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# Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity - 2012

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# 2012 SANTA CLARA LECTURE

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SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY

FEBRUARY 14, 2012



**IGNATIANT CENTER**  
FOR JESUIT EDUCATION

**2012 Santa Clara Lecture**  
**Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity**  
Catherine Cornille, Boston College  
Santa Clara University, February 14, 2012

In the context of burgeoning religious plurality, experiences of multiple religious belonging or hybrid religious identities have become increasingly reported and noted. Throughout the Western world, pockets of people have come to cheerfully claim to being both Christian and Hindu, or Buddhist and Jewish, or any combination of two and sometimes more religious identities. A classical example of this may be found in the figure of the Christian theologian, Raimon Panikkar, who, returning from a visit to India, famously claimed that: “I ‘left’ a Christian, ‘discovered’ myself a Hindu, ‘returned’ a Buddhist, all the while remaining a ‘Christian.’”<sup>1</sup> This enigmatic statement encapsulates a world of meaning which gradually comes to light in reading his oeuvre. Another Christian theologian, Paul Knitter, recently published a book titled *Without the Buddha, I Could Not Be a Christian* (London: Oneworld, 2009). In the course of the past decade, a growing body of scholarly literature has explored the subject. Though the phenomenon is probably as old as the reality of religious coexistence in different parts of the world, systematic reflection on it is relatively recent, at least in the West. Two edited volumes, published around the turn of the century, drew attention to the subject: a French volume edited by Jacques Scheuer and Denis Gira, *Vivre de Plusieurs Religions. Promesse ou Illusion?* (Paris: Les Editions de l’Atelier, 2000), and my own *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002). Since then, a slew of articles have appeared, and just this past year, two books were

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1 The Intrareligious Dialogue, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998, p. 2.

published on the topic.<sup>2</sup> By far the majority of these publications' authors are Christians.

Though the different authors are by no means in agreement on the meaning and theological implications of this phenomenon, the majority of Christian scholars writing on the subject tend to be supportive of multiple religious belonging, attempting to argue for its possibility on theological grounds. Mine has been a relatively lone critical voice, questioning the possibility and the desirability of multiple religious belonging. I am sure I would be readily joined by any number of more conservative theologians, if they would deign to consider, let alone comment on the phenomenon. However, my approach to multiple belonging is not based on internal religious or apologetic arguments, but rather on more phenomenological grounds. While most authors approach the phenomenon from the perspective of the individuals claiming multiple belonging, I attempt to view it also—if not mainly from—the perspective of the religions to which individuals claim to belong. Most religious traditions favor, if not require complete and undivided commitment from their followers. While this may be attributed to a sense of religious exclusivity, possessiveness, and jealousy, I would like to explore other reasons of a more logical, theological and spiritual nature which may lie at the basis of this emphasis on unique religious belonging.

While the expression “multiple religious belonging” has largely won the day in describing the phenomenon, it is clear that the experience of identification with more than one religion is highly varied, both in kind and in degree. Before engaging in religious or theological reflection, I

2 Gideon Goosen, *Hyphenated Christians: Toward a Better Understanding of Dual Religious Belonging* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2011) and Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian: An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2011).

would therefore like to offer a typology of multiple religious belonging. This might lead to the realization that the problem with multiple religious belonging is often less theological than linguistic.

### **Typology of Multiple Religious Belonging**

While the idea of belonging to more than one tradition is relatively new in the West, it has existed for a very long time in Asia with its long history of religious diversity, and in Africa, where the arrival of Islam or Christianity rarely meant the abandonment of traditional religious practices. In the course of history, the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging has thus manifested itself in a variety of ways, from voluntary to involuntary, and from an occasional or serial event, to a principled and categorical reality.

#### *Multiple Religious Belonging as Cultural Identity*

For most of the history of religions, the reality of multiple religious belonging has presented itself less as a matter of choice than as a matter of course. In countries such as China or Japan, where the cultures have traditionally been shaped by different religious traditions, each fulfilling a compartmentalized role within the fabric of social and religious life, cultural identity has automatically involved identification with multiple religious traditions. For centuries, the lives of Chinese were shaped by Confucian principles as well as Taoist and Buddhist ideas and practices, at times intermingled and at other times attending to various aspects or stages of life. And the religious identity of the Japanese continues to comprise Shinto, Buddhist, and occasionally Christian elements, each fulfilling specific ritual functions.<sup>3</sup> Religions entering these cultures were

3 Buddhism related to funerals and the afterlife, Shinto to life cycle and new year rituals, and Christianity to wedding rituals. For more on multiple religious belonging in Japan, see Jan Van Bragt, “Multiple

made to adopt a more limited and specialized role within the panoply of diverse religious offerings. And individuals have availed themselves of these offerings primarily in view of their aesthetic, social, and functional power. This type of multiple religious belonging may thus be regarded as a cultural trait rather than a personal choice. It reflects one's identity as belonging to a culture profoundly shaped by different religious traditions.

#### *Multiple Religious Belonging as Family Identity*

A different expression of involuntary multiple religious belonging may be found in the case of children born to interreligious marriages. Often, parents choose to raise their children predominantly in one or the other tradition. But exposure to the religious beliefs and practices of both parents still tends to generate a sense of identification with or loyalty to both religions. And children are also at times equally exposed to the two traditions, with a view that they will make their own choice when the time comes. As such, children born in Jewish-Christian households may visit the temple or synagogue on High Holidays while also celebrating Christmas and Easter. When no single religion is dominant in the life of the child, a certain compartmentalization may take place, where certain religious ideas and rituals assume a dominant role on certain occasions. Individuals born from interreligious marriages often have a sharper sense of the differences between religions and the tensions involved in navigating two different worlds, since their parents still belong primarily to one tradition and cannot fully participate in the life of the other, and since they have consciously chosen to maintain their distinct religious identities. Here, multiple religious belonging is thus a matter of belonging to a particular family and absorbing the various strands of its religious

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Religious Belonging of the Japanese People” in C. Cornille, ed. *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, pp. 7-19.

identity.

### *Multiple Religious Belonging as Occasional Ritual Participation*

One of the most prevalent forms of multiple religious belonging which may be found in any part of the world is that of the occasional visit to temples, shrines, or saints of any religion in light of particular needs. In India, one may find Hindus and Muslims visiting a shrine where an image of the infant Jesus is believed to protect children, while Christians and Muslims may be found in temples of goddesses who bestow fertility or grant favorable matches.<sup>4</sup> Shrines of Muslim saints in turn attract pilgrims from various religions who seek the saint's blessings. This scenario is repeated with appropriate adjustments in many parts of the world, where, as Premawardhana puts it, individuals "mix practices and beliefs eclectically in accord with shifting situational needs and without regard for where one belief "system" ends and another begins."<sup>5</sup>

One of the most common occasions for religious excursions into other religious traditions is the need for physical healing. In Africa, for example, native religious healers continue to be sought out by individuals who have converted to Christianity or Islam. And the new religions of Japan, many of which are focused primarily on healing rituals, receive visitors and clients from any number of religious traditions.

This may be typified as occasional or serial multiple belonging, since the act of belonging to a particular religion tends to be circumscribed

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4 For numerous examples of this, see Selva Raj and Corinne Dempsey, *Popular Christianity in India: Riting Between the Lines*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2002.

5 Devaka Premawardhana, "The Unremarkable Hybrid: Aloysius Pieris and the Redundancy of Multiple Religious Belonging" in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46:1 (2011), p. 100. Premawardhana provides a bibliographical sampling of such mixing from different parts of the world.

and limited by the duration of a particular need. Once the need is either met or thwarted, the sense of identification with a particular god, saint, or healer tends to dissipate or diminish, to be possibly reawakened when another crisis presents itself. While this may be regarded as a form of multiple religious belonging in the broadest sense of the word, it could more accurately be described as multiple religious participation, or better still, multiple religious mobilization. Here, religions are regarded as commodities or services which may be tapped or mobilized in times of particular need. One is less inclined to embrace the other religion wholesale, or to concern oneself with the internal religious exigencies of belonging.

*Multiple Religious Belonging and New Age or Post-Secular Religiosity*  
One may argue that all forms of multiple religious belonging are based on certain needs, whether material or spiritual. One of the newer and more common forms of multiple religious belonging in the West is that of so-called New Age or Post-Secular religiosity. Here, individuals who are weary of the purely secular and materialist view of the world and of the meaning of life, as well as of the traditional institutional structures and absolute claims of religions, turn to the various religions available in the marketplace with a view as to what they find spiritually nourishing and fulfilling. The multiplicity of religious options available indeed allows them to explore the teachings and practices of any number of traditions to which they may feel or claim to belong. However, this type of religiosity generally involves a rejection of traditional institutional structures and religion's self-understanding. As such, it may be more poignantly typified as "believing without belonging" (Grace Davie) or maybe multiple religious non-belonging.

*Multiple Religious Belonging, Inculturation, and Interreligious Dialogue*



Within the Christian tradition, the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging originally came to the fore in the context of inculturation. In the attempt to understand local cultures, the pioneers of inculturation such as Jules Monchanin, Henri Le Saux, Bede Griffiths, Raimon Panikkar, Hugo Enomiya-Lasalle, William Johnston, and others came to immerse themselves in the religion of that culture and often came to deeply identify with it. The greater openness to other religions in the course of the twentieth century paved the way for a more systematic and personal engagement with other religious teachings and practices.

The type of in-depth encounter which originally took place in the context of inculturation has now become available to anyone interested in exploring the teachings of any other religion. It may be done in private or in formal study, through academic and/or spiritual learning. Various academic disciplines focus on the study of other religions, and such in-depth knowledge of another religion has come to shape the discipline of comparative theology. Although comparative theology does not require multiple belonging, its profound engagement with another religion may in some cases lead to such experience.

One of the forms of inculturation and dialogue which raises some interesting questions for multiple religious belonging is that of reinterpreting the Christian faith through the philosophical categories of other cultures. Insofar as most philosophical systems are shaped by religious presuppositions, this form of inculturation involves using the metaphysical categories of one religion to interpret the symbols and texts of another religion. This process may be found to some extent in the pioneers of inculturation mentioned above. But it is most explicit in the work of John Keenan and Joseph O'Leary, who have

used Madhyamika philosophy to interpret Christian revelation.<sup>6</sup> These theologians view this exercise not so much as a case of double belonging but as an attempt to render the Christian message truly universal and responsive to postmodern philosophical challenges by integrating alternative hermeneutical systems. Just as the early Christians used Greek philosophical categories, and Aquinas integrated Aristotelian metaphysics, Mahayana philosophy is regarded as a new and promising way to come to understand the meaning of Christian revelation. While some may view this as multiple religious belonging in the sense of belonging to the worldview of one religion and the symbolic system of another, others may approach this as a form of creative hermeneutics and constructive dialogue. The question of whether this is a case of multiple religious belonging or not thus rests on the possibility of distinguishing the philosophical framework from the religion with which it has traditionally been associated.

This sample of different forms of multiple religious belonging demonstrates the variety of contexts in which this phenomenon takes place. In spite of this diversity, one may discern a few general characteristics. While multiple religious belonging may at times be the result of a deliberate process, in most cases it occurs spontaneously or inadvertently, as part of social or cultural circumstances or in response to existential needs. Second, multiple religious belonging tends to involve a

6 See John Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989) and all of his other works including the most recent *I Am/No Self: A Christian Commentary on the Heart Sutra* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011). For Joseph O’Leary, see his *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), and more recently his article “Skillful Means as a Hermeneutic Concept” in C. Cornille and C. Conway, *Interreligious Hermeneutics* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), pp. 163-183.

focus on religious practice and ritual efficacy, rather than on doctrinal or philosophical truth and coherence, as can be seen very clearly in the more popular expressions of multiple religious belonging. But one may also find it in the engagement with spiritual practices of other religions where the emphasis lies primarily on experience. And finally, the realization of multiple religious belonging often leads to a crisis and a struggle to reconcile the different strands of belonging experienced. That struggle is evident in a figure such as Henri Le Saux, whose diary reflects a sense of torture in trying to reconcile Hindu and Christian experience and thought.<sup>7</sup> It is certainly not the case that everyone struggles with or suffers from multiple religious belonging. But the degree of struggle with multiple religious belonging may be seen to be proportional to a) the intensity of commitment to one particular tradition, and b) the concern with logical, philosophical, or doctrinal consistency.

### **Christian Identity and Multiple Religious Belonging**

The response from Christian theologians to the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging has been predominantly positive. Some have seen multiple belonging as the most advanced form of dialogue between religions, meant to inform and inspire theologians about the possibilities (and sometimes the limits) of interreligious dialogue (Amaladoss, Clooney).<sup>8</sup> Others have proposed new approaches to absolute reality

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<sup>7</sup> See his spiritual autobiography: Swami Abhishiktananda, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*. London: ISPCK, 1999. Translated from the original French *La Montee au fond du Coeur*.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Amaladoss, “La double appartenance religieuse” in *Vivre de plusieurs religions: Promesse ou illusion?* (Gira and Scheuer, eds.) Paris: Editions de l’Atelier, 2000), p. 52. Francis Clooney, “God for Us. Multiple Religious Identities as Human and Divine Prospect” in

and to theological truth in order to accommodate multiple belonging (Habito, King, Drew, Goosen)<sup>9</sup>still others have questioned the very idea that religious or theological problems with multiple belonging exist, if one presumes that all religions are ultimately themselves hybrids and that clearly demarcated religious identities and boundaries are illusory (Hill Fletcher, Voss Roberts and Premawardhana).<sup>10</sup>

The tendency has been to view the phenomenon mainly or only from the perspective of the subject who claims such belonging. However, all religious belonging involves both a subjective and an objective pole, the latter referring to the criteria of belonging developed by the religion itself. As even Panikkar pointed out, religious belonging is a matter not only of the individual but also of the tradition to whom he or she claims to belong. With regard to Christian belonging, he proposed that “the criterion for Christian identity lies ultimately in the sincere confession of

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Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity (C. Cornille, ed.) Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002, pp. 44-60.

9 See Gideon Goosen, *Hyphenated Christians: Toward a Better Understanding of Dual Religious Belonging* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2011) and Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian: An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2011). Drew offers an overview of the views of Ruben Habito, Maria Reis-Habito and Sallie King on this.

10 Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism*. New York: Continuum, 2005, chapter 4; Michelle Voss Roberts, “Religious Belonging and the Multiple” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26:1 (2010) pp. 58-59, where she develops the metaphors of hybrids, rhizomes, and fluids to break through traditional bounded conceptions of religious identity. And Devaka Premawardhana, “The Unremarkable Hybrid: Aloysius Pieris and the Redundancy of Multiple Religious Belonging” in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 46:1 (2011) pp. 76-101.

a person, validated by a corresponding recognition of a community.”<sup>11</sup> A religious group cannot claim an individual as a member unless that person acquiesces to membership, and an individual cannot claim membership unless a religious group confirms it. While I may claim to be a Hindu, those words are meaningless unless a Hindu community recognizes me as such. Each religion, of course, has different criteria of belonging and distinctive initiation rituals, and most religions allow for varying degrees of commitment and belonging. But the ideal, for most religious traditions, seems to be one of complete and undivided commitment to one tradition. Even in India, where seekers are encouraged to explore the teachings of various gurus and religions, the pursuit of the highest state of realization ultimately requires full surrender to one particular guru or path and the abandonment of all other options. It is important to consider the reasons for this in any discussion on multiple religious belonging.

While a religion’s resistance to multiple religious belonging may be attributed to a sense of religious jealousy and possessiveness, there are also logical, practical, and spiritual grounds for the ideal or the goal of unique belonging. On a purely logical and theological level, belonging to a particular religion involves commitment to a particular worldview and to a set of practices which at some point inevitably clash with those of other religions. The phenomenon of multiple religious belonging has at times been likened to belonging to different clubs or organizations simultaneously: One may be a member of a sports club, a women’s club, a political party, a religious institution, and an AA group without sense of conflict or contradiction, other than time.<sup>12</sup> While it is certainly true that

11 Raimon Panikkar, “On Christian Identity: Who Is a Christian?” in C. Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002, p. 123.

12 Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist*

one may belong to different organizations, and that these often provide bridges to individuals from other religions, there are certain organizations whose ideologies preclude simultaneous belonging. Individuals tend not to invest themselves fully in two political parties with often opposing views, or belong to two competing teams of the same sport. Since the religious beliefs and practices of two traditions never seamlessly overlap or complement one another, multiple belonging poses ideological or theological problems. One cannot both believe that Jesus was the only incarnate son of God and view him as one of many avatars, or as one of the most important prophets in the history of God's engagement with the world. This central element of Christian faith is quite unique to Christianity, and it would thus be difficult to maintain it while also claiming to be Buddhist, or to abandon it while claiming to be Christian. Individuals who assume a hyphenated Christian identity tend to resolve the tensions between religions by reinterpreting the conflicting beliefs in more complementary or mutually harmonious terms or by "treating certain pivotal points of disagreement between the Buddhist and Christian worldviews as 'bracketed questions' rather than siding firmly with one tradition or the other,"<sup>13</sup> and by resorting to a transcendental perspective beyond any particular religious conception. Rose Drew refers to this perspective as "the monocentric pluralist perspective," which involves the presupposition that ultimate religious truth is unified and beyond

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Approach to Religious Pluralism. New York: Continuum, 2005, p. 82 and 91.

13 Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?* (Routledge, 2011), p. 210. Drew bases her analysis largely on interviews with Christians who claim Buddhist-Christian dual belonging, primarily Ruben Habito, Maria Reis-Habito, Sallie King, and Roger Corless.

any of its expressions in particular religions.<sup>14</sup> However, this pluralist move no longer matches any particular religion's sense of belonging. Roger Corless, one of the first scholars in the United States to claim to be both Buddhist and Christian, squarely admits this: "A person cannot be authentically a Buddhist and a Christian at the same time, since the systems are complete in themselves and, at several important points (such as the existence of God) contradictory. One can only be a "Buddhist-Christian" if one either ignores the differences between the systems or blends them in a transcendental unity."<sup>15</sup> Corless did end up developing his own synthesis between the two traditions, but he always insisted that this synthesis was his own, and no longer either Christianity or Buddhism.

In addition to the theoretical and theological contradictions involved, multiple religious belonging also presents a series of practical challenges. Every religious tradition requires certain forms of ritual participation and a commitment of time and resources which would make it impractical to belong to two or more religions at the same time. Paul Griffiths speaks in this regard of non-compossibility or of demands that cannot coexist,<sup>16</sup> such as the requirement to give 2.5 percent of one's income as *zakat* and the requirement of tithing to the Church, or participation in the Jewish and in the Roman Catholic ritual cycle. The more piecemeal one's participation in the ritual life of a particular tradition, the more capable one may be of multiple belonging. But such lukewarm participation is

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14 Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?* p. 189.

15 Roger Corless, "The Coming of the Dialogian: a Transpersonal Approach to Interreligious Dialogue" In *Dialogue & Alliance* 7:2 (1993), p. 13.

16 *Problems of Religious Diversity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, pp. 32-36.

hardly the ideal of religious belonging.

Besides the logical and practical challenges, the religion's emphasis on the need to belong to only one religion (at a time) may also be grounded in spiritual considerations. Most advanced spiritual paths require complete and unconditional surrender from adepts. This has to do with the fact that spiritual development and growth presuppose a chastening or dissolution of the ego and of desire, and this in turn takes place through complete abandonment or submission of one's will to a spiritual guide or some other expression of religious authority. Any form of divided loyalty or distribution of commitments over various religious paths or traditions might here be construed as a sign of pride or a withholding of one's ego and judgment, and thus as an obstacle to spiritual growth. It is of course true that the pursuit of the highest spiritual realization tends to be reserved for a religious or spiritual elite, regardless of the tradition. But it does suggest that the ideal of singular religious commitment and belonging is based not only on ideological and practical, but on spiritual reasons, tried by many religious traditions.

From a Christian perspective (as from the perspective of many, if not most religious traditions), multiple religious belonging is thus undesirable, if not impossible. It may be tolerated as a necessary compromise in certain cultural and religious contexts. But it prevents individuals from reaping the fruits of a total commitment and unreserved surrender.

### **Multiple Religious Identification**

While multiple religious belonging runs against the grain of religious identity and the logic of religious belonging, the problem in many cases may well be terminological, rather than logical or theological. The expression "multiple religious belonging" tends to be used to refer to



various degrees of identification with more than one religious tradition. It often involves individuals who belong primarily to one religion, but who have come to resonate or identify with particular teachings and practices of another religion. In his book *Hyphenated Christians*, Gideon Goosen defines dual religious belonging as occurring “when a person has a first major religion and draws on a second to a greater or lesser degree, according to the criteria of doctrine, practices, and actions”<sup>17</sup> Rather than dual or multiple religious belonging, this phenomenon might be more accurately described as “multiple religious identification” or “multiple religious participation.” Except in rare cases, this does not involve a desire to be fully initiated into the other religion or to fulfill all of the requirements of full membership. Most Christians who practice Buddhist forms of meditation are not inclined to take the three refuges.<sup>18</sup> And Hindus may identify with certain Biblical teachings and Christian practices without ever considering baptism. The appeal of the other religion thus tends to be partial and relative to one’s primary or dominant religion.

Paul Knitter suggests that what he himself has discovered in his process of Christian-Buddhist double belonging “characterizes many if not most other double-belongers: there is a core religious identity (which is often the tradition one grew up in) that enters into a hybrid relationship with another religious identity and tradition.”<sup>19</sup> This relation of hybridity, however, does not usually involve two equal partners. A core religious identity tends to function as the normative basis and the hermeneutical lens through which one perceives and evaluates the teachings and

17 *Hyphenated Christians* (Peter Lang: 2011) p. 19 and p. 159.

18 There are of course exceptions to this—such as Paul Knitter, who did go so far as to take the three refuges.

19 *Without Buddha I Would Not Be a Christian*, p. 215.

practices of other religions. This means that one will tend to identify only or mostly with beliefs and practices which are not in contradiction with one's core tradition. As such, Christians might be drawn to Jain notions of nonviolence, to Hindu expressions of love of God, or to Muslim practices of charity and fasting. William Johnston used Zen practice not as an end in itself, as is the case in Zen Buddhism, but as a preparation for the higher state of the *Unio Mystica*. This thus implies unequal belonging to more than one tradition, or a rather derived use of the term belonging with regard to the second religion.

However, in some cases, the appeal of or identification with another tradition may weaken one's attachment or commitment to the original tradition. This may lead to a conscious or unconscious shifting of one's normative basis to the other tradition. In this case, elements from one's original religion come to be selectively appropriated and reinterpreted in terms of the other religion. In the introduction to his book, Knitter raises the poignant question: "[H]as my dialogue with Buddhism made me a Buddhist Christian? Or a Christian Buddhist? Am I a Christian who has understood his own identity more deeply with the help of Buddhism? Or have I become a Buddhist who still retains a stock of Christian leftovers?"<sup>20</sup> Knitter himself believes that he is still primarily a Christian, writing for a Christian community and for the sake of advancing Christian theological thinking. But it is not always clear which religion dominates in cases of multiple identification.

The case mentioned above of identification with the symbolic system and the scriptures of one religion and the metaphysical system of another religion raises some interesting questions regarding religious identity and primary belonging. A good number of Christians have come to reinterpret

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20 Ibid., p. xiii.

Christian teachings through the non-dualistic worldviews of Hinduism or Buddhism. Most of them continue to regard themselves primarily as Christians who attempt to liberate the tradition from the shackles of the Hellenistic worldview in which it has traditionally been expressed and render it more genuinely universal. But the application of Buddhist and Hindu categories of interpretation to Christian revelation also leads to significant doctrinal shifts. Here is where the question of the limits or the boundaries of Christian identity and belonging becomes theologically interesting and highly charged.<sup>21</sup>

While multiple religious identification generally involves a certain predominance and normativity of one religion over another, in some cases individuals are genuinely torn between religious traditions, unable to choose between one tradition or the other and unwilling to reduce one to the other. In this case, one religion may exercise a certain normativity in some areas of life and the other in other areas, or one may come to experience a certain split in one's self. Roger Corless, for example, came to view Christianity and Buddhism as two parts of his identity.<sup>22</sup> This comes close to genuine religious hybridity. Such hybridity may result in some form of syncretism, the coexistence within a particular system of irreconcilable beliefs, or it may lead to a new personal synthesis. While some may dismiss such syntheses as purely subjective and as having little

21 Such questions, of course, apply also to other religious traditions. The discussion on multiple religious belonging is often informed by a rejection of religious boundaries. However, while such boundaries are seldom clear and defined, they do constitute a concern for individuals belonging to particular religions, and not only for those who are the "police of orthodoxy" as Voss Roberts puts it.

22 "Many Selves, Many Realities: The Implications of Heteronomy and the Plurality of Worlds Theory for Multiple Religious Belonging" in Pacific Coast Theological Society Journal. October 2002.

bearing on any particular tradition or on the history of religion as a whole, others have come to assign it a more constructive and theologically relevant role. Tinu Ruparell, for example, approaches it as a privileged position to engage in what he calls “interstitial theology,” defined as “a mode or methodology for the comparative philosophy of religion which, exploiting the structure of metaphor, aims at the construction of liminal perspectives or standpoints for continuing the conversation of religions in a creative and open-ended way.”<sup>23</sup> It thus involves the redescription of each tradition in terms of the other by means of new metaphors or “new semantic hybrids” which will lead to “newly formed recombinant traditions.”<sup>24</sup> Ruparell thus envisions multiple new hybrid traditions which both create and reflect new religious experiences, the truth of which lies not so much in their propositional but in their pragmatic value. He states that “if sufficient people settle this liminal land, the newly formed recombinant tradition will have been found to be viable.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Multiple Religious Identification and Interreligious Dialogue**

Insofar as multiple religious identification involves a continued commitment to a particular religious tradition and to its development, it can become an important incentive for, and instance of interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue is here understood as the engagement between two or more religious traditions, oriented to mutual understanding and growth. This growth may take the form of a deeper

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23 In *Dialogue and Hybridity*. Forthcoming by Albany: SUNY Press, chapter 4.

24 “The Dialogue Party: Dialogue, Hybridity, and the Reluctant Other” in *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue*. Vigo Mortensen, ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003, pp. 235-248.

25 *Dialogue and Hybridity*, chapter 4.

self-understanding, a recovery of certain forgotten, neglected, or underdeveloped elements of one's tradition or direct learning from the other. Identification with elements in another religion may serve such dialogue and growth in a variety of ways.

First, it may point to elements missing or underdeveloped within one's own religion. Multiple religious identification often arises from an experience of lack or from spiritual needs which either led to the exploration of other religions or which became manifest as a result of encountering another religion. Widespread resonance with particular teachings and practices in another religion may thus lead to critical self-reflection and to an attempt to address those needs within one's own tradition, either through the recovery of neglected teachings and traditions or through the integration of new ideas and practices. It is largely the encounter with Hinduism and Buddhism which has reawakened interest among a good number of Christians in figures such as Meister Eckhart and Marguerite Porete. And the popularity of yoga and meditation among Christians is also a direct fruit of this encounter. Elements from the other tradition also often color or affect one's new understanding or integration of traditional rituals and forgotten teachings. While Christian yoga or Christian zen may claim roots in the Hesychast tradition, it is clear that it is also deeply indebted to Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

Second, multiple religious identification also represents a laboratory or a field of experimentation with interreligious dialogue. Individuals who identify with elements of another religion tend to perform what Raimon Panikkar calls an "intra-religious dialogue" or an encounter within oneself of the elements absorbed from another religious tradition. The attempt to integrate elements from different religions

within oneself provides an important resource for the more formal expressions of dialogue and comparative theology. It represents a lived and organic experience of dialogue in which insights are not imposed or constructed, but flow naturally from the deep encounter between religions. As such, they may become a starting point for more systematic reflection.

While multiple religious identification thus provides the basis for dialogue and for experimentation with the integration of alternate religious teachings or practices within one's own tradition, it also illustrates the challenges and the limits of such dialogue and integration. Not all experiences of multiple identification lead to a creative and constructive synthesis. Some struggle their whole lives with the attempt to reconcile the teachings and practices of different religions. This may provide some indication of the difficulty of conducting a constructive dialogue with particular teachings or practices of particular traditions. The experience of split or dividedness of individuals between two traditions may itself provide such preliminary indication. However, no single experience of the possibility or limits of multiple religious identification should be taken as decisive. Insofar as religions are always more complex and rich than the experience or insight of any individual, both positive and negative experiences of multiple religious identification must be taken within a larger temporal and experiential context. The more recurrent the experiences of multiple religious identification, the more significant they will be for a particular religion. One of the challenges of multiple religious identification for interreligious dialogue lies in how to concretely channel and integrate the multiple and varied instances of religious identification which affect members of a particular tradition, in this case Christianity. Some

Christians may identify with certain elements of some traditions of Hinduism, and others with certain traditions of Islam; some may be inspired by Baha'i ideas, while others may identify with a Taoist text. The attempt to constructively engage all of these forms of identification may lead to fragmentation of the tradition and to the dissipation of a tradition into varied clusters of believers involved in a constructive dialogue with one or the other tradition. The challenge is thus one of determining how all of these sources of inspiration may come to bear upon the tradition as a whole, and how to maintain unity while also allowing for a certain internal diversity.<sup>26</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The general and loose category of multiple religious belonging has been used to refer to a variety of kinds and degrees of identification with more than one religion. While for many such identification is a matter of course, of being born in a particular culture or family, it is increasingly becoming a matter of choice, as individuals are exposed to a variety of religious options, and as the traditional institutional hold of religions over their members weakens. Some practice multiple religious belonging as an alternative to any defined religious identity and belonging while others may continue to identify with or belong to single religious traditions.

Though individuals may claim multiple religious belonging, such claims are problematic when viewed from the perspective of the religions to which they claim to belong. For most religious traditions,

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<sup>26</sup> This challenge already presents itself in the field of comparative theology, where those who deal with the dialogue between Christianity and Judaism have little to say to those who deal with the Christian-Buddhist or the Christian-Muslim dialogue.

belonging involves at least ideally a commitment to a worldview, a way of life and a set of rules which occupy one's whole life. Hence, one cannot be fully Christian and fully Buddhist or Christian and Hindu in equal measure and at the same time. While this may be attributed to institutional jealousy or possessiveness, I have tried to show that there may be—beyond the logical and theological ones—also spiritual reasons for this ideal of singular religious commitment and belonging. While multiple religious belonging in the full sense of the term is thus impossible, the term is generally used in a general and derivative sense to refer to any degree of identification with the teachings and practices of more than one religion. Though this may involve complete abandonment of religious identity and belonging, many in fact continue to identify primarily with one or the other tradition, which represents the basis or the norm for selectively identifying with and integrating elements from another religion. Here, one may speak more accurately of multiple religious identification, or multiple religious participation. Insofar as one tradition remains normative, this type of multiple religious identification may become a rich laboratory for interreligious dialogue and comparative theology. The widespread appeal of certain teachings or practices may point to certain unfulfilled religious desires or spiritual needs and suggest possibilities for addressing those needs. In that sense, multiple religious identification may actually come to enrich, rather than diminish Christian identity, and serve as a catalyst for continuing theological and spiritual growth.