

Carpenedo, Manoela. *Becoming Jewish, Believing in Jesus: Judaizing Evangelicals in Brazil*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021. xiv + 283 pp. Hardcover. USD 99.00.

This is a book on the sociology of religion, not theology. It is about the religious experience of living subjects, not a history of Judaism that deals primarily with texts of the dead. A revised dissertation from the University of Cambridge, *Becoming Jewish* engages contemporary believers in their environments. Manoela Carpenedo narrates the experiences of ex-Evangelicals (in contrast to Catholic Christians) from Brazil who now self-identify as Jews. By living with them, she had the opportunity of seeing and listening to how they practice their religion in their houses, in their meeting places, and even in Israel on a group trip she took with them. Carpenedo's account is engaging, full of testimonies, and at times, I felt as if I were there in the room with her, especially because she mixed Portuguese and English in the text, which I appreciate as a Brazilian myself. The detailed accounts focus on the women members, for good reason. Feminists studies of religion are still very popular, women religious subjects are historically understudied, the author is a female, and most importantly, as she explains, the topic itself leads to this focus since the practical identity of this community revolves around the female body because of the importance of the Torah's purity laws (*niddah*) in their lives.

Carpenedo went to find out why these Brazilian ex-Evangelical Christian women "subjugated" themselves to what most feminists would consider patriarchal customs of modern Judaism when their experiences, mainly as Pentecostal, were more "liberating." Her answer is a complex one but focuses on the role of the female body. The practices of *tzniut*, or modesty (dressing in a way that covers the body), and *niddah*, or sexual purity (not sleeping with husbands during the period of menstrual impurity), are highlighted. The female's role in the identity of the community is also perceptible in their *Shabbat* observance, the preparation of food (*kashrut*, dietary laws), the raising of children, and the continuation of genealogical status (ethnicity). Carpenedo avoids imposing a definition of subjugation and liberation on the women she engaged with. And by talking to them and transcribing their conversations, she allowed her subjects to express their self-understanding. For Tziporah (pseudonym, 36 years old) and Dinah (41 years old), subjugation is something desirable because it is the will of God, not of males. In their perspective, through obedience to the traditions of modern Judaism, Jewish women have more control of their bodies and the lives of their family members than those *do mundo* (of the world), who still live in a *machista* (male-dominated) worldview. This might sound like a surprise to many, but this is how they understand their reality.

As the author contextualizes, this conformity to more strict forms of religiosity is a reaction to a perceived laxity practiced by most Brazilians and

the increased cultural influence of modern Judaism in Brazil. Carpenedo argues that these women's religious behavior is still influenced by their evangelical upbringing in their aversion to Catholicism (as paganism) and their view of a reciprocal relationship with God (prosperity gospel and healings; obedience to the commandments, *mitzvot*). On the cultural importance of Jewish ethnicity, Carpenedo demonstrates how the past is reimagined in the construction of this group's identity. While some members have a purported ethnic connection to European Jews (*Bnei annusim* or crypto-Jews), as described in chapter four, the members of this community see Jesus as the first reformer of Judaism (*hassidism*) and a role model (129–135). As the title might suggest, *Becoming Jewish, Believing in Jesus* is the hybrid (bricolage) process of somewhat disassociating themselves from "Christianity" in some aspects and becoming "Jews" in others. This makes any definition of their experience complicated.

Reflecting on the sequence of the book, I would just change one thing. In the current format, chapters one (the rise of Philo-Semitic discourse in Christianity) and four (Jewish ethnicity in Brazil) provide a historical context to the formation and experiences of this Brazilian community, while chapters two, three, and five describe their beliefs and practices. I would read chapters one and four together. At first, I thought that Carpenedo misunderstood the process of *Becoming Jewish* when she described this group, but after chapter four, I was convinced that the problematic category was *Believing in Jesus*.

I agree with her observation but would nuance the terminology. I do recognize that she tried to use the expressions her subject adopted and the ones easily identified by most people. However, as she mentioned in her account of the *Bnei Anusim* (ethnic Jews who changed their identity because of Catholic persecution) in Brazil, scholars with their narratives about Judaism in Brazil are responsible for cultural invention (149). And depending on how one defines Judaism and Christianity in this story, the analysis of such a complex religious group might be very different. I suggest that Carpenedo's way of describing (defining) Judaism is historically deficient but does not diminish her description of this religious community in Brazil. Actually, it highlights the complicated notion of religious identity discourse. Her complex understanding of the terminologies is perceptible in the title of chapter three, *Becoming Jewish, Believing in Jesus?*, which she ends with a question mark. But I do not know if she realizes the categorical complexities entailed in this interrogation.

Terms like *Jews* or *Judaism* and *Evangelicals* (notice that in the title of the book, the word is not Christianity) are often used in popular discourses but are rarely or poorly defined. In scholarship, the meanings of these terms are contentious, even when well defined. Who is a Jew? Is it one who has a certain DNA, or who lives in a certain manner, or both? In Carpenedo's account, Judaizing or becoming Jewish is about behavior. She defines "Judaizing" (becoming Jewish) as the tendency of gentile believers in Jesus to practice

Jewish customs to be saved (17). Throughout her account, Carpenedo describes Judaism as a lifestyle, a behavior, not an ethnicity. So what actions distinguish a Jew from a Christian? Following her account, Jewish practices are the purity laws of diet (*kasbrut*), sexuality (*niddah*), modesty (*tzniut*), and the sacredness of the seventh-day Sabbath. I am a member of a community (Seventh-day Adventism) that claims to follow the same principles from the Torah, albeit in a very different manner, but we do not consider ourselves Judaizers (although some Christians do call us that). Interestingly, when I lived in Jerusalem, Jews would not call me a Jew because I believed in Jesus as the Messiah and did not follow the principles of the Talmud. But Muslim neighbors would think I was a Jew because I was dressed up, carrying a book, and going to the Jewish district on *Shabbat*. Yet, I identified myself as neither, but as a Christian. It is clear from Carpenedo's narrative that this group of Brazilians see themselves as Jews, not Christians, which is telling.

The issue that informed the different definitions of the term *Judaism* should not be about the validity of the Torah as a guide for behavior (for even Christians, Muslims, and atheists adhere to some of its precepts and not others) but about how the laws of the Torah are systematized and applied by modern believers. In Carpenedo's account of the Brazilian community under study, it seems that their interpretation of the Torah is mainly informed by the rabbinic discourse of the Talmud. This is certainly not the Torah but an interpretation of it. Historically, one should not equate the Judaism of the Talmud with Judaism or the *only* interpretation of the HB. The term *Judaism* should not be equated with the HB—one is a collection of texts, and the other is what people do with the texts. I found it interesting that Jesus, according to the Gospels, was in many instances against the oral tradition of the Pharisees, which seems to be the main source of rabbinic tradition. Yet the Brazilian Jewish believers in Jesus give more credit to the Talmud (that is not so friendly to Jesus) than to Paul (who is not mentioned once in Carpenedo's account). Besides, many Jews did not or do not adhere to the oral law of rabbinic tradition. To say that the members of the group Carpenedo observed are Jewish Christians is a simplification of a more complex reality.

Now, my reflection on the term *Evangelicals* in her account: Carpenedo defines it as the form of Christianity that believes that Jesus heals, baptizes with the Holy Spirit, offers salvation, and is coming again (viii). But most importantly, protestant evangelicals try to renew Christianity (17) in the face of a prevalent disregard of the Bible. Of these qualifiers, the point that is of question and is more characteristic of this group she observed, based on the testimonies of these Brazilian "Jewish believers," is the role of Jesus in salvation. In some of the accounts, the members do state that they believe in Jesus as the Messiah (215), but what sort of Messiah? He seems to be a role model, not a Savior. In the words of one participant, "It does not matter if you believe or do not believe in *Yeshua*, Manoela.... *Yeshua* is not this figure

that saves you. It is your moral conduct that matters; whether you righteously observe the scriptural laws” (131). Jesus seems to be one of many pious Jews (*hassid*) like Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (*baal shem tov*), who is mentioned in Carpenedo’s account as an important spiritual guide to the community. So very similar to *Chabad*, where a rabbi (Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe) was venerated by some as the Messiah, this community in Brazil seems to venerate Jesus as an ethical Messiah but not as the divine son of God who redeems humanity from sin, as in orthodox Christianity (130–135). This understanding is coherent with what Carpenedo observed in their celebration of the ritual of *Pessach* (Passover). In their version of the ritual, narrated by Carpenedo, which does not conform to either rabbinic or most Christian standards, Jesus’s role is mainly connected to the ritual of foot washing (which is not prescribed in the Torah, but in the Gospels). His role as the paschal lamb, which is central in Christianity, is not there. After celebrating *Pessach* (Passover) with them, Carpenedo concludes that “the symbol of Jesus has lost its centrality within the cultural hierarchies of the Judaizing Evangelicals” (130). Therefore, are they still Christians? I wonder what Rabbi Shaul of the first century (aka Paul of Tarsus) would say to this community were he alive today. Maybe the same thing he did to the Galatians: that this is “another gospel”? I will let the reader decide this matter.

As a historian, I see similarities between the group described by Carpenedo and those described by ancient Christian writers like Epiphanius. These are groups labeled as practicing “Judaism” because of their view of Jesus as a role model and the emphasis on ritual purity for salvation. A comparative analysis of both groups would certainly illuminate how Judaism and Christianity have evolved. And this is only possible because of detailed accounts such as the one produced by Manoela Carpenedo. To her, historians are now in debt.

Regardless of one’s interpretation of the religious experiences of those described by Carpenedo, to those interested in Christian mission, Christian history, Jewish history, or religious history, *Becoming Jewish, Believing in Jesus* is a fascinating account of the religious landscape of my home country (Brazil), specifically about a group that I think most are unfamiliar with. The book shows the enduring influence of the Bible (mainly the HB) in society through the varied application in the life of believers, who, influenced by their context, apply the text in different ways. The book also has the potential of raising many questions about Jewish and Christian identity(ies). I congratulate Carpenedo for her work and look forward to engaging with her in our lovely tongue, Portuguese.

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