

PROGRAM GROUPS

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

- Topic: Multiple Religious Belonging and Contextual Theology
Convener: Catherine Cornille, Boston College
Presenters: Maria Clara Bingemer, Pontifical University of Rio, Brazil
John Borelli, Georgetown University

As the issue of religious identity is becoming increasingly a matter of free choice and multiple religious options, the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging or hyphenated religious identities has become an important challenge for Christian theology. The volume *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (2002) offers a discussion of this phenomenon, mainly within the context of Western Christianity. While multiple religious belonging is relatively new in the Western world, it has a long history and tradition in many, if not most other parts of the world. In East Asia, religious identity has traditionally been constituted by a mixture of Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist or Shinto, Buddhist and Confucian elements. As a minority religion, Christianity has often had to concede to being one of many religions with which individuals claimed affiliation. And in countries where Christianity has become a majority religion, it has often had to coexist with the traditional religions which already shaped people's religious and cultural identities. In the West, multiple religious belonging has until recently manifested itself mainly in the form of mixed marriages between different Christian denominations.

In the introductory presentation, Catherine Cornille discussed the meaning and different types of multiple religious belonging. She pointed out that it does not apply to the New Age combination of beliefs and practices from different religious traditions, which is characterized by a complete absence of religious belonging or commitment. Multiple religious belonging only applies to individuals who find themselves genuinely immersed and deeply committed to more than one religious tradition. This phenomenon may occur in the process of dialogue between religions. Whereas individuals engaged in dialogue generally understand and evaluate the truth of the other tradition on the basis of criteria derived from one's own religious tradition, some individuals may come to identify with the other tradition to such extent that it also acquires a certain normativity over one's own original religion. Here one may speak of genuine multiple religious belonging. For some, multiple religious belonging may also take the form of belonging to the hermeneutical framework of one tradition and the symbolic framework of another. Whether this really constitutes multiple reli-

gious belonging depends on the question of the possibility of adopting new hermeneutical frameworks, derived from different religious traditions, to reinterpret Christian faith.

Maria Clara Bingemer addressed the question of multiple religious belonging from the South American, and more particularly the Brazilian context, where the issue is framed mainly in terms of a return to one's ancient religious and cultural roots. A good number of Brazilian Christians are rediscovering the Afro-Brazilian tradition of Candomblé and attempting to achieve a synthesis between the beliefs and practices of the two traditions. For most practitioners of both religions, the emphasis is predominantly on practical and ritual efficacy, rather than on theological consistency. Prominent leaders belonging to the Afro-Brazilian religion may consider themselves to be Christian, while Christian priests and monks may immerse themselves deeply in the traditions of their ancestors. While some may move back and forth between the two traditions without much personal or spiritual struggle, for many it is a deeply confronting and very genuine search for spiritual and cultural wholeness and identity. Some of the leaders in the two traditions have also become sources of inspiration for others to experiment with the possibilities for multiple religious belonging.

While the issue of double or multiple religious belonging between different religious traditions is relatively new in the West, that of multiple belonging to different Christian confessions has been a challenge for different Christian denominations for centuries. This challenge has arisen from intermarriage between Christians belonging to different confessions, leading to both ritual and spiritual tensions. In the course of history, different Churches have developed various regulations and directives for dealing with particular forms of personal religious cohabitation and reconciliation between different Christian denominations. Within the larger framework of Christianity, multiple religious belonging may be theologically grounded in the notion that we belong in the first place to Christ and to God in one another. This focus on the essence of Christian belonging may serve as a model for the more complex challenges of multiple belonging between radically different religious traditions.

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