

COMPLEX RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Karla Suomala

The beginning of dialogue...

In the *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, Pi, the main character, tells the story of his extraordinary, if surreal, adventures on a lifeboat with a crew of animals. Prior to that epic journey, Pi describes his early and enduring interest in religion. By age 16, he claims Christian, Muslim, and Hindu religious identities. "The sense of community that a common faith brings to people spelled trouble for me," says Pi as he recalls an encounter between his parents, his priest, his imam, and his pandit.¹

"What is your son doing going to temple?" asked the priest.

"Your son was seen in church crossing himself," said the imam.

"Your son has gone Muslim," said the pandit."²

Each claiming him, the Hindu, Christian, and Muslim leaders begin to fight with each other over Pi's affiliation and then over the superiority of their respective traditions.

"That was my introduction to interfaith dialogue," says Pi.³

The end of dialogue...

In the "real" world, Pi's declaration of his Hindu-Christian-Muslim identity would also signal the end to his participation in interfaith dialogue. While people from different religious traditions engage with each other in a variety of ways, the term interfaith dialogue (or inter-religious dialogue) generally suggests a very specific type of engagement. As a twentieth

century development primarily in the West, interfaith dialogue involves more structured and formal conversations between representatives (usually religious scholars, clergy, and institutional officials) from at least two clearly defined religious traditions with the primary objective of mutual understanding rather than conversion. Within this model, Pi—who identifies himself with more than one religious tradition—would not likely be invited to the table. This wouldn’t be such an issue if Pi’s religious identity remained a fictional construct, with no correspondence to real people and living communities, but that is simply not the case.

A quick glance at the population in the United States demonstrates that having a complex religious identity—an identity in which one adheres to, practices, believes in, or belongs to more than one religious tradition through inheritance and/or choice—is on the rise.⁴ In the last century, for example, “the number of interfaith marriages rose in every decade, reaching highs in the 30 to 33 percent range as the twentieth century closed.”⁵ Diana Butler Bass points out that the children from these marriages “do not choose to belong to multiple religious communities; they simply do so by virtue of their birth.”⁶

The rate of intermarriage for American Jews is even higher. Already in 2001, a striking 52 percent of Jews between the ages of 18–24 came from intermarried families.⁷ And many children of intermarriage say they “simply cannot turn their backs on the non-Jewish half of their identity. Their rabbis may say they are Jewish, but in their hearts they are also whatever grandma and grandpa are,” reports Leah Blankenship in *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*.

Rabbi Alan Flam, former director of Brown’s Hillel, thinks that this is a radically new question for the Jewish community. He notes that:

Students are talking less about theology and more about culture. They are saying, “Wait, I have a dual identity,” similar to students who may have one parent who is Asian and one who is black. They are saying, “I want to figure out a way to affirm both identities in my life.”⁸

On a broader scale, the number of Americans who have adopted practices associated with Hinduism or Buddhism, such as yoga and meditation, has skyrocketed. In a recent *New York Times* article, William Broad points out that “the number of Americans doing yoga has risen

from about 4 million in 2001 to what some estimate to be as many as 20 million in 2011.”⁹ Similarly, a 2007 National Institute of Health study indicated that over 20 million people in the United States had meditated in the previous 12 months.¹⁰ While most of these individuals would not necessarily identify themselves as Buddhists or Hindus, they have integrated practices originating in these traditions that make their religious identities more complex or nuanced.¹¹

In the face of such change, the field and practice of interfaith dialogue has taken only very tentative steps toward rethinking the future of such dialogue. For interfaith dialogue to have a meaningful role in the future, it must take Pi and those like him into account. If it does not, there won’t be anyone left at the table.

Interfaith dialogue and its colonial roots

Catholic theologians Peter Phan and Catherine Cornille are among the few scholars who have even begun to take complex religious identity into consideration in their discussions of interfaith dialogue. They, however, both express doubt as to whether individuals identifying in religiously complex ways should even be included in dialogue. Phan, for example, says:

Indeed, interreligious dialogue...may militate against multiple religious belonging since as a matter of methodology it requires that participants in interfaith dialogue preserve their distinctive religious doctrines and practices, and that they show how these are not only similar to but different from those of other faiths.¹²

Cornille takes an even stronger position, stating that “All religions are based on particular beliefs and practices that at some level or another are mutually incompatible,” and as a consequence, “for most participants in dialogue, one religion in fact remains the primary object of religious identification.”¹³

Phan’s and Cornille’s positions reflect the general consensus in the world of interfaith dialogue. As someone who has been excluded from the dialogue table, interfaith blogger Susan Miller Katz points out, “Despite our lifelong immersion in interfaith reality, interfaith children [those who inherit at least two different traditions from their parents] have rarely been formally included in the ‘interfaith movement.’”¹⁴ She

goes on to suggest that interfaith children don't fit into the tried-and-true formula for interfaith discourse, a process that involves well-defined boundaries, distinct labels, and clear goals. Interfaith children, she quips, are perhaps threatening in that they seem to represent "the alarming consequence of interfaith dialogue gone wild, of tolerance turned into physical passion."¹⁵ Their very existence challenges the nature of the categories themselves.

The categories of religious identity and affiliation used to define dialogue participants are not as innocent as they might seem, though. According to sociologist of religion Robert Orsi, the terms we use to identify religions, as well as their adherents and the meanings that we attach to them, first appeared in the "early modern era in the West amid the ruins of the religious wars between Protestants and Catholics and just when Europeans were encountering the ancient religious cultures of Asia, Africa, and the Americas."¹⁶ The new discourses about religion and religions that emerged from this period, in which

the dilemmas, judgments, hatreds, and longings of modern Christian history were inevitably if unconsciously embedded...became one medium for construing the peoples dominated by European nations, at home (in factories, on slave plantations, in urban working class enclaves) and abroad.¹⁷

In other words, the religious categories that we use today, as well as the language we use to designate those categories, largely emerged during the colonial encounter as a way to preserve the status and power of white Christians and their institutions. The term syncretism, for example, reflects the profound discomfort that white Christians had with any type of blending or mixture of European Christianity and indigenous culture. Coined by Plutarch in the first century CE, the term syncretism did not take on negative connotations until the late seventeenth century in the wake of the Reformation. When Lutheran theologian Georg Calixtus used it to propose a unification of various Protestant Churches with each other with the ultimate goal of reunion with the Catholic Church, his ideas were rejected by both Lutherans and Catholics as a "heretical and inconsistent jumble of theologies."¹⁸ In the ensuing period of missionary expansion, syncretism came to denigrate "colonial local churches that had burst out of the sphere of mission control and begun to 'illegitimately'

indigenize Christianity instead of properly reproducing the European form of Christianity they had originally been offered.”¹⁹

Our conceptions of religious identity, both in academia and in the pew, are largely based on these older institutional models of identity and affiliation and reflect the same fears toward mixture and change as our colonial predecessors. Many religious leaders as well as theologians still talk about and study religion as if it were based upon a “unitary, organizationally defined, and relatively stable set of collective beliefs and practices” with clear definitional boundaries “that distinguish religious practices of one religious group from another’s, [and view] them as mutually exclusive.”²⁰ Within this model, religious affiliation has been understood as a sort of “master category that determines an entire set of norms for an individual member’s entire faith and practice—allowing some practices as ‘good’ or consistent with the organization’s religion and condemning others as ‘bad’ or even heretical.”²¹ This is still the case in the realm of interfaith dialogue. The result is that only those who identify as and are claimed by a single recognized religious tradition are invited to the table. Christian-Jews and Zen-Presbyterians need not apply.

New possibilities, new questions

Today, however, most sociologists would argue that religious identity, like other forms of identity, is a dynamic process through which a variety of “religious and cultural meanings are interpreted, reconstructed, and changed over time in light of new, ever-changing historical and social circumstances.”²² They employ terms such as hybrid which describes individuals formed by several interlocking religious histories and cultures, and who have learned to live with, and indeed speak from the “in-between” spaces of different religious cultures.²³ Like syncretism, the term hybrid was used pejoratively in the colonial period, but has been resurrected to emphasize the more positive aspects of mixture. In addition, scholars have more recently begun to use the term *bricolage* to designate individuals who choose to blend institutional and popular forms of religion or look to a variety of religious practices, beliefs, ethical systems, and traditions for inspiration. Both terms emphasize mixture and point to the fluid and multitextured nature of religious identity.²⁴

The potential for such identities is heightened in our time by a number of factors, including mass global migration patterns, which has made western societies far more diverse and the growing distinction between spirituality (understood as more experiential and internal) and religion (viewed as more institutional and communal). This divide between the individual and the communal marks what some scholars call a “privatizing” of religion; the locus of religious authority has shifted to the experience of the individual from a particular leader such as the pope or institution. These factors have contributed to an environment in which the Great Stories or Grand Meta-narratives (Truth with a capital “T”) are held suspect and certainty has been replaced by contingency and interpretation.²⁵ The result, at least on the individual level, is that religious identity in the West is more likely to be based on “an ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy—even contradictory—amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important.”²⁶

In addition to using the term syncretism (often negatively), theologians have also introduced a number of newer (less negative) terms to designate complex religious identity; the most common include dual/double religious belonging, multiple religious belonging, and hyphenated religious identity. These designations, however, tend to emphasize the discrete character of religious traditions and demonstrate discomfort with notions of religious mixture or blending.²⁷ When these terms are employed, they most frequently refer to scenarios in which two or more traditions coexist, without “subsuming one system into another” and where the systems may communicate with one another as separate entities.²⁸

Even while introducing these terms, many theologians are doubtful of the desirability of having such identities at all and even less certain about whether the ideal they point to is actually attainable. For Peter Phan, multiple religious belonging/hyphenated religious identity is more often than not:

a contemporary, postmodern form of syncretism in which a person looks upon various religions as a supermarket from which, like a consumer, one selects at one’s discretion and pleasure whatever myth and doctrine, ethical practice and ritual, and meditation and

healing technique that best suit the temperament and needs of one's body and mind, without regard to their truth values and mutual compatibilities.²⁹

He doesn't entirely close the door on complex religious identities, conceding that "such a spirituality must be respected as a possibly serious personal quest for meaning in a secular world and a challenging question to the continuing relevance and credibility of Christianity as a religion."³⁰ He even posits the possibility of such dual belonging but only when at least ten "assertions" (I would call them pre-conditions) including intensive study and reflection upon each of the traditions involved are met. Phan concludes with a final word of caution: "Multiple religious belonging is not for the fainthearted and the dilettante."³¹ Catherine Cornille goes even further to say that dual or multiple religious belonging is usually "incompatible with the very purpose and dynamics of religious belonging" and religion itself, both of which require "the complete surrender of one's own will and judgment to a truth and power that lies beyond or beneath one's own rational and personal judgment."³²

Even Paul Knitter, author of *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, who seemingly embraces the idea of dual or multiple religious identity, shares many of Phan's and Cornille's concerns about maintaining the coherence and integrity of individual religious traditions. In his recent book, Knitter describes his Buddhist-Christian identity as one of crossing over from one to the other and then crossing back again in such a way that mitigates a blending or mixing of the traditions and emphasizes their complementarity and mutually enriching qualities.³³ Although he uses the term "hybrid" in his conclusion, he uses it not as a term to denote mixture or the development of a new identity formed from two older ones, but rather as way to describe the encounter between two distinct religious traditions in the life and consciousness of one individual.

In their attempt to grasp the complexity of religious identity, the theological terms outlined above largely fail to communicate the very dynamic, fluid, thick, relational nature of religious identity.³⁴ While expressing some aspects of the complexity of religious identity—its multiple strands or discourses—these terms still seem to assume the existence of static traditions that are pure, unadulterated, and unmixed. In addition, the terms and their histories are inadequately understood, so

that they are often employed interchangeably in literature on the subject, leading one scholar to ask: “Is our vocabulary so impoverished because there is no such thing to be described, or because we have difficulty envisaging it?”³⁵

Dialogue anew

Where does all of this leave us? If we continue to conduct interfaith dialogue as if Pi and people like him didn’t exist or exclude him out of a sense of religious superiority, the whole dialogue process will lose integrity. It will be founded on a convenient fiction, one that obscures our fears of change and perpetuates erroneous ideas of the nature of religious identity that privilege the few. It is too easy, argues Diana Butler Bass, “to accuse these people [with complex religious identities] of sloppy thinking or spiritual silliness, or participating in a thoughtless mélange of post-modern goofiness,” when this is not necessarily (or even usually) the case.³⁶ Taking people with complex religious identities seriously and recognizing the contributions they can make to interfaith dialogue may be the more difficult, but definitely the more honest, and ultimately the most fruitful, course of action. Especially as those of us engaged in interfaith dialogue realize that “they” are probably “us.”

Susan Katz Miller made the case in a recent *Huffington Post* piece for the inclusion of people with complex religious identities in interfaith dialogue:

As the real world shrinks and the online world expands, we have growing opportunities to meet, to exchange ideas and to share religious perspectives. Interfaith children have intimate lifelong experience with finding and creating these connections. We see the common ground... We see the differences... We see how to create bridges of understanding. We are those bridges.³⁷

Katz Miller argues further that excluding interfaith children or anyone with a complex religious identity from interfaith dialogue not only limits the contributions such individuals might make, but it can also breed religious and social conflict. According to Amartya Sen, “The increasing tendency to overlook the many identities that any human being has and to try to classify individuals according to a single allegedly pre-eminent religious identity is an intellectual confusion that can animate dangerous divisiveness.”³⁸

In some ways, the situation is ironic—the modern interfaith dialogue movement emerged from the ashes of the Shoah as a way to forge mutual understanding and compassion between individuals from different religious expressions. In the last half-century, this movement has made tremendous progress in achieving those goals, particularly among Jews and Christians. We are now at another turning point, however, and our circles of discourse must become more inclusive, in part because the first round was so successful.

Reflecting on his spiritual journey, Pi says,

We are all born like Catholics, aren't we—in limbo, without religion, until some figure introduces us to God. After that meeting the matter ends for most of us. If there is a change, it is usually for the lesser rather than the greater; many people seem to lose God along life's way. That was not my case.

Thinking about his friend Mamaji, who has both a French and an Indian passport, Pi asks his mother, “Why can't I be a Hindu, a Christian, and a Muslim?” And why shouldn't Pi have a seat at the table?

Notes

1. Yann Martel, *The Life of Pi* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), 64.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 68.
4. This is comparable to what is happening to racial categories. See Hope Yen, “Interracial Marriage in the U.S. Climbs to New High, Study Finds,” *Huffington Post*, February 16, 2012, accessed June 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/16/interracial-marriage-in-us_n_1281229.html and Gregory Rodriguez, “President Obama: At odds with clear demographic trends toward multiracial pride,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 2011, accessed June 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/04/opinion/la-oe-rodriguez-column-obama-race-20110404>.
5. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 61.
6. Ibid.
7. Pearl Beck, Ph.D., Ron Miller, Jacob B. Ukeles, *Young Jewish Adults in the United States Today*, American Jewish Committee (AJC), September 2006, accessed June 2012, http://www.ajc.org/atf/cf/%7B42D75369-D582-4380-8395-D25925B85EAF%7D/YoungJewishAdultsUS_102006.pdf.
8. Michael Lukas, “Divisible Jewishness,” *New Voices: National Jewish Student Magazine*, April 17, 2002, accessed June 2012, <http://www.newvoices.org/campus?id=0066>
9. William Broad, “How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body,” *New York Times*, January 5, 2012, accessed June 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/08/magazine/how-yoga-can-wreck-your-body.html?pagewanted=all>.

10. National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, "Meditation: An Introduction," updated June 2010, accessed June 2012, <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/meditation/overview.htm>
11. This data does not imply that all meditation practices in the United States are directly derived or influenced by Buddhism; many other world religious expressions also include meditation. However, it can be said that many of the meditation practices currently in use were at least inspired by an interest in or connection to Eastern meditative traditions.
12. Peter Phan, "Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003), 496–497.
13. Catherine Cornille, "Double Religious Belonging: Aspects and Questions," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23 (2003), 45–46.
14. Susan Katz Miller, "Why Include Interfaith Children in Interfaith Dialogue?" *Huffington Post*, July 8, 2012, accessed June 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-katz-miller/why-include-interfaith-ch_b_893526.html
15. Ibid.
16. Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2006), 178.
17. Ibid.
18. Charles Stewart, "Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture," *Diacritics*, 29, no. 3 (1999): 46.
19. Ibid.
20. Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), 186.
21. Ibid.
22. Dzintra Ilishko, "Pedagogical Challenges for Educating an Authentic Religious Identity and Responsible Pluralism," in *Religious Education in a World of Religious Diversity*, ed. by Wilna A. J. Meijer et al. (Berlin: Waxmann, 2009), 43.
23. Stuart Hall, "New Cultures for Old," in *A Place in the World? Places, Culture and Globalization*, Doreen Massey and Pat Jess, eds. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press: 1996), 206. See also Melissa Butcher and Mandy Thomas, "Ingenious: Emerging Hybrid Youth Cultures in Western Sydney," in *Global Youth?: Hybrid Identities, Plural Worlds*, Pam Nilan and Carles Feixa, eds. (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), 53–71.
24. Karel Dobbelaere, "Secularization," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, William H. Swatos Jr., ed. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 1998), 455. L. Voyer, "From Institutional Catholicism to 'Christian Inspiration,'" in *The Post-war Generation and the Establishment of Religion*, Jackson Carroll, W.C. Roof, David Roozen, eds. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995), 201.
25. James R. Beebe, "Bricolage: The Postmodern Eclectic. Identifying Syncretistic Religious Cosmologies," in *The Psychologies in Religion: Working with the Religious Client*, E. Thomas Dowd and Steven Lars Nielsen, eds. (New York: Springer, 2006), 20.
26. McGuire, 4.
27. Belonging, as opposed to other forms of claiming or appropriating religious identity, "entails a host of shared commitments, shared in a wider community of persons whose appropriations and meanings derived from them come close to one's own." See Jeffery Carlson, "Double Religious Belonging: A Process Approach: Responses," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23 (2003), 78.

28. Robert Schreiter, "Christian Identity and Interreligious Dialogue: The Parliament of the World's Religions at Chicago, 1993," unpublished paper, cited by Jeffery Carlson, "Double Religious Belonging: A Process Approach: Responses," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23 (2003), 77–78.
29. Phan, 497.
30. Ibid., 498.
31. Ibid., 500, 519.
32. Cornille, 45.
33. Paul Knitter, *With Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009).
34. Carlson, 79.
35. Stewart, 42, citing Barbara Abou-El-Haj, "Languages and Models for Cultural Exchange," in *Culture, Globalization and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony King (Binghampton: Dept. of Art and Art History, State University of New York, 1991), 143–44.
36. Butler Bass, 61.
37. Katz Miller.
38. Ibid., citation from Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).