
Dual Belonging: Essays from a Lively Spring Conference

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The bright topics of belonging and identity display our current cultural anxieties as well as our current cultural certitudes. We argue whether we can be just one thing, or whether our belonging and identity can be pluralized and drawn from several sources. For some topics, the current conversation favors precise boundaries and a binary choice. For other topics, the current conversation favors intersectionality and blending. But how do we best approach questions of ultimacy and meaning? How best to describe and live the fullness of religious self-understanding and its deep claims on us? Is religion singular or plural? Can we belong to more than one religious community or tradition at once? Some faithful people understand themselves in terms of “dual belonging,” a lively topic which brought scholars together in April of 2019 at the Annual World Mission Institute, a cooperative and collaborative venture of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Catholic Theological Union, and McCormick Theological Seminary. For fifty years these schools have shown ways that Roman Catholics and Protestants continue to see difference as a gift that enriches each, rather than as a threat that diminishes all.

Our program for the conference read:

As individuals are increasingly claiming dual or plural religious belonging, questions arise concerning the possibility and the desirability of this phenomenon. We invited scholars to reflect on the meaning of religious hybridity (dual belonging) and its implications for Christian faith. Though divided religious loyalty poses a challenge to Christian identity, we will also consider whether, and under what conditions, it may also become an occasion for religious growth.

The Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam present themselves to be monotheistic and exclusive, united in focusing on the primary allegiance required by this self-revealing God. The Shema proclaims, “Behold O Israel, The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” The same section of Deuteronomy continues:

Fear the Lord your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land.
(Deuteronomy 6:13-15)

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The story of Israel is of continually facing a choice: “...choose you this day whom ye will serve...” (Joshua 24:15) This stark choice is presented as rooted in God’s nature. God acknowledges other gods, and recognizes prior associations and identities, but asserts a claim of complete exclusivity, indeed of jealousy. Stern stuff, though scholars acknowledge that the religious practices of Israel incorporated some resident traditions and continued to tolerate and blend with surrounding groups.

The New Testament also brings a message of exclusion and finality, as Jesus announces to his disciples, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) And Acts proclaims, “...there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12). And Islam’s Shahada proclaims, “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.” And the Qur’an, Surah 3 includes these verses, “Indeed, the religion in the sight of God is Islam,” (v. 19), and “so whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him, and he shall be of the losers in the Hereafter.” (v. 85)

The history of each of the Abrahamic faiths is filled with stories of the faithful choosing to elevate a single religious identity. For example, when asked by her father to renounce her faith, the early third century martyr Perpetua asserted a single allegiance that subsumed all the other parts of her identity: Christian. Whatever her multiple cultural, political, social, and religious identities, Perpetua relinquished them for a single and unifying identity: Christian. Her persecutors agreed to subsume all under the same unifying identity: Christian, leading to Perpetua's confirmation and execution.

And yet. Which came first: dual/multiple identities, or the Scriptural declaration of exclusivity and singularity? If the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam continually assert and affirm singular religious identity that subsumes all others, is it that the Scripture authors recognized and were responding to the dual and multiple identities of their hearers and readers? History of Religions methodology refers to *homo religiosus*, but there is no necessary implication of exclusivity or singular identity/affiliation. Faithful women and men bring multiple identities and loyalties into the religious assembly: Philistine *and* Hebrew; Hellenist *and* Jew; pious Roman *and* Christian; Hindu *and* Christian (within the bhakti movements). Which part(s) of our identity must we relinquish to be acceptable? The dramas of the second century included the assertion of mutually exclusive identities for Judaism and for Christianity, and the dramas of the seventh century included similar assertions for the followers of the Prophet.

Speakers and papers

An introductory welcome and meditation is offered by the **Rev. Dr. James Nieman**, president of Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Nieman earned the Ph.D. at Emory University. He has been a pastor, a theological educator, and an administrative leader for over thirty years, and draws upon his earliest experiences in ministry for this opening reflection. He became president of LSTC in 2012.

Dr. Catherine Cornille offers the keynote address for this conference, providing a thorough and thoughtful sketch of the topic of dual belonging as problem and as promise. Her careful scholarship attends to the boundaries of belief and the consequences of combining affiliations and practices. Cornille is the Newton College Alumnae Chair of Western Culture and Professor of Comparative Theology at Boston College. She received the Ph.D. from Catholic University of Leuven and is the author or editor of sixteen books in the areas of inter-religious dialogue, comparative theology, and issues relating to pluralism. She has taught at Boston College for the past two decades and brings many disciplines into service of this singular task.

The Rev. Dr. JoAnne Marie Terrell offers a succinct and direct response to Professor Cornille's keynote address. Associate Professor of Theology, Ethics, and the Arts at Chicago Theological Seminary, Terrell brings an ethical and theological method grounded in experience and asks how the constrained and compromised western White Evangelical narrative could

An introductory bibliography on dual belonging

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- Kalsky, Manuela and Andre Van der Braak, editors. Topical Issue: Multiple Religious Belonging. *Open Theology*. vol. 3, no. 1 (January 2017).
- Phan, Peter C. "Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church." *Theological Studies*. 64, no. 3 (2003), 495–519.
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experientially embody or ethically enact the gospel. Rooted in her sanctified Womanist imagination, Terrell traces God's loving presence inside the Christian communities she found, and outside of Christian orthodoxy. Trained at Union Seminary in New York, Terrell's best-known publication is *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience* (Wipf & Stock 2005 [Orbis, 1998]). She is a practitioner of Christianity, Taoism, and Zen Buddhism.

Joy Ziemke, M.Div., MSW offers a thoughtful meditative response to Professor Cornille's address, traced through her own training in Contemplative Christian prayer traditions. Ziemke currently resides in Traverse City, Michigan, and serves as an addictions counselor and behavioral health therapist through Catholic Human Services. She is a member of SokukoJi Buddhist Community.

We are grateful for the opportunity to have heard these men and women of faith(s), and grateful to the editors of *Currents in Theology & Mission* for publication.

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