
Asian American Jews, Race, and Religious Identity

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This article is an exploration of marriages between white American Jews and non-Christian or Jewish Asian Americans in order to illustrate how Christian roots and biases inherent in the term *religion* delineate these families' boundaries around family practice such that such Jewish-Asian American families produce a broader range of cultural mixture than their Jewish-Christian counterparts. It argues that this blending occurs because of the different relationships to the notion of "religion" held by American Jews and non-Christian/Jewish Asian Americans, and their histories in the United States, due to 1) the reality that American Jews have been deeply involved in shaping contemporary understandings of religion in the United States and have spent several generations being formed by those understandings, whereas many Asian Americans have not; 2) the tendency among non-Christian and Jewish Asian Americans to use broader terminology like "tradition" and "culture" to describe various practices because religion is not understood as a separate system, and 3) Jewish involvement in white American appropriation of Asian practices.

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ON a lovely sunny day in Philadelphia at the turn of the millennium, an Ashkenazi Jewish woman married a Gujarati Brahmin man.¹ The bride wore a white dress. The groom wore a white *kurta pajama*, a mod jacket, and a yarmulke. They were married by a Renewal rabbi, outdoors.² During the ceremony, participants explicitly talked about similarities between Jewish weddings and Hindu weddings, noting that in a Jewish wedding, traditionally, the bride circles the groom seven times and in egalitarian weddings, the couple often circles a total of seven times, three times each and once together. Similarly, in a Hindu wedding, the couple's clothing is tied together before they circle the sacred fire together seven times. They noted that both traditions place their weddings under canopies—the Jewish canopy made of cloth and called a *chuppah*, the Hindu canopy made of flowers and called a *mandap*—and explained that in each tradition, this tent is interpreted as the home that the couple will create.

At the same time, they also drew selectively from each tradition. This couple had a *chuppah*, but the cloth came from one of the groom's mother's saris. His sister, who was holding one of the corners of the *chuppah*, commented in our interview that during the wedding, she thought that the cloth of the *chuppah* was nowhere near as nice as the flowers that make up a *mandap*, the Hindu wedding canopy. She was sad that her brother's interfaith wedding would not be as lovely as a Hindu wedding, but when she saw video of the wedding, she changed her mind, thinking that the cloth had looked just like a rainbow. They exchanged garlands, a central element of a Hindu ceremony.

The elements of both traditions were present beyond the wedding ceremony itself. The invitation showed a group of people and elephants dancing the hora, a circle dance often performed at Jewish weddings and during the reception, both guests danced both Jewish folk dancing and Gujarati folk dancing. Gujarati folk dance makes use of sticks, and the dancers had brought them along. When the Jewish women saw those sticks, they exuberantly incorporated them into their folk dancing as well. Although the wedding had moments that might have seemed tense—such as when the groom's sister shared her private thought that the *mandap* would have been prettier had it been made of flowers, even those moments appeared to have been resolved over the course of the day.

I first heard this story while I was doing the fieldwork and interviews for my book, *Beyond Chismukkah*, which, as the title suggests, ended up being about interfaith families that blend Christianity and Judaism. From

¹Ashkenazi is a term that refers to Jews of Eastern European descent. The majority of American Jews are Ashkenazi.

²The Renewal movement is a Jewish movement founded in the second half of the twentieth century that focused on music, meditation, mysticism, and gender equity.

the beginning, in part because I am myself half-Asian, many people suggested that I include interfaith families that moved beyond the typical Christian-Jewish model. In the end, I did not do so, in part because I felt that there was more than enough to be said about what happens when Christians and Jews marry. I also realized that the Jewish-Asian marriage was not, simply, a variation on a theme, or at least it was not simply a variation on a theme when the Asians in question were not Christian. The communal “ground rules” for combining Judaism with traditions that are not Christian are radically different from the boundaries that strike Jewish communal leaders, and often Jewish individuals, as important when combining Judaism with Christianity. This article, then, is an exploration of Jewish interfaith marriage that involves, from a Jewish perspective, what might be termed Asian religions, or as intermarriage with Asian Americans who strike American Jews as nonreligious.

In this article, I argue that the Christian roots and biases inherent in the term *religion*, as used by Americans, shape how Jewish-Asian interfaith families draw, shape, and understand their boundaries when the Asian family members in question are not Christian. Scholars and nonscholars understand the term *religion* differently, but in both cases, its Christian presuppositions result in mismatches with both Judaism and the range of Asian religions in the United States. That said, the mismatches also sit differently on the traditions; American Jews have been much more deeply involved in shaping contemporary understandings of religion in the United States and have spent several generations being formed by those understandings, whereas many Asian Americans have not. *Religion*, as it turns out, is a particularly poor term for understanding the practices and worldviews of non-Christian Asian Americans.³

³Terminology has been something of a challenge in this article. The term *interfaith* families is used by most Jewish communities that strive to welcome couples in which one person is Jewish, and the other is not. It is therefore often, though not always, a term that families use to describe themselves. Technically, if one member in the couple converts to Judaism, such that both people are Jewish, the household is no longer interfaith. I have continued to use the term here, particularly in reference to the book *My Basmati Bat Mitzvah*, not to delegitimize the conversion of the mother, but rather to note the collection of heritages in the extended family. Similarly, there is a challenge in how to refer to the myriad of Asian traditions represented by the Asian Americans in this article. In the end, as someone rooted in the study of American Judaism and American Christianity, but not American Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or any number of other traditions, I am thinking here from a Jewish studies perspective, not an Asian American studies perspective, and also thinking about how Jewish communities understand marriages to people who are not Jewish, but also not Christian or Muslim. As a result, it often does not matter whether the other religion in play is Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism, or something else. It matters that it is Asian, therefore both racially “Other” and potentially exotic, and that it is not one of the Abrahamic traditions against which Judaism has historically defined itself and been defined. That said, I acknowledge that it is problematic to lump this disparate collection of religions together as “Asian religions,” or to evade that problem by defining religious identity in the negative, in this case as “non-Christian.” As a result, whenever it is possible to be specific, I will do so, referring to individual religions as granularly as possible.

There are many reasons why Asian-Jewish families and the identities that result from such families are treated differently than their Christian-Jewish equivalents, most of which tie to negotiations of power—both between Judaism and the various Asian traditions and between the minority communities of American Jews and Asian Americans on the one hand and, on the other, a broader secularized culture that draws so many (but not all) of its assumptions from Christianity. First, American Jews' understandings of Christianity are rooted in the long and deeply intertwined history of Judaism and Christianity in Europe and the United States. This history is characterized by a power imbalance that has resulted in everything from Jewish assimilation to Christian norms to genocide. No such historical trauma exists in the relationship between Judaism and Asian religions. Although there have been moments of historical interaction and there are Asian-Jewish communities (perhaps most famously the Jews of Cochin in India and the Kaifeng Jews in China), generally speaking, the Asian and Jewish families that encounter each other through contemporary American marriages have relatively little shared history outside of the context of the United States. This means that, although they may encounter each other with fears about "outmarriage," the Jewish partners and families do not encounter Asian traditions with the same complex reactions built on generations of living as a minority within Christian culture. Rather, when white American Jews have encountered Asian traditions in the context of either the contemporary United States or in their travel as Americans, they have usually held more power in the relationship than their Asian interlocutors, a dynamic that limits how threatening American Jews find either those interlocutors or their traditions.

The second reason for these differences points to where the theoretical weight of this article lies. Scholars of religion note that most definitions of *religion*—both ones used in common parlance and often ones that we use in religious studies—are deeply shaped by the assumptions of Christianity, often specific forms of Protestant Christianity. The turns to both lived religion and the study of religious practices demonstrate that definitions of religion as solely a system of beliefs often only barely work for Christianity and are a particularly poor fit for many of the other traditions that we label as *religious*. The Christian heritage of the term tends to privilege belief and meaning, that is to say, theology and practices whose meaning and significance can be clearly stated and articulated (Orsi 2006, 177–204; Asad 1993, 27–79). Because the term *religion* and its attendant definitions, both lay and scholarly, are embedded in Christian contexts, it does not always best capture the lived experiences,

worldviews, and habits of either American Jews or non-Christian Asian Americans.

Often, however, those conversations are really about our own scholarship; using an analytic category with particular built-in assumptions can create scholarly blind spots. Scholars have given less attention to what precisely happens when the term *religion* is used by people who are not academic scholars of religion, but rather people living their lives and labeling their practices as they navigate a US culture with a particular religious history inflected mostly by particular forms of Christianity.⁴ The definitions of religion that people and communities deploy and the practices that therefore strike them as religious shape the choices that Jewish and Asian American individuals and couples make in navigating their daily lives and the combinations that seem possible as they blend identities.

This article draws on a range of cultural and ethnographic material depicting the ways that Asian American–Jewish identities are shaped in the context of contemporary American Jewish society, focusing on Asian Americans navigating their own Ashkenazi families and heritages.⁵ Because in Jewish and Jewish studies contexts, conversations about interfaith families inevitably focus on how the children raised in interfaith families identify, this article addresses family life but also considers how such offspring frame their experience, in childhood and in adulthood. These sources allow us to trace the real and imagined practices of Asian–Jewish interfaith families and the tensions inherent in using the languages of religion, culture, and ethnicity to describe them. If cultural and ethnographic material gives us evidence about the lived experiences of people drawing from Jewish and Asian heritage and also about the public constructions that they create around those identities, fiction both gives us a sense of the options imagined for such families and serves a prescriptive purpose, indicating the possibilities that are presented to them.

⁴Some scholarship has taken up this question. For instance, Tisa Wenger's *We Have a Religion* asks how the Pueblo nation redefined certain practices as "religion" in order to protect them, a strategic decision that both preserved and reshaped certain practices over and above others. In *The Regulation of Religion and the Making of Hinduism in Colonial Trinidad*, Alexander Rocklin examines the implications of seeing people as "without religion," a determination based in excluding practices and worldviews that fall outside of this Christian purview, in the context of the British colonial decision to import and exploit Indian labor in Trinidad. Although this work deals with high-stakes colonial settings and mine deals with middle-class homes in the United States, I owe much to the theoretical work of both Wenger and Rocklin in thinking through the uses of these terms by the people I write about here.

⁵Although there are longstanding Jewish communities in Asia, this article is not speaking to those experiences but rather situations in which the Asian culture in play is not Jewish.

JEWISH-CHRISTIAN INTERFAITH MARRIAGE: THE “NORMATIVE” INTERFAITH MARRIAGE

To understand how Asian–Jewish blending is distinctive, we need to establish a baseline for comparison, which, in the US context, is the white Christian–Ashkenazic Jewish interfaith family. Although there certainly have been changes over the past decade or so in how interfaith families with Christian heritage are welcomed into the Jewish community, the dominant trend remains in which parents are advised to choose one religion for their children because to do otherwise will confuse the children. Synagogues and Jewish communal groups encourage families to, in the words of one Jewish community professional, “make Jewish choices and progress on Jewish journeys” (Aldredge 2014).

What it means to encourage Jewish journeys means different things in different contexts. Although many Jewish organizations are primarily interested in making Judaism accessible and engaging to young interfaith families, in my fieldwork with Christian–Jewish interfaith couples, I heard numerous examples of more coercive strategies, sometimes from earlier generations, but sometimes in the contemporary moment. Multiple couples talked about hoping to enroll their children in both Jewish and Christian educational programs but not being allowed to do so. Such a boundary felt coercive to couples because they were only given access to Jewish communal resources that they deemed important to giving their children Jewish identity if they adhered to Jewish community norms by excluding Christian education. As I described in my book about Christian–Jewish interfaith couples, sometimes these families acquiesced, but other times, they simply decided to lie to the Jewish community about the choices they were making (Mehta 2018, 112–35, 161–200). I was also told stories of interfaith couples who joined interfaith support groups in their Reform congregations where they felt that the Christian partner was subtly or overtly pressured to convert (Mehta 2018, 161–200). Members of groups who explicitly wanted to celebrate both traditions, either in communities explicitly dedicated to such a project or in Unitarian Universalist settings, learned, over time, that if they were covered by local Jewish papers, the message was rarely that they were to be commended for keeping Judaism alive in unlikely places, but that by entering those places in the first place, they were threatening Jewish continuity. These groups were frequently so anxious about talking to outsiders that I had to work carefully and slowly to gain their trust.

The boundary policing in Christian–Jewish interfaith families is often as much or more a matter of Christian practice and material culture than of Christian belief. The presence of a Christmas tree in the home remains

problematic whether or not that tree is accompanied by belief in Jesus (or in Santa). Jewish homes are, generally, not decorated with Christian art—even when that Christian art might be a family heirloom.⁶ The people I have interviewed about their experience in interfaith families often tell stories about their own policing of the boundaries between Christian and Jewish or about their communities objecting to the boundaries they set.

Similarly, however, what it meant to be acceptably Jewish was not necessarily framed in terms of Jewish belief or practice. During my fieldwork, I was repeatedly told jokes (sometimes old saws, sometimes stories ranging in tone from loving and rueful to malicious) about relatives and community members that depicted men becoming more religiously Jewish (which is to say, more likely to join and attend synagogues or to participate in certain Jewish rituals) as a result of their marriage to non-Jewish women. Members of those religious communities, however, often felt that the inclusion of these non-Jewish women made the community “feel” less Jewish as did some grandparents who explained that, although they appreciated the Jewish educations of their grandchildren, the children still did not “feel” Jewish. They cited everything from fashion sense to sense of humor to culinary choices, expressing something ineffable about Jewish identity that clearly went beyond variations on Jewish observance and mastery of Torah and Talmud. Synagogues, religious leaders, and interfaith couples dedicated to raising Jewish children, however, could not necessarily control how children “felt” to others, but they could control whether the children were exposed to Torah and Talmud, Passover, and Yom Kippur over and above the Gospels, Advent, and Lent.⁷

The description that I have provided of Christian-Jewish interfaith families offers two important take-aways. First, if interfaith families want to affiliate with Jewish communities, those communities have historically heavily policed them to make sure that they did not include elements of Christianity in their homes and did not distinguish between elements of Christianity that were theological (belief in Christ) and elements that were not (Easter egg hunts). Perhaps because of the extent to which Jews focus on practice, religious and otherwise, in articulating how they experience Judaism, both sets of behaviors were understood to be Christian and therefore problematic.

⁶Some children of interfaith marriage defiantly press against that image, as Laurel Snyder does in the introduction to *Half-Lives: Jew-ish Tale from Interfaith Homes*, where she talks about her decision to collect Catholic religious art (Snyder 2006).

⁷Not only did these concerns come up in interviews and participant observation, but as my other work demonstrates, they also appear in prescriptive literature, even as that literature sometimes actively strives to advance an understanding of Judaism based more overtly in an institutionally based definition of religion.

Second, American Jews use and understand the term *religion* to apply to them, but when American Jews actually try to articulate what it might mean through the passing on of Jewish identities, they cast a much wider net than a particular set of beliefs or obedience to Jewish law. The idea that religion is not a particularly good category for American Jews is, perhaps, both deeply counterintuitive and simultaneously deeply obvious. It is counterintuitive because, as scholars such as Laura Levitt point out, in the process of assimilation American Jews have remade themselves into examples of “American middle-class Protestant culture,” which in part entails framing Judaism as a private faith (2007, 808–9). In the United States, for a variety of strategic reasons and particularly on either side of the Second World War, American Jews came to present themselves (and strive to be understood and understand themselves) as a religious group. Such an identification allowed them access, for better or for worse, to religious freedom and tolerance, if not always acceptance, as members of “tri-faith America” (Gordan 2018; Wenger 2017, 46–49, 168–73). This strategic shift made sense in a particular historical moment in the United States and indeed reshaped certain aspects of Jewish self-understanding.

This understanding of Judaism is familiar to anyone who is used to seeing a rabbi or two mixed in with the Protestant ministers and Catholic priest at a civic event and has been ensconced in particular civic scholarly conversations as part of “tri-faith” America (Herberg 1960; Schultz 2011). The formulation of Judaism as a religion, however, does not account for another common character in American life, the secular Jew. Present in such public settings as television shows like *Seinfeld* or books by authors such as Philip Roth or Bernard Malamud, the nonreligious Jew is also a familiar figure in public consciousness. And these public depictions help to underscore the reality that “*religion, race, class, and even ethnicity* have never been able to fully or accurately describe what it means to be a Jew in the United States” (Levitt 2007, 809). Indeed, Jews have a long history of identifying as an ethnic or even national group apart from the United States as well (Biale 2015). Between these poles of “Judaism as a religious faith” and “the secular Jew” are a range of practices, tastes, habits, and self-understandings that mark life for many Jews but are not easily encapsulated by the term *religion*, either in its colloquial or scholarly sense.

As my ethnographic and other research has demonstrated, although marriages between Jews and non-Jews are frequently referred to as “inter-faith,” faith is not necessarily the salient category for these families. The Jewish identity that they hope to preserve or pass on to their children might be characterized by practices or beliefs that fit neatly into conventional definitions of religion—synagogue membership, the ability to read

Torah, a desire to light Shabbat candles over dinner on Friday night—but they might have other characteristics: a love of smoked fish, an affinity for Sarah Silverman, or a particular mode of intellectual engagement. When faced with interfaith marriage to Christians, American Jews fear both a loss of Jewish communal membership and Jewish learning and some of these other characteristics of Jewish identity, which move beyond the bounds of what is traditionally understood as religion.

ASIAN AMERICAN–JEWISH IDENTITIES AND ADOPTION

American Jews, however, are notably more comfortable with identities that blend Judaism with non-Christian traditions, as the experience of Asian American Jews demonstrates. Stepping briefly away from the question of interfaith marriage, this distinction is particularly clear in the 2007 coverage of the first wave of girls adopted from China to become bat mitzvahs.⁸ Moving to Asian adoption within Ashkenazi Jewish families offers a more capacious definition of religiously complex families than the interfaith families that I usually study. Adoptive families have notably different relationships to the Asian cultures in question than do interfaith families. In particular, an interfaith marriage results in a household in which each adult is an “expert” in one of the traditions within the family; adoption of Asian children into Jewish families usually does not. Adoption, however, is extremely useful if one wants to understand the terms that white Jews use to describe Asian traditions, particularly as they offer Asian adoptees language through which to build their identities. As the *New York Times* reported, families negotiated that tradition in a range of ways. The *New York Times* article cites “contradictions” that “show up in ways both playful—yin-and-yang yarmulkes, *kiddush* cups disguised as *papier-mâché* dragons, kosher lo mein and veal ribs at the buffet—and profound” (Newman 2007). The article does not spell out the profound changes, but it does note that several of the girls whom they interviewed celebrated on days that have significance in the Chinese calendar, a coincidence that often facilitated the inclusion of Chinese elements. One interviewee had her bat mitzvah on a day when *Sukkot* coincided with the Chinese autumn moon festival, another on the eve of the Chinese New

⁸*Bat mitzvah* literally translates to “daughter of the Torah.” For non-Orthodox Jews, *bat* and *bar* (son) *mitzvah* ceremonies happen when a child is thirteen and usually feature their first time publicly chanting from the Torah and speaking about their assigned portion of the biblical passage. The ceremony often includes a range of other elements, depending on the community and family in question. After the formal religious service, many families also have a sizable party.

Year, when the Torah portion discussed welcoming the stranger, a particularly apt topic for a visibly different convert, adopted into Judaism.

One of the girls interviewed drew precisely the strategic lines between religion and culture under discussion here when she noted, “Judaism is a religion, Chinese is my heritage and somewhat my culture, and I’m looking at them in a different way,” she said. “I don’t feel like they conflict with each other at all” (Newman 2007). Of course, the speaker here is a thirteen-year-old who perhaps does not have robust definitions of the terms *religion* and *culture*; however, it is equally likely that she is echoing an understanding that she has acquired from the adults in her life. The lines that she draws assume that religion is reflected in the prayers and texts of Judaism and Chinese elements as *heritage* or *culture*. The article does not mention which elements of her Chinese heritage were present at her bat mitzvah, though she was the girl who celebrated during *Sukkot* and the Autumn New Moon Festival, but it is worth complicating how some of the elements that the article listed as areligious are understood.⁹ The yin-yang symbol that appears on commemorative yarmulkes is a Daoist symbol for dualism; the Chinese dragon is part of a Chinese creation story. To use the term *heritage* and to define these elements as areligious, then, is both contextual and strategic. And so, in this case, the comfort with a yin-yang yarmulke or a papier mâché dragon is born, in part, out of American ignorance about Chinese worldviews—a tendency to see Chinese myths as similar to Greek myths—fun, colorful, but not taken seriously enough to be threatening—not representing real views with which one might have to grapple. These symbols, however, are not only acceptable because of their valence of safety. They are also part of Chinese systems of belief and practice that are not traditionally separated into a distinct category called *religion* and that many Chinese Americans with whom the family and their Jewish community might interact also might well label as *cultural*, so they can be blended with Judaism. There is also a racialized element to Jewish reactions to the possibility of assimilation in comparing their reactions to Jews taking on Christian practices and Jews taking on Asian practices. Because, in the racial binary of the contemporary United States, Eastern European or Ashkenazi Jews are racialized as white, white Christianity poses particular opportunities or threats for American Jews.¹⁰

⁹It is, of course, also worth noting that the concept of *religion* has its own archeology that is closely tied to Christianity and does not necessarily map well onto Judaism, never mind onto various Asian traditions. These are, however, for better or for worse, the terms that are in play in both the context of American religion and in the conversations examined here.

¹⁰Though many Ashkenazi Jews object to framing Jews as white, legally they are framed as such; for instance, census forms do not list *Jew* or *Jewish* as a racial category, but more importantly, Jews are white from the standpoint of laws around redlining, in terms of racial profiling by the police, etc. For a historical look at how Jews went from being seen as a separate, Semitic race to being seen as white, see Diner 2017, chaps. 1–3; Goldstein 2007.

The “East” has long been exoticized and commercialized in the United States and Europe, making it an appealing spiritual playground in the American imagination (Iwamura 2011). For instance, many Americans, Jewish and otherwise, have yoga or meditation practices in which they chant sutras from Hinduism and Buddhism, learn worldviews and spiritual teaching drawn from those traditions, and do so without a sense that such behavior threatens their primary religious identity (or signifies taking on a new religious identity) (Jain 2017; Jain 2014). More to the point, they take on these identities without sacrificing their identities as Christians and Jews (Tanaka 2007, 115–16). Historically, and perhaps particularly in the context of Buddhism, Ashkenazi Jews are among the white converts who shaped American Buddhism. Intentionally or not, they did so at the expense of ethnic Buddhism, as practiced by Asian American communities in the United States and Asian American immigrants to the United States. Converts to Buddhism focused predominantly on meditation and philosophy and denigrated ethnic Buddhism, which contained folk practices that the converted Buddhists saw as impurities (Hickey 2010; Numrich 2003). In part because these attitudes shaped scholarly and popular understandings of Buddhism in the United States (this is, for instance, the Buddhism of the Beats, exemplified and popularized by the writing and celebrity of Allen Ginsberg), American Jews were powerful in shaping an American Buddhism that could be combined with Judaism or Christianity. Both because this was a Buddhism stripped of conflicting cultural particularity and in which white American converts were more powerful than Asian Buddhists, it rendered the traditions less threatening to, among others, American Jews.

Both Hinduism, through yoga, and Buddhism, through meditation, became traditions that American Jews easily combined with their Judaism. Not only do many individuals see no contradiction in combining Hindu or Buddhist teachings and practice with their Jewish identities, but also any number of pieces of popular culture and literature support such behavior, ranging from the now classic *The Jew and the Lotus* by Rodger Kamenetz or the more contemporary *Evolving Dharma: Meditation, Buddhism, and the Next Generation of Enlightenment* by author, activist, and rabbi Jay Michaelson to connect yoga poses to Jewish tradition (Kamenetz 2007; Michaelson 2013; Bloomfield 2004; Copeland 2020). American Jews, who can draw on at least a generation or two of efforts to blend Judaism with elements of Asian traditions, then, are more comfortable encouraging hybrid identities in blended families when those identities combine Judaism with Asian traditions than with Christianity. That comfort is facilitated by the relationship that American Jews have with “the East,” a relationship

that is both less historically fraught than their relationship with dominant American culture and one that is amplified by a healthy dose of exoticization. Additionally, this greater comfort with Asian traditions is often facilitated by how families deploy the terms *religion*, *culture*, and *ethnicity* when articulating their boundaries and policing them in Jewish-Christian and Jewish-Asian contexts.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF ASIAN AMERICAN AND JEWISH IDENTITIES IN FICTION

What, then, do these questions of power dynamics and definitions mean in the real lives of Asian American-Jewish blended families? The *b'nai mitzvah* of girls adopted from China give us one point of reference. Here, I want to delve deeply into two examples, one a young adult novel called *My Basmati Bat Mitzvah*, a coming-of-age story about an Indian American Jewish girl, the other based on the public presentation of Korean American cantor and rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl. Both of these messages are, in some ways, prescriptive—Buchdahl is a public figure whose heritage story is curated to offer an understanding of what multiracial liberal Judaism can look like. Similarly, as a young adult novel, part of what *My Basmati Bat Mitzvah* does is offer validation to Asian American Jews, but it also offers thoughts on how one might (productively) combine those identities. In both cases, we see a flexibility that is not generally afforded to children of Christian-Jewish interfaith families, but a flexibility that is, in part, predicated on the framing of Asian practices as heritage based or universally acceptable rather than as culturally distinct.

Young adult literature gives us a sense of what teens and tweens are told is possible, as they consider how to navigate complicated identities. Young adult literature serves many purposes, two of which are relevant here. It helps youth imagine possibilities beyond what they see around them—ways of being that may not be the immediate norm; but it is also prescriptive—setting limits or terms on those possibilities. The Asian fusion bat mitzvah featured in Paula J. Freedman's 2013 *My Basmati Bat Mitzvah*, a young adult novel about “just your average Jewish-Indian American girl,” does just this—it shows the options available to Tara Feinstein as she finds ways to be Indian and Jewish, while demonstrating some of the limits on those combinations (Freedman 2013). Unlike the girls in the *New York Times* article, Tara Feinstein, the narrator, is not adopted, but rather the child of an Ashkenazi father and an Indian mother who converted to Judaism upon marriage. Though her mother's conversion causes some of her Hebrew School classmates to suggest otherwise, Tara considers herself

completely Jewish but also half-Indian, and she wants her bat mitzvah to acknowledge this mixed identity. Although the novel imagines ways that Tara can achieve this goal, it does so by trading on some of the same concepts evident in the *New York Times* article—exoticization and a reworking of arguably “religious” elements as cultural. As Tara’s story is not based on adoption but rather gestures towards the negotiations of blended families, the novel also presents Tara as worrying that having a bat mitzvah might somehow distance her from her recently deceased grandfather, Nanaji, especially after one of her Hebrew School classmates suggests that the statue of Ganesha in her bedroom is a false idol.

Eventually, watching her Punjabi Hindu aunt doctor her Jewish grandmother’s matzo ball soup while her grandmother trades knitting tips with her Bengali Muslim classmate’s mother, Tara muses, “I thought again of Nanaji, how much he would have approved of Auntie’s mixed-up little Punjabi-Bengali-American-Hindu-Muslim-Jewish Diwali potluck. And then I knew—it was going to be okay.... I could be Indian American and Jewish American all at the same time. I could have my bat mitzvah and still honor Nani and Nanaji. I was a spiritual person, like Nanaji. I was just me, and there was nothing weird about that” (Freedman 2013, 203). In America, Tara’s aunt argues, Hindu versus Muslim does not matter—everyone is just brown. Her aunt and her grandmother adore each other, across their differences. And so, Tara decides that it will be okay—she is the logical result of her community, a community that understands her.

Tara also decides that she, like her Indian grandfather, is spiritual. Tara discusses Nanaji’s spirituality repeatedly, noting his connection to nature and birds, but the primary way that she connects to him is through her interactions with a statue of Ganesha that she keeps in her room. Tara inherited her Ganesha from Nanaji, who kept the statue on an altar that she has tried to replicate. Ganesha has a bowl of *teeka*, made from turmeric and incense ash, that Tara “shmears” on his forehead, as she saw her grandfather do. She knows, and has taught her friend Rebecca, that rubbing Ganesha’s stomach brings good luck and money (Freedman 2013, 78). Tara is careful to note that “for me, it wasn’t a religious thing. Just a little ritual to remember [Nanaji] by” (Freedman 2013, 78). For Tara, this practice is neither religious nor Hindu. For scholars of religion, however, this passage evokes Robert Orsi’s definition of religion as a network of relationships between heaven and earth, the living and the dead (Orsi 2006, 2). Throughout the book, Tara’s memories of Nanaji provide a grounding in her sense of self, a connection to both her Indian and Hindu heritages, and a referent for how to understand the world. Her moments of honoring him demonstrate both the religious nature of Tara’s relationship

to Nanaji's memory and the difference between Jewish approaches to Hinduism and to Christianity. In Hinduism, the ritual act that Tara commits is an offering: she is anointing the statue of a god with an offering. Whether or not the act has cosmological significance for Tara (other than memorializing her grandfather), one cannot imagine a similar argument about a Jewish character lighting candles in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary and calling it "not a religious thing."

Tara's form of honoring her grandparents while having a bat mitzvah meant more than simply keeping elements of Indian culture present in her life, more than wearing a dress made out of a family sari for her bat mitzvah or putting *chat masala* on her popcorn but rather takes the form of "interstitial integrity." *Interstitial identity* is an idea developed by Japanese-American, liberal Christian theologian Rita Nakashima Brock, drawing on scholarship and her own experience as a mixed-race woman whose life has moved her through many cultures. She describes integration as bringing many parts together to create integrity, or "how we know ourselves and make choices that sustain our values in relationship with others" (Brock 2007, 126). The term interstitial is taken from the connective tissue that connects organs in the body. It is through that connective tissue, Brock argues, that she can bring together the disparate parts of who she is—not by fusing the heart to the lungs as the same thing but by connecting them. The novel depicts Tara wrestling with how to do that very work of building an interstitial identity—how to make sense of these disparate parts that create her integrity, a process that is rooted in both choice and relationships, to her family and heritages.

The novel suggests that in addition to having a bat mitzvah and taking her spiritual dilemmas to Rabbi Aron, being Indian as well as Jewish American means that she will continue to be unsure she believes in God (Jewish or not), to rub Ganesh's stomach and light incense in his honor for luck, and to celebrate Diwali with her extended family—a holiday that she can explain in cosmological terms. The lines between religion and culture are, in Freedman's novel, blurred, and neither of them, in the end, defines community. Rather, Tara's community comes from her neighborhood and school, where the adults and children mingle across their differences. This young adult novel depicts a world that is diverse and fluid, with friendships that cross boundaries and senses of self that contain many disparate elements. Tara's identity is messy, pulling practices and ideas from any number of parts of her life. That messy, interstitial identity is possible because Tara fuses together something out of the many contributing elements, making an identity that honors the many distinct relationships that shape her life.

Although the basmati bat mitzvah is fictional, I have spoken with a number of Hindu-Jewish interfaith families whose experiences parallel Tara's. They spoke of Jewish weddings like the one that I opened this article with, which made explicit and intentional references to Hinduism. These weddings often point to commonalities between the seven circles of a Jewish wedding and the seven steps of a Hindu wedding, use readings (in English) of Hindu texts and chanting (in Sanskrit) of mantras, and also include the legally binding elements of a Hindu wedding—the exchange of garlands and the placing, by the groom, of *sindur* (red powder) in the parting of the bride's hair. The couples decorate their homes with Judaica but also with Hindu statuary depicting gods and goddesses. When they have children, these couples send them to Hebrew School while continuing to celebrate key Hindu holidays such as Diwali and *rhaki* and marking Hindu lifecycle events, such as naming ceremonies and rituals for the first solid food and first haircut. *B'nai mitzvah* celebrations often incorporate elements of both cultures—*tallitot* made of saris, for example, but maybe more significantly for this argument, *d'verei torah* that point to similarities between Jewish and Hindu teachings. As Brock's understanding of identity suggests, the solutions that families find change over time—interstitial identity is not stable—it shifts over time because it is deeply contextual (Brock 2007, 126). Sometimes, these combinations echo practices that exist in non-South Asian Jewish families—ever since the 1960s, one has, for instance, been able to find *tallitot* made out of saris (Ariel 2003, 145–46). Other times, the practice is formally endorsed—as with the wedding at the opening of the article, or in the *divrei torah* at *b'nai mitzvah* services—or informally endorsed, as when friends from a synagogue community attend a holiday or lifecycle event. Other times, there is no endorsement, although the family is in a Jewish community that has set limits around engagement with Christian tradition but has never thought to limit the engagement with Hindu tradition.

These families are aided by two factors in their incorporation of Hinduism into homes and identities that are acknowledged as Jewish. The first is the white American comfort with appropriation, discussed above, but the second has to do with Hinduism itself. Hinduism, being largely a creation of Western scholarship, does not have agreed-upon canonical texts or a unified belief system, and although many Hindus place deep value on correctly practicing certain rituals, within India those rituals vary widely from place to place (Kurien 2007, 8). As Prema Kurien notes, practices such as religious education classes and *satsang* or worship groups for the whole family are diasporic practices that are not part of mainstream Hindu practice in India (Kurien 2007, 9). This is not, of course, to imply

that those practices are somehow “less authentic” as Hindu, but simply to say that the cordoning off of education and worship in such ways largely comes from an attempt to make Hinduism work in non-Indian settings and that, historically, practices of devotion and tenets of education were less clearly marked off as something “religious” and apart from secular life. Whereas some members of Indian communities have switched to these more institutional modes of observance, many continue to practice as individuals or as families and therefore can strike American observers as disassociated from formal religion, and, particularly in a US context—where the Indian community does not have the hegemonic power that Christianity has or that Hinduism has in India—people are quite free to shape their practice as they see fit.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF ASIAN AMERICAN AND JEWISH IDENTITIES IN FACT

Fictitious and prescriptive depictions in young adult literature like *My Basmati Bat Mitzvahs* point to one form of identity construction—a form offered by a white author to Asian-Ashkenazi blended children. Clearly, however, identities are not constructed only in the world of fiction. Angela Buchdahl is the first Asian American to be a cantor and a rabbi in the United States. In addition to being the first Asian American to be ordained to either title, she is the first woman to hold both positions. A member of the Reform movement, Buchdahl has been the senior cantor of New York City’s Central Synagogue since 2006 and their senior rabbi since 2014 (Musleah 2013; “Central Synagogue” n.d.). It is tempting to see Buchdahl’s public negotiation of Korean-Jewish identity as somehow depicting her internal experience, and perhaps it does—we cannot know. What we can say is that her public presentation of Korean-Jewish identity is one that has allowed her to become a prominent rabbi in the Reform movement, with a prestigious pulpit and a place on lists such as *Newsweek*’s “America’s 50 Most Influential Rabbis” (Lynton et al, 2012). Her negotiation of these identities reflects some of the realities of non-Christian Asian American identities at the same time that they allow her to present herself as being undeniably, and singularly, Jewish.

In 2012, Buchdahl appeared on the PBS television program *Finding Your Roots*, where she and the host, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., explored her blended Ashkenazi Jewish and Korean heritages. In one scene, while Buchdahl, her husband, their children, and her parents sang the *Shabbat* blessings, Gates reflected in a voiceover, “Sometimes, interfaith or intercultural marriages force families to choose a religious or ethnic identity and sometimes one

cultural heritage is sacrificed. Angela Buchdahl . . . told me that she felt that the rich legacies of her Korean cultural heritage were slipping away from her children” (Gates 2012). In their conversation, Buchdahl told Gates a story about one of her children seeing a Korean figure skater on television and saying to her, “You’re Korean,” without any sense that he might be as well. Gates asked Buchdahl, “Does that bother you? Or your mom?” (Gates 2012). She responded:

You know, I asked my mom that. I said, I feel like I need to teach them more about being Korean. She said, “You are every day. When you are showing them the way that you respect someone who is elderly, when you teach them that they should be striving for the very best in everything they do. Those are Korean values. That is part of who you are as a Korean. I feed them Korean food also, and I teach them stories, but really, she said, it is about how you approach how you live your life. When you teach them that life is not just about being comfortable, but about what you can give back and realizing your potential on earth. She said, that’s a Korean way of looking at the world. (Gates 2012)

Gates commented that Buchdahl’s “mother is a multicultural saint,” and the values that she articulates are unthreatening to Jewish identity. First, these values are labeled as Korean, rather than as Buddhist (the religion with which Buchdahl’s mother identifies) or Confucian (a tradition that shapes many elements of Korean culture), which make them fit neatly within a multicultural framework rather than a multireligious framework. In addition, in Buchdahl’s articulation, they are stripped of cultural particularity—one could just as easily say that it is Jewish to respect your elders, give back to society, and realize your potential as one can call those things Korean. Although we do not have details of the stories that she tells, it is possible that these values are reflected in the Korean stories that Buchdahl tells her children (Mehta 2014). The particularity of those stories would help us to better understand whether those values look different in the context of transmitting Koreanness than they do in transmitting Jewishness. Without the particularity, however, they become less unnerving to a Jewish audience, which is potentially important for Buchdahl’s professional image.

Just as the term *religion* is an uneasy fit for American Jews, perhaps neither Buchdahl nor Gates used the term here because it is also a poor descriptor for Asian traditions, perhaps particularly as experienced by Asian Americans. Thinking specifically about the Chinese-American experience, scholars Russell M. Jeung, Seanan S. Fong, and Helen Jin Kim demonstrate that though Chinese Americans report the highest rate of

identification as “religious nones,” such a designation does not actually appropriately address their “lived tradition” of familism, which “prioritizes family interdependence and right relationships, through meaningful rituals of being family” (Jeung et al, 2015; Jeung et al 2019, 9, 6). Many practices that morally orient Chinese Americans are rooted in Confucian thought and Chinese popular religion but are not tied, particularly for the children of immigrants, to organized communities or to theological claims.¹¹ As a result, first-generation Chinese Americans often identify themselves as nonreligious despite having both ethical commitments and practices tied to familism. Jeung’s work with Brett Esaki and Alice Liu finds a strong parallel in Japanese-American religious experience as well (Jeung et al, 2015). Although Buchdahl is Korean, you can see parallels to this trend in the stripping of these values of either cultural particularity or as a referent to a recognized world tradition.

In fact, one can see a similar coding in Buchdahl’s piece, “Like Kimchee on a Seder Plate,” which she wrote in 2003. The piece was originally published in *Sh’ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas* and has been republished and repeatedly cited in venues ranging from ReformJudaism.org (the blog of the Reform movement) to the Jewish Women’s Archive to the *Times of Israel* (Buchdahl 2003; Kim and Leavitt 2015; Matzah Ball Soup for the Seoul? 2012). In this piece, Buchdahl frames her blended heritage by opening with a story about the year that her mother put the pickled Korean condiment kimchee on their Seder plate at Passover in place of *maror*, traditionally represented by horseradish. “My Korean mother thought it was a reasonable substitution since both kimchee and horseradish elicit a similar sting in the mouth, the same clearing of the nostrils. She also liked kimchee on gefilte fish and matza. ‘Kimchee just like *maror*, but better,’ she said” (Buchdahl 2003). Kimchee, then, appeared as a Jewish ritual item on the Seder plate and as a fusion food in nonritual contexts.

And, indeed, those opportunities for combination are more possible in part because of this slippery and porous boundary between what Americans call religion and culture in Asian society and therefore how they are read in Jewish community. Although one can put kimchee on a Seder plate, and interfaith families do, in fact, sometimes put hard-boiled Easter eggs on Seder plates, it is difficult to imagine that, in 2003, an article by a prominent rabbi called “There is an Easter Egg on My Seder Plate” could receive acclaim as a story of how fruitfully and productively

¹¹Though many Chinese-American practitioners of familism see themselves as religious nones, philosophers such as Tu Wei-ming articulate an understanding of Confucianism as fundamentally religious, in so much as its values reflect a “continuous process of spiritual cultivation” (Tu 1989, 116).

one can combine Christian and Jewish heritage.¹² One could argue, of course, that Easter eggs are symbols of Easter, a holiday that is about the death and resurrection of the Christian savior, whereas kimchee is just piquant food. Such an argument would both overplay the symbolism of the Easter egg, however, which is popularly understood to represent Easter, but not its theology, and underplay the reality that kimchee (and other fermented foods) are seen as an important element in regulating *qi*, or energy, a vital life force that is central to both traditional Asian medicine and to Daoism. Similarly, although one could argue that kimchee fulfills the culinary role of horseradish, this argument would fail to note that there is already an egg on the Seder plate and that eggs, dipped in salt water, are a traditional part of the meal. In this situation, food seems both more religiously neutral, even to religious actors, than we in religious studies might see it; but also kimchee, whose metaphysical implications are unknown (or potentially not taken seriously) by American interpreters, is allowed to be more “neutral” and less compromising to Jewish identity than its Christian counterparts.¹³

A 2013 profile of Buchdahl by *Hadassah Magazine* underscores the nonthreatening nature of Asian religions, in this case, Buddhism, from a Jewish institutional perspective. When delving into Buchdahl’s background, *Hadassah Magazine* describes her mother as persistent and resourceful and, as the first woman in her family to go to college; “Her mother sequestered herself in a Buddhist temple for a year to study for the admissions test” (Musleah 2013). Again, here we see Buchdahl’s mother’s connection to Buddhism presented as inspiring and not as something to be hidden. In addition, her mother’s Buddhism is allowed to inform Buchdahl’s Judaism. As the interview puts it, “Her mother’s Buddhism informs her Judaism, she says, noting that Jewish and Korean cultures overlap in their approach to life, their emphasis on giving back, and their drive to succeed and to be educated” (Musleah 2013). This list resembles the list that Buchdahl gave Gates and is carefully curated to represent the aspects of those cultures that can be seen to overlap. One also has to note that in the extensive literature on Jewish-Christian relations

¹²There is, in fact, a manual for Jewish parents whose children marry Christians called *There’s an Easter Egg on Your Seder Plate* (Reuben 2007), but it is less a celebration of the multicultural potential offered to the Jewish community by such unions and more a guide to creating harmonious family relationships despite the problem of an interfaith marriage.

¹³Here, Benjamin E. Zeller’s term “quasi-religious” proves helpful as a way of describing food practices that are “ways of life, systems of values, and symbols of meaning,” though the participants in these foodways do not always view them as religious. In the same volume, I also argue that food provides a venue for Christian-Jewish interfaith families to fuse practices precisely because, though food does much of the work of religion, family members understand food as “cultural” or “traditional.” For more information, please see Zeller 2014 and Mehta 2014.

such a broad-strokes discussion of similarity often receives a heavy critique from both Jews and Christians, a critique that is made more possible by familiarity with the tradition. In this take, Buddhism becomes those broad values. It is not belief in the Buddhist or Daoist concept of hungry ghosts (people who died unusually unhappy deaths or who are not properly venerated by ancestors); bowing before statues of the Buddha; food offerings; or chanted sutras. Buchdahl's mother's Buddhism may not now or ever have included those elements, but for an American-Jewish audience, whose understanding of Buddhism is largely shaped by the exported Zen of the Jew-Bu, those questions might not even come up.

The fact that Asian religions are often invisible in a US context is also evident in how others frame Buchdahl's multicultural background, for instance, in an interview with *Hadassah Magazine*. *Hadassah* comments that "while Buchdahl's 'Koreanness' remains vital, it is her Jewish identity that is front and center" (Musleah 2013). One must note the scare quotes for the word *Koreanness*, which seem to indicate an uncertainty about what it might mean or include, while clearly and firmly presenting Jewish identity, which will be largely fleshed out in the article. Similarly, the article demonstrates a certain need to place boundaries around Buchdahl's identity by bluntly noting that "except for her appearance, nothing in Buchdahl's office gives away her Korean background," which is instead evident in her home, which "is furnished with antique Korean pieces [and] books" (Musleah 2013).

In addition to making it clear that, other than her physical person, Buchdahl's office offers no evidence of Koreanness, the article offers a description of the Korean art in her home, once again missing the potentially religious implications of the art. In Buchdahl's living room is "a 10-panel screen with scenes of a mountainside changing through the seasons—a wedding gift from her grandparents to her parents, who in turn gave it to Buchdahl and her husband, Jacob . . . upon their marriage" (Musleah 2013). The *Hadassah* article frames this screen as art, on the one hand an important family heirloom, and on the other hand, it is not noticeably different from the "ambiguous Asian décor" that Jenna Weismann Joselit frames as "of a piece with middle-class American Jewry's affinity with *mah jong* and Chinese food—very much an external marker of cosmopolitanism and sophistication" (Ingall 2012b). Asian art provided middle-class Jews with a way to demonstrate sophisticated taste that potentially marked assimilation into the American mainstream without delving into the possibly risky territory of Christian high art. As a result, the presence of Asian art in Buchdahl's home does not therefore make the home appear "less Jewish," because Jewish homes are often decorated with Asian art,

particularly of nature scenes. That said, those decorative choices are often made without an understanding of the particular and culturally specific worldview that shapes that work.

A family heirloom, however, is hardly “ambiguous Asian décor.” First of all, it is a family heirloom, evoking all of the potential for an understanding of religion as embedded in relationships (Orsi 2006, 2). In addition, to simply read the ten-piece screen, with images that change through the seasons, as a beautiful piece of nature-based art is to miss the significance of nature in Korean worldviews. Landscape painting is, in point of fact, the preeminent art form in Korea precisely because in Korea, nature is sacred, a “living entity” symbolizing “both an integral part of human life and a higher spiritual being” (Lee n.d.). The shifts in the landscape as it moves through the seasons represent change, or the Buddhist idea of impermanence. In this way, then, Buchdahl’s landscape screen both honors the heritage of her Korean Buddhist family and, whether she articulates it as such, places elements of a Korean worldview front and center in the family home. The fact that this worldview is not explicitly named as religious makes such a choice acceptable in a way that one could argue would not be the same if, for instance, she wished to display inherited Catholic religious art.

The idea that Buchdahl’s identities might co-exist but not merge is potentially useful in certain Jewish contexts but also very much in line with how contemporary scholars understand Asian American identity. In updating Robert E. Park’s theory of the “Marginal Man,” Brett Esaki argues that most Asian Americans do not create a single, unified self that draws all elements of their cultural contexts together. Rather, “Asian Americans themselves assert that they have a multifaceted identity and resist a monolithic one,” and, as Esaki emphasizes, do so without evidencing confusion (Esaki 2016, 80–81). Although Buchdahl is not directly articulating multifaceted identity in the Hadassah interview (and, indeed, while much of the Hadassah interview is in the magazine’s editorial voice), the tendency to have multifaceted identities also offers a compelling explanation for why Buchdahl’s office might be “Jewish space” rather than “Jewish and Korean” space.

That said, identity is not always simple. After all, there is kimchee on the *Seder* plate; and, just like fictional Tara, Buchdahl has access to “interstitial integrity,” which is, once again, a “complex evolving process over time” (Brock 2007, 126). The idea that an iconic Korean food can fulfill the ritual obligations of Jewish life suits Buchdahl’s purpose in her essay. She writes that, though she grew up in a small Jewish community in Tacoma, Washington, where her family was always accepted

(both because the community was small and because her father's family had been among the synagogue's founders), "As the child of a non-Jewish mother, a mother who carried her own distinct ethnic and cultural traditions, I came to believe that I could never be 'fully Jewish' since I could never be 'purely' Jewish" (Buchdahl 2003). This sense was underscored by questions that she was asked when she left her close-knit community and entered the larger Jewish world, where she was faced with comments about not "looking Jewish" and questions about her status under Jewish law, since her Buddhist mother had never converted (Buchdahl 2003; Gates 2012). Buchdahl's point, in this essay, is to argue that Judaism increasingly, and also eternally, has contained a "mixed multitude" and that not being "purely" Jewish does not, therefore, keep her from being "fully" Jewish, and that there are many ways to be fully Jewish.

Buchdahl's choices are framed by the very real politics of being an extremely prominent rabbi and by holding that pulpit as a woman and a Jew of Color. It would be reasonable to assume that those navigations shape, in some way, how she presents the Korean aspects of her identity, but her depiction of Korean values is also very much in line with the perspective of other Asian Americans who see themselves as religious nones—not because they lack connections to culture, but, either because of a lack of knowledge about the rationale behind a behavior or a piece of art, they do not see those cultural expressions as religious or because the behavior or piece of art does not appear to meet the familiar American standards of what is religious.

CONCLUSION

Whereas American Jews are in the minority compared to American Christians, and therefore are concerned about the dangers of assimilation, their traditions are in a comparatively powerful place compared to Asian traditions. Most Jewish communities have a longer history in the United States and, however problematically, had been accepted as one of the pillars of "Tri-Faith America" by the time widespread Asian immigration became possible in 1965.¹⁴ This more established social position, vis à vis Asian Americans, is one of the key reasons that Ashkenazi American Jews

¹⁴For a compelling fictional presentation of Jews appearing as an "American religion" to Asian Americans, see Gish Jen's novel *Mona in the Promised Land*, about sixteen-year-old Chinese-American Mona growing up in Scarshill (a fictionalized Scarsdale), New York. Mona refers to her immigrant family as the "New Jews," looking to become American through hard work and education, and her version of the American dream is Jewish. Jen's version of the Jewish community is one that has assimilated without losing its particular, distinctive characteristics. This is salad bowl rather than melting pot assimilation, with the twist that in order to become American, Mona becomes Jewish.

are more comfortable with including Asian American practices in their interfaith families. It is not, however, the only reason.

For American Ashkenazi Jews, assimilation, be it the discarding of Jewish practices, the adoption of Christian practices, or a combination of the two, provided a pathway into dominant white American culture, whether it was framed as Christian or secular. Historically (particularly in the nineteenth century), interfaith marriage had accelerated that process of assimilation such that, whether or not the intermarrying individual was “lost” to Judaism, very often within a generation or two the children had merged into a not-Jewish American mainstream (Rose 2001). From the standpoint of Jewish leadership and parents, interfaith marriage to Christians posed very clear dangers to the Jewish identity of both the Jewish member of a couple and to the presumptive children of the union.

Rightly or wrongly, in the minds of Jewish communal leadership, marriages to Hindu and Buddhist immigrants did not pose the same threat to the Jewish community and its continuity. Partly, this was simply a numbers game. There are many more potential white Christian spouses in the United States than Asian or Asian American ones. Another reason is that this sense of marriage with Asian immigrants as less threatening is rooted in the fact that Judaism and Christianity have a very complex historical relationship that is not replicated in Judaism’s relationship with Asian religions. Also, as white Americans, Jews are less threatened by the idea that they might lose people to a racialized “other.” Most obviously, a white American Jew can, more or less, blend into white Protestant or Catholic society. That “passing” might or might not be comfortable on any number of levels, but, generally speaking, it is possible. It is simply less possible for an Ashkenazi Jew to pass in a racialized Asian religious community be they immigrant, first generation, or, as most such communities are, a mix of the two. The intermarrying Jew will stick out in such a context, and their children may as well. Even if their children would be able to pass, the subconscious assumption here is that they would not want to. In the United States, to become less white is to lose status, and so there is, I would argue, less of a fear that the children of white American Jews and Asian Americans would be “lost” to Judaism in favor of joining Asian religious communities.¹⁵

¹⁵There are, of course, white American Hindus and Buddhists, many of whom are originally of Jewish origin. Although those experiences share something in common with the experiences of the Jewish-Asian blendings that I suggest here, they are fundamentally a different set of experiences. For the most current work on the category of the white, American Jew-Bu, see Sigalow 2019. Note, however, that Sigalow does not offer robust consideration of appropriation in her analysis.

The nuances of how these traditions function are, of course, particular to their formation, both before and after their arrivals in the United States. Also, the traditions represented in the “catch-all” term *Asian American* extend well beyond Chinese American familism and Indian American Hinduism. The point remains that as we think about Asian Jewish families in the context of a long-standing American Jewish conversation about interfaith families, it remains true that the category of *religion* is not a category that perfectly fits onto any of the experiences in play. It is also true that, in general, as awkward as the term is for American Jews, it is a term with which they have, in general, grown more comfortable and to which they have more completely adapted than Asian American communities often have.

In both the example of a living rabbi with Korean Buddhist heritage and the fictional example of a bat mitzvah with Indian Hindu heritage, the traditions that are allowed to exist alongside Jewish tradition are permissible precisely because it is possible to define them as *not religious*, a move that Christian Jewish interfaith families try to make when they attempt to define Christmas trees as cultural, but which is often challenged by Jewish communities. The ability to define them as such exists in part because of the asymmetric power relationship between these traditions and Judaism contrasted with the asymmetric power relationship (in the other direction) that Judaism has with Christianity. Because of this asymmetric relationship, a Christmas tree, which is a potent but not theologically significant symbol of Christmas, is often unacceptable within Jewish communities. Ganesha, however, though a Hindu deity for whom Tara performs acts that are, traditionally speaking, acts of devotion, can be regarded as acceptable precisely because Hinduism has less power, in a US context, than does Judaism—it is a tradition that does not suggest assimilation and one that, through yoga practices and Transcendental Meditation, American Jews have dabbled and shaped to their own purposes for decades. This pattern is even more pronounced when Asian symbols, such as a yin yang, are so well integrated into American popular culture as signaling “Chinese” rather than “Daoism” that they can be uncomplicatedly included in the decorations for a bat mitzvah.

More importantly, however, acceptance has to do with how the categories of religion and culture, as defined in contemporary American usage, map onto Christianity, Judaism, and the broad array of Asian traditions. Because religion does not tend to strike Asian Americans as a deeply salient term for their experiences—which often consist of practices without worldviews or values that seem potentially universal (like respect for elders) or at least not metaphysical (like deep commitment

to family)—their traditions are often described as cultural rather than religious. This leads Asian Americans to refer to themselves as religious nones and, perhaps, results in Jewish communities seeing little problem in incorporating those values into a narrative of Jewish family life. As a result, the Jewish Asian interfaith family is more free, in Jewish communal contexts, to incorporate elements of Asian culture into explicitly Jewish family life, specifically because those elements can be explained as “cultural” to a Jewish audience that is both comfortable with appropriation and often lacking in the cultural context to understand the metaphysics behind the traditions. Additionally, these traditions are being explained by Asian Americans who would not, even outside of the negotiations of interfaith families, frame their practices as religious. The *religious/cultural* designations, however, do not so much add meaning in and of themselves as they represent the complex histories and power relationships around what practices may, and may not, be incorporated into Jewish life.

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