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Spiritual circles: ritual and the performance of identities in the Zionist Christian Church

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2009-10-13T11:23:42Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/7346

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how spiritual identities are constructed and enacted through ritualised behaviour in Zionist Christian Church services. Another aim was to identify the significance of specific religious objects and activities in order to investigate how these contribute to the performance of identity in the Zionists. The investigation was rooted in various ritual performance theories (Turner, 1982; Schechner, 2002).

The study utilized qualitative research methodology. The research data consisted of casual conversations with congregants, six open ended and semi-structured interviews, numerous photographs and approximately three hours of raw video recordings. Additionally, one vignette interview was conducted where congregants responded to photographs and video footage of their church service. Most of the data was gathered on site at the *Melville Koppies* nature reserve in Johannesburg. One congregation, the New Gospel Church in Zion of Africa, participated in the study.

The investigation revealed that Zionist identity is performed on both the individual and collective levels of Zionist culture. The results indicated that identity is constructed through a series of religious acts and symbolic behaviours and that identity formation occurs through performance. It was also discovered that Zionist church services are highly ritualized and that spiritual identities emerge through 'restored' behaviours prescribed in the ritual context. The belief in the 'Holy Spirit' was also discovered to play a significant role in the emergence of spiritual identities.