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# Can Christians Belong to More than One Religious Tradition?

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## I Perspectives on Non-Christian Religions

This paper seeks to explore the notion of multi-religious belonging and evaluate whether it is theologically possible for a Christian to follow Christ while retaining some form of identification with one's previous religion such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Chinese religions. Instead of a total rejection of past faiths, is it possible for a Christian, without falling into syncretism, to belong to more than one religious tradition?

Traditionally, categories of a theology toward other religions are grouped in the threefold typologies of pluralism, inclusivism and exclusivism. This categorization was criticized for its sharp distinction between positions on the non-Christian religions, and for its failure to take into account the complexities between various proponents of religious encounter. For example, many Evangelicals will be exclusivist

in their position on the finality of Jesus for salvation but will be open to incorporating the insights from other religions for life and faith. New models are still being proposed and debated with no real consensus on this evolving debate on the theories of religion.

## 1 Pluralism

John Hick, Paul Knitter, Raimundo Panikkar, Stanley Samartha, and others have championed the relativist positions which are untenable for Evangelicals holding to exclusivist claims of Jesus. Gavin D'Costa and Mark Heim have presented scathing critiques on the pluralist positions, namely, that pluralists deny others the right to alternative positions, which is a contradiction to the pluralist position. Once conversions and truth-validations are made illegitimate within religious conversations, then the rigour and quality of dialogues diminish radically into mere religious chatter.

Important critiques from Evangelicals on the relativistic positions focus on the problem of criteria for evaluating truth claims, the requirements to first sacrifice any faith positions, and a

reductionism of the diversity of religions into a monolithic faith.<sup>1</sup>

These types of pluralism, tracing their roots from liberal modernism, fail in relation to their own goals of respect to all religions and of allowing plurality of discourse. In addition, they move beyond the 'controlling beliefs of orthodox Christianity'.<sup>2</sup>

While these relativistic positions have gained acceptance in Western academia, such positions are seldom reflected on the field of religious encounter between firm religionists (for example, among Muslim theologians) in Asia or Africa. Even Buddhists who are open to other religious insights will eventually still insist on the more adequate path of Dharma for achieving enlightenment.

## 2 Exclusivist Perspectives

Recent evangelical positions on non-Christian religions straddle between inclusivists such as Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, Mark Heim and exclusivists such as Gerald McDermott, Timothy Tennent, Ajith Fernando and Don Carson. Gerald McDermott argues from scripture and the writings of Jonathan Edwards that Evangelicals will discover new insights when we engage with the teachings of other reli-

gions. As long as we retain our commitment to the Bible, such engagements with non-Christian truths are necessarily shaped and coloured through a distinctively evangelical lens. McDermott presents biblical arguments that God wants Gentiles to know him, people outside the Jewish and Christian churches have known him, and God's people can learn from those outside the Jewish and Christian churches.<sup>3</sup> Evangelicals can learn from other religions not only truths arising from creation and general revelation but also new insights found in these religious traditions.

Timothy Tennent, Associate Professor of Mission at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, recognizes that no longer can religious conversations be entered with Christians positing themselves at the head of the table, controlling the agenda and conclusions. Rather, Christians today need to sit at the roundtable and engage in dialogue with competing faiths. Tennent demonstrates what such roundtable discussions may look like through interactions with Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.<sup>4</sup>

Tennent presents the analogy used by A.G. Hogg about a man looking up at the moon, whose view is obscured by clouds. He needs to shift his position in an open field in order to gaze at the radiance of the moon. He lists two potential errors in exclusivism: first, a

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1 See works by Vinod Ramachandra, *Faiths in Conflicts? Christian integrity in a multicultural world* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), Christopher Wright, *Thinking Clearly About the Uniqueness of Christ* (East Sussex: Monarch, 1997), and Ajith Fernando, *Sharing the truth in Love: How to relate to people of other faiths* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2001).

2 Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 12, 18.

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3 Gerald McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000).

4 Timothy Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 232.

failure to fully appreciate God's activity in the pre-Christian heart; and second, an unwillingness to engage honestly with the objections from non-Christian religions. Tennent then presents himself as an 'engaged exclusivist', ie, one who is committed to the uniqueness of Christ but also one who is more open toward general revelation and is serious about engaging the religions from a missiological perspective.

Evangelicals such as Harold Netland, Amos Yong and Terrance Tiessen and others are exploring new models for engaging with non-Christian religions. Amos Yong has pointed out that exclusivism is primarily a soteriological category, helpful for clarifying the question of the unevangelized, but not so adequate for developing a theology of non-Christian religions.<sup>5</sup> In dealing with the question of who can be saved, Tiessen proposed the following five categories:

1. Ecclesiocentrism: salvation coextensive with the church;
2. Agnosticism: Scripture is silent on this issue of who can be saved;
3. Assessibilism: Hopeful (not simply agnostic) about the possibility of salvation beyond church boundaries. Non-Christians can be saved although non-Christian religions may not be regarded as instruments for salvation.
4. Religious instrumentalism: God's salvation is available through non-Christian religions, a form of inclusivism.
5. Relativism: Many ways of salva-

tions as part of God's divine program.<sup>6</sup>

While remaining rooted in the evangelical camp, Tiessen proposed assessibilism as a new position for engaging with non-Christian religions. In an excellent chapter on 'Is Assessibilism a new idea?' he surveyed and argued that early church fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, and other Protestant writers such as Lesslie Newbigin and J.N.D. Anderson fall into this category of writers who both affirm the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the means of salvation while at the same time are more open in acknowledging God's works among non-Christian religions.

## II Can Christians Belong to More than One Religious Traditions?

Multicultural identity is a growing reality in a global world. As a Malaysian Chinese, my identity is shaped by my ethnicity (as a Chinese) as well as my country of birth (as a Malaysian). As my wife is a Singaporean Chinese, our Canadian-born daughter grew up with contested loyalty and a sense of belonging to these three countries, with Britain (where we now live) as a growing contender! Is it possible to extend this hyphenated identity formation to the religious arena?

Multi-religious belonging is a phenomenon of individuals who identify themselves as followers of more than

<sup>5</sup> Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a pneumatological theology of religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 26-27.

<sup>6</sup> Terrance Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing salvation in Christ and world religion* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004) 33-35.

one religious tradition. Globalisation and multicultural realities have resulted in a new generation of Christians shaped by more than one religious tradition. People of faiths may find themselves in dual or multi-religious backgrounds due to inter-religious marriages of their parents, exposures to multi religious traditions or conversions to another faith. In the West, the phenomenon of multi-religious belonging occurs when a growing number of Christians are attracted to Asian religions. While some became Buddhists or Hindus, others decide to retain their Christian belonging while at the same time seeking to incorporate elements of Asian religions to their lives and practices. In mission contexts, there is a growing phenomenon of 'insider movements' or devotees of Jesus from Islam and Hinduism.

Previously, Christian theology has tended to treat non-Christian religions as tight and separate religious systems. Such a treatment is increasingly problematic as it does not reflect the multi-religious realities in Asia whereby influences and cross fertilisation of religious beliefs are daily faith experiences. In particular, there is a need to take into account the experiences and struggles of Christian converts from Asian religions, namely, the converts' own relationship with their previous faiths. Often converts will reject their past faiths in the process of conversion to Christianity. However, some would argue that it is unrealistic to expect new converts to terminate previous faith suddenly and radically. The tensions of liminality and inter-identity of dual belonging are hurriedly glossed over rather than given due space for analysis and synthesis.

Due to globalization and dynamic cultural changes, diaspora Christians (for example, Chinese Christians), continually struggle to make sense of ongoing religious and cultural diffusion, for 'Hybridity is not only about fusion and synthesis, but also about ambivalence and incommensurability, about the contestations and interrogations that go hand in hand with heterogeneity, diversity and multiplicity we have to deal with as we live together-in-difference.'<sup>7</sup>

Over time (after second or third generations), some Asian Christians may begin to rediscover their past religious roots and may readopt aspects of their past religious traditions. Of course, multi-religious belonging is common among Asian religions such as Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Shamanism and Shintoism.

### III Models of multi-religious belongings

A religious community is 'any group of persons that would, severally and collectively, acknowledge themselves to be members of a certain community that is recognizably religious'.<sup>8</sup> Strictly speaking, multi-religious belonging is not necessarily a new phenomenon as there were Christians such as Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktanada), Bede Griffiths and Krishna Mohun Banerjea maintaining dual belonging; there were also Hindus such as Ram Mohan Roy

<sup>7</sup> Ien Ang, quoted in KK Yeo, *Musing with Confucian and Paul: Toward a Chinese Christian theology* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2008), 51.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 3.

(1772-1833), Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884), and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) who expressed some personal devotion to Christ without joining the institutional church or leaving Hinduism. Nevertheless, its growing popularity in the West and as an academic study is normally located in the modern context of globalisation, contemporary individualism and the emergence of a supermarket of religious choices. Globalisation brought about closer interaction and assimilation between people of different religious traditions.

In addition, religious pluralism as an ideology has created a new situation whereby individuals are no longer choosing 'which religion but *how many* religions he or she may belong to'.<sup>9</sup> Scholars writing on this discourse used various terms such as multiple religious belongings, multi-religious belongings, dual (or double) belongings or hyphenated religious identity. Although these terms may overlap and are sometimes used inter-changeably, there are at least three ways of understanding the phenomenon of multi-religious belonging.

### 1 Multiple Religious Belonging: A Radical Pluralism

The first model of multiple religious belonging traces its origin from a *pluralist* paradigm of religion that *radically* raises interreligious discourse to a new level of religious identification and belonging. For Catherine Cornille, multiple religious belonging entails a

twofold movement: first, a conscious (not 'anonymous') identification with more than one religious community, and second, being recognised by those communities as a member. Specifically, this definition excludes new age thinking that picks and chooses various religious beliefs and practices based on individual tastes and preferences. In fact, sociologists of religion have noted this group as 'believing without belonging'.<sup>10</sup>

If applied strictly, such a definition may also exclude those who consciously identify with *only one* religious community (rather than dual or more) even though they may implicitly draw their inspiration from several religious texts, symbols and communities. Such individuals may not fulfill the criteria of identification with and acceptance by a specific religious community. Peter Phan defines multiple religious belonging or hyphenated religious identity as referring

to the fact that some Christians believe that it is possible and even necessary not only to accept in theory this or that doctrine or practice of other religions and to incorporate them, perhaps in a modified form, into Christianity but also to adopt and live the beliefs, moral rules, rituals, and monastic practices of religious traditions other than those of Christianity, perhaps even in the midst of the community of the devotees of other religions.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Cornille, *Many mansions? Multiple religious belonging and Christian identity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 2.

<sup>10</sup> See Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing without belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 61.

Theologically, such a possibility can be envisaged through those theologies that acknowledge a common essence in various religious traditions as different expressions of the same ultimate.<sup>12</sup> For Phan, non-Christian religions are not just part of divine providence or merely a preparation for Christianity, but he recognises these religions as vehicles of salvation.<sup>13</sup>

Jacques Dupuis builds on the concept of 'complementarity and convergence' that requires a 'mutual enrichment and transformation' between religions rather than a fulfillment theory of Christianity bringing completion to other religions that is one-sided.<sup>14</sup> Not only Christianity is a fulfillment of other religions, but other religions can bring transformation to Christianity.<sup>15</sup> At a level of Christian religious practice, this radical category is especially popular among mostly scholars in the West who identify themselves with Christianity but would like to adopt other religions (for example, Buddhism or Hinduism) as part of their religious identity. Instead of integrating two religious systems too quickly, these multiple religious believers claim to be able to maintain the integrity of these religions separately. For exam-

ple, one may remain a Christian and still identify with Zen Buddhism, and participate in religious activities of both communities.

As an Evangelical, I will offer the following criticisms of this position. First, the desirability for multiple religious belonging can be located within a pluralistic theology of religions paradigm—all religions lead to the same divine or ultimate reality. Gavin D'Costa's criticisms of John Hicks' and Paul Knitter's works as essentially based on enlightenment modernity are instructive for our discussion. D'Costa argues that 'the enlightenment, in granting a type of equality to all religions, ended up denying public truth to any and all of them'.<sup>16</sup>

Second, the attempt to maintain two or more religious systems can be sustained only as a liminal stage. As a religious system, the inevitable outcome has to be either a perennial form of religious relativism/syncretism or a founding of a new religious sect. Examples are Bahaism (combination of multiple religions) or Sikhism (combination of Hinduism and Islam). Pluralists present themselves as 'honest brokers to disputing parties, while concealing the fact that they represent yet another party which invites the disputants to leave their parties to join the pluralist one'.<sup>17</sup>

My third criticism relates to the nature and dynamics of belonging to a religious community, with the assumption that one needs to identify with

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12 For example, see Raimon Panikkar, 'On Christian identity', in Catherine Cornille ed. *Many Mansions? Multiple religious belonging and Christian identity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 121-144.

13 Phan, *Being*, 65-66.

14 See Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 326; and 'Christianity and religions' in Cornille, ed. *Many Mansions?*, 61-75.

15 Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration* (London: SCM Press, 2009).

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16 Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (T. & T. Clark: Edinburgh, 2000), 2.

17 D'Costa, *The Meeting*, 2.

basic ethos, doctrines, and worldviews of the community of choice. Belonging must be closely linked to *acceptance* by that religious community, without which, one's claim is based on a false premise.

## 2 Multi-religious Identity: An Internal Reality

Instead of maintaining or combining two external religious systems, there is a second type of multi-religious belonging, one which focuses on the interior. Rather than *multiple* religious identity, Perry-Schmidt Leukel favours the term *multi-religious* identity. For Schmidt-Leukel, the earlier term seems to be akin to having a split personality—of holding two or more religious systems within oneself. Multi-religious identity is having *one unique identity*, but 'one that is formed and developed under the influence of several religious traditions'.<sup>18</sup> Internally, my daughter's identity cannot be half Singaporean and half Malaysian. Identities cannot be compartmentalized but developed, based on historical, social and cultural conditions, including drawing its sources of traditions from various religions. In contrast to the first radical model, the second group may not belong to two or more religious communities simultaneously.

For Christians in Asia, *belonging* to two or more religious communities externally as a conscious choice can be problematic theologically and socially. In terms of Cornille's second criteria of acceptance by a religious community, dual belonging is generally not accept-

able to Christians, Muslims and Hindus in Asia. Nevertheless, it does not mean that it is impossible for a certain form of multi-religious *identity* to be nurtured among Christians. For *multi-religious* (in contrast to multiple religious) belonging, the emphasis tends to be on multi or dual belonging *within* oneself rather than a conscious maintenance of two or more religious systems or external identification with two or more religious communities (socially) at the same time.

If the first category of multiple religious belonging finds its sources (not exclusively) in a pluralist theology of religion, one suspects that this second type of internal multi-religious identity draws its theological inspiration within an inclusivist framework. While holding on to the centrality of Jesus, an openness to the revelation and efficacy of other religious truths allow practitioners of Christianity to develop a new identity that is not exclusively from the Christian tradition. Normally, such an individual

has one dominant religious affiliation and a second one which is secondary to the first but one on which the person draw is a continuous manner. The second religion may provide teachings, beliefs, and/or religious practices/customs. The degree to which the relationship between the dominant and the secondary is asymmetrical can vary.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gideon Goosen, 'Edith Stein: An example of dual religious belonging?' *Australian EJournal of Theology* [online] 5, 2005. Available from <[http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt\\_5/goosen.htm](http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_5/goosen.htm)>, 1. [10 July 2008]

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<sup>18</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation*, 46-48.

### 3 Dual Belonging: A Contextual and Mission Approach

There is a third group of practitioners of multi-religious belonging that is growing under a very separate circumstance in the Non-Western world, typically out of mission conditions. Claude Geffre distinguishes 'multiple religious belonging,' which is a postmodern form of syncretism, from 'double belonging,' which is the fruit of inculturation.<sup>20</sup> There is a growing amount of literature discussing insider movements, messianic movements, devotees of Jesus and churchless Christianity.<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Lewis defines 'insider movement' as follows:

An 'insider movement' is any movement to faith in Christ where (a) the gospel flows through pre-existing communities and social networks and where (b) believing families, as valid expressions of the Body of Christ, remain inside their socio-religious communities, retaining their identity as members of that community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.<sup>22</sup>

**20** Claude Geffre, 'Double belonging and the originality of Christianity as a religion' in Cornille, ed. *Many Mansions?*, 93-105.

**21** See for example, Timothy Tennent, 'The challenge of churchless christianity', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol. 29, No. 4: 171-177; and Herbert Hoefter, *Churchless Christianity* (Pasadena: William Carey, 2001).

**22** Rebecca Lewis, 'Promoting movements to Christ within natural communities', *International Journal of Frontier Mission* [online] 24:2. 2007, 75. Available from <[http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM\\_24\\_2\\_PDFs/24\\_2\\_Lewis.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM_24_2_PDFs/24_2_Lewis.pdf)> [1 August 2008]

Missiologists, such as Ralph Winter, compare insider movements with the transitions in early Gentile mission.

It is just as unreasonable for a Hindu to be dragged completely out of his culture in the process of becoming a follower of Christ as it would have been if Paul the Apostle had insisted that a Greek become a Jew in the process of following Christ...In the New Testament there was no law against a Greek becoming a Jew. However, Paul was very insistent that that kind of a cultural conversion was not necessary in becoming a follower of Christ.<sup>23</sup>

It may be helpful to delineate key differences between the radical model of multiple religious belonging and our current contextualisation model of dual belonging. First, rather than a pluralist appreciation of other religions, dual belonging stems from a growing recognition that Muslims and Hindus need not leave behind their past identities and cultures. Second, promoters of insider movements seek to avoid negative connotations of 'Western Christianity' labels such as imperialism, anti-nationalism and foreign influences. For Asian converts to Christianity, Jesus could be the centre for their faith but they will identify culturally and socially with their past religious belonging to Islam or Hinduism. Third, unlike the first radical proposal of com-

**23** Ralph Winter, 'To the new ASM: Greetings from the West', *Asian Missiology*, Vol.2/No.1: (2008), 201. Available from <[http://asianmissiology.org/vol2no1/12\\_mistakes.pdf](http://asianmissiology.org/vol2no1/12_mistakes.pdf)> [1st July 2008]

binning two or more religious systems, many of the proponents of insider movements include conservative Christian mission groups who are firmly in the exclusivist camp, with regards to their theology of religions. Fourth, while the first two models tend to consist of *individuals* without a single identifiable community, insider movements tend to consist of *mass movements* of Hindus or Muslims toward Christianity.

Thus far, we have distinguished different ways of understanding the notion of multi-religious or dual belonging. Minimally, we need to be aware of their distinct models and theological presuppositions before making reductionist conclusions on the validity of the phenomenon as a whole. Each model traces its origins out of different sets of conditions, through different theological justifications and consequently, demands a more sophisticated and nuanced response. Therefore, one could argue that theological assessments surrounding the phenomenon of multi-religious belonging, for example, to the issue of syncretism, need to be contextual and cannot be settled through a single system of analysis.

#### IV Some Methodological Considerations, with special reference to Insider Movements

Before discussing the issue of syncretism, it will be helpful to make a brief comment regarding an appropriate methodology for studying multi-religious belonging. Taking the evangelical tradition as an example, any assessment on other religions (one

may infer, including the theological possibility of dual belonging) will, at some point, take the biblical witness seriously; i.e., it will be one that engages with biblical and systematic theology.<sup>24</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop a dual belonging biblical theology of religion. However, in my survey on 'Theology of Religion', I have suggested that traditional evangelical categories need contextual reformulation that take non-Christian religious systems on their own terms.<sup>25</sup> In addition, I have developed a theology of the kingdom and a theology of creation as paradigms for religious encounter.<sup>26</sup> I follow Peter Beyerhaus' tripolar position that religions could have God, humanity and demonic influences.

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<sup>24</sup> See for examples, Donald Carson, *The Gaping of God: Christianity confronts pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 131-133; Harold Netland, 'Thinking theologically about religious diversity in the west', *A Journal for the Theology of Culture*. (2005), 19-35, and John Ridgway, 'Insider movements in the Gospels and Acts', *International Journal of Frontier Mission* [online] 24:2. (2007), 77-86. Available from <[http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/24\\_2\\_PDFs/24\\_2\\_Lewis.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/24_2_PDFs/24_2_Lewis.pdf)> [1 August 2008].

<sup>25</sup> Kang San Tan, 'Theology of Religions' in John Corrie, ed. *Dictionary of Mission Theology* (Nottingham: IVP, 2007), 384-388.

<sup>26</sup> Kang San Tan, 'The power of the kingdom in encountering Buddhist worldviews' in David Lim and Steve Spaulding, eds., *Sharing Jesus holistically with the Buddhist world* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 13-51, and Kang San Tan, 'Genesis 1-11 and Buddhist scriptures' in Paul De Neui and David Lim, eds., *Communicating Christ in the Buddhist world* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2006), 25-46.

There are aspects of non-Christian religions which need to be rejected due to their demonic sources or incompatibility with Scripture, just as there are aspects that need affirmation and re-appropriation as part of God's truth. An integrated missiological approach will take Scripture, Christian tradition (community of faiths) and the non-Christian cultural contexts as three sources for theological reflections, giving priority ultimately to the Christian Scripture.

Of methodological importance, in order to form theological perspectives, we need an accurate understanding of the lived experiences of these dual believers. Missiologists approach other religions from a critical realism perspective that considers all truths as God's truth (subject to biblical evaluation). With regards to multi-religious belonging, Jacques Dupuis cautions that 'theology ought to abstain from a priori pronouncements, arrived at by way of deduction from accepted principles and traditional positions'.<sup>27</sup>

Methodologically, before arriving at a theological assessment, it may be useful to employ the *phenomenological method of inquiry* so that Christian theological perspectives are informed accurately by the wide range of studies on the phenomena of multi-religious belonging. Otherwise, Christian theological assessment can easily fall into the dangers of absolutism, syncretism and relativism. We are interested to understand the phenomenon as well as making theological judgment; and we are interested in both the truth according to Christian scripture and the

meaning of dual belonging according to these practitioners.

One example of such an interdisciplinary approach is found in, '*Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas*. A Qualitative and Theological Study of Syncretism and Identity in Global Christianity', a doctoral study presented at the University of Copenhagen by Jonas Petter Adelin Jorgensen. Jorgensen studied two groups of insider movements: Muslim background believers *Īsā imandars*, that is, 'those faithful to Jesus', and Hindu background believers *Khrīst bhaktas*, that is 'devotees of Christ'. Both groups are self-consciously not Christians, although their religious faith shares a deep family resemblance to the larger Christian community. The religious lives of the *imandars* and *bhaktas* are found to be a mixture between Christian theological ideas and forms from other religious traditions (Islam and Hinduism respectively).

Instead of branding these groups as syncretistic, Jørgensen argues that the practice of the *imandars* and *bhaktas* could be viewed as new and creative manifestations of Christianity in a global age. The study concluded that theologically, the *imandars* and *bhaktas* identified Jesus Christ as central and essential, although their dual identification with Islam and Hinduism is based on a rather free interpretation of culture and symbols revolving around this fundamental relation.<sup>28</sup>

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**28** Jonas Petter Adelin Jorgensen, *Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas. A qualitative and theological study of syncretism and identity in global Christianity*, PhD thesis, University of Copenhagen, 2006. Available from <<http://isis.ku.dk/kurser/blob.aspx?feltid=160364>> [13 May 2008]

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**27** Dupuis, 'Christianity and religions' in Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions?*, 61-75.

## V Is Dual Belonging syncretistic?

For conservative Christians, the problem of syncretism is a major stumbling block for accepting dual religious belonging. The uniqueness of Jesus, the authority of scripture and core beliefs represent non-negotiable elements in authenticating the church as a distinct religious community in the world. Theologically, syncretism is seen as the mixture of elements from another alien source (or religion) which compromises the purity of the gospel. Within mainstream Catholic theology, in addition to the finality of Jesus Christ, the Declaration, *Dominus Iesus*,<sup>29</sup> emphasises the necessity of the Church for salvation and rejects salvific roles of some prayers and rituals in other religions.

It is necessary to keep these two truths together, namely, the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for this salvation. (para 20)

Indeed, some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel, in that they are occasions or pedagogical helps in which the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God. One cannot attribute

to these, however, a divine origin or an *ex opere operato* salvific efficacy, which is proper to the Christian sacraments. (para 21)

## 1 Complexity of Culture and Religion

Generally, for both Protestant and Catholic positions, there is a greater acceptance for assimilation of cultural elements and a greater distrust against those elements deemed as religious. Due to the difficulty in separating culture from religion, some would argue that there is a general tendency among Christians to reject most aspects of non-Christian cultures as religious. Through gains in mission education on concepts such as contextualisation and indigenous Christianity, evangelical Christianity is open to culture but generally negative towards religion. However, the biblical testimony contains both a rejection of the religions and cultures of Israel's neighbours as well as borrowings and learning from these cultures.<sup>30</sup>

Although culture and religion may be perceived as belonging to different spheres, both cultural and religious dimensions overlap significantly and both are important resources in the formation of an Asian identity. If one is to assume some form of continuity with one's previous religious beliefs and traditions, and if those positive elements of religious beliefs are to be retained,

<sup>29</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration, 'Dominus Iesus' on The Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church (August 6, 2000) ([http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html) [accessed 5th August, 2008])

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Wright, *Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Leicester: IVP, 2006), 441, and Scherer and Bevans, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization* 3 (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 201.

then, a certain form of double belonging is inevitable. Within the interiority of this double belonging, a synthesis of a new form of indigenous Christianity may emerge whereby Muslim-background and Hindu-background believers could identify with Christ without leaving their previous religious affiliations.

Our problem for discerning what is syncretistic is found not only in the close connection between culture and religion, but also in the very nature of Christian faith. The transcultural nature of Christian transmission means that Christianity in Asia is shaped by a Western gospel, indicating the difficulty in delineating an essence of Christianity in its pure form. This does not mean that one cannot detect family resemblances to what is authentic Christianity from cults and syncretistic religions. However, we must be cautious against the temptation of judging indigenous expressions of Christianity that look foreign as being syncretistic.

Another consideration in our discussion regarding syncretism is the different understanding of belonging and boundaries for Asians. For example, belonging to a religion has a thoroughly different meaning for a Chinese and a Christian. Chinese people are free to worship in a number of temples regardless of their Taoist or Buddhist (Mahayana, Theravada or Tibetan) origins. In Malaysia, it is not uncommon to find Hindus and Buddhists visiting Catholic churches during special festivals. Neither are they required to give allegiance to and sign membership with one local community.

Similarly, Jan Van Bragt showed the blurred boundaries among Japanese as

they negotiate the role and place of Shintoism and Buddhism in their communal, family and personal lives. Winston Davis highlights the contrast: 'Whereas in the West it was heresy (or pluralism, as it is called today) which seemed to threaten the unity of Christendom, in Japan it was monopraxis (emphasis on a single religious practice) that posed the greatest spiritual menace to the traditional integration of society.'<sup>31</sup>

## 2 Contributions from Anthropological Insights

Given the above complexity of dual belonging and the inseparable link between religion and culture, does this mean that there will be no basis for discernment against syncretism? Anthropological insights have shown that all religions were the result of prolonged syncretistic processes.<sup>32</sup> Yong suggested the role of insiders and outsiders in discerning what is syncretistic. In his discussion regarding critical contextualization of culture, Paul Hiebert suggested that the Bible, the work of the Holy Spirit and the local community as a hermeneutical community can be used as checks against syncretism.<sup>33</sup> Another anthropologist,

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31 Winston Davis, quoted in Van Bragt, 'Multiple religious belonging in Japan' in Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions?*, 13.

32 See Amos Yong, 'Syncretism' in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical foundations* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 373-376, and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation*, 67-89.

33 Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 91-92.

Charles Kraft makes a distinction between *Christian* (with a capital 'C') as those with true faith from *christian* (with a small 'c').

Adapting Charles Kraft's four kinds of form-meaning, we can tentatively suggest in broad terms possible forms of appropriate dual belonging.<sup>34</sup> The first type of response is 'Forms local, meaning local', whereby the insider movements generally follow Islamic forms of religion that are combined with local meaning resulting in an Islamic-Christian sect, followers of Isa within the Islamic tradition. So, insider movements from Muslim background believers may listen to the Christian message, read the Christian scriptures but remain essentially Muslim with regards to dominant worldviews and theological outlooks.

The second type is 'Forms foreign, meaning local' whereby Christian religious forms may be adopted but interpreted in largely Islamic concepts and meanings. Christian worship, fasting, religious observances and rituals may be adopted but its meaning remains largely local or Islamic. For Kraft, this is a form of Christo-pagan syncretism. For our case, we may term it as Christo-Muslim syncretism.

The third type is 'Forms foreign, meaning foreign'. Through a domination of Western Christianity, converts from Islam appropriate Christian/Western worship, music, doctrines, buildings, plus western meanings. According to Kraft, this is 'Dominant Syncretism'!

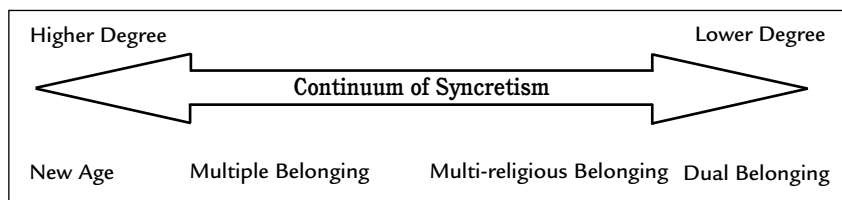
The fourth and final type is 'Forms

local, meaning Christian,' resulting in an 'Appropriate Church' whereby the church consists of largely local Islamic forms to which are attached Christian meanings. The meanings come neither from the sending nor receiving societies but primarily through a contextual interpretation of the Christian Scripture.

With regard to dual belongers, non-Christian scriptures such as the Quran or Tao Te Ching enable inter-textual readings of the Christian scriptures. Increasingly, new and imaginative Christian identities could be nurtured as Muslim background believers read the Bible alongside the Quran, and as Chinese Christians reinterpret Confucian texts through Christian theological critiques. KK Yeo, Professor of New Testament at Garreth-Evangelical Seminary, in *Musing with Confucius and Paul*, demonstrated how an evangelical Chinese Christian identity can be constructed without capitulating into dominant Western Christian ideals. Yeo's intertextual Pauline-Confucian studies, while demonstrating a hybrid identity, become a quest for an authentic Chinese Christian ideal.

In the final analysis, in contrast to a comparative study, Christian theology will need to engage more seriously with the total revelation of God, as found in the Bible, as well as theological perspectives within the Christian community. For example, what kind of new Christology and new ecclesiology are developed out of these three models of multi-religious belonging? Until we have more developed theologies coming out from these contexts, ongoing dialogue and continued creative thinking serve towards a missiological appreciation of these new movements.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Marknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 375-379.



## VI Towards A Critical Appreciation of Dual Belonging

The argument for *multiple* religious belonging, one that seeks to maintain two or more external religious systems, is problematic philosophically, socially and theologically. At the social level, it seems that there will be insurmountable problems as to how one can assert a dual identity deriving from two or more separate religious communities. However, at a phenomenological level, we are now witnessing groups and individuals who seem to live in more than one religious world. This is so particularly for those who come from Asian religious traditions. If religions are also worldviews, one could also extend the case of dual belonging among Western Christians when Christianity combines with secularism and postmodernism. To what extent does the emergent church movement in the West reflect a similar kind of dual belongingness?

I have not conducted a detailed theological analysis of the three models of multi-religious belonging but have indicated how anthropological tools and resources can contribute toward greater clarity on the question of syncretism in multi-religious belonging. Though tentative, a missiological framework could be suggested. While recognizing the ambiguities alongside the continuum from multiple religious belonging (external combination of two

religious systems), multi-religious belonging (within oneself) to dual belonging of one's past religious heritage, the diagram above illustrates both the dangers of syncretism and possibilities for enrichment when dual belonging is anticipated.

So, to the question whether it is theologically possible for a Christian to follow Christ while retaining some form of identification with one's previous religion such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Chinese religions, one must say a tentative and qualified yes. The answer seems to depend on what kind of multi-religious belonging we are talking about. Certainly, a positive yes for dual belonging but a tentative yes if we are referring to multi-religious belonging. Evangelicals will need to reject multiple religious belonging as a liberal modernist approach that is untenable with biblical faith. However, Asian Christians need not reject everything of past religious beliefs, as long as they are compatible with Christian scripture.

Just as Augustine learned from Neoplatonism, Thomas Aquinas learned from Aristotle, and John Calvin learned from Renaissance humanism, then it can be argued that Asian evangelicals may be able to learn from the Buddha and other great religious thinkers and traditions things that can help them more clearly understand God's revelation in Christ.

Asian Christian spirituality can recognize and affirm those elements that are 'good, true, and holy' within one's past religious faith whether it be Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam. However, regardless of one's answer or inclination, dual believers will need to reflect continually and exercise discernment, through the help of scripture, the Holy Spirit, and the local community of dual believers. In the process of critical reflection, there will be elements within one's previous religious beliefs and practices that can be retained and there will be other elements within one's past religious beliefs and practices which need to be rejected. Identification with one's past religion requires the convert to hold in tension those elements of continuity and discontinuity.

Over time, an intrareligious dialogue between insider movements and the established church traditions (past and present) as *equal partners* will further shape the development of insider movement's theology, and provide necessary corrections against excesses. Meanwhile, we approach the new phenomenon of dual belonging not as a final product or outcome but a dynamic process of negotiating identities between Christianity and past religious belongings; and between an emerging indigenous form of Christianity and

apostolic faith whereby 'distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed *by* the boundary as *at* it'.<sup>35</sup>

Dual belonging allows different perspectives to flourish within one and the same person; it encourages inculturation and promotes understanding between two religions. In interreligious dialogue, a dual believer is able to enter into past religious belief systems and draw insights which may not be available to an 'outside' observer or partner. In a sense, both *etic* and *emic* perspectives may be appropriated. This is particularly promising when the local community of a dual believer, such as Muslim background believers, becomes a hermeneutical community.

One can only pray and hope that the emergence of such indigenous Christian communities that straddles between the Temple and the Mosque presents unprecedented promise for the development of authentic Asian Christian identity and contributes toward the reconciliation of religious communities worldwide. Dual believers may then contribute to the project of self-theologising and development of indigenous Christian communities.

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<sup>35</sup> Kathryn Tanner, as quoted in Jørgensen, *Jesus Imandars*, 40.