
Religious Hybridity and Christian Identity: Promise and Problem

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Introduction

In a world of religious diversity and choice, many individuals have come to compose their own personal faith, drawing from elements of different religions. This reality is variously called “religious hybridity,” “spiritual fluidity,” “liquid religion,” “multiple religious belonging,” “multiple religious identification,” “multiple religious participation,” “religious multiplicity,” “multiple religious bonds,” or “spiritual but not religious.” These terms signify slightly different aspects of the same departure from the more classical (Western) understanding of religious identity as claimed by one religious tradition shaping one’s way of thinking, worshipping, and acting. It is tellingly expressed in the title of Duane Bidwell’s book *When One Religion Isn’t Enough*.¹ The phenomenon may be seen as a modern expression of the New Age movement of the mid- to late-twentieth century, which rejected the exclusive truth claims and authority structures of classical religions in favor of a more immanent, subject-centered, and experiential/therapeutic approach to religion and spirituality. While the term New Age went out of fashion as maybe a little flakey (associated with the Hippie movement) and uncool (because associated with the previous generation), what we have, in fact, is a certain normalization of the New Age phenomenon, or, as Paul Heelas and Linda Mercadante also put it, “New Age religion gone mainstream.”² Though this type of religiosity or spirituality is by its very nature difficult or impossible to define, it is characterized by a de-traditioning and an increase in individualism, which may be seen as two sides of the same coin. Religious hybrids believe that all religions teach the same universal truth and that they are able to access this truth from “a higher platform, as it were, from which to view people and groups they felt were confined within or limited to individual religions.”³ It is sometimes referred to as a “post-Christian” spirituality, not so much because of the Christian shaping of this spirituality as because those who adhere to it were once Christian.

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Even though there are continuities between the so-called spiritual-but-not-religious (SBNR) and religious hybrids, religious hybrids are (or seek to be) still grounded in a particular tradition, but have come to deeply identify (wittingly or unwittingly) with the teachings and/or practices of another tradition, and occasionally struggle attempting to reconcile these divided loyalties. This most commonly takes the form of Christians who also claim to be Buddhist, or Jews who are also Buddhists, or Christians who identify with elements of Hinduism or Taoism. There is Christian Yoga, Christian Zen, even Jesuit Yoga.

It is tempting from a Christian perspective to dismiss all this out of hand as superficial or as shallow flirting with different religious options. But it is important to go deeper into the phenomenon and consider more specifically the perils and the possibilities, the problems, and the promise of this type of religious fluidity. Though I will focus here on Christianity, my arguments may also be applied to other religious traditions, since it is based not so much on the doctrinal particularity of Christianity, but more broadly on the self-understanding and the working of religions. Before going into the positive and negative challenges of religious hybridity, I will first offer a further typology of religious hybridity, as well as elaborate on the conception of religion from which I approach this phenomenon.

1. Duane R. Bidwell, *When One Religion Isn’t Enough: The Lives of Spiritually Fluid People* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

2. Linda R. Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual But Not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 71.

3. *Ibid.*, 73 and 85.

Types of religious hybridity

Though the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging is relatively new in the West, it has existed for millennia in other parts of the world. It may be distinguished into voluntary and involuntary, temporary and permanent, partial and full religious hybridity. Involuntary multiple belonging refers to situations and contexts in which one inherits a particular configuration of religions through birth in a particular culture or family. Cultural multiple belonging may be found in China or in Japan, where the culture itself has come to be shaped by different religions that have adopted particular functions within a broader religious configuration. As such, Chinese may identify with Confucianism in social contexts, Taoism in relation to nature, and Buddhism in relation to death and the afterlife. Religious identity is mainly approached in terms of ritual efficacy, aesthetics, and etiquette. While Buddhist temples in Japan perform funeral rituals, Shinto shrines are visited to mark the various rites of passage other than death, and marriages are often performed in Christian churches. As Jan Van Bragt points out, for most Japanese, there is no sense of contradiction among these different types of belonging.⁴

A second form of involuntary multiple belonging involves birth in a multi-religious family. As interreligious marriages are becoming more common, children born in these families inherit the religious identities of both parents. While some couples may choose to raise their children predominantly in one faith or the other, the religious identity of both parents will still shape to some extent that of a child. As such, multiple religious belonging is here an integral part of family identity.

Besides these geographically and socially predetermined forms of religious hybridity, exposure to different religions may also lead to temporary or permanent, partial, or full identification with more than one tradition. Throughout history, individuals in times of acute distress or need have sought supernatural help or religious power from whatever tradition it is thought to emanate. Temples or shrines in India believed to cure infertility, procure a good match, or bring about any other miraculous results are visited by people from any religion and converts to Christianity in Africa often return to their African traditional religions and ritual healers when illness or misfortune befalls them. This type of multiple belonging generally lasts only as long as the crisis persists.

As religious prejudices are waning, and familiarity with various religions increasing, individuals may also come to sympathize and identify with teachings and practices from different religions on a more permanent basis, integrating them in a new personal synthesis. In many cases, one or the other tradition remains dominant and determines which elements from other traditions might be integrated. This is what takes place in confessional forms of comparative theology.⁵ In other cases, individuals might no

4. Jan Van Bragt, "Multiple Religious Belonging of the Japanese People" in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2010 [Orbis 2002]), 7-19.

5. Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative*

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longer submit to the criteria of one tradition and find themselves moving back and forth between different religions, identifying with one tradition in certain areas and with another in other matters of teaching or practice.⁶

“We are all hybrids”

Though the idea of voluntary and permanent hybridity may seem to be a recent phenomenon in the West, some forms of religious hybridity have been more of the rule than the exception in the course of history. Not only in East-Asia, where, as mentioned, individuals have been Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist, or Shinto and Buddhist for centuries, but also in pre-Christian antiquity where individuals might belong to mystery religions (and several at the same time) while also worshipping the Roman gods. Christians in Brazil and other Latin-American and Caribbean islands practice Christianity alongside Afro-Brazilian religions such as Santeria and Candomblé. In her book on the Christian missionary activity among the Pueblo and Sioux Indians, Joëlle Rostkowski uses the expression “Conversion Inachevée” to point to the fact that, in spite of centuries of missionary effort, most native peoples in the Americas continued to adhere to their traditional religions and ritual practices, which in fact experienced a resurgence in the second half of the twentieth century.⁷ In his article “The Unremarkable Hybrid: Aloysius Pieris and the Redundancy of Multiple Religious Belonging,” Devaka Premawardhana offers numerous examples of this type of popular mixing, suggesting, as the title indicates, that religious hybridity is more of the rule than

Theology (Chichester: Wiley, 2020).

6. There may also be certain borderline cases such as Paul Knitter (b. 1939), who states that he still identifies primarily as a Christian theologian, but also states that while Christianity is normative for him in the area of ethics, Buddhism is normative in the area of spirituality. See Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not be a Christian* (London: Oneworld, 2009).

7. Joëlle Rostkowski, *Le Conversion Inachevée: Les Indiens et le Christianisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998).

the exception in the history of religions, Christianity included.⁸

Christianity itself, like all religious traditions, may be regarded as a hybrid religion, borrowing from Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Greek philosophy and elements of mystery religions in its own historical formation. Many have speculated that the early monastic traditions of Christianity may have been influenced by Indian, and in particular Buddhist monastics and ascetics. And throughout its history, Christianity has adapted to new contexts by absorbing not only new cultural and linguistic elements, but also the religious ideas and expressions that shaped them. To be sure, the elements adopted from other religious and philosophical traditions are adapted and reinterpreted to fit fundamental Christian teachings and practices. But such adoption does point to the flexibility or elasticity of Christian faith and practice, and to its openness to new ideas and forms of expression. Jan Nederveen Pieterse has used the term “hybridization” in cultural studies to refer to the continuing transformation of cultures and religions as they interact with new cultures and social systems.⁹ All forms of inculturation thus involve some degree of hybridization.

Premawardhana rejects the very idea that religions are themselves “nonhybrid,” “pure, monolithic, internally coherent, and well-defined.”¹⁰ Stating that religions are by their very nature dialogical and internally multiple, he argues that the personal crossing of religious boundaries, or hybrid identities should thus be viewed as “unremarkable” or “redundant.”

The term hybridity has also been used to refer to personal identities more broadly conceived, which may serve as a basis for understanding and solidarity across traditions. Jeannine Hill Fletcher, for example, points out that “...Christian identities are always ‘hybrid,’ that is, they are created by intersecting with other categories of identity,” and that, “The hybrid identity of each member produces a religious community of infinite internal diversity.”¹¹ She argues that this hybridity, “can foster connections outside this particular grouping,” and that, “the idea of incomplete identification within a category can be embraced as the potential for Christians to forge solidarities outside the Christian community.”¹²

Though religious hybridity presents greater theoretical and practical challenges than other types of hybridity, it is certainly true that individuals may not identify with every teaching and directive of any particular tradition and that they may be drawn by various aspects of different religions. As humans, we are not

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necessarily wired to understand, resonate with or embody only one religion. Various religions may focus on different layers of the human person and different dimensions of existence. Just as it is not impossible for individuals from one religion to understand the teachings and practices of another, it is not inconceivable for them to resonate with the teachings and practices of another.

Problem of religious hybridity

Even though the experience of religious hybridity may be possible, or not impossible on a purely personal, or subjective level, this does not mean that it is always coherent on a theological level, or desirable on a spiritual level. While being a member of a particular athletic club and of a particular religion may not pose too much by way of hybrid tension, being a member of two religions might, especially when the demands or expectations set by the religions themselves are taken seriously. As I have argued before, religious identity and belonging is not only a matter of subjective choice and experience, but also of objective recognition by a particular tradition.¹³

On a theoretical or theological level, it must be clear that religions never do seamlessly overlap, and that there are always certain places where their teachings contradict one another or are in direct conflict. It is often said that Buddhism is easily reconcilable with Christianity or with any other religion because it presents itself as a philosophy, rather than a faith. There are indeed many ways in which Buddhism and Christianity are compatible and there is considerable debate about the possibility or impossibility of belonging to both. Buddhism in fact offers some new avenues to approach the nature of the self that may help to clarify certain Gospel passages. However, the notion of the vicarious suffering and death of Jesus Christ, which is at the heart of Christian faith, would be regarded as meaningless

8. Devaka Premawardhana, “The Unremarkable Hybrid: Aloysius Pieris and the Redundancy of Multiple Religious Belonging,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46:1 (Winter 2011), 100. For further examples of this phenomenon in India, see Selva Raj and Corinne Dempsey, *Popular Christianity in India: Ritng Between the Lines* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002).

9. Jan Nederveen Pieterse, “Globalization as Hybridization,” in *Global Modernities*, eds. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (London: Sage, 1995), 45-68.

10. Premawardhana, 89.

11. Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 89.

12. *Ibid.*, 90.

13. Catherine Cornille, “Strategies of Negotiation in Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging,” in *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging: Affirmations, Objections, Explorations*, eds. Gavin D’Costa and Ross Thompson (Surrey: Ashgate, 2016), 143-160. See also Catherine Cornille, “Multiple Religious Belonging and Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Understanding Inter-Religious Relations*, eds. David Cheetham, David Thomas, and Douglas Pratt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 324-340.

from a Buddhist perspective, unless radically reinterpreted in metaphorical terms. The idea of a personal God, though not entirely alien to Buddhism, also plays an entirely different role in the two traditions. The conflicting truth claims of different religious traditions are of course more evident in religions with a common parent, or that grew out of one another. One cannot be both Jew and Christian since the difference between the two religions hinges to an important degree on the recognition of Jesus Christ as Messiah, savior, son of God. The same is true for the difficulty of hybridity between Christianity and Islam. Advocates of religious hybridity tend to resolve these tensions by emphasizing the relativity of particular religious doctrines and expressions and by resorting to a common transcendent ultimate reality (monocentric pluralism) as the ultimate basis and the higher synthesis of those differences.¹⁴ Though this pluralist theology may serve to affirm the unity of all religious traditions, it is in tension with the self-understanding of religions, which do not see their symbols and teachings as merely historically relative expressions, and their practices as equal to those of other religions. The truth of teachings and beliefs and the correct execution of rituals and practices matters a great deal to practitioners, especially to those who have given their entire life to observing their observance.

Because of theoretical or doctrinal obstacles, religious hybrids have at times come to focus on religious and ritual practice. Here, the emphasis is on lived religion and on the ways in which people spontaneously resort to the rituals and practices of different religions, and in which practices of different religions may complement one another. While believers may certainly incorporate certain elements from other religions into their religious practice, as is the case with the widespread practice of Hindu and Buddhist forms of yoga and meditation by Christians, this does not mean that it is possible to be fully ritually engaged in more than one religion. One cannot practice all of the Triduum and Easter practices in Christianity while also observing Sabbath and Passover in Judaism. One cannot practice the liturgy of the hours while also practicing the Muslim *salaat*, or prayer five times a day. Paul Griffiths speaks in this regard of the non-compossibility of religions.¹⁵ One cannot give all of one's excess wealth as charity or *zakat*, as Islam prescribes, and do the same as almsgiving to a Buddhist monastery, as might be expected to procure good karma for lay people in Buddhism.

Besides the theoretical and practical obstacles, dual belonging may also represent an impediment for spiritual development. At the heart of the demand for complete involvement and surrender to the teachings and the practices of a particular religion is the idea that attainment of the highest goal of the tradition requires overcoming one's own limited human will and desire. Most religious traditions associate evil and sin with self-centered desire

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and consider the purification or the annihilation of desire as the means to attain the ultimate religious end. In the monastic traditions, this takes place through total abnegation of one's own will by obedience to a spiritual master and to a monastic rule. While this may not be expected from lay members of a religion, the attempt to fully comply with the teachings and practices of a certain tradition may be seen to fulfil a similar goal. The idea of religious hybridity thus contradicts the structure of spiritual development and growth as considered from within any tradition. It involves withholding of some judgment and some degree of personal autonomy that may thus hinder the process of spiritual growth. Religious hybridity involves a focus on the individual or the self as the ultimate arbiter of religious truth and efficacy.

On an institutional level, religious hybridity can threaten the continuity of religious traditions. One of the characteristics of religious hybrids is the tendency to spiritualize religion, to reduce it to a purely inner experience without need for communal practice or institutional affiliation. This is in line with a more general postmodern spiritualization of religion.¹⁶ This internalization of religion and religious hybridity also raises the question of religious transmission. How do religious hybrids socialize their own children? In *Losing our Religion*, Christel Manning suggests that parents with weak or multiple religious affiliations tend to let their children sample different traditions and follow them in their choice, rather than predetermining their religious path.¹⁷ Insofar as the message is that no religion fulfills all religious needs and desires, there is less chance that hybrid parents, or their children will come to strongly identify with a particular religion or contribute to its vitality and continuity. Here lies one of the contradictions of

14. See Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2011), 55-85, but especially 80-85.

15. Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 32-36.

16. See Marianne Moyaert, "Dual Belonging, Ritual and the Spiritual Revolution," in *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging*, edited by Gavin D'Costa and Ross Thompson (Surrey: Ashgate, 2016), 123-142.

17. Christel Manning, *Losing Our Religion: How Unaffiliated Parents are Raising Their Children* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

religious hybridity: while it depends on the existence of traditions to supply religious teachings and practices from which it can draw, it can lead to the erosion of religious commitment, and thus of those traditions themselves.

The promise of religious hybridity

Even though religious hybridity may be a challenge for Christianity as for most religious traditions, it may also be a blessing as it offers an occasion for both critical and constructive self-reflection.

First, religious hybridity may function as a critical mirror, or an indication of what might be lacking within a particular religion. Though religious hybrids, like SBNR's are at times portrayed as self-indulgent or self-centered religious consumers, they may also be recognized to represent a thirst for genuine religious experience and a search for answers to profound religious questions that they do not find addressed in a satisfactory way in any particular religious tradition. While previous generations may have accepted religious teachings blindly or indifferently, current believers have a wide choice of answers to their religious questions and expect their faith to make sense. This may explain why Buddhism is so appealing to many Christians and Westerners in general. At bottom, it is a fairly logical and rational religion that speaks directly to questions about the self and suffering. It also offers spiritual practices and exercises that can be integrated into a person's life without the need for an intermediary, and without requirements of institutional affiliation. People are searching for ways to enrich their spiritual life and experience. Though Christianity has a long and rich tradition of spirituality and spiritual direction, it has tended to remain the purview of monastics and has not been made available to the average lay person.

As such, it answers to the religious and spiritual needs of the modern or post-modern individual. Christianity may dismiss this as a dangerous "fusion of Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian," or it may acknowledge the need to make the spiritual riches of the tradition more generally available, and to also possibly learn from traditions such as Buddhism or Hinduism.¹⁸

Religious hybridity thus offers an opportunity for Christianity to grow through recovering forgotten or neglected elements of the tradition, and through integrating new insights or practices that might be derived from other religions. An example of this in the realm of spirituality may be found in the practice of intermonastic dialogue (DIM or MID) where monks from different religions immerse themselves in the spiritual life of the other in search of spiritual treasures that might be brought back to their own tradition. Certain forms of Zen practice have thus become part of Benedictine and Trappist monasteries (Pierre de Bethune), and there is a well-established tradition of Christian Zen. Similarly, yoga has come to be broadly practiced by Christians both inside and outside the Church and has given rise to specialized Christian

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forms such as Jesuit yoga. There is no denying that Zen is originally a Buddhist/Taoist practice, and that yoga has its roots in Hinduism. This thus represents a form of hybridity that does not pose a challenge to Christian identity, but on the contrary enriches it.

Comparative theologians may thus pay attention to recurring forms of religious hybridity and reflect on how the tradition might respond to certain spiritual or theological needs, either by recovering aspects of their own tradition or by integrating elements from the other tradition that might not be in contradiction with one's own tradition. This requires an in-depth study of the other religion which occasionally leads to identification with elements from the other tradition, and theological inspiration and learning. In *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, I identify six types of learning that may occur through theological engagement with another religion. It may lead to *intensification* of established texts and teachings, to *recovery* of forgotten figures and traditions, to *rectification* of one's understanding of the other and consequently also one's self-understanding, to *reinterpretation* of traditional teachings, *appropriation* of new ideas, and/or *reaffirmation* of established beliefs and practices.¹⁹ This type of constructive engagement with the other religion derives from or leads to a certain degree of hybridity. This hybridity may become the source of important theological creativity and innovation. Indeed, if as Christians we believe that the Spirit is also at work in other religions, then comparative theology may be seen to be

18. Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation" October 15, 1989, Par. 12. Available at: www.vatican.va

19. Cornille, *Meaning and Method*.

at the frontier of new theological thinking, and religious hybridity its means or propeller.

Comparative theology presupposes grounding in a particular tradition and community of discernment. Unlike forms of hybridity where the individual or the subject becomes the measure or the judge of what is true and good and interesting in another religion, comparative theology (at least in its confessional form) remains answerable to a tradition and to the processes of discernment operative in that tradition. While the comparative theologian inevitably works out her or his theological insights individually or in personal engagement with the other tradition, it is ultimately in dialogue with other theologians within one's own tradition that the validity and truth of those insights is discerned. As such, the hybrid identity of the comparative theologian remains subject to the given or higher truth and authority of a particular tradition. Some of the pioneers of this type of hybridity and theology were Christian monks and priests (Henri Le Saux, Bede Griffiths, Raimon Panikkar, Thomas Merton, Hugo Ennomiya-Lasalle, Oshida, Pierre de Bethune, etc.) who dove as deep as they could into the heart of Christian faith and practice, and still found inspiration in other traditions.

In addition to reflecting on what religious hybrids might be missing and searching for in other religions, one might also focus on why they choose to continue to identify (at least partly) with the Christian tradition. Since Christianity, and the Catholic Church in particular, has gone through challenging times losing considerable hierarchical and institutional credibility, it may be fruitful to reflect on which elements continue to inspire faith and commitment on the part of religious hybrids. Hybrids such as Paul Knitter refer to the social teaching of the Church and the example of Jesus Christ as reasons for continued loyalty and commitment. Others may be attracted to the aesthetics of the ritual, to the emphasis on solidarity, or to the Christian teaching of love and forgiveness. Though every religion aims to fulfil every religious and spiritual need, or attempts to shape the needs of its members according to its central principles, there may be some value for different religions to focus on their particular strengths and what they might contribute to a world of religious diversity. Religious hybrids may then help to draw attention to what those particular strengths are.

Conclusion

There is no easy and fast judging of the phenomenon of religious hybridity or dual religious belonging and its implications for Christian identity. It is a reality that is here to stay and that will only grow as the resources of different religious traditions become readily available as part of the religious patrimony of humanity. While religions themselves may tremble and fume at the way in which elements from their tradition are taken out of their historical and religious context and used for entirely different purposes, often disconnected of any foundational element of faith, they may also rejoice in the ways in which new cultures and generations may still find meaning in their texts, teachings, or practices.

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It must be admitted that the phenomenon of religious hybridity forms a threat and a challenge to any traditional religion. It breaks open the traditional boundaries of religious identity, which may lead away from any religious commitment, and from contributing to the community and to the continuity of the tradition. In its extreme forms, it becomes the end of communal religion as every individual forms their own form of hybrid religion, and as the very notion of heteronomy is abandoned. While some may rejoice in this—the history of religion is after all a mixed reality—the paradox and problem is that hybrid individuals depend on the religions whose authority they reject.

However, the reality of religious hybridity may also lead to religious innovation and renewal, provided religious hybrids remain rooted in a particular religious tradition and remain committed to its continuity and growth. Religious hybridity may then become a means of purification of the tradition, as well as a source of inspiration. Religious hybrids thus become a mirror for what is missing and what is possible. Christianity is only partly responsible for reality of religious hybridity, and—realistically—will not be able to change or reverse the flight from religious traditions and institutions. But it cannot afford to ignore it. It must deal with religious thirst from within by attending to the sense of lack that is felt and that leads to this exodus from established religions. There is a genuine thirst for experience of God, contemplation, prayer, meditation, and spiritual direction. Only by acknowledging this and addressing it will Christianity be able to speak to the spiritual hunger of religious hybrids and maybe help them to recognize that it is possible to be spiritual and religious, and that there is actually value in being spiritual and religious, or in being, or at least aspiring to be, “just” Christian.