

The Role of Messianic Jews in Europe Today

In discussing this title we need to define four areas of debate. Firstly, we have to consider something of the background of European Jews today. Then we shall need to define the term “Messianic” and observe the varying backgrounds which form our identity. Thirdly we must put ourselves as messianic Jews into the contexts of current European society and its churches. The fourth area of discussion lies beyond this paper and will be the topic for Richard Harvey’s paper. As a theological symposium the subject of messianic theology cannot be left out of consideration. It will therefore obtrude somewhat in this paper, although it is beyond our remit.

1. Jewish Backgrounds in Europe Today

It is said that we Jews are at each other’s throats unless someone else attacks us. It is certainly true that we are divided into a wide variety of different backgrounds and movements. We range religiously along the spectrum between the extremes of Chassidic and Lubavitch communities on the one side and definitely assimilated secular or even atheistic Jews on the other end of the spectrum. Between these extremes lie the majority communities of Orthodox, Reformed, Conservative and other denominations of Judaism. These in turn will include many who are *frumm* with careful obedience to their particular definitions of the Torah, Kashrut and religious practice generally. But they will also include those who are not very religious and who observe little of the Law, although they may enjoy keeping the rituals of the key holy days and the basic observance of the Sabbath as a family gathering with a nice meal. But prayer and Schul attendance may be quite foreign to their life style.

European Jews have been forced to live within non-Jewish societies and are influenced by the cultural and historical backgrounds of the various countries.

Russia is the only country in post-Shoah times that has really large numbers. No other European nation can count more than a million Jews. As we know too, it is Russian Jews who are very influential in messianic circles in many of our countries – and in this symposium! To understand Russian Jewry we have to appreciate that Marx was Jewish, as were also the Father of Russian Marxism Plekhanov, the leader of the German SPD Rosa Luxemburg and the great Marxist thinker Trotsky. The Jewish influence on the foundation of Marxism was such that Buber actually called Marxism a sect of Judaism! In those early days Russian Jews expected the Leninist revolution to deliver them from the violent oppression of the Tsarist regime and the anti-semitic attacks of the Russian Orthodox church. Large numbers of Russian Jews therefore abandoned their religious background in enthusiastic adherence to atheistic Marxist-Leninism. As we all know only too well, however, their hopes were quickly dashed and Communism showed its ugly anti-semitic face. This left the Russian Jewish community rudderless with no religion or ideology to undergird life.

Inevitably I am generalising, but we may see this as the background to the ideological and religious openness of Russian Jews when Communism collapsed and it became easier to move openly in new directions. Today however that ideological vacuum is being increasingly replaced by secular materialism – and a minority who embrace religious and nationalistic fervour in Israel and/or in Chassidic faith.

The Russian Jewish background differs markedly from other European backgrounds. Hungarian Jews are more largely assimilated and secular in background. German Jews were very largely eliminated in the Shoah, leaving only a few tens of thousands alive today – and they stand apart from the large influx of Russian Jews into Germany. The latter are still largely rather weak in the German language and find it hard to adapt to German culture, so can be somewhat isolated and ingrown. But their

children have their education in German schools and inevitably speak perfect German, often assimilating into German culture and society. They will some times live in two cultures, relating at home to the old forms of their parents. But at the same time they live in a German world at school and with their friends. Such tensions can threaten both the parents and the younger generations.

Hungary, France and Britain also host significant Jewish communities. With the threat of anti-semitism still hovering like a dark cloud over us in these countries, many of our people have hidden their Jewish identity and been frightened to admit that they are actually Jewish. It is therefore undoubtedly true that there are many more Jews in those countries than the official statistics declare. Thus in Britain the Jewish community has officially shrunk in my life time from some 500,000 to little more than 200,000. Of course some emigrated to Israel, but not such significant numbers as would explain this marked decline in the statistics. Of course too some have converted to Christianity - and some of those would no longer count in the statistics. But again we are only talking of a thousand or two, so this also cannot account for the decline in the Jewish community. We are aware that 50% of known Jewish marriages are with non-Jews and assimilation is the frequent pattern of such Jews who have married out – and their children even more so. I see this in my own family with my grandchildren and my brothers and their families. On the other hand, fear of being known as Jews is becoming much reduced, so people become more open now if they have Jewish roots. Our pluralistic societies produce considerable ethnic tolerance and anti-semitism becomes unacceptable popularly. Thus to my horror one of my daughters insisted on going to school wearing a large bright yellow button badge declaring in bold letters “I’m a nice Jewish girl”! To my great relief she had no problems as a result. When I was at school such a badge would have resulted in considerable anti-semitic feelings and actions, even to the extent of physical violence.

While Hungarian Jews may often be largely assimilated, French Jews have formed strongly Jewish communities which cling firmly to their Jewish identity. They may often not be very religious, being much influenced by French materialism and love for philosophy and philosophical debate. Messianic attempts at active witness have aroused strong and violent opposition.

2. Messianic Movements in Europe Today

The definition of “Messianic Jews” and “Messianic Movements” remains somewhat controversial. Some would wish to confine these terms to Jewish believers in the Messiah Jesus who belong to specific Messianic congregations and who live a life in approximate accordance to the traditional and biblical Law. Others of us would want to widen the definition to include those of us who are openly Jewish ethnically, but belong to churches which are ethnically mixed and don’t follow Kashrut, Sabbath or even the Holy Days. It is of course relatively easy to gather statistics for the membership of Messianic congregations, although even here a clear distinction needs to be made between overall membership and actual Jewish membership. In the Netherlands, for example, the Messianic congregations consist almost entirely of non-Jewish Christians who love Israel and enjoy Jewish worship, singing and music. In Britain too about half of Messianic congregations’ members are lovers of Israel and all things Jewish rather than actually being Jews. If in fact it is not as simple as one might at first think to get accurate statistics of messianic Jews in specific Messianic congregations, it is virtually impossible to gain good statistics of how many Jewish believers there are within the fold of other Christian churches.

Jewish believers who come from an assimilated or non-practising background may find a Messianic congregation somewhat alien culturally. They may feel inadequate because they were not brought up to know traditional Jewish practices and worship. Such believers will often feel more at home in

traditional churches related to the host culture and background of their country. They may also have no family connections with Israel, they will not be able to speak Hebrew and may even feel little loyalty to the State of Israel, although they will have to wrestle biblically with the place of the land and the return of the people to the land in the Scriptures.

However we define “the Messianic Movement”, we have to acknowledge that at present it remains small and weak with very little wider influence. For example, when Rowan Williams became archbishop of Canterbury he followed the custom for archbishops and visited the Anglican churches in Israel. As a theologian he was surprised to meet or at least to hear of Jewish/Messianic Christians which caused him to ask new theological questions concerning the meaning of “Israel” in the New Testament. He began to wonder whether God still has purposes for the Jewish people. But we may notice that even such an erudite and biblically/theologically astute Christian was totally unaware of us as Messianic believers and had never even heard of any Messianic movement in the modern era. Rowan Williams would be far from unique in this position. We as Messianic believers are therefore challenged to ask ourselves how we can gain wider influence within the *Ekklesia* of God in our different countries.

Because the Messianic movement is so weak and small in Europe, we face the real danger that we can be swamped by movements in America and Israel where the Jewish population is much larger and where (particularly in America) the Messianic movement is also much larger and stronger. But if we are to grow in a healthy way here in Europe, we cannot just follow foreign patterns.

Unfortunately Europe is tribal and fissiparous in our various countries and ethnic backgrounds. The Messianic movement needs therefore to develop in different ways according to the country and people amongst which it is located.

American Messianic theology has clearly sprung from its background of conservative evangelical Christianity. This often relates to right-wing Bible belt approaches. To this is then added a veneer of Jewish vocabulary and worship practices. As we shall see later (and Richard Harvey will doubtless lead us into greater depth on this subject) our calling is not just to add a few Jewish extras to what is fundamentally an American evangelical form of theology, biblical understanding, worship, church and leadership structures etc. The European Messianic movement needs to develop a fundamentally Jewish pattern in all such topics. Interestingly, I find that this struggle for an indigenization of the totality of our faith and practice relates closely to the same need in the churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America. As Jews I have found that we can particularly learn much from and give much to Chinese churches. The Chinese are often called the Jews of the East; I like to say that we Jews are the Chinese of the West! What is certain is that we have much in common.

As European Jews we have constantly to face the immense issue of the Shoah. In our background this hangs as a huge Damocles sword over our heads, influencing our attitudes to everything. We dare not forget that some 40% of European Jewry was humiliated, tortured and wiped out in the horror of the concentration camps. All of us as European Jews still have this as a vivid scar in our own family backgrounds, not just in the history of our people.

In this we differ radically from American and Israeli Jews. A large proportion of American Jews lived with three thousand miles between them and what was happening in Germany and Poland. Of course they all heard about it and shuddered with horror, but to many of them it was never personal either to themselves or to their family. In Israel many of the original settlers in the late 1940s and 1950s were survivors of the Shoah or at least had personally experienced the extremes of anti-semitic hatred in Europe. But in their lives in Israel ever since the foundation of the State of Israel they have had to face the very pressing hatred of Arabs and Palestinians in the surrounding nations

and even in their own midst. This threat can be much more relevant to their present lives than the memories of the Shoah. Thus the newer Yad va Shem does not avoid the desperate suffering of the Shoah, but it is built with much more light than the former exhibition. And although it forces the visitors into ever narrower confines as they make their way through the various rooms and along the central walk-way, the final conclusion is the wide panoramic view from the open area at the end. Light and freedom lie before us as we struggle beyond the tragedy of the Shoah.

In my generation we have lived through the Shoah. We can never forget it. It lies behind everything we believe. We brought up our children to feel the evil of what our generation experienced, so they too live with the underlying awareness that it could even happen again. So they need to keep one eye open to this. But actually the very thought of another Shoah seems to them so remote that they easily forget their history. To our grandchildren's generation the Shoah is just something their grandparents lived through, but for them it is hidden in their history books alongside of many other tragedies through the course of world history. We have to ask therefore whether the European Messianic movement should emphasise a post-Holocaust approach. What is vitally necessary for my generation may be redundant for the up-and-coming youth.

3. The European Christian Background.

As we have seen, many Jewish believers are to some extent assimilated and have fitted relatively easily into local cultures and churches. But we must not forget that each European country has its own forms of the church and its own cultural backgrounds. This inevitably influences the faith of Messianic believers within those churches. We have also to ask whether the Messianic congregations should in some ways adapt to the forms of the church which surround them.

As we have already noted, each European country has its own unique culture and church. Russia shares with several other countries its Orthodox background which underlies the whole Russian culture. It has been said that to be truly Russian means to be Orthodox. This must also influence the Russian Jewish community generally and the Messianic movement in particular. I have personally been struck by the number of Jewish believers I have met in Russian churches – both Baptist and Orthodox. It is noteworthy that the Russian Orthodox revival movement was led by the martyr Alexander Men who was Jewish. And his writings are spread widely through translation into Armenian and other languages.

Orthodoxy has always taught that each national church should have the liturgy in its own language and should not necessarily follow exactly the forms of the larger Russian Orthodox church. Each has its own rites and practices. If the messianic movement is to relate culturally to Russians, Serbs, Romanians, Bulgarians etc it will need to be aware of the particular forms of the local Orthodox church. As Messianic believers it is of course easier to relate to the Protestant churches in these countries and retain the more western evangelical background that we have inherited. And it is true that many Jewish believers in Jesus are active members of traditional evangelical churches in those countries. It will be a mistake however for Jewish believers as a movement to find their home in the westernised evangelical churches which have been founded through overseas Christian workers in the years since Gorbachev, glasnost' and perestroika.

Those of us who come from evangelical backgrounds do not always find it easy to relate to Orthodoxy. And it has to be admitted that ignorance reigns. In western Bible and theological studies we are taught about the various Protestant and Roman Catholic theological streams,

but Orthodox views are not generally considered. The same is true in the study of church history and missiology. Sadly the Orthodox tend to be just as ignorant of western Christianity as we are of Orthodoxy. Having lectured on Orthodoxy at All Nations (I used to belong to the Russian Orthodox church), I found that few if any other colleges taught anything about the subject.

When one moves to the former Czechoslovakia, it is the Roman Catholic church which predominates and the Protestants are largely traditional Hussite Reformed. If the Messianic movement wishes to gain influence more widely in the nation and church, it is to these churches we shall need to relate.

The Roman Catholic church also retains considerable influence in Hungary and France, although in both countries secularism has swept through the population and brought the church into considerable decline. Nevertheless the church has played a lasting part in shaping the culture and ways of thinking there.

It is more difficult to generalise about Germany and Switzerland. In these two countries the Messianic movement will be influenced by and will want to witness into Roman Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran churches according to the different regions. These churches tend to think and act regionally, so the more American emphasis on independent local congregations may hamper mutual understanding.

In Britain the Anglican church predominates in England, but the Church of Scotland is a Reformed church based on the Reformation background of John Knox. In Wales there is a strong Free Church history, while in N. Ireland Presbyterians and Anglicans are both strong. Particularly in England there are a multitude of significant other denominations, networks and independent churches.

As we consider the role of Messianic Jews in Europe today we are aware that it is the main churches of the various countries where we want to gain influence for the sake of the fullness of the Gospel. We long for a Jewish view of the Christian faith to gain credence in these churches. As followers of Jesus we want to inject a proper Jewish view into the main blood stream of each nation, not just live out our faith in a small side vein in ghetto-like fashion where we remain unnoticed and without influence. It is also true that many Messianic Jews have found and will continue to find their spiritual home within these churches.

4. What is our role in Europe today?

We have already noted and we are also all very much aware that the European Messianic movement is still small and weak. But we are encouraged by the growth God has given us over the past couple of decades. Until recently our resources were so limited that they were fully engaged just in surviving and helping to run our messianic fellowships. As a result the development of a messianic theology was something of a luxury and we could hardly afford to give time and energy to such matters. It is therefore very encouraging to see this consultation taking place to stimulate new Jewish approaches to biblical understanding, theology and the life of the church of God. The American messianic movement has been much larger and stronger for many years now, so they have written on such subjects. But, as we have already underlined, American messianic approaches may need considerable adjustment to fit Europe.

In this consultation we particularly want to think in terms of theological development, but it should in passing be noted that our Messianic movement also needs at some stage to examine

more Jewish approaches to worship, church structures, the rites of the church, Christian leadership, biblical understanding etc.

In our contemporary European context a messianic biblical theology needs to relate to the current trends in European life and thought which are also being swallowed by many Jews today. Thus it has been established that at least 35% of our British population believes in reincarnation. Amongst contemporary Jews too Eastern religions have infiltrated into the belief systems particularly of the younger generation. I don't remember ever hearing a sermon or Christian talk directly dealing with this topic. I also gather that our youth and children do not receive teaching related to such issues. We shall need to ask how our messianic faith sees the philosophical beliefs of Hinduism and particularly of Buddhism – eg anatta/non-being, anicca/non-permanence, Dukkha/suffering, tanha/thirst, samsara/reincarnation, karma/the law of cause and effect, atman/being or spirit.

In Europe today people (including academic studies) have become deeply suspicious of the rationalism which predetermined Christian biblical interpretation and theology until recently. But today existentialism and post-modernism hold sway with their emphasis on experience and relationships. Is this part of the reason for the growing strength of the Chassidic movement in Israel and even in UK? As messianic theologians we shall want to stand against the traditional theological division of Christology merely into the Person and Work of Jesus. We shall at least want to underline the relationships of Jesus as a topic in its own right, not just a short paragraph within the subject of the Person of Jesus. We shall also want our messianic theology to teach concerning the inter-relationships of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit which model love, grace and mutual service in honouring and glorifying one another. Post-modernism generally fails to bind spirituality together with morality and holiness. But in the Bible relationship to our holy God of righteousness requires that we be increasingly holy even as he is holy.

In today's European world pluralism has become the underlying assumption in contemporary society. We may also call it 'the super-market mentality', in which free choice reigns supreme and no one stands at the shop entrance and declares that their chosen biscuits are the only good ones! Messianic Bible teaching will want to emphasize fundamental Hebrew Scripture teaching that God is one, the unique creator of all things. We shall stress the biblical emphasis on people coming to know "that I am the Lord", the one and only Lord. Israel, however, was surrounded by nations which worshipped their particular deity who was both ethnically and geographically tied to that particular people and land (eg 1 Kings 20.23,28).

Contemporary European pluralism is noted for its attractive tolerance for anyone or any belief which shares its own tolerance, but on the other hand it is rigidly intolerant of anything or anyone who they deem to be intolerant. Conversion from one religion to another is obviously considered intolerant, for it prefers the new faith and seems therefore to reject the previous one. As messianic Jews we of course fall into this category even if we object to the word 'conversion' and talk of our faith as the messianic fulfilment of Jewish hope.

Post-modern thinking tends towards a holistic view of the world. It is therefore deeply concerned for environmental and ecological questions. Biblical concerns for the land are more than just eschatological fulfilment with political meaning for the State of Israel as the promised homeland for Jewish people. The Hebrew Scriptures have always linked God with the land and the people – some would of course add the Torah to this trio. It is noteworthy how Paul's earlier writings particularly stress that God's purposes reach out to all peoples, both Jews and Gentiles. But in Ephesians and Colossians particularly he develops earlier allusions to "all things" as well as

“all people” (eg Col.1.15-20 with its double emphasis on “he/him” and “all things/everything”). We may note in passing the enormous growth of the ecological and environmental mission A Rocha during these past twenty years. Its emphasis fits the contemporary mood not only in Europe, but also around the world.

Another trend in the European context in which we are developing the messianic movement is globalization. Narrow isolationism which is only really interested in its own issues hardly relates to this area of thought. Although we are particularly concerned for Jewish issues within the context of biblical faith, our movement needs to keep its eyes fixed on the wider concerns of the non-Jewish world everywhere. People today are observing not only ethnic globalization, but also economic and social globalization. Such width needs to be reflected in our biblical exegesis and theology as a movement.

These more contemporary movements also relate closely to a vital concern for the poor and those who suffer as a result of natural disasters or political oppression. We shall want to stress the biblical teaching on care for the widow, orphan, poor and aliens within our community. Total justice and equality for the Palestinians and other non-Jews in Israel is a *sine qua non* if we want Europeans today to support us. In the messianic movement too any hint of Jewish superiority will hinder our acceptance, let alone the possibility of us influencing into the non-Jewish churches.

We have not yet touched on questions of materialism and consumerism which largely reign in our contemporary cultures. This challenges us not only in the whole areas of our life style and our commitment to Jesus above all else, but also biblically in our understanding of God’s attitude to material wealth and welfare.

a) A Messianic Theology

European theology has been based very much on its Reformation background. As Jews however the Reformation plays little part in our history and should in no way be formative in the development of our theology or biblical understanding. In traditional evangelical circles it often needs to be pointed out that Romans was not written by Luther or Calvin! Their understanding of Romans and Pauline teaching contextualised the Gospel brilliantly, but we are no longer living in the 1500s! Our context is different – and even more so as messianic Jews.

More modern understanding of Romans in particular has moved away to some extent from the Reformation approach. Stendhal, E.P.Sanders, N.T.Wright and Dunn have taught about Paul’s teaching concerning the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in Romans and the other Pauline epistles. But little emphasis has been given to the missiological background of this teaching. For centuries before the coming of Jesus non-Jews were compelled to become part of Israel and the Jewish community if they wanted to believe in and follow the God of Israel. Paul is proving in his letters that a justifying relationship with God is by faith in Jesus and his work on our behalf, not on submission to Torah. If justification is gained by obedience to the Jewish Law, it remains restricted to Jews and those who join the people of Israel as proselytes or at least as God-fearers. Paul as apostle to the Gentiles has an axe to grind in demonstrating that Gentiles can be justified apart from obedience to the Jewish Torah. Any messianic biblical work will want to include this vital teaching of the New Testament. The particularism of God’s love for Israel and the Ekklesia does not preclude this universal emphasis. International mission is central to a proper Pauline theology.

While the western churches have particularly emphasised the writings of Paul in their theological understanding, the eastern and Orthodox churches have concentrated more on the

Johannine writings. Western theology has been quite forensic in its view of salvation, while the eastern churches have rather concentrated on a growing knowledge of God in which baptised believers are increasingly united with Christ and thus with God, taking on the very likeness and nature of God in their lives (commonly known as Theosis/Deification).

Perhaps messianic teaching may rather concentrate on Matthew, the particularly Jewish Gospel writer. As I have shown in my book “Matthew and Mission: the Gospel through Jewish Eyes” (Paternoster and Jews for Jesus), Matthew is writing for Jewish believers in a situation where most Jews were rejecting Jesus as Messiah and most Christians were not Jews – clearly parallel to our current situation in Europe. Matthew responds by demonstrating the glory of Jesus. First he sets the scene by emphasising in the genealogy Jesus’ identification with sinners, women and non-Jews. He is born from the Holy Spirit, is named ‘Jesus’ as the one who saves his people from their sins, and he is Immanuel/the high unknowable God of Melchizedek with us/God with us. He proceeds by showing the authority of Jesus in word (Chapters 5-7), deed (Chapters 8 and 9) and in sending his disciples out in mission (Chapter 10). It is not here appropriate that we expound the whole of Matthew (!), but surely his story of Jesus relates ideally to our Messianic situation in Europe today.

We have touched on the need for our European messianic movement to relate closely to the current context both of European societies and also of the various main European churches. Only in this way can we gain influence more widely. We long for a more Jewish approach to the Christian faith to contribute significantly to other Christians and to wider society. We also need to show that a messianic theology and faith has something distinctive and unique to add to more traditional Gentile movements.

It is here that our messianic theologians have much to give us and we eagerly anticipate our papers and discussions on this point. In private conversation Richard Harvey has suggested to me that we need a messianic theology which relates in structure and in subject matter to the theology of Moses Maimonides – I much look forward to a major theological work from him or others in this direction! Amen, may it be so!

A couple of basic, general areas for discussion

1. What fundamental trends do you see in society in the countries you relate to in Europe? How do these vary from American trends?
2. What fundamental trends do you see in the wider Christian church in the countries you relate to in Europe?
3. How do these vary from trends in American and Israeli churches/fellowships?
4. How can our small and weak messianic movement nevertheless gain influence more widely?
5. In the light of this paper, what sort of movements would you look for in future messianic theological circles in Europe?