

**Many yet One?**



# MANY YET ONE?

## Multiple Religious Belonging

*Edited by Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar  
and Joseph Prabhakar Dayam*



**World Council  
of Churches**  
Publications

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Cover design: Adele Robey, Phoenix Graphics, Inc.

Book design and typesetting: Michelle Cook / 4 Seasons Book Design

ISBN: 978-2-8254-1669-3

World Council of Churches

150 route de Ferney, P. O. Box 2100

1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

<http://publications.oikoumene.org>

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## INTRODUCTION

Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar  
and Joseph Prabhakar Dayam

**Multiple religious belonging**—a phenomenon “in which people of faith engage in the communities and practices of more than one religious tradition”<sup>1</sup>—is an important way in which many people today navigate the turbulent waters of religious affiliation and identification, by embracing hyphenated identities which bespeak multiplicity, fluidity, and hybridity. But how is such a widely varied and elusive reality to be understood, and what does it mean for Christian identity, Christian theology, and pastoral practice? This volume attempts to shed light on the meaning and implications of multiple religious belonging.

In a context which increasingly recognizes that religions are shaped rhizomatically and acknowledges that religions “abut, blend, supplement, and challenge one another within individuals and their lived communities,”<sup>2</sup> this book engages with the theological and pastoral questions which emerge at the interstices of “blurred” religious affiliations and borderless (spi)ritual practices that are concomitant to multiple religious belonging. Needless to say, an amoebic and amorphous phenomenon like multiple religious belonging, which is replete with its variegated diversity and attendant complexity, holds in it more questions that we have even yet learned to ask. In the course of learning to discover these questions the book offers a first step, throwing open to its readers one question worth pondering: Can modes of multiple religious belonging

be embraced “not as problems to be solved, but as proliferating sites of divine encounter”?<sup>3</sup>

At the very outset we want to eschew any claims that this volume is a “one-size-fits-all” venture. What is presented here constitutes the initial fruits of the World Council of Churches’ ongoing work on multiple religious belonging. This work had its beginnings in a pilot consultation on “Exploring Hybridity, Embracing Hospitality: Towards a Theology of Multiple Religious Belonging,” organized by the WCC’s programme on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation in collaboration with the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai, India, in October 2014. This was followed by a subsequent consultation organized in collaboration with the United Church of Christ in Cleveland, Ohio, in April 2015, focusing on the North American context. This probably helps explain why the articles in this volume have an Asian and American focus!

The context that foregrounds this volume is one in which several churches might find themselves—that is, one in which, despite the tacit acknowledgment that hybridity is intrinsic to most of our received and practiced Christian faith, there is an overwhelming insistence on rigidity and singularity in the expectations made of our religious identifications and affiliations. Such a context poses problems to those who, out of necessity, upbringing, or choice, find (spi)ritual sustenance in other religious traditions alongside Christianity and openly acknowledge that they have been “faithed” by drinking deeply from the wells of different religious and spiritual traditions. In a context where a majority of churches have so far been quiet on the changing pew culture they inhabit, the challenge is to move beyond tacit obliviousness and engage robustly with the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging in a theologically sound, experientially grounded, and pastorally sensitive manner. The book aims to be a step in this direction.

In introducing this book a few features are worth mentioning. The book does not fall into the trap of what Indian Dalit theologian A. P. Nirmal terms as “putting the horse before the cart”—that is, developing the theological/theoretical in isolation from the experiential.<sup>4</sup> Theological construction and imagination in the volume are thoroughly foregrounded in the experiential, giving rise to fresh perspectives. Recognizing that the prevailing culture of multiple religious belonging in many ways changes the shape and scope of being church, the theological musings in this volume that germinate from the fertile ground of religious practice engage creatively and critically with the question whether

churches in their attempt to connect with culture are “orchestrating warm feelings that soft-pedal the costly demands of the gospel.”<sup>5</sup> Perceptive to fears that the adaption of the churches to emerging contexts might involve the danger of the gospel being reduced to “flotsam, lacking substantive form,”<sup>6</sup> this volume revisits religious experiences with theological questions which interrogate the integrity of multiple religious belonging. Can multiple religious belonging be considered an authentic expression of faith in *creative fidelity* (to use Stephen Barton’s felicitous term) to the gospel of Christ—“where fidelity involves recognisable continuity with our scriptural faith tradition, and creativity involves an openness to the Spirit for the inspiration to interpret and ‘perform’ that tradition in ways that are life-giving”?<sup>7</sup>

Another unique feature of this book is its examination of the theme of multiple religious belonging vis-à-vis the experiences of the margins. This is important in contexts where, in popular perceptions, the increasing appetite for multiple religious belonging can be attributed to a “bricolage spirituality” or “pick-and-mix spirituality” symptomatic of postmodernity.<sup>8</sup> There is little doubt that certain forms of multiple religious belonging are “a light-hearted flirting with different religions”<sup>9</sup> and “a self-indulgent, free-floating, cafeteria-style potpourri of mutually incompatible religiosities.”<sup>10</sup> In such contexts, multiple religious belonging becomes self-seeking and divested from any commitment beyond self-gratification. Catherine Cornille’s critique that multiple religious belonging bypasses the “very purpose and dynamics of religious belonging,” which inherently involves “complete surrender of one’s will and judgment to a truth and power that lies beyond or beneath one’s own rational and personal judgment,” is salutary in such contexts.<sup>11</sup> At specific points this volume critiques the self-seeking inclination that may beset certain forms of multiple religious belonging and, drawing upon instances of marginalized communities appropriating the venue of multiple religious belonging for liberative purposes and to forge peaceable and just communities, questions the moral foundations of forms of multiple religious belonging that are not hospitably disposed to the “other.” A question that emerges is, Whether and how can multiple religious belonging as a passionate way of “being religious interreligiously”<sup>12</sup> be at the same time ethical “com-passionately,” exercising comradely passion for the “other”?

Another feature worth mentioning is that this book does not shirk from stepping into the murky waters created by the confluence of Asian Christianity and Western colonialism. The influx of Western Christianity in Asia forged

a new dichotomy between native religions and Christianity and theologically “muddied” the prevailing fluidity of religious belonging by introducing a paradigm of religions as rigid and calcified entities. A question which opens itself for consideration concerns whether the present discourse of multiple religious belonging is a tautology in Asian contexts, since multiple religious belonging in Asian contexts is ontological and not necessarily epistemic in nature.<sup>13</sup> Is the discourse of multiple religious belonging redundant in contexts like Asia, where participation in religious life is characterized by regular border crossings and people “live abundantly from their own religious heritage, while also living partially, but intently, from the richness of another or other religious tradition(s)”?<sup>14</sup>

Having been a persistent and pertinent fact of religious belonging and participation, religious hybridity has both a polyvalent dimension, which defies water-tight categorizations, as well as a problematic dimension often characterized by theological suspicion toward those who claim to be religiously hybrid. By exploring these polyvalent and problematic dimensions of multiple religious belonging, this book offers us glimpses of an important way in which human beings attempt to be “faith-ful” by fathoming the inexhaustible richness of our faith traditions. This may be provocative for some and profound for others. In unique ways, however, multiple religious belonging testifies to the “truth” that may be close to several hearts: that religions are not fortresses to be defended but wellsprings for the flourishing of life!<sup>15</sup>

John J. Thatamanil

## **Eucharist Upstairs, Yoga Downstairs: On Multiple Religious Participation**

**Dealing with difference has arguably been a core human project since** human beings stopped living in small hunter-gatherer cohorts and began to live in larger social groupings. Suspicion and fear of the other and of the difference the other embodies have posed problems for human communities, certainly for the span of the historical record, and likely for the whole of human experience. Hence, confrontation with difference and multiplicity is hardly a novel challenge. Still, the challenge of confronting difference and multiplicity has been enormously complicated in our historical moment. Global flows of information, images, and people place us all in ever-increasing intimacy.

New challenges are posed by our situation, and one in particular claims my attention. As we live in ever-greater proximity with each other, many more of us are becoming multiple. We have never been one, or merely one, but now otherness dwells not only in the stranger nearby but also within. This is especially true with respect to religious diversity. Increasingly, many of us are recognizing and naming ourselves as religiously multiple. Terms like “multiple

religious participation” and “multiple religious identity” are becoming more common in Christian theological literature (more on these terms below).

This essay seeks to clarify reflection around the theme of religious multiplicity but with an eye toward transnational contexts. Although I write as a North American comparative theologian, I am mindful that the question of religious multiplicity takes on a very different cast in the global South. While sustained attention to the question of religious multiplicity is new in North American and European theological circles, the phenomenon is far from novel in many parts of the world. The juxtaposition and integration of African Traditional Religion with Christianity in South Africa, the routine interfusion of Hindu and Christian and even Hindu and Muslim elements in India, and the well-known hybridity of religious life in China and Japan all testify to the complexity of religious identities. Perhaps theology always follows life and arrives late to the scene of religious multiplicity. Still, theological reflection is finally beginning to take seriously the question of religious multiplicity within persons and communities. The following question captures the task I take up in this essay: How might North American thinking about religious diversity be reconfigured by contributions from a global theological community of conversation that has long had to deal with religious multiplicity?

Christians have had to live with religious difference since the very inception of the Jesus movement, but it has done so uneasily. At first, and prior to imperial recognition, Christians did not speak univocally in their proclamations about religious diversity. Justin Martyr spoke about the *logos spermatikos* to suggest that the Word that became flesh in the Christ has been present and active in other wisdom traditions. Francis Sullivan maintains that despite the handful of biblical texts with which we are all familiar, the early church did not dismiss other religious traditions out of hand. Matters changed, he argues, when the church came under imperial sponsorship. Gradually over the centuries, a robust doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“outside the church there is no salvation”) came to prevail. Only recently—that is to say, post-Vatican II—has the church come to clarify forcefully what *extra ecclesiam* means. We now have a host of Christian theologies of religious diversity that affirm the truth, validity, and even the salvific efficaciousness of other religious traditions.

Recognizing and affirming that a variety of religious traditions contain truth, goodness, beauty, and even saving power, however, does not mean that theologians are open to the possibility of multiple religious participation. Although Christians and others in many portions of the globe routinely

participate in, or can be said even to belong to, more than one religious tradition, Christian theological production—especially in North America and Europe—has been largely blind to the reality of religious multiplicity. When religious multiplicity has been recognized, it has been called “syncretistic” and so has been delegitimated. Hence, there has been a vast and, until recently, unbridgeable chasm between official theological production and what we might call a “lived theology of religious diversity,” which has been, as a matter of practice, accepting of complicated modes of religious affiliation.

I am not a student of Christianity in Africa, but I am aware that multiple religious participation and belonging are quite common throughout the continent, and in South Africa in particular, with strong and ongoing participation by Christians in the practices of African Traditional Religions. If my intuition is right for South Africa and surely also for Christianity in much of the global South, one wonders about the implications of the split between official theological positions and actual popular practice. What are the implications for political life in pluralist societies when custodians of religious traditions insist on the artificial purity of singular religious belonging? Might not this emphasis on singularity threaten to exacerbate divisions between religious groups that might otherwise be ameliorated by affirming complex and porous modes of multiple belonging? Moreover, has Christianity anywhere been as singular as church hierarchies and elite theologians have liked to believe? Questions such as these suggest that the distance between elite theology and lived experience must somehow be bridged.

To begin, we must note that the manner in which questions about multiple religious participation (hereafter MRP) are posed discloses the geographical situatedness and the conceptual presuppositions of the scholars in question. In the West, scholars and nonacademics alike imagine religion in ways that make all forms of MRP vexatious. Built into our tacit and pretheoretical understanding of religion is the idea that religiousness requires exclusiveness in the same way that marriage does in monogamous societies. Singularity is the norm; multiplicity is the aberration. Questions about MRP are posed under the assumption that MRP is exceptional and singular religious belonging is the default norm. But the global study of religions discloses two factors that complicate standard discussions of MRP. First, religious traditions are fluid, malleable, and intrinsically impure; traditions are like rivers—as Wilfred Cantwell Smith long ago noted—that have flown into and out of each other and not discrete, reified, and homogenous entities.<sup>1</sup> Second, as already noted, for much of human

history, and still today in many parts of the world, societies are simultaneously informed by many traditions. To be at once Confucian, Shinto, and Buddhist is no rare occurrence but, rather, the norm in Japanese life. Singular religious identity is the aberration.

Growing attention to MRP in the West suggests that Western societies are also no longer able to take singular religious belonging for granted. Christians, and even Muslims, do yoga, Jews engage in forms of Buddhist meditation and become “BuJews,” and still more contested cases of inter-Abrahamic multiple religious participation are coming into public view.<sup>2</sup> What seems distinctive about American and European modes of MRP is that persons *select* the practices to which they are drawn. Individuals are often the primary agents of choice in a model that has often been characterized (negatively) as consumerist, whereas in East and South Asia multiplicity is less a matter of election and more a matter of variegated patterns of communal belonging. Several traditions shape any given community, and particular rituals from these traditions are dispersed in various ways across the lifecycle. Even when new religious identities are taken up by way of conversion, older elements of religious life are not abandoned wholesale. Hence, becoming Christian need not mean ceasing to be Hindu.

Because persons and communities in the West are now routinely informed by ideas and practices drawn from the repertoires of a variety of religious traditions, growing numbers of persons lay claim to some form of multireligious identity.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, we do not have accurate numbers about how many have come to think of themselves as, in some sense, multiply religious. In the absence of substantive empirical data, consideration of MRP must largely take the form of intellectual housekeeping. Several major families of questions must be broached:

1. What are we to make of the wide variety of terms used in the growing academic literature? These include multiple religious identity, multireligious identity, multiple religious participation, multiple/double religious belonging, dual citizenship, hyphenated religious identity (e.g., Buddhist-Christian), hybridity, and syncretism, just to name a few.
2. The best emerging literature displays a growing awareness that terms like “identity” and “belonging” are ambiguous and in need of clarification. Is identity ever integral and unified?<sup>4</sup> And what do we mean by “belonging” given that the notion is inapplicable to a variety of nonmembership



traditions? Most importantly, what does it mean to be religious? What about those traditions that do not draw the distinction between the economic, the political, and the religious as persons in the West have been tutored to make? For example, if economic justice is understood as integral to religious life, then persons might be said to engage in illicit forms of MRP merely by participating in daily life in capitalist societies while also seeking to be Christian—or, more saliently, Muslim, as Islamic cultures have not been shaped to the same degree by secularization, which has given rise to the very idea of privatized religion as a sphere that can be separated from the economic and the political. The possibility of such conflict is, however, largely unnoticed in the extant literature.

3. Normative questions also arise: Is MRP a coherent and salutary human possibility, or is it a mark of confusion? By appeal to what criteria might we decide such questions? Can one genuinely be committed to more than one religious tradition?
4. There is also a growing recognition in the relevant literature that the meaningfulness of MRP hinges on some account of religious diversity which holds that transformative truth can be found outside the boundaries of one's own religious tradition.<sup>5</sup> If, outside one's home tradition, all is darkness, then MRP is, of course, undesirable. Hence, any normative consideration of MRP requires some working theology of religious diversity. The distinctive question that MRP raises for any theology of religious diversity is this: What theology of religious diversity makes sense of the sheer fact of MRP? If all religious traditions are paths up the same mountain or are diverse means to the self-same end, why bother? Why circumnavigate a mountain when the religious seeker should be dedicated to her path of ascent alone? In order to think comprehensively about MRP, this nexus of issues—terminological, conceptual, normative, and theological—must be addressed together.

## **On Terminology: Belonging, Identity, and Participation**

In this conversation, the terms *belonging* and *identity* present greater challenges than the term *participation*. Belonging is problematic because membership,

especially if understood as a matter of exclusivity, is inapplicable to a number of traditions. With some noteworthy exceptions, one does not typically take up membership in Hindu, Confucian, or Shinto traditions. Hence belonging, at least in the sense of communally recognized membership, does not apply. Terms like “double belonging” are best reserved for cases in which persons can make claims of belonging, which might be validated by the communities in question. The matter becomes contested when persons assert that they are double belongers, but one or both communities in question deny such claims. Consider the case of Anne Holmes Redding, who asserts that she is both Christian and Muslim, a claim that has drawn her sanction from one tradition: she was defrocked by the Episcopal Church.<sup>6</sup> This case prompts the following as-yet-unresolved question: Must claims of double belonging receive communal authorization before they can be recognized as valid?

The term *identity* involves a nexus of elements that are intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural, and even metaphysical. To begin with, should we speak of multiple religious identities (plural) or multiple religious identity (singular)? The plural suggests that persons can have more than one identity; the singular suggests that even if one is shaped by a variety of religious traditions, identity nonetheless remains singular. For this latter reason, Perry Schmidt-Leukel commends the felicitous term *multireligious identity*. He writes, “It would be more accurate to speak of people having a ‘multireligious identity,’ that is, having a unique identity, but one that is formed and developed under the influence of several religious traditions.”<sup>7</sup> While I am convinced that perhaps no one has but a single identity, I am drawn to the simplicity of Schmidt-Leukel’s term.

The term *multiple religious participation* is the best generic term for modes of religious life in which persons take up ideas and practices drawn from the repertoires of discrete traditions. In some cases, such participation may so deeply shape personhood that one might wish to speak of multireligious identity, but not all who engage in MRP may wish to claim a multireligious identity or double belonging. John Berthrong, himself a Confucian-Christian, offers a strong definition of the term: “Multiple religious participation is the conscious (and sometimes even unconscious) use of religious ideas, practices, symbols, meditations, prayers, chants, and sensibilities derived from one tradition by a member of another community of faith for their own purposes.”<sup>8</sup>

The concluding clause, “for their own purposes,” sounds a problematic note, however. Are persons who engage in MRP guilty of illegitimately expropriating the resources of other traditions, which are subsequently deployed

under alien intentionalities, that is, “for their own purposes?” Surely Berthrong did not mean to suggest that. Also limiting is the assumption that the persons engaging in such practices must belong to a particular “community of faith.” Increasingly, persons who engage in MRP belong securely to no primary home tradition. Thus, Berthrong’s definition must be revised: multiple religious participation is the conscious (and sometimes even unconscious) use of religious ideas, practices, symbols, meditations, prayers, chants, and sensibilities drawn from the repertoires of more than one religious tradition. Persons who engage in MRP may adopt a variety of modes of belonging. Such persons may belong to one primary home tradition, belong to more than one, or belong to none. The question of belonging should be disaggregated from the question of participation. Multiple religious participation (MRP) may lead to multiple religious belonging (MRB), but it need not.

Berthrong also draws an unwarrantable distinction between MRP and syncretism, although his definition of syncretism is far from compelling. He writes, “What syncretism means in the history of religion is actually quite simple.”<sup>9</sup> It is a theory that maintains that some religious leaders consciously borrow ideas, practices, prayers, vestments, rituals, and so on, from two or more different religions and concoct a completely new religion out of various older parts.”<sup>10</sup> But why should the term be reserved for attempts to found new religions? The term *syncretism* is best used to refer to the *products* of religious synthesis, whereas MRP is best used to designate the *activity* of persons and communities. Thus, persons and communities engage in MRP, an activity that can, but need not, lead to syncretism, understood as the fusion of materials drawn from the repertoire of more than one tradition. Hence, a person who cultivates yoga practice in addition to eucharist engages in MRP, but should the yoga practice become installed within a eucharistic service, the result is an example of syncretism. No normative judgment is implied herein. Both terms, MRP and syncretism, must first serve descriptively before they are subjected to normative evaluation.<sup>11</sup>

## **On Genealogies and Definitions**

Any working understanding of MRP hinges upon definitions of the religious, and hence of the genus *religion*. But definitions of the religious/religion are themselves not without histories. Over the last several decades, a growing body

of literature has demonstrated that our ideas about religion have emerged over the course of a complex historical process that has taught persons in the West to think of certain aspects of culture as religious and others as not. The term *religious* becomes meaningful only when some contrast term also becomes meaningful. In the modern West, that contrast term is “secular.” Hence, as Talal Asad and others have shown, our ideas about the religious and the secular co-arise. They are, as he puts it, “conceptual Siamese twins.” It follows from there that in cultures where this divide is absent—whether across historical time or geographical space—the act of designating some aspect of a culture’s life as religious, which logically requires designating others as not, is a problematic and anachronistic practice. The same can be said when certain traditions are identified as “religions.” Most of our traditions have been, and still are, far more than religions.

This awareness of the contingent and provincial origin of our very ideas about religion generates challenging questions. A genealogical imagination compels us to ask, “Under what set of historical processes does it become meaningful to talk about a discrete something called religion?” Why define religion and what function do these definitions serve? What organization of cultural space is presupposed by and follows from a given definition of religion?

Persons in the West and, through the processes of colonialism, others outside of the West have learned to reconfigure cultural space into religious and secular spheres. Similar processes have also been traced for the evolution of the notion that the world can be divided into a discrete set of “religions,” some of which rise to the status of “world religions.” Treatments of MRP presuppose a global horizon in which these processes have already taken place. These processes have generated certain definitions of religion that are marked by transcendentalizing and privatizing impulses. Religions are now often understood as systems that offer to their adherents “salvific knowledge” of some extramundane “ultimate/transcendent reality.”<sup>12</sup> Presumably, then, MRP occurs only when persons participate in more than one such system of belief and practice oriented toward some extramundane ultimate reality. *Per definitionem*, then, although there may be tensions between those who seek to reconcile the demands of Christian life with capitalism, persons who seek simultaneously to be Christian and capitalist are supposedly not engaged in MRP because capitalism is not a religion. Again, definitions matter.

So then, how should “religion” be defined? My own approach is to focus on the adjective *religious* rather than the noun *religion*. While I am prepared to