Multiple Religious Belonging

Editorial

André van der Braak*, Manuela Kalsky

Introduction to the Topical Issue "Multiple Religious Belonging"

https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0051

The topic of multiple religious belonging has recently received much interest, both in theological and social scientific circles. Also from a lived religion perspective, it is undeniable that more and more people construct their sense of religious belonging by combining elements from various religious traditions. This phenomenon ranges from 'hard' multiple religious belonging, where two or more traditions are self-consciously and wholeheartedly embraced, to 'soft' multiple religious belonging where beliefs, values and practices from various traditions are combined without any particular tradition being completely embraced, or perhaps even without an awareness of the traditional origins of those beliefs, values and practices. In this last example, speaking about 'religious belonging' is problematic. At the other end of the scale, there are people that claim to embrace all religious traditions, rather than multiple individual religious traditions.

Important publications within theology on multiple religious belonging are Catherine Cornille's edited volume *Many Mansions* (2002), Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Reinhold Bernhardt's edited volume *Multiple Religiöse Identität* (2007), and the World Council of Churches-publication *Many Yet One* (2016). More empirically-oriented research on multiple religious belonging can be found in Meredith McGuire's publication *Lived Religion* (2008). Multiple religious belonging is a contested phenomenon, not only empirically (how widespread is this practice really?), but also hermeneutically (what does it mean when we speak about 'belonging' and 'religious belonging'?). Therefore, it is important to employ both empirical and hermeneutical approaches to the study of multiple religious belonging, as is the case in the research project that the editors of this topical issue, André van der Braak and Manuela Kalsky, are heading up at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.[1]

Also in this topical issue, issues arising from both hermeneutical and empirical perspectives regarding multiple belonging will be discussed. The first group of articles addresses the hermeneutical issues. Paul Hedges critically observes how the discussion around multiple religious belonging in the West often relies upon a problematic Protestant definition of 'religion' which can be expressed as "the World Religions Paradigm": religious traditions are seen as entities with fixed borders, and belonging to each is seen as exclusive. From a Chinese context, however, participation in different religious traditions relies upon a very different construction of multiple religious belonging that he terms 'strategic religious participation' in a 'shared religious landscape'.

Daan Oostveen further elaborates the hermeneutical challenges that are involved in approaching multiple religious belonging from a theology of religions point of view. He argues that, next to a

1 This five-year project (2013-2018), "Multiple religious belonging: hermeneutical and empirical explorations of hybrid religiosity," has been supported by a grant from NWO, the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research. See https://www.nwo.nl/onderzoek-en-resultaten/onderzoeksprojecten/i/99/10499.html (accessed 6 November 2017).

***Corresponding author: André van der Braak,** Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands; E-mail: a.vander.braak@vu.nl
Manuela Kalsky, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands; E-mail: manuela.kalsky@gmail.com

Open Access. © 2017 André van der Braak, Manuela Kalsky, published by De Gruyter Open. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 License.

'hermeneutics of religions' (roughly corresponding to Hedges' World Religions Paradigm), a 'hermeneutics of religiosity' can also be found in many contemporary feminist and postcolonialist theologians, that does not focus on bounded religious traditions but on hybrid expressions of religiosity.

Ursula Baatz further explores the metaphors that are involved in the notion of 'religious belonging.' She distinguishes between territory (religious belonging as a variation on ethnic belonging or citizenship), relationship (religious belonging as a marriage or family relationship) and path (religious belonging as following a way). She argues that the latter metaphor is especially useful to understand Asian notions of religious belonging.

Apart from the hermeneutic viability of multiple religious belonging, its theological feasibility is also a point of contention in many discussions. In his contribution to this topical issue, Jonathan Weidenbaum offers critical reflections on the possibility of multiple religious belonging drawing upon the insights of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas.

After such hermeneutical and theological approaches, the next articles focus on the lived religion of multiple religious belonging. First, Joantine Berghuijs presents the results of her empirical exploration of multiple religious belonging in The Netherlands. She stresses that the empirical approach to multiple religious belonging is strongly intertwined with the hermeneutical approach. As sociologist Steve Bruce points out in his critical evaluation of the article of Berghuijs, measuring multiple religious belonging involves many hermeneutical decisions as to how to define 'religious belonging.'

Linda Mercadante also combines empirical and hermeneutical approaches in her article. She describes a case study of a specific group, 'The dances of universal peace,' and discusses the difficulty of applying labels such as 'multiple religious belonging' and 'spiritual but not religious.' Rory McEntee problematizes the notion of 'multiple religious belonging,' and advocates using 'interspiritual religious belonging' to describe the often-encountered phenomenon of those who claim to embrace multiple religious traditions while at the same time claiming to belong to none of them. Finally, Manuela Kalsky describes the emergence of a new type of 'flexible believers' in The Netherlands who no longer feel the need to consciously embrace religious traditions. She argues for a new transreligious approach to religious belonging.

As several contributors note, how one understands 'religion' is crucial for one's estimation of the feasibility of multiple religious belonging. Defining 'religious belonging' involves all kinds of hermeneutical decisions as to how to define 'religion' in the first place. Rhiannon Grant and André van der Braak both refer to George Lindbeck's three approaches to religion: cognitive-propositional, experience-expressive and cultural-linguistic. Rhiannon Grant uses Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach to religion, and proposes a Wittgensteinian concept of a religion-game in order to interpret multiple religious belonging in a way that fits with the turn towards lived religion. André van der Braak surveys the possibilities for Zen-Christian dual belonging. He argues that within the cultural-linguistic approach to religion, apophatic elements in both Zen and Christianity may be most conducive to a theological justification of dual belonging.

Jeremy Hustwit proposes in his contribution not to think of multiple religious belonging as an expression of choice, but just the opposite. He explains multiple religious belonging as the ontological condition of two or more religious traditions constituting the self, so that the self's possibilities are constrained by those traditions. He uses the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna to show that multiple religious belonging is the ontological condition of all human beings, and that it is monolithic belonging that requires significant mental gymnastics. Finally, Peter Feldmeier inquires into the possibility of dual belonging for Christians, using the Roman Catholic position as a test case. He argues for a modestly faithful form of Catholic theology that allows for some forms of multiple religious belonging, but also shows how fraught full-fledged multiple identities are.

The articles in this topical issue show that the discussion on multiple religious belonging is very much alive in theological, philosophical, sociological, and religious studies circles. It is our expectation that this discussion will continue and spread over the next years, and it is our hope that the contributions presented here will advance and deepen the discourse.

References

Cornille, Catherine, ed. *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock publishers, 2002.

McGuire, Meredith B. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Rajkumar, Peniel Jesudason Rufus, and Joseph Prabhakar Dayam, eds. *Many Yet One? Multiple Religious Belonging*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2016.

Schmidt-Leukel, Perry, and Reinhold Bernhardt, eds. *Multiple Religiöse Identität: Aus verschiedenen religiösen Traditionen schöpfen*. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2008.