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# Playing Many Religion-Games: a Wittgensteinian Approach to Multiple Religious Belonging

DOI 10.1515/opth-2017-0001

Received March 24, 2016; accepted July 11, 2016

**Abstract:** Using resources from Ludwig Wittgenstein and George Lindbeck, this paper develops a new conceptual tool for the understanding of religious identity: the ‘religion-game’. Although related to Wittgenstein’s language-games and drawing on Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model of religion, this conceptual tool produces new results when applied to examples of multiple religious belonging. Drawing on the existing literature about the practice of multiple religious participation in Western countries, two realistic examples are developed at length and it is shown that the concept of a religion-game can help people to express their religious belonging in more positive ways. In particular, the many everyday choices made by people with more than one religious affiliation are clarified as choices to participate in some religion-games but not others. This de-emphasises the role of identity, often assumed to be singular, in religious belonging and enables an emphasis on behaviour which both fits with the turn towards ‘lived religion’ and permits a vivid and accurate account of the experience of at least two common paths to multiple religious belonging.

**Keywords:** Wittgenstein, cultural-linguistic model, dual religious belonging, religious identity, lived religion

## 1 Introduction

This paper explores multiple religious belonging through analogies drawn from the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and theologians inspired by Wittgenstein’s work on language. Using two guiding principles – an emphasis on the way things actually are which could be summarised as “don’t think, but look!”<sup>1</sup>; and the idea that a well-chosen comparison or analogy is revealing both when it discovers similarities and when it finds differences – I will consider two examples of multiple religious belonging and show how analogies drawn from language and games illuminate what is happening in them. This move has been foreshadowed by scholars who are preferring the term ‘multiple religious participation’ to ‘multiple religious belonging’,<sup>2</sup> but the religion-game concept takes this move further and allows for a much more nuanced analysis of particular cases.<sup>3</sup>

A ‘religion-game’ is, by analogy with Wittgenstein’s ‘language-game’ concept, a patterned and bounded way of speaking and acting which is part of the religious life of a community. A religion-game may also

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1 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66.

2 See for example Thatamanil, “Eucharist Upstairs.”

3 Many thanks to Rachel Muers and Myfanwy Reynolds for reviewing earlier versions of this paper.

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qualify as a language-game, but it need not include linguistic elements in order to be a religion-game. The following could be included in a list of religion-games: intercessional prayer, liturgical dance, singing hymns, expectant silence, guided meditation, and reciting mantras. There are many, many other forms which could also be included in this list, some of which will be discussed in the course of this paper, but most of which I leave for future developments of this project. Overall, I use the term ‘religion-game’ to pick out relatively specific practices which belong to forms of life known as religious traditions (here looking to the ordinary use of the term ‘religion’ rather than trying to over-define it or give it arbitrary boundaries.) Some religion-games may also occur in contexts not usually regarded as religious: the ‘singing hymns’ religion-game occurring at football matches and secular weddings would be one example. I consider this still to be a form of religion-game if the originating context is religious, although similar examples can be found in situations where religion is implicit, disregarded, or thought to be irrelevant.

The use of the religion-games concept puts the focus of attention on the *practices* of religion, and on the rules by which these games are played. Using the religion-games concept does not deny the role of metaphysical claims and belief structures in some religious traditions, but it does not take these as in any way primary; rather, the language-game ‘making metaphysical claims’ may sometimes also be a religion-game. For those who engage in multiple religious participation, and who hence may be asked to accept more than one set of such claims – claims which may be in logical or practical conflict – playing this game is often not a top priority, although some will choose to participate in it at some times, and can show a remarkable facility for reconciling very different metaphysical perspectives.<sup>4</sup> Other religion-games, such as those involved in worship and meditation practices, the telling of stories, and the embodied aspects of the religious tradition, are felt to be more significant in day-to-day life. In order to explore how the use of the religion-games concept changes our understanding of religion by changing the focus of attention, I now move on to consider some examples.

## 2 Examples

The following case studies are fictionalised, but contain details from real people’s experiences. The first is based primarily on material reported by Susan Katz Miller in *Being Both* and Leslie Goodman-Malamuth and Robin Margolis in *Between Two Worlds*; the second is based primarily on material reported by Rose Drew in *Buddhist and Christian?* and on Paul Knitter’s *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*. These have been chosen as representing multiple religious participation situations typical of those found in the UK and the USA today. They are core cases – circumstances in which there does not seem to be room for significant and lasting doubt, either on the part of the practitioner or the observer, that there is genuine multiple religious belonging. There are many forms of less certain cases (such as most of those discussed by Goosen<sup>5</sup>) but for the purposes of the main part of this paper, obvious cases are complicated enough. In my conclusion I will comment on ways in which the concepts used here could be turned to the project of assessing borderline situations.

### 2.1 Anna, both Jewish and Christian

Anna was born to a Jewish mother and a Christian father. They considered choosing one religion for her, but felt that she would need to decide about her religious identity as an adult, so set out to raise her equally in both traditions. She attended a synagogue with her mother and a church with her father, and went to a secular school. At home, the family kept kosher and celebrated the major holidays of both traditions: Pesach, Easter, Yom Kippur, and Christmas. Home rituals such as prayers over food and at bedtime were roughly alternated between the two traditions, with her parents taking turns to lead. Early on, Anna simply accepts this; by the age of ten, she has questions to which there are no easy answers, such as: “Am I a Jew or a Christian?”

<sup>4</sup> Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?* 207.

<sup>5</sup> Goosen, “An Empirical Study of Dual Religious Belonging”; Goosen, *Hyphenated Christians*.

Faced with this question, what can Anna's parents say to her? Using a framework in which the two identities are incompatible – a framework which leads the authors of surveys to ask people only to tick one box to indicate their religion, a framework which focuses on the incompatibility of beliefs between different religious traditions, and one which Anna is very likely to encounter at school, at church, and in the synagogue – her parents probably have to say, “You can choose which to be.” They might be able to say, “You are both at the moment,” but Anna is likely to find this unsatisfactory. Being both is not easy, and Anna may feel that she is actually neither, or not doing either properly. Miller stresses the benefits to be had from ‘being both’ but notes that many people have objections, and in particular the feeling that “both religions will be watered down” remains a strong one.<sup>6</sup> Miller counters this reservation with two arguments, one empirical and one theoretical. The empirical argument is that as it happens, many people who are choosing dual belonging come “from the vast ranks of the unaffiliated” – and are moving into greater religiosity than they would have had otherwise, rather than away from religion.<sup>7</sup> This may comfort those who are concerned about multiple religious belonging as a sociological trend, but does not apply to Anna specifically. She personally is not moving in either direction but starting to consider a choice to be made about whether to remain in both the traditions in which she has been raised.

Miller's other counter-objection is that being in two traditions, although it may mean a lack of an “immersive” experience – there will always be an awareness that other traditions exist and are real options – does not mean missing out on feeling “rooted” or “well grounded”. It only means that the grounding will be in two traditions and not just one.<sup>8</sup> This is getting closer to helping Anna, but the metaphor of ‘rootedness’ does not address issues about day-to-day behaviour. Although it can be extended to suggest that someone has roots which reach down to two sources of water, it is also clear that someone with one set of roots can convert to become a member of another group entirely: conversion from Christianity to Judaism or vice versa is as plausible, perhaps even more plausible within standard understandings of religion, than having both roots and present membership in two traditions. Anna might be contented to be told that she has roots in two traditions and can grow up to belong to either or both, but she might equally well object that this image in no way explains what her religious experience is like in practice. What other ways of framing the issue might help her to understand?

Her parents could offer her a comparison with someone who is bilingual. My analysis of this framing of possible answers to the question “Am I Jewish or Christian?” draws on the work of George Lindbeck, whose cultural-linguistic model of religion uses a Wittgensteinian understanding of language to argue that religion, and especially doctrine, is like a language. The key points in this analogy are that religion is like a language in that firstly, it is public; secondly, it has a ‘grammar’ (a set of rules determining how expressions can be structured), which can be learned either explicitly or implicitly; and thirdly, that it is ultimately judged by ‘pious ears’, the faithful who listen to new formulations of old ideas and are able to judge whether or not they are ‘grammatical’ – whether, despite the changes, they follow the essential rules of the religion.<sup>9</sup> Within this analogy, being raised both Christian and Jewish would be like being raised to speak both English and French. Although there are some possible worries about the latter situation – it was thought for a while that speaking two languages would confuse children and slow down their learning, for example – it is common and generally socially unproblematic. Indeed, being bilingual raises some educational questions but does not present a conceptual problem, since the possibility of speaking more than one language is widely accepted. In terms of the conceptual issue raised, having more than one religious identity is perhaps more like being biracial: individuals who have one Black parent and one White parent within the current Western system of racialisation are often challenged if they identify as both Black and White, or as belonging to another category such as biracial; in the US in particular, there has been a presumption that any amount of Black ancestry makes an individual fully Black.<sup>10</sup> Being bilingual might be related to

<sup>6</sup> Miller, *Being Both*, 65.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

<sup>9</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*.

<sup>10</sup> Rockquemore and Brunnsma, *Beyond Black*.

having more than one race/ethnicity or more than one religion, but it does not raise the same level of social anxiety. Given this, using the religion-as-language analogy to discuss multiple religious participation can help to normalise it and make such a position seem easier to maintain. This is much needed when there are common and current framings in which it is only possible to have one religion at once.

It might occur to Anna's parents to frame answers to her question, "Am I a Jew or a Christian?" in terms of ethnicity or race, especially because Jewishness has often been regarded as an ethnicity in the past. This might provide responses which are seemingly easier to explain, such as "You are both, because you have one parent from each religion." However, there are considerable difficulties here. For one thing, to regard Jewishness itself as an ethnicity in this way is potentially confused (although often forgotten in popular discourse, it is the case that worldwide there are Jews who would be treated, within the current system of racialisation, as belonging to every race), and can support anti-Semitic beliefs about the innate characteristics of Jews. For another, although Judaism has a history of being regarded as an ethnicity, Christianity is not in the same position: entry to the Christian community is through belief, practice, and ritual (especially baptism), and thus to describe Christian belonging as an ethnicity is fundamentally flawed.

However, there are also significant ways in which the religion-as-language analogy seems to be confused or to produce odd results. It can put the emphasis on spoken elements of religion, although this can be avoided with a more careful interpretation of the analogy. It gives some ways to discuss different traditions within a religion – a denomination can be compared to a dialect – but it is easy to push the analogy too far here, and use linguistic pictures which do not have anything like the same social and political implications as their alleged religious counterparts. More importantly, the religion-as-language analogy tends to treat the religion as a cohesive whole. Although one might continue to learn vocabulary and grammar throughout life, there is a certain level above which one is fluent in a language; it is not clear what it would be to be 'fluent' in a religion. George Lindbeck has made some suggestions, although tends to assume that we will know a fluent speaker when we meet one, and I have addressed this problem previously, arguing that there are "competent practitioners" who can be identified as fluent enough to make useful judgements.<sup>11</sup> However, in doing so I have shifted the emphasis, from knowing the grammar of the religion to knowing what to do in order to participate in the religion. These are related, because knowing the grammar involves knowing 'how to go on'<sup>12</sup> or what to do, but the religion-as-language analogy does not readily provide a way to discuss this new emphasis in detail.

Another analogy might provide an easier way to explain the multiple religious participation situation and simultaneously focus on practice. Wittgenstein posited a range of 'language games' which each had a set of rules and were played in specific situations. Some involve actions and objects as well as speech; all have internal rules which may not be transferable to other language-games; they do not generalise to whole languages ('telling a joke' is a language-game, and you can play it in English or French), but are recognisable practices within languages;<sup>13</sup> and each is self-contained, with a measure of independence from other language-games and with a finite set of rules. Despite the claims of some Wittgensteinian scholars, religions are not language-games: Christianity, or Judaism, is too complex, more like English or French than telling a joke, hence the viability of the religion-as-language analogy discussed above. Religious practices, though, might be like games, in many of the same ways that linguistic practices are like games and can be called 'language-games'.

Using the idea of a religion-game, Anna's parents can address her question "Am I a Jew or a Christian?" with some fresh perspectives. At home, Anna is being taught to play both Jewish and Christian religion-games. This, firstly, sheds light on some of the practices involved. Saying a Jewish blessing over food and a Christian grace, even at the same meal, might be understood as 'translating' within the religion-as-language analogy (telling the same joke in English and French); but in fact, the two practices have distinctively

<sup>11</sup> Grant, *Wittgensteinian investigations*, 98.

<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §179.

<sup>13</sup> For language-games in Wittgenstein's work, see *ibid.* The example I give here is from §23. For more about the relationship of language-games to natural languages, see Rhees, "Wittgenstein's Builders."

different grammars – both include thankfulness, but Jewish blessings are specific to types of food, whereas Christian graces often focus on communal aspects of a meal and a comparison with the actions of Jesus. Rather than regarding it as a translation, in which case it must seem inept, or the two mixing to create a creole, which raises (possibly misplaced, but very common) concerns about the purity of the religious traditions, it would be better to consider this as the playing of two different religion-games.

For someone like Miller, who argues that dual belonging has very real advantages, this analogy makes some points much easier to demonstrate. Practising two religions might be seen as a spiritual cross-training: getting better at running can make you better at football or rowing, because the strength and skills can transfer. Knowing the patterns of one religion can make you stronger in your other faith tradition as well – as Paul Knitter puts it in a memorable book title, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*.<sup>14</sup> For Anna, this analogy makes it easy to see that her participation, rather than some innate quality of her personality, is what matters: “I do both Jewish and Christian things.”

## 2.2 Bob – both Christian and Buddhist

Bob now participates in both Christian and Buddhist religion-games. He was raised in a broadly Christian household and attended a Methodist church sometimes. As a young man, he rejected some aspects of Christian belief and explored other religions looking for ways to satisfy his urge to be ‘spiritual’ without offending his intellect. He continued to attend church at times, but also began to visit a meditation group fairly regularly. The meditation group offered him the opportunity to take the Three Refuges during a weekend retreat, and he went ahead. When he came home for Christmas, and was happy to attend services, his mother was confused. “I thought you’d done that ritual,” she said. “Are you a Buddhist or a Christian now?”

Like Anna, Bob may need to begin answering this question by rejecting a tick-box approach to religion in which it is only possible to be one at once. He can give an answer in terms of language – “I speak both Buddhist and Christian” – but this analogy does not give him much space to explain why he has taken up Buddhism without leaving Christianity entirely behind. Learning a second language is often held to be good, so it gives a positive light to his choice, but besides straightforward communication, inter-cultural understanding, and opportunities to work abroad or with speakers of the second language, it is not usually seen as having intrinsic benefits. Bob has not taken the Three Refuges in order to communicate better with Buddhists, although for some this kind of exploration is rooted in a desire for interfaith understanding; rather, he has accepted meditation practice, the Three Refuges, and perhaps other aspects of Buddhist practice or belief because he finds them personally useful in some way. His retention of aspects of Christian belief and practice are also motivated by personal factors, perhaps including emotional attachment, acceptance of some of the propositional claims as true, or feeling that the moral elements of Christian teaching are important.

Answering in terms of religion-games gives Bob more capacity to address these points. “I practice both Christian and Buddhist religion-games because they help me in different ways.” He can go on to discuss specific religion-games: for Bob, as for many Western Buddhists, meditation is the central religion-game in Buddhism. “Meditation is central to my practice” and “I practice meditation regularly” are both statements Bob could make which make sense in this situation and fit neatly into the religion-games paradigm. However, it might not be so easy for him to talk about his Christianity, especially if this takes the form of belief and is not manifested in explicit action. How can the religion-games concept help to describe this situation? At first it seems unlikely to be useful, because holding beliefs such as “Jesus is Lord” or “Jesus was a wise teacher” does not sound like playing a game at all. There is a level of interpretation on which making claims like these is to play a language-game, though: to make the statement “Jesus is Lord” is to make a move within a distinctively Christian language-game, a language-game which is also a religion-game. If the slippage between ‘holding a belief’ and ‘making a statement’ here is acceptable – as it

<sup>14</sup> Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*.

should be if you regard beliefs as always taking the form of propositional statements – this may be enough said. If, on the other hand, beliefs do not always come in the form of propositional statements – perhaps sometimes they are better understood as feelings or attitudes – another perspective is needed to address the relationship between beliefs and religion-games. Suppose Bob has a feeling of love and affection towards the figure of Jesus, even if he would not articulate this in a statement such as “I love Jesus”. To have a particular feeling might be regarded as a religion-game if it can be shown that it has rules and is played or practiced within a community. Bob’s feeling of affection, I argue, does have these properties: he could break the rules of ‘loving Jesus’ by, for example, being mistaken about the identity of Jesus. In order for his feeling to make sense, it has to exist within a culture in which Jesus is a known figure – this need not be a church community, but if Bob grows up in a society with no knowledge of Jesus he would be very unlikely to come to have this feeling, and if he moved into such a society as an adult the people around him would require explanations about Jesus before being able to accurately comprehend his emotion. Having a feeling of love for the figure of Jesus, then, is culturally specific; although apparently an emotion, it is also subject to the same kinds of rules as other religion-games.

It is now, I hope, clear that describing Bob’s multiple religious participation as the practice of religion-games from more than one religious tradition helps to illuminate what is happening in his life. It will also help to explain the many different forms which multiple religious participation can take: even within the Buddhist and Christian pairing of religions, Drew found considerable differences of practice among her case studies. Her interviewees not only selected different traditions within the two religions – Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Quaker branches of Christianity, for example – but also chose which religion-games to play – attending Mass, saying mantras, reading the Bible, sitting meditation, and so forth.<sup>15</sup> This diversity is not captured by umbrella labels such as ‘Buddhist-Christian dual belonging’. Nor it is unique to people who draw from more than one tradition; Jeffrey Carlson has argued convincingly that everyone chooses which religious practices to undertake, and nobody has an entirely ‘pure’ tradition or practices all of it.<sup>16</sup> Ethnographic work on people’s real practices, especially informal practices, tends to support this – see, for example, Meredith McGuire’s writing about lived religion.<sup>17</sup> The logical conclusion to this line of thought would seem to be that there are in fact no religious traditions, no ‘world religions’, no Christianity and no Buddhism for someone like Bob to belong to.

This is at odds with both the ways in which religions are ordinarily discussed – including the ways in which I have discussed them so far in this paper – and with people’s sense of what it is to have a multiple religious belonging. Drew’s participants often describe tensions between their two religious identities, for example, or the claims made by the two religious traditions in which they practice. Breaking down religions into religion-games does not mean the breakdown of religions as traditions. Rather, just as language-games must each be played within a language (even if the same game can be played in more than one language), religion-games are learned and played within religious traditions. A religious tradition could be thought of as a group of religion-games which have historical associations and which make sense when practiced together. For example, within his Christian tradition Bob might add his feeling of affection for Jesus to participation in worship services and giving money to Christian charities. These religion-games all inform one another: even at the simplest level, the emotion adds meaning and sense to the practice of worship, and the worship includes teachings which encourage giving money to help the poor. Within a single religion, the religion-games are expected to all support one another, even if individuals do not actually practice them all personally; when they do not, it is common to find that two separate denominations or traditions have formed within the religion (as when changes to the rules of a religion-game cause a schism – consider the rules for ‘conducting a Christian wedding’, for example, or ‘electing a bishop’).

Religion-games from another tradition may or may not help to inform one another: Roger Corless found Buddhist and Christian claims to be in direct conflict, while Paul Knitter uses Buddhist ideas to illuminate

<sup>15</sup> Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?* chapter 2, ‘Interviewee profiles’.

<sup>16</sup> Carlson, “Pretending to be Buddhist and Christian.”

<sup>17</sup> McGuire, *Lived Religion*.

Christian beliefs.<sup>18</sup> This may affect the religion-games in which people choose to participate – tending to reject those which conflict directly with others they already like to play – but it may not have as direct an effect. Within the religion-games model, it is perfectly possible to swap between two sets of rules which are apparently contradictory; Corless, for example, “contends that Christianity takes its message to be superior to that of other traditions, as does Buddhism, and that these mutually exclusive positions must be taken seriously if one is authentically Christian or authentically Buddhist.”<sup>19</sup> His own solution to this is to defocus the ‘I’ which belongs, and to regard himself as a ‘host’ to religious traditions rather than belonging to them, but this is contrary to the way in which religions are discussed in ordinary language. It is also unlikely to satisfy someone who feels, as Bob might well feel, that they do in fact belong to a religious community and tradition. It might be more productive for Corless to describe his situation in terms of religion-games. While participating in a Christian religion-game, he can accept ‘Christianity is superior’ as a rule of that game, but reject it while playing a Buddhist religion-game. Alternatively, he might regard ‘making superiority claims’ as a form of religion-game in which he does not wish to participate, and – while acknowledging that many others in both traditions do play this game – refuse to do so. Since there are bound to be many other religion-games in both traditions, in which many members of the tradition participate but Corless does not, this alone does not take him outside either of the traditions. Bob can use this kind of move to argue that in choosing to participate in some Buddhist and some Christian religion-games, he is a member of both traditions.

### 3 Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated a wide variety of ways in which using the religion-games concept, and to a lesser extent the religion-as-language analogy, help to illuminate what is happening in clear-cut cases of dual religious belonging. To finish, I will turn to a pair of cases in which the situation is much less clear, and ask whether describing them in terms of religion-games will be of assistance.

The first concerns Carole, who like Bob grew up in a Protestant Christian household and later came to both explore and then embrace Buddhism. However, unlike Bob, Carole does not retain an attachment to Christianity; she regards herself as having converted to Buddhism rather than having multiple religious belonging. In some ways, this seems like a simpler case; certainly, it is easier to describe in the ‘tick one box’ model of religion in which a person can only have one religious identity at once. This impression does not stand up to a closer examination of what people in Carole’s situation actually do. A very common situation is that someone, having converted away from the religion into which they were born, or having ceased to hold its central beliefs, continues to practice some key rituals, especially where – like Christmas gift-giving or the Pesach seder – they are rituals deeply embedded in the life of the family. The situation of rejecting some beliefs or practices but continuing to participate in some central religion-games, or practices which are seen as cultural as well as religious, is common enough that terms such as ‘lapsed Catholic’ and ‘atheist Jew’ are already present in our ordinary vocabulary for discussing religious affiliation.

Carole identifies, at this point in her life, only as Buddhist, but she could be said to have “a foot in both camps” and would have been included in Goosen’s research sample, so in some senses has a multiple religious belonging.<sup>20</sup> By describing this in terms of the religion-games in which she chooses to participate, rather than in terms of identity or trying to determine whether her Christian community would still accept her as part of that community (where, for example, her family might count her in and her former church might not), we gain a significantly more nuanced and fine-grained picture of the situation.

My last example is Dave, who would tick the box labelled ‘No religion’ if he were asked to complete a survey form. Dave grew up in a household of many religious affiliations: his mother, like Anna, was raised both Jewish and Christian, and his father, like Bob, was raised Christian and embraced Buddhism

<sup>18</sup> Corless wrote in many places himself and is also quoted as an interviewee in Drew. Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?*, Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*.

<sup>19</sup> Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?* 46.

<sup>20</sup> Goosen, “An Empirical Study of Dual Religious Belonging,” 163-164.

later in life. Dave's parents took him occasionally but not regularly to events and children's classes at the synagogue, the church, the other church, and the meditation hall. They celebrated bits of some religious holidays when it suited them, and allowed him to participate in his grandparents' traditions when it was practical to do so. As an adult, Dave is happy to 'just pop in' to a wide range of religious observances when he feels the need, but has no stable affiliation to a particular organisation or community. Is 'no religion' an adequate description of Dave's situation? It completely underestimates Dave's ability to participate in a wide range of religion-games when the situation arises, and it ignores the fact that these situations do arise – for social or family reasons, or for spiritual or emotional ones, Dave does choose to participate in religion-games. He is without a specific religious identity, and therefore of 'no fixed religion' but he is not without access to or knowledge of religion. The religion-games concept allows us to describe Dave's situation in a much more nuanced way: having learned a variety of religion-games in childhood, he is able to switch readily between religious settings and act in ways which are appropriate. His knowledge of religion-games is wide and although his lack of affiliation may bar him from some of the longer-term religious practices or those which require a specific identification, he is able to participate in parts of at least three religious traditions. Dave may not be 'religious', but he might call himself 'spiritual', and he is definitely a player of religion-games.

These cases raise complex questions about religion and identity. In common with other forms of the turn towards 'lived religion', such as McGuire's work,<sup>21</sup> framing these cases in terms of religion-games focusses attention on practice rather than belief – although, as I have outlined above, it does not mean ignoring belief. There is a tendency, in thinking about multiple religious belonging, to ask who is 'really' practising multiple religious belonging, and to characterise some people as having genuine hyphenated or multiple identities and others as being, in some way, not quite there.<sup>22</sup> There can also be a blindness to the ways in which conversion is never the same as being raised in a religion, or that leaving a religion is not the same as never having belonged to it – we are often inclined to take at face value claims that someone has 'left all that behind' without seeing the ways in which reaction against a tradition is in some ways a move which keeps one deeply related to that tradition.<sup>23</sup> Using the religion-games model can move our thoughts away from these common but unhelpful patterns. Instead, we look at the religion-games in which they are involved. The 'grey area' between 'merely' learning about other religions and 'actually' having multiple religious participation can be mapped by the process of learning different religion-games. As one becomes more practiced and confident in a set of religion-games, one is closer to a full belonging; but no member of the tradition will ever engage in all the religion-games ever played within a complex and storied religious tradition, so there is no absolute boundary over which one can cross (or fail to cross).

In some religious traditions there are specific practices associated with conversion itself, of course. Becoming a member of the community requires participation in these religion-games, and some traditions also ask people to desist from participating in the practices of other religions after that point. However, to assume that they do abandon them merely because they are asked to do so is naïve; in the real world, this is not easy to achieve and some religion-games – perhaps those which are cultural as well as religious, or deeply embedded in family life, or ways of speaking which have deeply shaped patterns of thought – are likely to persist long after conversion. The effect of some religion-games which have become cultural patterns is so strong that it affects even those who have never seriously participated in the religion. If you doubt this, please observe carefully the next time a debate breaks out online about American Jewish families who display Christmas trees. These people, who choose for cultural reasons to participate in a religion-game not from their own tradition, are easy to discuss within the religion-games framework, but not so obviously understood by models of religion which focus on belief or purity of practice.

<sup>21</sup> McGuire, *Lived Religion*.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Goosen, "An Empirical Study of Dual Religious Belonging" and Cornille, "Double Religious Belonging: Aspects and Questions." Both do this for different reasons.

<sup>23</sup> The decision by members of Monty Python's Flying Circus to experiment with abandoning the punchline did not divorce them from the previous comedy traditions which had relied on punchlines; in an odd way, it sometimes seems to bring them closer together.



Finally, looking at multiple religious belonging using the religion-games concept pushes us to ask different questions about religious identity. Amartya Sen has discussed the way in which some current pictures of the ‘multicultural society’ are flawed, especially where they attend to inheritance over choice and assume the coherence and continuity of a series of separate subcultures or enclaves.<sup>24</sup> Using religion-games, instead of religious belonging, as our starting point, we are taken away from this image and are able to see the ways in which many people have some forms of multiple religious affiliation – perhaps weaker than belonging, but including familiarity and affection. Everyone chooses which religion-games they will play from the many options, whether those are all derived from a single religious tradition with a historical continuity or are learned from a range of different religions. This choice is affected by inheritance and upbringing – for many people, the religion-games learned in childhood have the power of familiarity and emotional overlays akin to those of a native language – but it is still a choice, which does not have to be about picking one religion over another, and leaves the boundaries of religious communities in some ways permeable.

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<sup>24</sup> Sen, *Identity and Violence*, 116.