

To:

The Secretariat

International Association for Mission Studies

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Proposed paper for the IAMS conference in August 2016

Study group:

Interreligious studies and mission

Title:

‘Messianic’ Jews, barriers or bridges in Jewish Christian relations? An ‘emic’ approach to dialogue

Abstract:

Background of the theme

The current ‘Messianic movement’ of Jesus believing Jews has surprised both the Christian and the Jewish world for several reasons: its size (as compared to the small numbers of Jewish Christians throughout history); its concern for expressing Jewish identity; its emphasis on evangelism among fellow Jews; and the creation of ‘Messianic’ congregations in many countries.

‘Messianic’ Jews adopt rites, customs, and celebrations that are in keeping with Jewish tradition. In so doing, they deliberately identify with the cultural heritage of their people. However, this stance is not generally accepted by the Jewish community, where ‘Messianics’ meet with rejection and opposition. Most rabbis do not consider them as genuine Jews. Meanwhile, Christian theologians and Churches respond in various ways to this movement, ranging from enthusiastic appraisal to virtual neglect. Often their Jewish practices are rejected as a ‘return to the Law’.

Main thrust of the paper

The position of Jesus believing Jews is particularly problematic with respect to Jewish Christian dialogue, and this is what I want to bring to light.

First part: background and situation

I will briefly show:

- (1) the discrepancies between the self-identifications of this movement and how they are perceived by their parent Jewish and Christian parent communities,
- (2) the transgression of existing boundary markers so as to create space for faith in Jesus within the Jewish community, also within Judaism as a religion
- (3) the development of new boundary markers so as to create space for a Jewish expression of that faith within the wider Christian context

For these elements, I will make use of my research for my recent publication, *The Messianic Jews and their Holiday Practice* (Frankfort: Peter Lang, 2015).

Second part: dialogue

Next, I will relate these findings to the area of Jewish Christian dialogue, and quote some recent publications of Messianic Jews, Christian theologians involved in dialogue, and rabbinic authors writing on Jews and faith in Jesus.

- (4) In fact, Jesus believing Jews call in question some of the theological presuppositions of the way in which this dialogue has been developed in the last 50 years? Why do they generally not participate? Why is the issue of ‘conversion’ (of Jews to Christianity or of Christians to Judaism) generally avoided or dealt with in critical terms?
- (5) The temptation for Jewish-Christian dialogue is to take a certain theology of mutual acceptance as a starting point. In practice, this limits the scope and leaves out several categories of each religion, especially those who claim to be Jews and followers of Christ at the same time. The challenge is to accept their self-identification as a starting point for discussion and collaboration. This approach is in line with the emphasis in religious studies to combine ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ understandings of people of other cultures.
- (6) It could be noticed in passing that this last principle should apply to dialogue in general within a pluralist society, also between Christians and

Muslims when it comes to accepting Muslim background believers in Jesus.

- (7) Pointing out some small scale recent initiatives to accept ‘Messianic’ believers as partners in Jewish Christian dialogue, I want to argue that their presence can enrich the dialogue because they succeed in combining Jewish concerns with Christian beliefs. In so doing they can help both communities to deal in a peaceful way with delicate issues that so often divide them (‘conversion’, maintaining Jewish identity, solidarity with the state of Israel, replacement theology, etc.).

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Relevant Publications:

Latest publications in the field related to the subject-matter of this paper:

- *Messianic Jews and their Holiday Practice: History, Analysis, Gentile Christian Interest* (Series ‘Edition Israelogique’ Nr. 9). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015, 323 pp.
- (with Guy Athia) ‘Le judaïsme,’ in: Christophe Paya (direction), *Être chrétien dans le monde d’aujourd’hui : croire, penser, agir*. Charols: Excelsis, 2013, p. 475-483.