

Multiple Religious Belonging

Steve Bruce*

Multiple Religious Belonging: Conceptual Advance or Secularization Denial?

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the notion of ‘multiple religious belonging’ (MRB). Through an analysis of a recent study by Joantine Berghuijs, it argues that MRB is ill-defined and exaggerates the extent of popular religiosity. If MRB is at all common, then the de-legitimizing effect of religious pluralism (which is well-supported by the evidence) is challenged. This paper suggests that such a challenge is unwarranted by Berghuijs’s evidence and concludes with an elaboration of the various and very different things that might be encompassed by MRB.

Keywords: multiple religious belonging, secularization, consumerist religion

1 Introduction

All academic disciplines are subject to cycles of fashion but – probably because incontrovertible evidence is in short supply – those of the social sciences and humanities seem particularly afflicted by the search for conceptual innovation. One novel twenty-first century contribution to the social scientific study of religion is the idea of ‘multiple religious belonging’ (MRB). This paper will argue that the term is misleading, exaggerates the apparent popularity of religion, and is incompatible with a widely accepted element of explanations of secularization.

To elaborate slightly, I will argue that the word ‘belonging’ is usually inappropriate for the phenomenon that Joantine Berghuijs studies.¹ Clearly there many ways and degrees in which we can feel positive about, or be involved with, religious beliefs and behaviour but, in normal use, the term ‘belonging’ denotes and connotes things that are absent from what Berghuijs has called ‘multiple religious belonging’.

Because it is such a broad notion, MRB allows an estimate of the numbers of people in the West who are religious that is vastly greater than those produced by more conventional ways of estimating the popularity of religious sentiment such as counts of religious activities redolent of religious belief (such as church-going), counts of the use of religion for rites of passage, or conventional attitude surveys. That of itself does not mean that MRB is a bad idea but it gives us good reason to consider it critically.

MRB also implies rejection of the de-legitimizing effects of pluralism.² The secularization thesis supposes that, at least for Christianity, diversity undermines the certainty with which people can hold their beliefs. If MRB is at all common then that argument needs to be reconsidered.

In this paper, I will identify conceptual and evidential problems with the emerging use of MRB. I will then argue that the phenomenon is most likely a feature of largely secular societies. Finally, I will suggest a number of elaborations of phenomena which may be encompassed by MRB. Each of these is worth studying but bunching them under one term is not helpful.

¹ Berghuijs, ‘Multiple Religious Belonging’, 24.

² As does the rational choice, supply-side or religious market approach to variations in religiosity associated with Rodney Stark and associates. because this topic is vast, I will pass it here but for a book-length critique, see Bruce, *Choice and Religion*.

*Corresponding author: Steve Bruce, University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland;
E-mail: s.bruce@abdn.ac.uk

2 Problems with the word “belonging”

We can consider in turn each of the three words in the phrase ‘multiple religious belonging’. The meaning of ‘multiple’ is clear and not much contested, though its sense obviously depends on the next adjective. Logically and grammatically the adjective ‘religious’ and the noun ‘religion’ stand or fall together. The noun is the property identified by the adjective; the adjective means possessing the qualities of the noun. However, the critical approach to religion advanced by philosophers Jonathan Smith, Talal Asad, and Tim Fitzgerald, and summarised by Paul Hedges, wishes to separate them.³ Smith says ‘Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy’.⁴ But in the sentence before that, Smith says ‘there is a staggering amount of data ... that might be characterised ... as religious’.⁵ The word ‘might’ in that sentence offers a variety of interpretations depending on who is doing the characterising and how accurate that characterisation is. I might be characterised as an acne-ridden teenager but no-one who has met me could do so accurately. If that ‘might’ allows that characterisations may be more or less accurate, then what looks like a radical approach to the subject is just a roundabout way of getting us to the same destination as does the mundane pre-post-modern method: if we can have the adjective ‘religious’ then we must allow the noun ‘religion’.

Far from religion being created by external observation, references to religion pepper the extant texts of people in Christendom at least since the Reformation and functional equivalents can be found centuries earlier. And, contrary to the suggestion of many authors, outside the extremely hierarchical and monolithic Catholic Church, those references do not come primarily from elites.⁶ They appear in the biographies and letters of ordinary people who pondered and argued about religion. For example, in the eighteenth century, the Seceder Presbyterian Churches were willing to split over an oath which required town burgesses to swear to uphold ‘the true religion professed within the realm’.⁷ Lay Seceders as much as their clergy argued whether the phrase referred specifically to the Church of Scotland (in which case no Seceder could take the oath) or to Presbyterianism more generally (in which case it could readily be taken). But nobody had any difficulty knowing what sort of thing they were arguing about. Joantine Berghuijs follows the Asad line in asserting that ‘Boundaries around the official content of religions have been, and are being, drawn through social, political, and theological content for dominance of elites’.⁸ That wording is a little ambiguous but in the Hedges paper,⁹ and in the reasoning of Asad and of Michel Foucault who is the inspiration for this line of thought, ‘for dominance of elites’ means only, largely, or primarily for the convenience of elites. It is certainly true that most organised religious bodies appoint officials who are tasked with clarifying and protecting the distinctive content of those bodies and with deciding what sorts of relations with other bodies may be permitted: denominations are generous while sects are narrow-minded. However, in the Protestant strand of Christianity every believer is, in theory, equally able to discern the will of God. It is this epistemological proposition that explains why Protestantism so easily and often fragments.¹⁰ And that fragmentation is usually driven by lay people rather than the clergy (who have a vested interest in the status quo) and ideological cohesion is desired as much by the laity as by the clergy. Indeed many Protestant bodies either have no clergy at all or make little distinction in the authority of the ‘preaching’ and the ‘teaching’ elders, to use the Presbyterian distinctions. Usually it is the college-educated clergy (and particularly those, such as college lecturers and chaplains, who have no pastoral responsibilities) who lead the way in arguing against traditional exclusivist attitudes to the faith. Finally, given that many Protestant sects have been politically disruptive and radical – think of the Quakers, Hutterites, Doukhobors, Levellers,

³ Hedges, ‘Multiple Religious Belonging After Religion’, 51.

⁴ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Berghuijs, ‘Multiple Religious Belonging’, 24; Hedges, ‘Multiple Religious Belonging After Religion’.

⁷ Drummond and Bulloch, *The Scottish Church*, 110.

⁸ Berghuijs, ‘Multiple Religious Belonging’, 19–20.

⁹ Hedges, ‘Multiple Religious Belonging After Religion’.

¹⁰ Bruce, *A House Divided*.

English Civil War-period Independents, and Primitive Methodists – it is difficult to see how the claim that the policing of the faith is an especially elite pre-occupation, can be sustained.

I must stress that most low-level concept formation in the social sciences is barely the work of scholars. Talcott Parsons' idea of 'pattern variables', for example, is clearly remote from the thought and experience of lay people but the variables themselves have correspondences in ordinary lives. I cannot recall my mother ever uttering the words 'particularism' and 'universalism' but she perfectly understood 'being biased' and 'treating all people the same'. Our concepts must have their correspondence in lay usage because otherwise we could not do our research. Our idea of religion cannot be a *mean* of lay people's understanding of religion but it should be close to a *mode* otherwise we will be wasting our time when we try to ask our subjects about their religious beliefs and practices and that is true of every way of 'asking' from reading the diaries and letters of the long-dead to intensive personal interviewing or questionnaire surveying of the still-living.

As an aside, I should add that Rhiannon Grant's related suggestion that quantitative social scientists impose a uniform notion of religion on a population with diverse and ambiguous religious and spiritual interests and sentiments seems to have little idea of how social science surveys are designed. She refers to the 'tick-box approach to religion' and to 'a framework which leads the authors of surveys to ask people only to tick one box to indicate their religion'.¹¹ When we design survey questions, we often pilot test with a method that asks the completers to talk about how they understand the questions and what they mean by their responses. And we can check for signs of unhappiness with question wording: the same question frequently skipped, two boxes ticked instead of one, an initial response crossed out and another substituted, and the like. Thirdly, we correlate responses to search for consistency: for example, do the people who choose the designation 'religious' attend church frequently, claim to believe in God, and so on? Finally, questions that produce stable and consistent responses are used in many surveys; those that do not are dropped. It is true that many surveys ask respondents to tick only one box but many also include more nuanced options. The British Social Attitudes questionnaire, for example, offers the usual categories – No Religion, Christian - no denomination, Roman Catholic, Church of England/Anglican, Baptist and so on through Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and Muslim – but it also has write-in boxes for Other Protestant, Other Christian, and Other non-Christian.¹² Only 7 per cent of Scots did not answer the religion question in the 2011 census and it seems highly likely that most of them were (because they objected to being asked) refusing to choose a category rather than displaying an inability to choose.¹³

As Jeanine Diller noted, the word 'belonging' in 'MRB', as currently used, suggests far too great an attachment for what is being described.¹⁴ A brief bit of autobiography will make the point. As a matter of preference, I strongly identify with Scotland: I voted for devolution in 1997 and independence in 2014. I read Scottish history and Scottish novels and watch Scottish films. I play Scottish music in a Scottish ceilidh dance band. Scottish news on the radio interests me in a way that news items about England do not. There is an objective base to those subjective cultural preferences: I was born in Scotland to a Scottish father, was educated in a Scottish school and university, now live ten miles from where my father grew up, and have spent 80 per cent of my adult life living and working in Scotland. It would thus seem sensible to say that I am Scottish or that I belong to Scotland.

Were I so minded, I could claim some attachment to Bulgaria. My mother was Bulgarian and I have Bulgarian relatives. I am interested enough in Bulgaria to know more of its history than of that of Serbia or Romania and to keep half an eye on political developments. But I have had no contact with my Bulgarian relatives since my mother died, have only visited the country three times and each briefly, do not read or speak Bulgarian, and feel so little attachment to Bulgaria that it would be preposterous to say that I belong to Bulgaria. Indeed, I probably have a stronger tie to New Zealand than to Bulgaria, despite the objective base for a Bulgarian identity being far stronger than that for a New Zealand one. I watch New

¹¹ Grant, 'Playing Many Religion-Games', 3.

¹² NatCen, 'British Social Attitudes annotated questionnaire BSA 30'; <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/downloads/questionnaires.aspx>. Accessed September 2017.

¹³ *Scotland's Census 2011*.

¹⁴ Diller, 'Multiple religious orientation'.

Zealand club rugby on satellite television and support the All Blacks rugby team. I can sing the New Zealand national anthem and admire the fact that it is not only in two languages but starts with the Maori version. If I cannot buy local produce, I will buy New Zealand lamb. I also buy New Zealand wine. Early in my career I considered following colleagues in migrating to New Zealand. None of that means I belong to New Zealand. Even looser terms such as ‘association’, ‘affinity’ and ‘affiliation’ seem inappropriate.

Belonging implies a strong bond. It is also generally not a matter solely of personal preference. The governments of nation-states decide which claims to belonging are accepted and they reject many. Just occasionally, as some Australian government ministers discovered in 2017 to their considerable embarrassment, citizenship may be awarded when it is not requested.¹⁵ Though just how choosy they are usually depends on their popularity. Religious organisations similarly claim the right to determine who belongs. Almost all Christian bodies use either the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed as summaries of the beliefs that Christians are expected to hold. If we move down a level of abstraction, we find that churches, sects and denominations have membership tests. You might like the theology and worship styles of the Exclusive Brethren but you cannot sensibly claim to ‘belong’ to the Exclusive Brethren unless a Brethren meeting accepts your claim and that will require that you meet the standards for membership set by the Brethren. By definition, sects have detailed membership tests and ‘dis-fellowship’ or expel those who fail to meet them. National churches have to be inclusive and thus have only weak membership tests: historically, taking communion at Easter was sufficient to qualify you as a member of the Church of England. Denominations such as Methodism conventionally have membership tests but are now slack in imposing them. Because it thinks of itself as the universal Christian Church, the Roman Catholic Church has been slow to accept a category of ‘member’ and wishes to regard as members, all whom it has baptised. But even such theoretically inclusive bodies require godparents to promise to indoctrinate the infant being baptised in the correct beliefs and have some separate ceremony of confirmation or first communion at which the now-grown infant makes a personal commitment to the faith. And even if any particular organization has only very lax membership requirements all (except perhaps the Quakers and Unitarians) have implicit lists of other organizations or faiths that one cannot simultaneously support. In December 2016 there was a public outcry when verses from the Koran were read as a prayer during an Anglican Cathedral service and the official responsible had to resign.¹⁶ As Christianity has declined in popularity in the West so most major Christian organizations have become more ecumenical but relatively few Christians would accept that Islam offers a valid route to God.

In brief, ‘belonging’ to some religion is not – as MRB suggests – solely a matter of personal preference. The three Abrahamic religions have statements of faith and requirements that distinguish themselves from other each other and even the supposedly tolerant religions of Hinduism and Buddhism have beliefs and practices that allow little confusion as to whether one is a Hindu or a Buddhist. That is, we should not confuse considerable internal variegation with a lack of boundaries. As we see when Hindus campaign against castes that have converted to Christianity, Hindus know when someone no longer belongs. There needs to be a reciprocal acceptance from those empowered to approve or reject personal preferences. I could announce tomorrow that I am Jewish (and a large number of white US New Agers claim to have been native Americans in previous lives) but the local rabbi and Jewish community will not accept my claim.

3 The evidential problem

There is also a problem with the evidence for MRB. Most of the work in which it is used is conceptual and offers only anecdotes to illustrate theoretical or classificatory discussions. One of the few attempts to offer representative data is a Dutch survey conducted by Berghuijs. Before I offer any criticism I must say that this work is an excellent creative starting point which identifies many of the problems

¹⁵ The Australian constitution forbids ministers and members of parliament from enjoying dual citizenship. A number of ministers discovered that, unbeknownst to them, they had been awarded citizenship of other countries by virtue of parentage or place of birth and had to resign.

¹⁶ Sherwood, ‘Bishop “distressed” by row following Qur’an reading at cathedral’.

inherent in measuring MRB and shows some clever ways of working round those problems. However, there are some flaws, not so much in the structure and conduct of the survey, but in how the results are presented.

The headline claim is that MRB is far more common than we think: it is present in ‘at least 23% of the population’. But when one looks closely at just *what* is present, one gets a rather different picture. When asked the direct question, only 3 per cent identify as adherents of two or more religions.¹⁷ In order to go beyond institutional religion, the survey asked about a variety of ‘modalities’. Some of these – social participation, for example – seem sensible but others are such weak and tenuous connections we would never use them in describing involvement in the arts, sport or politics. For example, admiring the ethics of a religion is an ‘affinity’ so that a Christian admiring Buddhist ethics counts as MRB. Provided one is thinking in the abstract rather than looking at how Buddhist monks behave in Sri Lanka, I would have thought almost anyone who knew a little about the subject would admire Buddhist ethics. Importantly it is Buddhism, the eastern religion most open to being reduced to an almost secular philosophy, that figures highly in MRB. More than half of MRBers combine Christianity and Buddhism. But that ‘combining’ is an exaggerated way of describing what the survey actually found. Consider that under the discussion of ways that Christians could also ‘belong’ to Buddhism, Berghuijs says ‘the highest combination of modalities ... consists of appealing values ... attractive rituals ... and being inspired by Buddhism’.¹⁸ This is hardly meaningful. Though I would follow Max Weber in describing myself as ‘religiously unmusical’, I have no problem saying that Buddhist values (provided one takes the views of the Dalai Lama and not those of actual Buddhist monks in Buddhist countries) are appealing, many of the rituals are attractive, and Gautama was inspirational. But if we apply a conventional understanding of the notion of ‘belonging’, MRB is revealed to be extremely unpopular: of those whom Berghuijs initially describes as combining Christianity and Buddhism, ‘45 per cent is active Christians but only 4 per cent is involved in a Buddhist community and 3 per cent is involved in both a Christian and Buddhist community’. What this might mean is that a tiny proportion of Dutch Christians attend a meditation group. In the 2011 census in England and Wales, precisely 46 out of 276,786 people in Bolton wrote-in ‘mixed religion’ or similar: that was 0.017 per cent of the population.¹⁹ Of course, many of those who chose a pre-set option such as ‘Christian’ may have had some positive sentiment towards or relationship with, some other religion, but even still, these sort of data suggest that actual involvement in more than one religion is extremely rare.

A final way of making my point is to look at the constituency we know well. Apparently 55 per cent of the sample ‘are involved in Christianity on one or more modalities’.²⁰ Consider what that could mean in the light of these two facts. First, with the exceptions only of the very unpopular Quakers and Unitarian-Universalists, every Christian denomination and sect either requires or very strongly recommends church attendance. The Catholic Church regards it as a sin to fail to attend mass weekly. The Reformed churches all require their adherents to gather together to be educated in the faith, to worship God, and to support each other in their ‘walk with the Lord’. Second, only 16 per cent of the Dutch regularly attended church in 2013.²¹ If these data are reliable, more than a third of those who Berghuijs regards as ‘involved with Christianity’ fail to meet the most basic requirement of all Christian bodies for ‘belonging’. Apply that ration to even the most optimistic estimates for MRB and we are dealing with a rare phenomenon.

In brief, the very generous way in which Berghuijs conceptualises MRB inflates the figures for those who would normally be described in those terms. I play blues music on my guitar, attend blues concerts, have a Robert Johnson poster on my wall, and read biographies of the great Delta bluesmen. This does not make me a poor black share-cropper from Mississippi.

¹⁷ Berghuijs, ‘Multiple Religious Belonging’, 24.

¹⁸ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹ Bolton Council, ‘People in Bolton’.

²⁰ Berghuijs, ‘Multiple Religious Belonging’, 24.

²¹ Anon, ‘Dutch church attendance in decline’.

4 The need to consider belief

Any focus on belonging is welcome because arguably social science approaches to religion have been overly ‘Protestant’ in concentrating too much on belief, as though being religious was largely a matter of entertaining certain propositions about the origins and nature of the world and about our current place in that world or in whatever world we may enter post-mortem. Yet belief is central to belonging in both directions. Unless we believe certain things we will have no wish to perform certain religious actions or to associate, identify or belong to any religious collectivity. Looked at the other way round, any enduring belonging to any religious collectivity will result in us believing things we would not believe were we not associated with that collectivity. There is patently a considerable difference between the ideological apparatus of a committed Calvinist, a committed Catholic or Communist. While there may be secondary reasons for association, we will not associate for long with some body defined by beliefs we find implausible. And unless that body succeeds in persuading those who associate with it of certain things they would not otherwise believe then that collectivity will not survive long.

I raise this because there is one good reason to be suspicious of the claim that MRB is at all common. Sherkat asserts that ‘there is a limit to the number of meaningful affiliations [and] individuals will devote more of their scarce time, energy, and resources to the group they feel most comfortable with – to the detriment of other attachments’. He then adds ‘there is also a limit to the compatibility of members’ conceptual schemas, or preferences, with voluntary organisations’ ideologies and commitments’.²² There are two principles involved here. The first we can think of simply as our *capacity* for beliefs. It may be relatively easy to learn the most superficial elements of any religious tradition. A reasonably bright person can readily master what is required to appear from a distance to be a meditating Buddhist or a churchgoing Christian: covert researchers so masquerade frequently. But any serious knowledge of two competing religions requires either long periods of immersion (such as one gets in childhood socialization) in both or a great deal of study. Then there is the matter of *compatibility*. Provided one takes religion seriously (and it is hard to imagine why someone who did not would bother to learn about even one) it is hard to see how one can simultaneously believe in a creator God who sent his only son to die as a sacrifice that redeemed our sins and in an endlessly self-recreating universe of suffering from which one escapes the necessity of rebirth by following certain ethical codes, practising yogic detachment, or praying to bodhisattvas. It might be possible for any one individual to sustain patently incompatible notions provided they remain privately held ideas but any articulations of them or any attempt to turn them into action is likely to invite others to point out the incompatibilities and to ask for clarification.

5 Has diversity ceased to be de-legitimizing?

The evidential basis for the argument made by Peter Berger (before he famously changed his mind) that diversity weakens religion is the obvious fact that most people believe what they believe because they were born into a society that held those beliefs. Like language, religion is generally acquired through the family and reinforced through interaction with like-minded believers. It is bolstered by social institutions such as education and by a general presence in the culture. Religion is most persuasive when it is taken-for-granted.

Knowing of alternatives need not threaten one’s faith if those alternatives are carried by minority populations that can be stigmatised and historically most societies have responded to diversity by murdering, expelling, forcibly converting or isolating the deviants in a ghetto. But in modern societies, with an essentially egalitarian view, religious conformity can no longer be preserved or re-imposed by such methods. When it is people like you that differ, such differences have to be taken seriously and a minority of stubborn zealots apart, most people find they have positive social relationships with people of different religions. This in turn forces people to change what they claim for their religion. It becomes

²² Sherkat, ‘Preference structures and normative constraints’.

harder to believe that one's own faith is uniquely correct or has a monopoly of virtue. There is good statistical evidence for this effect. Over the twentieth century, the children of parents of the same faith in the UK had a 1 in 2 chance of remaining in that faith. Thus two Anglicans or two Methodists had to have two children to ensure that one continued in their faith. But the odds on children of religiously-mixed marriages (even if both parents were Christian; for example a Catholic and an Anglican) continuing in the faith were only 1 in 4. That is, they were halved.²³

Diversity also has crucial social-structural effects. In a context where it is assumed that all people are in some sense much-of-a-muchness, it becomes ever more difficult to justify the state supporting only one of a variety of religions. The shift towards tolerance follows different routes in different polities. In America, the drafters of the constitution dealt with the fact that, while most of the colonies had tax-payer funded churches, they were not the same church, by making the neutrality of the state a constitutional principle. In Britain, the state responded to increasing dissent from the notionally 'state' Church of England and Church of Scotland by reducing, gradually and in a piece-meal fashion, first the penalties on dissent and then the privileges of establishment. The serious disabilities were removed in the early eighteenth century. In 1829 the prohibition on Catholics voting and holding most public offices was removed. In 1872 dissenters were permitted to graduate from Oxford and Cambridge universities. As the religious culture grew more diverse, other important social institutions gradually scaled back, and then ended, their support for any particular religion. Religious education in UK state schools, for example, used to be the promotion of Anglican Christianity in England and Presbyterianism in Scotland. Now it is neutral education *about* religion. The neutrality of the state and other important social institutions removes a great deal of religion's 'ambient' reinforcement and gives a powerful signal that there is nothing wrong with not having any religion.

In brief, in both its social psychological and social structural effects, increasing diversity weakens religion. The consequence for the demand for religion can be very clearly seen in comparisons between places and comparisons over time. The most religious societies in the West are the most religiously homogenous: Poland, Ireland and Greece. Narrower comparisons point to the same conclusion. The three Baltic states share similar political histories and have much else in common but they differ in degree of religiosity and it is Lithuania – the least religiously diverse that remained the most religious.²⁴ A comparison of three Scottish islands – Lewis in the Western Isles and the northern island groups of Orkney and Shetland – that were similar in everything except degree of religious diversity comes to the same conclusion: Lewis, the one with the least diversity remained the most religious.²⁵ It is also the case that almost every Western society has become more religiously diverse since 1900 and they have become less religious. However, if MRB is at all common, then the proposition that diversity weakens religious sentiment is rebutted. Hence much hangs on the evidential support for the phenomenon.

So that the discussion can be kept within manageable limits, I confine my comments to the West. MRB is not unusual in the East (though I will return to the propriety of the term 'belonging'). Many Japanese people, for example, will make offerings at Shinto, Daoist and Buddhist shrines without feeling the need either to examine the differences between these faiths or to reconcile them. This is not to say that Buddhism, for example, is never exclusivist and intolerant. When it becomes attached to an ethnic or national identity it can be every bit as hostile to alternatives as any of the Abrahamic faiths: witness Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka leading attacks on Tamils. Likewise Hinduism in the form of Hindu nationalism. But at least in theory the faiths with a creator God and a single point of revelation are more likely to be exclusivist than those lacking such features.

The earlier remark that Berghuijs's Christians also belong to Buddhism might just be churchgoers who have also attended a mediation group was not flippant. Following Berger's frequently made point that religious people accommodate to secularization by 'compartmentalising' their beliefs, I would like to suggest one way round the problem of competing belief systems that explains why Buddhism features

²³ Voas, 'Intermarriage and the demography of secularization'.

²⁴ Bruce, 'The supply-side model of religion: the Nordic and Baltic states'.

²⁵ Bruce, 'Reconciling secularization and supply-side: three Scottish islands'.

in Berghuijs's combinations with Christianity far more than any other religion. One can reconcile one's Christian faith with some elements of Buddhism by regarding Christianity as a salvation religion and 'secularising' Buddhism into a system of ethics or a psychological system. That form of secularization is now itself encouraged by Buddhists who teach 'Mindfulness' as a secular psychotherapy.²⁶ So you remain a Christian but become a vegan and meditate.

6 MRB in evolutionary context

The key to MRB then is a novel attitude to our traditional faiths. We have to radically re-write those faiths so they are no longer exclusive and so that their apparently incompatible elements are reconciled by being 'metaphoricised' (if that neologism will be permitted). As extreme liberals do with Christianity, objective conditions and locations (evil, original sin, Christ's divinity, heaven and hell) have to be re-interpreted as subjective states: the Presbyterian pastor Norman Vincent Peale's *Power of Positive Thinking* is a good example of such psychologising. Such reinterpretation can only become at all popular in a context where the organizations historically tasked with preserving the Christian faith are irredeemably weakened by loss of members, social power, or both.

This facet of secularization is often misunderstood. Secularization is accompanied by a proliferation (not a decline) in the number and variety of religions on offer. Precisely because the once-hegemonic churches by then lacked the power to suppress competition, the late 1960s saw the flowering in the West of new religious movements, many of them inspired by eastern religious themes.²⁷ The key evidence for testing secularization is not the range of religions on offer but the total number of people interested in them. The 2001 census in Scotland showed only 47 Hare Krishnas, 39 Moonies, and 188 Scientologists; they could all have fitted on two buses.²⁸ And the only serious attempt to gauge the size of what Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead called 'the holistic spirituality milieu' concluded that less than 1 per cent of the population of a typical English town was engaged in possible New Age activities for spiritual reasons in a typical week.²⁹

Religious people might regard MRB as a counter to secularization but the social scientist should see it instead as an *expression* of secularization. It is such in three senses. First, that it exists at all shows the weakness of our once-hegemonic religious organizations; like the ecumenical movement, it is not something that was permitted by the Abrahamic faiths when they were powerful enough to resist such radical re-interpretation of their core tenets. Second, its rejection of institutional authority and its preference for the individual's right to decide what he or she will believe, is a clear instance of the general rise in consumerist orientation that is the death of the historic faiths. Third, the numbers interested in constructing their own faith packages from degrees of involvement in a variety of faiths is tiny. Secularization permits us MRB; it also ensures that few of us will take up the opportunity.

7 Conclusion

As deployed by Berghuijs, MRB will not serve the social scientist studying religion well. As I have argued, 'belonging' suggests far too strong a bond for what is usually being described. The obvious solution is to sub-divide the phenomena by degrees of interest. Jeanine Diller's eight orientations offers one way of doing this.³⁰ The following is rough sketch and can doubtless be improved by others but it gives a clear impression of what I am proposing.

²⁶ Bruce, *Secular Beats Spiritual*.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Bruce, *Scottish Gods*, XX.

²⁹ Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*.

³⁰ Diller, 'Multiple religious orientations'.

Multiple Religious Belonging

MRB should be confined to being an observant ‘member’ of more than one religion (religion here meaning such high level abstractions as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism etc). Given that all of these faiths make exclusive claims (at best permitting one or more of the others as minor tributaries that feed in to the best possible religion), we should expect this condition to be remarkably rare. It will certainly not be endorsed by the majority of officials of any of these faiths.

Universalistic Re-interpretation of Multiple Religions

The above may be conducted on the basis of simply ignoring the incompatibilities of the teachings of the religions to which the individual claims belonging. Or it may be justified by universalism. We are all God’s children and all religions are fundamentally the same. One can find this both articulated by intellectuals who devise a universalistic ‘meta-religion’ (such as Theosophy) and expressed by people who know nothing about any religion. The latter vastly outnumber the former but, before the supporters of MRB get excited, it must be said that such remarks as ‘I don’t know why they are fighting all the time. All religions are really the same’ are usually uttered as throwaway remarks by people who not only know nothing about religion but also have no interest in remedying that ignorance.

Multiple Religious Association

Migration and secularization have combined to make inter-faith marriages more common and thus created the increased likelihood of spousal and parental obligations causing the occasion taking part in activities predicated on more than one religion. We can imagine that a very liberal Christian who marries an observant Jew may sometimes attend synagogue in the company of his or her partner and assist in raising the children as Jews.

Multiple Religious Interest

It is possible to maintain an informed interest in more than one religion: for example, the Christian who knows and sympathises with the main tenets of Buddhism or the Muslim who knows the principle Christian teachings and periodically reads the Bible or other Christian texts. This ‘interest’ should be more than just having a Buddha statue on the mantelpiece and a string of Tibetan prayer flags.

Ancillary Religious Respect

We need a term to describe committed adherents of one religion finding something to respect in a second religion. That cathedral official who thought it a good idea to introduce some Koranic verses in a Christian service is an example.

Secular Respect for all Religions

The above should not be confused with the far more common phenomenon of secular people trying to treat a wide variety of religions with equal respect. Many examples can be found in the behaviour of politicians in religiously pluralistic societies who feel obliged to show some respect for the faiths of all their constituents. British MPs will routinely attend the opening of new churches, mosques, synagogues,

temples and gurdwaras in their constituencies. For the duration of some ceremony, they deport themselves appropriately – taking off shoes or putting on hats – and they make polite remarks about the benefits of this or that religion.

In summary, I am suggesting we need to be extremely circumspect in employment of the notion of multiple religious belonging. Taken at face value, it is so rare that, beyond serving as evidence of the change in attitude to religion inherent in secularization, it need not trouble the social scientist.

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