

***JewBus* Are Not What They Used to Be. A Call for a Diachronic Study of the Phenomenon of the “Jewish Buddhists”**

by Mira Niculescu

Abstract

The success of Buddhism in the West, and in America in particular, since the middle of the twentieth century, gave birth to a new hyphenated religious phenomenon: the Jewish-Buddhists. While a growing number of scholars have been addressing this phenomenon, all of the studies published so far speak of “Jewish-Buddhists” as if they could be described in the same way it was in the seventies. In this paper, I take issue with the monolithic, reified approach towards the phenomenon of the “Jewish-Buddhists”, and will try to show their evolution from their early days at the dawn of the emerging Counter Culture until today. Following findings derived from diachronic and ethnographic fieldworks, conducted since 2009, I will suggest that this evolution has undergone three main phases, which I call the three “ages”: the age of challenging, the age of claiming, and the age of re-claiming.

1. Introduction

A Jewish mother takes a trip to the Himalayas. She is looking for her son and she knows exactly where to find him. When she finally reaches the gate of a large Buddhist monastery in the heart of Nepal, the monk, who opens the door, finds a little plump American woman with a strong Brooklyn accent planted right in front of him. She seems both quite upset and quite determined. She hurls at him defiantly with her chin up: “I want to see the Head Monk.” “Well it is not so simple to see our venerable teacher, dear Madam”, he replies. “He is on a silent retreat right now and he has private consultations only once a month. But you are lucky, the next one is next week, and I can put you on the list for an interview. Are you ready to wait here until called?”

“Yes, I will wait”, replies the mother. She has just travelled the world to see him, and has already been, ever since she passed the Hudson River, way out of her comfort zone anyway; So waiting a week at the gates of a Buddhist monastery (*chas v’shalom*¹ – that her late father would see her there!) is not going to stop her now. She came to find her son, so she will. After ten days or so, she receives the message that the teacher *will* see her. They introduce her to all of the formalities, how to be dressed, what offerings to bring, the required greeting etiquette and what not. They finally usher her into a large reception room. Freshly shaved Buddhist monks are sitting on cushions in peaceful silence all around the walls. In the middle, on a beautifully sculpted wooden throne, seated on a cushion in a saffron robe, still and quiet, his body displayed in the customary cross-legged lotus position so foreign to the West, presides the Head Monk. Upon seeing him, our Jewish mother drops her bags and all the formalities she had just acquired, and runs towards him, shouting: “Nu,² Michael, enough already, come back home!”

This joke has been circulating in many versions and in many places for a few decades now, but Rosie Rosenzweig tells it much better than me. Rosenzweig is an American journalist and a Jewish mother who, just like in the story, took a trip up to the Himalayas because of her Buddhist son. However, in her case, she did it *together with* her son, in order to better understand what journey he had embarked on. The autobiographical book she drew from this experience, *A Jewish Mother in Shangri La*³, was intended, alongside other autobiographies already famous in the Jewish world, such as Boorstein’s *That’s Funny you don’t Look Buddhist*⁴ or Lew’s *One God Clapping*,⁵ to help give better understanding, from the inside out, to the “Jewish-Buddhist” phenomenon.

The “Jewish-Buddhist” phenomenon emerged in the aftermath of World War II, at the dawn of the Counter Culture in America in the fifties,⁶ at a time

¹ “God forbid”, in Hebrew.

² A colloquial expression equivalent to “come on!”

³ Rosie Rosenzweig: *A Jewish Mother in Shangri La*, Boulder, Shambala, 1998, p. 1.

⁴ Sylvia Boorstein: *That’s Funny, you don’t Look Buddhist. On being a faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist*, San Francisco, Harper 1997.

⁵ Alan Lew/ Sherril Jaffe: *One God Clapping. The Spiritual Path of a Zen Rabbi*, Woodstock, Jewish lights, 2002.

⁶ Although Jewish interest in Buddhism has been noticed at the beginning of the 20th century. See Martin Baumann: *Creating a European Path to Nirvana. Historical and Contemporary Developments of Buddhism in Europe*, in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion* Vol. 10, No. 1 (1995), pp. 55–70.

when Asian Buddhist Masters were bringing their teachings to the West. In this context, American Jews seemed particularly taken by the message of Buddha, and their presence in the emerging Western Buddhist circles was soon noticed. Studies published in the nineties estimated that Jews made up 16⁷ to 30 % of Buddhist practitioners and up to 50 %⁸ of Buddhist scholars.

Since the publication of *The Jew in the Lotus*⁹ in the mid-nineties, the first book to popularize the expressions “Jewish-Buddhists” and also “*jewbus*”, popular interest as well as academic scholarship have progressively increased. Since the late nineties, studies from various countries and from various disciplines have endeavored to understand this phenomenon from the perspectives of religious circulation and return¹⁰, New Age ritualism¹¹, and identity¹², the anthropology of conversion to Western Buddhism¹³, interreligious dialogue,¹⁴ Jewish spirituality and the New Age movement¹⁵, the notion of hyphenated religion and dual belonging¹⁶.

However, within all of these discourses, the “Jewish-Buddhists” seem to be systematically described as a monolith both in kind and in time. Yet, can we talk about Jewish-Buddhists today the same way we could in the seventies, or even in the nineties? Can we talk about this phenomenon as if nothing has changed since the counterculture? Arguably no. Yet, Valley, who hints

⁷ James W. Coleman: *The New Buddhism. Some Empirical Findings*, in: James William Coleman, in Duncan R. Williams / Christopher S. Queen (eds) *American Buddhism. Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, Richmond, Surrey, Curzon 1999, pp. 91–99, p. 95.

⁸ Judith Linzer: *Torah and Dharma. Jewish seekers in eastern religions*, London, Johnson Aronson 1996, p. xxii.

⁹ Roger Kamenetz: *The Jew in the Lotus. A poet’s rediscovery of Jewish identity in India*, San Francisco, Harper 1994.

¹⁰ Linzer, *Torah and Dharma*.

¹¹ Cia Sautter: *Chochmat: Rhymes with Spirit Rock*, in: *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 1.1 (2002), pp. 5–15.

¹² Anne Valley: *Jewish Redemption by Way of the Buddha*, in: Celia Rothenberg / Anne Valley (eds), *New Age Judaism*, London: Vallentine Mitchell 2008, pp. 19–33.

¹³ Lionel Obadia: *Shalom Bouddha. Judaïsme et bouddhisme une rencontre inattendue*, Paris: Berg International 2015.

¹⁴ Yonatan Gez: *The Phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists in Light of the History of Jewish Suffering*, in: *Nova Religio. The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (August 2011), pp. 44–68.

¹⁵ Marianna Ruah-Midbar: *Current Jewish Spiritualities in Israel: A New Age*, in: *Modern Judaism*, 2012, pp. 102–124.

¹⁶ Mira Niculescu: *I the Jew, I the Buddhist. Multi Religious Belonging as Inner Dialogue*, in: *Crosscurrents*, September 2012, pp. 350–359.

in her article at a change in “generation”¹⁷ of Jewish-Buddhists, remains an exception. Scholarship on the topic generally concurs to speak about the phenomenon in a-temporal terms. Talking about Jewish-Buddhists synchronically bares the risk of discarding both the complexity of such an individual religious posture, and its evolution throughout the years.

This is why in this paper, I take issue with a monolithic, reified approach towards the phenomenon of the “Jewish-Buddhists”. I argue that this phenomenon cannot be assessed socio-anthropologically as a single or stable object, since it is unified neither in kind – as shown by the variety of individual postures it speaks of, nor in time – as shown by its evolution since the Counter Culture. I would like to take further Valley’s hint of a generational layering, and suggest that the “Jewish-Buddhist” phenomenon has to be looked at diachronically in order to fully see its processual dimension.

I draw this analysis from ethnographic multi-site and transnational fieldworks based on a combination of in-depth interviews of 200 individuals involved both in Buddhism and in Judaism, textual analysis from internet websites and articles, and from popular literature on the phenomenon as well as participant observations during transnational fieldworks conducted since 2009 between Israel, Western Europe (France and England), and America (New York and San Francisco).

I suggest that the phenomenon of the Jewish-Buddhists has evolved in three distinct phases, and I call them “ages”: first, in the seventies, the age of challenging; second, in the nineties, the age of claiming; and last, in the 2000s, the age of re-claiming.

2. The Seventies: The Age of Challenging

The Jew in the Lotus was published in the United States in 1994. The book, written by the American writer Roger Kamenetz, recounts the encounter between a delegation of American rabbis and the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. Kamenetz sought to understand why so many Jews of his generation had become Buddhists. Indeed, already within the first generation of Western Buddhist teachers were many Jews. Among the three Buddhist schools attracting Westerners in America – successively, Japanese *Zen*, Indian *Vipassana*, and Tibetan *Vajrayana* – he names of the first and most prominent American Buddhist

¹⁷ Valley, *Jewish redemption*, p. 19.

teachers were telling: in *Zen*, Weitzman, Hartman, Fischer, Maguid, and Merzel; in *Vipassana*, Kornfield, Goldstein, Salzberg, and Schwartz; in Tibetan Buddhism, the spiritual names of Thubten Pemo, Tubthen Chodron or Surya Das hid those of Landsman, Green, and Miller.

None of the previously mentioned estimations of Buddhist Jews provide sources and thus their accuracy can be called into question. However, the significance of the phenomenon of “Jewish-Buddhists” is more of a qualitative nature than of a quantitative one. For Ram Dass (formally known as Richard Alpert), a former Harvard Professor and a New York Jew turned Hindu teacher, the percentage of Jews involved in the early boom phase of Buddhism was “inordinate” and “outlandish”¹⁸. And indeed, the Jewish presence in emerging Western Buddhist circles in America was so noteworthy that its observers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, have been joking about it: late rabbi Alan Lew recalls that when he started practicing Zen meditation in Berkeley in the sixties, so many of those who came to the morning meditation were Jewish, that they used to joke about them being almost “enough for a *minyan*”¹⁹. American writer Roger Kamenetz in his best-seller *The Jew in the Lotus*, reports that in the eighties, Buddhist Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa, soon started interspersing his talks with *Yiddish* words, while jokingly calling his newly founded circle the “Oy Vey²⁰ School of Buddhism.”²¹ Wes Nisker, a Jewish Buddhist teacher of Insight Meditation,²² jokes that the founders of “one of the first large Buddhist meditation centers in America” in the nineties, “Goldstein, Kornfield, Salzberg and Schwartz, (...) sounded more like a law firm than a Buddhist teaching collective”²³.

¹⁸ Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*, p. 9.

¹⁹ The Quorum of Ten Mn (and Women in Liberal Circles) traditionally required to pray. In: Lew / Jaffe. *One God Clapping*, p. 63.

²⁰ A very famous Yiddish expression akin to an exclamation of worry/sadness, that Ashkenazi Jews use today in a lighter way, and often to make fun of themselves.

²¹ Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*, p. 9.

²² An American version of the South East Asian Vipassana school of Theravada Buddhism. See Gil Fronsdal: *Insight Meditation in the United States. Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness*, in: Charles Prebish / Kenneth Tanaka (ed.), *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, Berkeley, University of California Press 1998, pp. 165–180.

²³ Wes Nisker: *The Big Bang, the Buddha, and the Baby Boom. The Spiritual Experiments of my Generation*, San Francisco, Harper 2003, p. 116.

However, not everyone in the Jewish community found this funny. According to Kamenetz himself, “where I came from, leaving Judaism for another religion seemed like a big betrayal”²⁴.

Indeed, when they first became visible, around the late sixties and early seventies, Jews who practiced Buddhism became a source of concern for their families. This angst, which is only hinted at in this article’s opening joke, was very real in the seventies.

During our interview in 2014, San Francisco-based Zen teacher Denise recalled how, as a university student who had just joined Zen circles in the sixties, her parents took her to such a “anti-cult clinic”. As a child of holocaust survivors from Austria and Poland, she grew up near New York in a house filled with psychological distress and pervasive fear. After a car accident, during her time at university, a strong insight pushed her towards the exploration of the practice of Zen. To her, it was incredibly satisfying. But, she recalled:

“But my family didn’t feel that way; they had me deprogrammed. At that time, a lot of young people would get into cults. And I was 24, so they were afraid. (...)

So I said I will go voluntarily; so they took me to an office in New York city, where there was a big unit dedicated to that. I was taken to a room, where there was a doctor. A Jewish doctor, who was wearing a kippah. So he was obviously religious. The room was locked, and like he had a big desk and I had a tiny little chair. He had the power to have me locked away”.²⁵

For Denise, engaging in Buddhist practice as she states herself, “was not in opposition with my Jewish upbringing, but rather in response to a very strong spiritual experience that I didn’t find any ways of exploring at the time in the Jewish meditative tradition, which had been decimated by the Holocaust”. Studying this deeply led her to ordination in the Soto Zen lineage, and to live in a Zen center, where she teaches. Though for Denise, this commitment was never oppositional, her family was appalled. She recalls: “My parents’ generation, including my mother, became afraid and shunned me. Some family members mourned me as if I had died. However, over time, the fear softened, and they trusted me to help them in their old age.”

²⁴ Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*, p. 9.

²⁵ Transcription from a personal Interview, San Francisco, July 2009.

“Cult clinics” are one of the first things Judith Linzer mentions in the introduction of *Torah and Dharma*, the book she drew from a psychology thesis written in Berkeley in 1974.²⁶ Linzer back then worked in such a clinic and recalls receiving many anxious phone calls from parents whose children were talking about yoga and Buddhist meditation. Indeed, the seventies were the golden age for the flourishing of various New Age and Eastern spirituality groups, from Osho and Hare Krishna to Zen Buddhism, and the mainstream American society frowned upon them. By contrast, today, yoga is a mainstream, if not middle/upper class, activity – even businessman and politicians advocate for. The reception of Eastern practices, at least in the case of Buddhism and yoga, has undergone a 180° turn in less than three decades.

From a normative Jewish perspective especially, with founding principles that strictly prohibit any form of idolatry, Hindu and Buddhist-based practices, seemed particularly threatening: even if presented as “spiritual” rather than “religious” practices to a Western audience, they were offered in frames that systematically involved the presence of statues and images – even if they did not involve actually praying to “foreign” gods.

Rabbis in the seventies severely condemned these practices, as shown in this extract of a letter from the Lubavitcher Rebbe published in 1978:

“It is well known that certain oriental movements, such as Transcendental Meditation (T. M.), Yoga, Guru, and the like, have attracted many Jewish followers, particularly among the young generation. Insofar as these movements involve certain rites and rituals, they have been rightly regarded by Rabbinic authorities as cults bordering on, and in some respects actual, Avodah Zarah (idolatry). Accordingly, Rabbinic authorities everywhere, and particularly in Eretz Yisroel, ruled that these cults come under all the strictures associated with Avodah Zarah, so that also their appurtenances come under strict prohibition.”²⁷

The seventies were the age of fear and of condemnation, a time where rabbis, Jewish mothers and synagogue chairs felt very much challenged by what the Jews who had “gone to Buddhism” told them: that Judaism did not provide answers for their own existential angst, did not satisfy their need for “answers”,

²⁶ Linzer, *Torah and Dharma*, 1996.

²⁷ <http://crownheights.info/something-jewish/12180/yoga-and-meditation-is-it-kosher/>, last accessed September 6th, 2017.

but rather imposed on them beliefs that seemed outdated and ritual behaviors that seemed senseless.

When Jewish-Buddhists appeared, they thus seemed to adequately embody the mindset of Counter Culture: a newly-born Western subculture, led by a middle and upper class of students and artists, who were at a point of discontent and rebellion towards their fathers' culture and the world they inherited. They decided to throw it all away while embracing opposite values. So too, with respect to their spirituality and religiosity, they rejected the religions they were brought up with (mainly Christianity and Judaism),²⁸ and avidly embraced what they discovered in Hinduism and Buddhism, belief systems that were seen as the antipodes of Abrahamic religions.

In short, being a "Jewish-Buddhist" in the seventies thus meant to be an ethnic Jew who practiced Buddhism, and either never really had any religious/spiritual connection to Judaism (in most cases), or had discarded it.²⁹ It was basically being a Western Buddhist who "happened to be a Jew".

Naturally, the Jewish "soul" would "come out" from time to time. For instance, poet Allen Ginsberg wrote a Kaddish after his mother's death in the late fifties³⁰. Yet, for these new Western Buddhists, Judaism was basically being left behind.

3. The Nineties: The Age of Claiming

This type of fear from Jewish families did not stop with the end of the Counter Culture and the impending 21st century. In 1990, Kamenetz reports that when the father of Rabbanit Greenberg, the wife of a New York based orthodox rabbi, heard that she was part of the delegation that would travel to Dharamsala in order to meet with the Dalai Lama, "he became so upset, that he made a special study of the Talmudic tractate, *Avodah Zara*"³¹. In the Jewish tradition, people start a special study in extreme cases of illness and life-threatening

²⁸ See Wade Clark Roof: *A Generation of Seekers. The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby-Boom Generation*, San Francisco, Harper 1993, and Harvey Cox: *Turning East. Why Americans Look to the Orient for Spirituality – And What That Search Can Mean to the West*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1978.

²⁹ See Linzer, *Torah and Dharma*, p.24. I gathered the same information during the interviews I conducted in America, in England and in France, between 2008 and 2016.

³⁰ Alan Ginsberg, *Kaddish*, in: Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/49313>, last accessed November 13th, 2016.

³¹ Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*, p. 11.

situations of their loved ones, hoping the merit of their study will protect them from danger. Not coincidentally did Mrs Greenberg's father choose the Talmudic tractate that expounds on idol worshipping, one of the major prohibitions for Jews, as stated in the foundational "ten utterances" (better known as the "ten commandments").

Likewise, in the nineties, the rebellion of the "Buddhist-Jews" was still alive, as shown by the "list" written by Zen practitioner David Gottlieb and sent to orthodox Rabbi Akiva Tatz, explaining both outlining his choice for Zen and voicing his discontent with Judaism.³²

However, *Letters to a Buddhist Jew* also shows that this Zen-practicing Jew, who was so clearly discontent with Judaism, was not only willing to exchange with an (orthodox) rabbi, not only willing to be addressed by him, as the title indicates, but was indeed asking for it: he initiated the conversation. He was in need of such a dialogue. Maybe by criticizing Judaism as he did, he wanted to be convinced. And it apparently worked: twenty years later, as he told me in our Skype interview in 2012, Gottlieb had left Zen behind and had become a quite observant Jew – even preparing a doctoral thesis on Jewish thought.

The nineties were the time of claiming being both Jewish and Buddhist, as shown by the publication of other autobiographies of Jewish-Buddhists, such as Boorstein's quoted above *That's Funny you don't Look Buddhist*³³ or Lew's *One God Clapping*³⁴, but also Fischer's *Jerusalem Moonlight*³⁵, and Zen translations of Jewish Psalms³⁶.

Derived from their own personal accounts, it seems that some of these Jews who meditated for many years, had come to terms with their own Judaism, ready to claim being both Jewish and Buddhist. This happened not in spite of their Buddhist practice, but actually *thanks* to it: meditating and inquiring about "who they really were" – a leading Buddhist question, made them realize that their "true nature" was Jewish.

³² Akiva Tatz/David Gottlieb: *Letters to a Buddhist Jew*, Southfield, MA: Targum Press 2004.

³³ Boorstein, *That's Funny, you don't Look Buddhist*, 1997.

³⁴ Lew, *One God Clapping*, 1999.

³⁵ Norman Fischer: *Jerusalem Moonlight. An American Zen teacher walks the path of his ancestors*, San Francisco, Clear Glass Press 1995.

³⁶ Norman Fischer: *Opening to You. Zen-inspired Translations of the Psalms*, New York, Viking Compass 2003.

This is what Insight Meditation teacher Sylvia Boorstein expressed when she recounts that after meditating for a while every day, she realized that Jewish psalms (Tehilim) started popping up in her mind.³⁷ Similarly, late rabbi Alan Lew recalls in his spiritual autobiography that it was Zen that brought him back to Judaism:

“Zen meditation, which focused on the present moment, had given me a wide, vibrant view of the world. It laid reality bare. It allowed me to overhear the constant arguments going on in my head. Now I heard something else, underneath, after all the veils were drawn back. I confronted my essence, and my essence was Jewish.”³⁸

Lew and Boorstein are but two among many examples of Jews who “came back to Judaism” as a result of their Buddhist practice. These two characters reveal the multiplicity of figures that hide behind the unified term “Jewish-Buddhists”: one is a Buddhist teacher, the second is a rabbi; yet, both moved closer to Judaism without discarding their Buddhism.

Can Lew, Boorstein, and others, similar to those who returned to Judaism due to the practice of Buddhism, be called “Jewish-Buddhist,” just like the first Jewish-Buddhists as described in the “first age” – those who Anne Vallely calls the “first generation” of Jewish-Buddhists?

Lew, when he became a rabbi, did not describe himself as a Buddhist. Buddhism was not his identity; it was a tool he still used. When I interviewed Boorstein in San Francisco in the summer of 2009, she told me about the expression “Jewish-Buddhist” – and even more so “jubu”, which made no sense to her, as it does justice to neither Judaism nor Buddhism. She was, as she put it “not half this and half that, but entirely “Jewish” *and* “Buddhist”.

It seems to her just as inaccurate, if not symbolically violent, to impose on her such a hyphenated label, as it is for the Jewish-born Tibetan Buddhist nun Thubten Chodron to be constantly reminded that she is Jewish³⁹.

So the label of Jewish-Buddhist does not seem to work. It makes sense only when talking about a phenomenon, yet without the hyphen. And in that perspective, *Buddhist Jews*, or *Jewish Buddhists*, can be defined, not as Buddhists who happen to be Jewish, but as Jews who feel connected to both Judaism and to Buddhism.

³⁷ Boortsein, *That’s Funny, you don’t Look Buddhist*, p. 1.

³⁸ Lew, *One God Clapping*, p. 59.

³⁹ Thubten Chodron: *In the Land of Identities*, <http://thubtenchodron.org/2011/06/healing-israel-jewish/>, last accessed August 23, 2016.

4. The 2000's: The Age of (Re-)claiming

Homecoming had another consequence: it was not rare that a Jew, who reconciled with his or her Judaism, then set up to help other Jews to also find the way back.

This is why, not long after becoming a congregational rabbi, Lew had joined forces with his old friend and Buddhist teacher Norman Fischer to create what they called a “Jewish Meditation collective”: a place where they could integrate the input of what they had learned in their Buddhist training, but within a Jewish context. Through this project, they intended to apply the tools of Buddhism: mindfulness, equanimity, non-judgment, freedom to Torah, Shabbat, and festival. For instance, Pessach was the opportunity to meditate on the importance of freeing oneself, in a Buddhist perspective, from one’s own mental patterns.

By creating *Makor Or*, the Zen rabbi and the Jewish Zen priest were offering the benefits of Buddhist practices and teachings to their fellow Jews, yet within a Jewish context. Indeed, they had understood that times had changed, and that, at the turn of the 21st century, Jews who wanted to meditate had reached the age of re-claiming. Yes, they wanted to experience the benefits of meditation, but, as opposed to their predecessors from the seventies, who were willing to discard all heritage and to adopt entirely new cultural and spiritual practices, they also wanted to re-invest in, re-claim and re-appraise their Judaism. In fact, at the same time that meditation had become more and more mainstream and that more and more people practiced it, many Jews expressed a desire for exploring spirituality within Judaism. This explains the success of books written in the eighties and onwards by orthodox rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, starting with his best seller *Jewish Meditation*.⁴⁰

After the age of the Counter Culture and the pessimistic diagnosis of the “disenchantment of the world”⁴¹ in the West, the beginning of the 21st century seemed to become the time of “returns to religion”.

In such a cultural context, more and more formerly secular Jews, who meditated in Buddhist circles “returned” to Judaism – often to intrinsically

⁴⁰ Aryeh Kaplan: *Jewish Meditation. A Practical Guide*, New York, Schocken 1985.

⁴¹ Marcel Gauchet/Oscar Burge: *The Disenchantment of the World. A Political History of Religion*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1999.

religious types of Judaism.⁴² Some, like the former sadhu turned rabbi Dovid Zeller⁴³, would offer their trajectories as exemplary tales of home-leaving in order to “return” better or *tshuva*⁴⁴.

Similarly, Jews, who were raised in religious settings and discarded Jewish practices completely for an intense involvement in Buddhism, eventually came full circle: practicing Buddhism enabled them to come to terms with who they were and to look at their tradition with new eyes. Such was the case with Brenda Shoshanna, born and raised in Borough park, one of the so called “ultra-orthodox” neighborhoods of Brooklyn, who became a Zen teacher and describes in her book *Jewish Dharma* how, in her view, Zen and Jewish values and practices highlight each other.

For the most observant ones, meditating in a Jewish context was a *sine qua none* condition. Such was the case of Len Moskowitz, a born and raised orthodox New Yorker and a Yeshiva university graduate, who used to attend faithfully all the meditation retreats Lew and Fischer offered (he only ever attended theirs). Moskowitz now teaches the meditation practices he acquired at Yeshiva University, the orthodox Jewish university in New York.

But the majority of the new students of Buddhist meditation within Jewish settings did not share Moskowitz’s concerns of kashrut and of a religiously “safe” environment; for most of them, it was simply about re-appraising Judaism through an innovative approach.

Lew’s passing in 2009 did not prevent Fischer to continue the work of *Makor Or* alone, and today, the Jewish Zen monk collaborates with other rabbis from the Institute of Jewish Spirituality, to co-lead retreats that today are called “Jewish meditation retreats”.

The very fact of the creation of an “Institute for Jewish Spirituality”, based on the practice of mindfulness and meditation, shows the depth of this re-claiming process: it has turned into an institutionalization of the use of Buddhist tools within a Jewish frame.

⁴² As displayed through exemplary discourses regarding the return to Judaism on Religious Jewish Websites, which aim and bring closer estranged Jews (what is called “*kiruv*”, from “bringing closer”): “From Buddha to Torah” <http://www.aish.com/sp/so/From-Buddha-to-Torah.html>, Last accessed November 14th, 2016.

⁴³ David Zeller: *The Soul of the Story: Meetings with Remarkable People*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub. 2006.

⁴⁴ “*Tshuva*”, the return to religion, as being one of the most highly praised values in Judaism.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to show the evolution of the phenomenon of the Jewish-Buddhists since their emergence during the age of the Counter Culture. And I have suggested that this evolution has undergone three main phases, which I have called “ages”: the age of challenging, the age of claiming, and the age of re-claiming.

Today, although there are no more cult clinics, there are still, and probably will always be, harsh critics towards Jews, who have taken on Buddhist practices – as seen in internet articles trying to convince the sons of Avraham that Buddhism is “*treif*”⁴⁵.

Nonetheless, today, Buddhist and Hindu-based practices are fully part of ‘legitimate’ Western cultures, as ‘Eastern spiritualities’ have become tools for well-being and self-actualization, and have even evolved a deep affinity with corporate and consumer cultures. There is nothing “counter cultural” anymore in doing yoga during the week and attending synagogue services on *Shabbat*⁴⁶.

So, calling someone a “Jewish-Buddhist” today is certainly very different from what it implied a few decades ago. This is why the diachronic lens seems so important when wanting to appraise this phenomenon, even in such a short time period.

Jewbus “are not what they used to be”, indeed.

⁴⁵ Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*, p.11.

⁴⁶ The seventh day of the week, which in Judaism is considered a sacred day of “pause” – literally what “Shabbat” means.