



Becoming Jewish, Believing in Jesus: Judaizing Evangelicals in Brazil

by Manoela Carpenedo, New York, University of Oxford Press, 2021, xiv + 283 pp., £64.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780190086923

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removing ‘isms’ from the country’s constitution through a referendum, ending the suppression of those who believe in Democratic Islamism, addressing the root causes of militancy and terrorism, and mainstream Islamist movements broadening their scope to include advocacy of more inclusive policies (275-277). Islam and Islam present these policies as ones that could stabilize and secure democracy in Bangladesh, but not all of these recommendations can effectively be achieved through governmental legislation or action. For example, mainstream Islamists expanding the scope of their movements and the policies they advocate for is not contingent on policies enacted by Bangladesh’s government. This recommendation requires a shift in these movements’ understanding of their own identity and in Islamists’ desire to be inclusive of other religious groups and minority populations. No policy could cause this shift to occur because this shift would have to be endogenous to these movements. There would have to be a change in individual perceptions and possibly public opinion for this recommendation to come to fruition.

Overall, this book could have benefitted from a greater exposition of policies integral to the development of democracy within Bangladesh and how these policies coincided with Islamic values. This would have strengthened the policy recommendations made by the authors but also provided more insight into the historical analysis of this case. The argument developed by Islam and Islam could also have had greater support if there had been an explicit statement on which theoretical frameworks this analysis was based and if there was a specific definition utilized when referencing the representative democracy in Bangladesh rather than referring to it as democracy more broadly. However, this book would be an asset to advanced undergraduate students or graduate students who are interested in the historical relationship between democratic systems of governance and Islam, especially if they are intrigued by the coexistence of Islamic society and representative democracy in Bangladesh. This book provides a perspective on the relationship between Islam and democratic systems of governance that is counter to some prevalent theories and those who are interested in having a more nuanced understanding of this relationship will find this text quite intriguing.

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This book renders visible the creativity and newness that we can find today in the study of religion while it deals with a situation in which both the researcher and those in the field were uncertain about how to name the experience in question. It is praiseworthy how the author dared to face this complex theoretical and empirical situation. The book initiates with the constant demand for a definition: are they still Christians? Are they somehow Jews? Are they authentic Jews? Is that even possible? How can they be Christians if they do not accept Jesus to be God, but a human being?

Those are not easy questions to answer. And as one keeps reading, the perception is that the situation is even more difficult than this. If we take a less empirical position on the matter, we are dealing with the definition of a religion and a religious community. Should the researcher accept that the beliefs are the central aspect that defines religion? Should the focus be placed on the ritual practice? Or should the underlying rationality be taken as the main feature? Should we accept their word on what they are, or should the researcher develop her analytical definition?

Taking the reader by the hand, Carpenedo allows us to perceive how the apparent contradictions between their beliefs, practices, and rationality are not contradictions at all, but the formulation - or, in her own words, the *emergence* -, of a conservative tradition that had previously not existed. One discovers that the apparent contradictions only exist if the reader tries to place this complex experience in previously designed boxes of Christianity and Judaism. As a consequence, Carpenedo has produced a strong argument for an emerging trend within Evangelical Christianity as something new that she called, as an analytical concept, 'Judaizing Evangelicals'.

Some features distinguish the growing community of more than ten thousand members and one hundred congregations (that are kept anonymous as a request from the people under research) from Messianic Judaism and Christian Zionism. In the first place, these folks are ambiguously willing to claim themselves Jews (in chapter 4, Carpenedo elaborates on their ethnogenesis as possible remnants of Jewish families forced to convert to Christianity during Brazilian colonization. The author describes a situation while travelling with them to Israel where they 'wept over the horrors done to the Jews as part of their personal stories' (184) and are not related to Jews in their preaching or religiously. Rather, they are willing to remain part of the Christian community and 'embrace the mission to disseminate the Judaizing truth within the Christian world' (17). Their binding premise is that there is truth in the God of Jesus-the-Jew and that Jesus is pointing everyone to this necessary corrective path. One will find in the subjects of the study an apparent distance from Christianity and a revival of Christianity through its Judaic roots. Playing with the etymology of this word, this is a radical transformation of Christianity, one that aims for its Judaic roots. Or, as the author states (92), they understand this as a *t'shuvah* - that is, as a return to Orthodox observance within Judaism without leaving Christianity.

Let us take a closer look at each chapter. The book is organised around five chapters (plus an Introduction and a Conclusion) that guide the reader from 'The rise of Philo-Semitic Attitudes and Zionist Discourses in Christianity', through their religious conversion, their imagination of the past and ethnicity until the last chapter 'Gender and Moral Transformation'.

The first chapter situates the research among similar trends, such as Messianic Judaism and Christian Zionism, only to distinguish them and explore their singularity. The experience here is, as already mentioned, difficult to conceptualise with the labels at hand. Carpenedo is dealing with a community that 'proposes the dramatic adoption of an Orthodox Jewish ethos among people who were not born among Jewish families' and that 'aims to bring the "Judaizing truth" to other Christians' (27). This takes the matter into a discussion of Global Evangelical Christianities in the Global South, and particularly in Brazil, and presents some aspects of the community via central characters, like 'The primordial leader', 'The teacher', and 'The virtuous leader'. The leader and the teacher are men (Abraham and Levi), and the virtuous leader is a woman, Sarah. This is a fine way to display the organization of the community and the authority, marking from early on the gender balance and gender transformation that Carpenedo will develop at the end of the book.

Due to the gender asymmetry and moral conservatism of this religious experience, Carpenedo's research was directed at the women in the community. Hence, she followed those women in their experiences, highlighting how they left their previous religious affiliation.

Carpenedo's approach to religious conversion as a 'complex, ongoing, staged process' (46) privileges their reflexivity and criticism of their previous Charismatic Evangelical affiliation to portray how they became 'willing subjects of Judaizing Evangelical discourse' (47). Hence, the second chapter works through a double 'exit narrative': first from Catholicism into Charismatic Evangelicals and, then, from this to Judaizing Evangelicals to probe such questions as: How the Charismatic Evangelical subjectivity was formed? Which role do the structural dimensions of religious practice play in this change? With a dash of surprise, one reads how the Charismatic Evangelicals are seen as too much 'secular' or 'wordly', 'degenerated' even (66). This refusal includes two central aspects of their previous Evangelicalism: the material focus of the Prosperity Gospel and the anti-intellectualism, taking them into a more 'austere' position in which their spiritual fulfilment and ethical code become central, including the virtue of modesty. In short, they 'experience a passage from one subjectifying Charismatic Evangelical discourse to another informed by a completely different system of values, highlighting the role of religious ritual and intellectual elaborations' (79). In so doing, Carpenedo portrays the moral conundrums that lead those under study start to inhabit a new scenario, one in which they feel - at first - that they had lost their prominence and agency as women.

What the author portrays, then, is an enormous process of religious and moral transformation. The double exit (first from Catholicism and then from Charismatic Evangelicalism) and entrance into a Judaizing Evangelical system of values are not only related to the individual process each of those women experienced, but also point to a moment in the cultural transformation within the religious landscape in Brazil. More and more Evangelicals are turning to Judaism or incorporating their aesthetics, values, and objects. The congregation Carpenedo researched is, probably, the one that took this trend the farthest. In the third chapter, 'Becoming Jewish, Believing in Jesus?' we are faced with this larger sociocultural transformation and with the production of a 'hybrid reality' as the result of a dialectical process of appropriation of Jewish and continuation of Christian elements. This is possible because Carpenedo takes a 'grassroot approach that analyzes how these different religious traditions are understood and organized within the community on different levels: culturally, ritualistically, and at the micro-level of people's lives' (90). As a result, the reader can grasp how their Jewishness is brought together by Christian rationality to the point that it only exists as something new and unique and not as Jewish per se.

This distinct religious path leads the congregation into three main kinds of 'encapsulation': physical, social, and ideological (98–104), strengthening their inner ties. After all, this is not an individual conversion; this is a family matter in the first place. A wife's conversion will entail a radical transformation in a husband's life, not only due to sexual purity laws but also to changes in their everyday food and the education of their children. Several converts have even changed their professions to be able to adapt to the new restrictions. This is one of the reasons for the stimulation of new weddings within the congregation from an early age. Young girls face a match-making process as soon as they enter adulthood (101). Considering these facts, the reader is left wanting to know more about the family life of those members, as the research was very much focused on women's experiences. As mentioned earlier, this is understandable mostly because Carpenedo is a woman dealing with a very gender-segregated congregation. However, this reader suspects that even the women could share some information on the effects at the family level.

In the last chapter, we are faced with a robust discussion on the moral transformation these women experienced. Due to its conservative gender roles, women are the main ones responsible for (re)producing the religious morality at home and within their families. Carpenedo asks for the reasons that lead those women into a pious conservative subjectivity in a complex manner, avoiding simplistic answers on 'agency' and 'empowerment' versus

‘subordination’. The turn Carpenedo gives to this matter relies on her consistent ethnographical analysis: the Judaizing Evangelicals are a new and unique trend, one in which the possibilities are not yet settled and the ‘socially predefined or prescribed performances’ (195) are in the making and under transformation. This is a religious trend in which assemblage and hybridization set the tone, so how can one reproduce ‘given cultural patterns’? One could take this opportunity to observe the creation of gender roles in an ‘emerging conservative tradition’ (197). And Carpenedo takes this opportunity to show us ‘how religious women inhabit and create changing multivalent cultural systems’ by revealing the ‘incoherencies, hybridization, and ambiguity present in Judaizing Evangelical women’s relationship with religious norms’ (196).

Throughout the chapter, we are told how these women experience and embody a transformation of their cultural and moral schemes by creating particular manners of modesty (*tzniut*) in a society that historically objectified women’s bodies. How they deploy scientific arguments to keep their bodies out of male view and how they relate to a secular sexualized culture are central in the development of this ethical cultivation. The use of head coverings is just one example of how they create new meanings for old practices. Carpenedo convincingly argues that ‘their transformation is inspired by Orthodox Jewish discourses and ideals, but [...] they simultaneously mobilize former Christian sensibilities, following Charismatic testimony rhetoric and results-oriented logics, all comply with Judaizing norms’ (214–215). There is indeed an assemblage of divergent sensibilities, values, and rationalities from distinct religious traditions that need to be addressed if one wants to understand what is happening, and Carpenedo did it with enormous expertise and excellence.

Despite its many triumphs, there are still several areas for elaboration that would have been valuable for the reader. First of all, the focus on the moral transformation these women underwent - terrific as it was - prevented the scrutiny of how a larger transformation occurred and even reached them. This reader was left wondering how these women came into contact with the Judaizing Evangelicalism in the first place. How do their families become part of this trend? What kind of role and agency do these women have in this decision? Was something they looked for or was this the result of a web of relations in which the family was entangled and they had to deal with it? Widening the focus from the individual to the family - as this seems to me to be the sociological unit of transformation - would give us a more comprehensive picture of the change and, probably, would also illuminate women’s role and agency in it. A second point is a possible development of Carpenedo’s argument. I would suggest that what we are observing is not only how these women create meaning for themselves and cultivate a moral self via assembling those distinct aspects mentioned in the previous chapter; what they appear to be doing is more than that, is creating a new religious morality for everyone, one that spans to their husbands, children, but also beyond the domestic and into the public life of the nation. The recent trend in Brazilian evangelicalism of adopting Jewish images, objects and values has in this particular congregation its climax and may be helpful to understand the more general movement.

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