

Are Jewish Converts still Jewish?

Interview with David Moss

Ed. Faith magazine's Patrick O'Brien interviewed David Moss, President of the Association of Hebrew Catholics (AHC). The AHC relocated to Ypsilanti, Michigan in Sept. 2001. [The interview below reflects some modifications made to fit a flyer produced by the AHC. The full interview may be found at <http://www.faithmag.com/issues/mar02.html#cover>].

Some people thought our February issue headline: 'A Catholic Deacon Born Jewish' implied that Deacon Warren Hecht was no longer Jewish. Is he?

Well, the term *Jew* is ambiguous the way it is normally used. Sometimes it refers to a person's religious practices and sometimes to a person's ethnicity.

Deacon Warren's religious practices are not those of a Jew but of a Catholic. However, Deacon Warren remains a member of the Jewish people, or more properly, the People Israel. This is the people that descend from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In their religious faith and practice, they may be Catholics, Rabbinical Jews, Protestants, or something else.

Many Jews don't like to be called converts since they already believed in God, and in their religious observances, they were already responding to that part of the Word of God in the *Tanakh*, or what we call the Old Testament. When we recognize the Messiah and enter His Church, we fulfill or complete our Old Testament Faith. But we do not lose our ethnicity, who we are. For clarity's sake (since we do not practice Judaism) and to not offend our Jewish brothers and sisters, we do not use the term *Jewish Catholic*. Instead we use the more theologically correct term, *Catholic Israelite* or, synonymously, *Hebrew Catholic*. That is, we are members of the People Israel who observe the Catholic Faith.

How many Hebrew Catholics are there?

I've seen figures estimating that one half million Jews have come to faith in Jesus since the Second World War. There are no reliable estimates for those that have entered the Catholic Church, but from my experience I would guess that the numbers range, at the least, in the tens of thousands.

Whatever the total number, it is a significant percentage of the Jewish people. Before the war, there were an estimated 18 million Jewish people in the world. After the war that number went down to an estimated 11-12 million. I think now it is between 13-14 million.

In addition to the *Shoah* (holocaust), other factors in the decrease of the Jewish population include: assimilation, a low birth rate among many segments of the Jewish people, and inter-marriage which leads to assimilation.

What is the difference between your group, Hebrew Catholics, and Jews for

Jesus, Messianic Jews, etc ... ?

Messianic Jews are Jews who have come to faith in Jesus in the non-Catholic Christian world. Typically, their theology derives from Evangelical Christianity. Instead of entering one of the Christian denominations, many are joining Messianic congregations that have been springing up in many cities throughout the Americas, Europe and Israel. In these congregations, they attempt to live as Jews with modifications arising from their belief in the Messiah.

The term Messianic Jews is an umbrella term. It does not signify a common set of doctrines or practices. The majority believe that Jesus is both Messiah and Son of God. A small number believe that he is Messiah, but not divine.

The group 'Jews for Jesus' might also be called Messianic Jews. Since they do not maintain their own congregations, they point new Jewish believers to a (non-Catholic) Christian congregation.

That the Messianic Jewish movement is growing so fast can be attributed to three major factors: (1) a primary focus of their work is evangelization of the Jews; (2) they don't have to take into account the Magisterium or Sacred Tradition; (3) they make an effort to preserve their Jewish identity.

We are Catholic. We have freely chosen to enter the Church established by the Messiah, in which He has established a teaching authority, the Magisterium, responsible for guarding and handing on the deposit of faith given to the Apostles. That deposit is reflected in the doctrines of the Church. Thus, our efforts and mission must be in keeping with the teaching and discipline of the Church.

Elias Friedman, OCD, who lived as a Carmelite friar for approximately 50 years in Israel, launched the AHC to preserve the People Israel within the Church. Somewhat similar reasons motivate the Messianic Jewish movement.

The problem of Jewish identity may briefly be described as follows. When a Jew enters the Church, he enters into a community and culture that has become sociologically, for want of a better word, Gentile. The term Gentile refers to the non-Israelite peoples of the world.

Consequently, the Jewish convert is separated from his people, his culture and his heritage. Then, through assimilation to the prevailing culture, his offspring are no longer considered part of the People Israel.

Most importantly, the corporate vocation given to the People Israel can no longer be fulfilled, either in the convert or in his offspring. This is the case because, since the 3rd or 4th century, the People Israel have not had a corporate presence in the Church. Thus, in the Jews that enter the Church, the People terminate.

What do you mean, the people terminate?

The basic way that Jews preserve themselves and their heritage is through their offspring. The Jewish community recognizes the offspring as a Jew and, therefore, a member of the People Israel. Through the community, the individual is given his or her identity as a member of that community.

However, when a Jew enters the Church and marries, there is no community recognition of the offspring as members of the People Israel. Thus, the offspring, in effect, become Gentile. And even if the family attempts to preserve some aspects of their heritage, by the second or third generation, those aspects have disappeared and the offspring have completely lost any sense of their identity as Israelites.

So, even if the convert continues to describe himself in terms of his Jewish origins, the preservation of the People through his offspring comes to a halt. Thus, my statement that 'the People terminate'.

That explains why, when I was interviewing a Rabbi about interfaith marriage, he stated that every Jew that converts or marries and does not raise their children Jewish - that is like another Holocaust. I was startled by the comment. Is this what he was referring to?

Yes. The way it's communicated doesn't add clarity. But, the Rabbi uses the term holocaust in the sense of how many Jews are lost. The People Israel have a God-given vocation in this world. They, therefore, also have an obligation to preserve themselves and their vocation.

There are two things that threaten this people: violence and assimilation. Violence is brutal and swift, such as the pogroms, where under the Czars, the army would destroy whole Jewish villages. Even worse, of course, was the Holocaust, an attempt to totally wipe out the Jewish people during the Second World War.

Assimilation is peaceful and slow, but just as sure. Through the last 1700 years, Jews who have entered the Church have assimilated to the various cultures of the Church. The Jews outside the Church, therefore, cry out: to be open to Christ is to betray your people.

All who hear the Gospel, including Jews, have to answer the question posed by Jesus: "Who do you say that I am?" However, because of assimilation there is no concrete and visible presence of the People Israel within the Church. Thus, Christianity is seen as a Gentile religion and, as such, the majority of Jews have no reason to consider the Gospel, much less answer the question posed by Jesus.

The People Israel were given the Torah by God through Moses. Furthermore, they believe that God has provided a way for Gentiles, through their various religions, to find a place in the next world. But, those who are observant of their Jewish Faith generally have no reason to investigate the Gentile religions.

Is that why Jews don't evangelize or have programs to convert people like other religions?

Basically, yes. Jews don't believe that Gentiles have to become Jews to please God. The covenant given to Noah applies to all of humanity. Thus, the Gentiles, through their religions, can find a place in the next world with God.

They also believe that the Torah is the Word of God and that they have a mission to witness to the nations the truths contained in the Torah. Some also recognize that Christians have brought the wisdom of the Torah to the world, despite their mistaken beliefs in Jesus as the Messiah.

It is also important to recognize that there is no one Jewish position on anything. Reform, Conservative and even Orthodox Jews don't have a single set of doctrines or a teaching authority as do Catholics.

Another reason for the lack of Jewish evangelization over the last two millennia is their minority status in most of the nations that they resided in. In the light of persecution, various restrictive laws, and other conditions, their primary emphasis was on survival and the transmission of their heritage.

What is the goal of your organization, the Association of Hebrew Catholics?

Our goal is to preserve the identity and heritage of Israelites within the Catholic Church, through the establishment of a Hebrew Catholic Community juridically approved by the Holy See.

By identity, I mean their election (calling, vocation). The election is a choice of God that applies to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that is, to the People Israel of the flesh. It is collective and it is eternal.

Today, the Jew who enters the Church is unable to fulfill his vocation as a member of the People. Instead, he enters the Church and assimilates to the prevailing culture.

Isn't this true of all cultures or is that not a fair question?

There are similarities. You can look at converts from other peoples, cultures and religions and, at times, see their own people turn against them because they feel like the convert has betrayed them.

In these cases, we are dealing with human nature. In the case of the People Israel, however, the issue is of a people created, formed, and preserved by God, a people still intimately connected to the ongoing drama of salvation history.

For example, the Catechism states that Jesus will not return until all Israel recognizes Him. Thus, it appears that there is a connection between that part of the People Israel we identify as Jews and the second coming of Jesus.

Yet, how will His people recognize Him if they are not given the opportunity to consider the Gospel? And, since the program of the Church today, with respect to the Jews, is one of dialogue, not evangelization, how will the opportunity to consider the Gospel arise?

I believe the dialogue is important and good because of the history of Catholic Jewish relations. Healing, respect, trust, honest communications, learning about the other, and shared efforts in the social arena are all necessary and important.

Yet, the dialogue has its problems. One problem arises from the efforts of some Catholics within the dialogue, as is also the case in other Catholic disciplines, to re-interpret Scripture and Tradition to the detriment of the Catholic Faith. Thus, in attempting to deal with issues that have negatively and unjustly affected the Jews, they are betraying the Catholic Faith.

What do you mean? Who is betraying the Catholic Faith?

Let me give an example outside of the dialogue which takes an extreme form: the Jesus seminar. Here, theologians vote on whether passages really reflect the words of Jesus or not. When one looks at the results of their votes, one finds that the New Testament has completely lost its character as the inspired Word of God. Others have questioned or challenged the truths of the virgin birth, the resurrection of our Lord, the miracles of the loaves, and so forth. I could go on.

Within the dialogue, you will find the aberrant notion that there are two parallel paths to salvation: one for the Jews, which is Rabbinical Judaism, and one for the Gentiles, which is Christianity. Of course, one may ask: How then do we explain that the Church was formed by Jews? that Jesus, Mary, the apostles and almost all the early believers were Jews?

Overall, however, the dialogue is necessary, important, and producing good fruit.

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Returning to your original question about the goals of the AHC: I already mentioned our primary aim that is focused on preserving the People Israel within the Church. With the establishment of a Hebrew Catholic Community, the other major aim will begin to develop, that is, restoring the heritage of Israel to the life of the Church.

For 3,500 years, God has formed the People Israel. There is much in their literature, their culture, and in their spiritual and moral disciplines that will edify Catholics. God has given them certain gifts and called them, as a Servant People, to be a blessing to the nations. As a People living out their vocation within the Church, I believe they will be a blessing to the life and mission of the Church, and to their brethren outside the Church, the Jewish people.

I do not yet know what ecclesiastical format the Hebrew Catholic Community will take. There is much work that has to be done by theologians and those involved with canon law.

Scripture states that *“for everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.”* The AHC makes the case that the time is at hand to restore the People Israel, as a People, to the life of the Church.

So in Acts, where they discuss the problem of Gentiles entering the Church, the issue was do Gentiles need to become Jews before they can become Christian. What you are saying is that it is reversed? Now the question is can you be a Jew and become Christian?

Yes. Let me state the question as it has been asked of me: *“Can I, a Jew, become a Christian without becoming a Gentile?”*

In Acts, the Church was made up primarily of Jews. Through observance of the Torah, the People Israel had been formed by God to be a holy people, separated from the pagan world surrounding them. The Mosaic laws not only formed them, but it preserved them as a people.

In the New Covenant, where the Gentiles were being grafted onto the People Israel

through baptism, the following dilemma faced the Jews: How were they to retain their identity if they now no longer had to observe all of the Mosaic laws?

For example, the laws regarding ritual purity (such as the dietary laws), had helped keep them a distinct people. But, in the new dispensation, Jews began to eat with Gentiles. It became apparent that their distinctiveness could no longer be preserved through these laws. And in those early days, while the understanding of what Jesus had taught was developing, you can read in the New Testament where some of the early Jewish followers of Jesus continued to observe the Torah. In fact, this situation continued through the next two or three centuries, while the People Israel maintained a corporate presence in the early Church.

But the reversal of the situation in Acts is not the only reversal we are witnessing. St. Paul, speaking to the Gentiles, taught that they, the Gentiles, had received mercy because of the failure of the majority of the Jews to believe in Jesus. But a time would come when the Gentiles, who had the faith, would lose it. And, from their failure, the Jews would again receive mercy. And with mercy, all Israel would be saved, bringing about the return to faith of the apostate Gentiles. I believe we have entered that phase of salvation history.

Full circle. Thank you very much for this enlightening conversation. Is there anything you would like to add?

We invite all who are interested in this work to join with us in this privileged moment of salvation history.

From: <http://www.hebrewcatholic.org/>

The full interview may be found at <http://www.faithmag.com/issues/mar02.html#cover>

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