

Heretics, Infidels and Apostates: Menace, Problem or Symptom?

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UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF JEWISH identity has become increasingly complicated in the modern world as various Jews have developed ways of expressing their Jewishness that strain and often threaten some of the traditional assumptions of the Jewish community. I would like to present several categories which may be helpful in distinguishing and analyzing some of these anomalous cases of Jewish identity. In so doing, I also hope to show that the different responses of the Jewish community to certain of these threats are not primarily the result of the theological factors in terms of which the problem is normally couched. Rather, they are largely a reflection of the sociological predicament of being a Jew in a non-Jewish world.

The central distinction that I wish to propose was inspired by a remark made by a Jewish professor in one of his religion classes when I was a college student at Columbia University. He recalled being chided by a Gentile colleague for being somewhat of a "heretic" in his treatment of some issue in religion. His response, delivered with mock indignation, was to deny the accuracy of such a label. "My dear fellow," he said, "I must correct you. I am *not* a heretic. I am an *infidel*."

Although it did not occur to me at the time, I have since realized that there is an important difference between being a heretic and being an infidel. Within a specific religious tradition, each presents a significantly different problem. Heretics are those who hold to religious beliefs or practices that are at odds with the "majority position" in their religion. They believe, indeed, they believe very fervently. Unfortunately, they believe the wrong things [heterodoxy], at least "wrong" according to the leaders of their tradition, and the consensus of the community [orthodoxy]. Nevertheless, heretics identify themselves with their religion and insist that *their* beliefs are what the religion is *truly* about. Thus, the Christian "heretic" demands to be recognized as the only true Christian, the Jewish "heretic" as the only true Jew. Within Judaism, for example, the Samaritans, Karaites, and Sabbateans each insisted at various times that their group alone represented "true" Judaism.

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

Religious traditions deal with heretical challenges in various ways In some cases, heretics are persecuted and driven out of the community At other times, the traditional community simply acts as though the heretic does not exist and ignores the positions that he has taken In still other cases, the community regards heretics with scorn, but tolerates them in the hope that they can be persuaded to repent and return to the traditional perspective

When a heretical position is held for too long, however, it soon tends to be regarded as apostasy During the period of the prophets, for example, those Jews who had strayed into the worship of Canaanite gods were essentially heretical Jews — at first They were “sinful” Jews, but Jews, nonetheless While they were exhorted by the prophets to return to pure Judaism, those who persisted in their practices were eventually written off as apostates

In contrast to *heretic* and *apostate*, the term *infidel* has traditionally been used to refer to those who are *unbelievers* rather than *misbelievers* The problem which they present to the traditional religious community is not that they believe the wrong things, but that they are essentially devoid of interest and belief in the whole religious system or some major part of it Therefore, it is inaccurate to call them heretics Ordinarily, infidels neither claim to be members of the religious group whose beliefs they reject, nor are they regarded as members by the group Within the history of Christianity, Jews (along with Muslims) have frequently been regarded as “infidels,” *i e*, unbelievers, and not as “heretics,” *i e*, misbelievers Curiously, during the Inquisition, it was necessary to reclassify Jews from “infidels” to “heretics” in order to try them In so doing, Judaism came to be seen not as an independent religion, but as a perverse deviation [heresy] from the true faith The Jews were accused of knowing the truth of Christianity and deliberately distorting it in the “heresies” found in the Talmud Judaism became a Christian heresy

In short, the heretic is usually the threat from within a religion that tests its theological boundaries, while the infidel is the threat from outside the religion One of the peculiarities of modern Judaism, however, is the fact that one finds *both* Jewish heretics *and* Jewish infidels who equally claim the right to call themselves Jews Admittedly, some of them may not be Jewish in a traditional *religious* sense, but neither is it legitimate to dismiss their claims of Jewishness on the grounds that they believe the “wrong” things, or nothing at all It is well-known that Jewish identity includes non-religious dimensions which are no less real simply because they are difficult to define or explain

I recognize that “heretic” and “infidel” are terms that one encounters

mainly in the study of Christianity.¹ Judaism, in general, has been less concerned with purity and uniformity of belief than Christianity. However, I think it is too frequently overlooked that the issues of heresy and infidelity are highly significant for Jewish tradition as well. The question of heresy in Judaism has always been confusing, since Judaism has neither a central religious authority nor a universally accepted dogma against which heresy can be defined. Therefore, what constitutes heresy is never fixed, and tends to vary with historical developments. What is normative at one point in religious history can become heretical at another. For example, at times, both Hasidic and Reform Jews have been considered heretics by other Jews.

One source of confusion about Jewish identity in the modern world stems from the seemingly paradoxical fact that the modern Jewish "infidel" (e.g., the Jewish secularist or humanist who does not believe in or practice traditional Judaism) is not only tolerated but is possibly even normative for large segments of the Jewish community, whereas one particular kind of Jewish heretic, the "messianic-Jew"² (i.e., one who clearly believes in and practices some of traditional Judaism, but also believes certain "wrong" or unacceptable things) is regarded with great alarm by the Jewish community, indeed, the "messianic-Jews" heresy threatens to cast their very Jewishness in doubt, to render them apostates or "former-Jews." This situation raises two important questions: Why can't a Jew become a follower of Jesus and remain a Jew? Why does the Jewish community react with greater concern and animosity to this "heresy" than to the pervasive "infidel-ity" of many modern Jews?

Background to the Modern Hebrew-Christian/Messianic-Jew Movement

The Hebrew-Christian movement, which originally developed in England in the late 19th and early 20th century, arose as a result of the historic failure of missionizing among the Jews, who are remarkably resistant to the Gospel message. Particularly in its most recent resurgence, this movement represents a new packaging for an old product. The rea-

1 Jewish tradition, particularly during the Talmudic period, did develop a number of ways of describing religiously deviant beliefs and practices. Since these terms did not always have a consistent meaning in every period of the past and do not have widespread currency today, I prefer to use the English terms that I have mentioned. Nevertheless, the distinctions I am suggesting can still be discerned in the rabbinic terminology. The term *min* is the closest to heretic. One of its primary meanings is a member of a Jewish sect that has embraced positions unacceptable to the rabbis. The Jewish Christians were an example of such individuals. Terms like *kofer* and *apikoros* come closer to what I describe as infidels. They refer to those who are skeptical of certain religious doctrines, or who deny them altogether. Finally, terms like *mumar* or *meshummad* are closest to apostate, since they imply actual defection from Judaism and conversion to another religion.

2 "Messianic-Jew" [or "Hebrew-Christian"] is the term commonly used by those persons of Jewish background who believe that Jesus was the messiah described and expected in Jewish tradition.

son why Jews have never been very receptive to Christian missionizing, it has been suggested, is that they have the silly idea that it is somehow un-Jewish to believe in Jesus. The ideology of the modern messianic Jewish movement suggests that Jews should be approached at the level of their ethnic-national identity and group loyalty and be shown that nothing Jewish need be given up by becoming a follower of Jesus.

Messianic-Jews will argue that believing in Jesus is not really a religious conversion or a betrayal of the Jewish people. On the contrary, it is a legitimate manifestation of Judaism. Indeed, they argue, it is the ultimate Jewish position. Thus, on the pocket card of pointers for messianic Jews who witness to traditional Jews, they are instructed NOT to say Jesus Christ, which does not sound Jewish to the average Jew, but, rather, Yeshua the messiah [or mashiach]. They are NOT to talk about converting, which suggests taking away one's Judaism to become a "goy," but, rather, of "becoming a completed Jew," which suggests adding on to a Jew's Jewish heritage. They are to refer to "Bible-believers" [others say "Jewish believers"], not Christians, "meeting of Bible-believers," not "church," "second part of the Bible," not "New Testament," and "tree," not "cross." In other words, they want to de-Gentilize Christianity.

The goal of the messianic-Jews is to provide a Jewish-like atmosphere where Jews will feel comfortable enough to accept Jesus as the messiah without feeling that they have deserted the Jewish people. By witnessing to their fellow Jews as *Jews* who believe in Jesus, the messianic Jews can show that acceptance of Jesus does not forfeit a person's Jewishness. As a result of this strategy, messianic Jews are often accused of deliberately trying to *deceive* traditional Jews into believing that Jesus is the Jewish messiah, i.e., to trick Jews into becoming Christians. However, since the evidence for such intent to deceive is, on the whole, unconvincing, it is more useful to accept the good intentions of most messianic Jews and to determine whether their position can rightly be called Jewish or whether they have — despite their good intentions — grossly misunderstood Judaism.

One of the things that most irks the Jewish community about the messianic-Jews is this claim that not only are they still Jewish, but that they have "improved," "completed," "enriched," "complemented," or "fulfilled" their Jewishness and, finally, become "whole." It is obvious why this rhetorical approach that emphasizes *adding something* to Judaism is more appealing than the idea of *converting from* Judaism. The messianic-Jews refuse to admit that they have rejected or betrayed some fundamental part of themselves and their upbringing. They do not want simply to be Christians. Rather, they want to erase, or at least blur, the traditional boundary between Judaism and Christianity. Depending on one's perspective, their approach can be characterized as an attempt at either reappropriating central Christian theological points into Judaism, or absorbing Judaism into Christianity. Of course, the underlying assumption of every "completed" Jew is the common Christian notion that Judaism is

somehow *incomplete*, an idea which only indicates an *incomplete* understanding of Judaism

Most messianic-Jewish groups are profoundly puzzled by the refusal of the Jewish community to consider them Jews, when the same community admits the possibility, however reluctantly, of Jewish atheists or Jewish Zen masters, and accepts the fact that Jesus and his original followers were all Jews and a movement within Judaism. The pamphlets of such groups frequently point to what one messianic Jew calls a "great paradox. How can it be that one who follows a Jew (all of whose original followers were Jews) is no longer Jewish?"

Different strands of the messianic-Jewish movement have developed several basic arguments in defense of the "Jewishness" of their movement. The older Hebrew-Christian movement takes a slightly different stance than do the newer messianic Jewish groups. The Hebrew-Christian groups tend to appeal to ethnic definitions of Jewishness, while the newer messianic-Jewish groups frequently emphasize a religious definition of Jewishness.³ One common Hebrew-Christian approach is to divorce Jewishness from religion and to see it solely as a question of nationality or race. According to this position, no matter what Jews believe or do not believe, they remain Jews, descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If they are humanists, they are still Jews, if they are atheists, they are still Jews, if they believe in Jesus, they are still Jews. Nothing can eradicate that Jewishness. Such messianic-Jews see themselves as members of the Jewish *people*, but followers of the Christian *religion*. They are simultaneously Jewish and Christian in the same way that one can be simultaneously American and Christian. They insist that there is no danger of their becoming Gentiles by accepting Jesus, because Gentiles, like Jews, are born, not made.

This racial or ethnic approach to Jewishness is more characteristic of the older Hebrew-Christian movement. These groups tend to be opposed to preserving many Jewish practices because they would make acceptance in the fundamentalist Christian community difficult. These messianic-Jews are unlikely to have arks and Torahs or to have a seder during Passover. Very few maintain Jewish practice and identity. Historically, Hebrew-Christians have been completely assimilated, gentilized, and church-acculturated. Jewish members of the movement are gradually assimilated into Christian churches. Thus, the movement is mainly a half-way house to complete apostasy.⁴ Within several generations, the members' ties to Judaism disappear completely. Perhaps it would be fair to call such Hebrew Christians semi-apostates.

A newer type of messianic-Jew has arisen in conjunction with recent

³ See David A. Rausch, *Messianic Judaism: Its History, Theology, and Polity* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), ch. 6.

⁴ Ira O. Glick, "The Hebrew Christians: A Marginal Religious Group," in *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group*, ed. by Marshall Sklare (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1958).

interest in the Jewish roots of Jesus and the church. These messianic-Jews claim a tie with the Jewish Christians of the first century and claim to be Jewish congregations who happen to believe in Jesus. Their goal is not for Jews to be assimilated into Christian churches, but to continue to live as Jews. They present Jesus as a loyal Jew who interpreted the true meaning of the Torah and was in the great tradition of the Jewish prophets.

Unlike the previous approach, these messianic-Jews deny that Jewishness has anything to do with birth at all and their argument usually finds its inspiration in Paul's words to the Romans:

He is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal (2:28-9).

Jewishness is thus defined as an inner spiritual condition, not a matter of birth. One pamphlet called "Who is a Jew?" claims that

not everyone who is descended from Israel really belongs to Israel and not everyone born of Jewish parents is ipso facto a Jew. A Jew has to choose to be a Jew, he cannot be one through the sheer incidence of birth. A Jew is not merely a unit in a certain national grouping, but a man, who has personally and out of conviction come into living touch with God. Only then is he a true Jew.

Of course, the messianic-Jew insists that the living relation to God which makes one a "true Jew" can be fully accomplished only through acceptance of Jesus and, specifically, not through the traditional understanding of Torah.⁵ Although most of the newer messianic Jews continue to observe some rituals and observances that developed during the rabbinic period, their tolerance of rabbinism is usually limited to the level of ritual practices that probably serve as emotional anchors to their Jewishness. When it comes to religious law and scriptural exegesis, however, the rabbinic tradition is consistently described in such messianic-Jewish literature as a man-made religion lacking in genuine authority or spirituality.

Jewish Theological Responses to "Messianic-Jews"

The prevailing feeling throughout the medieval period was that even baptism into Christianity did not obliterate a person's Jewishness. Rashi took a talmudic maxim from another context — "A Jew, even if he has sinned, remains a Jew" (*Sanhedrin* 44a) — and transformed it into a halakhic principle relating to apostates. Apostates were generally considered Jews who had sinned, but they did not lose their Jewish identity, nor were they transformed into Gentiles. Although they did not enjoy all of the privileges of Jews "in good standing" (e.g., participation in synagogue

⁵ "Such contact with God does not come by means of the Law, and certainly not through the instrumentality of Tradition — 'the commandments,' which have accumulated through the centuries. The Jew, who believes in Jesus Messiah, is a complete and true Jew."

services), they were still Jews for the purposes of halakhah (e.g., matters of marriage and divorce, taking interest, inheritance, etc.)⁶ However, while Rashi insisted that even apostates remained Jews despite their sin of apostasy, Maimonides took a much dimmer view. He tended to see Christians [or Nazarenes] as idol-worshippers. Moreover, Maimonides insisted, a Jew who worshipped an idol was no longer to be regarded as a Jew.

The contemporary Jewish position seems to be a combination of both of these perspectives. On the one hand, the Jewish community is reluctant to exclude any Jews from its ranks merely because of philosophical or theological differences, while, on the other hand, Jews who accept certain Christian ideas have passed beyond the pale of tolerance. The Jewish community contends that they have simply gone too far to be still considered Jews.

Although the refutation of Christianity was probably not a great concern of Maimonides, his positions have provided authority for much of the theological polemics against Christianity in general, and messianic Judaism in particular.⁷ Rabbinic theology may never have been able to present a list of definitive Jewish beliefs, but Maimonides' thirteen articles of Jewish faith have served as such a creed particularly when it has been necessary to show the Jewish objection to basic Christian theology.⁸

While many Jews today would have difficulty accepting some of Maimonides' articles of faith, and some Jews would have difficulty with most of them, most could probably agree on an underlying principle behind a good number of these points. It could be summed up in a single article of faith: "That which a Christian believes, I will never believe [regardless of whatever else I believe]." Doubtless, many Jews are able to read a similar level of meaning into the words of the morning prayers, "Blessed are You, O God, for not having made me a 'goy'." Due to the historical tension between Judaism and Christianity, Jews have tended to elevate the *denial* of Christian doctrine to a paramount element of their self-definition. Ironically, the medieval Christian charge that Jews were infidels, i.e., non-believers in the Christian gospel, has been internalized by many

6 Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), pp. 67-76; Jacob Katz, "Though He Sinned, He Remains an Israelite," *Tarbitz*, 27 (1957/8): 203-217; Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Who Was A Jew?* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1985).

7 Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Ktav, 1977).

8 In particular, Maimonides' claims about the unity of God, the incorporeality of God, the direct relationship between humans and God, the eternality of the Torah, the truthfulness of the prophets, and the coming of the messiah have been used to repudiate the Christian doctrines of the trinity, the incarnation of God in Jesus, the role of Jesus as mediator between man and God, the end of the Law and the new covenant through Jesus, and the messiahship of Jesus [the messiah is yet to come because the changes expected in a messianic world have not occurred].

modern Jews who agree on few theological positions *except* for their non-belief in Jesus and the Christian theological principles related to him

Messianic-Jews see a double standard in the position of the Jewish community. On the one hand, it defines Jewishness in terms of cultural and sociological identification with the Jewish people. The messianic-Jew claims this identification as much as any other Jew. On the other hand, the Jewish community wishes to read the messianic-Jews out of Judaism on the basis of their deviance from traditional religious beliefs. The messianic-Jews see it as hypocritical to exclude messianic-Jews from Judaism by invoking elements of Maimonides' creed, since other Jews are not required to hold strictly to these religious positions, nor are they excluded from Judaism when they fail to do so. In short, the messianic-Jew accuses the Jewish community of *selective enforcement* of its theology as a means of suppressing one particular heretical group. If Jewishness were consistently defined as a religious matter, the messianic-Jews might be able to see why they are not Jews in the sense that traditional religious Jews are. But they find a religious definition of Jewishness somewhat arbitrary in its application, since not all "legitimate" Jews practice the religion of Judaism in all its aspects.

The messianic-Jews have identified some of this theological "bad faith" in their own literature when they criticize the secularity and unbelief of much of modern Judaism. They rightly observe that many modern Jews are religious "infidels." One messianic Jewish pamphlet raises the question of how a Jew could believe that Jesus is the messiah. "Most Jews don't believe in Jesus, do they?" it asks. The response is "You're right but then, when has TRUTH ever been determined by a majority vote? After all, many Jews don't even believe in God!²¹ And others have NEVER looked at all the prophecies in the Old Testament." Unfortunately, the legitimate issue in messianic-Jews' complaint is often obscured by their tendency to accept uncritically the New Testament identification of the Pharisees [read non-messianic-Jews] as religious hypocrites.

The quick answer to the "paradox" posed by the messianic-Jews lies in an important difference between the modern Jewish infidel and the Jewish heretic. The modern Jewish infidel remains faithful to the community, in spite of theological infidelity, while the messianic-Jew is seen as unfaithful to the community as well as to the religious tradition. The Jewish community finds the messianic-Jew guilty of both ethnic infidelity [by violating group solidarity] and theological heresy. As far as most Jews are concerned, the interaction of these two elements transforms the messianic-Jews into apostates, despite the latter's claims to the contrary. However, to understand fully the dilemma raised by Jews who embrace Jesus as the messiah, one must go back to the origins of Christianity.

The Situation in the First Century

At the time of Jesus, there was not one true Judaism or a normative Jewish tradition. In the first few centuries of the Common Era there was, within Judaism, a proliferation of competing sects which disagreed on issues of theology, law, interpretation, politics, etc., but none ever claimed that the others were not Jews. The majority of Jews in the world were common people, who probably had little sense of affiliation to any specific sect at all. The most prominent sects were the Pharisees (forerunners of rabbinic Judaism), the priestly Sadducees (who had rejected the Oral Law) and the ascetic Essenes (who expected the eschaton). Fortunately for the later rabbis, both the Sadducees and the Essenes disappeared by the 2nd century so they provided no further problem for Judaism. However, Jewish histories tend to gloss over the fact that, from the point of view of the later rabbis, all of the Jewish sects other than the Pharisees were technically guilty of heresy in one form or another.

The point that must be made, of course, is that it was only *after* the Pharisees had become the controlling influence in Judaism that the positions of other groups of Jews were retroactively condemned as heretical. It is not even true to say that these groups had strayed from "true" Judaism. What really had happened was that "true" Judaism had evolved and changed. One might even say that, from the point of view of what Judaism had been before, it was the Pharisees whose ideas were heretical. Very often, yesterday's heretics become today's religious authorities. This is not necessarily bad, since the result often is creative evolution within a tradition.

At the same time, it is important to realize that these Jewish heretics did not lose their status as Jews nor were they excluded from the Jewish community. In the first century, even Jewish Christians were still regarded as Jews, as a Jewish sect. In time, the Nazarenes were branded as heretics by the rabbis, most decisively after their failure to support the Bar Cochba revolt. [They had refused to accept Akiba's claim that Bar Cochba was the messiah.] In the wake of the failure of that revolt, they became dispersed, and rabbinic Judaism paid little more attention to them, whereupon they slowly disappeared, like the other heretical Jewish sects.

The initial acknowledgement of the Jewishness of the first followers of Jesus is crucial for the modern messianic-Jewish claim for the Jewishness of the belief in Jesus. Nevertheless, while it is true that Jesus and his original followers were all recognized as Jews, it is also clear that the followers of Jesus did not remain a Jewish sect and Judaism soon dissociated itself from Christianity completely. There is normally a limited life-span for sectarian movements as tolerated alternatives, after which they usually move to become separate traditions, are reabsorbed by the original

tradition, or disintegrate. A sect is like a branch broken from its original trunk. Either it reroots, is grafted back, or dies.

"Messianic-Judaism" in Historical Perspective

Criticism of the messianic-Jews' claims of Jewishness can best be made on a simple historical level rather than a theological one. Speaking from a historical point of view, the major fallacy behind the argument of the messianic-Jews that they are, in fact, Jews is the common Christian misconception that identifies Judaism with the religion of the "Old Testament," the religion of the ancient Israelites which allegedly stopped its development in the first century. When messianic-Jews use the word "Jew" they mean it in this special sense. They see themselves as "Biblical Jews," but *not* as the descendents of the rabbinic tradition. They insist that Biblical Judaism was *displaced* by rabbinic Judaism, and that the latter is not "true" Judaism. Since it is rabbinic Judaism that is blamed for the Jewish opposition to belief in Jesus, the messianic-Jews usually discount the last 1900 years of Jewish religious development [or at least large portions of it] as a rabbinic distortion that was not divinely ordained. Others simply neglect to mention it at all.

But to say that the Tanakh or Old Testament alone comprises Judaism is a gross distortion, historically as well as theologically. When rabbinic Judaism, on which modern Judaism rests, is characterized as "un-Jewish" or as a human invention of the Pharisees that is lacking in religious authority, one has redefined Judaism in an unjustifiably bizarre way. The result of this semantic juggling is that the messianic-Jews often come to the strange conclusion that Christianity is more "Jewish" than Judaism. Whether or not the messianic-Jews approve of the developments of rabbinic Judaism, they cannot simply wish them away. Their claim that belief in Jesus does not require giving up anything Jewish, makes sense *only* if one first disregards as "un-Jewish" the rabbinic interpretation of the Bible and ignores almost all of Jewish history and religious development since the first century.

At the same time, the assumption that Judaism is *identical* with the religion of the rabbinic period, i.e., the life of talmud and halakhah, is also a historical distortion, for two reasons. First, within the history of Judaism, there have always been sectarian groups, which the rabbis of the time systematically downplayed, ignored, or rejected, (e.g., Jewish mysticism, hasidism) but which have also enriched and contributed to Judaism. Second, much of modern Judaism has severed its tie to the rabbinic model. Only by recognizing this fact can the phenomenon of the Jewish infidel be understood.

Emancipation, Religious Pluralism, and the Secular Jew

It has been mainly in the last two centuries that the question of who or

what is a Jew has become such a confusing issue. The dual effect of the Jewish enlightenment (*haskalah*) and the political emancipation of the Jews in the 18th and 19th centuries radically altered the meaning of being a Jew. During the 1800 years from the destruction of the second temple to the French Revolution, Judaism was relatively monolithic, and Jewish law or halakhah was its unifying force. To be a Jew was to be a member of the Jewish people *and* to be a person who believed in and practiced Jewish religion to a certain degree. The Jewish community had no real place for a non-religious Jew. That was a contradiction in terms. The religious and the national or ethnic dimensions of Jewish identity were inseparable. However, as the Jewish reformers of the 19th century slowly dismantled halakhah as the unifying force behind Judaism, it became possible, for the first time, to abandon Jewish law, or parts of it, without abandoning being a Jew. Today, one can be a religious Jew without being Orthodox regarding Jewish law, and one can probably be a committed Jew without being much of a believer at all. Being Jewish does not *require* a specific theological commitment. Clearly, it is no longer religion pure and simple that unifies Jews in their sense of Jewishness. Recent polls show that only 25% of American Jews say that religion is "very important" to them and less than 15% attend religious services weekly. Rather, Jewishness has to do with loyalty to, and concern for, the Jewish people, and identification with their history and culture. Sociologists have noted that American Jews compensate for the relative weakness of their religious commitment by emphasizing Jewish group loyalty and support of Israel. Jews often join synagogues less because of intrinsic religiosity than to affirm their social identification with the Jewish community. The major function of Sunday school often has been to foster Jewishness [i.e. cultural identification] more than to learn Judaism. In short, what characterizes many American Jews is not what they believe or do, but the fact that they associate and identify with other Jews. Thus, there has grown up a strange new creature who demands a place in Judaism and whom I have dubbed "the Jewish infidel."

One of the most influential figures of the modern world is also a good example of that new type. Although he rejected every trace of traditional Judaism and said that the only thing Passover was good for was constipation, many Jews are proud to call him "one of their own."⁹ I am referring to Sigmund Freud, who wrote, in his autobiography, "My parents were Jews and I have remained a Jew myself." Throughout his life Freud felt intensely Jewish, he associated almost exclusively with other Jews, and he credited his Jewishness with giving him the intellectual independence to develop psychoanalysis. But, elsewhere, Freud defiantly announced that he was a "godless" person, "as little an adherent of the Jewish religion

⁹ Quite a few recent books have focused specifically on Freud's "Jewishness" as a major factor in his life and work.

as of any other." In fact, he saw all religion as an infantile illusion, a wish-fulfillment, and a collective neurosis. He even went so far as to propose the incredible theory that Moses, Moshe Rabbenu, was not a Jew at all, but a renegade Egyptian priest who was later murdered by the Jews.

One of my favorite anecdotes about Freud concerns a minor incident that occurred when he was in his 70s. An American doctor wrote to him about a dramatic experience which had led him to accept Jesus as his personal messiah. He asked Freud (as a fellow-physician) to think about the subject with an open mind. Freud wrote back:

I am glad to hear that this experience has enabled you to retain your faith. As for myself, God has not done so much for me. He has never allowed me to hear an inner voice, and, in view of my age, if he doesn't hurry, it won't be my fault if I remain to the end of my life what I now am — "an infidel Jew."¹⁰

The emancipation of the Jews not only produced the possibility of the Jewish "infidel," it also chipped away at the boundary that separated the Jew from the Gentile. The perennial problem of how to live among the Gentiles without becoming one of them became more acute. One result is that for many modern Jews the *sine qua non* of their Jewishness is not primarily an affirmation of some essential Jewish quality (which no one can seem to identify anyway). Rather, the *minimum* that they can agree upon is that to be a Jew is to be unlike the Gentiles in some essential way.

Although atheism is no less serious a religious threat to Judaism than the belief in "false messiahs," the Jewish atheist is of less concern than the "messianic-Jew" for a simple reason. It is not lack of belief that threatens to dislodge one's Jewishness, nor is it simply following the ways of the Gentiles. To be sure, American Jews have become increasingly assimilated into Gentile culture. However, to embrace the *radioactive core of goyishness* — Jesus — violates the final taboo of Jewishness and brings immediate condemnation. Belief in Jesus as messiah is not simply a heretical Jewish belief, as it may have been in the first century, it has become the equivalent to an act of ethno-cultural suicide. Philip Roth has suggested that one of the things which connects Jews to each other is "an ancient and powerful disbelief, which, if it is not fashionable or wise to assert in public, is no less powerful for being underground — that is, the rejection of the myth of Jesus Christ." Ironically, Roth continues, this passion with which Jesus is rejected is not always equalled by the passion with which the God of Moses is embraced or approached.¹¹ It is not so surprising that the Jewish community can tolerate the atheism of Jewish infidels but not the messianic-Jews' belief in Jesus. More than a religious issue is at stake. To accord to Jesus any major role in one's life is not simply to violate a number of religious dogmas, more important, it is to transgress a cardinal

¹⁰ Freud, "A Religious Experience" [1928].

¹¹ "Jewishness and the Younger Intellectuals: A Symposium," *Commentary* (June 1961) 350-1.

social taboo. It removes the one thing that permanently separates the Jew from the Gentile.

The puzzling fact that a Jewish atheist will be accepted as a Jew, while a Jewish believer in Jesus will not, is a result of the mixed nature of Jewish identity. Membership in the Jewish people is most commonly a simple matter of birth that requires no additional religious affirmation. For those whose Jewishness is not established by birth, entry into the Jewish people [or exit from it], has always been seen as a religious matter and occurs only by an explicit act of religious conversion into Judaism [or out of it]. This situation can be compared to the difference between native-born citizens and naturalized ones. Aliens who seek to be naturalized as American citizens are required to study history and civics and to take an oath of loyalty, though neither of these is specifically required of native-born citizens. In addition, citizens (native-born or naturalized) do not lose their citizenship by disagreeing with various principles of their country, but only by swearing allegiance to another country. Similarly, within Judaism a person loses status in the community as a Jew most clearly when he or she accepts another religion and identifies with members of that religion. Jews by birth may choose to be atheists and not lose their Jewishness for the same reason that Americans may be fascists or communists and not lose their American citizenship. Judaism — unlike the state of Israel — does not recognize dual “citizenship.” Therefore, Jewish Christians in effect “denaturalize” themselves from the Jewish people in the act of accepting Christianity. To accept another faith separates one from the Jewish people in a way that not observing Jewish religion does not.¹²

Shabbatai Zevi: Heretic or Apostate?

If we are going to place the present heresy of messianic-Judaism in perspective, I think it is valuable to consider another very important group of Jews who also believed that the messiah had already come. In 1648, the year of the Chmelnitzky pogrom in Poland and other severe anti-Semitic persecution, a somewhat unbalanced man by the name of Shabbatai Zevi [1626-1676] proclaimed himself the messiah. Slowly, despite the opposition of many of the rabbis, he achieved widespread acceptance throughout all of the Jewish communities in the world and many Jews sold their businesses and property and travelled to Jerusalem to prepare for the messianic period. When Shabbatai went to Constantinople to take the crown of the Turkish Sultan and inaugurate his messianic rule, he was arrested, jailed and, finally, given the choice of conversion to Islam or death. He chose to convert.

¹² An interesting sociological issue would concern to what extent a convert's Jewishness is more tied to religious observance than is that of a born Jew. I suspect that a recent convert who gave up his faith to become a Jewish infidel would soon revert to being seen as a Gentile in the eyes of the Jewish community.

A messiah who converts to another religion is a real embarrassment, probably even worse than one who is crucified. But, just as Christianity turned an awkward situation to its own advantage by saying that Jesus' humiliating execution had been part of God's plan all along, some of the followers of Shabbatai claimed that he *had* to convert in order to fulfill his messianic function. In other words, the apostasy of the messiah was necessary for him to liberate sparks of divine holiness trapped in realms of impurity like Islam. Although Shabbatai had converted, he was not really a Muslim, he was still a Jew. While most of Shabbatai's followers stayed within Judaism, these "messianic Jews" were still persecuted by the official rabbinic authorities. Other followers of Shabbatai, including some rabbis and mystics, felt that the apostasy of the messiah should serve as an example for them, and that redemption required that they pretend to be Muslims. They did not follow the worldly Torah and halakhah, but, rather, the mystical Torah revealed by the messiah. This Jewish-Muslim sect still survives in Turkey, where its members are formally Muslims, but feel, inwardly, that they are Jews.

Here, too, one can ask at what point, if any, did Shabbatai and his followers cease to be Jews. When did they lose their position as Jewish heretics and become apostates or former Jews? Would contemporary Judaism accept as Jews those who still insisted on the messiahship of Shabbatai?

Traditional Jewish history talks about the Shabbatean movement as a heresy and has tried to minimize it, sometimes even calling it a mass psychosis. However, it would be foolish to say that the followers of Shabbatai had ceased to be Jews. Indeed, they called themselves "believers" in contrast to other Jews whom they called "infidels." Gershom Scholem, the greatest expert on Jewish mysticism, has argued that the Shabbatean movement was Jewish from start to finish. It was symptomatic of a crisis of faith within the Jewish people as their medieval isolation came to an end. Scholem goes so far as to suggest that the movement paved the way for 19th century reform and *haskalah*. Throughout Jewish history there have been Jews who strayed from the traditional path. Often they simply disappeared, but, occasionally, they were symptoms that some kind of change was necessary within Judaism.

Messianic Judaism as Symptom

I do not believe that the current messianic Jewish movement is, in itself, as serious a threat to Judaism as some alarmists have contended. In the face of intermarriage rates that are approaching 50%, it is a statistically minor problem.¹³ The strong reaction of the Jewish community to

¹³ Reliable estimates of the total number of people involved in the various forms of messianic Judaism are difficult to make. As is the case with other controversial groups, estimates from both Jewish groups and the group itself often tend to be exaggerated for various

messianic Judaism testifies to certain deep-seated fears rather than the movement's actual power. Jews are especially sensitive to perceived threats to the transmission of Jewish identity from one generation to the next, and in American society such threats are more subtle than pogroms or holocausts. The overall dilution of Jewish identity through the gradual assimilation and secularization of many American Jews is a fairly pervasive problem, but it is not one with specific targets that are easy to identify, blame, or remedy. As a result, much of the fear of losing the next generation for Judaism has been transferred into the campaign against so-called "cults" and groups like the messianic Jews.

As is the case with intermarriage, one question that is repeatedly raised is "What about the children?" Even if messianic Jews claim to retain some form of Jewish identity, however mutilated it seems to other Jews, it is not irrelevant to consider the kind of religious or cultural identity which they will transmit to their children. For the older Hebrew Christian movement, it is clear that descendants of Hebrew Christians were very soon indistinguishable from "full-fledged" Christians. However, it is really too soon to tell how children raised in the newer messianic Jewish groups that insist on preserving Jewish rituals and culture will relate to either Judaism or Christianity. In a certain sense, the messianic Jew's children face a religious and psychological dilemma similar to that of children of interfaith marriages: how to accommodate within their identity two religious traditions that are regarded as mutually exclusive by society at large. While the Christian portion probably has an edge over the Jewish one in the resolution of this dilemma, it is also possible that, in some cases, the children of highly assimilated Jews will retain even less Jewish identity than the children of messianic Jews.

I have tried to examine the messianic Jewish phenomenon without succumbing to the kind of rhetoric that depicts its leaders as

vultures hovering and circling over thirsting bodies in the desert,
patiently waiting for the opportunity to snare yet another Jewish soul thirst-
ing for Divinity, stopping at nothing to win the soul of a young Jew.¹⁴

Rather, I think this movement is symptomatic of a number of factors that must be recognized if we are to understand the attraction of various new religious options pursued by young Jews today. In a world where traditional values and religion have lost much of their credibility, the transition from adolescence to adulthood can be accompanied by disorientation, alienation, and loneliness. One sees among the young (and the not so

polemical purposes. An additional problem in making estimates is the fact that most groups like these have high turnover rates, many members eventually return to their former religious group or move on to new ones. There is normally a relatively small inner core of highly committed members and a larger, though less committed, circle around it. About the most that can be safely said about the number of messianic Jews is that they are "in the thousands."

14. Dov Aharonifisch, *Jews for Nothing: On Cults, Intermarriage and Assimilation* (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1984).

young) a hunger for community, family, moral certainty, rules for living, and spiritual answers that are not easily found in modern urban society. The typical converts to unusual religious groups are not best understood as victims of spiritual kidnapping and deception. More likely, they feel psychologically dislocated and spiritually dissatisfied, with a deep desire to belong to a close, intimate community, and to have the certainty of simple, clear answers and the security of fixed rules for living.

This desire is as much true of the Jew for Jesus, the Jewish member of Hare Krishna, the Jewish Defense League, the Baal-Teshuva or the Lubavitch convert. Many of these people are disillusioned with the lukewarm religion and liberal ideas of their parents. A recent study of young Jewish women from reform or non-observant families who had decided to turn to Orthodox Judaism showed that most did so out of a desire for belonging, community, and stable values, rather than from specific beliefs about God.¹⁵

The psychological appeal of the messianic Jews is not unlike that of evangelical Christianity in general, and it should not be overlooked. Its emphasis on a close personal relationship with God and strong religious fellowship are things that members claim were not always so easy to find in Judaism. One supporter of the movement states, "It is in the context of the spiritual vacuum within Jewry that contemporary Hebrew Christianity must be seen, especially the Jews for Jesus movement."¹⁶ There is an element of truth in this exaggeration. Messianic Judaism offers a simple faith not requiring sophisticated scholarship. It gives a visible father figure who loves and forgives totally. Messianic Jews complain that they found the God about whom they learned in synagogues was too hard to relate to, too distant, and too impersonal. Some have great concern about life after death and feel that traditional Judaism has ignored this issue, or, at least, failed to address it clearly. Whether or not such feelings accurately represent the essence of Judaism, they remain facts that cannot be ignored or dismissed.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that not all modern Jews find the traditional forms of Judaism adequate to express their sense of Jewishness. Many people have noted the unique combination of the ethnic and the religious in Jewish identity. For some Jews, the ethnic dimension is all that remains in the wake of the secularizing currents of modern society. Other Jews seek to hold on to their ethnic identity at the same time that they begin to explore

15 Lynn Davidman, "Strength of Tradition in a Chaotic World: Women Who Turn to Orthodox Judaism," paper presented at the *Society for the Scientific Study of Religion* Conference, Chicago, Ill., October, 1984.

16 Jakob Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ After Auschwitz* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 142.

new spiritual possibilities outside of traditional Judaism. The Jewish infidel and the Jewish heretic are models that help to distinguish these different areas of tension in contemporary Judaism. Both are indications of dissatisfaction with traditional religious positions. If the sources of this dissatisfaction are not explored and addressed, they can begin to erode the continuity and stability of Jewish group life. I have tried to indicate that, for reasons which are not so much theological as sociological and historical, the Jewish community does not feel as profoundly threatened by the Jewish infidel as by the messianic Jewish heretic. As discussions of who and what is a Jew continue to proliferate, we must be wary of simple religious responses to a problem whose real issues need to be approached on a wholly different level than Maimonides' principles of faith.

Miriam's Prayer

DIANE KARAY

God of the flowing river
brimming between banks
the water flows,
bearing us all to the source,
bearing all to the sea
No more than currents swept inexorably
do we escape the swift tug of years
Watch over us on our river journey

When at last all evil lies submerged
under the billows of your endless wave,
bear us all by miracle and grace
to the river's brink and grateful song
With feet light as stars,
lead us in holy dance — circling desert,
circling fire and cloud,
until in the sweat of a generation's dancing,
we taste the aching salt
of freedom

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