

Always between Two Worlds: The Liminal Lives of Religious Exiters

David M. Merolla
Wayne State University, USA

Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism

By Schneur Zalman Newfield (Temple University Press, 2020)

How do individuals who grow up in unconventional, insular religious groups re-create their lives after leaving these communities? How does their upbringing and formative experiences continue to shape their identities and lives after leaving? These are important questions that drive at the heart of scholarship on identity construction, and the social construction of reality. In his fascinating new book, *Degrees of Separation*, Schneur Zalman Newfield addresses these questions in the context of people who go OTD or “off the derech,” a term used to describe individuals who leave ultra-Orthodox Hasidic Jewish communities. What Newfield shows is that while these individuals indeed leave their communities to varying degrees and stop engaging in the beliefs, customs, and practices these communities demand, their pasts and their upbringings never stop shaping their lives in a multitude of ways. As the title of the first chapter of *Degrees of Separation* suggests, they can check out, but they can never leave.

Newfield’s work is based on in-depth interviews with seventy-four exiters of Lubavich and Satmar, two ultra-orthodox Hasidic communities isolated from mainstream society. The strictures of ultra-Orthodox Hasidism permeate every aspect of members’ lives, including the clothes they wear, the food they eat, and even how they tie their shoes. As one example, most children who grow up in these communities attend special religious schools that generally eschew even basic instruction in subjects like English, mathematics, and science, instead focusing on religious instruction for boys and domestic skills for girls. Many members of the community are married before the age of twenty, often to a partner with whom they have had limited interaction. Newfield asks what happens when young adults who grow up in these communities embark on a courageous journey, not only leaving behind ties to friends and families, but also completely changing ontological and epistemological frameworks on life.

Newfield's primary theoretical contribution is showing readers that binary distinctions between exiters' lives pre- and postexit are misguided because they blur the ways exiters are continually shaped by their former experiences. He demonstrates with rich qualitative data that exiters live, to varying degrees, in a state of liminality, a state that exists somewhere between their old lives and new non-Hasidic identities. In other words, he describes "exiting" as a process without a true end point; people who go OTD always remain "in the process" of exiting their former communities. Newfield also shows that popular ideas of exiters being shunned or excommunicated by family are incorrect; nearly every exiter kept some level of contact with their Hasidic family.

Literature on religious exiting tends to focus on exiters of new religious movements (NRMs) (i.e., cults). In contrast, this book provides needed insight into the experiences of people leaving intensive religious communities into which they were born. In many ways these two processes are contradictory. Whereas individuals who join and then exit NRMs cannot replace their old understandings of reality with new understandings supplied by the NRM, Hasidic exiters must continually reshape their definitions of reality to counter prior, lifelong understandings. As Newfield shows, a complete refashioning of one's worldview proves incredibly difficult if not impossible.

For instance, some exiters have a lasting aversion to eating pork. Despite having generally abandoned the idea that eating pork is an affront to God, many exiters still cannot unlearn the idea that pork is simply not food. As one respondent indicates, "I feel disgusted by [pork], even though I know ... that it's no different from other meat and I understand that, but on this emotional level, I just have this aversion to it" (p. 107). This aversion to pork, despite an intellectual understanding that it is "like any other meat," seems to be as ingrained into the psyche as an aversion to eating cats and dogs is for a Westerner. Newfield also shows that many exiters keep their Hasidic sensibilities about topics such as race or gender relations, but replace their old religious logic (god intends for strict gender roles) with new secular justifications (men and women are just suited to different roles). In this way, the book provides a fascinating case study into how difficult it is for individuals to completely reconstruct the realities they know. A similar example is that for many exiters, marrying a non-Jewish person is one Rubicon they cannot cross. Having believed their entire lives that "goys" are fundamentally different from Jewish people, many exiters cannot even conceive of getting married to one, despite generally abandoning their religious views. These are just some of many ways exiters are indelibly affected by their upbringings.

Another strength of this book is that Newfield does not try to answer the question of why individuals leave these communities. Instead, even in his chapter titled "Exit Narratives," he views these accounts not as historical facts, but as (often self-congratulatory) scripts that exiters continually reproduce to justify their decisions to leave their communities. In this chapter, Newfield identifies two primary narratives, one that points to leaving for intellectual reasons and another that points to leaving for social-emotional reasons. Interestingly, the exiters who choose

one narrative over the other often doubt the credulity and probity of the other narrative.

As with all research this book has a few weaknesses. First, Newfield frames the study as one of religious exit, but I suggest the dynamics he describes are much deeper. These individuals are not merely leaving a religion. They are completely changing previously taken-for-granted ontological truths and entering a world that questions almost everything they formerly understood to be true. Second, I think Newfield's work would benefit from more engagement with the existing literature on identity and identity work (the word identity, after all, is in the title.) Doing so could have broadened the scope of his contributions beyond the study of religious communities by further elucidating more general ideas in social psychology.

Nevertheless, this book is an important contribution to the field and is ideal for graduate or advanced undergraduate courses in the sociology of religion or social psychology. It is an interesting read, the writing is accessible and relatively jargon free, and Newfield allows the data to do most of the talking. Moreover, as an exiter himself, Newfield writes in an engaging, empathic way that does not exoticize the Ultra-Orthodox Hasidic community. Overall, this book will make a great addition to the library of anyone interested in religious exit, identity transformation, and the social construction of reality.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)

David M. Merolla is Associate Professor of Sociology at Wayne State University. His research interests include race and racism, sociology of education, and social psychology.