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Between Judaism and Christianity

The Case of Messianic Jews

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Abstract

This article explores the major factors involved in why a sample of Messianic Jews have chosen this system of belief rather than stay within traditional Judaism or become Christian. Those interviewed are critical of their religious upbringing as Jews, although traditional aspects of Judaism remain important and relevant to their Messianic belief. The anti-Judaism present within the Church, both past and present, is their primary reason for not becoming Christian. The challenge that Messianic Jews present for both religions is how effective they are in helping people to live a faith perspective that has meaning in the complex, multi-faceted contemporary world.

Introduction

[1] From the perspectives of psychology and sociology, the most common way of acquiring religious faith and belief is the learning that takes place in childhood through parental influence, education, and culture. One's place of birth can also play a part in determining what religion a person follows. From a theological perspective, the work of God is also involved in the makeup of a person's religious faith. This study explores why some people brought up within traditional Judaism become Messianic Jews. This issue is examined through interviews carried out by the author with sixty Jewish members of Messianic Judaism located across Great Britain and with some reference to existing studies carried out in the United States. The U.K. interviews were carried out over a period of two years (2001-2003).¹

Judaism and the Unfulfilled Jew

[2] Most Messianic Jews are born and grow up as members of the traditional² Jewish community (Feher: 21). They are diverse in terms of religious upbringing, their knowledge of Judaism, and the meaning of being Jewish, Yet they continue to acknowledge their Jewishness and observe the teachings of Torah, to a greater or lesser degree. But unlike traditional Jews, Messianic Jews have come to a belief in Yeshua as the Messiah. So why do these individuals revise/change their faith perspective?

[3] Some Messianic Jewish believers testify to a profound personal crisis before taking up Messianic Judaism (Harris-Shapiro: 43-84). The stimulus for change is often identified by Messianics as a feeling of discontent with self and a loss of meaning in life (Rosen: 33-44). Among those interviewed, 80% spoke of feelings of meaningless, valuelessness, spiritual distress, and dissatisfaction with their lives generally. According to Viktor Frankl, the cause of such feelings is an

¹ The bulk of the material was collected face-to-face – a small number of interviews took place by telephone – with mostly predetermined questions and some semi-structured discussion.

² The phrase “traditional Judaism” refers to a variety of strands within Judaism: Ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform.

“existential vacuum.” Frankl believes that people have cognitive needs that must be met to help achieve a sense of purpose, meaning, and wholeness in their life experiences. Focusing on the feelings of spiritual distress and the religious needs in converts, Leon Salzman argued that rituals and symbols of a particular religion are more appealing and satisfactory than others. Archetypal theory develops this view further and purports that often the central factor in conversion is when a person is captivated by either a particular religious symbol(s) or religious/spiritual experience that fulfills certain of their psychological needs. In the case of Messianic Jews, the central most powerful symbol that all interviewees identified is Jesus Christ as Messiah. Messianic Jews say that belief in Jesus as Messiah makes them complete or fulfilled Jews.³

[4] Changing one’s religious perspective is also identified by Messianic Jews as a way to loosen family ties, enabling individuals to assert a sense of their own identity and purpose. This can be a way of rebelling against parents and their beliefs and values. Some Messianic Jews speak of their frustration either with an unquestioning stance of their parents to all things Jewish, or an apparent hypocrisy of identifying themselves as Jews but failing to observe many of the central principles of the faith. Other issues that Messianics identify as factors that contributed to their change of religious perspective involve their experience of religion in the home, the Synagogue, and Jewish education. Many Messianic Jews speak of these as consisting of rigid, empty, and negative experiences (Harris-Shapiro: 43-56; Tucker: 219-33). The majority of Messianic Jews (70%) interviewed for this study were brought up in observant traditional Jewish families. They say the attendance to ritual, legal observances, and maintaining tradition left them with a feeling of emptiness and with little understanding about the applicability and meaning of these practices and beliefs for Jews in the contemporary world. But while some Messianics complain about the rigid, legalistic approach of their up-bringing, other interviewees (30%) from less observant families commented that their lack of religious upbringing and observance was hypocritical to their open identity as Jews. Lewis Rambo states that before and after conversion people speak of their religious upbringing, or the lack of it, in a negative way, but if the receiving religion is less controlling and open, then people reflect more positively on their previous experiences. This was shown to be the case with all interviewees who identified aspects of a traditional Jewish home that are positive and relevant to a Messianic Jewish home. The observances of festivals such as Purim, Pesach, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Chanukah, which involve family gatherings in the home, were spoken of as experiences that gave a sense of belonging and identity. Women interviewees (60% of the sample) especially identified Sabbath preparations, lighting Sabbath candles, and celebrating festivals in the home with family and friends as a central plank in cementing a sense of identity and community. All interviewees said that the strong sense of community and family within traditional Judaism expressed important values of sharing and concern for others that they believed extremely important to their new religious perspective.

[5] Moving from the home environment to the role and function of the Synagogue, more issues of discontent emerge. Messianics recognize the important role the Synagogue plays in creating a sense of community, but their central complaint is that the Synagogue tends to be more of a social/cultural center than a spiritual center, where Jewishness comes first and religious issues are demoted to second place (Sklare and Greenblum: 88-98). Some Messianic Jews criticize traditional Synagogue worship because it lacks devotion to God; the formal content and character of worship and set liturgy can create a situation where people are merely going through the actions of worship. Another concern is that the liturgy is predominantly community orientated, leaving no space for

³ David Stern defines “completed or fulfilled Jew” in the sense that a Jew who accepts the New Testament is fulfilling his/her Torah faith (29).

individual petitions and spontaneity in the act of worship. This was a key issue for 70% of those interviewed. They felt that Synagogue worship was usually carried out in a formalized, rigid way that militated against the individual being spontaneous in worship. The extremely limited role that women had in Orthodox Synagogue worship was a concern of 35% of the sample. Messianic Jewish women, in contrast, are able to participate in many aspects of worship (e.g. reading from the scriptures, singing in the choir, offering prayers); preaching or acting as the leader of the community remains the domain of men.

[6] Jewish education is another area on which many Messianic Jews have mixed views. Some of the male interviewees (65 %) criticized their childhood encounter with the stress on knowing the Torah and speaking Hebrew as emphasizing knowledge of the intellect over knowledge of the heart. They identified this as part of the general trait of over achievement and perfectionism that is upheld within many traditional Jewish families because it is considered part of one's Jewishness. However, not everything about the emphasis on study and knowledge of Torah is considered negative. All of the male interviewees who had been brought up with the discipline of studying Torah and had learnt skills in discussing and dissecting texts commented that this has proved extremely useful for their teaching and missionary work, especially amongst Orthodox Jews. All women interviewees felt that study of the Bible was important for both men and women. Those from an observant Jewish background welcomed the opportunity they now had in Messianic Judaism to participate in bible study, although not to lead the study because they considered a male domain. This view continues to reflect the traditional Jewish view of the role of men and women as regards the public reading and teaching of scripture. There was general agreement amongst the interviewees that women should have equal access to opportunities that allowed them to study the scriptures and speak Hebrew because not only would this enable them to teach their children much more about their faith but that women also had a role in evangelizing.

[7] From the various views expressed above, it is evident that Messianic Jews do not view everything about traditional Judaism as negative and irrelevant to their new Messianic belief. The key factor that Messianic Jews give for becoming Messianics is that previously their encounter with religion left them feeling empty, confused, or dissatisfied. Life was spoken of as shallow and lacked meaning and purpose. Overall, their Jewish upbringing appears not to have assisted them in developing their knowledge of God in a personal and intimate way (Harris-Shapiro; Feher; Tucker). Messianic Jews state that recognition and belief in Jesus is essential to having a full experience of God; through such faith they have become completed or fulfilled Jews. The question therefore follows as to why such Jews choose Messianic Judaism rather than convert to Christianity in which belief in Jesus is also key to a person's faith?

The Jewish Convert to Christianity

[8] The traditional view of the split between Judaism and Christianity is that it occurred somewhere between the mid first century C.E. and early second century C.E. (see the work of Bultmann; Dunn). Daniel Boyarin summarizes this view when he writes, "The story would go that Christianity developed out of the "orthodox" Judaism of the first century, rabbinic Judaism, and either deviated from the true path or superseded its ancestor" (1999:1). A re-thinking of the early relationship between Judaism and Christianity and their divergence has emerged in the work of W. D. Davies and E. P. Sanders, who challenge the anti-Judaic understanding of the New Testament. Hayim Perelmuter, Jacob Neusner, and Robert Wilken argue that the separation between Judaism and Christianity was not complete until the third century C.E. Furthermore, Boyarin presents the picture of two co-emergent religious communities, Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, both emerging from

the first century C.E. and not undergoing a final separation until the late fourth or early fifth century C.E. (see also Lieu; Reuther).

[9] The traditional view of when the split occurred between Christianity and Judaism has dominated the thinking of the Church and the Synagogue. Until the late nineteenth century, a Jew expressing belief in Jesus as the Messiah was considered to have converted to Christianity. The possibility of being seen as a Jewish follower of Jesus within the boundaries of Judaism was not acceptable to either religion. In discussion with interviewees about these issues, the entire sample expressed the same sentiment: that whether Jewish or Gentile followers of Jesus, all were part of the same Messianic group. The common bond between them was belief in Jesus who brought a message from God for the whole of humanity. However, it was evident that not everyone felt it would be possible or even desirable to bring together in a formal or institutionalized way contemporary Gentile and Jewish believers in Jesus. Only a minority (25%) of the sample thought this was desirable.

[10] Further discussion on converting to Christianity revealed several other reasons why Messianic Jews have not chosen this option. These reasons centered on the Church's historical treatment of Jewish converts. Until the nineteenth century, the Church required Jewish converts, who were often forced to convert in order to avoid persecution or even death, to renounce and abandon all aspects of their Jewish belief, practices, identity, and heritage. If this was not observed, the offending individuals would be punished.⁴ But obeying the Church did not mean that Jews were always fully accepted. Often they were viewed with suspicion and considered by some within the Church not to be genuine Christians. History provides many examples of Jewish converts not being fully accepted within the Church. Evidence of this was seen as late as the twentieth century in Nazi occupied Europe where some Jewish converts were denounced as false Christians by fellow Christians and therefore exposed to the fanatical anti-Semitic policy of Hitler's regime (Endelman: 82-83).

[11] In response to the Church's historical treatment of Jewish converts to Christianity all interviewees said that this had proved a barrier, if not initially then ultimately, to any considerations they had had about converting to Christianity. One interviewee noted that because of the long history of anti-Judaism within the Church, many Messianics do not believe that Jews, even if they abandon all aspects of their Jewishness, are ever fully accepted within the Church. This aspect of the Jewish encounter with Christianity has left a deep scar on Jewish consciousness and has raised questions for Jews about how they are viewed by non-Jews and how best to structure relationships with other communities. Some of the interviewees actually said that reflecting on the treatment of Jewish converts in the past had caused them to consider what it was about being a Jew that was so threatening to non-Jews. Their comments indicated that in the process of becoming Messianic Jews they had questioned and reflected on their identity as Jews. According to Gillespie, such questioning and reflection is often part of a conversion process. In the case of those interviewed, all felt that aspects of their existing identity as Jews were relevant to their new faith perspective, but given the Church's history towards Jewish converts it would not be possible to express their Jewishness. It was stated by one of the interviewees that one of the reasons why Messianic Judaism emerged was because the Church is still considered unable to accept without prejudice Jews within its ranks. The great dilemma for Jews who come to recognize Jesus as Messiah is that if they convert to Christianity, then they feel they will be expected to renounce every aspect of Jewish belief and

⁴ In sixteenth century Spain under the Inquisition, many Jews converted to Christianity to save their lives, but secretly observed Shabbat and the key Jewish Festivals. In Portugal, for example, a number of Jewish women converted to Christianity but continued to cook in a Jewish manner and celebrate the Jewish Sabbath. These women were imprisoned and were eventually released if they recanted and promised not to continue these practices. Refusing to cease these practices carried the penalty of being burned at the stake (see Lindo; Chazan; Medieval Sourcebook; Parkes).

practice. All interviewees argued that this is unnecessary because although Jesus challenged aspects of Judaism, he remained within Judaism and did not advocate the establishment of a new religion.

[12] Interviewees also identified what they perceived as a lack of appreciation and recognition of the Jewish roots of Christianity within the Church as another reason why Messianic Jews choose not to convert to Christianity. Although they recognized that much was being done to redress this situation within Christian scholarship, 45% of the sample pointed out they knew either through Christian friends or direct experience⁵ that little explicit acknowledgement is given to Christianity's Jewish roots at the grass roots level of the Church. Some (65%) also expressed a concern that they felt that the Christian Church does not always reflect the teaching of Jesus, especially regarding justice and loving one's enemies. The opinions expressed show a combination of reasons why Messianic Jews do not choose to join the Christian Church. One final reason given by 90% of the interviewees for not joining the Church was its response to the treatment of Jews during the Holocaust.

The Church and the Holocaust

[13] Many Jews throughout Europe had, prior to and during the 1930s, undergone Christian baptism and believed themselves an accepted part of Christendom. However, their fellow Christians and Church authorities betrayed many of these new converts to Nazi authorities. Such actions show that Jews who converted to Christianity had to try and overcome the notion held by many Christians that, "Jewish character was considered inflexible and thus impervious to baptism" (Endelman: 83). This was reflected in the Nazi policy on Jewish converts: the person was still racially a Jew if he/she only had one parent, grandparent or great grandparent, or had converted to Christianity. All Jews, according to Nazi ideology, were race polluters and therefore needed to be removed from amongst the Aryan race in order for it to keep its purity (Yahil: 70-72).

[14] All interviewees said they felt that centuries of Christian anti-Judaism fed the racial and political hatred of Jews throughout Europe that emerged from the latter part of the nineteenth century. Some interviewees spoke of the record of the institutional Church in Europe under Nazism towards Jews as lamentable and others as unforgivable. The interviewees recognized that not all Christians supported Hitler's policy, and that some did carry out acts that saved a small number of Jews. Nevertheless, their predominant memory is one of abandonment. Some of the interviewees had family who either survived or died in the Holocaust, and even those who did not have this connection stated that they could not become members of the Church because during the Holocaust it generally abandoned its Jewish neighbors. The majority (95%) of Messianic Jews interviewed recognized that in some way the general lack of opposition by Church leaders throughout Europe to Hitler's persecution of Jews was linked to their concern about safeguarding the Church's own position and future survival. Although interviewees recognized this as a legitimate concern, because they could relate it to their own concern with the survival of the State of Israel as a Jewish homeland, they could not accept the fact that survival is achieved at any cost and definitely not irrespective of human dignity, human rights, and the death of innocent people. One interviewee of Polish ancestry recalled how a member of her family who survived the camps had told her that he would never trust the Catholic Church because in his city of Warsaw the Polish clergy and many of his Christian friends had reacted almost with indifference to the rounding up of Jews into the ghettos. Another interviewee spoke about her grandmother who was born Jewish in the Ukraine but who as a child had converted with her family to Christianity. Her grandmother at the age of fourteen remembers the sermon of a Ukrainian Orthodox priest given in 1941 that told the congregation not

⁵ 35% of the sample had explored to varying degrees the possibility of converting to Christianity and had attended services, bible study, prayer groups, and social events.

to help any Jews because they killed Christ and should themselves be removed from the face of the earth. Another of the sample had two family members from Germany who were helped by members of the Protestant Church to escape to Britain in 1935 after the announcement of the Nuremberg Laws. Yet another interviewee spoke of her grandmother telling her about family members who were saved because a group of Catholics in France hid Jews and helped them escape to Switzerland. One interviewee, an Israeli now living in the U.K., spoke about how her grandmother was the only survivor of her family because a Dutch Christian family hid her. This interviewee, while disturbed by this aspect of her family's history, said she sometimes attended Christian worship and other social events organized by the local Church because she believed Jews needed to be more pro-active in building and nurturing relations with Christians despite the past. But overall the feeling of the interviewees was one of skepticism because they were unsure that even now they could depend on Christendom to come to their aid. Their views reflect the following: "After Auschwitz the Jewish people suspect Christians as well as Christian theology. Jews have two thousand years of documented history on the danger of trusting Christians" (Rittner *et al.*: 230). Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that many contemporary Jews who believe Jesus to be the Messiah prefer to stay outside of the Church and proclaim their faith in Jesus through Messianic Judaism.

[15] In the context of the Church's two thousand year persecution of Jews, it is also possible to understand the growth of Messianic Judaism as an expression of resistance and challenge to a religion that universally claimed, and still does through some who advocate supercessionist theology, that Christianity is superior to Judaism. To some extent the Jewish acceptance of Jesus as Messiah as demonstrated by Messianic Jews could be considered as both a submission to Christianity and as an expression of resistance to the Christian appropriation of Jesus. In some ways, this reflects the views of Kaplan and Rafael who believe that colonial peoples, or in the case of Jews, a displaced people dominated by mainly Christian religion and culture since 70 C.E., are seeking through Messianic Judaism to create an independent religious perspective instead of adopting the religion of those who so often have been their persecutors.

The Challenge of Messianic Judaism

[16] Responses from the traditional Jewish Community and from various expressions of Christianity to the existence and growth of Messianic Judaism vary greatly. The overall response within the traditional Jewish community is to portray Messianic Jews as having allowed themselves to be misled and used by Evangelical Christians to attempt to ensure that Judaism does not have a future. The Christian Church is more diffuse in its views ranging from those who have little or no interest, to those who are concerned that Messianic Judaism will damage current Jewish-Christian relations, and others who actively support the growth of Messianic Judaism because they believe it is a tool to bring Jews to knowledge of Christ. There are those in both traditional Judaism and across the Christian spectrum who fear that the existence of Messianic Judaism will undermine both Christianity and Judaism. But these responses focus predominantly on how Messianic Judaism will either present a threat to Judaism and Christianity, damage existing Jewish-Christian relations, or serve the missionary aim of the Church. What both religions appear not to do is to critically reflect on why a significant number of Jews, as well as some Christians, are creating a hybrid faith using aspects of both Judaism and Christianity.

[17] The need for some Jews to adopt a "middle way" obviously raises questions about why neither traditional Judaism nor the various expressions of Christianity seem unable to meet their religious and spiritual needs. In a world where the growth of new religious groups is commonplace, the emergence of Messianic Judaism can be viewed as another expression of a phenomenon that has its roots in the growth of the rights of the individual to determine what is truth and falsehood. The

emergence of any new religion or religious group is an expression of the diverse reality of the world and the extensive inter-action between people, their cultures, and beliefs. It also reflects the fact that some people are searching for identity and meaning in a context of existential anxiety where the circumstances of uncertainty and multiple choice drive the individual to seek more ontological security in the sense of having answers to the fundamental questions of life, which for some can only be found through belief in a divine ultimate reality.

Conclusion

[18] The opinions and views of the Messianic Jews cited in this study show that Jews who follow the Messianic Jewish path do so because neither traditional Judaism or Christianity are able to provide these individuals with a level of ontological security that sufficiently quells their sense of fear and anxiety in a post-holocaust world. Messianic Jews are demonstrating individualism and expressing dissent against aspects of traditional Judaism and Christianity by creating a belief system and way of life that provides them with a greater level of certainty about life's purpose, the relevance of their faith for today's world, and a greater sense of God. The existence of Messianic Judaism in one sense presents the leaders of both traditional Judaism and Christianity with some serious questions about how it treats people within its own communities and outside of them. The challenge for both religions is to reflect on how effective they are in helping people to live a faith perspective that has meaning in the complex, multi-faceted contemporary world. In addition, the data collected for this study shows that the Church has still much to do in helping to heal the divisions between Jews and Christians and to demonstrate more explicitly its commitment to justice for all people irrespective of their religion, race, or ethnicity. Finally, Messianic Judaism is a controversial development for both traditional Judaism and Christianity because it is a hybrid that combines elements of both faith expressions. However, it also has the potential to erode further the barriers between Jews and Christians to the extent that both become more understanding and tolerant of each other, recognizing that there can be unity in and through diversity.

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