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## Evangelicalism in the Interspaces

### The Construction of Judeo-Christian Identity in a Messianic Community in Jerusalem

ENGBERG, ARON

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

# **Evangelicalism in the Interspaces: The Construction of Judeo-Christian Identity in a Messianic Community in Jerusalem**

*Aron Engberg*

## **Introduction**

It is evening in Jewish, Western Jerusalem. It is still warm outside, though colder in the modern air-conditioned building.<sup>1</sup> The congregation starts their celebration by singing the Shema Yisrael, in Hebrew. The group of 200-300 participants from many different countries knows it by heart:

Sh'ma Yisraeil, Adonai eloheinu  
Adonai echad  
baruch sheim k'vod  
malchuto l'olam vaed<sup>2</sup>

The singing continues with more upbeat contemporary songs, approximately half of them are sung in Hebrew, and the other half in English. One man, with his head covered by a kippa raises his hands in praise as the song reaches a climactic chorus. Once the singing is finished, a man, presumably a religious leader in the congregation, enters the center stage and declares that 'a new season is upon us'. He is referring to Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year two days past, and the 10 days known in the Jewish calendar as the 'Days of Awe' sandwiched between the New Year and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. He continues to elaborate on the theme of holidays until he reaches the last day of Sukkot – Simchat Torah – which represents, according to the speaker, 'our rejoicing in the law of the word of God.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The following is based upon field notes taken by the author in Jerusalem, 2 October 2011.

<sup>2</sup> 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. NRSV, Deut. 6:4-5. The transliteration is taken from [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/282822/jewish/Transliteration.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/282822/jewish/Transliteration.htm) (accessed 2012-09-14)

<sup>3</sup> The full sermon can be accessed at <http://www.kkcj.org/teaching/sermon/days-of-awe/> (accessed 2012-09-14)

During the sermon the discourse is interspersed by the speaker's blows in the Shofar; central points are orchestrated and highlighted by the blow of the ram's horn. After the sermon, the Eucharist – 'matzah<sup>4</sup> and grape juice' – are offered to everybody who has accepted Yeshua as Lord of their lives. The blessing of the articles is read in Hebrew.

This mixing of Jewish and Christian themes, thought-worlds, signs, and symbols might be expected within Messianic Judaism, but what are we to make of it when it occurs in a primarily gentile Christian context?<sup>5</sup> How can we interpret this apparent blending of traditionally Jewish and traditionally Christian elements, artifacts, theologies, styles of worship, and the conscious identification that the speaker makes with Jewish tradition? A first – and perhaps natural – response would be that this is a case of religious syncretism, a religious group (or individual) that combines elements from different (often perceived as mutually exclusive) faith traditions. The congregants themselves would no doubt contest such an interpretation. For them, the incorporation of Hebrew language and Jewish ritual elements is a way both to express love and appreciation for Jewish tradition and to make the service more available to the Jewish public in Jerusalem. If we accept their view, the appropriate term to label the events taking place in the service would be inculturation; a conscious adaptation of a religious message to the cultural context where it is being delivered. A more critical observer might object that the Evangelical approximation to Jewish tradition is merely an artificial attempt to bring Israeli Jews into the fold, thus arguing its 'liturgical adaptation' serves evangelistic and pragmatic purposes. In this case, neither syncretism nor inculturation would be the appropriate term; what is taking place is nothing more than the crude performance of an evangelistic strategy.

In a sense, this paper represents an ongoing attempt to conceptualise a contemporary religious movement with borders that are anything but fixed and stable. The path I chose to follow in this paper similarly tries to interpret one aspect of this movement – its conscious identification with Jewish tradition and its adaptation of styles of worship to a new context – without relying

<sup>4</sup> Matzah is an unleavened bread traditionally eaten by Jews during Passover.

<sup>5</sup> In the following I will use the terms 'gentile' and 'Jewish' to delineate between believers from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This terminology is generally accepted and employed within the circles that I am examining. However, neither the terms 'Jew' and 'gentile', nor 'Judaism' and 'Christianity' are understood in an essentialist way; it is not possible to define exactly what constitutes them or to conclusively draw the borders for Judaism or Christianity.

on a fixed and stable concept of religious culture. I will attempt to interpret the pro-Israeli strand of Evangelicalism's fascination with Jewish ritual in relation to the movement's location in a temporal-spatial interspace. I will argue that the Christian Zionist impulse to experiment with Jewish tradition should be understood as an attempt to navigate the religious interspaces which are formed by its strong identification with the Jewish people and the state of Israel, its integration of the national movement of Zionism into a specific Protestant eschatology, and its concrete presence in the context of Israeli society.

### **Religious interspaces & normativity**

In theory, the interspace could be any area where cultural or religious blending occurs. Empirically speaking, however, all religious and cultural practices are a result of intense blending, the remixing of earlier traditions and the negotiation of the cultural and religious material available. In that sense, all religions are the products of syncretism.<sup>6</sup> From the vantage point of official religion, however, something is experienced as syncretistic when it challenges established traditions by 'illegitimately' importing material from another religious, or cultural, tradition. This implies two things. Firstly, that there is a temporal dimension to the interspaces. A religious interspace is defined as such by not being a space yet; it has not yet acquired the normative power to define itself as a space proper. To do so it needs, at the very least, a history (real or imagined), cultural narratives that define the members of the group (what and who we are), and sufficient social and political resources to force other groups – most significantly the groups that it springs from, the spaces that it relates to – to accept it in its own right. Secondly, to define tradition or orthodoxy, to 'finalise' a cultural canon, is always a political process. It is a question of power. Hence, syncretism is the cultural or religious practices that do not qualify as orthodox, it is the new, the challenging, the revolutionary remix of previously unrelated religious material. As such, religious syncretism is the hallmark of popular religiosity; for it is precisely within the realm of official religion that the normative power necessary to define what is orthodox lies.

Scholars involved in the empirical study of culture or religion have invented or employed a range of different terms to describe the processes that they

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<sup>6</sup> McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 186

study. As a result we have many interrelated terms (for example, syncretism, inculturation, hybridity, creolisation etc.) basically describing the same phenomenon: the processes of re-mixing cultural or religious material. All of these terms, however, pre-suppose an area where cultural or religious practices are pure from alien influences; otherwise they would be without value. The same dilemma faces us when we discuss the religious interspaces. To conclusively determine the boundaries of the interspace we need to define the spaces. To decide what should be counted as the periphery, we need to decide what is central and that, again, is a question of power and normativity. A thorough criticism of the use of these terms by scholars of religion is offered by sociologist Meredith McGuire in her 2008 publication *Lived Religion – Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. In this, McGuire criticises the use of the category ‘belonging’ as a methodological tool to determine the religiosity of a research population. ‘Religion-as-lived’, McGuire argues, shows unstable, incoherent, and flexible patterns. Individuals create their personal religiosity from the cultural/religious material available to them. As all religious practices are syncretistic, and all personal religion is made up of material from different, disparate and often contradictory religious reservoirs, ‘anti-syncretism’ – i.e. the normativity that prevents, or seeks to prevent syncretism – is a far more interesting area of inquiry than syncretism in itself. It is easy to agree with McGuire in her understanding of religion-as-lived as being inherently syncretistic. However, this does not take us very far. What McGuire does not discuss at length is that from a religious, confessional perspective – not only from the view of ‘official religion’ – some elements of faith and practice will always be considered more central than others. Some ‘alien’ religious traditions are more frightening – indeed more ‘alien’ – than others. Also, for the individual, some reservoirs of religious material will reverberate more strongly with the individual religious identity than others. Narrative identity is constructed from different resources, but some resources will carry more normative power; if you grow up in evangelical, protestant Christianity it will (probably) have a better chance of providing explanations that make sense of the experiences you encounter in the world. Consequently, all hybridity is not the same; some mixing of practices can be considered harmless (also from the view of organised religion) at the same time as other elements evoke the strongest reactions. There are patterns also in the erratic chaos of postmodern religiosity. It is not syncretism, as such, that should evoke our interest, but rather the circumstances under which religious remixing will occur in any specific case. I have little doubt that different cultural-religious contexts will provide very different answers

here. What, for instance, is the structure that legitimises certain kinds of syncretism at the same time as it expels others? What motivates the renegotiation of some elements of the normative religious tradition, while others are not on the table? Why are some elements experienced as harmless, or even welcomed, while some are rejected with force? Why, in the context of my study of evangelical pro-Israeli Christianity, are some elements of Jewish religious tradition incorporated into evangelical worship, some traditions reinvented, and others rejected? And finally, how are these elements ‘baptised’ to fit into an evangelical worldview?

In the following I understand the concept of religious interspaces as the imaginary temporal-spatial area of intense negotiation between two – or more – areas that it stands in an ontologically subordinate, and hence, dependent relation to. I do not expect to be able to determine the boundaries of this space between spaces, nor do I presume to conclusively determine the conditions of this strange realm. Nevertheless, I believe the term carries some analytic value as it highlights the temporality, the indeterminacy, and the fluidity of contemporary Christian Zionism in Jerusalem. I furthermore believe it to be of value to understand the attraction of Jewish ritual and tradition towards which this paper is aimed. It is a task to which I now will turn.

## **The King of Kings Community**

The congregation in which the observation above occurred is called the King of Kings Community and has been a part of the religious mosaic of Jerusalem since the late 1980s. It describes itself as a ‘Messiah-centered, Spirit-empowered, disciple-making community that reveals the true face of Yeshua (Jesus) to Israel and to the nations.’<sup>7</sup> The congregation was established by two Canadian couples as a prayer group in 1983 but has since 1988 consciously strived to ‘become a local messianic congregation’.<sup>8</sup> To that end emphasis is put on the Jewish roots of (Christian) faith, ‘messianic worship’ (in other words: Klezmer-influenced, contemporary worship in Hebrew), Hebrew language gatherings,<sup>9</sup> social and political commitment to the state of Israel and cooperation with other local messianic bodies. Sermons – which are being uploaded to the webpage – show a variety of

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.kkcj.org/about/vision-and-core-values> (accessed 2012-09-14)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.kkcj.org/about/our-history> (accessed 2012-09-14)

<sup>9</sup> My observations in King of Kings were conducted only during the English speaking services.

themes ranging from classical evangelical theology and marriage counseling to more explicit focus on Israel in God's plan, the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith, the Jewishness of Yeshua, and End-times eschatology. All sermons are wrapped up in a language suitable for the Jewish environment in western Jerusalem; terms identified exclusively or primarily with Christianity, such as 'Christian', 'church', cross, trinity and 'Jesus' are consistently being avoided or translated. The leadership in the community is shared between messianic believers from Jewish and gentile origin – although a clear majority is gentiles – and they come from many different countries. One of the founding Canadian families is still represented in the leadership; the father, Wayne Hilsden, is senior pastor, and both his wife and his son are music directors.

As this brief summary of the King of Kings community shows, the 'messianic community' in Israel (or elsewhere) does not simply consist of Jews who have started to believe in Jesus as the Messiah or as a consequence of Christian mission. Many times, as is the case with King of Kings, the direction is the opposite; evangelicals who have started to identify with the Jewish people and Israel, and consciously adapted their theology and style of worship to Jewish or 'Jewish-like' tradition. This move is furthermore not purely religious – if anything ever is – even if it certainly is that as well, but, it is distinctively political. The point here is not to undermine the authenticity of King of Kings messianic orientation or to question whether it is really a Christian, rather than a 'Messianic' community, but rather to investigate how the King of Kings community navigates the interspace and how this orientation relates to contemporary Christian Zionism. To do so, we need a broader look at the Christian Zionist community in Israel.

## **Christian Zionism in the Interspaces**

In the following, I understand Christian Zionism as one of many siblings under the umbrella term Zionism. The minimum requirement to call someone or something 'Christian Zionist' is the belief that the state of Israel has a distinct and unique eschatological quality; that Israel has a specific role to play in universal salvation history. This does not have to mean that eschatology serves as the main motivating factor for Christian supporters of Israel, or that End-Times scenarios always are used to rationalise economic, political and moral support of Israel. In fact, the opposite is often true: in

Israel, the Christian Zionist community downplays the role of eschatology and only occasionally uses apocalyptic terms in explaining the reasons for Christian support of Israel.<sup>10</sup> To think of Israel in eschatological terms also does not imply the necessity to uncritically accept every Israeli policy or political strategy as an expression of the will of God. What it means is that Israel, whatever else it might be, is a pointer towards God's final restoration of the world; Israel can never be judged or evaluated by secular criteria alone. Furthermore, such a definition does not include any kind of Christian who supports Zionism, or even less, the right of the state of Israel to exist for any reason.

The belief in Israel's eschatological purpose is shared between Christian Zionists and Jewish religious Zionists.<sup>11</sup> However, while Jewish religious Zionism is understood from a Jewish horizon, and developed primarily in the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and his son Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, Christian Zionism relies on protestant eschatological narratives, primarily dispensationalism. The historical movement of Zionism is integrated into a Christian narrative of the end-times that fills the national awakening of the Jews with religious meaning. For them, God uses the national movement of the Jews to enact the final chapter of universal history. Hence, Zionism is primarily a religious story and the Christian Bible is the master source to conjure its meaning. Ultimately it is not a story about the Jews or even about Israel: it is a story about God; in other words, a narrative theology.

In a 2011 article written by the Israeli scholar Faydra L. Shapiro, Christian Zionism is understood as 'a kind of border zone between Judaism and Christianity, although undoubtedly between particular areas and articulations of

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<sup>10</sup> Malcolm Hedding, the former director of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, argues, for example, quite intensively that 'Christian support for Israel ... is not based on the prophetic portions of the Word of God ... [but] ... something far deeper, and that is the promises of the Word of God or the great covenants of history that God made with the people of Israel.' Nevertheless, the chapter in which this paragraph is found is titled 'Vehicle of World Redemption' and consequently joins the biblical promises to Abraham with the modern day state of Israel and hence, Israel with the ultimate redemption of mankind. Hedding, *The Basis of Christian Support for Israel*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> For Jewish religious Zionism see Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism and Jewish Religious Radicalism*. Ravitzky uses the term 'Jewish messianic Zionism' by which he means the non-Christological 'messianism' of the settler movement and the two Kooks. I avoid using the term messianism here in order not to confuse the non-Christological Jewish religious Zionists with the Messianic Jewish community that believes in Yeshua.



each, serving to both separate the two and bring them into contact.<sup>12</sup> This Jewish-Christian border, of course, is a mental construct and cannot be understood as a definitive cultural boundary between the two religions. Nor is Christian Zionism, if we follow Shapiro and imagine it as a border zone, the only possible crossing between Judaism and Christianity. Jewish-Christian dialogue contexts, as well as Messianic Judaism, can be understood as other areas of profound entanglement and contact. In examining this border area Shapiro turns to two case studies in which ‘prominent religious leaders’ – John Hagee and Rabbi Schlomo Riskin – ‘ventured out to the borderland of Christian Zionism ... [and upon their return found] themselves examined by those who monitor the Jewish-Christian border, and deemed to be over the limit with intoxicants brought over from the “other side”’.<sup>13</sup> In other words, John Hagee and Rabbi Schlomo Riskin, as two travelers of the interspace, encountered the forces of anti-syncretism; religious figures within their respective communities dedicated to re-define the boundaries between the two neighboring spaces. In Shapiro’s conceptualisation, Christian Zionism dwells in the interspace between evangelical Christianity and modern Jewish life. The modern-day Jewish state of Israel is viewed as a miracle, a reminder of God’s promises and a pointer towards history’s eschatological fulfillment. The social and political work executed on Israel’s behalf by several large Christian Zionist organisations is religious in purpose and explained in religious terms. In addition to that, Jewish feasts are celebrated by pro-Israeli Christians – most importantly, the Feast of Tabernacles. Jewish ritual artifacts are employed in Christian services and anti-Jewish Christian theologies are reevaluated and substituted for themes such as the Hebraic roots of Christian faith and the Jewishness of Jesus. Furthermore, in the Christian Zionist community several biblical metaphors that seem to illustrate the experience of being in the interspace – although I doubt that is their purpose – are frequently used: Christian Zionists are the ‘Watchmen on the walls’ (Isaiah 62:6) and they are ‘standing in the gap’ (Ezekiel 22:30) on behalf of Israel, comforting and protecting her. Similarly, the name of one of the largest Christian Zionist organisations both in Israel and globally, the Bridges for Peace has in mind not the (potential) peace between Israelis and Palestinians, but the peace between Jews and Christians.<sup>14</sup> The organisation imagines itself as a bridge, a crossing between Jewish and Christian traditions. In sum, Christian Zionism as a movement willingly, consciously and

<sup>12</sup> Shapiro, ‘The Messiah and Rabbi Jesus,’ 466

<sup>13</sup> Shapiro, ‘The Messiah and Rabbi Jesus,’ 465

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.bridgesforpeace.com/about> (accessed 2012-09-18)

effectively tries to relax the ‘border restrictions’ between the two religious communities to increase identification with the religious Other and to bring the spaces closer to each other: theologically, politically and socially.

In contrast to Shapiro’s conceptualisation of Christian Zionism as a ‘border zone’ I choose to imagine it as an interspace, a space between spaces. Although both metaphors are spatial and share the distinction between different areas, or spaces the border metaphor fails to capture the fluidity, flexibility and heterogeneity of contemporary Christian Zionism. A border is – even if a mental construct as Shapiro claims – a demarcation line between two fairly well defined territories, that is, if it wasn’t the Israeli-Palestinian ‘border’ that Shapiro had in mind. An interspace, on the other hand, is overlapping the bordering spaces conceptually. To conceptualise Christian Zionism as an interspace leaves more room for temporality. It highlights the impossibility of conclusive borders and the possibility of reformulation, negotiation and becoming. That is the development of an interspace, through the efforts of its ‘stateless’ inhabitants, into a space proper.

## **Navigating the interspaces**

The fascination with Jewish symbols, rituals and artifacts among pro-Israeli Christians is a rather new development in the history of Christian Zionism. Even if, from its genesis, Christian Zionists have been crossing borders, reinterpreting Christian tradition in the light of contemporary historical developments, and consciously cooperating economically and politically with the Jewish Zionist movement, Jews, and even more so Judaism, have generally been considered as spiritually deficient.<sup>15</sup> The medieval apocalyptic tradition – which integrated the destiny of the Jews in Christian end-times narratives – was largely as anti-Semitic as the rest of Christian Europe.<sup>16</sup> Early Christian Zionists often had no love for Jews, but nevertheless viewed them as instrumental in bringing about the end-times and the return of Jesus. The Jewish people had one, rather ungrateful, task to perform in the imaginative drama of prophecy theologians: to return to their ancient homeland, be persecuted by the anti-Christ, and finally convert to Christianity en masse.

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<sup>15</sup> Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 181-225; Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 112-113, 129-130

<sup>16</sup> Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 46-56

For instance, in John Nelson Darby's end times narrative the Jews held the central role, but there was no role, whatsoever, for Judaism. The Jews would return to Israel, undergo a persecution orchestrated by the forces of anti-christ in which two-thirds of them would perish, while the remaining third would hail Jesus as the Jewish Messiah upon his return at Armageddon.<sup>17</sup> As Christian Zionism still is dependent on a dispensationalist philosophy of history and prophetic speculation still continues to fascinate millions of evangelical Christians, as the popularity of the Left Behind-series shows,<sup>18</sup> this narrative of the End Times, and the instrumentalisation of the Jewish people, still remains an important part of Christian Zionist thought-worlds. Yet, it is not as central as it once was. The world has changed, and so has Christian Zionism. I think this is due to several external, and at least one internal factor, all of which can be considered structural conditions of Christian Zionist hybridity.

In chapter 4 of *Lived Religion* McGuire argues that American evangelicalism is not an authoritarian, inflexible and hierarchical tradition. On the contrary, 'evangelical traditions in America have had flexible boundaries, resistant to some church leaders' efforts to establish an authoritative conservative Protestant orthodoxy.'<sup>19</sup> This is partly due to the integration of popular religious elements – such as the focus on intense religious experiences, the centrality of being 'born again', the use of divination practices, and the importance of objects of power – into mainline American evangelicalism.<sup>20</sup> Christian Zionism, although never exclusively an American phenomenon, and even less so today, is dominated by American style evangelicalism and is influenced by its forms of worship, its theology, and its overall organisational structures. In a sense, Christian Zionism as a whole can be viewed as a popular religious movement. It operates primarily through parachurch organisations rather than official ecclesial structures. Lay participation abounds and its influence is spread through conferences and pilgrimages to Israel. Its origins – the apocalyptic speculations and the prophecy conferences – were definitely an expression of popular religiosity located in the periphery of the revival movements. In McGuire's view, popular religiosity is eclectic and highly adaptable and functions rather independently from the rules set by ortho-

<sup>17</sup> Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 183

<sup>18</sup> Forbes & Halgren Kilde, *Rapture, Revelation and the End Times*; Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*

<sup>19</sup> McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 75

<sup>20</sup> McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 68

doxy. Christian Zionism too has shown to be very adaptable to new political circumstances. In fact, adaptability is integrated into the very hermeneutics of the movement. Reading the bible in relation to political and historical developments in the Middle East and reinterpreting the scripture in the light of new developments is requiring a willingness to adapt and change in relation to these new circumstances. If it was not flexible enough to integrate new circumstances, it wouldn't be very long lived. The integration of the Zionist story in an eschatological framework produced the emotional identification with the state of Israel and the Jewish people that characterises contemporary Christian Zionism. Even so, this identification did not, for a long time, stimulate a re-evaluation of the traditional Christian stereotypes of Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness that has plagued much of Western Christianity. Throughout the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and into much of the second part of the century, the apocalyptic view of Israel and the Jewish people served as the main rationalisation of Christian support for Israel. Today, the reasons for Christian support for Israel are much more diversified for several reasons. In the context of a shifting international climate (post-1967 criticism of Israeli policies), increasing secularism, and in face of a rising theological critique of Christian Zionism's basic tenets, apocalyptic speculation alone is a shaky ground to rest the Christian support upon. The eschatological narrative – essentially speculation about the future – could not alone sustain pro-Israeli Christian support. The International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ) was established in 1980 as a counterforce to the relocation of the world's embassies – from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv – as a consequence of the passing of the 'Basic Law: Jerusalem' which specified the united Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. As a sign of the times, the ICEJ motivated its support of Israel primarily not in eschatological terms, but, rather, in covenantal terms: God's covenant with the chosen people is an eternal covenant and it includes – most significantly – the promise of land.<sup>21</sup> A second, parallel development, to the crystallisation of Christian Zionism into a religious movement also influenced this move into new theological territory. Similarly concerned with the Jewish covenant, was the church-directed Jewish-Christian dialogue that developed after the horrors of the Shoa. Many themes – such as the acknowledgement of Christian guilt for the holocaust, the emphasis on the Jewish context of the Christian scripture and the first Christians, the criticism of traditional anti-Jewish theologies and replacement theology – suited the growing Christian Zionist movement

<sup>21</sup> The clearest formulation of this view can be found in Hedding, *The Basis of Christian Support for Israel*

very well. Within Christian Zionism, this theological re-evaluation of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism has served to legitimise the identification with the Jewish people and the state of Israel. As such, it has effectively paved the way for even closer ties to the Jewish community, socially, politically and theologically.

At approximately the same time as the border towards Jewish tradition was being relaxed, the growing criticism from Christians in solidarity with the Palestinians and the international community necessitated a counter-reaction. Most significantly, the border towards Christians who did not share the eschatological understanding of Israel's restoration with Christian Zionists was in need of a strong defense. If the main Christian Zionist figures generally have accepted the use of Jewish signs and symbols it is partly because the threat towards Christian Zionist ideology comes not from the Jews, but from those (Christians) who don't share their theological understanding of the state of Israel. Hence, the furious criticism of 'replacement theology', anti-Israeli sentiment, and anti-Semitism all have to be seen as part of the same contestation of power as the increasing openness towards Jewish tradition. Christian Zionist popular religiosity is eclectic and flexible, but it is structured around political and theological positions that restrict views that are unwanted, and allows the harmless or desired to flourish. There are theological gatekeepers within Christian Zionism, but they do not restrict all hybridity indiscriminately. They are gatekeepers with a specific theological and political agenda. Christian Zionist hybridity must be viewed in light of their political commitment to the state of Israel and their theological understanding of her as an eschatological entity.

### **Perils in the interspaces**

The interspace that Christian Zionism inhabits is a fluid, undetermined territory that requires careful navigation; especially since the Jewish-Christian history is so full of antagonism, enmity and violence. I have argued above that the development of Christian Zionism during the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century has shown increasing entanglement with – and openness to – the Jewish society in which it operates. This is only partly true. Christian Zionism is still marked by an ambivalence towards Jewish tradition, and even more so

towards Judaism. The latter is often understood as a genuine – i.e. divinely inspired – but misguided religion. Jews and Christians believe in the same God, but Jews believe in the wrong way; what they are lacking is of course belief in Yeshua as the Messiah. The cultural adaptation of the King of Kings is, in part, a strategy to remedy this spiritual failure.<sup>22</sup> By ‘translating’ Christian worship into a Jewish language, and erasing signs of Christianity that might provoke Jewish sensibilities, the King of Kings community believes that the message they are proclaiming will be more acceptable to the Jewish public in Israel. Also, the argument that to become a messianic Jew is not to leave your Jewishness behind – but rather to fulfill it – is given credibility by the ‘Jewishness’ of such evangelical communities. The tension between the two communities is relieved and the step to accept Yeshua as the Messiah no longer implies that you have to leave your Jewishness behind and enter a Christian cultural sphere. There is a lingering theological tension here, however. Christian Zionists generally affirm the continued validity of the Jewish covenant with God – usually by reference to Gen. 12 – and are furious in their critique of ‘replacement theology’. After all, their eschatological anticipation is dependent on the continual validity of the Jewish covenant. In their view, any theology which does not accept that the Jewish covenant with God is eternal and irrevocable, and that it includes the promise of Israel’s physical restoration, falls under the umbrella term replacement theology. For instance, Malcolm Hedding, the then executive director of the ICEJ, characterises the Jewish covenant primarily in relation to territory in an article published at their webpage.

‘in essence ... [replacement theology] removes from Israel a national destiny in the land of Canaan because of her rejection of Jesus’ Messianic credentials. All the biblical statements of Israel enjoying future blessings in the land of Canaan are said to be descriptions of the spiritual blessings that now accrue to the Church. The expectation of a physical kingdom has been spiritualized and taken from Israel and given to the Gentiles (Matthew 21:43), even though Jesus never denied that the physical kingdom would be restored to Israel (Acts 1:6-7)’<sup>23</sup>

At the same time – as the evangelisation of King of Kings exemplifies – the covenant does not have any salvific quality. Jews, although guaranteed their physical salvation in the land of Israel through their unique relationship with God, still need Yeshua to save their spirit. The covenant determines the

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.kkcj.org/about/vision-and-core-values> (Accessed 2012-09-17)

<sup>23</sup> Hedding, <http://int.icej.org/media/replacement-theology> (emphasis mine, accessed 2012-09-17)

Jewish status as the people of God, it legitimises the Zionist claim of land, but, ultimately, it leaves Judaism spiritually empty. Or rather, Jewishness and the Jews have spiritual value for Christians, but Judaism holds none for Jews. Some Christian Zionists travelling the interspace have ventured further than that and have preached a message reminiscent of a theology of dual-covenants, that the Jews have a separate road to salvation outside the cross of Christ. As Faydra Shapiro demonstrates, however, these Christians have generally been forced to Canossa by the gatekeepers of the interspace. The most common approach among Christian Zionists today is to affirm the continued validity of the Jewish covenant and the exclusivity of salvation (in Christ) side by side, without resolving the theological tension that lies within.

A second, related, theological hazard arising from the Christian fascination with the Jewish people is so-called Ephraimite teaching, ‘one of the pitfalls of this movement [Christian Zionism]’,<sup>24</sup> as David Parsons of ICEJ puts it. Ephraimite teaching is the belief that Christian communities are descendants to the ten lost tribes of Israel and, hence, actually Israelites. It is hardly surprising that Christians attracted by the Zionist narrative and the idea of divine chosenness come to the conclusion that they too have a share in this chosenness, and it is hardly the first time in Christian history that similar ideas have surfaced. This time around, however, these ideas are tied up with an emphasis on the validity of the commands of Jewish law and Jewish religious ritual, and a belief in the Hellenisation of Christianity as contaminating processes that diverted Christianity from the pure message of Yeshua. How widespread this phenomenon is – and of course, where to draw the line against other Judaising and messianic communities – is difficult to know. But that the ICEJ dedicates space on their webpage and a seminar took place during the 2011 Feast of the Tabernacle to the critique of Ephraimite teaching shows, at the very least, that the ICEJ takes this threat seriously. In Parsons’ article, the main critique is that Ephraimite belief is unbiblical and rests upon shaky scholarly ground, but underlining the critique is also a will to re-inscribe the borders between Judaism and Christianity. Ephraimites, in Parsons’ view, have departed from Christianity by adhering to Jewish law and by teaching ‘a limited atonement’.<sup>25</sup> Once again, the core of the question concerns the exclusivity of salvation through

<sup>24</sup> Parsons. <http://int.icej.org/news/none/ephraimite-theory-%E2%80%99unsound-doctrine%E2%80%99> (accessed 2012-09-17)

<sup>25</sup> Parsons, David. <http://int.icej.org/news/none/ephraimite-theory-%E2%80%99unsound-doctrine%E2%80%99> (accessed 2012-09-17)



Jesus, the integrity of (evangelical) Christianity and the preferential position from which Christian Zionists interpret Zionism, Jewishness, and Judaism. In a sense, the ICEJ has begun to draw the theological boundaries of an unruly popular religious movement; for them, there are acceptable hybridity, and non-acceptable hybridity – i.e. hybridity that goes too far. Within the Christian Zionist community the ICEJ in a sense represents the forces of anti-syncretism. There is no consensus within Christian Zionism where the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate hybridity is supposed to be drawn. Most Christian Zionist environments in Jerusalem embrace Jewish tradition to some extent and most of them uphold the exclusivity of Christian salvation at the same time as they confirm the continued validity of the Jewish covenant. It is difficult to escape the impression that a certain practice is legitimate to the extent that it can be successfully re-interpreted and conceptualised within an evangelical theological framework. It is precisely at the point where John Hagee starts to question the exclusivity of Christ, and when the ‘Ephraimites’ starts to challenge traditionally Christian concepts such as the trinity, where the gatekeepers enter the scene and pull them back into the fold. The attraction of the Jewish tradition and the Zionist narrative that many Christians feel, coupled with the exclusivity of Christian salvation, opens up for an evangelical view of Judaism as a genuine, but yet crucially misguided, tradition. This, in turn, leaves the door open for a reinterpretation of Jewish spirituality. With this in mind it is time to return to where we started: how do we interpret the ‘messianism’ of the King of Kings community in relation to the interspace that it occupies?

### **Shared identity in the interspaces**

In this article I have tried to establish that Christian Zionism is located in the interspaces between Evangelical Christianity and contemporary Judaism. The interspace is a contested area, with no definite boundaries where different actors to different degrees combine evangelical Christianity with certain Jewish ritual elements. Rather than viewing the integrative ritual-like practices of Christian Zionism as something distinct and disconnected from its ideology, theology and historical narrative, I try to view the ritual behavior observed in King of Kings as something that expresses, constructs, and reconstructs Christian Zionist social and individual identity. The integration of Jewish elements in Christian worship, the playful construction of new ‘Jewish-like’ practices, and the reformulation of Christian ideas and rituals in Jewish terms have a social function within the Christian Zionist community



in Jerusalem. Analysing the ritual – or the ritual-like activities – taking place in the King of Kings community provides a window into how they make and remake their social world of Judeo-Christian communion. A striking feature of the service in King of Kings is that nowhere in the service is a distinction being made between Judaism and Christianity; in fact, speaking upon the theme of Jewish holidays the speaker consistently identifies these as our holidays. The identification with both the religious traditions is, judging from these statements, practically complete. Jewish holidays are Christian (or Messianic) holidays, the Jewish calendar structures Christian temporality, and the Torah is not a Jewish holy book or the Jewish name for the Bible, but ours. Within Christian Zionism it is common to speak of Judeo-Christian values as something distinct and inherently different from, for instance, Islamic or secular values. These values are an expression of the common ground inhabited by Jews and Christians, and presumably, a bulwark against the forces of Islam and secularism. Similarly, the incorporation of Jewish holidays and rites effectively creates the experience of a shared identity with the Jewish people and an identification with their historical destiny as it is being defined by the grand narrative of Christian Zionism.

At the same time, it is clear that the Jewish elements in the service (the Shema, the Shofar, the Prayer Shawls, the use of Hebrew etc.) are not only a political and social affirmation of a shared identity. Nor is the use of Hebrew simply an inculturation of the Christian service employed to decrease language barriers and increase the understanding of the audience. Most of the people in the congregation are far more fluent in English than in Hebrew. Additionally, if they do not speak English, there are also fully Hebrew services in the King of Kings. Rather, it is the other way around. Hebrew, though sometimes used casually, is used not for its clarity but for its sacrality; it is used as a ritual language. The Shema is sung in Hebrew to mark the beginning of the service as a demarcation between sacred and secular time and the Eucharistic prayer is prayed in Hebrew, while certain objects (the bread/matzva and wine) and persons (Jesus/Yeshua) are consistently mentioned only in Hebrew. Through the use of Hebrew as a sacred language listeners are being pulled back in time to the imaginary period when the congregations expressed their devotion to Christ in Hebrew, before the

Hellenisation of Christianity, the ‘parting of the ways,’ and the long history of Christian anti-Semitism. It is symptomatic of Christian Zionist reconstruction of historical memory when the Eucharistic prayer is preceded by the remark ‘Yeshua might have prayed’. It is ironic that authenticity is created by reading the Eucharistic prayer in a language formalised approximately 1,900 years after Jesus walked the earth, a language Jesus evidently never knew. It is ironic, though not coincidental, that through the remark – ‘Yeshua might have prayed’ – a link through the centuries is being established, a link that effectively connects the ‘holy meal’ (the Eucharist) with the holy language (Hebrew), and the King of Kings community with the community of the first Christians. The irony, but not the implication, is entirely lost on the prospective communicants.

Needless to say, it is not an uncommon phenomenon in the history of the Church that revivalist movements imagine a return to first century Christianity to find the ‘authentic’ Christianity before whatever the revival is directed against happened. Christian Zionists generally show little or no interest in rabbinic Judaism as a source for inspiration in their reformed liturgy. Mishnah or Talmud, for instance, are rarely mentioned. By the playful integration of Jewish themes and artifacts in the service, and by blotting out the border between Christian and Jewish traditions, Christian Zionism is making a leap through time to position itself in the situation of the first Christians; they are reenacting the very messianic Judaism that they ‘know’ from the New Testament. The King of Kings community is also self-consciously identifying ‘the first church in Jerusalem’<sup>26</sup> as a role model for their community. In the first church a historical precedent – that effectively bypasses 2,000 years of Jewish-Christian antagonism – is found that can serve as a solid base for the longed-for Judeo-Christian communion.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the identification with the first church puts contemporary Christian Zionism in the position of the first Jesus-believing Jews. From this vantage point, Judaism can be reinterpreted, the spiritual emptiness of contemporary Judaism can be exposed without fear of ‘replacement theology’, and the claim that Messianic Judaism ‘fulfills’ Judaism can gain credibility. Christian salvific exclusivity can be upheld, while at the same time ‘replacement theology’,

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.kkcj.org/about/vision-and-core-values> (accessed 2012-09-17)

<sup>27</sup> The history of Christian anti-Semitism is ‘bypassed’ not in the sense that it is seen as irrelevant historically, or theologically; it is irrelevant, or even destructive in the attempt to create a new Judeo-Christian communal identity.

anti-Semitism, and anti-Israeli theology are severely criticised and – ostensibly – abandoned.

The ritual-like practices of Christian Zionist communities where Jewish practices are integrated and ‘baptised’ into an evangelical worldview embodying Christian love for Israel and ground Christian Zionist inhabitation in the interspaces. It is specifically this ‘baptism’ of Jewish practices that separates normative Christian Zionist ‘hybridity’ from the ‘syncretistic’ practices of the ‘Ephraimites’. The fundamental role of ritual in ‘integrating thought, action and tradition’<sup>28</sup> makes it particularly apt to function as social glue, harmonising the disparate streams of Christian Zionist thought and social and political activity in the indeterminate realm of the interspaces. In the bible the historical precedent for Christian-Jewish communion is found, but it is only through the integrative force of ritual that the experienced oneness of Jews and Christian comes alive and can be finally expressed. It is an oneness read through Christian theology, viewed through Christian eyes, and understood in the light of the eschatological drama of dispensationalism. Nevertheless, in so far as the rituals create the experience of oneness and authenticity in its (primarily Christian) audience, it is definitely successful.

## **Conclusion**

Christian Zionism is oriented towards the future. In this paper, however, I have tried to show that not only speculation about the future but also a ‘return’ to the past is an important feature in contemporary Christian Zionism. The integration of Jewish elements in Christian Zionist worship has been analysed as a reconfiguration of the first church and the Judaism of Yeshua. This can be interpreted as an attempt to find solid historical ground for a movement in the interspaces and as an articulation of the experienced Judeo-Christian unity. Christian Zionism viewed as a heterogeneous group of travelers in the interspace challenges the definable boundaries between Judaism and Christianity. For the congregants in the King of Kings community, it is not the boundary between Judaism and Christianity that is the most important to safeguard against alien influences. Instead, the boundary is drawn between believers in Yeshua that share the view of the Israel’s centrality in the narrative of universal salvation and all the rest. While individual salvation is found exclusively in the figure of Yeshua, the salvation of the world is

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<sup>28</sup> Bell, ‘Religion through ritual’, 188

dependent upon the state of Israel and the international community's relation to her. At the same time as conventional boundaries between Judaism and Christianity are being dismantled, Christian Zionism re-organises the definitional boundaries between saved and un-saved, between those that will be fighting alongside God and Israel in the final battle and those that will find themselves on the losing side. Hence, Christian Zionism, as it is practiced in the King of Kings community, simultaneously challenges and re-inscribes the boundaries between Christianity and Judaism.

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