Perils and Possibilities of Multiple Religions Belonging: Test Case in Roman Catholicism

Abstract: After reviewing various forms of multiple religious belonging, the author argues for the necessity of preliminary first principles, primarily coming from a considered form of a theology of religions. While an exclusivist theology would not allow multiple belongings, forms of inclusivism, pluralism, and postmodern mutualism provide possibilities. Since Roman Catholicism takes the most typical inclusivist position and has documented authoritative magisterial texts regarding Christianity and the religious other, the author makes a test case from the official Roman Catholic position. These he uses to guide theological possibilities and limitations. Ultimately, what he argues is that the Catholic position is not completely coherent and itself weaves some pluralist and postmodern principles into its supposedly rigid inclusivist position. As a test case, it shows the problems in creating a complete and absolute paradigm regarding Christianity’s relationship with other religions. He finally argues for a modestly faithful form of Catholic theology that allows for some forms of multiple religious belonging, but also shows how full-fledged multiple identities are fraught.

Keywords: Theology of religions, Dual religious identity, Postmodern thought, Roman Catholicism, Inclusivism, Pluralism

1 Introduction

In the last several decades, interreligious dialogue has included the very dicey question of multiple religious belonging. Catherine Cornille rightly observes, “A heightened and widespread consciousness of religious pluralism has presently left the religious person with the choice not only of which religion, but also of how many religions she or he might belong to. More and more individuals confess to being partly Jewish and partly Buddhist, or partly Christian and partly Hindu, or fully Christian and fully Buddhist.”1 Making sense of multiple belonging strikes me as extraordinarily complex and involves a number of philosophical, theological, and devotional categories to negotiate. We might first ask: what counts as a bona fide multiple religious belonging? It wouldn’t be unusual for a Buddhist in South Asia to perform daily puja or ritual devotion to a Hindu deity while still robustly believing herself to be thoroughly Buddhist. The logic here is that the Buddha never rejected basic Hindu cosmology or the possibilities of non-human beings interacting with humans. So, seeking the boon of a Hindu deity might be imagined to be part of larger Buddhist karmic relations with the universe. Would such a Buddhist imagine herself identifying as both Buddhist and Hindu? In terms of identity, probably not. But in terms of religious practice, it would be difficult to argue otherwise.

Other forms of seemingly dual belonging involve the utility of various religions in one’s society. Rose Drew explains the situation in Asia as such: “People pray at shrines connected with various religious


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traditions, deities and saints. And, in Japan, many visit Shinto shrines on auspicious occasions, Christian churches for weddings, and Buddhist temples for funerals.”

2 Peter Phan explains, “In Asia religions are not considered as mutually exclusive organizations but as having specialized functions responding to a division of labor, as it were, to different needs and circumstances in the course of a person’s life.”

Here, it is difficult to distinguish multiple religious belonging with ritual or functional efficacy. Phan writes, “Multiple religious belonging emerges as a theological problem only in religions that demand an absolute and exclusive commitment on the part of their adherents to their founders and/or faiths. This seems to be the case with the so-called religions of the Book…. Not so with most other religions, particularly in Asia. In Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, multiple religious belonging is the rule rather than the exception, at least on the popular level.”

The issue of how and why one might imagine the possibilities of multiple religious belonging could follow the following axiom: The more a given religion is believed to be a complete worldview, where its doctrines and practices are believed uniquely divinely inspired, the more problematic multiple religious belonging becomes.

In addition to this expression of Asian religiosity that tends toward a kind of religious utilitarianism, there are other forms of multiple religious belonging. One expression would be engagement with another religion as an auxiliary religious influence. Here one might engage in another religion, particularly some of its spiritual strategies, to such an extent that one is deeply changed by the experience. One interprets reality in part through the lens of the secondary religion and allows one’s own religion to be influenced by the religious imagination of the auxiliary religion. One major figure who represents this lighter form of mutual belonging is Jesuit priest Francis Clooney, a major figure in comparative theology. Clooney’s particular interest is cross-reading Christian and Hindu texts. He demonstrates how a Christian could be informed by the truths Hindu texts reveal; truths about God, experiences of God, and insights into the nature of prayer. Each encounter affects the next. Hindu texts bring new questions or insights into Christian texts, that then makes him rethink the Hindu texts, and so on. In this modest form of multiple belonging, some of the truth of the other religion becomes part of one’s own psyche. Clooney has never publicly claimed a mutual belonging with Hinduism, but has often acknowledged that Hindu thought has become part of his consciousness.

There are deeper associations. Robert Kennedy, for example, is both a Roman Catholic priest and a Zen Roshi. Through lengthy training in Zen, he has received dharma transmission and is considered in the Zen community a bona fide Master. Yet, even with this depth of experience, he is hesitant to claim multiple religious belonging as part of his identity. Kennedy writes, “I have never thought of myself as anything but Catholic and I certainly never have thought of myself as a Buddhist.”

A third variant of multiple religious identities would be those for whom one’s home religion remains the core of one’s identity, but would also identify the secondary religion as indeed part of their identity. Peter Phan describes it as a primary identity with the other as qualifier.

Christian theologian and Zen Roshi Rubin Habito unapologetically identifies himself as a Buddhist-Christian. While there may be little substantive difference between Kennedy and Habito, their public and perhaps private self-identity differs in this regard.

Finally, there are those who believe themselves robustly belonging to the multiple religious belonging category. For some in this grouping, the truths of the religious other are not easily aligned with truths held in one’s home religion, but both remain true nonetheless. This was the experience of French Benedictine priest Henri le Saux (1910-1973), more famously known as Abhishiktananda. Le Saux deeply experienced the personal loving God of the Trinity. Under intense Hindu spiritual training, Le Saux had non-dual experiences of the impersonal Absolute, identified as Brahman. Le Saux could not intellectually rectify these experiences with those of a personal God. Though he could not conceptually unite these experiences,
he believed them both true. He placed himself in both religious camps. In his spiritual diary, he wrote of his commitment to Hinduism and the Hindu community, even as he never gave up his Christian faith:

When you pass beyond the namarupa (external forms), the mystery takes all forms (sarvarupam). The clash is not with a particular namarupa but with those who absolutize it. If to become Christian again I had to give you up, O Arunachala, to abandon you, O Ramana, then I would never be able to become Christian again, for they have entered into my flesh, they are woven into the fibers of my heart. How could I become Christian again if I had to forget Ramana and the people of the mountain…all those were who were my companions on the way, and were each in his own way my helper or my guide toward the great enlightenment. If to say Mass I had to give them the slip, then I could never again say Mass.7

Another framing of the same depth of dual belonging is posed by Sri Lankan priests Michael Rodrigo (1927-1987) and Aloysius Pieris, who both argue that Buddhism provides a complementary truth to Christianity. Pieris, for example, argues that Christians have love (agape) and Buddhists have a unique form of wisdom (prajna), and that collectively they form the fullness of the spiritual life.8 Thus, to be fully religious, one must take up the multiple religious mantle. This belief in other religions providing unique insights into the spiritual world that Christianity cannot was also the principal thesis of Raimon Panikkar: “I ‘left’ as a Christian, ‘found myself’ a Hindu, and ‘return’ as a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian.”9 Or consider Paul Knitter, who considers himself now under this larger fully dual identity.

Buddhist or Christian: which comes first? The reason I say that is because, as I have been going about my Christian and my Buddhist practices over these recent years, I can’t keep them apart. It’s not that they are blurring into each other and becoming just one practice. No, they remain clearly distinct…. Rather, for me, when I’m at Mass, it’s with Buddhist ears that I hear the words of the Scripture readings or of the sermon…. I feel the powerful symbols of the Eucharistic liturgy with Buddhist sensitivity. I’m constantly translating Christian into Buddhist and Buddhist into Christian but in what feels like a natural flow back and forth, like a conversation…. When encouraged to sit like the Buddha, I find myself sitting like the Christ.10

This particular essay intends to investigate the possibilities of Christian multiple religious belonging, and more specifically a Roman Catholic theological expression of it. The assets of such a perspective is that Christianity traditionally has understood itself as holding an absolute revelation in Jesus Christ, and an absolute salvation given by the grace of the Triune God and instantiated by the saving work of Christ. Further, Roman Catholicism has addressed considerations of the religious other in many modern, authoritative texts. The presence of magisterial texts and the modern history of a deep Catholic engagement with other religious traditions allows Catholicism to be a kind of test case to examine the complexities and theological problems of multiple religious belonging for most mainstream Christians.

2 Preliminary foundations: theology of religions

Theology of religions is a term that represents a person’s or religion’s understanding of the religious other in light of one’s own theological commitments. Given that many religions make universal claims about the nature of reality, and given that most religions understand their own religious tradition as privileged or particularly true, what ought that religion think about religions that have different and even competing claims? Are these competing claims de facto false, presuming the principle of non-contradiction? Are they alternative versions that can also be true in their own way? Are these religions vehicles of God’s grace or salvation?

One can reasonably argue that it is methodologically necessary to have some kind of theology of religions. Steven Duffy rightly observes, “Consciously or unconsciously [all] bring a pre-understanding, a

7 Abhishiktananda, Spiritual Diary, 175 as cited in Kearney, “Toward an Open Eucharist,” 142.
8 See my brief treatment in Feldmeier, Encounters in Faith, 270-272.
10 Knitter, Without the Buddha, 219.
prior set of postulates from their own faith and from their own tradition and its theologies.\textsuperscript{11} To imagine that one could intentionally engage another religion without theoretical commitments is to ignore widely accepted, long standing principles in hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{13}

Since the end of the twentieth century, theology of religions has become somewhat of an outdated project, given the fact that not much has advanced in the field.\textsuperscript{13} Following Alan Race’s ground breaking work, various theologies of religion were categorized under three basic headings: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.\textsuperscript{14} They continue to function as shorthand positions for those involved in the conversation, from Pope Benedict XVI to compendiums of theology.\textsuperscript{15} Given the aim of this essay, I will describe these positions from a Christian point of view and only in shorthand.

Exclusivism is a theological position that posits no grace or salvation outside of the Christian confession. Unless one proclaims explicit faith in Christ, one cannot participate in God’s saving grace: \textit{nulla salus extra ecclesiam} (or Christum). While one could question just how well the Bible is approached, nonetheless biblical support here is quite daunting.\textsuperscript{16} Luther and Calvin’s insistence (and those who follow them) that revelation makes a judgment against those who attempt to know God without it dominates this position, as does the emphasis on distinguishing God from human moral categories. Critics of exclusivism challenge that it denies the universal salvific will of God (1 Tim 2:4) and that its principles are not consistently applied. Paul Knitter has even shown that many self-identified exclusivists are now striving to find possibilities for the salvation for non-Christians while still maintaining \textit{solus Christus}. Some propose theories about the possibility of conversion after death, while others posit the possibility of God saving souls who \textit{would} have chosen Christ if they had the legitimate possibility in their lives.\textsuperscript{17} Exclusivism is problematic enough that Francis Clooney claims there are virtually no theologians who are bona fide exclusivists.\textsuperscript{18}

Inclusivism posits that Christ is the absolute savior and that his saving grace is operative outside of the formal Christian confession. This position is built on three assumptions. The first is that God desires that all people be saved. Second, all experiences of truth, goodness, and so on, are experiences of God’s grace. Thus to seek the good and respond to it is to implicitly seek God and respond to God’s grace working in one’s heart. Finally, all grace is mediated through Christ. Christian inclusivists usually claim embracing Christianity, while not necessary, is a great advantage because Christianity has the fullness of revelation. Thus, explicit Christian faith provides a privileged ability to cooperate with grace. This position too can boast of biblical support.\textsuperscript{19} Critics of the inclusivist position challenge that its adherents assess other religions insofar as they reflect truths of Christianity and do not allow other faiths to speak for themselves.

\textsuperscript{11} Duffy, “A Theology of Religions and/or Comparative Theology?,” 112.

\textsuperscript{12} See, for example, Gadamer on pre-understanding in \textit{Truth and Method}, 274ff; Ricoeur, \textit{Interpretation Theory}, especially chapter 2; and Schillebeeckx, \textit{The Understanding of Faith}, especially chapter 7.

\textsuperscript{13} Richard Schebera writes that “These modes simply repeat themselves and [their representatives] debate their relative merits, tweaking their own models but [without] much real adjustment or advancement.” Thus, it has “reached an impasse which limits its ability to foster realistic dialogue.” See Schebera, “Comparative Theology: A New Method in Interreligious Dialogue,” 9 and 17.

\textsuperscript{14} Race, \textit{Christians and Religious Pluralism}.

\textsuperscript{15} See, for example, Ratzinger, \textit{Truth and Tolerance}, 49-54 and \textit{The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Religion}, s.v. “Theology of Religions.”


\textsuperscript{17} Gavin D’Costa describes this as \textit{universal-access exclusivism}. See D’Costa, \textit{Christianity and World Religions}, 7. There is also the modified position of \textit{open exclusivism}, though it holds little hope for advancing the discussion. Douglas Pratt describes it thus: “Open exclusivism implies openness to some form of relationship with another without expectation of, or openness to, consequential or reciprocal change of self-identity with respect to the relationship. The ‘other’ is acknowledged, but only as an ‘anti-theoretical’ other whose presence calls forth either or both of patronizing and polemical engagement.” See Pratt, “Fundamentalism, Exclusivism, and Religious Extremism,” 247. Robert McKim describes his version of open exclusivism as being open to “some relatively unimportant truths” in the religious other, while stepping “over into inclusivism if you endorse something more robust.” See McKim, \textit{On Religious Diversity}, 47-48.

\textsuperscript{18} Clooney, “Theology, Dialogue, and Religious Others,” 319.

\textsuperscript{19} Many of these are chosen because they suggest grace involving the whole world. See Mk 9:40; Jn 3:16–17; 8:12; 9:5; 11:9; 12:46; 1 Jn 2:2; 2:5–6; 4:7–8; 4:12; 6:33; Acts 17:22; Rom 5:18; 11:32; 1 Cor 5:19; 15:28; Col 3:11; Eph 1:10; and Gal 5:22–23.
Further, they do not allow for authentic spiritual wisdom from other traditions that is different from a specific Christian articulation. This position is the most widely embraced in mainstream Christianity and is the formal position of the Catholic Church.

Pluralism is the most difficult position to describe because it has the greatest variety. Broadly, pluralism refuses to name any religion as the singular normative religious revelation. Pluralism's strength depends upon accepting two reasonable assumptions. The first is that God transcends comprehension. Thus, any articulation of God necessarily falls short of the reality of God. Second, it is this incomprehensible God that is being addressed variously in all authentic religions. Other assumptions may include that religions fundamentally point to the same underlying experience or have the same salvific project. Finally, one might deny that the above-mentioned unity is necessary, but simply maintain that Christ’s salvation is only one path and there are others that are potentially equally salvific in their own right. Critics of pluralism claim that it is highly selective in its data and that ironically it fails to respect religious plurality. In a word, it “domesticates differences.” While no religious body has endorsed such a position, it is embraced by a significant, albeit minority, number of those involved in interreligious dialogue.

A fourth model is emerging, one I will call the mutuality model, which highlights the postmodern worldview many take as our current hermeneutical landscape. Very briefly, a postmodern perspective has become increasingly sensitive to all conceptualizations and expressions of truth as being rooted in unique places and times. No articulation of truth, therefore is exempt from historical or philosophical critique. Postmodern philosophers have become suspicious of a classicist notion of knowing or having privileged access to truth. In short, no metanarratives that attempt universal claims are allowed. A postmodern mutuality model highlights the radical uniqueness of various traditions. Here one need not make a priori proclamations about the religious other, but rather accept its genuine alterity. Take, for example, Zen Buddhism. Instead of dismissing it as a natural religion (exclusivism), or looking for an implicit expression of the gospel (inclusivism), or stretching its description to include it among the same salvation or transformation agendas of other religions (pluralism), the mutuality model allows it to speak on its own with its own uniqueness. Could different religions have different ends and different modes of transformation unique unto them? Mark Heim writes about the possibility of different religious ends as a more fruitful endeavor, as it “directs us unavoidably toward the religious traditions themselves and their accounts of their own religious aims...not a generic construct imposed on them.... Such perspectives indicate the intrinsic value of study and dialogue that deal with the ‘thick’ descriptive natures of religions.”

All the standard models represent positions with intrinsically important values. And yet, they are all fraught. As I noted in an earlier essay:

Following the current and most creative developments of various positions in these models has been frustrating... The problem is that few are staying strictly inside any one of these models. For example, exclusivist-replacement theologies are straining categories by insisting on solely a Christian view of salvation even while providing rationale for non-Christian salvation. The most interesting work in inclusivist-fulfillment theories also seem to cross borders and strain their first principles.... One of the reasons that Jacques Dupuis’s Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism was both fascinating and frustrating may be the same reason it was investigated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) and survived. It was filled with pluralistic assertions but continued to retreat into inclusivism. He is now considered by some

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20 John Hick will most recently say that the ineffable God spoken of by Thomas Aquinas (Summa contra gentiles, I.14.3) is the same as the Ein Sof of Jewish Kabbalah, the al Haq of Sufism, the Dharmaakaya of Mahayana Buddhism and Hindu Brahman, and that descriptions of them and appropriations of their mystery are limited by human subjectivity. See Hick, “The Next Step Beyond Dialogue.”

21 Fredericks, Faith among Faiths, 113ff. Take, for example, the presumption that all religions point to the same religious experience. Investigating mystical descriptions often suggests that Hindus have Hindu mystical experiences, Christians have Christian mystical experiences, and Buddhists have Buddhist experiences, and so on. To say to John of the Cross, “Even through you claim that you are directly experiencing the Trinity, we know that your objective experience, before you subjectively appropriate it through your Christian lens, is the same as Zen satori, and that is the same as the Vedanta experience that “atman is Brahman” is an astoundingly assumptive claim. Two good essays regarding the uniqueness of mystical experiences are Katz, “The ‘Conservative Character of Mystical Experience,” and Gimello, “Mysticism and its Contexts.”

22 I have addressed this brief synopsis elsewhere; see Feldmeier, “Is the Theology of Religions an Exhausted Project?,” 258-260.

23 Heim, The Depth of the Riches, 30.
an inclusivist-pluralist…. Pluralists likewise seem to strain categories. For example, many pluralists claim a rough parity or a co-validity regarding other religions, even while asserting Christ’s salvation as “normative” or “universally relevant.” Upon scrutiny, these categories are at times inconsistently applied even in the same work.  

It should be obvious that any form of exclusivism would not allow for multiple religious belonging. A priori, the religious other’s worldview would be false. Inclusivism could modestly allow for some limited interreligious learning, perhaps inspiring one’s Christian imagination. Still, when one presumes that the Christian faith holds all truth, then other religions are valued insofar as they implicitly carry the Christian message. The pluralism and mutuality models hold more promises for multiple religious belonging, though they are not without their own problems in method. Because the vast majority of Christians are inclusivists, and Roman Catholicism formally endorses it, and given the above-mentioned reasons for testing multiple religious belonging in Roman Catholicism, the next section of this essay will detail the official Catholic approach to the religious other.

3 Roman Catholicism and the Religious Other

3.1 History through Vatican II

Throughout its existence, Christianity has wrestled with the question of a non-Christian graced life and the possibility of salvation for non-Christians. On the one hand, Christianity widely believes that Jesus is the absolute savior and sole mediator between God and humanity. “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). On the other hand, it was often assumed, even from the beginning, that those who do not know the gospel explicitly can experience God’s saving grace in their lives. Broadly, church fathers believed that pious, devout Jews and Gentiles who lived before Christ were saved by the preexistent Word (Logos). Justin Martyr spoke of the seeds of the Word (Logos spermatikos) planted in the hearts of these pious souls, and many of the great architects of Christian orthodoxy held the same view.  

Upon the church’s formation, such optimism about the salvation of non-Christians changed. Once the gospel had been preached, not believing in Christ was assumed an intentional choice to reject God’s explicit offer of salvation. Augustine, surely knowing that some would not have even had the chance to hear the gospel, argued that they simply were not predestined for heaven. The medieval church furthered Augustine’s claims by also insisting that not only did one have to have faith in Christ, one also had to belong to the church. The church was understood to be Christ’s sacramental body, and to be separate from the body was to be separate from Christ himself. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council declared, “There is only one universal Church of the faithful, outside which none shall be saved.” In 1442, the Council of Florence issued a profession of faith that read, “All those outside the Catholic Church, Jews, heretics, schismatics, pagans, unless joined to the Church, are damned to hell.”

Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) argued that no one could be damned for what they could not avoid and that those seeking God were already responding to his grace. Aquinas called this “baptism of desire.” But Aquinas never followed the implications of this in terms of those never becoming baptized, for he also thought that if someone did receive these graces and did respond, that person would, by God’s providence, be literally baptized before death. Still, Aquinas’s principle of implicit baptism grew theologically so that by the modern period Catholics came to believe that non-Christians could implicitly align their lives with God’s grace and be saved; this presuming that they sought the truth to the best of their ability. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the lack of conversion by the devout and saved non-Christian was deemed “invincible ignorance.”

24 Feldmeier, Is The Theology of Religions an Exhausted Project?, 262.
25 They would include Irenaeus, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian of Carthage, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom.
26 As cited in Feldmeier, Encounters in Faith, 6.
27 Ibid.
28 This was advanced by Pope Pius IX’s Singulari Quadam (1854).
Catholicism’s Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) dramatically advanced Catholic understanding of the graced and salvific lives of non-Christians. These are the most important texts:29

– **Lumen Gentium** (Dogmatic Constitution of the Church) describes various associations with the Catholic Church and how in each God’s grace and salvation is present. It first references other Christian denominations now no longer as schismatics or heretics, but “ecclesiastical communities” united to Christ and “joined to us in the Holy Spirit” (no. 15). The text then moves to non-Christians: “Finally, those who have not received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways. There is, first, that people to which the covenants and promises were made, and from which Christ was born according to the flesh: in view of the divine choice, they are a people most dear for the sake of the fathers, for the gifts of God are without repentance. But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are Moslems [sic]: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day. Nor is God remote from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, since he gives to all men life and breath and all things, and since the savior wills all men to be saved. Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life” (no. 16).

– **Nostra Aetate** (Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions): “Throughout history even to the present day, there is found among different peoples a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and events of human life. At times there is present even a recognition of a supreme being…. This awareness and recognition results in a way of life that is imbued with a deep religious sense…. Thus, in Hinduism men explore the divine mystery and express it both in the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy. They seek release from the trials of the present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love. Buddhism in its various forms testifies to the essential inadequacy of this changing world. It proposes a way of life by which men can, with confidence and trust, attain a state of perfect liberation and reach supreme illumination through their own efforts and by the aid of divine help. So, too, other religions which are found throughout the world attempt in their own ways to calm the hearts of men by outlining a program of life covering doctrine, moral precepts and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions…. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life. In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself, men find the fullness of their religious life. The Church, therefore, urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture” (no. 2). The text goes on to reiterate **Lumen Gentium’s** praise of Muslims and Jews who are particularly close to the church theologically and historically.

– **Ad Gentes Divinitus** (Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity): “Missionary activity is nothing else, and nothing less, than the manifestation of God’s plan, its epiphany and realization in the world and in history…. So whatever goodness is found in the minds and hearts of men, or in the particular customs and cultures of peoples, far from being lost is purified, raised to a higher level and reaches its perfection, for the glory of God, the confusion of the demon, and the happiness of men” (no. 9).

– **Dignitatus Humanae** (Declaration on Religious Liberty): “All men are bound to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and his Church, and to embrace it and hold on to it as they come to know it. The sacred Council likewise proclaims that these obligations bind man’s conscience. Truth can impose

itself on the mind of man only in virtue of its own truth, which wins over the mind with both gentleness and power” (no. 1). “It is through his conscience that man sees and recognizes the demands of the divine law. He is bound to follow this conscience faithfully in all his activity so that he may come to God, who is his last end. Therefore he must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience” (no. 3).

The Catholic Church strove here to provide some of its historical continuity. For example, to the dictum *nulla salus extra ecclesiam* (no salvation outside the church) we see non-Christians as being described as being in relation to the Church in some hidden manner due to God’s grace. Further, it is obvious in these and many other texts from Vatican II that Christ is the absolute savior, and non-Christians are saved implicitly through his grace. Further, Christianity represents absolute revelation, while other religions will ultimately see their goodness and some of the truths they hold as being raised to a higher perfection in the Christian faith.

Still, the advancements in thought are striking. There is no way that the magisterial claims of the medieval church were ever meant to include non-Christians in any implicit way. These claims were directly intended to exclude any who were not literally baptized and in good standing with the church, specifically the Roman Catholic Church. Recall the Council of Florence that specifically condemned “Jews, heretics, schismatics and pagans.” Or consider, for example, Pope Boniface VIII’s papal bull *Unam Sanctam*: “There is only one holy, catholic and apostolic Church we are compelled by faith to believe and hold, and we firmly believe in her and simply confess her, outside whom there is neither salvation nor remission of sins.... Furthermore we declare, state and define that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of all men that they submit to the Roman Pontiff.”

*Dignitatus Humanae*’s insistence on religious freedom is based on a fundamental assumption, namely that God speaks to the conscience, which binds one to follow its dictates. Thus, the primacy of the conscience overrides any conversion that is not authentic and requires those who sincerely believe in other religions to follow those religions. Contrast this claim to Pope Pius IX’s *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), which condemned the following thesis as heretical: “Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true” (no. 15).

The single greatest advancement in thought is that now not only does God save individuals who cooperate with God’s grace in their hearts, but God saves people in the context of their own religions, that is, non-Christian religions are themselves vehicles for grace and salvation. At this point, however, it seems obvious that the possibilities of multiple religious belonging are dim in Roman Catholicism. While other religions are praised for their spiritual riches and depth, and become vehicles of God’s saving grace, they are nonetheless preparations for the full gospel only known in Christianity, and their truths are understood as subsidiary to the fullness of truth.

### 3.2 Beyond Vatican II

For Catholics, the teachings of Vatican II hold a high degree of authority and are essentially normative. Certainly, formal magisterial texts following Vatican II are less authoritative. Nonetheless, they remain crucial in Catholic theological work, as they formally interpret Vatican II and guide ongoing theological advancement beyond Vatican II. In 1984, the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue published a document titled, *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions*. This

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31 See [http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9syll.htm](http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9syll.htm).

32 The most authoritative Catholic documents in order are: creedal statements; decreral letters; ecumenical councils; apostolic constitutions; papal apostolic letters; papal encyclical letters; papal apostolic exhortations; formal instruction from the CDF (with formal papal approval); teaching from one’s own a bishop’s conference; and teaching from one’s own local bishop. Curial documents have their own kind of weight and may be interpreted as *magisterial* in that they tend toward making policies based on higher magisterial documents. These too can be ranked: letters; instructions (commentaries that explain doctrinal points); and directives (pastoral advice).
The document describes and commends several kinds of dialogue: (1) Dialogue of life, focusing on common humanity; (2) Dialogue of collaboration, focusing on humanitarian issues; (3) Theological dialogue, seeking greater mutual understanding; and (4) Dialogue of religious experience, including sharing one’s spiritual life and religious practices. Dialogue is here described as, “not only discussion, but also includes all positive and constructive relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment” (no. 3). Here mutual understanding and enrichment is the key. It presumes that the religious other has spiritual truths or insights that the church can learn from.

– The Church opens itself to dialogue toward fidelity to man.... This is the case whether one regards the need to receive or, even more, when one is conscious of possessing something which is to be communicated. As the human sciences have emphasized, in interpersonal dialogue one experiences one’s own limitations as well as the possibility of overcoming them. A person discovers that he does not possess the truth in a perfect and total way but can walk together with others toward that goal. Mutual affirmation, reciprocal correction, and fraternal exchange lead the partners in dialogue to a greater maturity which in turn generates interpersonal communion. Religious experiences and outlooks can themselves be purified and enriched in this process of encounter. The dynamic of human encounter should lead us Christians to listen to and strive to understand that which other believers communicate to us in order to profit from the gifts which God bestows so generously (no. 21).

– At a deeper level, persons rooted in their own religious traditions can share their experiences of prayer, contemplation, faith, and duty, as well as their expressions and ways of searching for the Absolute. This type of dialogue can be a mutual enrichment and fruitful cooperation for promotion and preserving the highest values and spiritual ideals.... The sometimes profound differences between faiths do not prevent this dialogue. Those differences, rather, must be referred back in humility and confidence to God who “is greater than our heart” (1 Jn 3:20) (no. 35).

In the past thirty years some Roman Catholic scholars have pursued the possibility of multiple belonging along some of the lines noted in this essay so far. The Vatican’s document on interreligious dialogue is crucial here. It argues that both the non-Christian tradition and Christianity can be reciprocally corrected, that non-Christian insights can lead the Christian toward a greater maturity, and that both traditions can be mutually enriched by the encounter. Thus, the non-Christian tradition has religious goods the church does not have and could use.

These scholars have also appealed to postmodern insights eschewing metanarratives and opened themselves up to whole other expressions of truth different from the Christian paradigm. Postmodern theologian Steven Kaplan writes, “It is philosophically and religiously plausible to assert that there can be multiple, different, and even contradictory models of ultimate reality. Reality is multidimensional and so there is neither need nor possibility to correct all models of reality and reduce them to a single, dominant one.” Others have appealed to theological principles that expand beyond the bounds of Christianity. Jacques Dupuis, for example, has tried to bridge inclusivism and pluralism for a kind of regno-centric theology. Here the “kingdom of God” is taken as the absolute framing and one that extends beyond the borders of Christian doctrine. Dupuis, who strives to highlight the universality of the Christian faith, also describes the necessary “asymmetrical complementarity” of other religions that demands a Christian priority but also allows for mutual learning and possibly mutual belonging. Others have attempted a pneuma-centric theology that extends the presence and revelatory expression of the Holy Spirit beyond the boundaries of Christianity. Peter Phan writes, “What the Holy Spirit says and does may be truly different from, though not contradictory to, what the Logos says and does, and what the Logos and the Spirit do and

33 See, for example Haight, Jesus the Symbol of God; Haight, “Pluralist Christology as Orthodox,” and Lakeland, Postmodernity.
34 Kaplan, Different Paths, Different Summits, 321. Kaplan, while not a Christian, articulates what pluralist and mutualist Christians scholars believe to be true.
35 See Dupuis, Toward a Theology of Religious Pluralism and Christianity and the Religions.
say in non-Christian religions may be truly different from, though not contradictory to, what Jesus said and did.”

Such positions, whether taken from versions of the inclusivist, pluralist, or mutuality models, seem surely to be in conflict with Vatican II’s teaching about the religious other. And the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reacted strongly against these positions with the declaration Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and the Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church. In it, Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) laid out a magisterial response. First and foremost, Dominus Iesus challenges those theologies that argue other religions have revelatory value that goes beyond any revelation already found in Christianity. Admittedly, the document praises interreligious dialogue and its value. In fact, dialogue “requires an attitude of understanding and a relationship of mutual knowledge and reciprocal enrichment” (no. 2). Nonetheless:

The Church’s constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only de facto but also de iure (or “in principle”). As a consequence, it is held that certain truths have been superseded; for example, the definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ, the nature of Christian faith as compared with that of belief in other religions, the inspired nature of the books of Sacred Scripture, the personal unity between the Eternal Word and Jesus of Nazareth, the unity of the economy of the Incarnate Word and the Holy Spirit, the unity and salvific universality of the mystery of Jesus Christ, the universal salvific mediation of the Church, the inseparability—while recognizing the distinction—of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Christ, and the Church, and the subsistence of the one Church of Christ in the Catholic Church (no. 4).

Dominus Iesus clearly rejects the claim that ultimate truth transcends conceptuality and thus relativizes any expression:

What hinders understanding and acceptance of the revealed truth: the conviction of the elusiveness and inexpressibility of divine truth...relativistic attitudes toward truth itself...the metaphysical emptying of the historical incarnation of the Eternal Logos, reduced to a mere appearing of God in history; the eclecticism of those who, in theological research, uncritically absorb ideas from a variety of philosophical and theological contexts without regard for consistency, systematic connection, or compatibility with Christian truth (no. 4).

In Dominus Iesus, the Christian revelation is absolute: “Only the revelation of Jesus Christ, therefore, ‘introduces into our history a universal and ultimate truth which stirs the human mind to ceaseless effort’” (no. 5). Thus, while there may be some elements of truth in other religions, “it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation” (no. 22).

Dominus Iesus also takes on the supposed distinction between the work of the Holy Spirit and the specifics and singularity of Christian revelation: “There are also those who propose the hypothesis of an economy of the Holy Spirit with a more universal breadth than that of the Incarnate Word, crucified and risen. This position also is contrary to the Catholic faith, which, on the contrary, considers the salvific incarnation of the Word as a Trinitarian event” (12). Rather the work of the Holy Spirit is ultimately to bring all into the Christian economy: “The Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.... There is a single divine economy.... The Spirit is not an alternative to Christ nor does he fill a sort of void which is sometimes suggested as existing between Christ and the Logos” (no. 12).

Dominus Iesus clearly wants to distinguish Christianity from all other religious traditions. It even went so far as to claim that Christians have theological faith while those in other religions have mere beliefs. While there may be elements of truth in other religions, it insists that “the distinction between theological faith and belief in the other religions must be firmly held” (no. 7). Faith, in this case, also includes the specifics of Christian revelation: “The obedience of faith implies acceptance of the truth of Christ’s revelation,
guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself.... It is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed" (no.7).39 What then of other religions in this regard: “[B]elief, in the other religions, is that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute” (no. 7). Here belief is understood as a human striving to understand, rather than a response to something divinely inspired.

Cardinal Ratzinger is clearly concerned with religious relativism. This has been Ratzinger’s public concern for years: As Clooney notes:

In Ratzinger’s view, too many Catholics are inclined to believe that people of all religions can contribute equally to human advancement; that truth can be known only through multiple limited expressions; that all religions reach the same transcendental goal, though by different paths; and that Christ is but one facet of ultimate reality. Tainted by this tolerant attitude, the cardinal observed, Catholics are too ready to presuppose, when they enter upon interreligious dialogue, that other religions deserve equal respect and that Christian faith is not necessarily superior to the faith articulated in other traditions. This dangerous relativism, he believes, has replaced a Marxist-influenced liberation theology as the number-one threat to the faith today.40

Noted biblical scholar Pheme Perkins describes the issue of relativism as the central hermeneutic in Dominus Iesus itself: “Dominus Iesus has only one category for interpreting the religious dynamic of the twenty-first century—a ‘relativistic mentality’—and that, it asserts, is incompatible with Christian faith.”41

What does one make of Dominus Iesus? On the one hand, it fundamentally holds the position found in Vatican II documents, particularly regarding the univocal quality of Christ’s redemption and the Christian revelation. Clooney again: “The CDF does set parameters of Catholic rootedness, an all-encompassing Christic view of the world”42 On the other hand, it seems fraught with inconsistencies. Citing Vatican II’s Ad Gentes and Pope John Paul II’s encyclical Redemptoris Missio, Dominus Iesus claims that, “Certainly, the various religious traditions contain and offer religious elements which come from God [AG, no. 7], and which are part of what “the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures, and religions” [RM, no. 29] (no. 21). And further, “[God] does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals, but also entire peoples through their spiritual riches...[RM no. 55] (no. 8).” This simply cannot square with its claims that what non-Christians believe is only through human invention.

The distinction between faith and belief is odd. As Clooney again observes, “If God is present to people in their own religions, God is surely present in such a way that those people can respond to God and adhere to God.43 Another distinction Dominus Iesus makes is that Christian scriptures are inspired by God’s spirit, but other religions’ scriptures are not (no. 8). And yet in the same section we read that “the sacred books of other religions, which in actual fact direct and nourish the existence of their followers, receive from the mystery of Christ the elements of goodness and grace they contain” (no. 8). Has God inspired these texts or not? It says both.

One of the greatest outrages from the text came from Jewish and Catholic leaders involved in dialogue. Since Judaism is a non-Christian religion, Dominus Iesus could only be read that Jews have neither faith nor divine revelation, but possess only humanly derived beliefs about God. Already Vatican II had proclaimed regarding Jews that they retained “the divine choice” and that “the gifts of God are without repentance” (Lumen Gentium, no. 16). Further, the Church cannot “forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of that people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy established the ancient covenant” or that “the apostle Paul maintains that the Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made” (Nostra Aetate, no. 4).

Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, tried to assure the Jewish community: “In fact, the Declaration Dominus Iesus did not deal at all

39 Here Dominus Iesus is citing the Catechism of the Catholic Church (no. 15), with the emphasis in the published text.
41 Perkins, New Testament Eschatology and Dominus Iesus,” 82.
43 Clooney, “Implications for Inter-Religious Learning,” 158-159.
with relations between the Christian revelation and the faith of Israel, but with the other religions of the world. The Catholic Church does not consider the faith of Israel one among the other religions of the world. Rather it has an absolutely special relationship to Christianity, and the document itself makes clear that the Hebrew Testament is considered by the Catholic Church, together with the New Testament, as inspired by God in the strict sense of the term. 44

What Nostra Aetate seems to imply about God not revoking his covenant with Jews, Pope John Paul explicitly declared in many speeches. For John Paul, Jews are in an eternal covenant with God, they are “the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God.” 45 Such a position has guided the Vatican, which has no missionary interests toward Jews, given their non-revoked covenant with God. Cardinal Ratzinger will write (before Dominus Iesus) that “Christians...should also acknowledge God’s providence, which has obviously given Israel a particular mission in this ‘time of the Gentiles.’” 46

One can appreciate the Vatican’s sensitivity toward Judaism, given the church’s horrid history of anti-Semitism. One can also recognize that Christianity has a revelatory dependence on ancient Judaism and a covenantal dependence on God’s relationship with Jews. And, of course, Jewish scriptures (Tanakh) comprise much of the Christian Bible. Nonetheless, it eludes logical coherence to say that Christ is the fulfillment of revelation, that all other beliefs (inspired by God or merely by human industry) are only dark implicit expressions of the truth only found in Christianity and then to say that Judaism is exempt from this universal claim. Nor does it make sense to boldly claim that there is only one salvation, that is, in Christ, and at the same time assert that the ancient Sinai covenant of Torah is still intact for Jews and presumably salvific.

There are other problems with Dominus Iesus. While Dominus Iesus challenges incoherent, vague relativism, it strikes many as quite vague or even indifferent to necessary distinctions among other religions. Ought religions that are devoted to a personal, loving God be considered differently to those without an idea of God? Should religions so interconnected theologically to Christianity (i.e., Judaism and Islam) be treated differently than those without such common roots, such as Daoism? Further, we might ask why Dominus Iesus commends dialogue as a way to mutually grow if no other religion has anything to offer that cannot be found in its perfection in Christianity.

I am not singular in finding this document internally problematic. Charles Hefling observes, “A kind of conceptual instability runs through the whole document, insofar as its statements bear on non-Christian religion and religions.... Dominus Iesus undermines its own credibility.” 47

In many ways Dominus Iesus represents a good illustration of the complexity and inherent problems with interreligious relations. It does so here by failing in important ways, important because they illustrate just how difficult it is to affirm one’s own faith and its (seemingly) absolute claims while recognizing the venerable depths found in the religious other. While Dominus Iesus criticizes such theological projects such as regno-centrism or pneuma-centrism, one finds claims within Dominus Iesus that actually support such projects. While it denies actual revelatory life in other religions, one finds it also seems to assert them. While it fights against religious relativism and indifference, it relativizes all religious life outside of Christianity and seems indifferent to massively important religious distinctions among other religions, particularly distinctions that would matter regarding a Christian posture toward other given religions. If Dominus Iesus represents a Catholic form of inclusivism, still one finds assertions that seem to align Catholicism with the exclusivist model (at least in terms of the lack of revelatory quality in other religions), inclusivist claims to Christ’s absolute revelation while still saving those outside of Christianity, and pluralist claims that argue the Holy Spirit’s revelatory activity outside of Christian doctrine, and the odd exception of Judaism

44 As cited in Cunningham, “Implications for Catholic Teaching on Jews and Judaism,” 136.
46 Ratzinger, Many Religions, One Covenant, 104.
47 Hefling, “Method and Meaning in Dominus Iesus,” 116. Consider also Daniel Madigan’s observation: “Gerald O’Collins and Jacques Dupuis have already dealt extensively with the weakness of DI’s position on ‘the definitive and complete character of the revelation in Christ.’ This claim to completeness and absoluteness comes across not just as monopolistic, that is, the claim to have cornered the market on something of which others stand in need. It also appears a rather harsh pretension to have completely appropriated what God has revealed. There seems to be little of the sense, so often underlined in other magisterial documents in recent years, of the long process of grasping and appropriating what God has revealed...” See Madigan, “Saving Dominus Iesus,” 263.
in God’s Christian economy of salvation. Further, we find strained categories that simply make little sense, e.g., Christian faith versus non-Christian belief. Finally, Dominus Iesus simply cannot come to terms with Vatican texts that urge dialogue for the purpose of mutual enrichment, that is, there really is something in the religious other than Christianity does not have. It seems to actually assert that such a position is incompatible with the Christian faith!

4 Where does all this leave Catholic possibilities of mutual belonging?

It appears to me that having a theology of religions is necessary to even consider the nature of the religious other, and that such a theology dictates the possibilities or limitations of multiple belonging. It also seems to me that there is no theology of religion that adequately addresses the problem of religious plurality. This is why few theologians are staying strictly inside any one of these models. It also demonstrates why our “Catholic test-case” fails logical consistency. It may be impossible to create an absolute position. Perhaps one of the most important insights in postmodernity as it relates to this issue is the virtual impossibility of creating an all-inclusive, absolute, and logically consistent system that accounts for and determines our understanding of other religions. As I have argued elsewhere:

The real issue is in finding a way to skillfully deal with the conviction that absolute universal theories cannot deal satisfactorily with the complexity of religious diversity. What is clear is that every position is problematic. This explains why the best work coming out of a theology of religions has a difficult time staying in one camp. It is because each camp has fide truth-claims that need to be respected; locating ourselves in one while ignoring the truths of the others is increasingly unacceptable.48

Peter Phan argues that for a Christian to have a hyphenated religious identity, certain theological assertions would have to be maintained. Some fall within Catholic magisterial teaching quite comfortably, while others stretch the Catholic fabric.

1. That Jesus is the unique and universal savior does not exclude non-Christians from being saved.
2. God’s activity is present in other religious traditions.
3. God’s revelatory activity, whether understood as that of the Holy Spirit or eternal Logos, goes beyond that which was taught by Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, what the Holy Spirit inspires and what the Logos says in other traditions may be different, but not contradictory, to what the Logos incarnate said in Palestine in the first century.
4. Religious pluralism is part of divine providence and has a particular role in the history of salvation beyond merely a preparation for the gospel.
5. This autonomy of non-Christian religions does not detract from Jesus’s role as the unique and universal savior, as this is the climax of God’s plan. This makes Christian and non-Christian religions related to one another. But because they have an autonomous function in the history of salvation, they cannot be reduced to each other. Autonomy and relatedness are not mutually exclusive.
6. There is a reciprocal relationship between Christianity and other religions. Non-Christian religions complement Christianity and Christianity complements non-Christian religions. This two-way reciprocity is why dialogue between religions works to mutually enrich both sides.
7. There is also a reciprocal relationship between Jesus and other “savior figures” insofar as Jesus’s revelation and salvation are also complemented by God’s self-revelation and redemption manifest in other teachers of non-Christian religions.
8. Complementarity can be understood as asymmetrical; the asymmetry is required by the Christian claim that Jesus is the Logos incarnate and represents the climax or decisive moment of God’s dealings with humankind.49

48 Feldmeier, “Is Theology of Religions an Exhausted Project?,” 264.
49 Phan, Being Religious Interreligiously, 64-67.
Some of these assertions fit quite comfortably within Catholic magisterial teachings, such as 1 and 2. Beyond these, magisterial texts such as Dominus Iesus specifically condemn most of the other assertions. Yet, as we have seen, magisterial texts including Dominus Iesus also imply most of them. God is asserted to be a revelatory part of other religions’ histories and theologies. If that is so, then numbers 4 and 5 seem to be tolerable extrapolations. If these are true, and if dialogue with others ought to be mutually enriching, then assertion 6 follows. If 6 is theologically allowable, then 7 could be seen as part of God’s inspiring activity—it would virtually have to be understood that way. Phan’s final assertion, inspired I presume from Dupuis, rounds the Christian back to ensuring that the Christian give priority to Christian revelation. This would allow multiple religious belonging on virtually any scale except that which makes no priority between them. Thus, one would have to be a Hindu-Christian or a Daoist-Christian, with the emphasis on Christian as the primary identifier. This is Phan’s point of asymmetry.

Phan has further noted that great Christian pioneers who deeply engaged in the communities and spiritualities of other religions—some of whom I noted at the beginning of this essay—had common elements in their religious biographies. The first is that they were grounded in their Christian identity. None had doubts about the universal role of Christ as savior. Second, they all retained Christian as their principal identity with the religious other as the qualifier. Third, they held the necessity of intellectual mastery over the doctrines and practices of the religious other. Fourth, they inculturated the Christian faith in the philosophical categories of the religious culture to which they engaged, thus making sure their Christian faith was understood by themselves as sympathetically as it could be to that of the religious other. Fifth, they had highly respectable guides and masters in the other religion to learn from. Sixth and finally, they allowed themselves to experience the teachings and practices of the religious other not in terms of Christian categories, but on its own terms. 50

What we see in Phan’s work is that multiple religious belonging can and has worked with venerable members of the Catholic tradition. But also that it was a wholly earned hyphenated identity. These were not dilettantes who syncretistically jumbled insights from different religions together, but deeply holy Christians who ventured also deeply into the paths of the religious other and experienced truths that went outside of the Christian doctrinal tradition.

Some enthusiasts for multiple religious belonging unapologetically call for versions of syncretism. Paul knitter responds to critics who denounce a hybrid form of theology or religious belonging, or of religious promiscuity:

Our religious self, like our cultural or social self, is at its core and in its conduct a hybrid. That means that our religious identity is not purebred, it’s hybrid. It’s not singular, it’s plural. It takes shape through an ongoing process of standing in one place and stepping into other places, of forming a sense of self and then expanding or correcting that sense as we meet other selves. There is no such thing as a neatly defined, once-and-for-all identity…. So if we take the etymological meaning of “promiscuity”—the inclination to “mix it up,” from the Latin miscere—we can say, with a dangerous stretch of words, that not only are we all promiscuous; we have to be! We have an identity, but that identity in its origins and in its ongoing life comes to be and continues to flourish only through mixing it up with others. Hybrids are stronger, live longer, and have more fun than purebreds. 51

Others are less sanguine. Mark Heim reflects: “It is true that we are all hybrids in some way, that religious traditions are internally diverse, and that boundaries and borders are somewhat arbitrary impositions on the full spectrum of experience. These points [however] are often advanced with primary reference to individuals, with the express purpose of minimizing appeals to authority, loyalty or purity.” 52 In urging hesitancy for interreligious practice, Heim appeals to the need for greater sensitivity to the sanctity of one’s own claimed religion and the value of protecting the sanctity of the religious other’s boundaries. 53

Other challenges to such hybridity involve greater sensitivity to the nature of religions as all-inclusive projects. James Fallwell writes, “Religious traditions...involve worldviews and assumptions about reality....

50 Ibid., 71-76.
51 Knitter, Without the Buddha, 214-215.
53 Ibid., 27.
Sometimes—even often—these rigorous worldviews conflict. Religious traditions have content and their rituals are inextricably tied to the production and reinforcement of that content.” Comparativist Marianne Moyaert notes affirmingly, “Religions are, just like the cultures and languages they resemble, irreducibly particular.” Or as postmodern theologian George Linbeck argues, “Adherents of different religions do not diversely thematize the same experience, rather they have different experiences. Buddhist compassion, Christian love and...French revolutionary fraternité are not diverse modifications of a single human awareness, emotion, attitude, or sentiment, but are radically (i.e., from the root) distinct ways of experiencing and being oriented toward self, neighbor, and the cosmos.”

5 Conclusion

I began this essay arguing two things. The first is that there is a number of different forms of multiple religious belonging, some of them less daunting conceptually while others far more. Second, I argued that the very idea of multiple belonging relied on some kind of first principles that guided it, some kind of theology of religions. We went on to see that there are a variety of these and that they implied different possibilities of multiple belonging. We also saw that representatives of each model have a difficult time with internal coherency and staying perfectly true to their own first principles. My test case was the inclusivist model found in magisterial documents of the Roman Catholic Church. What we discovered is that this model, like others, is problematic. But if one would allow it to be stretched, particularly with postmodern insights, as we saw with Peter Phan’s theological criteria, this model may be salvageable conceptually and allow for some legitimate asymmetrical multiple religious belonging. I finally argued that a complete multiple belonging, one where both (or more!) religions were embraced equally was problematic in terms of the irreducibility of religions—a postmodern insight—and the fact that a religion is something of a whole worldview that will in crucial parts simply imply a different and often contrary worldview from any other religion; thus, making a complete hybrid identity probably impossible.

References

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55 Moyaert, “Absorption or Hospitality,” 62.


