Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed by Prof. Gerald Gamm

When "Common Knowledge" Goes Wrong

Bostons so-called white flight of the 1960s and 70s became a national symbol of the urban crisis. But what caused whites to move to the suburbs in such great numbers? Common knowledge holds that an influx of African Americans, assisted by the Boston Banks Urban Renewal Group, pushed Jews out of their neighborhoods and into the suburbs. In Urban Exodus, however, historian Gerald H. Gamm argues that the driving force behind suburbanization is not race but religion. Gamm studies two remarkably similar Boston neighborhoods, Roxbury and Dorchester, and argues that, while the Jewish population left, the Catholics stayed because of religious rules--rules that are real not because they are written down but because they are obeyed. Looking at canon law and Talmudic guidelines, he separates issues of membership, authority, and rootedness. In brief, Catholic congregations are bound by the geographical lines of their parishes and the physical structures of their parish churches, as established by Church hierarchy. Jewish congregations, on the other hand, are more autonomous, with the power to create and dissolve synagogues--and worshippers are not bound by geography and can attend the synagogues of their choice. Gamm is quick to point out that he does not argue that Catholics are necessarily more likely than Jews to stay in urban neighborhoods, but that the Catholic parish is better able to sustain neighborhood attachments. He also notes that race is a newer issue--only after the urban exodus had nearly run its course, emptying apartments and lowering rents, were blacks able to overcome longstanding barriers to entry. Indeed, it was the growing population of the automobile and automobile suburbs in the 1920s that pushed suburbanization, as middle-class whites left still-white urban neighborhoods. Urban Exodus is a thought-provoking look at the shifting populations in Americas cities--and the role organized religion plays in those shifts. --Sunny Delaney
My Personal Review:
This is primarily a response to the previous review. The reviewer calls this book "provocative", which is to damn with faint praise. It is far more than provocative; it overturns what has become gospel truth for a generation - that the Jews were forced out of Boston by hidden, mysterious forces. Malevolent bankers, with their red pens, together with city fathers seeking to keep black residents away from Catholic neighborhoods, had funnelled African-American home-buyers into the solidly Jewish district of Mattapan. In his examination of the subject, the author tests this claim, and proves with many documented sources than the accepted story is false. There was redlining, but the districts redlined included many white, Catholic neighborhoods that did not see white flight during the same years. The previous reviewer claims that the Irish Catholics of Dorchester did leave, but that was only well after the redlining that is claimed to have driven the Jews out of Mattapan. In fact, the author documents that the flight of Jews from Mattapan began before redlining went into effect, and was led by Jewish neighborhoods that were actually outside of the redlined district. Debunking an accepted story can be difficult when the story is so entrenched that no one sees a need to reexamine the original question. This may be the case here. Newspaper articles continue to be written based on the accepted version of history. The story of malevolent bureaucrats suits our time: Big Oil, Big Tobacco, Big Pharma all conspire against us. The accepted story of redlining in Boston protects us from having to answer the uncomfortable question: if redlining didn't cause Jews to sell their homes, what did? If the Jews had legitimate fears of crime from African-Americans, we blame the blacks. If the Jews didn't have legitimate fears of black encroachment in their neighborhoods, we have to ask whether the Jews were too racist to deal with black neighbors. Better we should keep blaming the bankers in their offices than reopen those old wounds.
Don't trust me - buy the book, or find it at the library, and make up your own mind.

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