

## Is Transreligious Theology Possible?

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# Multiple Religious Orientation

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the question of how one can live out multiple religions at once. I arrive at and explore eight answers to this question in the form of eight multiple religious orientations that I argue form a continuum from lighter to more intense forms of participation, i.e., seeking, multiple religious curiosity, hybrid identity without belonging, open single belonging, single belonging with crossing over, hybrid identity with belonging, double belonging, and beyond belonging. In the end, this understanding of religious orientations gives us names and a conceptual order for multiple religious participation which together may allow us to ask old questions more carefully and ask some new questions, too. It also leaves us with a wider personal perspective on the field.

**Keywords:** multiple religiosity; multiple religious participation; multiple belonging; crossing over; religious identity

I want to explore how people are living out an openness to multiple religions, not in a social, political or communal context so much, but rather in one's own personal "plan of life" as John Rawls has called it, as part of what one intends, consciously or not, to do in one's life. This question arises *after* one has found a way to muscle through the theoretical issues about being involved with more than one religion – including for example the apparent contradiction between their central beliefs – some of which may be resolved by adopting a view such as John Hick's or Mark Heim's.<sup>1</sup> Suppose I am convinced that multiple religiosity can make sense, and I want to adopt it in some way. How then can I live?

This issue has been on my mind ever since I met my friend, whom I'll call "Nan," twenty years ago in graduate school. She was born to a Hindu mother and a Christian father and was dating a Jew whom she eventually married. On top of all this, she was an anthropology major—open to and relaxed with diversity and ready to engage it. As her roommate, I watched her go off to Diwali and then a couple months later prepare for Christmas and then Easter, and eventually Shabbat on Friday nights and more.

As a pure-bred Christian, I was bowled over. I'd never seen anyone engage in anything except one religion at a time, and I was both attracted and repelled. Attracted, because of experiences I'd had while traveling: I had seen Jews at the Western wall deep in prayer, and remembered thinking they looked holier than me, seemed in closer touch with God than I felt myself. I had also traveled to India by this time and had had the great fortune of being on the ghats, the stairs that border the Ganges River, at a holy city for the Hindus, Varanasi, early one morning near dawn. I remember seeing a man, maybe about twenty years old, submerge into the river and resurface with an expression on his face so full of relief and connection that I could not help but think something spiritually real had happened to him in that moment. These experiences made me think that there was some path through Judaism and Hinduism in addition to Christianity to genuine religious experience and to God, and I suspected it was probably wider than just these three—that

<sup>1</sup> Hick, *Interpretation*; Heim, *Salvations*. For a very helpful overview of these and other responses to pluralism's problem of inconsistency see Ruhmkorff, "Incompatibility."

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God would find a way to meet people, sincere people really searching for God, where they were. So when I saw Nan engaging in Jewish, Hindu and Christian practice, I was for it. It demonstrated an even-handed approach to the many paths to God that seem extant in the world's religious traditions. Also, Nan was experiencing more of a good thing; if one path is good, could three paths be better?

On the other hand, I was thrown by how religiously busy Nan was; it looked frenetic personally. Moreover, I experienced spiritual recoil. I was about as Christian as they come: my parents were Christian missionaries in Africa before I was born; I had been praying to God as far back as I could remember; I had been saved, baptized, and kept the faith: I even attended Wheaton College (Billy Graham's alma mater). So when Nan asked me to go to Diwali with her, I demurred, thinking, "This isn't my path. This could be a good path for someone else, but it's not my path."

Issues about multiple religiosity have been in my belly ever since. Here, I want to tackle what has bothered me about this issue recently: the concrete options for participating in multiple religions. That is, Nan showed me one way to be multiply religious—to practice major holidays of three traditions, without delving deeply into their value and belief claims. What are other ways people participate in multiple religions; what is, really, the full slate of options for multiple religiosity?

## Multiple Religious Participation: What, Why, Who

To prepare to explore the "how" of multiple religious participation in Part II, let's turn in this section to what multiple religious participation is, why people do it, and who they are. John Berthrong's wonderfully titled book *The Divine Deli*—as in "I'll take a Christian hamburger on a Jewish Kaiser bun with a bit of Hindu mango chutney on top"—provides a good start at a definition of multiple religious participation:

...the conscious (and sometimes even unconscious) use of religious ideas, practices, symbols, meditations, prayers, chants and sensibilities derived from one tradition by a member of another...for their own purposes.<sup>2</sup>

So "multiple religious participation" is borrowing something from another tradition to use in one's own tradition or—to make an addendum to Berthrong—to use even if one stands in no tradition or in multiple traditions, as we will see.<sup>3</sup>

Why might someone be motivated to participate in multiple religions? I take the motivations to break into two types: situational and intentional. The situational reasons come from forces in one's life present for some reason other than one's religiosity; for example, by dint of love or marriage or one's family's practice or culture. Nan is a great example: she was born into a family that was already participating in two traditions and then, by covenant of marriage, she was thrown into a third. So, to borrow a line from Shakespeare, some are born multiply religious, and some have multiple religiosity thrust upon them. But some *achieve* multiple religiosity – that is, they consciously aim for it and get it into their lives, voluntarily.

Sometimes, I find myself envying people who have a situational reason for multiple religiosity because I am attracted to it and there is a certain naturalness about situational reasons. If someone says: "why are you trying to practice all these religions?" Nan for instance has the ready reply that she was born and married into this life. No question of artifice there. I don't have that. I'm from a Mennonite bloodline on both sides, to the point that after my Irish-Catholic husband and I married and he came to the first family reunion for my side, he said, "I bet you're thanking me for diversifying the gene pool around here." And, although marrying a Catholic husband has brought some intrareligious diversity in my life, that bond alone does not explain my forays into religious practices outside Christianity. Someone like me actually needs a reason to be interested in multiple religious participation; I don't have one built in, as it were.

<sup>2</sup> Berthrong, *The Divine Deli*, 35.

<sup>3</sup> This whole idea of multiple religious participation assumes that there are multiple religions to participate in. Here I will be assuming that there are religions, and that there is such a thing as religion *per se*, but both points are the subject of scholarly debate.

Possible such reasons are manifold. My stories about Israel and India already suggest that one might have an experiential basis for being interested. Obviously one doesn't have to cross seas to meet people of other faiths; there is plenty of religious diversity in America to provide an experiential basis for interest. Even if one does not encounter religious others directly, one might find wisdom in the writings or speech of people from other religious traditions. Or one might find techniques that enhance one's spirituality—such as ways of purifying the ego or calming the mind that enable deeper forms of prayer than one had before, or more truthful interactions in one's day-to-day life. If one finds such enhancements important enough, they might as an anonymous commentator indicated, develop a “hunger” for multiple religious forms— a hunger that arises from the realization that one tradition is not sufficient to nourish one's spiritual life. Sheer curiosity is also a driving force. As with physical travel, one might be simply curious – what is it like over there, in that religion?

Finally, those whose spiritual journey is at least partly intellectual might be attracted to multiple religiosity as a means to know God or—said more broadly to attempt to refer to the object of religious concern in more traditions—to know ultimate reality. Saying that it takes participation in more than one religion to come to know ultimate reality implies a stance on the three customary theologies of religious pluralism. One might think there is just one path to knowledge of the ultimate, a position generally called “exclusivism” but which I call “loyalism” to make it habitable (it is generally motivated by a desire to stay true to claims in one's scriptures, and that is too beautiful a thing to give an ugly name). Or one might think there are many paths to get to the ultimate, called pluralism. Or one might think something in between—the “inclusivist” view that there is only one effective path all the way to the ultimate, but there are many paths that get one part of the way there,<sup>4</sup> or that the sincerity or intensity with which one follows a “not-as-effective” path puts one on the effective path without one's knowing it.<sup>5</sup> If one takes the pluralist or inclusivist view, one might be drawn to multiple religious participation as a necessary means of getting a fuller picture of what ultimate reality is truly like. Think of ultimate reality in this picture as a diamond which one can see from one's viewpoint, on one side. In order to see all its facets, one actually has to move around it to grasp it from other viewpoints. If one stays just in one's position, one can find out important truths about it but will miss out on other truths of what it is like from over there, and there. On this understanding one actually *requires* the other viewpoint in order to get a fuller grasp of what it is one knows from one's own.<sup>6</sup> So that is another motivation for voluntarily taking on multiple religious participation.

Whatever the reasons, there seems to be an increasing number of people participating in multiple religions.<sup>7</sup> As Francis X. Clooney, S.J. says, there are signs we are now riding a “new inter-religious wave:”

The phenomenon of ‘multiple religious belonging’ is now deeply engrained in American culture. We can no longer imagine simply the prospect of well-established religions and their members deciding whether to dialogue or not. People, younger people in particular, find themselves having multiple religious attractions, experiences and commitments which cannot easily be fit into any given religious system.<sup>8</sup>

It is this range of “multiple religious attractions, experiences and commitments” that Clooney says people “find themselves having” which we will track next.

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<sup>4</sup> This is the Dalai Lama's view, see “Buddhism.”

<sup>5</sup> This is Rahner's view, see “Inclusivism.”

<sup>6</sup> An anonymous commentator asked whether inclusivists really believe one needs to leave one's own position to get the whole truth: at least Rahner, for example, “would hold that we have the whole truth of the diamond in Christ, while others see only partially. There really isn't a reason to explore other traditions, other than to help them see the fullness that Christians have.” Assuming the commentator has Rahner right, inclusivists disagree about the epistemological point here. For instance, *pace* Rahner, two other self-proclaimed inclusivists, Mark Heim and John Makransky, indicated in conversation that each other's viewpoints helped them to grasp more fully the Ultimate they met within their own.

<sup>7</sup> I have as yet to find a quantitative study on multiple religious participation, though some of the Pew numbers cited in the next section are a start.

<sup>8</sup> Clooney, “Wave,” paragraph 3.

## Multiple Religious Orientation: How

How would one order up a multiply religious life if one wanted to? We are about to delve into a plethora of options available for doing this, a smorgasbord of ways of being multiply religious. Why are there so many? My hypothesis: because of the inherently complex nature of religion itself.

I was a bio/pre-med major for the first couple years of college. When I switched to philosophy and religion, everything felt extremely abstract. I kept craving my fetal pig and my vial of liquids because I knew what it was that I was trying to understand; it was there, right in front of my eyes. I wondered “*Where is religion? What is it I am trying to understand?*” and finally got an answer when I read Ninian Smart. His seven dimensions of religion are the seven different places where religion can be found: (1) rituals, such as taking communion; (2) narratives, or stories that ground traditions, such as the cosmic story of creation or Jesus’ last supper story which underlies the ritual of the mass; (3) religious experiences and emotions, such as awe; (4) people - everyone who’s part of a tradition is actually part of the stuff of the tradition, as well as the institutional structures that people create and inhabit together, such as the church; (5) ethics, meaning norms about the right thing to do by people; (6) beliefs, such as that Jesus is the Son of God, and (7) material religion, such as sacred spaces, candles, icons, prayer beads, music and more, which are tangible traces of the other six dimensions or are conducive to creating them.

These seven dimensions create the many ways one can participate in religion: one can dip into one or more of the dimensions. One can pray or meditate or attend a service, retell a religious story, be inspired by a religious exemplar, discipline one’s actions around a religious code, believe a religious tenet, take solace in a religious sanctuary, and much more. Once we grasp the number of ways one might be involved in a religion, and then think of the number of religions, we can see that the logically possible number of combinations for multiple religious participation is incredibly vast.

## Two Continua

Furthermore—and I say this with a little trepidation since it semi-quantifies an utterly qualitative phenomenon—the many options for participating in a religion or religions run on a continuum. Working with Smart’s stuff of religion, we can order forms of religious participation from light to more intense forms of participation in this way:

1. *Conceptual openness.* One is not yet doing anything, believing anything, or putting one’s body anywhere. But one is open to the possibility that some of the beliefs of this religion are true, or that some of its practices are useful for spiritual growth, or that some of its ethics are morally right, etc. Many of my non-religious students, for instance, are open in this way. This is a very slight form of participation, but I take it to be one because it is so markedly different from conceptual closure.

2. *Material contact.* I have another friend who is not very religious, but she does enter sacred spaces and takes comfort and solace from just being in them. This is fairly low-stakes participation, in the sense that one is not believing or practicing anything, but one is still participating just a little by being in the space. The same is true when I visited the ghats at Varanasi; I participated just a little that morning in Hinduism by watching and in that case also by sensing the religious emotions of the moment that Smart mentioned, maybe even co-feeling or vicariously feeling them in the way we do at the movies. The same can be true of holding prayer or meditation beads, or seeing an icon, or hearing chants, or visiting a congregational service when one is not using them ritualistically oneself but taking in the materiality in still form or as actively used by others.

3. *Interfaith collaboration.* A paradigmatic example of this is the Better Together Campaign that Interfaith Youth Core out of Chicago is advancing: it is bringing college students together across religious divides to do something good in the name of religious difference, whether that be advocating for people without a

voice, housing people who are homeless, feeding people who are hungry or working for sustainable energy solutions. These multifaith activities rely on a shared ethics of compassion and being a force for the good implicit in so many religious and secular perspectives. Working shoulder to shoulder with people who think differently about religion builds relationships and understanding of shared values. It can also be a form of multiple religious participation depending on the way participants see it, e.g., it is if one takes oneself to be living out the ethical branches of various religions together.

4. *Dialogue* with someone whose perspective on religion is different from one's own is another form of participating in another religion lightly. One talks with people of different religious perspectives about their perspectives firsthand. In so doing, one steps into how that religion gets embodied, and thus learns about its practices, beliefs, experiences, emotions, etc. One also encounters one of the myriad of people who themselves help make up the social stuff of the religion itself, and in deep forms of dialogue comes away grasping one's own perspective and life anew in transformative ways. As Leonard Swidler explains: "The goal of dialogue is to learn, and to change accordingly."<sup>9</sup> Such dialogues are happening worldwide, e.g. at my university in our small-group dialogue forums, in my community's Multifaith Council of Northwest Ohio at Tables of 8, at the North American Interfaith Network annual conferences, and beyond.

Note that these last two categories – interfaith collaboration and dialogue – are necessarily forms of multiple religious participation, whereas the first two – conceptual openness and material contact – could be done for one or multiple religions.

All four categories constitute relatively low-stakes ways of participating in a religion. They are all ways of learning about it from the outside, watching or hearing about or working alongside others who are doing it. The remaining categories go progressively deeper because in them one engages in the tradition *oneself*, from the inside. These represent a new level of intensity of participation, different not just in degree but in kind.

5. *Comparative theology*. Francis Clooney founded a method called "comparative theology" that aims at "small, useful engagements in diversity" (*Comparative Theology*, 68) by selecting just two texts across a religious divide of which one is on one side; e.g., Clooney as a Christian pairs a Christian text with a non-Christian one. One studies first the text from the other tradition—slowly and carefully, owning and watching the bias of one's perspective—then takes what one learns from it *back* to the text from one's own tradition, looking for fresh insights about one's own view from the other view (60).

At first comparative theology sounds like an approach from the outside, as with the first four, this time by way of study. However, this last step of letting the other tradition inform one's own means that comparative theologians are actually *trying on for themselves* the other religion's ways of thinking. It goes beyond conceptual openness or listening to a conceptual participation in another tradition—even if just temporarily in one's imagination or conceptualization, for the sake of one's grasp of one's own.

6. *Adopting belief(s)*. This form of participation goes beyond temporary or imaginative conceptual participation to actual adoption of one or more of a religion's beliefs, in an isolated way that does not rise to the level of identity or belonging. Perhaps comparative theologians sometimes arrive here, when a belief that they have imagined fits.

Adopting selected beliefs from a single religion is, I think, relatively common and unproblematic, e.g. someone might say that they believe in what Jesus said during the Sermon on the Mount but not the further claim that Jesus is God. Adopting selected beliefs from multiple religions, though, can be trickier because in some cases—for some traditions, and for some beliefs—they *contradict* one another. Take beliefs about the status of Jesus in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These contradict each other. In Judaism, Jesus is not seen as God or a prophet. In Christianity, he is seen as God and not just a prophet, and in Islam he is seen as a prophet but not as God. One cannot adopt all three of these beliefs simultaneously without being incoherent.

<sup>9</sup> See Swidler, "What is Dialogue."

How then does one believe across these traditions without being incoherent? Be careful not to adopt the beliefs that conflict. Adopt *other*, *supplementary* beliefs that *are* consistent. For example, beliefs that one religion proclaims but about which the other remains silent are formally consistent. So a reformed Jew without a specific idea of life after death could adopt a Muslim idea of Paradise. Similarly, Jews, Christians and Muslims could adopt Buddhism's Four Noble Truths since all three traditions are basically silent about them.

7. *Adopting practices.* This is a very visible form of religious participation—people engaging in one or more practices from a tradition such as attending public services, being involved in other communal events, adopting forms of prayer or meditation, etc.

As was the case with adopting selected beliefs, adopting selected practices from a single religion is at least conceptually unproblematic, e.g. someone might adopt Buddhist vipassana meditation without also proclaiming the Triple Gem. Adopting selected practices from multiple religions, though, can be difficult since practices might conflict in the same way beliefs do; in some cases this is because contradictory beliefs underlie the practices in question. For instance a Jew or Muslim could not consistently take the Christian Eucharist given its connections with Christian beliefs about Jesus' death and resurrection. But, as with beliefs, people can still adopt *other* practices that *complement* or *supplement* one another. Among the many available examples, Thomas Merton (*Seven Storey Mountain*), Robert Kennedy (*Zen Gifts to Christians*) and Paul Knitter (*Without Buddha I Could not Be a Christian*) have each added Buddhist practices to their Christian ones; Thich Nhat Hanh (*Living Buddha, Living Christ*) has done the reverse; the memorably-titled class of "Jew-Bu's" combine Jewish and Buddhist forms. There are also Christians taking up Jewish Sabbath and Passover rituals, to name a few.<sup>10</sup>

8. *Identity.* Identity is calling oneself a participant in a particular tradition ("I am a Buddhist")—a deep form of participation that might happen suddenly or gradually, sometimes after sufficient belief or practice to warrant self-identifying. Identity is, I am sure, subject to a host of psychological and sociological pressures. Such identity, as I am using the term, is decided by the *individual*. Though most religious identities at least in the United States are single-religious identities, it is in principle possible to identify with multiple religions. As in the belief and practice cases, though, one will need to be judicious about which ones (more soon).

9. *Belonging.* In contrast, belonging is decided by the *community* of the religion in question in some way.<sup>11</sup> This might be by way of a leader in the tradition, as when a rabbi confers the status of being a convert to Judaism, or by way of an initiation rite, such as saying and earnestly meaning the *shahadah* for Islam (no leader required), or by both, such as when a Catholic priest takes a candidate through the rites of Christian baptism and confirmation or a Zen priest takes a candidate through Jukai. Again, single belonging is the norm at least in the United States, but multiple belonging is theoretically possible and actually done, as we shall see soon.

Identity and belonging are both deep forms of participation. I place identity before belonging here since, in adult conversion anyway, it is precisely the fact that someone self-identifies with a religion that makes him or her seek belonging to make that identity official. But this may run the other way 'round, too: for example, in cases where one belongs as an infant, one may self-identify only later, and in that case identity will be the deeper form.

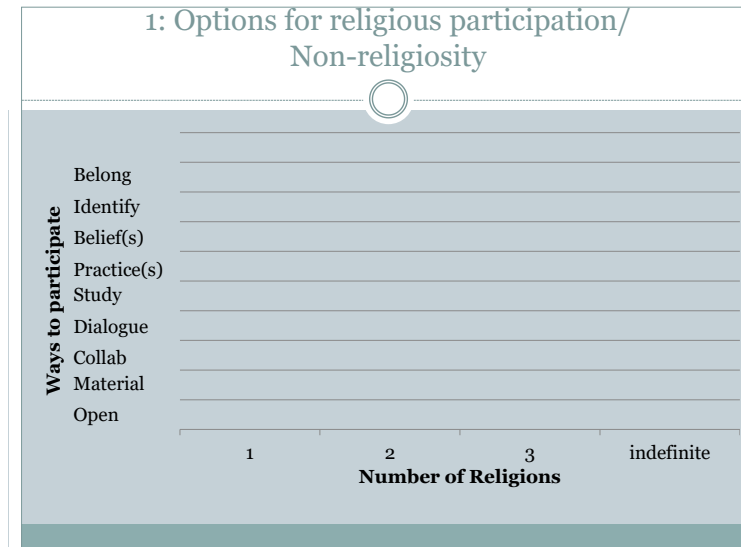
This is then a continuum of ways of participating in religion. The farther one goes on this continuum, the *deeper* one participates in religion. At the same time, there is a second continuum: one can participate

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Robert Voss cites a host of interesting examples of Christians in India adopting Hindu practices including "Hindu patterns of possession in contemporary Christian saints; Christian chariot festivals; shrines of Christian martyrs and healers that incorporate Hindu practices such as animal sacrifices, vows and hair-shaving rituals" etc. Voss, "Belonging," 50.

<sup>11</sup> "Religious belonging implies more than a subjective sense of sympathy or endorsement of a selective number of beliefs and practices. It involves the recognition of one's own religious identity by the tradition itself and the disposition to submit to the conditions for membership as delineated by that tradition." Cornille, Introduction to *Mansions*, 4.

in these ways for one or two or a number of religions. The more traditions one practices, the *broader* one participates in religion.

We can combine the degrees of participating in religions with the number of them to create an X-Y coordinate plane or graph – see Image 1 – to represent the options for religious participation, from none to a lot—a conceptual representation or map of the multiple religious playground, as it were. Constructing this visual space helps us answer my original question: How would one order up a multiply religious life if one wanted to? The graph relays a full range of answers, from no religious participation at the bottom left zero point, to capture those not conceptually open to any tradition, to belonging to three or more traditions at the top right, to capture those whose religious activity is as broad as Nan’s but also so deep as to *belong* to multiple traditions (more in a moment).



I want to emphasize that the graph is itself value-free; being higher along the vertical axis or further along the horizontal axis is not necessarily better or worse. It would take argument to substantiate such claims, and I can see plausible arguments favoring norms for positions all over the graph.<sup>12</sup>

## Religious Orientations

Using the graph to picture one’s own participation in religion can be personally revealing because it shows the choices one is making against the background of possibilities in principle open to them. It is interesting for me to see, for example, that I have been participating in dialogues and interfaith community action that have put me at least in principle into contact with an indefinite number of religious perspectives at a relatively low-stakes level, and that simultaneously I have limited my higher-stakes participation to a limited, definite set of traditions. The reader can explore where her or his own profile lies.

The graph also allows us to display common *patterns* of religious participation, which I will call “religious orientations.” Its strength is that it allows us to talk carefully about radically different kinds of religious orientations that span the gamut from no participation in any religion to multiple ways of participating in multiple religions. Some of these patterns are engaged in frequently enough that we are giving them names in the literature; I will suggest a couple other patterns that do not as yet have names as we go.

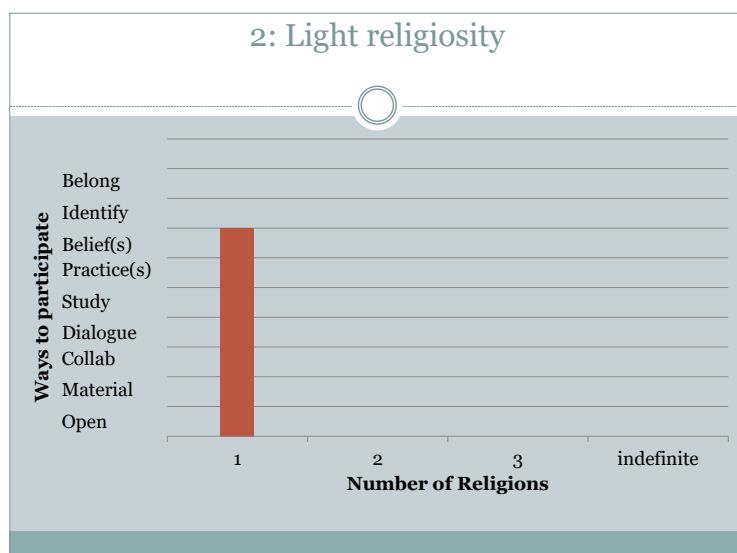
Let’s first take the null pattern which I will call non-religiosity to refer to those who have no religious

<sup>12</sup> For example, someone might argue that being at the zero point is best, e.g., if it turns out that no religion is true or useful for anything of value, while someone else might argue that being in the middle right—using practices from multiple traditions—is best, e.g., if we are at too early a stage of religious development as humans to expect truth out of any current forms but are still so constituted that such practices are a necessary means to finding out more.

activity at all, modeled by the empty chart itself in Image 1. Non-religious people may be pro-religious or anti-religious or neutral about religion; their essential feature is that they do not engage in religion. Some of the sharply increasing number of Americans who are religiously “unaffiliated” probably follow this pattern. The Pew report “‘Nones’ on the Rise” (2012) suggests some of the unaffiliated do not believe or practice in major ways, e.g., 49% of this group never attend a religious service,<sup>13</sup> and 32% do not believe in God.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, 88% say they are “not looking for a religion that would be right” for them,<sup>15</sup> which probably means they are not dialoguing or studying or collaborating with religious traditions either.

So some of the religiously unaffiliated are probably non-religious altogether.

But some of the unaffiliated display what I would call light religiosity – activity in the lower half of the chart above no activity but below the identity and belonging that comprise affiliation (Image 2). Eight percent are attending religious services at least annually, and an interesting 18% are doing enough with religion to count themselves as religious but unaffiliated, though why they say this and thus what they may be up to religiously is unreported by Pew.<sup>16</sup> The unaffiliated also report strikingly high degrees of spirituality: 68% believe in God (30% are indeed “absolutely certain” there is a God<sup>17</sup>), and 41% pray at least monthly (21% in fact daily). Some of these forms of spirituality may surface occasionally in a religious form unreported by Pew, e.g., occasional use of a Hail Mary or prayer beads, etc. I assume that the rule for light religiosity is that it occurs in a single religion, and picture it thus on Image 2.



There are other patterns of unaffiliated behavior I’ll call seeking and multiple religious curiosity and group into one graph since they both fall in the lower right quadrant of the x-y plane (see Image 3). The seekers are the 10% of the unaffiliated that Pew says *are* looking for a religion that is right for them and who thus are probably engaging multiple religions in various ways as part of their search. Those with multiple religious curiosity behave like seekers but have a different intention. They are *not* actively looking for a “right” religion but, parallel to the similar case of bicuriosity in gender attraction, have as Clooney says “multiple religious attractions and experiences” for an indefinite number of religions. They do not surface in Pew’s report but they do surface in my classrooms and beyond.

<sup>13</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” 11.

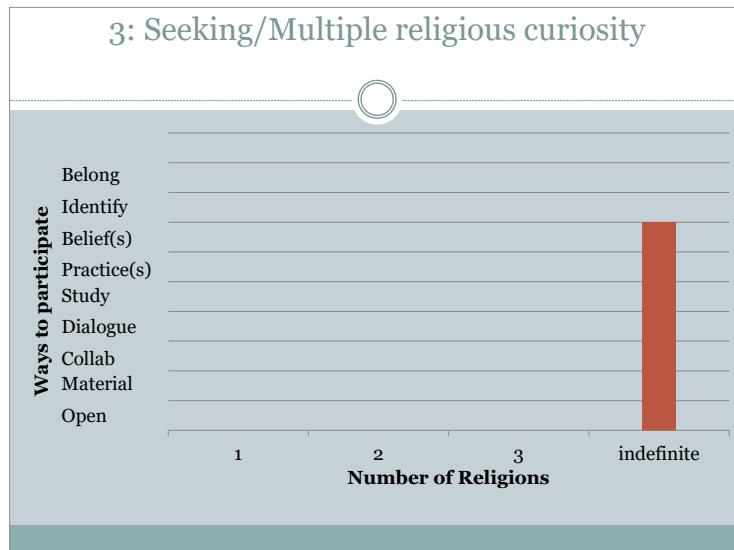
<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 10.

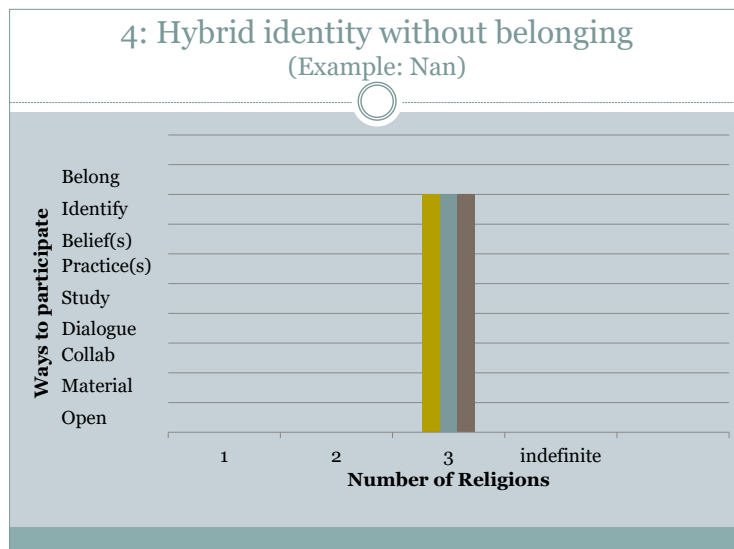
<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.





These then are the major religious orientations short of identity and belonging: non-religiosity, light religiosity, seeking and multiple religious curiosity. The first pattern that rises to the level of identity is single identity without belonging which is (as the name indicates) participation in *one* religious tradition to the point of identity but without taking the steps to belong formally (such as baptism or jukai, more below). Hybrid identity without belonging (Image 4) is (1) participation in *multiple* traditions to the point of identity but without formal belonging, and (2) the melding of these identities into one. So think of Nan: instead of saying “I’m a Hindu and a Christian and a Jew,” she would say “I’m a Jewish-Christian-Hindu,” where the dashes are a verbal trace of her combining the religions in her identity.



The phenomenon of religious hybridity is nicely elaborated by two thinkers, Jeannine Hill Fletcher and Michelle Voss Roberts. Hill Fletcher, in a wonderful piece called “Shifting Identity,” says:

When aspects of identity are forged into a singular individual in such a way that they cannot easily be compartmentalized, one cannot ask what it means to be a Christian without recognizing that the answer is also conditioned by other identity categories....[In] lived experience...our identity features are mutually informing...<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Fletcher, “Shifting Identity,” 17.

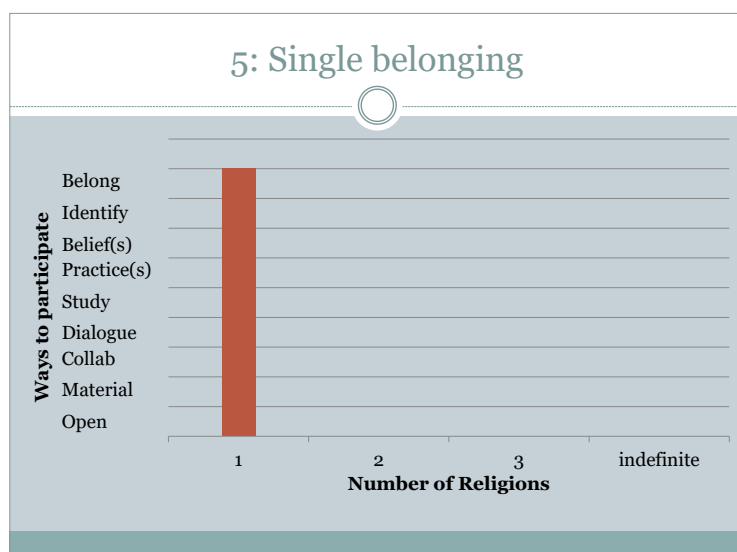
The fact that our identities “mutually inform” each other seems powerfully right. I am both a professor and a mother. But one can’t really understand the kind of professor I am until one understands that I am a mother; I am the kind of professor who will not answer emails between 5 and 9 pm. One also can’t understand the kind of mother I am until one understands that I am a professor; I am the kind of mother who is not going to be able to go on all the field trips. Thus, although it is accurate to say I am a professor and accurate to say I am a mother, it is even more accurate to say that I am a professor-mother, the hybrid which explains how these two identities inform one another.

Nan’s religious hybridity seems to go even deeper than my professor-motherhood, though, since I am comfortable claiming either identity solo, but she would not say she is a Jew full stop, or a Christian full stop, or a Hindu full stop. Her identity is only with the hybrid. As Voss Roberts says:

Hybrid identity is both double and partial. Hybrid identity is double because it affirms multiple realities; it is partial because it is never completely at home in any of them....In the logic of the hybrid, the opposition between religious traditions must be held loosely...[given] the necessity of everyday life.<sup>19</sup>

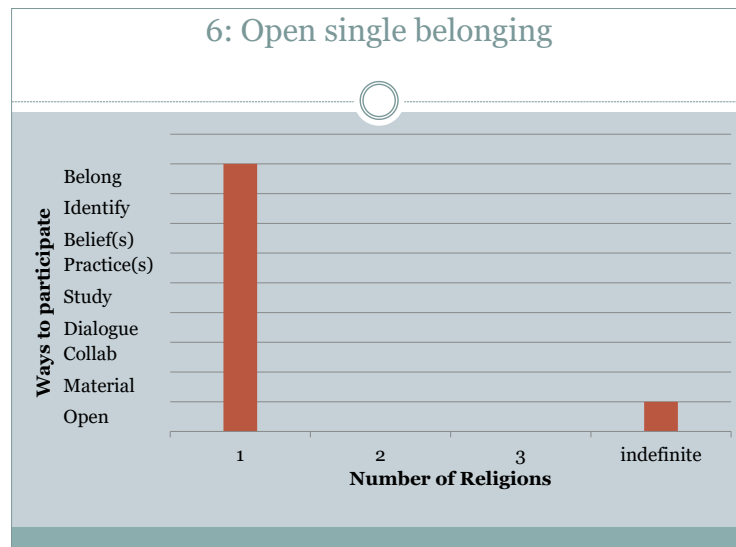
I suspect Nan is “never completely at home” in her religious identities because of two colliding facts: (1) “holding [these identities] loosely” means avoiding holding a belief from one of these religions that contradicts a belief in another, and (2) for her particular triad, Nan might reasonably take some of the beliefs that contradict each other to be essential to these traditions – for example, she may take the contradictory beliefs about Jesus’ divinity in Christianity and Judaism to be essential to those faiths, or she might take beliefs about God’s being one in Judaism and Christianity but many or all in Hinduism to be essential to all three faiths. To hold the triad together, then, she might avoid believing *any* of these things, which would make her *lack* beliefs essential to being a full-blown Jew, Christian, or Hindu. So the most she could do is identify with the hybrid “Jewish-Christian-Hindu” and adopt the remaining non-conflicting beliefs and practices. Since these are legion, Nan can still be very religiously occupied, but there will be silences about the conflicts even in the midst of the activity.

Now let’s move from religious identity to religious *belonging*, beginning with single belonging (Image 5) in which one participates in a single religion to the point of formally belonging to it, by whatever leader or rite of initiation makes it official. Single belonging is a common form of religiosity. Moreover, some of the greatest saints and mystics of all time are single-belongers. To use Christian examples, St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Thomas Aquinas—all were engaged completely and only in the Christian tradition. Obviously, single belonging to any major religious tradition is rich enough to command our attention for a lifetime and still leave us with more to know and experience.

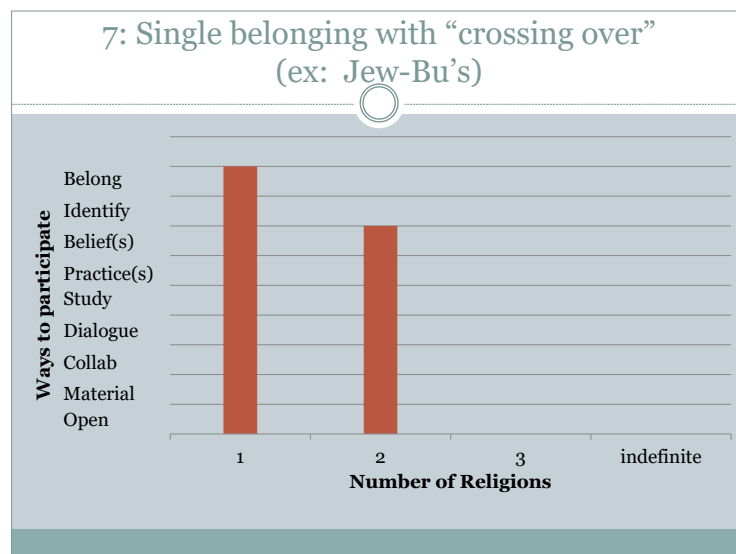


<sup>19</sup> Voss, “Religious Belonging,” 51.

Open single belonging, as I am calling it (Image 6), parallels the conceptual openness which sits between non-religiosity and the lower-stakes forms of religious participation. It is a conceptual openness to another tradition while sitting in one's home tradition. Another friend of mine is an open single-belonger. She practices, identifies and belongs as a Christian. Though she doesn't engage other traditions actively, she takes her identity as a Christian to be historically contingent on her being born into her family and culture, and she is probably right about this given the statistics showing that, had she been born somewhere else in the world, she probably would have had a *different* home tradition. She knows she could switch to some other path but takes her path to work equally well and really better for her: it is no accident that the symbols and the practices and the beliefs on this path are efficacious for her because it's her tradition. So she is open to the truth or efficacy of another tradition, but content belonging where she is.

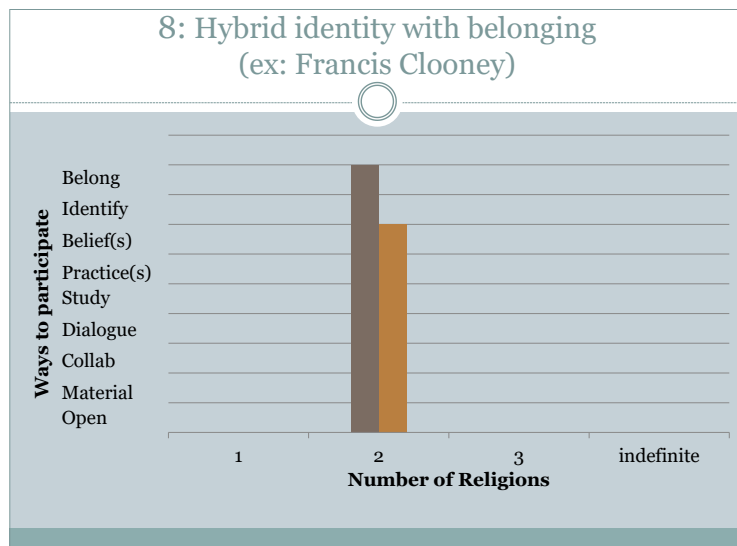


Single belonging with crossing over (Image 7) applies to people who belong in one tradition but “cross over” by adopting beliefs or practices from other traditions as a way to inform their own tradition. Thomas Merton is a good example. Although he travelled, dialogued, studied and wrote eloquently and with insight about Buddhism and Daoism, and though he engaged in Buddhist meditation, he never identified with or belonged to either Buddhism or Daoism. He was a Catholic monk, a single-belonger, who crossed over by using practices and taking inspiration from the texts of other traditions.<sup>20</sup>



<sup>20</sup> See Merton, *Seven Storey*.

Another orientation is hybrid identity with belonging (Image 8). This is similar to hybrid identity without belonging, since it involves participation to the point of identity in multiple traditions and identity with a “dash”, but in the context of *belonging* to one of them. In this regard, Francis Clooney is interesting because he seems to maintain a primary allegiance and belonging to Christianity but in a form that imbues Christianity with Hinduism.



Peter Feldmeier writes of Clooney:

If asked, ‘Are you a Hindu or a Christian-Hindu?’ Clooney would say that he is not, that he is a Christian, particularly a Roman Catholic Jesuit. Then he might say, as he has in public conferences, something like: ‘But, in a way, I am a kind of Hindu-Christian. It has become a part of me.’<sup>21</sup>

For Clooney, Hinduism is enhancing Christianity, not the other way around. The order matters. You’ll notice I made one bar higher on the chart to signify this priority: one part of the identity rises to belonging while the other part is only at the level of identity. Clooney, for instance, has not gone through any of the rites of initiation to become a Hindu but he has gone through them all (indeed can administer them all) as a Christian.

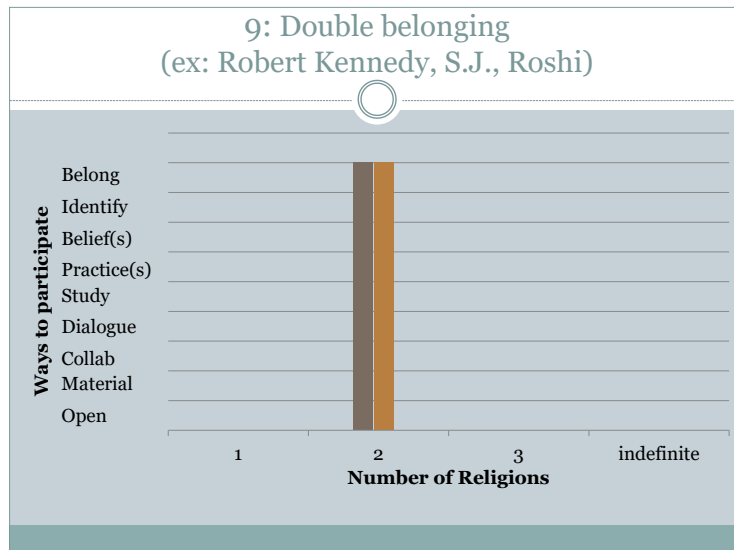
The logic of Clooney’s single-belonging with hybridity may mirror Nan’s non-belonging hybridity in at least one way: for his particular diad, Clooney might reasonably take some of the Hindu and Christian beliefs that contradict each other to be essential to these traditions – for example, beliefs about Jesus’ status or God’s nature. But, unlike Nan who stays agnostic about beliefs that conflict in her traditions which makes her unable to belong to any of them, Clooney can drop the Hindu beliefs that conflict with Christian ones to honor his full belonging in Christianity—certainly at least until further dialogue indicates otherwise.

Double belonging (Image 9) is comparatively neat and clean: one formally belongs to the two traditions of interest by going through the rites of initiation for both. Take as a good example Robert Kennedy, S.J., who is an American Jesuit priest and also a Zen Roshi master in the White Plume lineage. He says that Christians come to Zen for a deeper prayer life—that “Zen gives us a method to put (Christian) contemplation into practice”<sup>22</sup>. Or consider Paul Knitter, author of *Without Buddha, I Could Not Be a Christian* and both a Catholic and a Buddhist, who writes toward the end of his memoir: “In 1939 I was baptized. In 2008 I took refuge. I can truly call myself what I think I’ve been over these past decades: a Buddhist Christian”<sup>23</sup>. Notice the two formal markers of his double belonging, and the lack of a dash between the identities.

<sup>21</sup> Feldmeier, *Encounters*, 272.

<sup>22</sup> Kennedy, *Zen Gifts*.

<sup>23</sup> Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, 216.

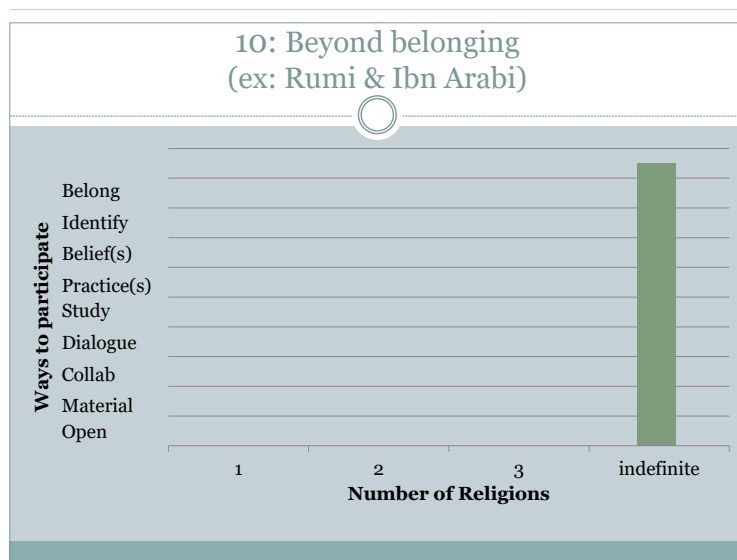


Double belonging takes judgment. As in the hybrid cases, one tries to avoid holding beliefs in one tradition that conflict with the other. Combining that norm here with the call also to belong to both traditions entails that one must identify traditions whose essential beliefs do not contradict. It is generally assumed that the essential beliefs of Buddhism and Christianity do not contradict, at least regarding fundamentals, and hence we see Buddhist Christians and Christian Buddhists. This is not so for other pairings. For example, many Christian and Muslim denominations take the beliefs about the divinity of Jesus in their faiths both to conflict and to be essential, making double belonging to these faiths difficult if not impossible, at least within these denominations. For example, the Episcopal Church in 2009 deposed Ann Holmes Redding as an Episcopal priest after she proclaimed in 2007 that she had become “both Muslim and Christian”<sup>24</sup>, and Wheaton College (IL) recently took steps to terminate Associate Professor Larycia Hawkins for saying that Muslims and Christians worshipped the same God.<sup>25</sup>

The final category of beyond belonging (Image 10) was inspired by a discussion with Peter Feldmeier in which we tried to identify the edge of the envelope in multiple religious participation. “Does anyone triple- or quadruple-belong?” Neither of us knew of anyone who had—testimony to how difficult it is to achieve belonging even twice. But we did know of those who single-belonged but who by their own report moved beyond belonging to an embrace of every religious form. The category of “beyond belonging” is thus interestingly similar to multiple religious curiosity in its interest in an indefinite number of religious forms, but instead of being embodied without ever having belonged to a religion, this interest is embodied after religious belonging. So in contrast to multiple religious curiosity, this final orientation sits above the level of belonging on the chart, not below it.

<sup>24</sup> See Tu “I Am Both” and “Defrocked.”

<sup>25</sup> Wheaton College’s Media Center. There may be other denominations of Islam and Christianity which make it *practically* possible to double-belong. As an anonymous commentator suggested, it also may be *conceptually* possible to double-belong to these faiths on flexible-enough readings of e.g., the divinity of Jesus (cf. with the Word in Islam) or the meaning of the Trinity (cf. with Islam’s 99 names). Indeed, as the commentator pressed: “What seem to be contradictory beliefs may be occasions for really fruitful comparative work.” The fascinating question in these cases will be whether the conceptual revision required to render the views compossible is so deep as to render them no longer truly Christian or truly Muslim views.



We can see beyond belonging in both Rumi and Ibn Arabi. Rumi says, “I am neither Muslim, nor Christian, Jew nor Zoroastrian; I am neither of the earth nor of the heavens; I am neither body nor soul” (“Poems,” II). Similarly, Ibn Arabi, writing roughly at the same time:

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks, a temple for idols and the pilgrim’s Ka’ba and the tables of the Torah and the book of the Qur’an. I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love’s camels take, that is my religion and my faith.<sup>26</sup>

Rumi’s quote makes beyond belonging sound like no-belonging; Ibn Arabi’s makes it sound like all-belonging. But the point of both seems to me the same: the categories of belonging fail because, as an anonymous commentator said so well, the Reality that they take themselves to be “experiencing in two different traditions is [, they think,] both within and beyond all traditions.” It is as the Buddha and Wittgenstein said: both have kicked the raft or ladder of belonging away because they have no need of it now.

## Conclusion

I began this paper with the question of how one can live out multiple religions at once. We now have eight answers to this question in the form of eight multiple religious orientations—seeking, multiple religious curiosity, hybrid identity without belonging, open single belonging, single belonging with crossing over, hybrid identity with belonging, double belonging, and beyond belonging. We also have four other religious orientations that naturally arose on our way through the continuum—non-religiosity, light religiosity, single identity without belonging, and single belonging.

What does this understanding of religious orientations in general and multiple religious orientations in particular yield? For one thing, it gives us names and a conceptual order for states of multiple religious participation which together may allow us to ask old questions more carefully and ask some new questions, too. One new question that haunted me as I wrote is whether multiple religiosity is an acquired taste, and more specifically whether, for some people at least, the lighter forms of it such as seeking and multiple religious curiosity give way to the more intense forms.

Old questions about multiple religiosity that we can understand anew include a fidelity question: Is participating in multiple religions unfaithful? The work on orientations allows us to see that this question arises more urgently for the *more* intense forms of participation, since those without identity or belonging

<sup>26</sup> Al-Arabi, *Tarjuman*, verses 13-15.

have little or no religion to be unfaithful *to*. The reverse is true of an ethical question about multiple religiosity: is participating in other religions plundering them for one's own gain? Vincent Miller argues in *Consuming Religion* that we are not plundering if, when we participate in another religion, we do so within this religion's fuller theoretical and practical context. Assuming that Miller is right, it turns out that the ethical question is more pressing for the *less* intense forms of participation since they take in less of the context Miller recommends.

Finally, this work on religious orientations leaves us with a wider personal perspective on the field: it creates self-understanding to know where our tree stands in the forest of options. It also may make us aware of new possibilities for living out religiosity that we had not yet considered—a result that could prove useful in these religiously transforming times.<sup>27</sup>

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