15 Strategic religious participation in a shared religious landscape

A model for Westerners?

Paul Hedges

Introduction

Can one person participate in the rituals and beliefs of more than a single religion? For most modern Westerners, this seems almost like a non-question. Of course not! You are either Buddhist, Christian, Sikh, or Muslim. You cannot, in any coherent sense, do the rituals of a certain tradition one day and then engage in the rites of another the next day. However, this common-sense Western norm has not been the standard global pattern through most of history. People have, and still do, participate in, belong to, and identify beyond the boundaries of a single religious tradition – and in many places this is perfectly normal and acceptable.

Moreover, in the West today, many people are engaging in what is often termed multiple (or dual) religious belonging (or identity). However, this is generally seen – by scholars, religious professionals, and many of the public – as some form of spiritual dilettantism or illegitimate syncretism. It is frequently frowned on or dismissed as lacking seriousness or credibility. The argument of this chapter is that we should not so readily dismiss these practices and that we may simply be looking at a different way of doing religion. To this end, we will explore the traditional way in which such boundary crossing between religions has occurred in the Chinese context (and beyond), which I have elsewhere described as strategic religious participation (SRP) in a shared religious landscape (SRL). My argument is not to suggest that Westerners should start copying East Asian patterns of religiosity. Rather, it is to suggest that patterns of religiosity may now be occurring within Western contexts. We are simply doing religion differently. As such, rather than dismissing this as illegitimate, some form of spiritual pick’n’mix, or superficial dabbling it is actually a way of doing religion that is credible, serious, and profound. If an individual, family, or community can use one tradition for marriage, another for death, a third for meditation, and so on, why should we not see this as normal?¹ It is certainly increasingly common and arguably has implications not just for the people doing it but also for scholars of religion studying the phenomenon and for Christian (and other) theologians and religious professionals who are thinking about what

religious identity, belonging, and participation mean. Does it even have implications for thinking about a transreligious, or interreligious, theology?

In this chapter, I will briefly address the way that Western scholars have typically thought about multiple religious belonging and the paradigm for thinking religion that informs this. I will then describe in general terms the East Asian context of SRP in an SRL.² I will then briefly address some ways in which this phenomenon could describe some contemporary Western trends found in America, Europe, and elsewhere concerning the way that people are engaging with multiple religious traditions. Finally, I will address at more length some potential consequences from this about how we may come to think about theological issues in light of this.

The West: the world religions paradigm and strong religious borders

Why do we assume that people cannot belong to more than one religion at any one time? Nor participate in the rites and rituals of different traditions? Such activity is often spoken of as a transgression of “natural” boundaries, or even compared to some form of spiritual adultery.³ It is seen as something that goes against what religion is or truly should be. All these attitudes come from a context in which what are often termed the Abrahamic monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) have been predominant. Especially in certain forms, including the Protestant strands that have dominated North Western Europe and North America for the last couple of centuries, singular and exclusive identity and belonging are affirmed. Strict creedal confessions of belief demarcate each religion, even each denomination or sect within each religion, such that seeking to belong to more than one seems intellectually incoherent. It also violates the strict teachings and representations of these religions. Given several centuries of Western colonialism, and over the last couple of centuries a military and economic dominance that has ensured cultural and intellectual global hegemony, this has become the predominant model. Without entering into the intricacies, the models of what religion is within Western Protestant religious imaginaries have been taken by scholars and others as defining and definitive of the very essence of religion. It has shaped what has come to be called the world religions paradigm (WRP).

Within the WRP, each religion is imagined to exist as a clearly demarcated monolith. It has distinctive and unique beliefs, as well as its own defining rituals and practices. It claims sole allegiance of its members, who must adhere strictly to the confessions set out in the foundational books, which state what it says. If you have done any courses in religion, you may well have been taught according to this kind of “world religions” model, which presents each religion in turn by a set of common criteria: beliefs, scriptures, priests, history, rituals, etc. Each religion becomes a distinct and bounded entity of belonging and belief. However, although this – to some extent – maps out

some dominant trends within the Abrahamic traditions, it is far from normative or representative of the world's wider religious landscape.

In short, the way in which one part of the world does religion has become a pattern and map to presume to say how all religion works, or should work. It is a deeply colonial, or orientalist, set of presuppositions, which has taken a Western model and applied it globally. We shall see, though, that this model is far from normative in the East Asian context, where we will focus on China but also look broadly.

The East: strategic religious participation in a shared religious landscape

If you wandered into a traditional Chinese temple across much of Asia, you may be surprised that inside you would find statues of such figures as the Buddha, the bodhisattva Guanyin, Confucius, figures from Chinese folk tradition such as Sun Wu Kong (the Monkey King), and Daoist deities, including perhaps the popular Eight Immortals, or maybe the Jade Emperor. How to reconcile that one temple (even if nominally Buddhist or Daoist) may contain figures from seemingly four different “religions” (Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Chinese folk religion)?

Our question perhaps only seems strange because of where we are viewing it from. In the East Asian Sinitic world (i.e., primarily China but also those territories affected by Chinese cultural mores), what we may term SRP in a SRL has been the norm. Let us break this down into its two component parts to discuss it. First, SRP. This denotes that doing “religion” in East Asia has not primarily been about belonging to a particular tradition, nor adherence to a set of doctrines and beliefs (creedal statements) that define what it means to be a member of one religion as opposed to any others. Rather, one will make use of religious traditions, ritual experts, and ways of doing religion as are useful and appropriate. For instance, Buddhists are known for doing funerals and so may be called upon for such services, Tianshi Dao (Heavenly Master Daoist tradition) Masters were often considered the best exorcists and so may be sought out for this, and any passing itinerant monk may be asked to do services at the local village temple as and when the need arises. Meanwhile, in some rituals, Daoists, Buddhists, and local ritual (folk religion) priests may all have a role in some contexts. Religion is therefore not about believing and belonging to a single tradition. Rather, one will strategically employ the services of whichever tradition(s) and its (their) ritual experts that are available, suitable, or customarily required for certain acts. This is what is meant by SRP. We should also note that in imperial China, the three dominant traditions (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism) were often seen as complementary, in what was termed the *sanjiao* (three traditions) teaching. This was variously understood by different figures at different times, but as one way of conceiving it: Buddhism dealt with our eternal concerns and certain rituals; Confucianism deals with our outer relationship

with family and society; and Daoism concerns our personal bodily/spiritual cultivation.

SRL meanwhile signifies that despite considering several different traditions, a fairly common cosmological system underlies it all. This, in the Chinese context, may be concerned with the fact that everything is composed of *qi* (often translated as breath, but signifying also psycho-spiritual matter: it is the stuff that everything is made of), a belief in the interaction of yin and yang and the so-called five agents (or sometimes five elements), and often reincarnation. These were taken, to a large degree (even if sometimes contested), as a common ground, such that the different doctrinal teachings of the varying traditions could be seen as not significant differences compared to what was held in common. As such, mixing traditions or taking bits from each was not typically seen as violating core doctrinal systems or some illicit form of mixing.

It may be objected, as has been argued by some, that this context of SRP in a SRL may have been a common grassroots viewpoint but was rejected by elites, who demanded strict allegiance to only one tradition and fiercely rejected the others. However, this does not do justice to the context. First, at the most elite level – in some senses – of imperial decrees, the *sanjiao* teaching was often pronounced and officially taught. Second, although strong disputes and even vehement rejection of the other traditions was heard at times, it is not the whole story. Confucianism, when it adopted meditational teachings (in the Neo-Confucian tradition) borrowed directly from Daoism and Buddhism, even while often derogatorily condemning those traditions (as it, in some ways, became more like them). Confucian scholars would be known in retirement to go live in Buddhist or Daoist temples, without any sense that they stopped being a Confucian. Third, in training, Daoist masters would often send their disciples to Buddhist monks (and vice versa), believing they had particular skills they could learn. All of this is only possible because of a sense that all lived within a SRL. It even shows elite practice and acceptance of SRP. Notably, we could expand examples, and these are only mentioned here as indicative.

Eastern ways in Western landscapes: crossing boundaries and multiple belonging

Arguably, in the contemporary Western context, we are seeing people engaging in what looks like SRP in a SRL. In the West, because of the WRP, such crossing between traditions has traditionally been viewed as at least difficult, if not deeply problematic, and even illegitimate. Certainly, much of the literature suggests this. Nevertheless, particularly among millennials the sense that what is often termed multiple religious belonging (MRB) is neither problematic nor some form of dangerous syncretism. It is considered perfectly fine to learn or borrow, rituals/techniques from such places as Hindu yoga, Buddhist meditation, Christian and Jewish rituals, Native

American traditions, etc. Scholarship in the study of religion, not to mention Christian theologians, have often condemned this. However, the Chinese and East Asian context suggests that we should not be so troubled. Although some ways of doing or thinking about religion make this seem illegitimate, other ways of doing or thinking about religion make it seem natural and expected. The issue is that engaging in MRB is often misunderstood, so the question becomes: How this can be changed in our ways of conceiving the religious field?

Interreligious streams: transgressions and interventions in the religious fields

What implications does this have for the way that we do theology today and think about spirituality and religious performance? I would argue that for those exploring what we may term transreligious or interreligious theologies, the implications are immense. First, as should be clear, it to some extent tears up the rule book. Scholars have argued, for many years, that doing MRB or engaging in rituals across traditions is not simply theologically illegitimate (which, arguably, in some traditions it may be) but that it is also doing “religion” wrong. These, we should realize, are two entirely separate issues. What regulations cover what religious leaders say is legitimate within their tradition is not coterminous with what religion is or what it should look like. Indeed, here we should note that the very term and concept of “religion” itself is one that has a particular Western and colonial backdrop that has shaped how we envisage it (and, for some, is even why we envisage such a thing exists);⁴ as such, we speak of “religion” here not as a “thing” but as a social reality.⁵ This is an important caveat, because it means that we cannot even speak of there being a right or wrong way of understanding “religion” or regulating the way we see it. Those parts of society that we see as religious vary due to various social and cultural factors that have shaped them.

Second, and following from our first point, we can see the regulation of whether religious worldviews permit some form of MRB or SRP in a SRL as socially and culturally determined. They are not set in stone. As such, the parameters that have made the Abrahamic traditions seem less liable to MRB or SRP in a SRL are not prescriptive. Indeed, knowing that worlds of religious understanding give different perspectives on this also suggests that these different ways are not getting it wrong, but have equal validity. It can thus lead to a rethinking of how we think about the “natural” barriers between religions, and even whether we should see them as such. Further, the notion of the complementary nature of traditions or what disagreements may mean can also be seen through different lenses.

Third, doing what we may term a transreligious or an interreligious theological task no longer becomes a perilous venture bordering, at best, on illicit syncretism. Rather, such ventures may be seen as a perfectly legitimate

employment of resources in a SRL. Much of the literature not just on MRB,⁶ but also on inter-riting (the sharing of rituals across religious boundaries; Moyaert and Geldhof (2015)), and on interreligious encounters and theologies in general,⁷ has tended to come from Western contexts and is reflective of the WRP as normative. However, for those who come from a context where SRP in a SRL is normative, this may seem irrelevant. Whether in the East Asian context⁸ or in today's Western context, doing transreligious or interreligious theology is not a marginal or dangerous pursuit, but rather arguably the new norm. We are still certainly a long way from this, certainly in ecclesial contexts or academic theology and understanding; nevertheless, the situation on the ground may be more fluid and changing faster. As is often the case, theology may need to play catch-up with the wider world.

Notes

- 1 A recent exploration of such patterns in the US context is found in Bidwell (2018).
- 2 The first two parts of this chapter will draw heavily from my paper, Hedges (2017). Readers are encouraged to go there for references and further resources on the issues discussed.
- 3 See Knitter (2009).
- 4 On such debates see King and Hedges (2014, 1–30).
- 5 See Schilbrack (2017, 161–178). This is explored further in Hedges (Forthcoming, chapter 1).
- 6 See e.g. Cornille (2002, 1–6) and Berthrong (2000).
- 7 See Hedges and Race (2008) and Harris, Hedges, and Hettiararchi (2016) as two overviews on the typical theology of religions literature.
- 8 However, it has been noted that although this has reflected historical practices and understandings influenced by Western norms and the hegemonic imposition of the WRP standard, we are seeing a change in understanding in East Asia and elsewhere to a context where singular belonging and identity in religion is being enforced.

References

- Berthrong, John. 2000. *The Divine Deli: Religious Identity in the North American Cultural Mosaic*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Bidwell, Duane. 2018. *When One Religion Isn't Enough: The Lives of Spiritually Fluid People*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. doi:10.1353/scs.2019.0018
- Cornille, Catherine. 2002. "Introduction: The Dynamics of Multiple Belonging." In *Many Mansions? Multiple Belonging and Christian Identity*, edited by Catherine Cornille, 1–6. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- Harris, Elizabeth, Paul Hedges, and Shantikumar Hettiararchi, eds. 2016. *Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions: Retrospective and Future Prospects*. Leiden: Brill.
- Hedges, Paul, and Allan Race, eds. 2008. *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*. London: SCM Press.
- Hedges, Paul. 2017. "Multiple Religious Belonging After Religion: Theorising Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape as a Chinese Model." *Open Theology* 3 (1), 48–72. doi:10.1515/opth-2017-0005

- Hedges, Paul. Forthcoming. *Understanding Religion: Method and Theory for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies*, Chapter 1. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- King, Anna, and Paul Hedges. 2014. "What Is Religion? Or What Is It We're Talking About?." In *Controversies in Contemporary Religion*, edited by Paul Hedges. Vol. I, 1–30. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Knitter, Paul. 2009. *Without the Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*. Oxford: Oneworld.
- Moyaert, Marianne, and Joris Geldhof, eds. 2015. *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. doi:10.1558/firn.32269
- Schilbrack, Kevin. 2017. "A Realist Social Ontology of Religion." *Religion* 47 (2): 161–178. doi:10.1080/0048721x.2016.1203834