

Manoela Carpenedo

Becoming Jewish, Believing in Jesus

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Since the end of the 20th Century, philosemitic, Zionist, and Judaizing Christian movements have been proliferating rapidly across the formerly colonized countries in the global South. These trends have been the subject of numerous journalistic accounts and have been theorized in the scholarly literature. However, there are few truly in-depth ethnographic works that thoroughly document such important religious and political trends through the use of long-term and immersive fieldwork. Manoela Carpenedo's account of a Judaizing Evangelical movement in Brazil does considerable work toward filling this gap in the literature, providing us with a fine-grained account of Judaizing Evangelical practices and theological adaptations. She offers us a glimpse into the intimate spiritual lives of her informants while still carefully situating the Judaizing movement within broader post-colonial dynamics. Alongside ethnographic vignettes and rich interview material from her case study, Carpenedo considers social, political, and theological trends in Brazil that have energized a climate of grassroots religious diversification and exploration, trends that now pose a significant counter-force to the long-standing Catholic hegemony.

In the first half of the book, Carpenedo helps us to understand exactly how Judaizing Evangelicals, an offshoot of Charismatic Evangelicalism, coalesced to form a transnational religious moment. She describes in detail how Evangelical participants came to identify as "Jewish" after periods of spiritual seeking and denominational shifting within the Evangelical world. What distinguishes Judaizing Evangelicals from other related sub-groups such as Messianic Judaism, she explains, is their specific desire to go beyond a superficial incorporation of Jewish symbols, the Sabbath, and Jewish holiday celebrations. Carpenedo's interlocutors are specifically interested in adopting the legal and ritual strictures of Orthodox Judaism that govern everyday life, including *halachic* (Jewish law) regulations regarding modest dress, ritual purity, and kosher food. What I found most enlightening about this discussion was the way that Carpenedo fully explicates the process by which her informants gradually departed from widespread and traditional Christian hostility toward Jewish law and so-called "legalism." In turn, she

argues, Judaizing Evangelicals come to embrace *halacha* as a mode of purifying their Christian faith from pagan influences. Simultaneously, they are drawn to Jewish orthopraxis and the conservative religious lifestyle it demands as means of rejecting the corrupting moral influences of modernity.

Carpenedo's account of her informants' conversion journeys is thorough and conveyed in a respectful and deeply humanizing manner. I was, however, left wanting more information about the community's specific relationship to Orthodox Jewish textual sources, institutions, online resources, and rabbinic authorities. Carpenedo mentions that the community obtained information about Orthodox practices online, that they managed to purchase a Torah scroll and kosher meat in a local Jewish community, that they underwent ritual circumcision, and that they study Hebrew and the Talmud. While the community clearly does not view itself as beholden to rabbinic authorities or needing an official Orthodox Jewish conversion to identify as Jews, I was left wondering: Why not? How exactly do Judaizing Evangelicals make sense of their relationship, or lack thereof, to the Orthodox Jewish world, especially when it is clear that they still rely upon it for essential resources, and when they look to Orthodox Jews as models for how to act and dress? How did Carpenedo's interlocuters convince members of the "mainstream Jewish community in Brazil" to perform ritual circumcisions and how exactly did they purchase the Torah scroll (114)? It would be helpful for the reader to know which "mainstream" Jewish community Carpenedo is referring to here and how this relationship was forged. I raise these questions because the performance of ritual circumcision on men who have not undergone any official Orthodox Jewish conversion, and even the sale of a Torah scroll to a non-Jewish community, would meet strong resistance from most Orthodox Jews. Future research might address how Judaizing Evangelicals navigate their liminal position as individuals who identify as Jews within a Christian social landscape, and how exactly they obtain essential resources from local Jewish communities who still view them as Christians.

In Chapter 4, Carpenedo illustrates how the adoption of Jewish orthopraxis extends beyond a process of theological hybridization and actually results in an ethnic re-identification with Jews. Judaizing Evangelicals deepen their connection to Judaism by claiming blood-line descent from *Bnei Anussim* (the descendants of Sephardic Jews who were forced to convert during the Spanish Inquisition and later resettled in Latin America, where many continued to practice their Jewish faith in secret). Identifying as *Bnei Anussim*, Carpenedo argues, more firmly secured her interlocuters' sense of religious distinction and separation from Evangelical Christianity, a socio-cultural milieu that Judaizing Evangelicals have come to view as theologically weak and morally lax. The embrace of a racialized Jewish identity and desire for ethnic particularism, Carpenedo claims, is simultaneously the result of collective disillusionment with homogenizing *mestizo* identities and the multi-cultural ethos present in Brazil today.

Moreover, as we see in Chapter 5, for Judaizing Evangelical women in particular, Jewish identification and a sense of ethnic identity is reinforced, not only through a reimagining of the collective ancestral past, but through the adoption

of female-specific Orthodox Jewish practices such as *tzniut* (modest dress and head-covering) and *niddah* (observance of menstrual taboos and of required periods of sexual abstinence). Carpenedo examines the personal motivations that lead Judaizing Evangelical women to adopt willingly a more conservative religious lifestyle and affiliate with an arguably less egalitarian religious community (in contrast to their previous Charismatic churches). By placing her work in conversation with recent studies of female agency in Islamic and Jewish movements, Carpenedo cogently illustrates how the more constraining aspects of Jewish orthopraxis, while deemed challenging at first by her informants, are eventually experienced as empowering and as precious opportunities for personal spiritual growth. For example, Carpenedo demonstrates how the practices associated with *niddah* empower Judaizing Evangelical women by affording them greater control over sexual intimacy in their marriage, in contrast to expectations of sexual availability that previously defined their lives as Charismatic Christians.

Carpenedo has produced a highly lucid and rigorous account that will be broadly accessible to scholars, clergy, and undergraduate students. The book strikes an elegant balance between detailing personal conversion journeys and mapping out the broader social trends that are transforming Brazil's Christian landscape. Her very thorough review of the literature on conversion throughout the book will be particularly useful to scholars working to conceptualize their own studies of new religious movements. Carpenedo's research advances the field of conversion studies specifically by challenging portrayals of conversion as ideological rupture through empirically grounded documentation of theological shifting and religious hybridization, as Evangelicals integrate elements of Jewish orthopraxis into pre-existing Christian ideological frameworks. The result is a new hybrid religious culture, one that introduces new moral sensibilities and value systems compatible with Orthodox Jewish lifestyles. The past, Carpenedo amply illustrates throughout the book, is just as important as the present when analyzing contemporary conversion trends. It is precisely their previous and deeply formative experiences in Charismatic churches, alongside the influence of an imagined ancestral Jewish past, that can help account for how and why increasing numbers of Evangelicals are choosing to live their lives according to the strictures of Jewish law.