

**Between Faith and Community:  
The Choice of Christianity by the FSU Immigrant Adolescents in Israel**

**Nelly Elias**

The recent immigration wave from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) brought to Israel a large group of about 300,000 immigrants who are either not Jewish (i.e., people of different nationalities married to Jews), or partly Jewish (i.e., children of inter-ethnic marriages) who are not recognized as Jewish according to the *Halakha*<sup>1</sup>. Thus, when this multi-ethnic collective of partly Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants relocates into the local institutional and ideological reality, religion could become one of the major resources for immigrants' incorporation into the dominant majority (i.e., conversion into Judaism), or it could facilitate an intensive search for alternative sources of identification and belonging (i.e., affiliation with Christianity).

Hence, the present study aimed at examining the process of religious identity construction of the non-Jewish immigrant youngsters who, being irreligious prior to immigration, choose to affiliate themselves with Christianity after arrival in Israel. Moreover, because participation in the organized religious community plays an important role in the immigrants' adaptation and their identity formation (see e.g. Cao, 2005; Chong, 1998), we compared immigrant adolescents who actively participate in the immigrant churches with those, who define themselves as Christians indoors while hiding their religious affiliation outdoors and taking no part in any religious form of communal life.

The research was based on 93 in-depth interviews with the FSU immigrant youth aged 12-18, conducted in 2005. 58 interviewees defined themselves as religious, with 65% of them affiliated with Christianity. Hence, the findings presented here are drawn from this sub-sample of 38 young Christians. In addition, in 2006 we re-interviewed 10 interviewees who were affiliated with an organized Christian community to provide a better understanding of the role of religious communal life in these interviewees' adaptation process.

### **Findings**

First and foremost, the findings reveal that most of the interviewees were experiencing significant difficulties stemming from the ongoing adaptation to their new social and cultural surroundings. Thus, interviewees complained of difficulties in learning the new language and of pain of loss and longing for the hometown and friends left behind. Moreover, for many interviewees, integration was complicated even more by their parents' failure to adapt to the new circumstances, as they were unemployed or occupied in low-income jobs. Yet, the situation of the non-Jewish interviewees was even more problematic, as their lack of affiliation with the national and religious majority deprived them of one of the most important resources necessary for their successful integration: the very legitimacy of their arrival in Israel.

In this situation, when the host society did not provide the young immigrants with meaningful tools for belonging, many have found refuge in Christianity, even though they did not affiliate themselves with it before the immigration. That is, most

of the interviewees who define themselves today as Christians, were born in secular families and throughout their formative years in the FSU did not take part in any form of religious activity. Hence, their turn to Christianity should be seen as a response to the identity crisis they experienced after the immigration, as well as to the loneliness, helplessness and anxiety stemming from the relocation difficulties.

This said, the "newly-born" Christians in the sample notably differed in the salience of their religious identity and the centrality of the religious way of life in their adaptation process, as 22 of them hid their religious affiliation and were not involved in any organized religious activity, whereas 16 interviewees were openly affiliated with an established Christian community. Hence, the findings below will be presented in two sections, according to the division between unprofessed and professed Christians, which would highlight the different pathways of religious identity construction.

### *Unprofessed Christians*

The category of unprofessed Christians consists of 22 interviewees who defined themselves as Christians indoors, but who were not identified with any particular Christian denomination, had a minimal or no knowledge of Christian dogma and hid their religious beliefs outdoors. In Epstein's (1999) terms, such religious worldview can be defined as "minimal" religion, since it constitutes of faith alone - belief in God as a guiding and protecting power - disconnected from any particular religious doctrine. Such a weak religious basis is not surprising in light of the post-Soviet immigrants' secular background and lack of the inter-generational religious transmission.

Hence, these interviewees' faith has developed independently, without any parental influence or other agents of religious socialization. Moreover, most of them claimed that in the past they did not believe in God, and that they had turned to God only in Israel, in search for emotional support at times of loneliness and helplessness. A feeling of loneliness was usually reinforced by a deep longing for the homeland. In this sense, rare church visits played an important role in the interviewees' lives, since the church (regardless of any particular denomination) was perceived as a piece of homeland.

From the interviews with unprofessed Christians it is also evident that these interviewees' religious knowledge was limited to a few most popular Christian rituals and symbols, rooted in the Russian classical literature. Likewise, being disconnected from the traditional sources of religious education, the interviewees were mostly inspired by the Hollywood films touching Christian motifs and rituals, which they constantly compared with the Jewish ones. Thus, rather than searching for the guidelines of a religious way of life, the interviewees were looking into Christianity for a substitute for those holidays and ceremonies, such as *Rosh Ha-Shana* [Jewish New Year], *Bar-mitzvah* or wedding, which were not open to them in Judaism.

Furthermore, none of the unprofessed Christians was affiliated with an organized religious community or shared their religious beliefs with family or friends. In this situation of spiritual isolation and lack of communal support, the interviewees felt a great sense of insecurity about the legitimacy of their religious affiliation and avoided any visible attributes that could expose their religious identity. It appears, therefore, that these interviewees' choice of Christianity aimed at providing them

with valuable emotional support, as well as a cultural resource, which compensated them for some of the disadvantages they were experiencing as non-Jews living in Israel. Yet, lack of affiliation with an organized religious community placed significant limits on further formation of their religious identity, as well as on their ability to openly lead a Christian way of life.

### *Professed Christians*

Similarly to their unprofessed counterparts, this group of 16 young immigrants also found their way to Christianity after arrival in Israel. Yet, their religious identity construction, as well as the place of religion in these interviewees' lives, notably differ from the patterns identified above. Professed Christians' religious knowledge is mainly drawn from the Scriptures; they pray several times a day; visit church every weekend; and are not afraid to declare their religious identity outdoors. We should ask, therefore, what is responsible for such a stark difference between these two groups of non-Jewish teenagers with seemingly similar cultural background and migration experience?

First, it appears from the findings that most of the interviewees in this group (12 in total) are residents of a medium-size town in the southern periphery of Israel and belong to the same immigrant church.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, such over-representation of members of a single religious community can be explained by the non-representative sampling method. On the other hand, the immigrant church's location in the geographic and economic periphery of Israel is hardly surprising, since it fulfills a variety of their members' adaptation needs - a role which is especially important for the weaker strata of immigrant population.

This said, one of the main integration difficulties mentioned by the interviewees was their detachment from the previous peer-group and hence, a feeling of social isolation. Thus, the analysis of these interviewees' immigrant narratives shows that their first encounter with a church usually happens as part of their search for a social network. That is, these interviewees' spiritual journey usually does not start with a search for God but rather for new friends, and so they meet other young immigrants who further serve as their guides into the church. Hence, in contrast with the unprofessed Christians who complained about their social and spiritual loneliness, their professed peers were characterized by a dense social network of other young Christians, with whom they could share their feelings and spend time together by participating in communal activities organized by the church.

One of the key areas of the church activities oriented towards youth were Bible classes taking place once a week after the main service. Participating in Bible classes played a central role in shaping the interviewees' religious identity, which was built on learning the Scriptures and their internalization. Thus, in contrast with unprofessed Christians, the professed Christians were well familiar with the Scriptures and the guiding principles of a Christian way of life. In this sense, the interviewees' familiarity with the Christian doctrine even gave a new meaning to their immigration to Israel and legitimized their presence in it, as Christians living in the Holy Land. It appears, therefore, that affiliation with Christianity assists these interviewees in solving the identity crisis forced upon them by the host society and finding a balance between their national and religious identities. Thus, unlike unprofessed Christians, who were hiding their religious affiliation from the local peers, the professed

Christians felt much more confident about their place in Israel and were not afraid to discuss their religious beliefs with the native-born peers.

Although most of the interviewees' religious activities took place on the local level (usually in the church itself), they also mentioned three events on the national scale, targeting Christian youth all over Israel: the Festival of Christian music, Christian seminars, and the Christian humor competition. These events point to the ongoing formation of the nation-wide network of young Christians in Israel, which blurs geographical and sometimes also ethnic and cultural boundaries. That is, such events turned out to be one of the rare opportunities for inter-cultural contacts between the FSU immigrant youth and the children of labor migrants, thus creating a basis for forging friendships between the two sectors of Israeli society who usually live in separate worlds.

Finally, the Internet was also a useful tool for the inter-personal communication, used by the interviewees for establishing or maintaining friendships with other Christian youngsters (mostly Russian speakers) in Israel and abroad. In this sense, the Internet helped the interviewees to take part in a transnational virtual community of the Russian-speaking Christians in the FSU and in other countries where the post-Soviet diaspora resides, who found on the Web an opportunity to exchange religious materials, to find friends with similar worldviews and to feel a sense of belonging to the larger Christian world, thus challenging their marginal status of a religious minority in the predominantly Jewish Israeli context.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The present study shows that both professed and unprofessed Christians turn to Christianity after arrival in Israel, as a result of the hardships of immigration, exacerbated further by their lack of belonging to the national and religious majority. Indeed, as Smith (1978) poignantly noticed, immigration itself is often a theologizing experience and immigrants frequently react to the alienation and confusion that result from their arrival in a new country by strengthening their religiosity. Yet, in contrast with the previous studies, which mostly focused on immigrants coming from a religious cultural background (see e.g. Cadge and Ecklund 2007; Kivisto 2007), the present research reveals that irreligious youngsters too turn to religion and reinvent themselves in religious terms as a reaction to marginalization and exclusion.

That said, being equally marginalized by the host society, these two groups of "newly-born" Christians fundamentally differ in terms of the centrality and consolidation of their religious identity. Though unprofessed interviewees define themselves as Christians indoors, they have a very vague understanding of what it means, and their religious identity is mainly based on the popular aspects of "cultural" Christianity. Moreover, they are characterized by a deep sense of insecurity regarding the very legitimacy of their religious identity, which is kept in secret from the outside world. The main obstacle to a further consolidation of these youngsters' religious identity is connected to their situation of double isolation, both spiritual and social, since they are cut off from any form of religious communal life. Hence, their turning to religion provides them with a valuable emotional support, but it does not solve their identity crisis, nor does it facilitate their social integration.

In contrast, being affiliated with an organized religious community, professed Christians are characterized by a well-consolidated religious identity, which is built

on theological knowledge acquired from participation in Bible classes and reading the Scriptures. Moreover, by making Christianity their primary identity, the non-Jewish immigrant youngsters manage to escape the undesirable aspects of their marginal status vis-à-vis the Jewish majority and to reclaim their legitimate place in Israel. A possible explanation for this finding lies in the special place ascribed to Israel in the Christian religion as the [home]Land of Jesus Christ. In this sense, we should emphasize that while a powerful Christian concept of "homecoming" is an important principle in Evangelicalism, it becomes a crucial one in the context of non-Jewish immigrant youngsters who use Christianity to justify their migration in theological terms.

Thus, the study reveals a major importance of affiliation with the established religious community which explains the differences found between the professed and unprofessed young Christians. That is, professed Christians have found their way into the immigrant church, which simultaneously serves as a primary source of social support and of religious knowledge. Moreover, an affiliation with the local religious community further facilitates other forms of religious activities, both on the national and transnational levels. In the lives of unprofessed Christians, on the other hand, an encounter with the established religious community did not take place. Hence, despite the positive psychological effect of religious belief, the choice of Christianity in hiding fails to solve the main problem they are facing in Israel - that of social isolation and marginality.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The *Halakha* is the code of rabbinic law which provides precise guidelines for the Jewish way of life, and which is also accepted by the State of Israel in determining civic status. Hence, every individual, whether observant or not, is classified along religious lines. The *Halakha* applies a matrilineal definition of who is a Jew, and so the FSU immigrants who were born of inter-ethnic marriages in which only the father was Jewish are not recognized as Jews in Israel. This is especially important given the close connection between religion and state in Israel, which limits the freedom of non-Jewish immigrants with regard to their personal status in marriage, divorce, registration of children, burial etc.

<sup>2</sup> The church was established in the beginning of 2000s by the Russian-speaking immigrants who were not recognized as Jewish according to the *Halakha*. The church has an inclusive, non-congregational character in terms of Christian denominations, and it welcomes any immigrant who believes in Jesus Christ.

## References

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