Religiosity and Fertility: Jews in Israel

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Research has addressed the need for additional empirical investigation of the role of religiosity in demographic behavior (e.g. Adsera 2006; Berghammer 2012; Frejka and Westoff 2008; Hayford and Morgan 2008; Lehrer 2004; McQuillan 2004; Westoff and Marshall 2010; Zhang 2008). Israel presents a fascinating case study of the role of religion and religiosity in demographic processes. Contemporary Israel is a rare example of a modern democracy in which there is overlap between civil and religious authorities. Religious authorities and religiously-based political parties exercise direct and indirect influence over the education and social welfare systems, as well as other important aspects of life such as marriage, divorce and burial rites. In short, the political power of religious groups in Israel makes it likely that, according to the ideas outlined by McQuillan (2004), there are important effects of religion and religiosity on fertility in Israel. Moreover, Judaism, a scriptural religion, is likely to contain pronatalistic values that are translated through religious institutions. We note that the theoretical notions developed by Goldscheider and McQuillan are potentially complementary to economic theories of the role of religion, which emphasize the importance of perceived costs/sanctions and benefits/rewards from demographic choices that women and men make over the life course (e.g. Lehrer 1996, Lehrer 2004, Stark and Finke 2000). For example, among the religious in Israel, Judaism may provide psychological and social rewards to those who have many children, in the form of approval and social status. The strict adherence to a very particular, constrained way of life on the part of the ultra-Orthodox in Israel must be understood in the context of the powerful religious institutions and leaders which exert their influence on community members through sanctions and rewards for particular behaviors.

In Israel, contemporary fertility differentials by religion and religiosity are very much the focus of current popular debate, if relatively little scholarly study. Fertility differentials across religiosity subgroups within the Jewish population have important effects on population composition in Israel, and consequent political and religious developments.[1] A discussion of religiosity in the Jewish population in Israel can be organized around categories of Jewish religiosity which correspond with defined social constructs (Hleihel 2011). Distinctions can be made among the following numerically important groups: (1) ultra-Orthodox; (2) religious; (3) traditional; and (4) secular/not religious.

These religiosity categories are closely associated with fulfillment of religious commandments (e.g. observance of the Sabbath), and/or affiliation with certain Jewish religious political parties, specific types of religious education for children, and particular religious communities (Hleihel 2011). For example, self-defined ultra-Orthodox and religious persons are much more likely to strictly observe the Sabbath and keep kosher laws than are traditional individuals; likewise, traditional are much more likely to fulfill these commandments than are self-defined secular persons (author calculations, Israel Social Survey 2009).

[1] A study of the fertility of the Arab population in Israel, a heterogeneous minority, is beyond the scope of this paper. The Arab population, comprised of Muslims, Christians and Druze should be the subject of separate analyses, as their population processes are quite distinct from each other and from that of the Jewish population.

We discuss the different religiosity groupings in terms of distinctions based on social characteristics and behaviors. The ultra-Orthodox have a commitment to extreme segregation from the secular world. As Friedman (1991) discusses, the ultra-Orthodox groups stem from a contra-acculturation movement, which developed during the period of Enlightenment in Europe. They shun all contact with outside culture and essentially form separate societies living in segregated neighborhoods and towns. Based on the 2009 Israel Social Survey, 7.6% of adult Jewish women aged 20 and over define themselves as ultra-Orthodox (ICBS no date).

In contrast to the ultra-Orthodox, the national religious movement originated during Enlightenment in the acculturation groups that promoted contact with the outside world while maintaining Jewish culture and practices (Friedman 1991). Persons who see themselves as part of the national religious movement are likely to self-identify as religious, but not ultra-Orthodox. These religious Jews are generally well-integrated into Jewish Israeli secular society. Based on the 2009 Israel Social Survey, 10.6% of adult Jewish women aged 20 and over self-identify as religious (ICBS no date) .

An additional 39.8% of Jewish adult women in the 2009 Social Survey define themselves as traditional (ICBS no date). Traditional Jews in Israel do not define themselves as (strictly) religious or Ultra-orthodox, and not as secular. Generally, traditional Jews do fulfill some religious commandments and maintain Jewish customs. However, their traditional behavior is not necessarily motivated only by religious commitment, but may also be associated with identification and affiliation with the Jewish people or with their Jewish ethnic group, community and family (Ben-Rafael and Sharot 1991). The large category of traditional Jews is sometimes broken down further into two subcategories: traditional/religious Jews and traditional/less-religious Jews. The former group, while less likely to fulfill strictly the Jewish commandments (such as Sabbath observance) than are Ultra-orthodox or self-defined religious women, are more likely to do so than are traditional/less-religious women.

The largest group of adult Jews, at 41.8%, self-defines as secular/not religious (ICBS no date). We note that substantial proportions of self-identified secular women report at least occasional observance of religious commandments, attend synagogue for major holidays, and rate religious ceremonies as very important in their lives.[2] This would seem to suggest that even secular Jews in Israel are not completed secularized.

Recent research, based on data from the Israel Social Surveys 2002-2009, has documented that period fertility and cohort completed fertility among Jews shows great variability with respect to religiosity (Okun 2013; see also Bystrov 2012). For example, among women born during the 1950s and 1960s, ultra-Orthodox women have levels of cohort completed fertility ranging from 6.2 to 8.0. Religious women have cohort fertility in the range of 4.0; traditional women have cohort fertility in the range of 2.5 to 3.5, with a slight downward trend noticeable among some of these traditional women. Secular women have the lowest number of children on average, but maintain replacement-level or just above replacement-level cohort fertility across

[2] For example, among native-born secular women aged 20-44, 49% report that they follow kosher laws at least to some degree, 26% report attending synagogue on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, or more frequently, and 45% report that having a Jewish burial is very important for themselves.

birth cohorts, with no statistically significant change over cohorts. With the exception of a short-lived peak in cohort fertility among the ultra-Orthodox, there is remarkably little trend in cohort fertility among any of the religiosity groups, or among Jews overall (Okun 2013).

In this paper, we analyze recent, micro-level data from the 2009 Israel Social Survey (ISS) that measures religiosity among Jewish Israelis directly with respondents' subjective definitions. Space constraints do not allow us to detail all of the variables available from the 2009 ISS, but we highlight the most important ones here. In terms of religiosity, the ISS contain information on self-defined religiosity, which is chosen by Jewish main respondents in one of five categories: (1) ultra-Orthodox, (2) (national) religious, (3) traditional-religious, (4) traditional - not religious, or (5) secular. It is also important to emphasize that data contain information on main respondents' subjective definition of current religiosity, as well as retrospective reports on subjective religiosity of household of origin at age 15. Therefore, it is possible to untangle some of the endogeneity problems associated with potentially bidirectional relations between fertility and religiosity. Moreover, the 2009 module also includes a wide range of self-reported information from main respondents on their religious commitment and practice (e.g. adherence to religious commandments such as refraining from travel on the Sabbath, or keeping of kosher laws); we can utilize this detailed information to gain a better understanding of the behavioral meaning behind each of the five categories above. In addition, the 2009 module contains information on how the main respondent classifies his/her spouses' level of religiosity (in the same five-category classification system). Thus, are able to explore the impact on fertility of differences between spouses in religiosity (Lehrer 2004). Other important variables in the data which relate to community effects of religiosity include (1) whether the respondent participates in organized religious study, in settings such as lectures, seminars or religious lessons; (2) whether the respondent sees herself as affiliated with a particular religious movement within Judaism (e.g national religious or reform); and (3) whether it is important to the respondent that people living in their residential area will have a similar level of religiosity as themselves.

The most important demographic, social and economic information which can be garnered from the ISS includes main respondents' fertility histories, age and sex of children living in the household, current marital status, number of times married, and year of marriage/marital disruption. Additional information includes main respondents' occupations, details of employment (e.g. part-time and full-time work), current monthly earned income, education, immigrant status, and socioeconomic status, including home and vehicle ownership. There is also some more limited educational and employment information for the main respondents' household members. The attitudes questions contain information on main respondents' opinions on the overall importance of work and family in life, feelings of work-family conflict, desired age to start a family, desired family size, and reports on gender role attitudes and gender division of household work and childcare, as well as outsourcing of housework and childcare. The survey also includes information on attitudes towards separation of religion and State, as well as tolerance for non-traditional family behavior (non-marital fertility and divorce).

Our main purpose in this paper is to examine fertility differentials in a multivariate framework which attempt to unpack the effects of religiosity on parity progression. Separate analyses are done for different birth orders. We explore the effects of religiosity on fertility in the context of the theoretical framework proposed by McQuillan (2004) and Goldscheider (1971, 1999), as well as the economic framework, as outlined by Lehrer (2004). The multivariate analyses exploit the rich source of data available in the 2009 Israel Social Survey to understand how and in which contexts religiosity affects fertility.

Preliminary results from the multivariate analyses show that community effects of religiosity significantly magnify the relationship between religiosity and fertility, and that family building norms partially mediate the relationship between religiosity and fertility. While women's employment activity is significantly related to fertility, controlling for paid work does not change the estimated relationship between religiosity and fertility. The influence of religion appears to be propping up marriage and fertility even among seculars Jews. We conclude that unlike in most other developed societies, the institutional power of religion in Israel has not declined over the past half-century.

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