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Jesus for Jews

The Unique Problem of Messianic Judaism

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Abstract

Messianic Judaism is a movement of people who identify as Jews and self-consciously embrace – although to degrees that can differ quite widely – Jewish culture and religious tradition, while at the same time maintaining a belief in the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, and the authority of the New Testament. Despite a wide range of contemporary response to the question of what constitutes Jewishness, all four major denominations of Judaism agree that Messianic Jews are *not* acceptably Jewish, and that Jewishness is utterly incompatible with belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. This research uses the unambiguous Jewish rejection of contemporary Messianic Judaism as a platform for thinking about the construction of heresy and its study. By examining mainstream Jewish responses to Jewish believers in Jesus, both in Israel and in North America, we see that this “heresy” is not primarily an issue of belief, but rather a form of discipline that speaks from and to particular social locations, historical relationships and distribution of power.

Introduction

[1] There is, today, no consensus even within mainstream Judaism on the matter of what constitutes “Jewishness” or acceptable Jewish practice. The notion that an individual needs to do certain things or believe certain propositions has receded quickly in the face of a modern, pluralistic reality. There is now secular humanistic Judaism, queer synagogues, and Jewish Buddhists to add to the already wide theological and observance divides present in the major denominations of Judaism. Even the basic question of “who is a Jew” – who is a member of the house of Israel – is not as straightforward as it once was. The accepted “traditional” religious formulation is that of matrilineal descent or conversion according to

certain specifications. A Jewish mother or a proper conversion is, in this understanding, what confers membership. In 1968 this became more complicated when Reconstructionist Judaism embraced as Jewish those born of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother, followed by the Reform movement in 1983. Thus contemporary Judaism is deeply divided on both this matter and questions of Jewish belief and practice. Yet interestingly, despite this range of response to the question of what constitutes Jewishness, all four major denominations agree that Messianic Jews are *not* acceptably Jewish, and that Jewishness is utterly incompatible with belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ.

[2] This is, in fact, one of the few things that all four major denominations of Judaism *do* agree on. In this paper I use the case of the unambiguous Jewish rejection of contemporary Messianic Judaism as a platform for thinking about the construction of heresy and its study. What makes Messianic Judaism a special concern for modern Judaism?

[3] We know that religious hybridity has come to be an accepted, even lauded effect of pluralism. Studies of contemporary Jewish identity are increasingly attentive to how practitioners construct personal Jewish identities, picking and choosing from various elements. Peter Berger, in *The Heretical Imperative*, starts from the notion that heresy – in the form of “picking and choosing” is one of the unavoidable hallmarks of modernity (see particularly chapter 1). Yet while modern Jews might freely choose from among an abundance of ideas and cultural practices to incorporate into their Judaism, the Gospels are strictly disqualified.

[4] An immediate, pious answer, would assert simply that a belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ is expressly forbidden in Judaism as compromising the pure monotheism expressed in Deuteronomy 6:4. Orthodox Jews do not even use the name of Jesus, referring to him as “that man,” “J,” or “Yoshke,” even rendering “Christians” as “Xians” to avoid the appellation “Christ.”¹ The belief that Trinitarianism is plainly forbidden for Jews renders Jewish believers heretics – Jews who propound a false belief within the house of Israel.

[5] But is activism against Messianic Judaism actually about these Jews’ faith in the Jesus that Stuart Charmé has termed “the radioactive core of goyishness” (28)? Is it simply that these people have violated a fundamental group expectation, what Harris-Shapiro terms “the Jewish norm of loyalty to eschew Jesus at all costs” (56)? Or perhaps it is the recognition that for those Jews living as tiny minorities in at least nominally Christian cultures of North America and Europe, a Jewish embrace of Jesus amounts over time to an act of ethno-cultural suicide (Charmé: 28).

[6] Certainly the fact that no similar repudiation is made, for example, of Jews confessing Buddhist or Hindu beliefs and practices, or atheism, which are no less theologically problematic than Trinitarianism, suggests the issue is at least as much sociological and historical as it is strictly theological. Organizations such as Jews for Judaism are almost

¹ Most popular is the use of the counter-name “Yeshu,” which is both very close to the modern Hebrew for Jesus (“Yeshua”) but is popularly understood as an acronym for *Yemach Shemo U’Zichro* (“May his name and memory be erased”). Many scholars have argued against this interpretation as an actual etymology for the name, most famously David Flusser who argues that as a Galilean of the time, the final “a” sound (Hebrew letter *ayin*) would not have been pronounced (15).

entirely aimed at countering the influence of Christian missionaries rather than any other religious presence, suggesting similarly that Jews and Judaism have a special concern with Christianity and proselytism that goes beyond any theological issues about the role, nature, or status of Jesus.

[7] Messianic Jews are well aware of the apparent inconsistency and make strategic use of it. Singling out Jewish belief in Yeshua (Jesus) as a special problem is presented as deeply illogical in this 1990 published open letter to the Israeli Supreme Court regarding the 1989 decision against Gary and Shirley Beresford, Messianic Jews who sought Israeli citizenship as Jews under the Law of Return:

In Israel, one can be an atheist and be Israeli, a Baha'i follower and be Israeli, a Hindu and be Israeli, a Buddhist and be Israeli, or even a murderer and still be Israeli. Yet, if a Jew who truly clings to his national identity and the heritage of his faith happens to believe in the way hundreds and thousands of Jewish people in the first century did, that Yeshua of Nazareth is the Messiah of Israel . . . he is told, "You are not a part of the Israeli nation. . . [We] humbly request, as fellow Jews, and as fervent followers of the Hebrew Scriptures, that we be accorded the same respect, recognition, and rights as the rest of the nation whose heritage, history, and destiny we share. . . We are Jews. We were born as Jews, and we will die as Jews (*Jerusalem Post International Edition* [May 5]: 4).

[8] As Carol Harris-Shapiro correctly explains,

The traditional allowances made by Orthodox Jews toward liberal Jews are not extended to Messianic Jews; unlike liberal Jews, Messianic Jews are not considered as “captive children” unintentionally violating Judaism. The core value of freedom of thought held by liberal Jews that enables them to accept secular Jews or Jews incorporating Eastern practices stops cold at Messianic Jewish theology; a Jew can believe almost anything but Jesus as Lord. Clearly, besides heresy, a more powerful dynamic is at work (174).

[9] This paper takes up these issues to investigate what it is that makes Messianic Judaism such a special problem for Jews. At first glance the issue appears to be a straightforward theological rejection of “wrong belief” asserting itself to constitute “right belief.” I use this case study to help understand that heresy is not an issue of belief – it is not “what you think” – but rather heresy is a form of discipline that speaks from and to particular social locations, historical relationships, and distribution of power.

Messianic Judaism

[10] As with many religious traditions, it is difficult to date the emergence of Messianic Judaism with any clarity due to definitional difficulties. Certainly the movement itself strives to emphasize a grounding in the earliest church, with its blend of Gentile and Jewish followers of Jesus, and prior to any self-consciously “Christian” identity. This period, before any kind of “parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity, provides the core model of Jesus belief as a Jewish movement with extensive Gentile participation.

[11] What is now called Messianic Judaism grew out of the broader historical phenomenon of participants in mainstream Christianity – converts – who are of Jewish birth. Famous examples abound and include Bishop Michael Solomon Alexander (first Protestant bishop of Jerusalem, d.1845), Benjamin Disraeli (twice prime-minister of Great Britain d.1881), Edith Stein (nun, martyr, canonized saint, d. 1942), and Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger (archbishop of Paris, d. 2006) The convictions, needs, and options available to these individuals were such that they chose to affiliate and participate fully in historical Gentile Christian traditions.

[12] The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a Hebrew-Christian movement in the form of congregations, missions, and organizations aimed specifically at Jewish believers in Jesus. But inspired by late 1960s trends in America that emphasized ethnicity and “roots,” youth in the Hebrew Christian movement began to forefront their Jewishness as the cultural context for their religious convictions. While a late twentieth century movement, the name itself had gained a measure of currency much earlier, and David Rausch reminds us that Arno Gaebelein’s periodical *Our Hope* publication started to use the expression “Messianic Judaism” in its tagline as early as 1895.

[13] Thus we might find in the emergence of Messianic Judaism a place where the search for alternative spiritualities (in the form of the Jesus people) and a renewed emphasis on ethnicity (manifested in a search for Jewish roots) together with a commitment to liberation (in seeking freedom from institutional Christianity) coalesced. It was here that contemporary Messianic Judaism was born as a movement of people who identify as Jews and self-consciously embrace – although to degrees that can differ quite widely – Jewish culture and religious tradition, while at the same time maintaining a belief in the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, and the authority of the New Testament. Without a doubt, Messianic Judaism is deeply steeped in Christian theology and institutions. Formal doctrinal statements made by Messianic Jewish organizations are overwhelmingly consonant with evangelical Christian beliefs. Messianic congregations are supported financially, politically, and in prayer by many evangelical Christians. Many Jews in the leadership of Messianic Judaism were trained in Christian seminaries and Bible schools.² Despite some opposition to Messianic Judaism from within evangelical Christianity, Jewish believers are accepted fully as members of the body of Christ.

[14] Despite this clear relationship to Christianity, Messianic Jews assiduously reject the label “Christian” and any suggestion that they have “converted.” According to their way of thinking, a Jew who has come to faith in Yeshua does not convert to anything and does not “switch,” so to speak, either ethnically (into a Gentile) or religiously (into a Christian). Rather, she remains eternally Jewish, only moving from the category of “unbeliever” to “believer,” from lost to saved. Messianic Jews not only refrain from thinking of themselves as Christians, but often reject Gentile Christianity outright as associated with paganism and persecution – a faith expression felt to have deviated from the path of righteousness and thus requires a turn toward deep self-examination and correction. For Messianic Jews,

² This was especially true of the movement’s early generation of leadership. There presently exist several learning institutions specifically dedicated to the training of Messianic Jewish leaders that are without Christian denominational affiliations. Of these, the most significant is the Messianic Jewish Theological Institute (MJTI) of Florida, and its related *Hashivenu* organization, which seek to build a “mature” Messianic Judaism.

Christianity is for Gentiles and is not necessary or even relevant for Jews and their salvation. Thus they are reborn not as Christians, but as (Jewish) believers in Yeshua.

[15] To be sure, Messianic Jews, like most conservative Christians, take passages such as John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 with the utmost seriousness. They absolutely reject what has come to be called “dual covenant” theology and vigorously assert that everyone, Jews included, are saved only through faith in Jesus Christ. Yet because of their membership in the house of Israel as Jews, they do not need to go through Gentile Christianity in order to access the God of Israel, but rather can do so as in the early Church, as ethnic Jews. While in this schema Jews *do* need Jesus Christ for their salvation, they do not need to be adopted or grafted into that covenant with God. It is in fact Gentiles who become “spiritual Jews.” Messianic Jews assert that embracing faith in Jesus Christ is God’s ultimate plan for the Jews, and that as believers they are “fulfilled” or “completed” Jews.

A tenet of Messianic Judaism asserts that when a Jew accepts a Jewish Messiah, born in a Jewish land, who was foretold by Jewish prophets in the Jewish Scriptures, such a Jew does not become a Gentile. In fact, he becomes a completed Jew – a Jew who believes Jesus is the Messiah (Lieberman: 2).

[16] Aside from asserting a separate congregational identity for Jewish believers in Jesus, Messianic Judaism differs from mainstream Christianity in its use of Hebrew terminology, attention to biblical feasts and holy days, prominent displays of Jewish symbols, and the use of Jewish liturgical forms and practices. Messianic Judaism itself is not homogeneous (see Harvey). Some of the differences within the broader movement center on the role ascribed to spiritual gifts, degree of Torah observance thought acceptable or advisable, and even the ethnic makeup (i.e. Sephardic or Ashkenazi) of its Jewish participants.

[17] As might be imagined, this movement encounters significant opposition from many different quarters and on a variety of grounds. Some conservative Christians, for example, criticize Messianic Judaism for its separatism, asserting that it functions to re-build the “wall of division” broken down by Jesus Christ (cf. Ephesians 2:14). Messianic Jewish groups that encourage Jewish believers to continue in Torah observance are also criticized by conservative Christians for their continued adherence to the law rather than fully accepting the new covenant of grace.

[18] Mainline Protestant disapproval centers on the conservative theological and political convictions of Messianic Judaism, coupled with mainline denominations’ efforts to repudiate Christian anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism. Because Messianic Judaism is completely condemned by all streams of contemporary Judaism, its rejection by Christians is popular with the Jewish community. Support for Messianic Judaism in particular Christian sectors functions as an undeniable problem in interfaith activity, such that the acceptance or rejection of the validity of Messianic Judaism has come to serve as a kind of mainstream Jewish litmus test for Christian sincerity in work with Jews.

Resistance

[19] In marked contrast to Messianic Jews’ self-understanding as complete or fulfilled Jews, the mainstream Jewish community labels them disparagingly as “converts,” who are mourned as “lost” members of the Jewish people, reflecting a tragedy of epic proportions.

What might appear hyperbolic in the example below is, in fact, a quite typical way that most mainstream Jews understand Messianic Judaism and its perceived role in converting the Jews to Christianity:

Evangelical Christianity has spent over one billion dollars in the last decade to convert Jews to Christianity. Under the guise of “Jews for Jesus” and “Hebrew Christians” a new threat of spiritual terrorism has emerged in the form of “Messianic Synagogues,” . . . Their ultimate goal is the eradication of the Jewish people through assimilation. It is our obligation to stop them (Messiah Truth Project).

[20] Mainstream Judaism vigorously rejects the Messianic Jewish claim that it is possible to be Jewish and believe in Jesus at the same time.

One thing upon which the entire Jewish community and several Christian denominations agree is that “Hebrew Christian” movements are not a part of Judaism. To be a “Jew for Jesus” is as absurd as being a “Christian for Buddha” and as ridiculous as “kosher pork”; it is an obvious contradiction. To paraphrase Elijah, if you are a follower of Jesus, call yourself a Christian. If you are a Jew, practice Judaism. Don’t deceive yourself; you can’t be both (Kravitz: 26).

Or, as Harris-Shapiro aptly notes, “American Jews for the most part consider Messianic Jews not only traitors for leaving the fold but also liars for claiming they are Jewish, not Christian” (15).³

[21] Thus we find that in North America, Messianic Jews have been met by many different facets of the mainstream Jewish community with demonstrations, attempts to block purchases of real estate, disruption of events, and lawsuits over the use of Jewish symbols (see Cohn-Sherbook: 180-81 for examples from Los Angeles and Philadelphia in the 1980s).⁴

³ This is a convenient point to address the difference between Jews for Jesus and Messianic Judaism. The relationship of Jews for Jesus to Messianic Judaism depends on one’s standpoint. Certainly many Messianic Jews do not consider Jews for Jesus to be a Messianic Jewish organization. Rather, Messianic Jews emphasize the Christian theology, Gentile practices, and conversionary emphasis of Jews for Jesus. Jews for Jesus discourages Jewish practice and Torah observance, whereas these are encouraged by the Messianic movement, although to quite varying degrees. That said, for mainstream Jews, there is no effective difference between them whatsoever. This lack of differentiation does not result primarily from an absence of knowledge about these differences within the Jewish community, but rather is due to the insignificance of the differences in the eyes of mainstream Jews. Messianic Jews, because they act like and claim to be “regular” Jews, are perceived to be far more dangerous than Jews who consider themselves to have converted and identify themselves openly as Christians of Jewish ancestry or upbringing.

⁴ See Office of the Commissioner for Federal Judicial Affairs Canada for the five-year legal battle between The Canadian Jewish Congress and Chosen People Ministries over their use of the “menorah” symbol that began in the late 1990s. Several Jewish communities held anti-missionary demonstrations during the 2001-2006 “Behold Your God” campaign of Jews for Jesus in North America.

Such activism is aimed at disassociating Messianic Judaism from mainstream Judaism, and blocking their participation in the mainstream Jewish community.⁵

[22] “Taglit-Birthright” was founded in 2000 by philanthropists Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt. It is a program known throughout the Jewish community for its extensive financial and organizational efforts to ensure that all Jewish youth can participate in a short-term program in Israel. Since the program’s inception close to two hundred thousand Jewish youth have taken advantage of their free trips to Israel. Birthright uses a broadly inclusive definition of Jewish to determine eligibility, allowing applicants recognized as Jewish by one of the recognized denominations of Judaism and also permitting those who have one Jewish parent. The only restriction is to ensure that the applicant does not actively practice another religion.

[23] In keeping with this restriction, it came to light in November 2008 that the program was using a screening process to prevent Messianic Jewish youth from joining.⁶ As reported in the *Jerusalem Post* on November 25, 2008, Taglit-Birthright’s CEO explained,

Contemporary Jewish life has many diverse criteria for being Jewish and Taglit-Birthright Israel has followed the broadest guidelines used by the contemporary community. . . There is unanimity in Jewish life that individuals who may be from Jewish lineage or family life and who choose the Messianic path (and in so doing accept the Christian belief in Jesus) have chosen a path that separates them from the accepted parameters of Jewishness in contemporary Jewish society. . . Such a choice is regarded as analogous to freely converting out of normative Jewish belief systems.⁷

[24] Known Messianic Jews have even been denied burial in Jewish cemeteries. When Malvern Jacobs passed away in Toronto in 1999, the limits of Jewish inclusion were also put to the test. Jacobs was a prominent Messianic Jew, whose family had anticipated burying him in a Jewish cemetery. This move was blocked, however through agreement within the mainstream Jewish communal organizations, leaving his hearse and mourners physically locked out of the cemetery itself. Dr. Jacobs was ultimately buried in a non-Jewish cemetery (van Rijn). Malvern Jacobs was not unfamiliar with opposition from the Jewish community – the Jewish Studies department he headed at Canada Christian College was closed in 1998 following complaints from the Canadian Jewish Congress that started when the program opened in 1991 (McAteer).

⁵ As a rule, this kind of activism is only mobilized in response to specific moves perceived as threatening to the mainstream Jewish community in some way. Aside from Jewish anti-missionary organizations, overwhelmingly Messianic Jews, their congregations, and their beliefs, are simply ignored by the rest of the Jewish community.

⁶ While this only became widely known in 2008, this de facto screening was happening since the program’s inception. As early as 2000 the approved Birthright application of Rebecca Rubin, a Messianic Jew, was rescinded once her affiliation became known to the organization (see Feiler).

⁷ Underscoring the point made in this paper is the fact that Michael Steinhardt, one of the founders and major funding sources for the program, publically identifies himself as an atheist.

[25] In a May 2009 research interview, I discussed this very case with a mainstream, liberal Jewish rabbi in the United States. Rabbi Norman (a pseudonym) insisted that he would have done the same, arguing that,

. . . if somebody converts out, as the rabbi of the congregation I am the *mara d'atra* [local religious authority]. I tell them that I will not allow someone who's converted out [Messianic Jews, to be buried in our cemetery]. And I know, *af al pi sh'chatab, Yisrael hu* [even though he has sinned, he is a Jew], and I don't care. I don't care. Because you made a public [statement], you spit on your people, and you know what? Take the consequences, take the responsibility with you.

[26] Rejection of Messianic Judaism is vigorous, and sometimes violent in Israel, including vandalism, public harassment, and disruption of worship services. Israeli immigration law reflects this rejection, and considers Messianic Jews to have converted to another religion because of their faith, denying them citizenship rights as Jews under the Law of Return.⁸ A messianic Jewish congregation and chess club in the southern town of Arad have had their services disrupted and their participants harassed regularly since 2004. An October 2007 fire that damaged a Jerusalem church building that houses two Messianic Jewish congregations was determined to be arson. Reports circulated that the anti-missionary group “Yad l’Achim” had been threatening one of the pastors and his congregation for years, nourishing the suspicion that anti-missionary Jewish activists had caused the fire.⁹ The suspect arrested and charged with delivering the March 2008 bomb that maimed a 15 year old Jewish believer at his home in Ariel has confessed to five years of active involvement with “Yad l’Achim” (see Azoulay). These cases, among others, have afforded Israel the dubious honor of being placed on the list of countries that “persecute Christians” (see Voice of the Martyrs; U.S. State Department).

[27] There is some evidence to suggest that this opposition has relaxed in recent years. For example, two of the major television news programs in Israel, channel 10 in 2004 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJKVAZpc7dU>) and channel 2 in 2007 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sEBAldf4L0>), arguably among the most popular in the country, aired stories about the Messianic Jewish community. The tone of the stories were overwhelmingly positive, highlighting Messianic Jewish use of Jewish symbols, their good citizenship, army service, and persecution by Orthodox Jews and the state itself. Happy, Zionist, baby-loving, singing and dancing Messianic Jews were contrasted with foul-mouthed and angry ultra-Orthodox Jews. For an increasing number of secular Jews in Israel, Messianic Jews are seen as benign and unfairly persecuted by extremists and the religious establishment. The 2004 story on Messianic Jews that ran on Channel 10 even opened with

⁸ Despite any appearances to the contrary, the April 2008 ruling by the Israeli Supreme Court concerning Messianic Jews does not change this fact. The new ruling permits citizenship solely for Messianic Jews who are children only of a Jewish father. These individuals are not considered Jews under the Law of Return, which states in Amendment 2 (1970) section 4B that “For the purposes of this Law, ‘Jew’ means a person who was born of a Jewish mother or has become converted to Judaism and who is not a member of another religion.”

⁹ This was the building that had been rebuilt following the arson attack of October 1982 that was also popularly attributed to anti-missionary ultra-Orthodox Jews.

the following introduction, dramatically appealing to secular Israeli concerns about religious coercion by the state:

What would you say about a country that persecutes a group of citizens only because of their religious beliefs? What would you say about a country where they abuse, threaten, and physically injure people for their beliefs? And the government not only does not prevent it, it joins in the persecution. The country, as you've already guessed, is called Israel. These people are called "Messianic Jews." They are Israelis in every way. They serve in the army, pay taxes, and vote for the Knesset. They are no more strange, no more dangerous, than any other minority in the country. They are simply Jews who believe in both the Bible and the New Testament, and that is their "great sin." Look at them. Even if you're not one of them, you should be worried. Because today it's them, but you could be the next victim.

[28] Fears of the threat posed by Messianic Judaism seem to have waned outside of Israel as well over the last few decades.¹⁰ Several non-Messianic Jewish scholars, most notably Dan Cohn-Sherbok (an ordained Reform rabbi) and Carol Harris-Shapiro (an ordained Reconstructionist rabbi), have produced careful, objective studies of the Messianic Jewish movement.¹¹ There have also been increasing reports of tactical Jewish alliances made with Messianic Jews, particularly concerning Israel (see Jacobs and Rogers: 92-98). The inclusion of two articles on Messianic/Judeo-Christian communities in the recently published *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora* also suggests that this picture of active resistance to Messianic Judaism is not monolithic. However significant these cases might be, they remain exceptions to the general rule of opposition, criticism, and boycott by mainstream Jews against Messianic Jews.

Heresy and Apostasy

[29] Jewish understandings of what is referred to in English as heresy or apostasy, is an extremely complex matter. Jewish sources refer to several different categories and forms of deviation from normative – or becoming normative – Jewish behavior and belief, often reflecting the vocabulary of different contexts and periods.¹² To further complicate matters, not only were many of these sources subjected to censorship in medieval Europe, but also internal Jewish concerns about community security sometimes resulted in the deliberate use of codes to obscure specific references to groups and movements, making it difficult in many cases to identify with any precision what or who was being repudiated. That said, at a minimum we can safely assert that a concept of unacceptable deviation from accepted

¹⁰ For example, in the mainstream Jewish Bnai Brith annual report of Antisemitic incidents in Canada from 1996-2008, Messianic Judaism was present in the reports from 1997, 1998 and 1999. From then onward it seems that the "deceptive and aggressive proselytizing" (1998) criticized in the reports paled in comparison to escalating incidents of anti-Semitism in the form of vandalism, harassment and violence.

¹¹ In the spirit of full disclosure I might add myself, an Orthodox Jew, to this list of mainstream, non-Messianic Jewish scholars dealing with the phenomenon of Messianic Judaism.

¹² Thus we have a variety of labels that can be applied to the "heretic," including *min*, *apikores*, *kofer*, *mumar*, *meshummad*, *anoos*, *poshea*. The closest concept to "heresy" is *minut*.

norms, in different forms, exists in historical Judaism and could result in community sanction. “Unacceptable practice” has most significantly been understood to include the public desecration of the Sabbath, habitual violation of the dietary laws, and idolatry. The range of “unacceptable belief” for Jews is broader, and could include a denial of the divine origin of the Torah, the ascription of partners to the singular deity, and the denial of the ultimate resurrection of the dead. In the past, community sanctions against the “heretic” could include the inadmissibility of temple sacrifices, disqualification of legal testimony in court, and not being counted to a prayer quorum. Of course the application of these criteria for participation in contemporary Jewish life would leave precious few sitting in the pews.

[30] Of critical importance here is to note that these categories, prohibitions, and punishments apply only to Jews. What is permitted and prohibited in terms of practice and belief to a non-Jew is rather different, resulting in a much wider scope of acceptable behavior.¹³ Not surprisingly, the heretic – the deviant Jew – was treated to a level of opprobrium utterly unmatched by rabbinic attitudes toward Gentiles. “The subversive power of the heretic” as Jacques Berlinerblau asserts, “is predicated on the fact that she or he is ‘one of us’” (335). Yet at the same time, regardless of behavior or beliefs, an essential principle of unchangeable “Jewishness,” eternal membership in the house of Israel, was maintained (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 44a; for a discussion of ‘*af al pi sh’chatah, Yisrael hu’*, see Katz). Simply put, while it is possible to convert *to* Judaism, it is impossible to convert *out* of Judaism, regardless of how far one has strayed from normative beliefs or practice. At the same time the conscious decision to subscribe to another belief and practice system that conflicts with core Jewish principles is unacceptable and potentially punishable.

[31] As Zito laments, the sociology of heresy has been much neglected. In comparison, some sustained attention has been given to its closest relation, apostasy. Apostates are leave-takers, public defectors from one group affiliation to another, often under contested conditions. Heretics, rather, still see themselves as part of the group, but with a more correct interpretation of dogma or praxis than accepted by the “orthodox.” “Sociologically speaking, then, a heretic is a deviant who is objectively subordinate and subjectively ‘one of us’” (Berlinerblau: 351). The heretic is a dissenter from within who is often relegated to the margins of the group, yet believes herself to occupy the true center.¹⁴ As Charmé distinguishes between them,

¹³ The question of whether Trinitarian belief is permitted even for a Gentile is a very complex issue in Jewish law, and centers on the matter of whether such belief qualifies as “idolatry” (*avoda zara*) or just “associationism” (*sbituf*).

¹⁴ Dein rather misses the point when he asserts, “The fact that some Messianic Jews reject Orthodox *halacha* further reinforces this sense of disapproval, eliciting hostility from those outside the Messianic Jewish community” (78). That Messianic Jews reject Orthodox *halacha* does not bother the mainstream Jewish community one bit – most of the non-Messianic (i.e. mainstream) Jewish community rejects Orthodox Jewish *halacha*. Rather the contention that their own beliefs and practices are Jewishly acceptable is what bothers those outside the Messianic Jewish community. In fact it is that minority of Messianic Jews that do strive to observe Orthodox Jewish *halacha* that are perceived to be the most threatening precisely because they appear to be Orthodox.

Heretics do not see themselves as apostates, since they regard themselves as neither traitors to their own religion nor as converts to a new religion. Unlike apostates, who totally reject both their old religious beliefs *and* their old communal identity, heretics try to correct the religious beliefs of the tradition at the same time that they continue to affirm their membership in the religious community (18).

[32] What can Messianic Judaism teach us about the study of heresy and apostasy? I am most interested in the particular problem it presents vis-à-vis contemporary Jewish life by which we are forced to wonder what makes some heresies more dangerous than others? What is so threatening about Messianic Judaism?

[24] To even ask such a question reminds us of the “relational” aspect of heresy that Berlinerblau addresses. Heresy only makes sense in reference to an “orthodoxy” that asserts its power to define group boundaries and norms. But in asking “what makes Messianic Judaism so problematic,” we are forced to re-examine the “orthodoxy” glossed throughout this paper as “mainstream Judaism.” While the expression “mainstream Judaism” might serve a useful referential purpose, it covers a myriad of differing interests, locations, and positions within its scope. Working out some of the relational aspects of the Messianic Jewish heresy serves to remind us that just as we must be careful not to essentialize heresy, we need to remember that orthodoxy is also not monolithic. The “problem” of Messianic Judaism is quite different for various locations within mainstream Judaism, and its rejection by those different locations expresses something different in each case. Undoubtedly, the problem of Messianic Judaism is different for a liberal Jewish community in America, say, than it is for an ultra-Orthodox group in Israel.

[33] Boundary maintenance is very difficult for liberal Judaism in North America. At this time, close to half (48% in 2001) of all American Jewish couples were “intermarriages” that included one non-Jewish member. The vast majority of the non-Jews in such cases are at least nominally Christian. Because of this demographic reality, both the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform) and the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (Conservative) have had to carefully examine questions concerning the role of Gentiles in ritual and institutional Jewish life (see Abelson). The high rates of marriage with Christians and their increasing participation in synagogue life raises the issue of cultural assimilation. The quest to locate a Judaism that allowed Jews to “pass” within modern, gentile culture was part of the *raison d'être* of liberal Judaism. Its success at creating the possibility of a Jewish life that was integrated within non-Jewish families and society blurred the boundaries between Jew and non-Jew, and ultimately liberal Judaism and liberal Christianity. But the ongoing unequivocal rejection of Messianic Judaism expressed both a rejection of any kind of theological hybridity and served to reinforce Reform Judaism’s clear place within mainstream Judaism.

[34] These issues are quite different than those found in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish rejection of Messianic Judaism in Israel. This community is far more concerned with issues of power, specifically religious coercion of vulnerable populations. It is possible that this stems from the community’s own extensive experience of poverty and its historical awareness of the material rewards offered by Christian missionaries to Jews to encourage their conversions to

Christianity. It is also fuelled by a conception of Israel as an independent Jewish state in which pressure from a historically dominant Christianity should not be tolerated.

[35] At the same time as we recognize that the orthodoxy which marginalizes Messianic Judaism is not monolithic, we are also encouraged by this case to note that it is not always singular. While the strongest critics of Messianic Judaism are indeed Jews, the movement has also received no small measure of condemnation from conservative Christians who often assert that Jewish believers should be integrated into Gentile congregations. The question of how believers in Jesus Christ – Gentile and Jewish – should correctly relate to Jewish roots and practices has plagued the Church since the birth of the movement and remains a matter of contention even among Messianic Jews.¹⁵

[36] A critical factor that makes Messianic Judaism so threatening for mainstream Judaism is its success. It was anticipated that such a hybridity could not survive and that it would soon be assimilated into mainstream Christianity, as had Jewish followers of Jesus in the past. This threat of cultural assimilation into gentile Christianity is one that the movement of Messianic Judaism is keenly aware of and works hard to fight against. Yet so far this has not taken place, and the movement continues to grow, among Jews and Gentiles, in Israel and in North America.¹⁶ The movement has also proved itself over time; there are now many second and even third-generation Messianic Jews coming of age in those communities. This is also the case in Israel, where Messianic Jewish congregations have grown significantly in size and – even in a Jewish country with a culture largely hostile to Christianity – there is no major city lacking in a Messianic Jewish congregation.

[37] Surely success is a necessary condition for a “wrong belief” to be problematic for the host tradition. While there are a number of Jews who are practicing Goddess worship or Buddhism and even synthesizing these traditions with their Judaism, neither of these have developed a separate congregational movement that is eagerly and actively seeking new members (see Ariel 2011: 5, on the “disproportionately large role” that Jews have played in many new religious movements).

[38] It is the incredible fertility of Christian converts, not necessarily Jewish, their mission and ability to reproduce and grow through evangelism that is a significant part of the problem. Christians, especially evangelical Christians, make more Christians. A Messianic Jew is not just a convert but an additional agent of conversion, a convert maker, both through active evangelism to Jews and by communicating the plausibility of his own choice simply by having had made it.

¹⁵ An example is the furious debate that followed the 2005 publication of Mark Kinzer’s *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People*. A Messianic Jewish leader and rabbi, Kinzer’s most striking arguments were that Jewish believers in Jesus should continue to practice Orthodox Jewish *halacha*, and that Messianic Jews should not engage in overt missionary activity in order to bring Jews to faith. Not surprisingly, the book was forcefully criticized by leaders in the wider Messianic Jewish movement.

¹⁶ Estimates vary, but a conservative count suggests approximately 100 congregations in Israel and 300 congregations in North America. Israeli congregations can be divided into about 70 Hebrew-speaking, 25 Russian-speaking, and 5 Amharic (Ethiopian) congregations. Of the North American congregations, Gentiles make up a significant portion of their membership – some suggest as much as one-half. Also one-third of these North American congregations have a membership of fewer than thirty (see Juster and Hocken).

[39] No doubt another major factor that sharpens the perceived threat of Messianic Judaism is the unique historical relationship between Judaism and Christianity. This is true both in a theological and a historical sense. The Jewish history of persecution and forced conversion at the hands of Christians professing belief in Jesus Christ renders the choice of some Jews to participate in those beliefs anathema for the mainstream Jewish community. Thus Messianic Judaism is more than just Jews who hold wrong beliefs. Rather, it is perceived as the striking of a blow of wilful erasure against a sacralized group memory of suffering and martyrdom. The Jew who practices Buddhism, to continue the example, cannot be viewed as a “traitor” to Judaism as there is no historical enmity between Jews and Buddhists. The heresy of a Jew participating in Buddhist beliefs or practices is entirely theological rather than posing the acute historical and ethnic problem of Jewish believers in Jesus.

[40] Messianic Judaism is also a special case because of the unique theological relationship between Judaism and Christianity. As Yaakov Ariel notes, “In no other case has one religious community considered another religious group to hold a special role in God’s plans for human redemption, and to be God’s first nation” (2002: 41). Because Christianity grew as a movement from within Judaism into a separate tradition – a process commonly referred to as “the parting of the ways” – the maintenance of boundaries between the two takes on a special importance. The similarities and shared background of Judaism and Christianity require that the boundaries between the two be strictly – artificially, some might suggest – maintained. Practices deemed threatening to the process of developing a Christian identity apart from Judaism were labelled “Judaizing,” a phenomenon, however vague, that was singled out as a significant problem by many early Church Fathers.

[41] Messianic Judaism threatens a carefully established division between Judaism and Christianity that most Jews and Christians are eager to maintain. It is a hybrid of two traditions that are relatively close, and it is that very closeness that requires strong boundaries. So while the Jewish Buddhist belief is perhaps “heretical,” she is not erasing any critical lines between Judaism and Buddhism, two different traditions, and with separate enough histories, that the boundaries between them need little in the way of maintenance to uphold. Simply put, there have been far more Jewish-Christian syntheses in the past 2000 years than there have been Jewish-Buddhist.

Conclusion

[42] Perhaps most telling is the fact that mainstream Jewish opposition to messianic Judaism is never framed using a discourse of heresy. Doctrinally (and this is a rather imperfect word to use here) Messianic Judaism, together with Jewish-Buddhism or the belief in the messiahship of the late Rebbe of Lubavitch, all present serious theological challenges.¹⁷ Effectively, however, it is only the first of these that has been written out of Judaism. It is not, apparently, beliefs that matter. While the concept of heresy does exist in Judaism, it is not commonly mobilized; rather other strategies of exclusion are appealed to. David Berger’s

¹⁷ There has been extensive discussion concerning the belief of many Lubavitch Jews that their late Rebbe is the Messiah and will be resurrected at some future point in order to fulfill that role. Most relevant to this paper is David Berger’s work, where he specifically wonders why these beliefs, which he argues are a contradiction of basic Jewish tenets, and their adherents have been met with such indifference from Jewish Orthodoxy.

conscious avoidance of the term “heresy” is a case in point: “The messianist belief in itself, with its abolition of Judaism’s criteria for identifying the Messiah, is seen by some as heresy. I have studiously avoided that term, though I do not quarrel with those who use it” (145).

[43] For contemporary Judaism, heresy as constituted by wrong belief no longer exists. In his study on the role of heresy in Judeo-Christianity in late antiquity, Daniel Boyarin explains,

It is not a trivial but a very interesting fact that as the history moved on, heresiology remained a living, vital, and central part of Christianity, while in rabbinic Judaism, eventually Judaism tout court, heresiology was to wither and (almost) die out, leaving in its wake the ambiguity that marks Judaism till this day as sometimes a religion, sometimes not (11).

[44] When Messianic Jews argue that if there is room for atheist Jews or Buddhist Jews, there ought rightly be room for Jews who believe in Jesus, they are making an argument about religion that is distinctly Christian (where belief and doctrine matter most). It is also a modern argument that relies on the separation of ethnic Jewishness from the “religion” of Judaism. The kind of wrong belief that is disciplined in Messianic Judaism is one that is felt to present a social, perhaps ultimately existential, threat to the ethnic group. Contemporary Jewish ambivalence about what constitutes heresy and the location of its threat reflects the contemporary Jewish ambivalence about Jewishness, its essence, nature, and location.

[45] While at one level, heresy is about ideas and discourse, the management of heresy is a social matter of people marginalizing other people, together with their distinctive beliefs. Heresy requires real people, with particularly problematic relationships and locations that create specific tangible problems. It is the particular historical relationship of Judaism and Christianity, and their particular compositions that refuses Jesus-belief but permits atheism, Buddhism, and goddess worship as nonthreatening “wrong beliefs” that a Jew can embrace while still calling himself a Jew. But while these beliefs are unacceptable by any known religious or doctrinal Jewish standard, they do not place a Jew who embraces them outside the community in the way that Jesus-belief does. Wrong belief does not a heresy make. Heresy is not – at least for modern Judaism – what you think.

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