

# More Americans exercise choice in religion

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**By Andrea Useem**

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—When Aurora Turk was growing up in Mexico City, being Catholic was a given.

“It was taught to me by the nuns at school and my mother at home,” she recalled. “My whole world was Catholic.”

But Turk’s adult life has been marked by religious exploration. Married to a Brooklyn-born Jew, the 38-year-old mother now follows the teachings of an Indian spiritual teacher.

While Turk’s story seems unique, her experience of switching religious identities is common for many Americans. According to experts who study the phenomenon, spiritual seekers are exercising their freedom of choice more than ever before.

Sixteen percent of Americans have switched their religious identities at some point in their lives, according to the [2001 American Religious Identification Survey](#), one of the largest studies of its kind.

“People are making more choices in everything, from lifestyle to sexual identity. It’s not surprising if they are making more choices in religion,” said Peter Berger, professor of sociology and theology at Boston University.

In other words, the era when religion was determined solely by accident of birth is over, he said.

Barry Kosmin, co-author of the 2006 book *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans*, which is based on the 2001 survey data, predicted more switching is to be expected.

“Family and ethnic loyalties—the old glue that maintained inter-generational religious identification—has weakened,” he said. In addition to moving more frequently, Americans also are more likely to be “searching” for religious truth, often outside their own traditions, wrote Kosmin, who directs the [Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture](#) at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn.

The 2001 study showed clear winners and losers in the competition to attract and retain members: Twice as many Americans left Catholicism as joined the faith, while evangelical Christianity registered a net gain, with more than three times as many people joining than leaving.

The biggest change, however, was registered among Americans who said they had no religious identity at all, increasing from 8 percent of the U.S. population in 1990 to 14 percent in 2001.

While religious switching may bring satisfaction to individual seekers, the phenomenon can be unnerving for religious leaders, who are vying for “customers” ever more aware of new options, Kosmin said.

“We have a supply-side religious market with more competing firms each year,” he noted. Megachurches are successful in part because they actively reach out to “potential” members, of which there are many in high-mobility

suburbs and exurbs, Kosmin wrote.

But success in attracting new members doesn't necessarily translate into success at keeping them, reported Daniel Olson, a sociologist at Indiana University South Bend who studies religious competition.

The 2001 survey found, for example, that while the Mormons welcomed a relatively large number of converts, an equal number left the faith. Jehovah's Witnesses and Buddhists displayed similarly high levels of turnover.

Surprisingly, smaller religious groups are better at recruiting new members, Olson said. Most switching happens through social relationships, like marriage and friendship, and members of a small religious group are more likely to have lots of relationships with nonmembers, whom they are able to pull into the faith.

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