of Jewish assimilation because it has been assumed that the number of Jewish converts was small. Although the rate of conversion to Christianity may have indeed been low, Jews dropping their religious affiliation became more common in the 1920s and 1930s. To determine the rate of assimilation among the Jewish communities in European capitals such as Berlin, Prague, Vienna, and Warsaw, scholars like Honigmann (1989), Riff (1981), Rozenblit (1989), and Endelman (1997) used the number of Jews who abandoned Judaism as a measure of assimilation. Generally, conversion to Christianity or adopting another (religious) identity is seen as an important element in identificational assimilation and is also related to bridging boundaries in society.

One of the earliest and most influential definitions of assimilation was given by Park and Burgess of the Chicago School, which was a pioneering institute in the study of the immigrant experience. In this definition, assimilation is

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