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Jews Among Evangelists in Los Angeles

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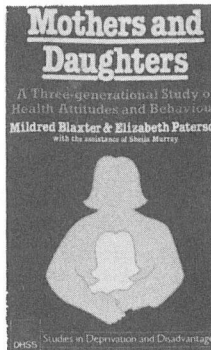
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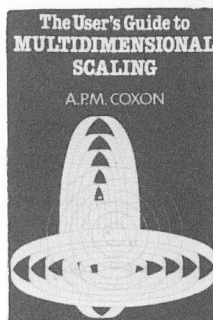
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The Politics of Jews (Review Article)
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With great regret, for financial reasons, the World Jewish Congress relinquished its sponsorship of the *J.J.S.* as from the last issue of 1980.

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JEWS AMONG EVANGELISTS IN LOS ANGELES

Jacques Gutwirth

Introduction

A **S**IZABLE number of persons in the Los Angeles conurbation can be described as marginal — not only those who are obvious drop-outs, but also Hispanic Chicanos, Asiatics, and some urban American Blacks. Many are recent immigrants and others do not come from a Christian background. There are also young Whites who are marginal not because of their ethnic origin but because they had joined groups such as the Jesus Movement, which arose largely as a reaction to the excesses of the counter-culture of the late 1960s. The Jesus Movement rejected sexual permissiveness and the use of drugs, but approved of a communal life-style.

For a number of years, I have been carrying out anthropological fieldwork in Messianic Judaism in the United States.¹ That movement combines Christian evangelism and a stress on Jesus Christ as the Messiah with elements from the Jewish liturgy and Jewish traditional observances. There has been a Messianic synagogue in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles since 1973, and it was while I was studying that synagogue that I learnt of the Open Door Messianic Jewish Congregation, which had been established in 1977. Eventually, I discovered that it was a branch of the Open Door Community Church, which referred to it as a 'house church' — and, in order to distinguish it from its other house churches, called it the 'Jewish church'. To my surprise, at least half the members of the Jewish church were clearly non-Jews: they were Blacks, Hispanics, Asiatics, and white Gentiles. I decided to discover more about the parent organization, the Open Door Community Church. I attended meetings and rallies and tape-recorded speeches, I had many informal interviews with leaders and ordinary members, and I also studied the literature published by the O.D.C.C., as well as various reports on the Church's activities by outside observers.²

The Open Door Community Church

The leader of the O.D.C.C., Dr Robert Leslie Hymers, is a white American who was born in Glendale, Los Angeles County, in 1941.

After the age of ten, he was placed in various foster homes and he attended 13 different schools. The turning point for him, at the age of fourteen, was when he came into contact with a Chinese Southern Baptist church and discovered warmth and friendship. He converted to evangelical Christianity and found a new purpose in life. He surmounted many hardships, and obtained degrees in Divinity and Religion from seminaries in San Francisco. In 1970, he was ordained as a Southern Baptist minister, and his particular concern in the San Francisco area was with the 'unchurched, the poor, the minorities',³ with whom he could readily sympathise, in view of his own personal background. In 1974, he moved to Los Angeles and became associated with the Jesus Christ Light and Power movement, which ministered to counter-cultural and marginal groups near the campus of the University of California at Los Angeles. In the following year, he left that movement and with two associates he founded the Open Door Community Church.

Doctrinally, there is little to distinguish that church from the evangelical mainstream. While the O.D.C.C. does have a non-sectarian, inter-denominational character, Hymers stresses its dependence on the evangelical tradition. He refers to himself as a Wesleyan and seeks to re-establish the dynamic revivalism and the kind of religious education which characterized the early Wesleyan movement in the United States.⁴

The O.D.C.C. stresses the value of commitment and urges its members to lead a life of repentance, holiness, and separation. In seeking to establish a kind of 'primitive' evangelism, it looks to the Baptist and Methodist churches for its inspiration, and also to individuals like Charles Finney (1792-1875), a famous revivalist preacher.⁵ Finney is regarded as a spiritual ancestor of the Church, and his fighting vigour and concern for the urban proletariat are reflected in Hymers' own ministry. Hymers frequently refers to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the golden age of American evangelism, and urges his Church members to work for a restoration of that golden age. On the other hand, he does not encourage the emotionalism which characterized nineteenth-century revivalist movements; speaking in tongues is generally ruled out of order.⁶ The primary aim of the O.D.C.C. is to inspire its members with a faith which is based on rational principles and which can be strengthened through disciplined self-improvement rather than through emotional stimulation.⁷

The Open Door Community Church operates on a two-tier system: it consists of a series of house churches and each individual is a member of a specific house church as well as of the wider unit, the O.D.C.C. The house churches are generally found in rented houses or apartments, where the pastor or deacon of the house church resides with a few members of his congregation. Weekday prayer meetings and Sunday

morning services are usually held in the living room of the house church and visitors are welcome, but numbers are generally limited to about two dozen persons. When the congregation grows larger, the house church divides; thus, there were three house churches in 1977, seven in 1978, 13 in 1979, and 23 by the summer of 1980.

Once a week, on Sunday evenings, all the members of all the house churches of the O.D.C.C. come together at a rally held in a rented hall,⁸ where they become aware that they are part of a large group, hundreds strong, rather than members of a small sect.

The location of the house churches reflects the social background of the members. In 1979, of the 13 house churches, three were in Hollywood, two in the San Fernando Valley, and one each in Culver City, Echo Park, Mar Vista, Palms, Santa Monica, Venice, and Watts — while the Jewish church was in the Pico-Robertson area. By 1980, one more house church had been established in the San Fernando Valley, three more in Mar Vista, and a further three in Hollywood; and downtown Los Angeles, east Los Angeles, and Highland Park each acquired a new house church. It is significant that the most rapid growth occurred in Mar Vista and Hollywood, which are both white middle-class areas with an appreciable number of marginal individuals — students, young actors and artists, as well as Asiatics and Blacks. The San Fernando Valley house churches are in another predominantly white middle-class neighbourhood, and they attract a large following from the Hispanic minority in that area. In at least five house churches there are bilingual pastors to cater to the Hispanic members. Although the O.D.C.C. generally serves marginal individuals in middle-class white localities, there are some exceptions: the members of the newer house churches in downtown Los Angeles and Watts are mainly inner-city Blacks.

The rapid expansion of house churches was reflected in the numbers attending the Sunday evening rallies: from 250-300 in 1979 to 500-600 in 1980.

Messianic Judaism and the Open Door Messianic Jewish Congregation

Messianic Judaism, which centres on the acceptance by Jews of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, is a recent religious movement which has grown rapidly. In 1973, there were only three congregations of Messianic Jews in the United States; by 1980, there were about 30, in large cities such as Los Angeles, Washington, and Philadelphia. The size of the congregations varies from 20 members in some cases to more than 200 in others.

Evangelical Christianity has long attracted some Jewish converts, but it was only in 1917 that they formed their own organization, the

Hebrew Christian Alliance of America. The founders were Jewish converts working as missionaries among Jews whom they hoped to attract by the use of Jewish forms of worship. Several Hebrew Christian churches were established, but they were short-lived.⁹

In the early 1970s, autonomous Jewish Christian congregations reappeared in a new form — Messianic Judaism. I believe that predisposing factors were the sense of Jewish re-awakening and self-assertion after the Six-Day War of 1967, and the growing emphasis on ethnicity in the United States. The adherents of Messianic Judaism stress their ‘affiliation’ with the Jewish followers of Christ in the first century of the Common Era. In their services, they use hymns drawn from the Jewish liturgy, and some of their prayers are taken from the *Siddur* (the Jewish prayer-book). Their synagogues are decorated with Jewish symbols, such as a Star of David and a *menorah* (a branched candelabrum). Male worshippers usually wear skullcaps, and sometimes also prayer shawls.

The Open Door Messianic Jewish Congregation has two leaders, a pastor and a cantor, both of whom were marginal Jews. The pastor, the Reverend B., was born in New York in 1936 into a middle-class ‘socialist’ family. He states that he himself had been a ‘radical atheist’, strongly committed to the civil rights movement. While demonstrating in the Southern states, he was impressed by the activities of non-violent black Christian militants. In 1963, he converted to Christianity and for some time worked as a missionary for the American Board of Mission to the Jews, a fairly traditional missionary organization. In 1976, he was ordained as an American Baptist Minister and became ‘interim pastor’ of a black Los Angeles church. The following year, he joined the Open Door Community Church with the express intention of organizing a Jewish group. At a Messianic Jewish Conference in Los Angeles, he summarized his beliefs and objectives as follows:

I am a Minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God has called me to the Jewish people. I believe very strongly in the points of view of the Fuller School of World Mission¹⁰ which advocates indigenous churches, churches that meet the cultural needs of people they are talking to. Jewish people have a distinct culture . . . I will be culturally Jewish, . . . nevertheless my root is not Judaism but Evangelical Christianity.

The second leader of the Jewish congregation, its ‘cantor’ and liturgist, is Dr S., a fourth-generation Los Angeles Jew with a doctorate in Economics. He also was born in 1936, into an upper-class Reform Jewish family. After being involved with the hippy movement and various exotic religious cults, he converted to Christianity in the early 1970s but was determined to retain his Jewish identity. He eventually joined the Jewish congregation of the O.D.C.C.

When the Jewish congregation was established in July 1977, it had only eight members and was situated in the Fairfax area of Los

Angeles, where there is a high proportion of Jewish residents. Initially, according to Reverend B., it operated in ‘a pleasant, quiet way’, requiring only a moderate commitment from its members. Before long, however, it was decided that the more authoritarian patterns of the other house churches of the O.D.C.C. would be adopted, and that a greater commitment would be required. It was also decided to encourage Gentiles to join — partly in order to ensure the survival of the congregation, which had not been noticeably successful in recruiting Jews. In 1978, the Jewish house church moved to a house in the Pico-Robertson area, a middle-class neighbourhood which, like Fairfax, has a large proportion of Jewish residents.¹¹ It holds two weekly prayer meetings, on Friday evening and on Sunday morning. In this it departs from the practice of other house churches, which hold meetings on Thursday evenings and on Sunday mornings. The Friday evening service at the Jewish house church — the ‘Shabbat’ service — is worth describing in some detail, for it serves to clarify the role of an ‘indigenous’ Jewish group within the context of the O.D.C.C.

The Friday evening service. I attended Friday evening services in 1979, before the expansion of the congregation had necessitated their renting a hall for the prayer meetings. In a room about 18 feet square, there were some two dozen chairs arranged in a semi-circle facing a lectern; there were no visible Jewish symbols (unlike the case in other Messianic meeting places), and in fact the only decoration was a poster about Jesus Christ. The service began at 7.15 p.m. and lasted until about 10.30 p.m.; it was attended by some 20 young male and female worshippers, informally dressed. However, all the men wore skullcaps, lending a strong Jewish symbolic tone; and the cover of the brochure containing the order of service was decorated with a drawing representing the Star of David, open Torah scrolls wrapped in a prayer shawl, and the Tables of the Law supported by two lions. Within the brochure were several prayers in transliterated Hebrew accompanied by a translation in English; their author is the cantor, Dr S., and he has based them on traditional Jewish liturgies but has adapted them with references to ‘Yeshua’ (Jesus).

The Friday evening service begins with the cantor reciting a prayer which starts with the words, ‘How fair are they tents’ (as rendered in the translation in the brochure) — words familiar to Jews who attend the preliminary morning service in a synagogue. One of the female members of the house church then kindles the Sabbath light in the same manner as that of an observant Jewish woman, but as she does so, Dr S. christianizes the rite by declaring, ‘Yeshua, our Messiah, says, “I am the Light of the World”’. There is then a responsive reading of psalms from the King James Authorized Version, followed by about 20 minutes of hymn singing. One of the hymns is often *Oseh Shalom*, sung in

the melody of Jewish liturgy, but there are usually another four or five hymns taken from the Baptist Hymnal¹² used in the O.D.C.C. The words of the hymns are projected onto a wall and the singing is accompanied by piano, guitar, and vigorous hand-clapping which is spurred on by the animated gestures of the pastor or the cantor. Anthropologists have demonstrated how community singing has a strong physical, emotional, and intellectual impact on the participants and helps to foster a feeling of cultural unity.¹³ In this case, the feeling of cultural identity is far closer to traditional evangelical Christianity than it is to Judaism, owing to the selection of the hymns.

When the hymn singing is over, however, several important elements of the Jewish liturgy are introduced into the service. The cornerstone of the Jewish creed, the *Shema* — 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One' — is recited by the entire congregation in Hebrew and in English; it is followed by the *Amidah* or the *Shmoneh-Esre* (the 'eighteen' benedictions). The opening benedictions are taken almost verbatim from the Jewish liturgy, but the text of the others is altered by the insertion of references to 'Yeshua'.

Reverend B. then delivers a 'pastoral prayer' from the lectern. The prayer follows a fairly typical evangelical Christian pattern, and while it is informal and improvised, it also follows a stereotyped form: in the course of the prayer, Reverend B. comments on the past and coming events affecting individual members, the congregation as a whole, and the life of the Church. The congregation then recite the Our Father in unison and very formally, after which there are responsive readings from the New Testament (or, as they say, the New Covenant). There is then a period of silent meditation, when all sit with bowed heads and closed eyes. By now, the service has come to resemble a fairly traditional evangelical meeting; but true to this liturgical medley, the silent and solemn meditation is rudely interrupted by a loud and joyous exchange of *Shabbat Shalom* and renewed singing — but now the singing follows the melodies of synagogue chants.

For a few minutes, all the members enjoy a period of brief relaxation. Reverend B. then makes a series of announcements and recommendations in the informal but authoritarian style which is characteristic of the leaders of the Open Door Community Church. The congregants are frequently reprimanded; on one occasion, he upbraided two young men who had escorted two 'unsaved' girls to the cinema, pointing out that although it was not necessarily wrong to see a film, it was wrong to accompany to the cinema girls who had not been converted: missionary duties must take precedence over frivolous amusement.

Then follows a sermon, usually also delivered by Reverend B., but occasionally by a pastor from another house church. In the latter case, the visiting pastor usually begins his sermon with a testimony about his own conversion after a life of sin, and his spiritual rebirth — this shows

the members that their leaders have gone through the same experiences. The sermons delivered on Friday evenings at the Jewish church are very similar to those heard at other house churches of the O.D.C.C.; the Jewish element is limited to the occasional use of Hebrew phrases such as *Yeshua Ha-Mashiah* (Jesus the Messiah) or *Brit Ha-Hadashah* (the New Covenant). A regular feature of many sermons is an attack on 'antinomianism' and on false teaching; at one service, the preacher harshly attacked what he called 'the perverted Gospel' and labelled as antinomian not only such creeds as Islam and Mormonism, but also modern Judaism as well as the type of Christianity practised by the Liberal churches of America.

After the sermon comes the 'Invitation' — a call to conversion, for uncommitted friends and visitors. The Invitation is common to all house churches of the O.D.C.C. The pastor urges all those present to commit themselves to Christ:

Many of you have lived a filthy life . . . I am speaking to everyone individually. Give up a life of sin . . . Can I ask you to bow your heads and close your eyes and surrender to *Yeshua Ha-Mashiah*. Say, 'I want to make peace with God . . . I may be Jewish, Catholic, it makes no difference . . .'. If you want this, slip your hands up.

The dramatic style of the sermon, the build-up to it, and the stress placed on the appeal to each individual person, often produce the desired effect. At the service in which I recorded the above Invitation, two Filipino high-school students did, in fact, slip their hands up. Altogether, the testimony, sermon, and Invitation last about forty minutes, by the end of which time the congregation must have little doubt that if the road to salvation is open to all, it is nevertheless a very straight and narrow path.

By now, the Friday evening service is practically over; but on one occasion I witnessed a somewhat rare occurrence — a 'confession session'. An undesignated female member of the congregation was said to be guilty of having committed sins which were also undesignated. The leader urged her to confess; she failed to do so, but the majority of the congregation did stand up one by one to confess their own sins, in low tones occasionally interrupted by sobs. The sins could hardly be termed grievous — failing to make peace with a companion in a university dormitory, or neglecting to perform some menial task for the Church. Each confession was followed by a few questions from the pastor or the cantor, prayers by a fellow worshipper, and absolution by the cantor. Thus, although the alleged culprit did not confess, the plea that she do so led to a most effective form of ritual mortification, with little or no penance, but with renewed submission and commitment to the Church.¹⁴

A more usual way of bringing the Friday evening service to an end, however, is spontaneous praying in a subdued light; some members sit

on the floor, some kneel, while others stand, and there is a restrained emotionalism. Personal difficulties are frequently mentioned: problems at school or at work, or with parents, are very common. Prayers are also offered up for friends or relatives, that their difficulties may be resolved or that they may find salvation. Intercession is invoked on behalf of the leaders and the members of the Church and for the success of the Church's activities. Health and healing are rarely mentioned, but the atmosphere of prayer meetings is very similar to that which prevails in group therapy sessions, in which personal anxieties are relieved. The style of the prayers also binds the group together and gives each member the feeling of being part of a strong fellowship.

Finally, at about 10.30 p.m., the service ends with the congregation chanting the Eve of Shabbat Parental Benediction, while in an adjoining room the cantor blesses the traditional Sabbath bread, the *challa*, and kasher wine; then all partake of the bread and wine, and the meeting merges into an informal social gathering.¹⁵

Why does such a mixture of ritual elements, more of a patchwork quilt than a true syncretic phenomenon with strong cultural and social roots, attract and keep together a group of persons of whom only a minority are of Jewish origin? Reverend B.'s answer is that Jewish members feel comfortable with the Jewish component in the service, while the Gentile members are also attracted by it. However, another explanation might be that there is in fact no such special attraction, and that the members of that house church simply go to the house church assigned to them by the O.D.C.C.

The patchwork impression which services at the Jewish house church give is the direct result of Reverend B.'s avowed attempts at communicating the precepts of evangelism through an 'indigenous frame'. His aim is not to integrate Jewish cultural and religious elements into an evangelical whole. In other words, he is a missionary who takes account of some of the cultural needs of his congregants. Moreover, the Jewish members of the house church are not particularly Jewish-oriented. If they were, they would find it difficult to be at ease in the essentially evangelical atmosphere of the church, which does not encourage the development of a Jewish identity. Reverend B.'s technique is in line with the general strategy of the Open Door Community Church: pragmatic flexibility towards religious and cultural backgrounds, but within the one goal of furthering a distinctly North American evangelism.

The Jewishness of the Jewish house church is skin-deep rather than fundamental — which is why the congregation cannot be regarded as truly representative of the Messianic Jewish movement, whose members try to maintain and even to develop their Jewish identity. It is surely significant that the O.D.C.C. Jewish house church has attracted

comparatively few Jewish converts since its foundation. Moreover, between 1979 and 1980, when the size of the congregation almost doubled (from about 30 to about 60 members), only a handful of Jewish members were recruited. Nevertheless, the O.D.C.C. is so committed to its Jewish house church, that it assigns to it members from other house churches. In one case, the person was half-Jewish and had only a slight Jewish cultural or religious background; he was a graduate student at the University of California at Los Angeles and the son of a Stanford University professor. It seems that the purpose of the transfer was to enhance the prestige of the Jewish house church.

Usually, when a congregation has expanded to 50 or 60 members, it is divided into two house churches. In the case of the Jewish church, such a division was not thought advisable; one large so-called Jewish sub-group of the O.D.C.C. was apparently considered to be a valuable showpiece. The Jewish house church has members from several minority groups — Blacks, Asiatics, and Hispanics. The Asiatics are mainly lower-middle class, while the Blacks and Hispanics (many of whom are college students) are mainly from working-class households. The Jewish members of the congregation, on the other hand, are from middle or upper-middle class backgrounds, although some of them may have been drop-outs in the past; and they are also highly educated. The U.C.L.A. graduate student who was transferred to the Jewish church was awarded his Ph.D in 1979, so that with the cantor (Dr S.) the congregation could boast of two doctorates. At that time, the only other person in the whole Open Door Community Church known to have a Ph.D. was its leader, Dr Hymers. The few Jews in the Jewish house church do not have a profound Jewish cultural or religious influence on the congregation, but they certainly give it social lustre.

In order to arrive at an appreciation of the Jewish contribution to the Open Door Community Church, it is necessary first to look in more detail at the total membership of that Church.

Composition of the Open Door Community Church

In 1980, the O.D.C.C. distributed a questionnaire to all its members, and gathered 515 completed forms.¹⁶ The survey showed that the two largest single ethnic groups were the Whites (36.8 per cent) and the Hispanics (35.4 per cent), while Blacks accounted for 19.6 per cent and Orientals for 8.2 per cent.

More than two thirds (67.2 per cent) were under the age of 26 — 40 per cent being under 21. Altogether, four fifths of the total (80.2 per cent) were under 31, and they included some very young members: 11.6 per cent were in the 11–15 age group. By contrast, those aged 41 to 60 accounted for seven per cent, while only 2.2 per cent were over 60 years old. These figures confirm my own observations at a rally of the

O.D.C.C. which I attended in May 1979, when the overwhelming majority of the 250–300 members present were clearly under the age of thirty.

As for religious upbringing, the largest single group (43.4 per cent) came from a Catholic background; 36 per cent came from Protestant households, and 6.1 per cent were of Jewish origin; the remaining 14.5 per cent either had no religious background or had belonged to a very small sub-group (as in the case of some Buddhists from Asia). The majority of the former Catholics were the Hispanics who constituted, as stated above, 35.4 per cent of the total O.D.C.C. membership.

Most of the adult members of the Church had attained a fairly high standard of education: 84 per cent had attended high school, 41 per cent had received a college education, and nine per cent had spent more than four years in an institution of higher learning. The published survey did not give data on occupation or income, but the educational achievements of the members show that they were generally oriented towards the middle class.

The marginality of the members is apparent from their replies concerning their life-style before joining the Church: 13 per cent said they had been 'dropouts from society'; 17 per cent had used hard drugs and 41 per cent, marijuana and other soft drugs; and 10 per cent stated that they had been 'cured' of homosexuality.

Flexibility and rigidity

Since the Open Door Community Church's policy is to establish 'indigenous' house churches, those which cater for Hispanics therefore have decorations found more commonly in Catholic than in evangelical churches. But, as in the case of the liturgy in the Jewish house church, such non-evangelical features are merely superficial; the major part of the weekday and Sunday morning services at the house churches follows the style of many Baptist, Methodist, or other revivalist churches. There are pastoral prayers, testimonies, and a sermon, followed by a 'class meeting' during which the members discuss the sermon, memorise Biblical passages, confess their sins and temptations, and pray for each other.

While there is some latitude in incorporating features from non-evangelical rituals, there is no compromise over such matters as religious discipline and the fulfilment of duties assigned by the leaders. Each house church keeps a record of the activities of its members, and if one of them fails to perform mandatory missionary duties, the penalty is exclusion from one or more services of the Church. The O.D.C.C. seeks to 'cure' homosexuals, but any formerly homosexual members who relapse are automatically barred from the Church for life.

Adultery, reading pornographic material, pre-marital sex, taking drugs, drunkenness, heavy smoking, laziness, and greed are punished by temporary or permanent exclusion, and the culprits may be publicly castigated in the Sunday evening rallies. On 29 September 1979, all the members were sent a circular which gave a detailed list of transgressions and penalties, and mentioned the names of some of those who had 'sinned'.

On the other hand, the Open Door Community Church is not as harsh and authoritarian as some of the more extreme evangelical churches. Dating is permitted within certain limits, members may watch television and listen to the radio as well as go to the cinema — but only if the programmes are 'good'. However, even such concessions do not alter the fact that the standards of behaviour required by the Church are in sharp contrast to the permissiveness found in the Los Angeles area. The Church stresses the importance of working hard at school and college, of application in one's job, and of establishing a strong family unit. In other words, it wants to ensure that its members, however marginal they may have been in the past, become successful and respectable citizens.

Most inter-denominational or non-denominational churches tend to be even more theologically and politically conservative than are those in the mainstream of evangelism.¹⁷ The O.D.C.C., however, claims in the words of Dr Hymers: 'We do not preach politics here, we do not endorse candidates'. Nevertheless, Communism is vigorously attacked, as are Liberal Christians. Dr Hymers condemned the financial support given by the 'liberal' World Council of Churches to the Patriotic Front of what was then Rhodesia, because of the politics of the Front.¹⁸

In the matter of abortion, the Church takes an uncompromisingly conservative stand; an amendment to its constitution and by-laws states that the 'United States is under judgement because of the perfidious act of abortion on demand'. On the other hand, the O.D.C.C. showed a surprisingly tolerant attitude towards the rights of homosexuals; it even joined Liberal Christians in a demonstration against a proposition for limiting the employment opportunities of homosexual men and women in California. Some cynics might explain this stand as a strategical move to attract and 'cure' homosexuals and enrol them in the O.D.C.C.

It is at the Sunday evening rallies for all members, and friends and visitors, that the faithful are urged to renew their allegiance while the others are exhorted to commit themselves to Christ. The variety of original religious backgrounds is stressed, and Dr Hymers in the course of his rally sermon will often ask Catholics, Protestants, and Jews to stand up and identify themselves. Some of the features of Judaism are praised — for example, the beauty of religious celebrations such as the

Passover *seder* or the kindling of Hanukah lights. However, there is no doubt that the road to salvation for all is only through a commitment 'to live for Christ'. The faithful will sometimes be asked at the Sunday evening rallies to stand up and 'handclap Jesus'; as they do so, most of the uncommitted also rise. At one rally, the preacher urged those who were seated to come forward:

Raise your hand! Come back to God! Have the courage! You may be a Catholic, a Protestant, a Baptist, a Jew. It does not matter! You need Christ! . . . It takes courage . . . I know you are kind of nervous . . . There is a kind of struggle inside you between God and Satan.

At every Sunday evening rally I attended, several dozen persons responded to the Invitation and were welcomed by the Church leaders, while the rally choir and congregation sang the emotional nineteenth-century hymn, 'Just as I am, without one plea'.

The stress throughout the rallies is not on millennial prophecies, but on individual salvation, with a warning that there was always the possibility 'for the unsaved to die on the freeway this evening', and if that happened they should be 'ready to meet God'. Those who respond to the appeal and step forward are told that they represent 'America that comes to live for Christ'. The aim of the church is to create here and now a better America, an America patterned on the one which is said to have existed in the golden age of the nineteenth century.

The committed members of the O.D.C.C. are closely supervised to prevent backsliding. They must all help in 'Gideon's Army', by spreading the good word from door to door for several hours every Saturday; there are regular choral and instrumental rehearsals; and a 'class ticket' is checked and punched by the pastor supervising each activity. Working for Gideon's Army, however, may be more effective in reinforcing the convictions and identity of the proselytizer than in attracting new members to the O.D.C.C.

Church, cult, or religious half-way house?

The members of the Open Door Community Church, with their disciplined behaviour and life of commitment, stand in sharp contrast to the surrounding permissive society of Los Angeles,¹⁹ and it is the well-defined lines separating them from their environment which has led some critics to say that the Open Door Community Church is a cult. Dr Hymers, in reply, stated ironically in a sermon: 'We are authoritarian, sure we are, but the Church resembles a cult like a humming bird resembles an ostrich'. But he took the accusation sufficiently seriously to enumerate, in an 'Open Letter to Parents' distributed in 1979, the strong and varied relations of his church with other Born Again evangelical groups. He stressed that he was an ordained Baptist

minister and that while his church was not a Baptist church, its inter-denominational status placed it in the same league as other famous evangelical churches, such as Moody Memorial Church in Chicago and Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa. He pointed out that the Open Door Community Church co-operated with Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the Billy Graham Evangelist Association, Jews for Jesus, World Vision International, and Jesus to the Communist World, and that it gave 'money through those well-known mainstream organizations each week'. The Church also used materials provided by the Billy Graham Evangelist Association and handed out anti-Communist tracts supplied by the Jesus to the Communist World organization.

Almost all the income of the O.D.C.C. is derived from a tithing: the members must give the Church at least ten per cent of their gross income. Holy Communion is held twice a month, but only those 'who are sure they are Born Again should share in the Lord's Supper';²⁰ however liturgically pragmatic the Church may be, in this case it adheres strictly to hard-core evangelism.

In 1980, in a forceful attempt at refuting charges of being a cult, the O.D.C.C. held a rally at Hollywood Palladium Hall ostensibly concerned with the subject of the inerrancy of Scripture. That was aptly chosen, as such a theme is a central doctrine of many 'hard-line' conservative evangelical churches. The sponsorship committee included several well-known evangelical personalities: a famous entertainer and author, the former pastor of a well-known evangelical church in Boston, and the leader of the Campus Crusade for Christ. The rally was held on a weekday evening and about 1,600 persons attended. The principal guest speaker was a best-selling evangelical author and former editor of the 'trans-denominational' evangelical magazine, *Christianity Today*. The Jews for Jesus²¹ also participated in the event, with a musical performance by their group, 'Israel Light', while the leader of the Jews for Jesus took the public donations and made a short speech. The Jewish presence in the O.D.C.C. was thus again emphasized on this occasion.

If the Open Door Community Church is not a cult, neither is it an institution in the usual mould of evangelical Christianity — in view of its semi-communal life-style, its emphasis on discipline, and the authoritarian attitude of its leaders. Although the Church has expanded since its foundation, it has also lost a great many adherents; the number of new recruits has exceeded that of those who have fallen away. The leaders frequently warn that Satan is on the attack. There have certainly been many notable defections: one 'liberal' Presbyterian minister was accused of taking away several members from one of the house churches, and even more strikingly, one O.D.C.C. preacher 'rebelled' and left the Church, taking a number of adherents with him. Sometimes, a resident of a house church 'escapes' during the night,

without warning. It seems that many are called, but not all stay the course.

It may well be that, in practice if not in intent, the main function of the Open Door Community Church is to 'rescue' drop-outs and members of ethnic minorities, guide them in a new style of living, and teach them the values of the 'moral majority' until they become integrated successfully within the wider middle-class community and leave the Church. Since most of the members of the O.D.C.C. are young men and women under the age of 30, they tend to respond positively to the paternal authority of the Church leaders at first, especially since these leaders do not seek to cut them off from most contacts with the outside world — as do many cults. However, after two or three more years, when they are in steady employment and then marry, they find it increasingly difficult to submit to authoritarian leadership and they leave the Church. One way of retaining their allegiance might be to promote them within the Church, but of course such positions are limited in number, and only a few have the abilities necessary for leadership.

Conclusion

Jews in the United States have expressed great concern about the appeal which various cults have for the vulnerable young of their community.²² The February–March 1980 issue of *Alternatives* (a Christian magazine published in New York) has a directory which lists nine specialized services, of which six are 'Missions to the Jews'.

However, the Jewish involvement in the Open Door Community Church is clearly very limited in terms of numbers, since in 1980 only about six per cent of all members were of Jewish origin. On the other hand, Jews are prominent in positions of leadership; in 1979, four of the 13 house churches were led by Jewish pastors; and one of these four had a Master's degree in psychology and acted as a qualified counsellor for young members of the Church. That was a very useful asset in any discussion with parents who were fearful about their children's adherence to the O.D.C.C. It is also worth noting that the leading musician at the Sunday evening rallies is a Jewish lady pianist.

The Church is so intent on recruiting Jews that it has passed an amendment to its constitution and by-laws to the effect that 'This Church does not recognize conversion from Judaism to Christianity, does not require Jews to convert from Judaism to become members, and considers its members to have remained Jews.' Few, if any, Christian churches have been known to make such a formal pronouncement. The Jews for Jesus movement has goals which are somewhat similar to those of the Open Door Community Church, and there is close collaboration between the two organizations, whose

leaders hold one another in great esteem. The important difference between them is that Jews for Jesus is a missionary movement among Jews rather than a church, while the O.D.C.C. reaches out to members of all religions, including Jews.

The subject of the State of Israel occurs rather infrequently in sermons at the Sunday evening rallies, but on at least one occasion the leader of the Open Door Community Church declared, 'We support Israel . . . All across the United States, believing people are strong supporters of Israel'. However, it is clearly not this pro-Israel attitude which leads the Church to emphasize the Jewish presence in its midst.

In an article on 'The Jews of Los Angeles', the *Los Angeles Times* of 29 January 1978 stated that Jews 'by most accounts have the highest per capita income and per capita are the best educated, most productive and socially active citizens in the community'. Presumably, such an influential daily newspaper reflects the opinion of a substantial proportion of the population of the Los Angeles area. Generally, Jews in the United States are seen as the model of a poor urban community which became strikingly prosperous and respectable within one or two generations. The Open Door Community Church undoubtedly attaches special importance to its Jewish house church, and to Jewish recruits in its other house churches. Most of the members of the O.D.C.C. are young persons from ethnic and marginal groups, and it is likely that they look upon the Jewish members of the Church as a link with the world of the established middle classes whose values the Church has taught them to appreciate, and whose ranks they wish to join.

NOTES

¹ See my discussion on Messianic Judaism in my 'Rapport de Mission CNRS/NSF', *Revue des Études Juives*, vol. 136, no. 3–4, 1977, pp. 415–23. See also my 'Fieldwork Method and the Sociology of Jews: Case Studies of Hassidic Communities', *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. 20, no. 1, June 1978, pp. 49–58.

² I am grateful to the leaders and members of the O.D.C.C. for their unflinching co-operation. I am also grateful to Professor C. Peter Wagner of the School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, who made available to me papers on the O.D.C.C. by four of his graduate students: William P. Addley, Brian Kingsmore, Kenneth M. L. Wheaton, and C. Wayne Zunkel; and to Barbara Clairchilde, then graduate student at U.C.L.A., for her co-operation.

A valuable source material is Dr R. L. Hymers' dissertation for a second doctoral degree at San Francisco Theological Seminary, *Guidelines for House Churches: A Study on Organizing and Developing House Churches*, 2 vols, June 1981.

³ Most, but not all, biographical data are taken from Hymers, *Guidelines . . .*, op. cit.

⁴ For a survey of Revivalism, Methodism, and the Wesleyan influence, see Sidney A. Alsthrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, vol. 1, New York, 1975.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 557.

⁶ In his *Guidelines . . .*, op. cit., Hymers states: 'We . . . believe that all spiritual gifts described in the New Testament are currently operative today, but believe that the 'sign' gifts are given only to some and not to be over-emphasized' (vol. 2, p. 341).

⁷ In this context, see Garry Schwartz, *Sect Ideologies and Social Status*, Chicago, 1970, pp. 177-80.

⁸ The Church distinguishes between 'members' and 'friends', but both participate equally in the life of the Church; membership is contingent on a screening and examination process. As the distinction is difficult for an observer to detect and as participation is equal, the term 'member' in this paper refers to both members and friends.

⁹ On the Hebrew Christian movement, see Ira O. Glick, 'The Hebrew Christians: A Marginal Religious Group' in Marshall Sklare, ed., *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group*, New York, 1958, pp. 415-31; and B. Z. Sobel, *Hebrew Christianity: The Thirteenth Tribe*, New York, 1974.

¹⁰ Dr Hymers and other leaders of the O.D.C.C. consult Professor Wagner of the Fuller School on matters of their Church policy.

¹¹ In an area of about three square miles, south of Beverly Hills, about half of the 23,000 residents are said to be Jewish; see Neil Reisner, ed., *Jewish Los Angeles: A Guide*, Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles, 1976, p. 12.

¹² *Worship and Service Hymnal*, Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, Illinois, 1976.

¹³ See Roger Bastide, *Le Candomblé de Bahia*, Paris, 1958; C. Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le Cuit*, Paris, 1964, p. 36; and Gilbert Rouget, *La Musique et la Transe*, Paris, 1980.

¹⁴ See Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community*, Cambridge, Ma., 1972, pp. 73-74, where she indicates how mortification in utopian communities involves submission to social control and leads the individual into new directions and fosters personal development.

¹⁵ For the words of the Benediction, see Numbers, 6: 24-26. Partaking of the bread and wine on this occasion is in the Jewish ritual manner, and is not intended as Christian Holy Communion.

¹⁶ See Hymers, *Guidelines . . .*, op. cit., pp. 71-76.

¹⁷ See Louise L. Lorentzen, 'Evangelical Lifestyle Concerns Expressed in Political Action' in *Sociological Analysis*, vol. xli, 1980, pp. 144-54.

¹⁸ On this issue, the stand taken by the O.D.C.C. was similar to that of other evangelical churches: see Ernest W. Lefever, 'The WCC: An Uneasy Alliance Between God and Marx', in *Christianity Today*, 7 September 1979, p. 25.

¹⁹ See Robert W. Balch, 'Looking Behind the Scenes in a Religious Cult: Implications for the Study of Conversion', in *Sociological Analysis*, vol. xli, 1980, pp. 137-43.

²⁰ See Hymers, *Guidelines . . .*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 306.

²¹ The Jews for Jesus movement arose about 1970 in the San Francisco area. Its public appeals for conversion attracted a great deal of interest; see 'Jews for

Jesus' in *Time* magazine, 12 June 1972. For a sociological analysis, see Dan La Magdeleine, *Jews for Jesus: Organizational Structure and Supporters*, unpublished M.A. dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, Ca., 1977. See also the article by the leader of the Jews for Jesus, Moshe Rosen, 'Why Are Young Jews Turning to Christ?' in *Christianity Today*, 10 November 1972; and Moishe (sic) Rosen and William Proctor, *Jews for Jesus*, Old Tappan, N.J., 1974.

The Jews for Jesus movement is often wrongly identified by the public at large with Jewish Christianity and Messianic Judaism.

²² During the high tide of the Jesus Revolution, the visible presence of Jews in the movement led to many alarmed articles. See, for example, André Ungar, 'Jews and Jesus Freaks' in *Reconstructionist*, December 1973, pp. 7-11. This concern persists; more recent articles include Mark Cohen, 'Missionaries in our Midst: The Appeal of Alternatives' in *Analysis*, vol. 64, March 1978 (publication of the Institute for Jewish Policy Planning and Research of the Synagogue Council of America).

It has been suggested that as many as 40 per cent of all cult members are Jewish, but a more reasonable estimate is made by Rabbi Maurice Davis, who puts the proportion at about 12 per cent: see Lita Linzer Schwartz, 'Cults and the Vulnerability of Jewish Youth', in *Jewish Education*, Summer 1978.