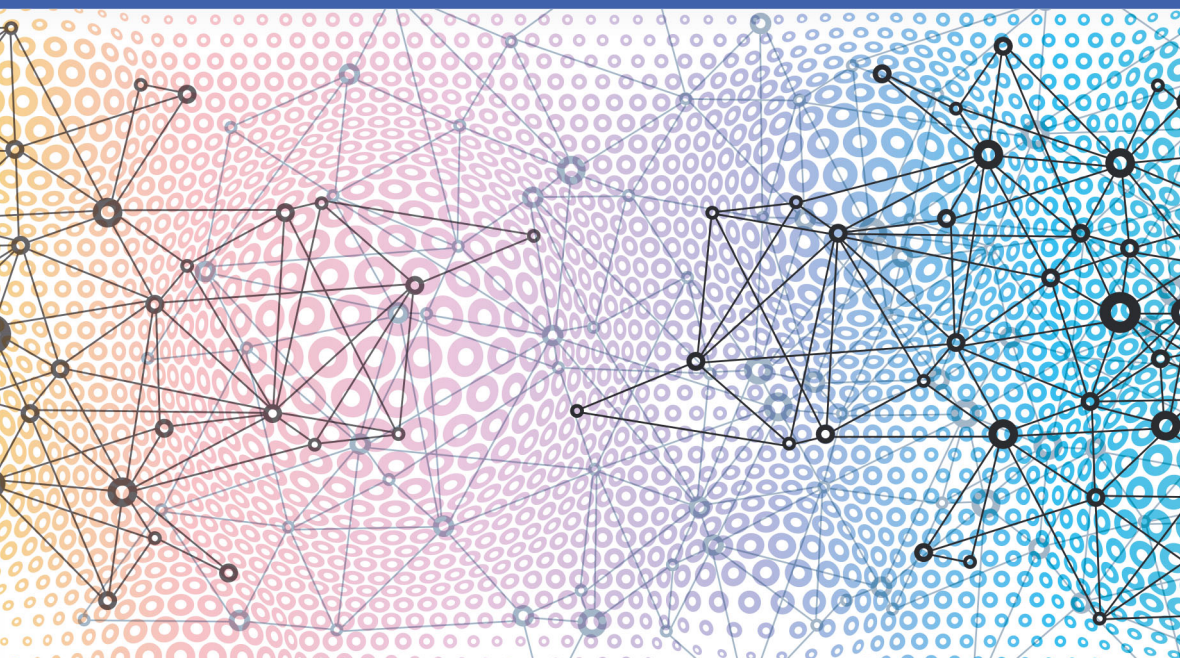


Remixing Religion

Multiple Religious Belonging and Beyond -
A Latourian Proposal



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André van der Braak

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Acknowledgments

This book is the synthesizing monograph of a research project funded by the Dutch Research Council NWO, that took place from 2013 to 2019 at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam: “Multiple Religious Belonging: Hermeneutical and Empirical Explorations of Hybrid Religiosity.”¹ The research project investigated a new conceptual framework for religious diversity and hybridity, that of “multiple religious belonging” (abbreviated as MRB in this study). The idea for this project came from the Dutch feminist theologian Manuela Kalsky, who was at the time the longstanding director of the Dominican Study for Theology and Society (DSTS) in Amsterdam. She had earlier initiated, for the DSTS, the research projects ReliFlex (about new forms of flexible religiosity) and NieuwWij (New We), about the transformation of the religious and cultural forms of belonging in Dutch society.

Manuela Kalsky and I both started our professorships at the Vrije Universiteit on January 1, 2012. The faculty of Theology (currently the School of Religion and Theology) was during that time rapidly transforming from a Protestant faculty in the tradition of VU founder Abraham Kuyper into a multireligious and even interreligious faculty dedicated to dialogue and diversity (see Van der Braak 2019). Governmental subsidies were secured for Buddhist and Hindu chaplaincy training programs. A Center for Islamic Theology had already been established earlier. My own research project was about the encounter of Asian Buddhist traditions with secular Western modernity (see Van der Braak 2020). It struck me that many Western Buddhists had a very different type of Buddhist religious belonging than Asian Buddhists. They resembled the flexible believers that Manuela Kalsky was describing. Therefore, we decided to combine our research interests and investigate the new interpretative framework of MRB. We received a generous governmental grant from NWO for a six-year research project at the Vrije Universiteit, with various societal partners, the most important of which was the DSTS.

Apart from myself and Manuela Kalsky, the two other primary members of the research team were postdoctoral researcher Joantine Berghuijs, who was responsible for the empirical part of the research project, and PhD student Daan Oostveen, who undertook hermeneutical and intercultural explorations of the discourse of MRB. Associated researchers were Anke Liefbroer (VU Amsterdam; interfaith spiritual care and MRB), Hans Schilderman

1 <https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/327-25-008>

(Radboud University Nijmegen; psychology of religion and MRB), and Jonatan Hendriks (VU Amsterdam; communities and MRB). There was a board of advisors, consisting of Joep de Hart (sociology of religion), Hijme Stoffels (sociology of new religious movements), André Droogers (anthropology of religion), and Zhu Caifang (Chinese religion and MRB).

The project combined empirical research (To what extent and in which forms does MRB exist as religion-as-lived in the Netherlands?) with hermeneutical explorations (How is MRB conceptually defined in the research literature? What are the historically contested meanings of key notions within the academic study of religion, such as “multiplicity” and “belonging”?). It then explored how a cross-cultural hermeneutical confrontation with Asian conceptualizations of “religion” and “religious belonging” could contribute to an alternative hermeneutical framework from which to understand hybrid religiosity.

This book is both a synthesizing monograph of the MRB project and an attempt to extend the findings of the project in a new hermeneutical direction. I am grateful to the Dutch Research Council (NWO) for their financial support of the project. I want to thank my co-project members Manuela Kalsky, Daan Oostveen and Joantine Berghuijs, and all the others that were involved in this project. But mostly I want to thank my partner Muriel Boutreur, who has consistently supported, motivated and inspired me during the long period that it took to complete this book.

Introduction

Abstract: This introduction sketches the Western religious landscape as one of declining institutional affiliation alongside a persistent and recomposed hybrid religiosity, presenting the VU-based multiple religious belonging (MRB) project (2013–2019) as the empirical and conceptual starting point for understanding this landscape, while arguing that “belonging” is often no longer the best primary lens. The book moves from MRB as a productive heuristic to “remixing religion” as a more adequate description of practice-centered recombination across repertoires, treating MRB and remix as discursive fields that shape what can be seen and lived as religion. This introduction outlines the structure: part 1 assesses MRB empirically, hermeneutically, philosophically, and comparatively; part 2 develops an immanentist and Latour-inspired framework for “immanent gods” and more-than-human agencies.

Keywords: multiple religious belonging; remix; hybrid religiosity; lived religion; immanence; Latour

Throughout the modern Western world, traditional religious affiliation is in decline. Fewer and fewer people identify themselves as belonging to one of the major mainstream religious traditions, the so-called “world religions” (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism). Rather than, as things used to be, simply belonging to a single religion, many people increasingly combine beliefs and practices from different religious traditions. Some claim to belong to two or more religions. Others add secondary religious participation to their primary religion. And, most confusingly, others claim to not belong to any religion in particular, even as they describe themselves as religious or spiritual.

However, all kinds of new forms of religiosity and spirituality thrive. This book argues that many are not abandoning religion but remixing it. They are finding meaning, purpose and belonging in ever-newer, ever-stranger

ways. Describing, analyzing and understanding such remixed religiosity is a major challenge for theology and religious studies today. It requires an analytic and theoretical shift.

Multiple Religious Belonging and Beyond

Conventional theological and religious studies paradigms have trouble interpreting hybrid religiosity. Some scholars describe it pejoratively as religious consumerism (Berthrong 1999; Phan 2004). Since hybrid religiosity runs counter to the exclusivity claims of the Western monotheistic traditions, it is often interpreted in theological circles as syncretism, a term with a strongly negative connotation (Bernhardt 2008).

Such hybrid religiosity is increasingly being investigated using a framework of *multiple religious belonging* (hereafter MRB), which has been the subject of much contemporary debate and discussion.¹ The field of research on MRB is widely dispersed and fragmented, however, which shows the need for multidisciplinary research that addresses hermeneutical as well as empirical issues. The MRB research project aimed to bridge this gap, as well as the gap between the various academic discourses on religious belonging on the one hand, and the lived reality of MRB on the other.

The project was both cross-culturally comparativist (MRB in the West and China), and multidisciplinary, combining theology and religious studies. Its approach aimed at observing and deconstructing Western and modernist assumptions regarding religion and religious belonging.² As a result of such assumptions, pejorative terms such as “bricolage spirituality” or “pick and mix spirituality” point to a normative rejection of hybrid religiosity as “a lighthearted flirting with different religions” (Cornille 2003) or “a self-indulgent, free-floating, cafeteria-style potpourri of mutually incompatible religiosities” (Phan 2003). It aimed to elucidate this problem, not to solve it,³

1 Important landmarks in the debate on MRB include publications such as Berghuijs et al. 2018; Bernhardt and Schmidt-Leukel 2008; Bidwell 2008, 2018; Cornille 2002, 2003, 2016; D’Costa and Thompson 2016; Drew 2011; Egnell 2006; Kalsky 2008; May 2007; Oostveen 2020, 2026; Rajkumar and Dayam 2016; Van der Braak and Kalsky 2017.

2 As Rajkumar and Dayan write in the World Council of Churches publication *Many Yet One*: “despite the tacit acknowledgement that hybridity is intrinsic to most of our received and practiced Christian faith, there is an overwhelming insistence on rigidity and singularity in the expectations made of our religious identifications and affiliations” (Rajkumar and Dayam 2016, 2).

3 As the philosopher of religion Paul Griffiths wrote, “argumentative attempts at resolution of a particular philosophical problem are most useful not where they produce agreement, but

and followed feminist theologian Michelle Voss Roberts in approaching new forms of hybrid religiosity “not as problems to be solved, but as proliferating sites of divine encounter” (Voss Roberts 2010, 59) and, following theologian Peter Phan, as a way of “being religious interreligiously” (Phan 2004).

This book is both a synthesis of the findings of the MRB project, and an attempt to take theorizing about hybrid religiosity a step further. The religious landscape of 2026 is no longer the same as that of 2012. Tara Isabella Burton, in her book *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (Burton 2020), has described the contemporary religious landscape with the metaphor of the remix. This metaphor is taken from the musical genre in which elements from various existing recordings are being creatively combined and interspersed by disk jockeys or producers. Burton has extended the metaphor to describe the contemporary religious landscape in the US. The second part of this book explores this metaphor of the remix and presents a Latourian proposal for describing and understanding such remixed religiosity.⁴

The core thesis of this book is not only that an increasing number of people today are remixing their religiosity, rather than only combining religious belongings. It also argues that this new empirical reality requires an analytic and theoretical shift in how we conceptualize religion, religious belonging and religious participation. This book will both explore MRB and go beyond it. It argues that MRB is a productive but also limited framework, that the framework of the remix is a better heuristic for describing hybrid religiosity as practice-centered recombination, and that the philosophy of the French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour (1947–2022) provides a philosophical grammar for such remixed religiosity, also offering a vocabulary for engagement with religious agencies that doesn't reduce them to mere psychology, or elevate them into supernatural realms.

Methodology

Engaging contemporary debates between theology, philosophy, social sciences, and the study of religion, this book both introduces and discusses current debates on the possibility and practice of hybrid religiosity, framed within the wider context of theology of religions, philosophy of religion,

when they show with clarity how deep the disagreement really goes” (Griffiths 2001, xii).

4 A Latourian proposal is only one possible way to go beyond MRB. Within the MRB project, Daan Oostveen has attempted to use Deleuze's philosophy to come to a rhizomatic understanding of hybrid religiosity (Oostveen 2020, 2025, 2026).

intercultural philosophy, and postcolonial and feminist thought. Throughout, it will critically reflect on the notions of religion and religious belonging.

As Richard King explains, the critical theory approach to religion considers “the academic study of religion not as the study of a preexisting and established object, but as a discursive field that produces its object of study in the very process of engaging in the language game of ‘religion’” (King 2017, xiii). Similarly, this study does not consider MRB or remixed religiosity to be a preexisting and established object, but rather a discursive field that can indeed produce MRB-ers or remixers (people who start to describe themselves in this way because they read about it). Such a discursive field is always contingent, constructed, and “imagined,” not in the sense of being false or created, but as a result of the imagination of the scholars who constructed and continue to be active in this discursive field.

This type of reflexivity is a methodical commitment of this book: MRB or remixed religiosity are not pre-existing “objects” out there in the religious field. Such frameworks function as discursive fields that can conceivably produce the very MRB-ers and remixers that they aim to describe.

Overview of Chapters

The overall argument of this book develops in two movements. Part 1 (chapters 1–4) summarizes, synthesizes and evaluates MRB research, including the findings of the MRB research project. It shows that MRB is an analytically productive yet also limited conceptual tool for describing and understanding hybrid religiosity. Part 2 (chapters 5–8) proposes a new framework, organized around the metaphor of the remix, and presents its Latourian proposal for interpreting remixed religiosity.

Chapter 1 describes the empirical findings of the MRB project (Berghuijs 2017, 2018). It maps the phenomenon of MRB in the Netherlands and clarifies what is at stake in measuring it. It distinguishes “hard,” “medium” and “soft” MRB, and discusses the various methods of measuring MRB, ranging from emic self-identification to more external, etic indicators. In the discussion it starts the reflection on how such measurements always presuppose certain understandings of what “religion” is and how “belonging” works.

Chapter 2 reconstructs the historically contested meanings of “religions” and “religious belonging” across several disciplinary discourses, and distinguishes different ways in which belonging has been imagined (as confessional commitment, justified belief, or experience). The chapter shows that MRB research often inherits a World Religions Paradigm that

is shaped by Western—and frequently Christian—assumptions about religions as bounded traditions that offer coherent packages of beliefs and practices to their “belongers” (often interpreted as membership). It discusses Oostveen’s distinction between such hermeneutics of religions and alternative hermeneutics of religiosity, that emphasize flows, practices and individual orientations that do not presuppose discrete “religions” (Oostveen 2020, 2026).

Chapter 3 tests the lens of MRB by investigating dual Buddhist-Christian belonging, one of the most widely studied forms of MRB. While beginning with the familiar grammar of Christianity and Buddhism as distinct “religions,” it increasingly encounters the limits of that grammar: Buddhist-Christian belonging frequently involves uneven or selective participation, shifting identifications, and the “unbundling” of practices from their larger religious “package,” especially in the case of Western Buddhism.

Chapter 4 provides the decisive comparative perspective. Some scholars have called MRB the norm rather than the exception in East Asian cultures (e.g., Phan 2004; Rajkumar and Dayam 2016; Van Bragt 2002). However, what looks like MRB from a Western angle is often more intelligently described as Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape (Hedges 2017, 2019). This does not invalidate MRB, but it relativizes it: “belonging” is not a universal default. This chapter therefore sharpens the book’s overall diagnosis: MRB is a useful heuristic paradigm for certain configurations of hybridity, but as a general paradigm, it can also unintentionally reinscribe the very boundaries and membership assumptions that are increasingly being undone in the contemporary religious field in the West.

Part 2 will explore the metaphor of the remix as a more adequate description of much contemporary hybrid religiosity. Whereas MRB presumes that the primary phenomenon is belonging (even if multiple), remixing points to an active, participatory, often pragmatic recombination of elements drawn from multiple repertoires. This points to a new way of being religious altogether (or perhaps a return to older ways of being religious).

Chapter 5 argues that religions can be seen as remixes, and religious practitioners can be seen as engaging in remixing. It will present Tara Burton’s empirical description of the rise of the Remixed, and Seth Walker’s work on the remix metaphor. The Remixed are not merely between traditions; they see no need for religious self-identification at all in their pursuit of meaning, community, ritual and transformation. Remixed religiosity unbundles practices from their institutional packages and re-bundles them into new assemblages and platforms. It shifts from beliefs and confessions to practices, often involving ritual engagement with more-than-human

powers, agencies and presences. Yet it rejects vertical transcendence. The question becomes: how can such agencies be real without requiring a transcendentalist ontology?

Chapter 6 attempts to conceptualize such new remixed religiosity. It first discusses, and rejects, sociologist Colin Campbell's thesis that Western religiosity increasingly comes to resemble Eastern religiosity. It then moves on to the British historian of religion Alan Strathern's model of immanentist and transcendentalist modes of being religious (Strathern 2019). Whereas transcendentalist religion is organized around ontological verticality (a sharp divide between "this world" and "the beyond"), immanent religiosity is organized around "metapersons" (gods, spirits and ancestors) that are experienced as real and effective within this world, and as accessible through ritual practices.

This chapter argues that immanentism provides a vocabulary for describing remixed religiosity that is practice-centered, efficacy-oriented, and that foregrounds metapersons as embedded in a monist cosmos rather than as existing in a supernatural higher world. Remixed religiosity can be understood as a re-immanentization of Western religiosity (often expressed as a therapeutization of religion, the unbundling of religious beliefs and practices, and renewed ritual experimentation). It is neither "failed belonging" nor "weak faith," but a different mode of being religious, that is frequently misread by the transcendentalist bias of theologians and scholars of religion. Making sense of remixed religiosity requires taking the ontological turn that has been initiated within cultural anthropology (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Rather than treating metapersons as only symbolic or psychological, an ontological turn approach asks what kind of realities are being enacted in practices involving metapersons.

In chapter 7, the thought of Bruno Latour will provide the main theoretical framework for making sense of remixed religiosity. Two conceptual tools that Latour offers, Actor-Network Theory and Modes of Existence, provide a new philosophical grammar to talk about metapersons without collapsing them into "mere psychology" or "supernatural beings." Actor-networks shift the emphasis from substances and objects to relations, mediations and practices through which metapersons can become effective. Modes of existence clarify that different ontological domains (science, law, fiction, religion, etc.) have different truth conditions (veridiction). Truth is not one-size-fits-all; it is mode-specific.

Latour describes metapersons as beings of transformation and beings of religion that are part of religious actor-networks that can be activated through ritual activity. They appear and disappear according to how they

are engaged. Latour practices philosophical diplomacy. He argues that we need to hear religious claims in the right key, avoiding category mistakes such as judging metapersons by the veridiction of science, reducing them to inner states, or misreading them as supernatural beings.

Concluding Remarks

This book argues that the contemporary Western religious field is increasingly characterized not primarily by *multiple belonging* but by *remixed participation*, often best understood as a return of immanentist religiosity, and that a Latourian ontological pluralism offers the most precise tools for describing how such remixed religiosity can be real, efficacious, and intelligible without reinstating transcendentalist bias.

The phenomenon of remixed religiosity is of great relevance to the future of religion in the West and could therefore be of great significance for the social meaning and shaping of religion, and for new forms of social connectivity. For social organizations in the field of religion, education and media, it is of great importance to respond adequately to this trend, which means taking it seriously rather than responding defensively (the churches), or interpreting it as solely an exponent of secularization (some social scientists) (Kalsky 2012).

The Western image of religion as a unitary, organizationally defined, and relatively stable set of collective beliefs and practices, is challenged by the phenomenon of remixed religiosity. Extensive religious blending and within-group religious heterogeneity may be the norm, rather than the exception, as they have been and still are in Asian cultures.

Scholarly theories of religion have long depicted religious belonging at the level of the individual in terms of commitment to the relatively coherent beliefs and practices of a single, received faith tradition. The contemporary phenomenon of hybrid religiosity may not be new, but might suggest that the earlier depiction of individual religious belonging by scholars was no more than an artifact of their definitional and methodological assumptions. Therefore, this book reconsiders the established conceptions of religious identity and belonging. It argues that the borders of religious identity and belonging are as contested, shifting and malleable as the definitional boundaries of religions.

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Part One

Multiple Religious Belonging

1. Empirical Explorations of Multiple Religious Belonging

Abstract: This chapter synthesizes empirical findings on multiple religious belonging (hereafter MRB) in the Netherlands within a lived religion approach. It differentiates “hard,” “medium,” and “soft” forms of MRB and shows how research designs already presuppose particular understandings of religion and belonging. Comparing emic self-identification with etic indicators, it demonstrates that measured MRB populations depend on whether studies prioritize affiliation, practice, material culture, experience, or ethics. The chapter argues that methodological choices often import world-religion categories and membership assumptions that do not fit contemporary patterns of selective participation. It concludes that measurement debates are conceptually revealing: they expose instability in “religion” and “belonging.”

Keywords: hybrid religiosity; lived religion; emic; etic; measurement; religion

This chapter will show how the new religious reality of hybrid religiosity thematized as multiple religious belonging (hereafter MRB) is found in several empirical findings. It will focus on summarizing and reviewing the empirical research of Joantine Berghuijs on MRB in the Netherlands (Berghuijs 2017).

Methodologically, this project situated itself within the lived religion approach to religion and religious belonging (McGuire 2008). Scholars of religion and theologians often assume a cognitive consistency between individuals’ religion, as institutionally framed, and a person’s actual religion, as lived. However, people’s everyday religious practices rarely resemble the tidy, consistent, and theologically correct packages that religious traditions promote through their institutions. Therefore, the empirical research project focused on mapping out people’s MRB-as-lived, including the complexities, apparent inconsistencies, heterogeneity, and untidiness of the range of religious

practices, beliefs and expressions that are part of MRB. Rather than only measuring affiliation or organizational participation, the empirical research focused first on individuals, their religious experience, and the concrete practices that make up their personal religious experience and expression.

Hard, Medium, Soft MRB

When MRB is studied from an empirical perspective (Berghuijs 2017, 2018; Goosen 2011; Kalsky 2017), it rapidly becomes clear that the term refers to a large number of quite different phenomena. Janine Diller (2016), for example, has outlined no less than ten different ways of being multiply religious, ranging from fully belonging to more than one religious tradition, to being “spiritual but not religious,” to engaging multiple religious traditions with various levels of commitment. Rory McEntee (2017) has advocated the use of the term “interspiritual religious belonging” to describe the often-encountered phenomenon of those who claim to engage with multiple religious traditions while at the same time claiming to belong to none of them. Kalsky (2017) has described the emergence of such “flexible believers” who no longer feel the need to consciously embrace religious traditions. She advocates a new transreligious approach to religious belonging.

Theologian Michelle Voss Roberts (2010) has distinguished three ways in which the term MRB is used: (1) To refer to “the great pioneers”: the elite virtuoso attempts of largely male Christian theologians or monastics (e.g., Abhishiktananda, Bede Griffiths, Aloysius Pieris) to combine their Christian tradition with a second tradition; (2) to refer to “popular practice” in which different rituals and practices are combined in one’s own religious life; (3) to refer to “the hybrid,” those who do not fit comfortably within a single identity but exist somewhere at the intersection between traditions.

Somewhat similar to Voss Roberts, in the MRB project a distinction was made between “hard” MRB, where two or more clearly delineated traditions are self-consciously and wholeheartedly embraced (such as the virtuosos), “medium” MRB, where one self-identifies with one tradition but also participates in other traditions (for example Christians who also practice Buddhist meditation without self-identifying as Buddhists), and “soft” MRB where beliefs, values and practices from various traditions are combined without any particular tradition being fully 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 controversial. According to Berghuijs’s empirical investigation of these

various forms of MRB in the Netherlands, 3 percent can be classified as hard MRB-er, 12 percent as medium, and 8 percent as soft (Berghuijs 2017).

The hard, medium, and soft in these labels do not refer to the strength, intensity, or seriousness of belonging, but to the extent to which hard boundaries are being preserved between religions. Hard MRB-ers claim to belong to at least two distinct religions. Medium MRB-ers claim belonging to one religion (usually Christianity), but also participate in other traditions. Soft MRB-ers claim no belonging to religions in the traditional sense. At this soft end of the scale, much New Age spirituality is found, in which the absolute truth claims of all institutionalized forms of religion are rejected, which perhaps should be understood as the absence of any religious belonging. At the hard end of the scale, one finds a strong sense of MRB: having two equally strong religious identities simultaneously, e.g., being a fully committed Buddhist and a fully committed Christian at the same time (Drew 2011).

Empirical Approach

Empirically exploring the phenomenon of MRB is beset by a number of problems. In general, measuring religiosity is problematic. General survey publications (such as those from the Pew Research Center in the US or the *Religionsmonitor* in Germany) often base their numbers on the percentage of respondents that consider themselves to be belonging to a particular religious tradition, group or community. Alternatively, the percentage of people who attend religious services or meetings is used. Often, the non-affiliated (or Nones) are lumped together as one category.

Based on those general surveys, MRB is a substantial phenomenon. In 2009, 24 percent of American adults indicated that they attended services of at least one faith other than their own (Pew Research Center 2009). According to the *Religionsmonitor* 2013, 26 percent of former West Germans and 13 percent of former East Germans draw from different religious traditions (Bertelsmann 2013).¹

Joantine Berghuijs (2017, 2018) has attempted to quantify the occurrence and nature of MRB in the Netherlands, a highly secularized country in terms of low church membership and church attendance (Bernts and Berghuijs 2016). Her research was based on three questions:

¹ More recent empirical studies such as the Pew Research Center 2023–2024 *Religious Landscape Study* (Pew Research Center 2025a) and the *Religionsmonitor* 2023 (Bertelsmann 2023) confirm these trends. A detailed discussion of their findings falls outside the scope of this book.

- 1) How many multiple religious believers (MRB-ers) are there in the Netherlands?
- 2) From what religions do they draw, and which combinations of religions are most common?
- 3) What kind of religious elements are combined? (e.g., practices, ideology, ethics, or other) (Berghuijs 2017, 20)

The survey was conducted among a representative sample of the Dutch population aged 18–80 in December 2014 by Motivaction Research and Strategy.

Measuring MRB: Emic and Etic Approaches

The first question of the number of MRB-ers can be approached in two ways. The first way is to ask respondents whether they combine different traditions in their life (similar to the *Religionsmonitor* 2013). The second way is to ask respondents whether they self-identify as Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, and so on, and count those that self-identify as follower of two or more traditions. The answers to these two questions provide an emic result: the number of respondents that view themselves as combining religious traditions (regardless of whether they use the MRB label). In the etic approach, Berghuijs used her own definition of who should be counted as an MRB-er. She measured seven modalities of belonging, based on the dimensions of religiosity developed by Glock and Stark, and Smart (Glock and Stark 1965; Smart 1996):

- Affinity: affinity with religion by inspiration, relatedness, attractiveness of rituals or appealing values
- Practice and material culture: prayer, meditation, yoga, fasting, pilgrimage, text reading, celebrating holidays, owning of objects with personal religious meaning
- Ideology: religious beliefs, relevant to the respondent
- Experience: religious experiences and emotions
- Ethics: ethical values taken from religion
- Social participation: involvement in religious groups: gatherings and services, membership, financial contributions, volunteering, professional involvement.

- Identification: self-identification as a follower of a religion (I consider myself ...) (Berghuijs 2017, 22).²

Please note that the self-identification used in the emic approach is included as one of the modalities. The modalities were translated into a number of survey questions. For each question, respondents were asked to identify from which religious tradition(s) they drew their involvement. If a respondent mentioned a particular religious tradition, this was counted as them having a relation to that religion. Those who had relations to two or more religions were counted as MRB-er. This was casting a wide net.

Results

The emic survey results were that 24 percent of the respondents (3.1 million adult Dutch) indicated that they combined elements from different religious traditions. When asked to specify which traditions they combined, several indicated intra-religious traditions (e.g., Catholicism and Protestantism). When these were subtracted, 17 percent combined elements from different religious traditions. Table 1 shows the combination of elements from religious traditions in the emic approach in percent of the population. The religions that are combined most are Christianity with Buddhism (10 percent) and Christianity with Judaism (4 percent).

Table 1. Combination of elements from religious traditions (in percent of the population)

n = 2177	Islam	Judaism	Buddhism	Hinduism	Other religion
Christianity	3	4	10	3	1
Islam		1	2	1	0.1
Judaism			2	1	0.04
Buddhism				3	1
Hinduism					0.2

2 Two other modalities, *narrative* (religious stories, persons or books relevant to the respondent) and *origin* (religiosity of parents, religious upbringing or school type) were also measured but not included in the analysis.

In accordance with the etic approach, an overview was made of the number of respondents that have relations with one or more religions (see table 2). For instance, 38 percent have affinity with Christianity, 45 percent are involved in Christian practices or material culture and 19 percent derive ethical values specifically from Christianity. A total of 55 percent are involved in Christianity on one or more modalities. In the last two columns we see that MRB is most prominent in the case of affinity: 51 percent have affinity with one or more religions, and 11 percent have affinity with two or more religions. The second most prominent modality is practice and material culture (51 and 7 percent), and the third one is identification (39 and 3 percent).

Table 2. Relation with different religions per modality of belonging (in percent of the population)

Modality	Christianity	Islam	Judaism	Buddhism	Hinduism	other	relation with one or more religions on this modality	relation with two or more religions on this modality
affinity	38	6	5	12	5	1	51	11
practice and material culture	45	6	3	5	2	1	51	7
ideology	17	3	2	2	1	1	20	3
experience	23	4	1	1	1	1	29	2
ethics	19	4	4	4	3	0.5	22	6
social participation	29	4	1	1	1	0.2	34	1
identification	33	5	2	3	2	0.4	39	3
relation with this religion on one or more modalities	55	10	12	17	9	3		

Using this data, Berghuijs calculated the total number of multiple religious believers in the Netherlands (defined as those with relations to two or more religions) to be 23 percent. This number is higher than the 17 percent that was found by asking directly about combining religions. The groups were only partly overlapping: 46 percent of the MRB-ers are also a “combiner,” and 64 percent of the “combiners” are also an MRB-er.

Within the group of MRB-ers (23 percent), several combinations are found. The combination of Christianity and Buddhism is the most prominent

(13 percent, n= 238), followed by that of Christianity and Judaism (11 percent). A large majority in this group (72 percent) had a Christian background, both Catholic (39 percent) and Protestant (31 percent). Only 1 percent were raised in a Buddhist tradition.

Table 3. Combinations of religious traditions (in percent of the total population)

n = 2177	Islam	Judaism	Buddhism	Hinduism	Other religion
Christianity	7	11	13	7	1
Islam		5	5	4	1
Judaism			5	4	0.4
Buddhism				8	1
Hinduism					1

Table 4 specifies which modalities were combined within the group. The modality of affinity was mainly connected with Buddhism, combined with all kinds of modality in Christianity. Most individuals in the group were related to Buddhism in only one or two modalities. The average involvement in the two traditions is 1.7 modalities for Buddhism and 3.4 modalities for Christianity. The highest combination of modalities concerns affinity with Buddhism in those that practice Christianity (47 percent). The total affinity with Buddhism is 63 percent. This affinity consists of finding the values of Buddhism appealing (39 percent), finding the rituals of Buddhism attractive (34 percent), being inspired by Buddhism (27 percent), and feeling related to Buddhism (17 percent). Out of this group of 283 Buddhist-Christian dual believers, only 20 percent of the group self-identify as a Buddhist. Fourteen percent of this group self-identify as both Buddhist and Christian.

For 48 percent of the respondents, religion/spirituality is a personal quest in which you can combine elements of different religions. Furthermore, not all respondents felt comfortable with having to specify their answers according to bounded religious traditions, because they wanted to stress commonalities rather than differences. In the survey, the possibility was given to relate a modality to “religion in general” rather than to a specific religion (in the case of affinity, practices and material culture, and ideology), “all religions” (in the case of ethics) or “no specific religion” (in the case of religious experiences). A total of 46 percent of respondents endorsed one of these general expressions at least once. Only 41 percent of this group also counted as MRB-er because of other answers in the survey.

Table 4. Combination of modalities within the group Christianity-Buddhism (n = 283)

Buddhism	affinity	practice	ideology	experience	ethics	social part.	identification	Total
Christianity								
affinity	41	15	8	6	21	2	11	64
practice and material culture	47	26	10	8	27	3	16	75
ideology	14	7	7	4	10	1	5	25
experience	20	10	3	7	12	1	9	35
ethics	27	10	6	5	31	1	6	46
social participation	26	10	4	5	13	3	8	43
identification	28	13	6	7	17	1	14	49
Total	63	28	13	9	35	4	20	

Discussion

Berghuijs used three approaches to quantify the occurrence of MRB in the Netherlands. Her first approach was to ask respondents whether they combine different traditions in their life. Her second approach was to ask respondents to self-identify as Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, and so on, and count those that self-identify as follower of two or more traditions. The answers to these two questions provided an emic result: they indicated whether respondents viewed themselves as combining religious traditions, regardless of whether they used the label of MRB to refer to themselves (most did not). In a third, etic approach, Berghuijs used the seven modalities of belonging described above.

The use of self-identification for measuring religious belonging in the West, however, is problematic. What is measured in this case is religious identity, not religious belonging. However, as we will see in chapter 3, many (perhaps even most) Buddhist practitioners in the West do not self-identify as Buddhist.³ Berghuijs concludes that “belonging” is a slippery conceptual category that is hard to operationalize and to measure as an etic category

3 To give another example: John Thatamanil describes how as a graduate student he became a student of an Advaita guru. He also became part of an Insight Meditation Group. Yet, he only self-identifies as Christian (Thatamanil 2020, xvi). As a matter of fact, Thatamanil wrote his

(Berghuijs 2018). It is easier to measure affiliation or membership or group meeting attendance. And as an emic category, “belonging” is slippery as well. We could ask people to self-report on whether they see themselves as belonging to Christianity, Buddhism, etc. However, such self-reports correlate very poorly with their actual religious behavior. For such reasons, Berghuijs prefers to speak about multireligiosity, or being multiply religious (Berghuijs 2018).

Another problem with the term MRB is that there are significant overlaps between multiple religious identity, multiple religious belonging and multiple religious participation. Hard MRB, meaning self-identifying with two or more traditions, comes close to multireligious identity. On the other hand, soft MRB, merely taking up elements from various religions, comes close to multiple religious participation. Should we conclude that “belonging” as a term lies somewhere in between “identity” and “participation”? Or are identity and participation both components of religious belonging, interpreted in a composite and multidimensional sense?

On one end of the spectrum, Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Reinhold Bernhardt have argued to not speak about MRB but about multireligious identity (Bernhardt 2014; Bernhardt and Schmidt-Leukel 2008; Schmidt-Leukel 2020). On the other end of the spectrum, John Thatamanil, Mark Heim and Marianne Moyaert have argued to not speak about MRB but about multiple religious participation (Heim 2016; Moyaert 2016; Thatamanil 2016, 2020). Kalsky and others argue to continue to use the term “belonging” in the larger, multidimensional sense that includes self-identification, participation, affiliation and affinity in the sense of “feeling at home with.” Such a larger definition also serves to counter the connotation that multiple religious believers are somehow promiscuous, allowing themselves to be distracted by strange and irrelevant practices, or are superficial shoppers in a divine deli (Berthrong 1999). MRB-ers do have a genuine religious longing, not any less than single believers, even if they cannot completely fulfil that longing in one religious tradition, or even in any religious tradition at all (Berghuijs, Schilderman, Van der Braak and Kalsky 2018; Kalsky 2017; Oostveen 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2026).

Admittedly, such belonging might not fully meet Christian theological criteria for authentic belonging. However, we may consider that the notion of religious belonging has so far been colonized by Christian theology. Perhaps we need to decolonize the study of religious belonging in order to

book in part for medium multiple believers, “those who seek to remain within sacramental Christian communities even as we seek also to cultivate Buddhist mindfulness or yoga practice.”

make room for non-Christian imaginings of religious belonging that capture important elements of such a belonging that would otherwise be missed.

We can end this chapter with four preliminary conclusions. First, there is a large discrepancy between emic and etic approaches to MRB. In general, 48 percent of the Dutch population has a positive attitude towards combining elements from different religions. Twenty-four percent agree with the statement “I combine elements from different religious traditions in my life.” If corrected for intra-Christian answers, 17 percent remains. This is the first, emic answer to MRB. The etic answer used a wider, multidimensional definition of religious belonging, resulting in 23 percent MRB-ers.

Second, one of the main forms of MRB is Buddhist-Christian dual belonging. The group of Buddhist-Christian believers seems to largely consist of Christians who have developed a warm sympathy for Buddhism, with only a minority becoming strongly involved. It may be disputed whether this is truly MRB. Is expressing an affinity with Buddhism just a fashionable and socially desirable response?

Third, the uneasiness with the world religions schema, which is reported by a substantial minority of the respondents, may well contribute to an explanation for the difference in results between the emic and etic approaches to MRB. The emic group of self-declared “combiners” only partially overlaps with the etic group of MRB-ers, calculated based on their responses to questions that were along the lines of the world religions. The World Religions Paradigm will be critically discussed in chapter 2.

Fourth, the meaning of religious belonging remains contested. What does it mean when “membership” is no longer a guiding criterion? Do people belong religiously in different ways than before? Berghuijs addressed this question by using her seven modalities of religion. However, as she notes herself, “the results do not give much information about the nature of the several forms of belonging per person in terms of salience, variability, motives and aspirations, social embeddedness, and importance for daily life” (Berghuijs 2017). Berghuijs has addressed such issues in her qualitative and quantitative follow-up research.

This chapter has laid the empirical foundation for the book’s overall argument. It has shown that hybrid religiosity is real, and that it can be conceptualized as MRB. However, its emic/etic discrepancies have confirmed our reflective methodological commitment to MRB as a discursive field. Measuring MRB is not neutral: it helps to constitute what can be seen (and said). It confirms or challenges established preconceptions about what religion is and what religious belonging is. Chapter 2 will further explore such hermeneutical questions.

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2. Hermeneutical Explorations of Multiple Religious Belonging

Abstract: This chapter argues that disagreements about multiple religious belonging (hereafter MRB) are frequently disagreements about the meanings of “religion” and “belonging.” It maps MRB debates across major scholarly discourses and shows how different terms carry distinct normative stakes. Reconstructing the contested histories of “religion” and “belonging,” it distinguishes belonging from identity and participation and highlights how MRB research often relies on a World Religions Paradigm that presumes bounded traditions and membership-based belonging. Using Charles Taylor’s typology of belonging and particularist critiques of universal definitions, the chapter proposes a key methodological distinction: a hermeneutics of religions versus a hermeneutics of religiosity.

Keywords: hybrid religiosity; hermeneutics; religion; World Religions Paradigm; multiple religious belonging; Charles Taylor

This chapter summarizes and reviews the relevant debates on the hermeneutics of multiple religious belonging (hereafter MRB). It will not attempt to provide a comprehensive history or overview (work that is done elsewhere by many authors) but rather provide a guide for readers unfamiliar with the theological notions that underlie various approaches to MRB. It is based on chapters 1 and 2 of the PhD dissertation of Daan Oostveen (2020, 2026).

Whereas the various academic disciplines agree on the social fact of increasing religious hybridity,¹ they conceptualize this phenomenon using a bewildering and overwhelming variety of terms.² To give a sense of this

1 The available literature of the time included Bernhardt and Schmidt-Leukel 2008; Bochsinger 2008; Cornille 2002; Kalsky 2008; May 2007; Schmidt-Leukel 2012; Sharma and Dugan 1999.

2 The conceptual field around MRB includes concepts such as hybrid religiosity, patchwork-religion (Wuthnow 1998), *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss 1966), unaffiliated spirituals (van de Donk

wide range of conceptualizations, this chapter first gives an overview of how these terms are used within four disciplinary discourses on religious hybridity: theology of religions; social sciences and humanities; feminist and postcolonial studies; and intercultural studies. The remainder of the chapter will engage in a hermeneutical analysis of the MRB discourse, by focusing on the concepts “religion” and “religious belonging.” What different meanings do they carry? What is the difference between belonging, identity and participation? What is the difference between religious and non-religious belonging? Does “multiple” refer to the combination of adherence to several bounded and discrete religious traditions? Or do we need a different hermeneutic of MRB altogether, based more on religiosity than on religions? What are the implications of MRB for boundaries between religious traditions?

The final discussion section evaluates Oostveen’s suggestion to distinguish between a hermeneutics of religions and a hermeneutics of religiosity: a hermeneutics of religions is best suited to approach hard and medium MRB, whereas soft MRB is best approached by a hermeneutics of religiosity.

Four Disciplinary Discourses

Four major disciplines can be distinguished in which discourses on MRB have been developed: Christian theology (specifically the theology of religions that focuses on explaining and evaluating religious diversity); the social scientific study of religion; feminist and postcolonial studies, and the intercultural study of religion. What makes an interdisciplinary approach difficult is the fact that in all these disciplines, the notions of “religion” and “belonging” are defined somewhat differently.

Theology of Religions

Theology of religions is a subdiscipline of theology that aims to theorize and normatively evaluate religious diversity. Theologian Mark Heim gives a brief historical overview of theology of religions. At its inception, it was connected with Christian mission, and tasked with “explicating the conditions under

et al. 2006), floating believers (de Hart 2011) and believing without belonging (Davie 1994). Other terms that are used are: multiple/dual religious belonging, identity or participation; hyphenated Christians; JewBu’s; flexible/floating believers; unaffiliated spirituals; syncretism; salad bar spirituality; interspiritual/interreligious/transreligious/rhizomatic belonging; spiritual but not religious; religion without religion; the Nones.

which other religions were or could be bridges to Christian faith" (Heim 2016, 33). More recently, religious diversity as a challenge to Christian universality has become more an intellectual than an apologetic problem. In both approaches, religious diversity is a difficulty to be negotiated. In such a negotiation, three approaches can be distinguished: (1) overcoming religious diversity with Christian evangelization (exclusivism); (2) explaining how other religions can function as branches of the Christian way of salvation (inclusivism); (3) arguing that multiple religions can constitute their own equally valid paths toward one ultimate reality (pluralism).

It is theology of religions where the discourse of MRB can be found most often. Religious hybridity has often been said to run contrary to the exclusivity claims of Christian, Islamic and Jewish traditions, and has therefore theologically often been pejoratively interpreted as syncretism: the blending of foreign, non-Christian elements with (putatively "pure," "authentic") Christian beliefs and practices. The very notion of syncretism, however, assumes a coherent tradition as the baseline against which syncretic divergence could be plotted (McGuire 2008, 188–93). This notion of tradition is questioned by thinkers such as anthropologist André Droogers, who approaches syncretism alternatively from the perspective of religion as a form of play (Droogers 1995, 54). This helps to understand how people manage to combine religious rituals and practices that are each embedded in a different belief system (such as Buddhist meditation and Christian prayer).

Christian theological discourses on MRB often normatively distinguish between "serious" MRB (mainly "hard" Christian-Buddhist dual belonging) and superficial supermarket-like MRB (soft MRB), which is seen not to constitute "true" religious belonging. For example, Berthrong speaks of the "divine deli" where people feel free to choose between religious options, noting that such "[p]romiscuity has never been highly regarded by the guardians of religious orthodoxy" (Berthrong 1999, xvi). For Phan, this situation is what he terms "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 ... without regard to their truth values and mutual compatibilities" (Phan 2004, 62). Within this theological discourse, hard MRB (although it is empirically quite marginal) has received the most attention, especially Buddhist-Christian dual belonging.

Some theologians attempt to justify MRB, mostly from a Christian point of view. Others doubt that MRB is truly possible (for an overview see Van der Braak 2022). In the view of Catherine Cornille, for example, MRB implies "a discriminating and self-sufficient subject that is precisely what needs to

be left behind in the pursuit of the highest level of spiritual and religious attainment" (Cornille 2002, 3). Other theologians are more open to MRB, and attempt to theologically justify it by pointing to the universality of the ultimate religious experience that lies at the base of all traditions, and therefore (a) religious traditions can be regarded as different expressions of the same ultimate reality and experience (Drew 2011; Hick 1985; Hick 1995; Knitter 2009; Schmidt-Leukel 2005), or (b) religious traditions are complementary and open up different aspects of the same ultimate reality (Dupuis 2002). They aim at a theology of religions by constructing a pluralistic hermeneutical framework that can accommodate the phenomenon of MRB (Kalsky 2008; Moyaert 2011).

In the theology of religions, MRB has most often been approached through the exclusive/inclusive/pluralist paradigm. For exclusivists, MRB is not possible. For inclusivists, full hard MRB is not possible, but unequal hard MRB and medium MRB are possible, and even desirable. MRB can help one to become a better Christian. The most staunch advocates of MRB have been the pluralists. MRB is not only possible or desirable, it is natural. If all religions are travel guides for the spiritual seeker on her way to Ultimate Reality, it makes sense to use complementary travel guides for the various terrains that one will encounter on one's journey. However, we could argue that pluralism ultimately limits MRB to a preliminary stage. Once the Rubicon of various individual religions has been crossed, spiritual seekers from various religions can meet on the commons, share the information of their travel guides, and plot their course towards Ultimate Reality. Their religious adherence is to Ultimate Reality, not to their specific religious tradition, which is only a signpost on the way to Ultimate Reality. They feel at home in all traditions.³

Within the pluralist typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, pluralism was implicitly presented as the most advanced and mature option when it comes to relating to religious diversity. Theologians that disagreed with the pluralist stance had to defensively self-identify as inclusivists or even exclusivists. Also, when it came to MRB, pluralism seemed the most mature option. Pluralist theologians Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Paul Knitter famously spoke about "transformation by integration." The individual religious experience takes precedence over the traditions themselves. Religious traditions have no independent value in themselves, but serve as signposts and travel guides for the individual seeker on her way to Ultimate Reality.

3 McEntee (2017) has proposed to describe such a religious adherence as "interspiritual belonging."

They are road maps for climbing the mountain, each with its own utility in various circumstances. Rather than occupying two or more rooms in the mansion, MRB-ers end up meeting in the commons after having crossed the Rubicon of single religious belonging.

However, an increasing number of theologians today reject the pluralist typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, out of a discontent with the hegemony of pluralist approaches to interreligious dialogue and religious diversity. They are sometimes labeled “particularists,” and include “conservative” orthodox and postliberal theologians such as Gavin d’Costa, George Lindbeck, and John Milbank, who aim to preserve the uniqueness of the Christian tradition (see Hedges 2010). Also “progressive” feminist and postcolonial theologians such as Jeannine Hill Fletcher and Kwok Pui Lan are critical of those pluralist approaches that neglect religious and cultural hybridity.

Whereas most pluralist approaches to interreligious dialogue and religious diversity are interested in finding common ground between religious traditions, out of a conviction that multiple religious traditions can potentially offer access to religious truth and salvation, particularists tend to focus on the uniqueness of religious traditions, and the fundamental differences between religious traditions and religious individuals.

Particularists view MRB not from an outsider perspective but from an insider perspective. They focus more on the tradition than on the individual: what are the norms regarding MRB within the home tradition? Is MRB allowed, and under which conditions? They remain agnostic to the question whether belonging to the second tradition would be a valuable contribution. Although for many particularists, this would render MRB either impossible or inadvisable,⁴ for others, MRB would still be possible if conceived as being similar to being bilingual.⁵

Social Sciences and Humanities

Sociologists of religion often prefer empirical research into religion.⁶ However, quantitative sociological data (especially data from surveys) reveal little about individuals’ religion, as they are based on core interpretative concepts such as religion, religious traditions, religious belonging, conversion, and

4 Examples of theologians that tend to be critical of the possibility of MRB are Cornille 2003, 2016; D’Costa 2016; Griffiths 2001; Lindbeck 1984; Moyaert 2011, 2016; Strange 2016.

5 Grant 2017, Homrighausen 2015 and Von Brück 2007 have explored such an approach.

6 Social scientific empirical approaches to the phenomenon of MRB can be found in the work of Bidwell 2008, 2018; Bruce 2017; Drescher 2016; Goosen 2011.

religious identity. Survey questionnaires are ill-equipped to capture the complex amalgam of contemporary religious belongings, with all their eclectically chosen and often invisible elements, and the many permutations and creative intermixing that each individual might create from these many diverse elements.

The phenomenon of MRB shows that standard notions of religion and religious belonging are wholly inadequate when it comes to describing how religion is actually expressed and experienced in the lives of individuals today. The new paradigm in the sociology of religion of “lived religion” distinguishes the actual experience of religious people from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices (Hall 1997). It focuses on how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people, rather than official spokespersons, in the context of their everyday lives. At the individual level, religion turns out to be “an ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy—even contradictory—amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important” (McGuire 2008, 4).

In their everyday lives, people construct their religious worlds together, often sharing vivid experiences of that intersubjective reality (Orsi 2003). What is approached as “individual religion” is therefore also fundamentally social in nature. Religious belonging is not a consumer choice, but draws upon shared meanings and experiences, learned practices, borrowed imagery, and imparted insights. Nancy Ammerman criticizes the overtly simplistic assumptions that some prominent sociologists of religion make about the motivation and orientation of religious actors. The relationship between human and divine is not only about maximizing rewards, but is also oriented toward belonging and communion (Ammerman 2007, 227).

In the seventies, the approach to religion in Social Sciences and Humanities shifted from a focus on religious experience to a focus on meaning-making, as was especially apparent in the influential work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (Bush 2014). Of course, religious practitioners do have personal beliefs and experiences, but these were seen as secondary to the contextualized meaning-making practices that they engage in.⁷

This approach to religion shifts the focus of inquiry from the “private” inner representations, ideas and experiences of the subject to the publicly accessible and verifiable linguistic and material processes that are behind meaning-making in the world. It abandons all efforts at investigating “private

7 The Romantic discourse, with its individualist orientation, continues today in the widespread notion of spirituality.

experiences,” especially suprasensible experiences of the real, the sacred or the holy. In radical opposition to theological discourses, in such social scientific discourses, the sacred no longer has an ontological meaning, but is approached through the textual, the linguistic and the symbolic.⁸

Feminist and Postcolonial Studies

In feminist studies, gender issues are also taken into account with regard to MRB. In contemporary Western societies, women show much interest in MRB, and they are to a large extent “carriers” of this new phenomenon (Groot, Pieper, and Putman 2013; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Sointu and Woodhead 2008). Especially female theologians and scholars of religion have stressed the importance of a feminist perspective on religious hybridity (Egnell 2006; Fletcher 2005; Gross 2005; Strahm and Kalsky 2006), also within postcolonial studies (Donaldson and Kwok 2002; King 2000). Michelle Voss Roberts has stressed the need for queering the discourse on MRB (Voss Roberts 2010). Manuela Kalsky has stressed the rise of what she calls flexible believers (Kalsky and Pruim 2014).

Feminist and postcolonial theologians focus not on religions as singular homogenous entities, but on the positioning of individual persons within traditions. Jenny Daggers describes Jeannine Hill Fletcher as investigating the construction of individual “hybrid” religious and cultural identities. In such an approach, MRB is not only possible, but perhaps even unavoidable. As Daggers puts it, “Fletcher’s model allows for Christian identity to be shaped in conversation with religious others, amid wider cultural relations, rather than within Christian faith communities alone” (Daggers 2013, 166). This is especially relevant in non-Western contexts, where being a Christian involves “successfully combining the truth of Christianity with the truth and life-giving possibilities of indigenous traditions” (Daggers 2013, 166).

8 The American scholar of religion Jeffrey Kripal has noted that in the academic study of religion, religious experience is contextualized, quite correctly, as always “constructed” by local languages, ritual practices, and institutions. However, the danger of exclusively approaching religious experience as contextualized lies in losing sight of what makes religious experience religious. In the immanent frame, the so-called “supernatural” is taken off the table, in principle, as inappropriate to the academic project. Kripal notes: “And then we are told there is nothing ‘religious’ about religion, which, of course, is perfectly true, since we have just taken all of the fantastic stuff off the table. Put a bit differently, *our conclusions are really a function of our exclusions*.” (Kripal 2019, 40). Transpersonal psychologist Jorge Ferrer has similarly discussed how the linguistic turn within religious studies has tended to ignore that which religion is essentially about (Ferrer and Sherman 2008).

Intercultural Studies

In philosophy of religion and intercultural philosophy and theology, various researchers stress that in the wider history of religion, MRB may have been the rule rather than the exception, at least on a popular level. For example, in Asia, MRB seems to be a common phenomenon. Whereas in the West, religion tends to be investigated as a unitary, organizationally defined, and relatively stable set of collective beliefs and practices, East Asian cultures are often characterized by an open-ended religiosity that is not so much concerned with objective truth as it is with a subjective need to worship and seek protection, and a situational efficacy of rituals and practices (Van Bragt 2002, 9–10). And whereas in the West, “belonging” implies “finding one’s identity in,” it could be argued that for most Japanese (and Chinese), there is no perceived need for any identity besides being Japanese (or Chinese) (Van Bragt 2002, 10). Asian theologians, as well, question Western presuppositions regarding religious identity and belonging, such as the Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung and the Vietnamese theologian Peter Phan (Chung 1992; Kalsky 2007; Phan 2003, 2004, 2006).

Jan van Bragt has suggested, in his discussion of MRB in Japan, that the Western conception of religion is losing its monotheistic rigidity and is drawing nearer to the Japanese traditional sense of religion, in which the idea of exclusive affiliation to one religious group does not constitute the norm (Van Bragt 2002). In such a situation, MRB should no longer be viewed as a deviating state of affairs against a presupposed normative pattern (exclusive belonging to a single religion, conceived as a particular system of beliefs in a bounded community).

Paul Hedges has compared MRB in the West to Chinese religious diversity, and has discussed the hypothesis that the Western religious landscape is starting to resemble the Chinese one (Hedges 2017, 2019). Asian criticisms of Western assumptions about MRB have been published by Peter Phan (Phan 2003, 2004, 2006), by Pui Lan Kwok (Kwok 2005), and in the collections of essays published by the World Council of Churches, *Many Yet One* (Rajkumar and Dayam 2016).

This short overview makes clear that the notion of MRB is used in different ways in the various discourses that we discussed. The meaning of MRB hinges on what religion and religious belonging mean. This is why the next section will present a genealogical overview that will demonstrate the contingent and provincial origin of Western ideas about religion and religious belonging. How did the world get divided into a discrete set of religions? More specifically, it hinges on some account of religious diversity in which transformative truth can be found outside one’s own religion. It requires a theology of religious diversity.

Religion and Religious Belonging Reconsidered

Anthropologist Talal Asad has stressed that religion should not be viewed as some “transhistorical essence,” existing as a timeless and unitary phenomenon (Asad 1993, 29). Neither should it be connected to fixed notions of transcendence (Stoker and Van der Merwe 2012a, 2012b). Some of the historical changes in the very definition of what it means to be religious have become inadvertently embedded in scholarly conceptual tools, leading to inappropriate, supposedly empirical evidence on people’s religious beliefs and practices (De Vries 2008; Fitzgerald 2003; Masuzawa 2005; McCutcheon 2003).

Also, the term “religious belonging” can have a variety of meanings. Oostveen distinguishes three semantics of “belonging”: belonging as ownership (being committed to), belonging as membership (being affiliated with), and locative belonging (feeling at home) (Oostveen 2020, 128–30). Baatz argues that the notion of “religious belonging” functions as an identity marker, establishing boundaries, in two senses: (1) Territorial (belonging as situating one’s fundamental beliefs within a mental or physical territory, such as “The Church, a religion”), (2) Relationship (belonging as participating in rituals or practices in order to be socially/emotionally connected to a family, a culture, a group or a person) (Baatz 2017). A different, more inclusive metaphor for religious belonging that does not involve establishing boundaries is that of (3) belonging as walking a religious path, which includes silencing the craving for identity and clear boundaries. Whereas (1) and (2) are static, (3) is an activity and a process. The maps and the resources for walking such a path are provided by the religions as bounded territories (1) and social communities (2). Religious belonging in the sense of (3) refers to practices and beliefs that one “owns,” rather than to territories or communities that one is owned by (Baatz 2017).

Nevertheless, we live in a world where religion and religious belonging seem self-evident social realities. A major part of the world population is considered to belong to one of the five (or ten) world religions, one of many smaller local religions, one of the many new religious movements, or be involved in one of the many forms of “popular religion.” Even though historians of religion have abundantly established that the very notion of “religion” itself is an early modern European invention, this does not seem to change our lived reality. This “invention of religion,” however, is only one step in a much more fundamental and all-encompassing historical process. The dynamics of this process are increasingly being discussed as “religionization” or “religion-making” (Moyaert 2024; Thatamanil 2020): the social construction of what “religion” is, what counts as religion and what doesn’t.

In such a step-by-step process of religion-making, which continually shifts the meaning of religion, also religious belonging is created and continually reimagined. Today, religious belonging is often characterized in terms of religious belief, in the sense of agreeing with, or giving assent to, particular propositions. However, such an interpretation of religious belonging is not as natural and universal as has been assumed. As historian of religion Peter Harrison argues, not only is it often missing in non-Western cultures, it is also missing in Western antiquity (Harrison 2024).

In this section I will follow the analysis of comparative theologian and religious studies scholar Marianne Moyaert, who has written a history of the various patterns of religionization that have characterized Christianity in Western Europe, with a focus on Christian imaginations of the religious other (Moyaert 2024).⁹ The process of religionization refers to the creation of bounded religious traditions, in order to create “us” and “them.”¹⁰

Roman Religio

Let us begin our genealogical research “before religion” with the Latin term *religio*. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith already pointed out, this term originally referred to a sense of restraint, a feeling of having to tread carefully (Smith 1962). Later it referred to worship practices or the performance of ancient rituals to please the gods. *Religio* became almost synonymous to tradition. Cicero derived *religio* from *relegere*, to retrace or re-read. From a perspective of religious belonging, however, it is interesting that, as Moyaert notes,

another possible etymological root of *religio* is the verb *religare*, meaning “to bind together” or “to tie together,” indicating a shared reverence for the same gods. From this perspective, *religio* is a power that holds people together. [...] People belong together because they share *religio* as *traditio* and this sense of belonging is reproduced by performing ancient rituals together. (Moyaert 2024, 17–18)

9 As Moyaert notes, the tedious work of revealing and identifying patterns of religionization is important, because we need to re-imagine our religious world, to see it and think about it differently (Moyaert 2024, 9). I would add: it is not only important to identify historical patterns of religionization in Christianity in Western Europe, but also to cross-culturally study the imaginings of the religious worlds of non-Western and pre-Christian Western cultures. A tall order indeed.

10 Or, as Moyaert calls it: “co-dependent processes of ‘selfing’ and ‘othering.’” “Selfing” refers to “the construction of imagined normative identities” that generate a sense of religious belonging. Such “selfing” always goes hand in hand with “othering”: “the creation of a deviant and hence illegitimate other” (Moyaert 2024, 1).

The notion of *religio* was connected to *superstitio*, which originally referred to more personal devotions and oaths, but was later linked more pejoratively to “all irrational, improper and perverted credulity as well as unauthorized divination, magic and astrology” (Kahlos 2007, 96). *Superstitio* was seen as not the opposite of *religio* but as an inappropriate and illegitimate perversion of it (Kahlos 2007, 95). It was eventually used to refer to the *religio(nes)* of foreigners.

In the Roman term *religio*, there is not really a place for religious belonging. One belongs to the family and the polis, but not to religion. Religious practices and rituals are obligations that are connected to one's family belonging and one's belonging as a civilian. If there is anything that would compare to religious belonging in the contemporary sense, it would be philosophical belonging: antiquity knew various philosophical schools, systems of beliefs and practices that one could voluntarily accept.

Christianity as True Religio

In a next step, Christianity came to be considered the only true *religio*: only baptized and faithful Christians could be saved, other forms of *religio* led to perdition. They were exemplars of *superstitio* or *religio falsa*. Tertullian redefined true and false *religio* as the worship of true and false gods.

The invention of this imaginary binary construct of true and false *religio* is the first pattern of religionization within Christianity that Moyaert distinguishes. It leads to the demarcation of norm versus deviation. The illegitimate other becomes the heretic. “Heretics are accused of falsely claiming the name ‘Christian’ for their beliefs and practices. Pretending to be Christian, they poison the one Christian truth with their false and innovative teachings” (Moyaert 2024, 38).

In this phase, Christian belonging was characterized in terms of faith. Harrison argues that first-century Jews, Christians, and Pagans had no conception of belief in the modern sense (Harrison 2024, 32). The key terms in the first century were the Greek *pistis* and the Latin *fides*, which are translated as “faith” or “belief.” However, as historian Teresa Morgan has shown, their primary meanings center on “trust,” in a cognitive, affective, active and relational sense (Morgan 2015). In Christian communities,

the relational aspect of faith, which is the most central, extended to the trustworthiness of God, to trust or confidence in God, trust in the person of Jesus, and trust among persons in the Christian community. Faith was also understood as a divine gift, and one that demanded a response of obedience. It was linked to a set of behaviors and obligations. There

is little evidence that faith was understood primarily as right belief, or as assenting to propositions. Neither, at first, was there a conception of “the faith,” a body of doctrines to which orthodox Christians subscribed. (Harrison 2024, 34)

The earliest Christians thought of themselves “not as a community set apart by the unique set of propositional beliefs to which they subscribed, but as ‘those who trust’ or ‘the faithful’” (Harrison 2024, 34, see also Morgan 2015, 234–41). Extending well into the Middle Ages, they referred to themselves as “the faithful” (*fideles*) rather than “Christians” (*Christiani*). Christian belonging consisted in being faithful, not in being a Christian believer.

When second- and third-century Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr attempted to define the gates of proper Christian belonging, they arrived at faith and baptism: “Baptism, while invisible as such, is understood as an indelible spiritual mark branded onto Christian bodies. Like cattle being branded, baptism marks adherence to Christ and thus to God’s new people. It changes Christians in their essence, fixates their belonging, and transforms them profoundly and sets them apart” (Justin Martyr 1948, 4).¹¹

The scholar of religion Daniel Boyarin argues that in the third century, Christian writers were using both Judaism and Christianity to refer to systems of beliefs and practices that could, like philosophical schools, be voluntarily adopted and maintained. To be a Christian meant belonging to the Christian system of beliefs and practices, rather than to the Judaic system (Boyarin 2017, 27).

By the end of the fourth century, texts can be found in which “Christianity’s new notion of self-definition via ‘religious’ alliances was gradually replacing self-definition via kinship and land” (Boyarin 2017, 28). This new notion of Christian belonging made room for the reorganization of significant aspects of life under a single, totalized, imperial Christian rubric. Christianity became a “religion,” disembedded from other cultural practices and identifying markers.

An interesting development in this regard is Julian the Apostate, who in the 360s attempted to create his own religion, Hellenism, on this very model. In this, Boyarin argues, he participated in “the invention of a new notion of ‘religion’ as a category, as a modality of identity formation, and as a regime for power/knowledge” (Boyarin 2017, 29). Vasiliki Limberis notes: “In particular, Julian echoes Christianity’s *modus operandi* by turning pagan practices into a formal institution that one must join” (Limberis 2000, 399).

11 Quoted in Moyaert 2024, 24.

The Reification of Faith

After the first century, a process started to take place that Morgan calls “the ‘reification’ of *pistis/fides*, where this trust relationship becomes objectified as oaths of allegiance, letters of credit, or the idea of a formal covenant” (Morgan 2015, 120–23). Also, an element of doctrinal commitment became more important as doctrinal diversity and “false teachings” became a source of concern. This tendency, connected with Max Weber’s notion of the “routinization of charisma,” culminated in the composition of the Nicene Creed in 325 (Harrison 2024, 41–46). As Harrison argues, however, such creedal statements should be understood more as liturgical speech acts or performative utterances than as propositions that Christians should assent to.

The opposition between orthodoxy and heresy culminated in the construction of various creeds, and was further institutionalized during the centuries-long process of the Christianization of Europe. The ideal was a unified Christian society that needed to be protected against its others (Jews, heretics, and pagans, including Muslims). Moyaert describes this second pattern of religionization as religio-racialization: the naturalization of religious difference in terms of physiological/biological difference (Moyaert 2024, 133). The reform program of Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073–85) led to the Crusades that were based on a dehumanization of Saracens (Muslims). But next to these external enemies of Christianity, there were also internal enemies threatening authentic Christian belonging. Heresy returned as a problem for which the Inquisition was founded in the thirteenth century to conduct “the war on heresy.”

Harrison argues that, at first sight, practices of marginalizing and persecuting heretics might give the impression that believing in a set of propositions was essential for Christian belonging. In reality, however, such practices were more about restoring social order and harmony. Some scholars even suggest that the heretic beliefs from such persecuted groups as the Cathars and the Bogomils were the construction of committed churchmen, and a result of the imagination of Inquisitors (Harrison 2024, 48). All throughout the Middle Ages, the statements of the Creed were meant to be taken refuge in, not to be literally believed, which was largely irrelevant for salvation: “Salvation was not a matter, primarily, of explicitly assenting to the right set of propositions, but of being incorporated into the body of the Church through the medium of the sacraments. The specialized task of getting the doctrines right was left to theological authorities” (Harrison 2024, 52). These theological authorities, the medieval theologians, attempted to relate Christian faith to Aristotelian ideals of knowledge.

The era of colonization led to the encounter with indigenous peoples who did not fit within the fourfold religionized map of the world (Christians, Jews, Muslims and pagans). They were seen as having no religious belonging, and could therefore be easily converted to Christianity. This was originally done by baptizing them *en masse*.

During this phase, religion and religious belonging increasingly became part of what Foucault would term “a power/knowledge regime.” The notions came to serve certain power interests. As Boyarin notes, “a major category (if not the only one) for dividing human beings into groups is ‘the subject of their beliefs,’ hence the power/knowledge regime of [...] ‘religion’” (Boyarin 2017, 33). Religious belonging to various religions were created. Boyarin argues that Judaism and paganism were created by Christian authors as other religions “precisely in order to cordon off Christianity, in a purification and crystallization of its essence as a bounded entity” (Boyarin 2017, 33). Obviously, pagans themselves did not refer to themselves as belonging to paganism. And as Boyarin notes, Jews themselves did not refer to themselves as belonging to Judaism until the nineteenth century (Boyarin 2017, 24). Therefore, Judaist and paganist belonging were created by a hegemonic Christian discourse.

Confessional Belonging

The Reformation in the sixteenth century, inspired by a desire to return to a more authentic Christian belonging, led to its interiorization. This had already started in the fourteenth century, when the movement of the Modern Devotion around Geert Grote (1340–1384), reinterpreted *religio* as “the quality of devoting one’s life entirely to God,” regardless of whether one lived in a monastery or elsewhere (Moyaert 2024, 157). *Religio* became a virtue that could be practiced by anyone. Today we would call it “religiosity.” Christian reformers, both Protestant and Catholic, reinterpreted true Christian belonging now as interiorized, spiritualized, hermeneutical and personal (Moyaert 2024, 175).

This turn inwards led to increased efforts to educate people about Christian doctrine. Many different confessions or creeds were created, that were meant to clearly define what Christians believed. This ultimately led, however, to the next pattern of religionization: confessionalization. Christian belonging splintered into many forms of confessional belonging: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, and so forth (Moyaert 2024, 181).

This splintering of churches led to a proliferation of theological authorities that offered competing proposals for what Christians should believe. As Harrison puts it, this

brought a decisive end to the institutionally mediated trust relations that had been central to early Christian and medieval conceptions of faith. [...] It was no longer possible simply to reside trust in “the Church” because there were multiple churches each with their own distinctive teachings. As a consequence, faith necessarily became a more personal matter, with individuals assuming for themselves the burden of understanding and assenting to sets of beliefs. (Harrison 2024, 66)

The discovery of the New Worlds in the sixteenth century, followed by the rapid incursion of Christian missionaries, involved the question of what it meant to convert non-Christians to Christians: what constituted true Christian belonging? The first wave of Catholic missionaries baptized those who were willing, rather than attempting to inculcate the doctrinal truths of Catholic Christianity. They drew upon the notion of implicit faith: membership of the Church was bestowed through the rite of baptism. Augustine had written that through the sacrament of baptism the infant becomes “a believer,” even though it is unable to assent to any doctrines. The next wave of missionaries, however, “withheld baptism from those unable to articulate core Christian doctrines unless they were on death’s doorstep” (Harrison 2024, 69).

This was one of the results of the Reformation: a new idea took hold of what it was to be Christian. Luther and Calvin rejected implicit faith, and insisted that Christians must have an explicit knowledge of what they believed. Sacramental practices should be accompanied by knowledge of Christian doctrines. Such knowledge increasingly became a responsibility of the individual. The Church was no longer the custodian of religious knowledge, and a guarantor of its truth (Harrison 2024, 73).

As Moyaert puts it: “From now on, Christian discipleship is not just about participating in the sacramental life of the church and performing the communal rituals that bind the Christian community together; it is about knowing, understanding, and consenting to certain beliefs and practices, and about evaluating one’s life in the light of the respective confessional standard” (Moyaert 2024, 197). Salvation was no longer collective but became an individual matter.

Religious Belonging as Justified Belief

Therefore, the individual had to be able to not only make private judgments about which religious beliefs to hold (which, ironically, had previously been condemned as heresy), but also to offer a justification for holding those beliefs. This led to an “ethics of belief”: “the idea that we have a moral duty

to be able to provide good evidence for holding the beliefs we do" (Harrison 2024, 82).

These developments required a new understanding of faith, in which the role of trust was diminished, and the role of reason was elevated. Philosopher Thomas Hobbes was a representative of the seventeenth century in arguing that "to believe in God is not to put one's trust in God, but rather to give intellectual assent to the proposition 'God exists'" (Harrison 2024, 112). This was precisely the opposite of first-century understandings of faith. Faith now became a form of knowledge, rather than relational trust: "The shift is from trust to an appeal to the evidence. On these new understandings, to believe in God or Christ was not so much to reside trust in them as persons, but to believe their edicts and utterances on the basis of some independent evidence" (Harrison 2024, 113).

In a time of increasing religious pluralism and confessional conflict, however, the adoption of correct religious beliefs and practices became problematic. Which beliefs and practices? And based on what evidence? This led to the rise of systematic theology that was concerned with propositional belief and its justification. With regard to Christian belonging, an individualized evidence-based belief replaced a communal, trust-based faith (Harrison 2024, 127). This allowed the invention of the modern notion of "religion" (and the recognition of plural "religions") constituted by propositional beliefs.

The next pattern of religionization was the religio-secular divide. With the invention of religion, religious belonging became an extension of Christian belonging, and it became opposed to being secular (no religious belonging). Tolerance became an important religious virtue. True religious belonging was tolerant religious belonging, adogmatic and apolitical. Orthodox Christian belonging, with its focus on truth, shifted to enlightened, deist Christian belonging, with a focus on reason and rationality.

Richard King has described how in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, conforming to this model of confessional belonging, Hindu and Buddhist believers to the religions of "Hinduism" and "Buddhism" were created (King 2000).

Religious Belonging as Religious Experience

As we have seen, the criteria for religious belonging (i.e., Christian belonging) gradually shifted from right faith to right belief. To be a religious believer, especially in the Protestant tradition, meant to be convinced of the truth of certain creedal propositions.

As the reality of religious diversity became more apparent, Eastern religious believers were initially conceptualized as believers in Buddha,

Brahman, or the Dao. However, closer contact with Asian religions led to the realization that their believers do not attach all that much importance to holding creedal beliefs (obviously they do hold religious beliefs, but these are not fundamental to their religious belonging, see e.g., Lopez 1998). They prioritize religious experience over creedal belief.

Starting in the nineteenth century, Romantic discourses began to put religiosity beyond the reach of rational criticism by assigning it a special place in the heart. Religion referred to a universal potential in humans. A Schleiermachian and Jamesian understanding of religion gained popularity: being religious is not so much about holding religious beliefs but is primarily a matter of seeking out and having religious experiences. Religion scholars focused on the core religious experience of the individual itself, defined variously as the feeling of absolute dependence (Schleiermacher), the subjective consciousness of the numinous (Otto), the sacred (Eliade), or one's ultimate concern (Tillich). The individual consciousness was primary, not external reality. Such an approach to religion in terms of experience lends itself well to a pluralist understanding of religious diversity. Rather than competing and incompatible belief systems, religious traditions are different "fingers pointing to the moon": conventional conceptual systems that were meant to make room for a "pure," uncontaminated ineffable experience of that which always must remain beyond words and concepts. Religions are different paths up the same mountain, or different rivers flowing into the same ocean.¹²

The American comparative theologian Hugh Nicholson points to the consequences for the notion of religious belonging (Nicholson 2017). In the early nineteenth century, liberal theologians made a distinction between two types of religious belonging: profound and authentic inner belonging on the one side, versus the superficial and external belonging defined as membership of religious institutions. Nicholson notes how the liberal theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) in his book *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, first published in 1799, distinguished between a private inner religious belonging (which he saw as true religious belonging) and a public external, political religious belonging that led to the sectarian strife and persecution that caused the cultural despisers to criticize

¹² Whereas this experiential approach to religion continues to be very popular with religious believers, the notion of a "pure" religious experience has been challenged as being very problematic in academic circles. Experience, perception and language are inevitably bound up with each other, and arise in a context of socialization. It is highly doubtful whether there can be such a thing as a "pure," unmediated experience (see e.g., Wright 1992, 2000).

religion so heavily (Schleiermacher 1893). He attempted to depoliticize religion by developing a contrast between the true church and the external religious society: “the true church embodies the principles of reconciliation and unity, the external religious society the principles of antagonism and separation” (Nicholson 2017, 79).

For Schleiermacher, true religious belonging was not to particular external religious society but to “an unbounded form of religious community founded on a particular kind of religious intuition (his ‘sense and taste of the Infinite’)” (Nicholson 2017, 79), which for him was the essence of true religion that transcended sectarian controversies. This contributed to the privatization, interiorization and universalization of true religious belonging that was fundamental to pluralist theologians, the Theosophical society, and perennialist thinkers alike. True religious belonging is not confessional but universal, not to a particular religion but to Truth, as epitomized in the famous poem by Rumi:

I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Magian, nor Muslim.
I am not of the East, nor of the West,
nor of the land, nor of the sea. (Barks 1995)

Taking the step from confessional belonging to such universal belonging was the “crossing the Rubicon” that pluralist theologians wrote about.

The World Religions Paradigm

The last step in the process of religionization is the emergence of a new religious taxonomy in the nineteenth century. The medieval fourfold map was replaced by the World Religions Paradigm, intended as descriptive, but in reality a normative redescription of the beliefs and practices of (sometimes invented) non-Christian religious traditions based on the parameters of Christian belonging.

The World Religions Paradigm sees religion as a stand-alone category that is different from other realms such as politics or economics. The various religions are multiple species of this single genus. Whereas religion is universal, the various religions are particular manifestations of religion, with coherent worldviews, ritual practices, creedal beliefs, and foundational texts. Religious belonging, according to the World Religions Paradigm, is defined by belief in a creed: the assent to particular doctrinal propositions, that form the more or less unchanging core of religions. Religious believers are “believers” (Moyaert 2024, 250). The World Religions Paradigm is described by Paul Hedges as follows:

Firstly, religions are understood to be bounded territories of belonging. That is to say that there are quite clear lines of demarcation between each one such that Christianity, Islam, or Zoroastrianism are understood to be clearly separated and demarcated. [...] Secondly, the act of being in a religion is understood to be primarily about believing in a set of principles. That is to say there will be some form of belief system or creed which is adhered to and which will be distinct between religions. [...] Thirdly, and inherent within points one and two, every religious tradition is seen to be its own internally coherent and regulated entity. That is to say, it comes with its own set of meanings and a clearly defined set of beliefs and practices. (Hedges 2017, 53–54)

Although the World Religions Paradigm is often presented as a descriptive paradigm that finally overcomes Christian normativity, critical scholars such as Masuzawa, Thatamanil, and Moyaert understand it as a new modern expression of religionization. It builds on the various older patterns of religionization: interiorization (true religiosity is a human universal: the inner quality of personal dedication and commitment to the divine), confessionalization (true religious belonging means embracing the particular scriptural hermeneutics, creeds, rituals, symbols and so on, of one's chosen confession) and religio-secularization (true religion is a tolerant and peaceful private affair, disentangled from politics and other public realms).

This genealogical overview has shown us that our seemingly self-evident understandings of religion and religious belonging have deep historical roots. They have contingently arisen during a long process of religionization, culminating in today's World Religions Paradigm. As a next step, we will zoom in further on the way that religious belonging has taken shape in the West during the past few centuries.

Taylor's Three Types of Religious Belonging

In his book *A Secular Age*, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor offers his own historical overview¹³ of ways of being religious in Europe since the sixteenth century. He describes three Weber-style ideal types of social matrices in which religious life was carried on (Taylor 2007, 437). These types of social matrices can be interpreted as three types of religious belonging (see Van der Braak 2020).

13 Taylor himself calls it "an outrageously simplified potted history" (Taylor 2007, 437).

In the premodern age, religious belonging was characterized by what Taylor calls the ancient régime (hereafter AR) matrix. In this AR matrix, there was a strong link between one's religious belonging and one's political belonging—"a close connection between church membership and being part of a national, but particularly local community" (Taylor 2007, 440). In this type of religious belonging, one's connection to the sacred entails one's belonging to a church, which is co-extensive with the state. The rituals, practices and beliefs that bind the nation together as a community also constitute one's individual religious belonging. The religious tradition that one belongs to is the self-evident backdrop of collective existence. There is no connection to the sacred other than through the church. There is a link between adhering to a religion and belonging to the state. Medieval pre-Reformation Christianity was of such a type. The Australian Buddhist teacher Winton Higgins describes this type as follows:

The individual was baptized into and learned to participate in "the Church" as a matter of course; it and its truth-claims had no rivals—in this sense belief was "naïve"; its structures based on the sacred/profane binary, its enchanted stories, doctrines, rituals and festivals had been there since "time out of mind" and constituted the very fabric of one's reality and way of life. Religion was something enacted, communally acted out, to win favor with benevolent supernatural forces and ward off the malevolent. (Higgins 2012, 118)

Over time, Taylor suggests, this AR-form of religious belonging led to a new phase and type: the Age of Mobilization (1800–1960), that led to what Taylor calls an M-type of religious belonging. Now, the status quo of the AR-type of belonging is replaced by the mobilization of new rituals, practices and institutions. There is no longer an ancient regime to be taken for granted, and no enchanted cosmos in which God resides and in which all are embedded. God is still present, however, in what Taylor calls a "Modern Moral Order" of mutual benefit that God has established, and to which the various religious denominations have to conform. In the M-type of religious belonging, there is a certain amount of disembedding. One voluntarily belongs to the religious denomination of one's choice. This is an important step towards individualization, Taylor notes: one joins a denomination because it seems right to one. But through this association one is still connected to the larger

church and its heritage, which still feeds and fuels the nation.¹⁴ Higgins describes this M-type of religious life as

typically represented by an ever growing number of “denominations.” The latter had clearly not existed since time immemorial: one had to commit to one of them as a matter of individual choice and conscience; they and their assets had to be built up, often from humble beginnings. The faithful lived largely in a modern, disciplined, disenchanted, soul-searching world. Their piety expressed itself in their orderly work, family and church lives, and their attention to civic duty: being a Christian meant being a robust citizen of one’s community and nation. [...] Religious choice and piety were individual responsibilities, further aspects of individuation, but they fostered a communitarian ethic. (Higgins 2012, 119)

Today, Taylor argues, we live in an Age of Authenticity (hereafter AA), characterized by the rise of expressive individualism. Taylor claims that this has not only profoundly altered the conditions of belief in our societies, but also our lived experience of religious belonging. The understanding of human life, agency and the good now centers around the notion of authenticity. The primary value becomes choice: “bare choice as a prime value, irrespective of what it is a choice between, or in what domain” (Taylor 2007, 448). The Age of Authenticity has radically expanded people’s available options. The intra-Christian religious pluralism that was already inherent in the Age of Mobilization has now exploded into unlimited interreligious options, which Taylor calls “the nova effect.” As long as one stays within the Modern Moral Order of mutual benefit—do not harm anyone and do not go against the public interest—we are all free to do our own thing.

With regard to religious belonging, this means a qualitative shift: “The religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this” (Taylor 2007, 486). In this type of belonging, which we could call the AA-type of belonging,

there is no necessary embedding of our link to the sacred in any particular broader framework, whether “church” or state. Today, those that are

14 In China, such a type of religious belonging is actively encouraged by the Chinese government. However, in spite of this there remains much connection to the sacred outside the five official religions in China, which is called “popular religion” or “superstition,” depending on the discourse.

Christian, or Buddhist, are so in their own way, and they fashion Jesus, or Buddha after their own taste, not beholden to any orthodoxy. This type of religious belonging no longer accepts the external constraints of any religion: “let everyone follow his/her own path of spiritual inspiration. Don’t be let off yours by the allegation that it doesn’t fit with some orthodoxy.” (Taylor 2007, 489)

Significantly, however, religious belonging is uncoupled not only from religious institutional authority, but also from political allegiance. The liberal understanding of religious belonging sees it as something private, something that should be kept behind the front door. This means that for many today, there are no longer external constraints (a larger church, an orthodoxy, social and political norms) that limit one’s religious belonging.

Taylor’s three types of religious belonging are ideal types. They do not accurately reflect reality, and they cannot be equated to different phases in history. However, the third type has come to increasingly color our secular age, and Taylor claims this shift goes a long way to explain the conditions of belief in our day. For some, such as AA-belonging takes the form of interspiritual belonging. They have gone beyond exclusive M-belonging and crossed the Rubicon. For others, such as the Nones, it takes the form of no religious belonging at all.

The genealogy of religion and religious belonging is contested. There are multiple perspectives from different disciplines, each emphasizing other factors. After Taylor’s philosophical overview, we will now briefly consider some theological perspectives on the history of religion and religious belonging, focusing on Christianity.

Particularist Perspectives on Religious Belonging

As has been apparent from our overview of discourses on MRB, within theology of religions there is controversy between pluralist and particularist narratives. Also, the genealogy of religion and religious belonging that we offered earlier can be contested.

Four Types of Christianity

In chapter 1 of her book *Postcolonial Theology of Religions*, the English feminist theologian Jenny Daggars (2013), who self-identifies as a particularist theologian, gives her own version of the genealogy of Christian belonging. In her version, she stresses the deeply Eurocentric nature of the various

Christian attitudes to religious diversity so far, which she calls *Christianity increased*, *Christianity transcended* and *Christianity diminished*. And whereas those three attitudes need to be left behind, according to her, she argues for a new Christian attitude to religious diversity that she calls *Christianity recentred*.

In Dagger's account, in the twelfth and thirteenth century, the first real Christian encounters with other faiths took place. However, these were not true interreligious encounters between two or more equal religions, but encounters between true and false religion.¹⁵ In the fifteenth century, Nicolas of Cusa was on a quest, not only for concordance between Catholic and Orthodox Churches, but a concord of religions. In *Reconciliation of the World Religions*, for Cusanus, *una religio* meant "the unattainable truth about God [...] of which all belief systems are but shadowy reflections" (Lash 1996, 11). For Cusanus as a negative theologian, true worship meant knowing God to be ineffable and transcendent, whereas false worship confused God with his works. At the end of the fifteenth century, Renaissance writers Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola spoke in a similar way about world religions beyond Christianity.¹⁶

Both the Reformation and the European colonial project greatly increased awareness of religious diversity. Christian missionaries responded by spreading the truth of Christianity around the world (*Christianity increased*), out of an exclusivist attitude to religious diversity. This approach, Daggers argues, was (and is) deeply entangled with the expansionary colonial project. It considers only Christian belonging as true religious belonging.

Christianity was either transcended (through notions of a universal natural theology and natural religion, resulting in Deism) or diminished (through criticisms of such a universal natural religion). *Christianity transcended* led to pluralist attitudes to religious diversity and the arising of the discipline of "theology of religions," studying the Christian relationship to other religions, not from a position of superiority but a position of equality. This led to a pluralist openness to MRB. It is possible to belong to more than one religious tradition. In fact, true religious belonging is to religion, rather than to one of the individual religious traditions (including Christianity),

15 As Daggers notes, "Theologians' dominant concern was to correct divergence from the doctrinal truth of the 'one true faith'; doctrines of the enemies of Christendom were to be vigorously contested. Truth was to be upheld in the face of error" (Daggers 2013, 15).

16 The use of the term "world religions" here is very different from the later World Religions Paradigm.

which need to be transcended since they are all merely signposts and travel guides to true religiosity.¹⁷

Christianity transcended eventually led to the discipline of religious studies that philosophically studied natural religion (which pointed to universal truth available to reason) and empirically studied the sacred texts, artifacts, beliefs and practices of the various religious traditions, initially through the distorting lens of Christian categories but increasingly in their own terms.¹⁸ For secular thinkers, universal natural religion was reduced from universal truth to fiction. David Hume famously criticized natural religion on empirical grounds in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Hume 1779). This was followed later by critical theories of religion by Feuerbach, Marx, Freud and Durkheim. Religion referred to a social and cultural phenomenon that consisted of the various religious traditions (Christianity included), each with their own beliefs and practices that lack any truth value however (*Christianity diminished*).

This led to a secular approach to religion and religions that places no inherent value on religious belonging, viewing it as just a social and cultural phenomenon that can be studied by religious studies, from a secular perspective that also included criticism of religion's negative social and psychological functions. Within religious studies, religions of South and East Asia were gradually allowed full and equal membership in the family of religious traditions around the world. And so the World Religions Paradigm was born, embraced by both *Christianity transcended* and *Christianity diminished*.

From Daggers' postcolonial and particularist point of view, three Christian attitudes to religious diversity and religious belonging emerge: (1) for *Christianity increased*, the attitude to religious diversity is exclusivist, and true religious belonging is Christian belonging; (2) for *Christianity transcended*, the attitude to religious diversity is inclusivist or pluralist. Religious belonging can be multiple, but either remains subservient to Christian belonging (for inclusivists) or ultimately transcends the particular religious traditions and transforms into interspiritual belonging; (3) for

17 For Protestant theologians, such universal truth was accessible through true doctrine. For Kant, such universal truth was a moral one, and referred to the moral law within. For Schleiermacher, such universal truth was an experiential one: the feeling of absolute dependence. Therefore, true religion was found in the piety of the heart, not in the abstract reasoning of the mind.

18 Comparative study of religion, as founded by Max Müller, shifted from the study of natural religion to the study of the various religions. The focus was on discovering common ground, out of Müller's silent conviction that what is common to all religions, whether revealed or not, may possibly constitute the essential elements of true religion.

Christianity diminished, religious diversity and MRB are neutral facts that can be studied by social science.

For contemporary postcolonial Christian theologians, Daggers argues, the conditions of postcolonial postmodernity invite yet another approach to religious belonging that focuses on religious traditions as “places of return.” In this approach, single religious belonging is seen as belonging to a specific tradition (such as Christianity), seen not as a bounded and static entity, but as a living dynamic stream with fluid boundaries (*Christianity re-centred*). Multiple religious participation is possible for Christians, but primarily as a way to enrich and deepen their primary Christian religious belonging, similar to interreligious practices such as comparative theology and scriptural reasoning.

Daggers is very critical of any pluralist approach to religious diversity that is based on the World Religions Paradigm. She views such approaches as belonging within and resulting from the trajectory of *Christianity transcended*. As Dagger notes, “Whether spoken on behalf of Christian theology or over against it, when accommodation with secular modernity or with the religions leads to a reduction in the scope of Christian claims, religion as Christianity transcended is at work” (Daggers 2013, 85).

Masuzawa has argued that in the construction of world religions pluralism, in Daggers’ terms, the absolutism of *Christianity increased* was transferred to the absolutism of *Christianity transcended*. Notions of universal religion or religiosity were prevalent in religious studies in the early twentieth century, and formed the basis for comparative research. The search was on for the commonalities between religions that would define the essence of religion. Later in the twentieth century, Wilfred Cantwell Smith published *Towards a World Theology*, in which he argued for a single history of universal religion that unites the diversity of religious traditions (Smith 1981).

In such attempts, Daggers argues, there is a readiness to transcend Christian particularity within a broader universal framework (Daggers 2013, 87). For the theologian Paul Tillich, such a broader universal framework can be found in his notion of “ultimate concern,” which is so general, she argues, that it contradicts no particular religion. Tillich and Smith constructed, in their own way, a universal arena that served as a commons where the religions could meet and establish a greater harmony. Such a commons is beyond Christianity; it is a form of *Christianity transcended*.

Daggers argues that the reduction in the scope of Christian claims can be seen in the work of John Hick. According to her, Hick reduces the divine incarnation in Jesus Christ as first myth and then metaphor. As Daggers puts it, “Hick is prepared to excise the uniqueness of Christ in order to

create a neutral arena for interfaith conversation" (Daggers 2013, 93). Hick's postmodern critics have argued that Hick's supposedly neutral universal arena is a form of monism, reminiscent of the perennialist tradition, as manifested for example in the Theosophical Society and in Otto's approach to comparative mysticism. Other postcolonial critics such as Kwok Pui Lan have argued that it is still too much based on a Christian theistic framework (Daggers, 2013, 95).¹⁹

Communal Aspects of Religious Belonging

Daggers argues that the pluralist approach to religious diversity and religious belonging also involves an increasing focus on the individual's religious belonging rather than on belonging to a tradition. The individual's quest for meaning and salvation becomes central, and precedes their belonging to a tradition. The individual becomes the final arbiter in deciding the validity and efficacy of their religious belonging: it has to make sense to them, they have to feel at home. As Lindbeck puts it: "Religions are seen as multiple suppliers of different forms of a single commodity needed for transcendent self-expression and self-realization." (Lindbeck 2009, 8).

However, the interpretation of religious belonging as the individual committing, or refusing to commit, to an entire, single package of beliefs and practices of an official religion, fails to describe adequately how individuals engage in their religions in their everyday lives. In reality, people construct their religious worlds together, often sharing vivid experiences of that intersubjective reality (Orsi 2003). What is approached as "individual religion" is therefore also fundamentally social in nature.

Religious belonging is not an individual consumer choice, such as choosing an internet service provider, but draws upon shared meanings and experiences, learned practices, borrowed imagery, and imparted insights. Nancy Ammerman criticizes the overtly simplistic assumptions that some prominent sociologists of religion make about the motivation and orientation

19 In answer to some of these postcolonial criticisms, Paul Knitter (2002) has offered a "kingdom-centred" pluralist liberation theology in which he includes Latin American liberation theology. He conceives the common ground between religious traditions as the promotion of liberation and justice for the poor of the world. Daggers argues that in spite of these attempts, however, theology of religion in general still remains Eurocentric in its monistic universalism, although she detects a certain evolution: "The *ecclesiocentrism* of the exclusivist approach gave way to the *christocentrism* of the inclusivist approach, which evolved into Hick's pluralist *theocentrism*; Knitter then pushed further to the *soteriocentrism* of his pluralist liberation theology, which he refers to as "kingdom-centred" (Daggers 2013, 95). Particularist theologians such as Milbank have rejected such a myth of western universalism, since it undermines respect for other religions precisely as *other*.

of religious actors. The relationship between human and divine is not only about maximizing rewards, but is also oriented toward belonging and communion (Ammerman 2007, 227).

Several theologians, such as Cornille and D'Costa, have argued that religious belonging involves not only a subjective choice by the individual to belong to a certain community and religious tradition but also involves being accepted as a believer by that community and the larger religious tradition (Cornille 2016; D'Costa 2016). Accordingly, the possibility and feasibility of MRB should not only be approached from the perspective of the individual involved, but also from the perspective of the religious tradition. Only the religious community and the larger tradition, they argue, can decide whether those that claim to be its adherents are truly believers, and give its assent and validate their belonging.

Three objections may be formulated. First, what Cornille and D'Costa argue may be true in theory, albeit not in practice, for the Roman Catholic Church. However, for most other religious traditions such a requirement of assent, and a mechanism for giving assent, is not obvious. In Buddhism, for example, the ceremony of taking refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha could be interpreted as a form of assent by the tradition. However, taking refuge is based on individual choice and conviction, and there are no Buddhist regulations that would rule out taking refuge.

Second, while it is certainly true that religious communities have been relatively neglected in the study of MRB, Hendriks and Van der Braak argue in a recent article, it is also a contemporary reality that many religious communities today do not strictly adhere to a single religious tradition anymore even if they nominally belong to it (Hendriks and Van der Braak 2022).

Third, some forms of religious belonging, most notably Taylor's AR-belonging, are initiated by the tradition rather than based on individual choice. However, such "natural" forms of religious belonging that one simply grows up in, usually tend to be single belonging. As Taylor has described, since the early nineteenth century an M-type of religious belonging is most common, based on a voluntary affiliation with a denomination of one's choice. And since the sixties, a third AA-type of religious belonging is becoming dominant, in which affiliation with a denomination plays no role anymore. And M-type and AA-type believers tend to be the ones that are MRB-ers. Those with an M-belonging tend to be hard and medium MRB-ers, and those with an AA-belonging tend to be soft MRB-ers.

Discussion

In this chapter, we have seen that the various disciplinary discourses on MRB (theology of religions, social sciences and humanities, feminist and postcolonial theology and intercultural studies) not only have different views on MRB, but also work with different notions of religion and religious belonging. To elucidate this diversity, we have engaged in a brief genealogy of religion and religious belonging. We have given room to postcolonial and particularist views on this genealogy. Many theologians view MRB as impossible or unlikely, due to either theoretical incommensurability or practical noncompossibility. Others see MRB as possible, as overlapping language games or being bilingual.

We have seen that the notion of *religio* was used in a pragmatic way in a Roman context to refer to traditions and practices that did not require any religious belonging. It was transformed by the early Christian Church fathers into a reconnecting with God that required Christian belonging. In modernity, the notions of religion and religious belief were invented. The process of religionization culminated in the World Religions Paradigm, that contains a problematic Protestant definition of religion and religious belonging. It approaches religious traditions as entities with fixed borders, and belonging to each is seen as exclusive and as based on doctrinal assent.

The World Religions Paradigm will not be used as a framework in this book. Although it may feel like a natural way to think about religion, it is actually a contingent construction. The British philosopher of religion Paul Griffiths stresses that when it comes to religions, there are no natural kinds. Religious forms of life can be sorted in an infinite number of ways, just as plants and animals, and the type of sorting usually represents the interests of the sorter. Any particular sorting of religions should be considered as a useful fiction. With regard to the World Religions Paradigm, Griffiths sees three disadvantages to this particular sorting (Griffiths 2001, 15).

First, some forms of religious belonging (involvement in shamanism, New Age, new religious movements) are not easily placeable within this sorting, and show up as “no belonging.” Second, the boundaries of the world religions themselves are fuzzy. When do people legitimately belong? Some may self-identify as a believer to one of the world religions, whereas their belonging might have marginal importance to their life. Third, the boundaries between the world religions are fuzzy and flexible. Intrareligious variation within the world religions might be as large as interreligious variation between them. Belongers to one religion might not belong together at all according

to an alternative way of sorting (e.g., many Westerners who claim to be Buddhist have little in common with Asian Buddhists).²⁰

Where to go from here? Several postcolonial and postmodern thinkers have argued that since “religion” is an invention of Western modernity, it should not be applied as a universal concept to premodern or non-Western societies. Birgit Meyer has used the example of “religion in Africa” to show how colonial factors play a role in applying the notion of “religion” to non-Western societies (Meyer 2020). Richard King has unmasked the construction of Hinduism and Buddhism as world religions as Western inventions that were based on the unquestioned assumption that religion was universal (King 2000).

Should we abandon the term religion? Talal Asad argues that there can be no universal concept of religion but, at most, an archaeology of changing concepts of religion (Asad 1993). Several thinkers have suggested to no longer use the term “religion.” Others, such as Kevin Schilbrack, have argued, however, that we should keep the term “religion” because it describes a social fact (Schilbrack 2014). This is the approach that this study will follow. Religion is a social reality, defined by Paul Hedges as follows:

“Social reality” refers to systems or concepts which, while created by humans (and therefore artificial constructions), have a real effect upon the world and how we live. [...] The traditions we term religions [...] have real social consequences: people build temples to express their “devotion”; women do not attend temples when they menstruate, believing in “pollution”; followers of religions go to countries rife with the Ebola virus because their “faith” gives them a duty; people have a “calling” to dedicate their lives to poverty, celibacy, and “prayer.” (Hedges 2021, 34)

In this book, the concepts of religion and religious belonging will be used, following Hedges’s suggestion (Hedges 2017, 52), as useful “essentially contested concepts” in the sense that Gallie has defined them (Gallie 1956). According to Gallie, for some terms (“art,” “social justice,” “democracy,” “Christianity”) we cannot find a universally agreed definition. They exist with grey borders so that we do not know what is inside their boundaries and what is not. However, we would be worse off if we did not have them. Therefore, we should not abandon their use because we cannot agree how to use them. This study will use “religions” to refer to traditions around

20 Pluralists such as John Hick and Perry Schmidt-Leukel agree that religions are not bounded entities but permeable streams, and not mutually exclusive but overlapping. They understand religions as systems that offer “salvific knowledge” of an extra-mundane “ultimate” or “transcendent” reality.

the world that relate to somewhat similar domains. However, no assumptions will be made about commonality of function, organization, or modes of behavior. Also, religion will not be treated as a separate sphere from philosophy, politics, economics, or art (Hedges 2021, 34).

Oostveen notes that two types of hermeneutics are being used in speaking about MRB: a hermeneutics of religions, focusing on bounded religious traditions (sometimes, but not always, based on the World Religions Paradigm), and a hermeneutics of religiosity that focuses on individual religiosity rather than bounded religions (Oostveen 2020, 2026). While different types of hermeneutics of religions are popular with both Christian theologians and social scientists,²¹ various hermeneutics of religiosity can be found in many contemporary feminist and postcolonial theologians that do not focus on bounded religious traditions but on hybrid expressions of religiosity.²² For such theologians, religious belonging is always multiple in the sense that individuals continually construct their religious belonging out of diverse elements taken from religious traditions, rather than affiliate themselves with religious traditions as bounded wholes.

Such scholars approach religion as religiosity, where religious diversity refers to the continuous and irreversible creation and spreading of new forms of being religious, and where religious belonging refers to the hybrid identities of individuals that participate in this ongoing religious ecology, continually forging new connections, without the need to form any stable affiliation to bounded religious traditions. Some of these theologians argue that the “theology of religions” should be replaced by a “theology of difference” or a “theology without walls.” (see Martin 2019).

Also, sociologists and anthropologists of religion that operate from the framework of lived religion argue that MRB does not necessarily mean that people “belong” to multiple religions in the standard sense of having several affiliations (although a small minority may do so). It means that contemporary individuals construct their sense of religious belonging using

21 It may be argued that the critique of feminist and postcolonial theologians is mainly aimed at the Eurocentric universalist and arboretic way of thinking (in a Deleuzian sense); the true opposition is not between hermeneutics of religion and religiosity, but between Deleuze’s arboretic and rhizomatic ways of thinking.

22 See e.g., Chung 1992; Egnell 2006; Fletcher 2003; Gross 2005; Kalsky 2007; Phan 2003, 2004, 2006. For example, Kalsky and Pruim conducted interviews with “flexible believers” in the Netherlands and concludes that these new hybrid forms of lived religion present a challenge to traditional conceptions of religious identity and belonging (Kalsky and Pruim 2014). Kalsky argues for a paradigm shift from an “either/or” to a relational “as well as” approach within a rhizomatic network of meaning.

beliefs, experiences, expressions and practices of various religious traditions, without even bothering whether they would be recognized as “belonging” to those traditions by the traditions themselves.

However, as we have seen, religious traditions and communities are also an important aspect of religious belonging. Several theologians see room for a hermeneutics of religions that is free from the Protestant assumptions of the World Religions Paradigm. For example, Daggers’ notion of *Christianity re-centred* stresses respect for the unicity and alterity of each religious tradition. Religious traditions are not viewed as particular subsets of the generic category “religion,” but as Wittgensteinian language games with their own syntax, semantics, experiences and practices. Depending on how firm the boundaries between traditions are thought, religious traditions are either incommensurable or contain significant overlap.

Based on this definition of religious belonging, MRB might be a useful term. Admittedly, not many MRB-ers, not even hard MRB-ers, will fully meet Christian theological conditions for authentic belonging. But then, how many single Christian believers do? Continuing to use the term “belonging” can counter the connotation that MRB-ers are somehow promiscuous (hard MRB), allow themselves to be distracted by strange and irrelevant practices (medium MRB), or are superficial shoppers in a divine deli (soft MRB). MRB-ers have a genuine religious longing, not any less than single believers, even if they cannot fulfil that longing in one religious tradition, or even in any religious tradition at all.²³

In chapter 3, we will discuss various proponents of such a new hermeneutics of religion to look at one of the most popular forms of MRB, Buddhist-Christian dual belonging.

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23 In Christianity, many AR-believers that have grown up with Christianity do not feel actually that much at home in Christianity. They are the ones who become M-type or AA-type MRB-ers. However, through their MRB they may find ways to reconnect and deepen their Christian faith.

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3. Philosophical Explorations of Buddhist-Christian Belonging

Abstract: This chapter investigates Buddhist-Christian (hereafter BC) belonging as a “hard” configuration of multiple religious belonging (hereafter MRB), and uses it to test the adequacy of belonging language. Engaging theological debates (including feasibility arguments and confessional objections) and interview-based research, it shows how BC belonging destabilizes assumptions about coherent, bounded traditions. Philosophical and typological perspectives (including cultural-linguistic models and apophatic strategies) clarify how dual belonging is negotiated without collapsing differences or forcing doctrinal closure. A Maha Karuna Chan case study illustrates how practice, authority, and recognition shape what counts as belonging. The chapter’s central claim is that BC belonging often functions as uneven participation and unbundled practice.

Keywords: multiple religious belonging; theology of religions; apophatic theology; Paul Griffiths; George Lindbeck; Zen

An important phenomenon in the religious landscape today is that of Buddhist-Christian (hereafter BC) belonging: people that claim to belong to, owe allegiance to or believe in both the Buddhist and Christian faiths. A growing number of people describe themselves in this way as both Buddhist and Christian. For example, theologian Paul Knitter, a practicing Roman Catholic, famously declares that he is a “card-carrying Buddhist” as well, and that without Buddha, he could not be a Christian (Knitter 2009).

This chapter will first focus on two theological studies on BC belonging: Rose Drew’s *Buddhist and Christian?*, in which she interviews six self-declared BC believers (Drew 2011), and *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging*, a collection of essays edited by Gavin D’Costa and Ross Thompson that describes itself as a kind of “feasibility study of whether it makes religious

sense to call oneself both Buddhist and Christian" (D'Costa and Thompson 2016). It contains several affirmations of BC belonging (Drew 2016; Knitter 2016; R. Thompson 2016), several confessional challenges to BC belonging (D'Costa 2016; Strange 2016; Tilakaratne 2016), two general challenges to BC belonging (Cornille 2016; Moyaert 2016), and several explorations of BC belonging that question the nature of religion and religious belonging (Brazier 2016; Gethin 2016; Vélez de Cea 2016; Williams 2016).

This chapter will also discuss various philosophical approaches to BC belonging by Lindbeck and Griffiths (Griffiths 2001; Lindbeck 1984, 2009). When it comes to BC belonging, it seems important to make more fine-grained distinctions. Therefore, this chapter will continue to explore a specific case of hard multiple religious belonging (hereafter MRB): dual Zen-Christian belonging based on an apophatic approach to religion. It will attempt to map out how different approaches to religion are connected to affirmations of or objections to BC belonging (see Van der Braak 2017b).

Drew's Study of BC Belonging

Does BC belonging inevitably distort the essence of both Christianity and Buddhism, or does it merely change their cultural expression? From a theological point of view, is it possible to be authentically both Buddhist and Christian? In her landmark study *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging*, Rose Drew interviews six BC believers, all Christians that also embraced Buddhism: Roger Corless (Roman Catholic and Tibetan Buddhist in the Gelugpa tradition); Sr. Ruth Furneaux (an Anglican eremitic nun and Soto Zen and Satipatthana (mindfulness) practitioner); Ruben Habito (Roman Catholic and Zen Master in the Sanbo Kyodan lineage); Maria Reis Habito (Roman Catholic, Zen practitioner and disciple of a Taiwanese Buddhist Master); Sallie King (Western Zen and Quaker), and John Keenan (Episcopalian priest who sees himself as philosophically Buddhist). As is becoming clear from this description, BC belonging is not a unitary thing.

In discussions of BC belonging, a distinction is usually made between natal believers that are born into and grow up in a religious tradition, and convert believers that voluntarily decide, at a later age, to become affiliated with a religious tradition. Such natal and convert believers make for substantially different dynamics, especially when they find themselves within the same religious community. When discussing BC belonging in the West, it is important to keep in mind that this phenomenon has so far

often involved Christians adding a convert Buddhist belonging to their natal Christian belonging.

Table 5 gives a schematic overview of the various combinations of natal and convert Christian and Buddhist belongings that characterize these six BC believers and some others. For the sake of completeness, also Christian and Buddhist participation is added to the overview.

Table 5. Forms of BC Belonging

	Natal Buddhist	Convert Buddhist	Buddhist Participation
Natal Christian		Ruben Habito Maria Reis Roger Corless Chung Hyun Kyung Paul Knitter	Ruth Furneaux John Keenan Sallie King
Convert Christian	Vincent Oshida	Paul Williams	
Christian Participation	Dalai Lama Masao Abe Thich Nhat Hanh		

Ruben Habito and Maria Reis-Habito combine their Roman Catholic natal Christian belonging with a convert belonging to Sanbo Zen and Taiwanese Zen; Roger Corless combines a natal Roman Catholic belonging with a convert Tibetan Buddhist Gelugpa belonging; Ruth Furneaux combines a natal Anglican belonging with Buddhist participation as a Soto Zen and satipatthana practitioner; John Keenan combines a natal Episcopalian belonging with a participation in philosophical Buddhism; Sallie King combines a natal belonging as Quaker with a Buddhist participation in Western Zen.

In the theoretical introduction to her book, Drew describes her study as partly descriptive and partly normative. The descriptive part of her study is not the focus of this chapter: her six interviews with BC believers are a most helpful contribution to the illumination of the religious lives of actual BC believers.¹ However, the normative part of her study will be investigated in this chapter. Is it truly possible to belong to both Buddhism and Christianity, under which conditions, and how should we theologically understand such BC belonging?

1 For another example of such empirical research see Homrighausen 2015.

In her attempt to formulate what she calls “the Buddhist-Christian challenge,” Drew quotes one of her interviewees, Ruben Habito, who:

reflects that the best thing about being Christian and Buddhist is “being able to receive nourishment and enrichment from these two traditions,” but that the most difficult thing is, on the one hand, “trying to see how apparently contradictory or incompatible elements can be seen in a more coherent picture” and, on the other hand, trying to be faithful to each of these traditions and respect their integrity “in a way that does not compromise either.” (Drew 2011, 7–8)

Drew translates this into two demands. The first is:

One must find satisfactory ways of *integrating* the Christian way of thinking and being and the Buddhist way of thinking and being, such that dual belonging does not involve turning a blind eye to apparently outright contradictions nor entail being pulled in opposite directions by one’s religious commitments. (Drew 2011, 8)

Drew cites three reasons for claiming that BC believers need to pursue the integration of the two traditions that they belong to:

(1) Philosophical: the obstacle of conflicting claims to truth. To the extent that the BC believer wishes to affirm the truth of both Buddhism and Christianity, it must be possible to find some level at which the teachings of both traditions do not contradict each other, and can be integrated with each other.

(2) Psychological: the threat of a split personality. Drew quotes the psychologists Fowler and Erikson to suggest that living two parallel but entirely separate religious lives is unhealthy, potentially leading to a split personality disorder. Therefore, it is imperative to come to “a unified framework of meaning.”

(3) Soteriological: the need to follow one path. Skipping to-and-fro between two religious paths is likely to hinder spiritual progress. This echoes suspicions voiced by Catherine Cornille elsewhere that the BC believer is somehow not wholeheartedly committed, and therefore less likely to succeed (Cornille 2002, 3). Drew quotes Ruben Habito who recalls a Japanese saying that those who chase after two rabbits will catch neither: “Perhaps in declaring my aspiration to live as a Buddhist, and my aspiration to live as a Christian, I am ... rendering myself unable to live up to either in a faithful and authentic way” (Drew 2011, 161).

Drew's second demand is to ensure that the unique character, insight and integrity of each tradition is preserved, and that what is special and attractive about each is not lost (Drew 2011, 8). With regard to this need to preserve distinctions, Drew gives two arguments: (1) Buddhism and Christianity *are* distinct traditions; they offer different insights. Therefore, a BC believer must be authentically Buddhist and authentically Christian; (2) Buddhism and Christianity are each effective vehicles for spiritual transformation in their own right. Therefore, they do not require mixing with other vehicles.

Drew argues that the extent to which a BC believer meets this dual challenge (integrating Buddhist and Christian worldviews, as well as preserving the unique distinctions between Buddhism and Christianity) will determine whether or not their religiosity can be considered authentic from the perspectives of both traditions involved (Drew 2011, 7).

How one approaches Drew's dual challenge, or even how relevant one considers it to be, is also dependent upon one's way of conceiving religion. In the next section, I will follow Lindbeck's three ideal types of theological approaches to religion.

Lindbeck's Three Approaches to Religion

In *The Nature of Doctrine*, theologian George Lindbeck outlined three approaches to religion that are often used with theology and religious studies: the cognitive-propositional, the experiential-expressive, and the cultural-linguistic (Lindbeck 1984). These three types constitute all-embracing and fundamentally different notions of what religion is.

The *cognitive-propositional* model approaches religious traditions primarily in terms of their church doctrines, and the ways in which they function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities. Religions are thus seen as similar to philosophy or science (Lindbeck 1984, 2). The truth of religious doctrines lies in their ontological correspondence to objective reality. Religious belonging is conceived in terms of belief: assenting to the doctrines of the religious tradition.

The second type focuses on the *experiential-expressive* dimension of religion: the essence of religion is to be found in the inner feelings, attitudes and existential orientations that arise as a response to the divine. Religious doctrines are not to be seen as cognitive and discursive truth claims that correspond to reality, but as noninformative and nondiscursive expressions of those feelings, attitudes or existential orientations (Lindbeck 1984). The truth of religious doctrines lies not in their correspondence to the divine

(which is beyond conceptualization), but in how well they articulate or represent and communicate the experience of the divine. The various religious traditions each articulate this experience in their own way, but the experience itself is held to be universal and common to all religious traditions (Lindbeck 1984, 33). It is often considered to transcend particular religious belongings.

Lindbeck introduces a third, *cultural-linguistic* model of religion (taken from anthropologist Clifford Geertz and other social scientists), which approaches religions as forms of life that are similar to languages and cultures. The truth of religious doctrines lies, in a Wittgensteinian sense, in their use, not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action (Lindbeck 1984, 4). Religious doctrines are not hypotheses about reality, nor descriptions of religious experience. They are “different idioms for construing reality, expressing experience, and ordering life. Attention, when considering the question of ‘truth,’ focuses on the categories (or ‘grammar’ or ‘rules of the game’) in terms of which truth claims are made and expressive symbolisms employed” (Lindbeck 1984, 34). Religious belonging is seen here as participation in a particular form of life.

Lindbeck himself was critical of the cognitive-propositional and experience-expressive models of religion, and considered his own cognitive-linguistic model as most representative of religion. Since his work appeared in 1984, his cognitive-linguistic type has been adopted by several theologians that sometimes self-identify as “particularists” (e.g., Daggers 2013). In this chapter, the work of Paul Griffiths will be used (Griffiths 2001).

Cognitive-Propositional

From a cognitive-propositional approach to religion it is not easy to find a way to meet Drew’s first demand regarding the need for integration of Buddhist and Christian truth claims. Since both Buddhist and Christian doctrines are considered to function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities, it is hard to see how they can be combined. The two traditions seem based on certain beliefs that are fundamentally incompatible (for example, the belief in a personal Creator God, versus the denial of such a God). It is tempting to conclude that BC belonging is incompatible with crucial parts of the content of Buddhism and Christianity, and is therefore illegitimate.

In *Buddhist Christian Dual Belonging*, evangelical theologian Daniel Strange takes this approach when he calls the BC believer guilty of idolatry and unfaithfulness (Strange 2016). Also, Theravada Buddhist Asanga

Tilakaratne maintains that the Christian concept of a savior, transcendent or otherwise, is not found in the Buddhist path. Therefore, the Buddhist teachings on nirvana are incompatible with Christian accounts of salvation. He denies that Buddhists and Christians can ever be more than *kalyana mittas*, good friends (Tilakaratne 2016).

One possible strategy for finding ways to integrate seemingly contradictory Buddhist and Christian doctrines is the attempt to reinterpret the teachings of one tradition in terms of the other.² For example, John Keenan and Joseph O'Leary have used Buddhist Madhyamaka teachings to reinterpret some Christian doctrines. Two of Drew's interviewees (Reis Habito and King) interpret Christian salvation in terms of the Buddhist notion of being fully present in the moment (Drew 2011, 135). Whereas such a reinterpretation of doctrinal issues can lead to convergence and common ground, meeting Drew's first demand of doctrinal compatibility, it seems more difficult to meet Drew's second demand of preserving the distinctions between Buddhism and Christianity. As Catherine Cornille notes, one must wonder whether it still makes sense in such a case to speak of *dual* belonging (Cornille 2016, 154).

Paul Griffiths has described the various attempted solutions to the philosophical problems around the compatibility of the truth claims of various religions. The common-sense response would be that not all religious claims can be true, and some must be more true than others. This would lead to a position of exclusivism (one's own religion is true and others are not) or inclusivism (one's own religion is true but others may have part of the truth). However, another strategy would be to refuse to make distinctions among religious claims with respect to their being true or not (Griffiths 2001, 36). Such strategies, Griffiths notes, go back to either Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) or Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). We will discuss the Kantian strategy here, and the Wittgensteinian strategy later.

The Kantian strategy is to distinguish between essential religious claims that are true, and non-essential religious claims that are not true. Kant made a distinction between "pure religious faith" and "historical faith" (the historical and cultural particularities of religious traditions). Kant claimed that the fundamental religious claim that all moral duties are given by God is present in all particular religions. This fundamental religious claim was discoverable by reason alone, unaided by revelation, scripture or authoritative church teachings. Even though we cannot know anything about God's nature through our pure reason, we are able to know the fundamental

2 Cornille (2016, 152–54) discusses this strategy.

religious claim through our practical reason. Other particular religious claims are peripheral. They may indeed vary and be incompatible. But they should not be confused with the fundamental religious claim.

Griffiths claims that some contemporary pluralists use this Kantian strategy to separate essential from non-essential claims. For example, John Hick distinguishes between the unity of the Real as it is in itself, and the variability (and seeming incompatibility) of the ways in which it is experienced by us. However, the incompatibilities are not religiously important for what religion is really about, which is “the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centredness” (Hick 1985, 95). Such particular religious claims are equally true and equally false, as in the well-known Indian parable of the six blind men and the elephant: their claims about the elephant are all true since they describe an aspect of the elephant, but they are false since they cannot describe the whole elephant.

Griffiths mentions two criticisms of such Kantian approaches (Griffiths 2001, 43–44). First, it is not possible to separate essential religious claims from particular ones. It would amount to telling religious believers that they misunderstand their religion. Second, he disagrees with the assumption that the various particular claims bear the same amount of truth. Some particular claims (e.g., the claims of Jim Jones that led to Jonestown) are less true than others.

Griffiths himself holds an open inclusivism. Most religious believers, Griffiths argues, are inclusivists with respect to truth (Griffiths 2001, 57). The home religion is at the top of a hierarchy of truth-teaching religions. For both Buddhist and Christian believers, the universality of their form of life is important.

Buddha does not withhold true teachings from non-Buddhists because his compassion does not permit such withholding [...] the best (only possible) way for Buddha to make true teachings available to non-Buddhists is by establishing (anonymously, of course), [...] communities of Hindus, Jains, and Confucians, for example. [...] those who have explicit knowledge of the teachings of Buddhism are, by definition, those who know more of what is true, religiously speaking, than those who do not. (Griffiths 2001, 58)

Experiential-Expressive

Theologians who accept the experiential-expressive model of religion, tend to defend the possibility of BC belonging not by reinterpreting religious doctrines themselves, but by reinterpreting their ontological and epistemological status. Religious doctrines do not directly correspond to

the divine, but serve as indirect expressions of our experience of it. They should be seen as “fingers pointing to the moon,” as the Buddhist Zen tradition puts it.

At first sight, such a strategy seems very compatible with especially Mahayana Buddhist hermeneutics, in which two types of truth are distinguished: conventional (or relative) truth and ultimate (or absolute) truth. All religious doctrines, including Buddhist ones, are only conventionally true, and are to be judged according to their pragmatic efficacy. The hermeneutic principle of *upaya* (skilful means) holds that various doctrines can be effective for listeners with various backgrounds and degrees of comprehension. From such a perspective, also Christian doctrines such as the belief in a Creator God, can be soteriologically effective for listeners with a Christian background. Their use could be justified as an application of *upaya*.

Paul Knitter uses the Zen image of religious teachings as fingers pointing to the moon, although he adds that Buddhist fingers point to different parts of the moon than Christian fingers, and therefore add complementary knowledge (Knitter 2009, 72). He argues for a complementarity between his own Liberationist Christianity, with its stress on compassion and social justice, and his Nyingma Tibetan Buddhism, which stresses that compassion must arise out of spiritual wisdom (Knitter 2016).

An often used image within this approach to religious diversity is that all religions are different paths to the same mountain top. However, such a metaphor would make BC belonging impossible, since one cannot walk two paths simultaneously. Drew therefore follows the German theologian Perry Schmidt-Leukel in modifying the metaphor to religions being different hill-walking guides that guide one on the way to the mountain top. Such maps can be drawn from various perspectives, with different considerations in mind (Drew 2016, 30).

This strategy meets Drew’s first demand by addressing her three motivations for the need for integration: it takes away the philosophical contradiction between Buddhist and Christian doctrines by relativizing their ontological status. It removes the risk of a psychological split identity by relativizing their ultimate character. And it argues that combining Buddhist and Christian doctrines can be soteriologically effective as a form of *upaya*. It also seems to meet Drew’s second demand in not syncretistically merging Buddhist and Christian traditions but keeping them as separate approaches to the divine. However, particularist critics argue that this strategy does not do full justice to the uniqueness and particularity of both Buddhist and Christian traditions.

Cultural-Linguistic

When viewing a religious tradition from a cultural-linguistic perspective, “its doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical directives are integrally integrated to the rituals it practices, the sentiments or experiences it evokes, the actions it recommends, and the institutional forms it develops” (Lindbeck 1984, 19). Consequently, one could defuse the apparent contradiction between Christian and Buddhist truth claims by arguing that they are not incompatible (in the sense that they cannot both be true at the same time), but incommensurable. Truth claims are commensurable if theologians can discuss them in terms that permit a direct comparison of theologies, even to the point of determining which theology is more true. On the other hand, truth claims are incommensurable if they are embedded in starkly contrasting conceptual frameworks whose languages lack sufficiently overlapping meanings to permit theologians to directly compare them. From this perspective, Christian and Buddhist truth claims are as incapable of contradicting one another as a game of golf is of contradicting a game of tennis. Playing golf and playing tennis are both “forms of life.” Griffiths defines a form of life as “a pattern of activity that seems to those who belong to it to have boundaries and particular actions proper or intrinsic to it” (Griffiths 2001, 7). Therefore, marriage is a form of life, as is playing squash or tennis.

Griffiths defines “religious belonging” as “inhabiting a form of life and considering it to be comprehensive, incapable of abandonment, and of central importance” (Griffiths 2001, 7). By comprehensive, he means that “it seems to them to take account of and be relevant to everything” (Griffiths 2001, 9). By being incapable of abandonment, he means that “it must seem to them that living in it is sufficiently constitutive or definitive of who they are that leaving it is impossible without also leaving themselves” (Griffiths 2001, 10).³ He gives the example of speaking and thinking in our native language. In learning another language, “I will always and necessarily be a native speaker of English grafting another linguistic skill upon the trunk of my Englishness” (Griffiths 2001, 10). He argues, “A Catholic Christian, for example, baptized as a baby, trained up—in the faith, a regular and faithful attendee at Mass, a reader of the Bible, a sayer of prayers—such a person is likely to be in the same case as a native speaker of English” (Griffiths

3 Griffiths’s definition of religious belonging is “an account in terms of how the forms of life that people belong to *seem to them*, not one in terms of how those forms of life actually are” (Griffiths 2001, 11). With this approach he aims to avoid ontological questions such as regarding the existence of God, the gods or other supernatural beings.

2001, 11). By being of central importance, he means that “it seems to them to address the question of paramount importance to the ordering of their lives” (Griffiths 2001, 11).

Griffiths argues for a Wittgensteinian particularist approach to religious diversity that starts with respect for differences, particularity, and respect for the other. Such an approach refuses to make distinctions among religious claims with respect to their being true or false—but for a different reason than Kantian strategies. According to Wittgenstein, religious claims are fundamentally different from ordinary hypothetical claims that can be proved or disproved by empirical evidence. They are part of the picture of the world that is non-negotiable in a form of life. Disagreement about religious claims means inhabiting different forms of life, which means that evidence and argument are irrelevant to the function that religious claims have within their form of life. Therefore, if only testable hypotheses can be true or false, no religious claim is true. Or, if only absolute and non-negotiable claims can be true, only religious claims can be true.

However, one could object that today, many religious claims are being translated into hypothetical claims. The benefits of prayer, mindfulness, and participation in religious ritual are empirically established, not in the least by religious believers who are convinced that these claims are actually true of the world, not only true within their form of life. Therefore, one could argue that the Wittgensteinian approach also amounts to telling religious believers that they misunderstand their religion.

Griffiths would answer such an objection by arguing that religious people are not religious in the same way that most golfers play golf (as a matter of choice, recreation, and preference), and that they will often be willing both to die rather than abandon their religion and to kill in its defense (Griffiths 2001, 47). However, although this may be true for some extremely committed religious believers, it could be argued that contemporary AA-believers, and many AR-believers, are religious exactly in the same way that most golfers play golf. Only a small minority of committed M-believers would fit Griffiths' definition. The Wittgensteinian view that religious claims are all equally true within their form of life, but are not true ontological claims about the world, is easy to embrace for nonreligious people, but hard to embrace for religious believers.⁴

For Griffiths himself, combining religious forms of life is impossible, due to their comprehensive and centrally important nature. However,

4 Rhiannon Grant defends a Wittgensteinian particularist approach to religious belonging (Grant 2017).

some theologians have argued that BC belonging is still possible from a cultural-linguistic approach. Lindbeck himself has nuanced his initial thesis of the incommensurability of religious traditions in an *Afterword* to his book (Lindbeck 2009). Theologian Michael von Brück has compared BC belonging to being bilingual (Von Brück 2007, 199–206). Different religious (and secular) traditions can be seen as different languages in which to engage with the divine. Just as most of us grow up within one language but manage to learn other languages later on, we can become proficient in multiple “religious languages,” and speak them when the situation requires so. And just as the ability to speak a language makes one part of that linguistic community, being able to “speak” a religious tradition makes one a religious believer of that tradition.⁵

Such “religiously bilingual” BC believers construct their sense of religious belonging using beliefs, experiences, expressions and practices of Buddhist and Christian forms of life.⁶ Strictly speaking, religious belonging is always inherently multiple in the sense that it is made up of diverse, complex, and ever-changing mixtures of relationships, commitments, and communal practices.⁷ Therefore, one needs to question definitional boundaries that distinguish religious practices of one religious form of life from another, even to the extent of viewing them as mutually exclusive.⁸

With regard to BC belonging according to the cultural-linguistic model of religion, its authenticity is not so much a matter of the cognitive-propositional compatibility of Buddhist and Christian doctrines, but of the performative compatibility of Buddhist and Christian practices and ways of life. Griffiths calls this *compossibility*. In establishing such compossibility it becomes necessary to be more specific about which forms of Buddhism and Christianity are being combined. As Griffiths notes, some Buddhist and Christian forms of life are clearly not compossible:

5 However, Von Brück stresses that, just as one learns one's native language in a different way than later languages, one's native religious belonging is qualitatively different from later religious belongings. See Von Brück 2008.

6 For an empirical study of eight “bilingual” Buddhist-Christians, see Homrighausen 2015.

7 Sociologist of religion Thomas Tweed defines religion as “confluences of organic-cultural flows.” (Tweed 2006, 54).

8 As Buddhism is coming to the West, its boundaries and its identity as one of the “world religions” are becoming increasingly problematic. Many contemporary Western Buddhist practitioners prefer to label themselves as “hybrid” rather than as Buddhist. Some contemporary Western Buddhists, such as Jon Kabat-Zinn or Stephen Batchelor, wonder whether the very sorting together of various forms of life as “Buddhism” has become an obstacle to disseminating the doctrines and practices formerly known as “Buddhist” to a wider audience (Batchelor 2015).

It seems reasonable to say that Greek Orthodox Christianity and Gelug Tibetan Buddhism are different religions just because it is performatively impossible to belong to both at once—in much the same way that it's performatively impossible simultaneously to be a sumo wrestler and a balance-beam gymnast, or natively to live in the house of English and the house of Japanese. (Griffiths 2001, 13)

Other Buddhist and Christian forms of life may be more similar to cycling and speed skating: two forms of life that are not only compossible but that even strengthen one another. However, Abraham Velez de Cea has argued that Griffiths' argument could be applied to single religious belonging as well:

Paraphrasing Griffiths, it is reasonable to say that the Franciscan order and Opus Dei are different Catholic institutions just because it is performatively impossible to belong to both of them at once. Likewise, it is performatively impossible to fully endorse the theological systems of Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus at the same time, or to fully live the religious life as an enclosed Carthusian nun and a Missionary of Charity in the streets of Calcutta. (Vélez de Cea 2016, 175)

An Apophatic Approach to Zen-Christian Dual Belonging⁹

So far I have described various strategies that meet Drew's two demands to varying degrees.

(1) From a cognitive-propositional approach to religious doctrine, taking religious doctrines as true descriptions of reality and trying to address doctrinal contradictions, one could show that such doctrines are not truly incompatible by translating Christian doctrines into Buddhist terms and vice versa. In this strategy it becomes possible to meet Drew's first demand of conceptual integration, but at the risk of blending Christian and Buddhist doctrines, thereby not meeting her second demand of preserving the unique distinction of each tradition. As we have seen, one could also follow a Kantian strategy that separates essential from non-essential religious claims.

(2) From an experience-expressive model of religion, one could relativize the ontological and epistemological status of religious doctrines, and find common ground in the nonconceptual experience of the divine that those doctrines point towards. This is a valid strategy for meeting Drew's first

9 This section is based on Van der Braak 2017b.

demand, although for particularist critics, this strategy fails to fully meet her second demand.

(3) From a cultural-linguistic approach to religious doctrine, one could attempt to defuse the apparent contradiction between Christian and Buddhist doctrines by claiming that religious traditions are not contradictory but incommensurable systems of thought and practice. Rather than looking into the compatibility of their doctrines, one would need to look into the compossibility of participating in their practices. In this case, Drew's first demand is met not by looking for common ground, but by using practical compossibility as a criterion to avoid, as Drew puts it, "being pulled in opposite directions by one's religious commitments" (Drew 2011, 8). This third strategy most fully meets Drew's second demand.

In her contribution to *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging*, the British theologian Janet Williams first reviews these strategies and then adds her own challenge: perhaps authentic BC belonging does *not* require that, in Drew's words, one finds "satisfactory ways of integrating the Christian way of thinking and being and the Buddhist way of thinking and being" (Drew 2011). Perhaps, rather than attempting to "fix" contradictory Christian and Buddhist truth claims through reinterpreting them, relativizing their ontological and epistemological status, or treating them as incommensurable, one should simply accept that they do indeed contradict each other. However, she explicitly contests the inference that mutually exclusive beliefs render BC belonging theoretically illegitimate. She argues that a spiritual life that embraces opposites of faith and practice is not only possible, but has the capacity to be richly rewarding, and indeed constitutes a mode of belonging which is an authentic expression of elements intrinsic to the tradition (Williams 2016, 218).

Williams finds such modes of belonging in the apophatic strands of both Christianity and Buddhism. Apophasis is the Greek word for negation or denial, and is the opposite of kataphasis, affirmation (Drew 2011, 8). Williams points to two different understandings of apophasis in the Christian tradition. The first understanding has been formulated by Thomas Aquinas as a *via negativa*, complementing the *via positiva* and transcended by the *via eminentiae*. Apophasis is complementary to affirmation, but it eventually needs to be transcended by a superlative affirmation of the divine, thereby leaving the Christian truths as set out in revelation or philosophy intact. The second understanding takes apophasis as denying the accuracy of both affirmative propositions and their opposites. In this view, "apophasis is a second-order discourse, concerning not the divine subject, but the discourse which addresses the divine: it generates no statements about

God, but statements about theological language” (Williams 2000, 4). This second version of apophasis is an ongoing process that forms an integral part of spiritual education. Williams notes that there is a consensus that the second version of apophasis is theologically and soteriologically significant (Kenney 1993; Williams 2000, 6).

In her article in *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging*, Williams only uses resources from the Christian apophatic patristic tradition to show that the Christian notion of a Creator God is both being affirmed and denied, in order to penetrate to a deeper realization, since “the role of doctrine within Christian faith and life must be subordinate to flourishing, to abundant existence” (Williams 2016, 230). In what follows I will first extend Williams’ approach by using resources from the Zen tradition, in order to argue that also in the Zen tradition, apophatic practices can be found in which Buddhist doctrine is considered subordinate to flourishing.¹⁰ Afterwards, I will relate such Zen apophasis to Zen-Christian dual belonging, reviewing the various approaches to religious doctrine that I have just discussed.

Zen

Zen¹¹ has exercised a fascination over Western philosophers, theologians, psychologists and spiritual seekers. Since it made its entry in Western culture at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, followed by the many writings of the Japanese religious scholar D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966), it has captured the imagination of many. It has been hailed as a universal religion, founded on individual experience rather than conformity to church structures, meditation rather than ritual, critical investigation leading up to “the Great Doubt” rather than belief in religious dogmas. For many Christian believers, Zen served as a perfect complement for a Western Christianity that was perceived as lacking spiritual vitality. It was presented to the West as a universal mysticism that contained the core of all religions without cultural baggage.¹² The Japanese Zen philosopher and religious studies scholar Masao Abe (1915–2006) served as the main representative of Zen in the West after the death of D. T. Suzuki. He sought to advance the interreligious dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity, for example, through his dialogues with theologian John Cobb (see Mitchell 1998).

¹⁰ In an earlier book, Williams has pointed out various affinities between the Zen Buddhist and patristic Christian apophatic traditions (Williams 2000).

¹¹ Of course, what is known in the West as the single entity of “Zen” in reality comprises a varied and heterogeneous collection of Buddhist traditions in China, Japan, Korea and other East Asian countries, that span about 1,500 years.

¹² E.g., Suzuki 1991. See also Van der Braak 2008 and Wright 2000.

Most theological approaches to Zen-Christian belonging have been from an experiential-expressive model of religion. The famous Zen metaphor of all doctrines being “fingers pointing to the moon” seems well suited to explain Zen-Christian dual belonging. Both Zen and Christian doctrines need to be transcended in order to arrive at a transformation of consciousness.

With regard to the Zen tradition, it is clear that its scriptures are full of apparently outright contradictions: the *Heart Sutra* rejects all Buddhist doctrines as empty (Lopez 1988); the *Vimalakirti Sutra* mocks established Buddhist heroes such as Sariputra and shows the superiority of layman Vimalakirti over respected Buddhist monks (Watson 1996, 87); Zen master Linji Yixuan (d. 860) recommends that “if you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha,” (Watson 1999, 52) and shouts that “*nirvana* [enlightenment] and *bodhi* [awakening] are hitching posts for donkeys” (Watson 1999, 26). The Zen practitioner is being pulled in opposite directions by his religious commitments: both great faith and great doubt; both great effort and realizing the futility of all effort; both self-power (*jiriki*) and other-power (*tariki*).

The Zen tradition is rooted in two Indian Buddhist philosophical traditions: the *tathāgatagarbha* tradition and the Mādhyamika thought of Nāgārjuna. Its discourse on enlightenment contains elements of both kataphasis and apophasis (Gimello 1976; Van der Braak 2010).

The kataphatic strains in Zen thought are connected with the *tathāgatagarbha* notion of Buddha nature. The term *garbha* means both “embryo” and “womb.” Therefore, on the one hand, it points to the fact that every sentient being possesses the germ to attain Buddhahood. On the other hand, it refers to the universal essence of Buddhahood (also expressed as Buddha nature). In *tathāgatagarbha* thought, enlightenment is conceptualized as the realization of one’s Buddha nature. “Buddha nature,” however, is but one of the many Buddhist terms and concepts, such as *nirvāṇa*, *paramārtha*, and *sūnyatā*, that are to be properly used in a soteriological way, not a metaphysical way. In order to avoid their reification, they need to be deconstructed again and again. Therefore, apart from the kataphatic strain in Zen thought, a continuous apophatic strain can be discerned, which goes back to Mādhyamika thought and its emphasis on *sūnyatā*. Philosopher Youru Wang describes the inner struggles within the evolution of Zen discourse on enlightenment as an ongoing dialectic between kataphasis and apophasis, between the substantialization of Buddha nature and its deconstruction (Wang 2003, 54). According to Wang, the Chinese adaptation of the *tathāgatagarbha* thought eventually evolved into the deconstruction of Buddha nature in Zen.

Two Understandings of Zen Apophasis

In contemporary formulations of the apophatic character of Zen, two understandings can be distinguished that are connected to different approaches to religious doctrine. The first understanding has been the most popular: Zen is an anti-ritualistic tradition that relativizes all religious doctrine in order to arrive at a direct realization of the nonconceptual ultimate Buddhist truth, the experience of enlightenment (*satori* or *kenshō*). The Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945) described the Zen enlightenment experience as a “pure experience” prior to the subject-object distinction. The nature of such a “Zen experience” is summarized by Zen scholar Hee-jin Kim as follows:

Enlightenment is construed as seeing things as they really are rather than as they appear; it is a direct insight into, and discernment of, the nature of reality that is apprehended only by wisdom, which transcends and is prior to the activity of discriminative thought. (Kim 2007, 1)

Kim strongly criticizes such an interpretation of Zen enlightenment. He identifies several problems with this reading: (1) it implies a strong separation between “things as they really are” and “things as they appear to be”; (2) it suggests that insight is reached by leaving behind all discriminative thought; (3) “seeing” is conceived predominantly in epistemological, intuitive, and mystical terms; (4) it privileges a pre-discriminative state of mind; (5) it assumes a final duality that negates all difference and multiplicity (Kim 2007, 1).

Kim offers another interpretation of Zen enlightenment based on the work of the Zen thinker Dōgen (1200–1253): rather than transcending duality through an unmediated, nonlinguistic awareness of things as they really are, enlightenment means fully realizing duality and embodying it. The Zen form of life is then aimed at practising and embodying such an ongoing realization which takes place in the midst of language and thinking, rather than by rising above them.

Such an interpretation of Zen is in line with more recent interpretations of Zen that criticize Suzuki's presentation to the West. Rather than a kind of universal mysticism that gives access to an enlightenment experience “beyond words and letters” (fitting in with an experience-expressive approach to religious doctrine), Zen has more recently been understood as a form of life that is very much “within words and letters” (fitting in with a cultural-linguistic approach to religious doctrine).¹³ Zen philosopher Dale

13 For an overview of recent debates on these two interpretations of Zen, see Heine 2008, 3–14.

Wright, for example, suggests that Zen enlightenment is an awakening *to* rather than *from* language. “Enlightenment” can only be realized when we are well established in the language game of Zen (Wright 1992, 2000). Being proficient at the Zen language game means knowing how to use “live words”: words that facilitate the kind of ongoing performance of enlightenment that Peter Herschok has termed “improvisational virtuosity”: the capacity to freely and spontaneously respond appropriately to a wide variety of situations, perfectly in tune with all persons and circumstances involved. The Japanese-American religion scholar and Zen practitioner Victor Hori elucidates such an understanding of enlightenment by using the example of gravity. Rather than desiring to transcend gravity (which would leave us completely incapacitated, floating helplessly and out of control), we should strive to master gravity, which allows us to move about with grace and beauty. Just as there is no free flying beyond gravity, there is no Zen enlightenment beyond thought and language in a realm of pure consciousness (Hori 2000, 306).

In this second understanding of the apophatic character of Zen, enlightenment is indeed beyond conceptualization, not however because it is somehow a “mystical” and transcendent state of mind, but rather in the same way as riding a bicycle is beyond conceptualization. Enlightenment is not something to be experienced but something to be continually performed. In order to reach such a performance, one needs to become proficient in the language game of Zen, mastering a reservoir of skills and practices. Wright calls attention to the importance of the shared language game within the Zen Buddhist monastic world. Zen doctrines are more than just a tool, more than just fingers pointing to the moon. Zen monks are raised and educated in Zen monasteries. Enlightenment occurs not in the absence of language, but through language, through very complex Zen language games that include liberating “live words” rather than stultifying “dead words,” pointing, shouting, silence, and anti-language rhetoric. Westerners take such anti-language rhetoric literally, but it is a form of language. Rather than speak about awakening *from* language, we should speak about awakening *to* language, by becoming proficient at the Zen language game, and learning how to use live words (Wright 1992, 133; 2000).

Zen-Christian Dual Belonging

So far, I have attempted to show that, just like some apophatic Christian traditions, the Zen tradition envisions a form of spiritual life that embraces opposites of faith and practice, not as a temporary suspension of judgement in order to reach a higher nondual truth, but as an ongoing spiritual practice

that is valid in and of itself. What are the implications of this for authentic Zen-Christian dual belonging?

Firstly, the apophatic elements in Christianity and Zen allow for forms of authentic Zen-Christian dual belonging that can leave aside Rose Drew's first demand of conceptual integration. And secondly, whereas many Zen-Christian dual believers may practice apophysis from an experiential-expressive approach to religious doctrine (viewing it as a path towards the realization of a nondual enlightenment experience), a cultural-linguistic approach to religious doctrine may be most fruitful for a theological legitimization of Zen-Christian dual belonging. Zen-Christian dual believers that practise apophysis in the spirit of Dōgen from a cultural-linguistic approach to religious doctrine view it as an ongoing practice within duality. In terms of the mountain metaphor: Zen apophysis is not one of the paths to the mountain top, it is the ongoing practice of walking the path while realizing that there is no mountain top.¹⁴ From this point of view, such Zen-Christian dual believers can be seen as participants in Zen and Christian language games. And although they may feel free to ignore Drew's first demand, they are still able to meet Drew's three conditions that gave rise to that demand: philosophical justification, psychological balance, and soteriological effectiveness.

(1) Apophysis provides a philosophical justification for holding incompatible or mutually exclusive religious beliefs (such as the belief in emptiness and the belief in Buddha nature, or the belief in the human nature of Christ and the belief in his divinity). This is because religious beliefs are not seen as ontologically corresponding to objective reality, nor are they considered to be expressions of feelings, attitudes or existential orientations. Therefore, the only requirement is that they are practically compossible as two types of religious discourse.

(2) From a psychological point of view, one's identity is not determined only by allegiance to certain doctrines. The Austrian scholar of religion Karl Baier has argued that for Buddhist-Christian believers that practice apophysis, the need for a kataphatic identity (the articulated sense of who I am based on a religious narrative) is superseded by the experience of an apophatic identity (who I truly am is beyond all religious narratives), a

14 The Jesuit and Zen-Christian dual believer Ama Samy cites Dōgen scholar Kim that "opposites of dualities are not obliterated or even blurred; they are not so much transcended as realised. The absolute freedom in question here is that freedom which realises itself in duality not apart from it" (Samy 2007, 92, citing Kim 1975, 52–53).

process that is actively stimulated by the apophatic traditions in Buddhism and Christianity (Baier 2008, 212–13).

(3) From a soteriological point of view, being religiously bilingual allows one to participate more fully in both forms of life, and find even richer ways of embracing opposites of faith and practice. Zen-Christian dual belonging can be very helpful in deconstructing various deeply implicit forms of kataphatic identity (based on deeply held unexamined Buddhist and Christian narratives) in order to make room for true faith in one's apophatic identity.

I have followed Janet Williams in exploring another approach to BC belonging, focusing on the Zen tradition. Rather than holding on to the need for arriving at a unified framework of meaning, I have zoomed in on several forms of life in the larger Zen and Christian traditions that use apophasis as an important practice, in which contradictory and mutually exclusive doctrines are not rejected but embraced as part of a form of spiritual life that embraces opposites of faith and practice. Therefore, apophasis changes the dynamics of BC-belonging in important ways, because the need for a unified framework of meaning falls away. While this cannot adequately explain all forms of BC belonging, I think that apophasis is a useful category that deserves further exploration.

However, in such further exploration, it is important to keep the various complexities around the notion of apophasis in mind. Apophatic practice is most commonly understood as one of the stages of the spiritual path, a means to an end, a strategy that must be left behind when the goal (the revelation of Christian truth, or the nondual experience of enlightenment) has been realized. This seems also to be the understanding of apophasis that Catherine Cornille presupposes when she argues, in a brief reference to Williams' article, that Williams, just like Paul Knitter "also grounds the possibility of BC belonging in a radically apophatic approach to ultimate reality," and therefore subsumes her apophatic approach under the focus on the transcendent unity of all religions (the experience-expressive model of religion) (Cornille 2016, 149–50).

However, in this chapter I argue that both Christian and Zen traditions have two interpretations of apophasis, one in which apophasis is merely instrumental, and ultimately needs to be transcended by either the *via eminentiae* or the nondual experience of enlightenment, and another in which apophasis is an ongoing spiritual practice. The first interpretation of apophasis would indeed fit in an experience-expressive approach to religious doctrines. However, the second interpretation of apophasis would be more compatible with a cultural-linguistic approach to religious

doctrines. Apophasis as a second-order discourse is a religious practice that provides BC-belonging with theological legitimacy. Not because it leads to a converging worldview, but because it allows bilingual Buddhist Christians to freely move back and forth between two discourses, while understanding the deep differences in doctrine and expression between Buddhism and Christianity (Homrighausen 2015, 66). In my opinion, it is the second interpretation of apophasis that holds most promise in further developing a theological interpretation of BC belonging.

A Case Study: Maha Karuna Chan

As a case study that will illustrate such apophatic religiosity, I will now turn to the Dutch Maha Karuna Chan community, an informal and fundamentally open community of lay Zen Buddhist practitioners, who dedicate themselves on an individual basis to Zen practice, and its application in their lives.¹⁵ This case study shows a number of additional elements of hybrid Buddhist religiosity in the West: a preference for practice rather than doctrine; the hesitance to use the label “Buddhist” to self-identity, and their resulting lack of measurable Buddhist belonging.

Maha Karuna is Sanskrit for “great compassion.” Maha Karuna Chan was founded in 1987 by the Dutch Chan teacher Ton Lathouwers (1932–2024), who received transmission from the Chinese Chan teacher Venerable Ti Zheng Lau He Shang (1923–2002), in Indonesia also known under his Theravada Buddhist name Bhikkhu Ashin Jinarakkhita.

As a professor of Russian literature in Leuven, Belgium, Ton Lathouwers lectured on the work of Dostoyevsky, Shestov, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. He also studied in Japan with Zen masters Shin’ichi Hisamatsu and Masao Abe. Due to these various confluences, a form of “existentialist Chan” has been emerging in the Netherlands as an important new religious tradition, which is a significant source of religious and cultural renewal.

Maha Karuna Chan organizes four Chan meditation retreats a year: three five-day ones and one ten-day one. Throughout the Netherlands there are weekly meditation evenings in local centers. There is relatively little emphasis on ritual, and a strong emphasis on meditation practice. The Maha Karuna Chan has a loose institutional structure, and places strong emphasis on the individual encounter from heart to heart. The visitors to

¹⁵ This section is based on Van der Braak 2015b.

the Maha Karuna Chan retreats and meditation evenings are not monastics but lay practitioners.

In Maha Karuna Chan teachings there is less emphasis placed on traditional Buddhist doctrines such as karma and rebirth, and more room for creative approaches to mixing notions and images from various religious traditions. For example, the Buddhist image of Guan Yin bodhisattva is connected with the Christian image of the Virgin Mary (both in Western Christianity and in Russian Orthodox Christianity). As another example, the Zen notion of The Great Doubt (the necessity of doubting any and all religious certainties in order to break through to a liberating insight) is mixed with existentialist notions of descending into despair and nihilism and completely living through such nihilism.

By having such a creative mixing of various traditions, students of the Maha Karuna Chan not only learn more about Chinese Buddhism, but they also discover new perspectives on their own religious and philosophical traditions. Many are surprised to learn, for example, that a seemingly anti-religious existentialist philosopher such as Nietzsche is in fact quite compatible with the radical Zen Masters. Just as Linji spoke about killing the Buddha, Nietzsche spoke of the death of God—not as an expression of atheism, but in an attempt to revitalize the Western religious tradition.¹⁶

The Buddhist image of Guan Yin bodhisattva, who has a thousand arms to reach out to the suffering and needy people in the world who cry out for her assistance, and who sheds a tear because she can never help enough, offers many Western religious practitioners a new way of approaching compassion and solidarity—not as a moral obligation but as a spontaneous resonance that arises in the heart when confronted with the suffering of others. Guan Yin is not venerated as a supernatural goddess, but as a more-than-human being that cannot be reduced to mere psychology.

Many visitors to Maha Karuna Chan retreats do not call themselves Buddhist. Although they are quite committed to practicing meditation and applying the Buddhist teachings to their own lives, they do not formalize their belonging to the community. In this regard, they have quite an existentialist attitude to Buddhism. Even so, Buddhism is just as important to them, perhaps even more important, than other religious traditions are to their followers.

Because of their refusal to self-identify as Buddhist, such existentialist Buddhists from the Maha Karuna Chan often do not show up on empirical

16 As has been noted by various Zen philosophers, e.g., Abe 1989; Nishitani 1990. See also Van der Braak 2011.

research results. In an influential report by the WRR, the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy, such Buddhist meditators were labeled as “spiritual seekers without belonging”:

The worldview of the spiritual seekers without belonging is characterized by a transcendent, spiritual orientation, that doesn’t conform itself to doctrines. This emancipated category is empathetic, aimed at harmony with the world, and trusts its own intuition. (Van de Donk et al. 2006, 185)

The Future of Buddhist Belonging in the West

The findings of the Maha Karuna Chan case study reflect a wider trend in Buddhist belonging in the West. The category of convert Buddhist belonging, which has mostly been used to describe Western Buddhist practitioners, is being superseded for many members of the younger millennial generation by new and unknown forms of engaging with Buddhist practices that even call the Buddhist tradition into question. The notion of Buddhist belonging (or should we say, post-Buddhist belonging?) may be in need of further reimagining, beyond the categories of natal and convert.

We have seen in chapter 2 that Charles Taylor has argued that in an Age of Authenticity (hereafter AA) type of religious belonging, the primary value becomes choice: “bare choice as a prime value, irrespective of what it is a choice between, or in what domain” (Taylor 2007, 478). The religious pluralism of the Age of Mobilization has exploded into a “nova effect” of unlimited options. With regard to Buddhism, such AA-belonging covers phenomena such as Thomas Tweed’s nightstand Buddhists, members of local Buddhist reading or meditation groups, or secular Buddhist groups that, as Stephen Batchelor puts it,

are committed to a practice of the dharma but have no affiliation to a particular school of Buddhism. These spiritual nomads tend to be informed more by writings and podcasts from across the Buddhist spectrum than by a teacher of any particular lineage. Their sense of belonging to a community may be more virtual than actual (Batchelor 2015, 320).

An example of such a new virtual Buddhist belonging is the Buddhist Geeks movement, as described by Buddhist scholar Ann Gleig: a new generation of North American practitioners that meets through podcasts, social media

and online conferences.¹⁷ Gleig reported that at the 2012 Buddhist Geeks conference, many members described their religious identity as hybrid rather than Buddhist (Gleig 2014).

In her recent study on American Buddhism after modernity, Gleig discusses how the Buddhist denominations that have arisen within the context of Buddhist modernism are being succeeded in part by new alternative and innovative forms of deinstitutionalized Buddhist spirituality (Gleig 2019). They can be called postmodern rather than modern, insofar as they are being marked by fluid parameters, spiritual bricolage and inventiveness. She gives an example of such new (post-?)Buddhist spirituality by describing the next phase of the Buddhist Geeks movement.

In his keynote speech for the 2014 Buddhist Geeks conference, founder Vincent Horn introduced the neologism “unbundling,” a term that describes how new technologies such as mobile devices, internet connectivity and social media are breaking up the packages that traditional institutions (education, broadcasting, newspapers) provided, in order to provide particular parts of them. The unbundling of Buddhism refers to its being broken down into its composite parts and being combined with new discourses such as psychology, art, science and technology. Secularized mindfulness programs are an example of such unbundling and rebundling. Such an unbundling of Buddhism was inherent in the transition, in 2016, of the decade-long Buddhist Geeks project to a new teaching platform, Meditate.io, that would take a modular approach to meditation practice (Gleig 2019, 195–97). The platform had an app and a YouTube channel, but not even a website.¹⁸

In the unbundling of Buddhism, it is being destabilized as a metanarrative or absolute system. It is being relativized as just one way among many to perceive or point to a much larger reality (Gleig 2019, 204). For many Buddhist Geeks members, maintaining Buddhism as a distinct tradition is not a priority. As one of them, Daniel Thorson, puts it, “Buddhism is largely a dying tradition. It is not relevant, and this is a reason why young people don’t want to associate with traditions” (Gleig 2019, 207).

As a Zen teacher, I have about fifty students that come to my weekly Zen meditation evenings. Yet, very few of them self-identify as Buddhist. In a sense they “belong” to the Zen tradition, in that Zen is an important contemplative practice in their lives. But they do not feel the need for a Buddhist identity. However, such Western Buddhist practitioners might

17 www.buddhistgeeks.org

18 As of 2026, the app seems to be no longer active. Information about Vincent Horn can be found at <https://linktr.ee/vincehorn>. Accessed January 25, 2026.

still be counted as Buddhist believers. They do feel at home with Buddhist contemplative practices, Buddhist meditation groups, Buddhist platforms, and other Buddhist practitioners. They could be said to possess a Buddhist belonging, as long as we imagine such a Buddhist belonging very differently from the way that belonging is usually imagined.

Discussion

In this chapter we investigated the possibility of BC belonging, using Lindbeck's three approaches to religion: the cognitive-propositional, the experiential-expressive, and the cultural-linguistic. However, Lindbeck's model has been contested. According to Daggers, whom we already encountered in chapter 2, for example, Lindbeck remains firmly within the modernist European tradition by subscribing to a world religions paradigm. However, his cultural-linguistic theory of religion views religious traditions not as collections of objectively valid truth claims (as many exclusivists claim), or as mutually compatible and culturally determined expressions of a universal religious experience (as many pluralists claim), but in a Wittgensteinian sense as incommensurable language games. Daggers notes that Lindbeck has been criticized for ignoring postcolonial critique and "reinstating a fortress-like boundary around the Christian Church" (Daggers 2013, 162). She gives the example of Paul Knitter, for whom Lindbeck-style particularists "talk over the fence separating their respective backyards, resisting its removal" (Daggers 2013, 163). She notes that postcolonial theologians Jeannine Hill Fletcher and Kwok Pui-lan critique the notion of impenetrable religious traditions that should keep their mutual distance.¹⁹

In order to be able to analyze hybrid religious belonging, we also need to decolonize the term, in order to make room for non-Christian forms of religious belonging (such as Buddhist religious belonging but also AA-belonging). There are important differences between Christian and Buddhist religious organization with important consequences for belonging. For many Buddhist communities and traditions, the requirement of receiving assent from the communities, and a mechanism for giving that assent, is far from obvious. One could interpret the ceremony of taking refuge in the Buddha,

19 According to Daggers, "Fletcher brackets Lindbeck with exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist theologies of religions, in assuming each tradition is a singular homogenous 'collectivity with agency and subjectivity', wherein internal diversity is erased, and the emphasis is on relations between religions as entities" (Daggers 2013, 163).

Dharma and Sangha as a form of such an assent by the tradition. However, taking refuge is based on individual choice and conviction, and there are no Buddhist regulations that would rule out anyone from taking refuge.

Based on the findings of this chapter, the hermeneutics of religions does not seem a perfect fit for describing MRB, even a subset of MRB that would seem so clearly to be a combination of two clearly defined religious belongings. Let us, in chapter 4, look further at hybrid religiosity by turning our gaze to religion in China.

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4. Multiple Religious Belonging in China

Abstract: This chapter develops a comparative lens by turning to China, where multireligious realities have long existed without fitting Western models of discrete religions and exclusive membership. It surveys religious diversity and the contemporary “return of religion,” then asks what “belonging” can mean in a context characterized by porous boundaries and pragmatic engagement. The chapter argues that importing the concept “multiple religious belonging” (hereafter MRB) can mislead when it presupposes a Western membership grammar. Instead, it foregrounds scholarship describing Chinese religiosity as strategic religious participation in a shared religious landscape, and examines “modes of doing religion” as a more fitting analytic frame.

Keywords: Chinese religion; strategic religious participation; pluralism; Paul Hedges; Adam Chau; multiple religious belonging

This chapter will engage with Asia, specifically with China, in an exercise of cross-cultural philosophy of religion. Various Asian cultures have mostly been multireligious, with different religious traditions that have persisted alongside each other, yet without being the bounded and mutually exclusive entities that the World Religions Paradigm assumes. Asian religious history is very different, in a very instructive way, from the histories of monoreligious European and American Christian cultures.

This chapter aims at developing an intercultural and interreligious hermeneutics of multiple religious belonging (hereafter MRB) by viewing it from within a global context. Cornille argued that in the wider history of religion, MRB may have been the rule rather than the exception, at least on a popular level (Cornille 2002).¹ The World Council of Churches (hereafter WCC) publication *Many Yet One?* (Rajkumar and Dayam 2016) presents

¹ As Cornille puts it: “The idea of belonging to only one religion has been more or less alien to most of the religious history of China and Japan” (Cornille 2002, 1).

various case studies that show that in Asia, MRB is a common phenomenon. Rajkumar and Dayam stress that MRB involves “embracing hyphenated identities which bespeak multiplicity, fluidity and hybridity” (Rajkumar and Dayam 2016, 1), that “religions are shaped rhizomatically” (Rajkumar and Dayam 2016, 1), and that the religious belonging of MRB involves “‘blurred’ religious affiliations and borderless (spi)ritual practices” (Rajkumar and Dayam 2016, 1).

Non-Western forms of MRB challenge the assumptions with regard to religion and religious belonging inherent in the World Religions Paradigm. Whereas in the West, religions tend to be investigated as unitary, organizationally defined, and relatively stable sets of collective beliefs and practices with their own set of dedicated religious believers, we will find that East Asian religions are often characterized by an open-ended offering of religious and ritual practices that are situationally effective in meeting subjective needs for worship and protection (Van Bragt 2002, 9–10).

And, while in the West, belonging implies “finding one’s identity in,” it could be argued that for most Japanese (and Chinese), there is no perceived need for any identity besides being Japanese (or Chinese) (van Bragt 2002, 10). As we have seen in chapter 2, Baatz 2017 helpfully distinguishes between various metaphors of religious belonging: between religious belonging as territory (analogous to ethnic belonging or citizenship), religious belonging as relationship (analogous to marriage or family relationship) and religious belonging as path (analogous to following a way). She argues that the latter metaphor is especially useful to understand Asian notions of religious belonging.

In a non-Western context, MRB is constructed very differently than is being taken for granted in the World Religions Paradigm. We have seen in chapter 3 that Rose Drew, in her study of BC belonging, stressed the need for integrating the worldviews of the multiple religions to which one belongs, as well as the need to preserve the unique distinctions between them (Drew 2011, 8–13). She observed that her interviewees struggled with this double challenge. However, Asian hermeneutical models of MRB stress neither of these two imperatives: one can simultaneously hold multiple worldviews, and boundaries between religious traditions are often deliberately blurred.

Religious Diversity in China

In their publication *Religious Diversity in China* (Schmidt-Leukel and Gentz 2013), Perry Schmidt Leukel and Joachim Gentz list several reasons for turning to China:

While the West has a long record of religious wars and conflicts and, in some places, still struggles with fully accepting religious diversity, China seems to offer an alternative scenario with features that are quite strange to the West: It is used to the phenomenon of multireligious participation (people participating in several religious traditions and practices at the same time) and it teaches the unity of different religions. (Schmidt-Leukel and Gentz 2013, 8)

They note that many Chinese interreligious debates are not between centralized churches about truth, but about money and status for local centers (Schmidt-Leukel and Gentz 2013, 4). In China, boundaries between religions are fluid and flexible, very different from the bounded religions in the West:

From Ming times, religious traditions became more fluid in their own selfconception as syncretist and eclectic tendencies were encouraged by the state and evaluated more positively by the other traditions. Due to the general fluidity of all religious traditions in the regulated pluralism of late imperial China, we cannot use Western segregating models derived from the highly exclusivist monotheistic Abrahamic religions to explain and understand them. This fluidity of boundaries requires us to pay attention to different symbols, ideas, terms, and practices as markers of distinction rather than of the religious traditions as a whole. (Schmidt-Leukel and Gentz 2013, 5–6)

Schmidt-Leukel and Gentz summarize the history of religious diversity in China. During the first millennium CE, the main religions attempted to form competitive distinct identities, thereby distancing themselves from several forms of popular religiosity such as medium cults and magical techniques (Schmidt-Leukel and Gentz 2013, 7). During the second millennium, the equality of religions was generally established, which could be seen as a proto-pluralist approach, however under strict state control. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese religions were redefined according to the Western hermeneutics of religion. Today, they say, China has not accepted a Western model but has continued its practice of regulated pluralism: “Modernity changed the Chinese religious landscape, but not its basic structure” (Schmidt-Leukel and Gentz 2013, 6).

The Chinese religious landscape is open to pluralism, which opens up possibilities for interreligious coexistence, and reflection on MRB:

The centuries-long, highly dynamic, and multifaceted practice of and reflection on religious pluralism in China provides an ideal research field for an analysis of transdisciplinary questions about the connections between and relations of religious theory, religious policy, and religious practice. The Chinese experience may provide crucial contributions to contemporary discourses about different ways to practice religious diversity in different places now and in the past. (Schmidt-Leukel and Gentz 2013, 7)

The Return of Religion to China²

Western sinologists have, until a few decades ago, mostly claimed that there is no religion in China today, and have therefore focused on historical research into Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. Empirical data seem to confirm this picture. In a major questionnaire survey carried out among Han Chinese in 2005, 8.7 percent identified themselves as religious, 52.3 percent as non-religious, and 26.1 percent as anti-religious (firm atheist). However, when asked about religious beliefs and practices, 27.4 percent reported to have paid homage to or worshipped Buddhas or Bodhisattvas; 21.6 percent had prayed to the God of fortune; 12.5 percent to other spirits, while 28.6 percent said that they felt comforted or empowered through these religious activities (Yao and Badham 2007, 30–31).

This apparent discrepancy between religious identity and religious practice is related to the hermeneutical complexities around the notion of “religion” in China. In classical Chinese there was no term that was equivalent to the Western notion of “religion.” In the nineteenth century, the term *zongjiao* was coined, consisting of the words *zong* (ancestral tradition) and *jiao* (teaching). However, this term has a pejorative connotation in China for ordinary Chinese, suggesting superstitions, dogmas and institutions. The dictionary meaning of *zongjiao* is “a social ideology and an imaginary reflection of the objective world which urges people to believe in God, ghosts, spirits and retribution for sin, and places hope on the so-called kingdom of Heaven or next life” (*Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* 2002, 2554). Therefore, many educated Chinese tend to distance themselves from *zongjiao*, and tend to use terms as *xue* (learning) or *jia* (family) to refer to their way of life (for example Confucianism or Daoism).

2 This section is based on Van der Braak 2015a.

But regardless of such secular interpretations of religious practices, religion-as-lived is increasingly recognized as very much present in China today. In *The Religious Question in Modern China*, Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer comment on the rapidly changing perceptions of religion in modern China:

Until little more than a decade ago, popular and scholarly discourse on China relegated religious practices to the domain of the quaint customs of a rapidly fading past and the lofty platitudes of ancient sages. Whether the subject was yearly offerings to the Kitchen God or the abstruse learning of Confucius, these traditions, if they could even be called religion, were never considered to have much bearing on the real life of Chinese society today. But since the end of the twentieth century, a clear shift in perception has been taking place. The Chinese world has not been immune from the global resurgence of religion and from the growing impact of religion on social and political life. (Palmer and Goossaert 2011, 1)

Indeed, religion is back as a social reality in contemporary China (perhaps it never really left), just as religion remains a social reality in the West, in spite of dire predictions of secularization theorists such as Peter Berger about the impending demise of religion. There is currently a great interest among Chinese intellectuals, government officials and scholars in what has been called “the religious question” (*zongjiao wenti*). Also among Western scholars, interest in religion in China today is increasing. The study of religion in contemporary China (rather than just the history of Chinese religious traditions) has opened up as an important new field of study.

But what exactly does the academic category of “religion in China” refer to? Goossaert and Palmer describe how a “religious field” has been created, and is continually being adapted and re-created, throughout the history of China:

The category of religion is a contested one, and the history of China’s religious question is to a great extent the story of how this category has been imposed, rejected, appropriated, expanded, contracted, and assigned a place within ideological systems by different actors over the past century—the dramatic and often painful story of how a “religious field,” in Bourdieu’s terms, has been created and resisted by actors who have struggled to control, monopolize, co-opt, convert, or destroy the symbolic resources that it potentially contains. (Palmer and Goossaert 2011, 9)

The “return of religion” to China has once again transformed this religious field, and its academic study should be truly multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, including at least the perspectives and discourses of philosophy of religion, sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, and intercultural theology. Goossaert and Palmer conclude that religion in China has become an unstable and contested category, an anomaly:

The result is a de-centered religious universe, exploding centrifugally in all directions. Since traditional Chinese cosmology and society were religiously structured, the result is a de-centered society, a de-centered China: a Middle Kingdom that has lost its Middle. Thus the religious question: will there ever be, once again, a spiritual center of gravity for the Chinese world? (Palmer and Goossaert 2011, 3)

The first step in investigating such a religious question would be to inquire into its hermeneutical aspects. The sociology of religion is currently experiencing a paradigm clash between contested discourses. Traditionally, a secular discourse within the social sciences tended to view religion as an illusion that was irrational, ignorant and foolish, and therefore incompatible with modern secular society.³ The natural result of such a secular discourse has been the secularization thesis, which has been proven outdated by now for most scholars of religion.

These days, within the social sciences, the “religious markets” approach is becoming quite popular in American sociology of religion (Stark and Bainbridge 1986, 1996; Stark and Finke 2000). This paradigm frames religious activities as taking place in a marketplace, consisting of competing vendors that each offer their religious products. Such a liberal discourse that frames the religious question in terms of markets might, according to some, have a promising potential for stimulating religious freedom in China: markets require a free exchange of goods in order to function optimally. It helps to overcome the fixed opposition between religiosity and secularity.

The American Chinese-born sociologist of religion Fenggang Yang has extended the religious markets paradigm for the situation in China (Yang 2011). Because of the limited supply of religious options in China due to government restrictions, he claims, the market collapses into a threefold market: the red, black and grey market. The “red market” of religion in China, in which “the red stain [of communist ideology] is reflected in the

3 Sociologists Stark and Finke give in *Acts of Faith* an extensive description of the history of the social scientific study of religion as a child of the “Enlightenment” (Stark and Finke 2000).

rhetoric of clergy, theological discourse, and practices of the sanctioned religious groups" (Yang 2006, 97), consists of all legal (officially permitted) religious organizations, believers, and religious activities (the five religious traditions of Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism). The "black market" consists of the illegal (officially banned) religious organizations, believers, and religious activities (such as house churches). The "grey market" consists of all religious and spiritual organizations, practitioners, and activities with ambiguous legal status, and refers to a wide range of religious practices that are subsumed under nonreligious labels such as health or Chinese culture, in order to secure the legitimacy and legality of the practices (Yang 2011, 85).

But is the market metaphor really appropriate? As Goossaert and Palmer note, "Since the market provides the greatest realm of freedom in socialist China, couching religion in the language of supply and demand is one strategy for legitimating it. And, to be sure, commercialization and commodification are obvious characteristics of much religious activity in China today" (Palmer and Goossaert 2011, 12). However, applying economic concepts to the discourse of religion also has its downsides. Although markets for religious services and commodities do exist in China, the many configurations of social relations in China's religious landscape today are too complex and manifold to be reduced to the market metaphor.

From an anthropological perspective, religion is closely associated with culture, as thickly described by Clifford Geertz as "a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz 1973). Therefore, some scholars in China have preferred an ecological discourse on religion in China. It is a holistic view of all forms of religiosity in China, which attempts to describe the religious landscape in China without the narrow definitions that have constrained the theological and secular discourses on religion in China, in order to make room for the dynamic processes of interactive change, adaptation, and innovation, that characterize the religious field in China, and which cause its components and boundaries to be constantly contested. Goossaert and Palmer therefore prefer the ecological discourse to the market discourse: "we have chosen to take China's religious landscape as part of an evolving ecology of elements in constant interaction with one another, and in which a major change in one element, or the addition of a new element, may lead to a cascade of changes in the rest of the system" (Palmer and Goossaert 2011, 6).

There is another reason that the more holistic ecological discourse on religion might be more fruitful than the liberal market discourse: it leaves more room for important differences between the Chinese and the Western religious ecosystems. These differences might be most fruitfully elucidated from within a theological discourse. From a theological point of view, the notions of religion and *zongjiao* uphold fundamentally different concepts of the sacred and the secular, and the relationship of the human to the divine (Van der Braak 2017a).

As David Hall and Roger Ames have argued, Western notions of ontological transcendence tend to be out of place in the Chinese worldview (Hall and Ames 1987, 1995, 1997). Whereas in Western theology, the positions of exclusivism (claiming an exclusive access to religious truth for one's own tradition) and inclusivism (claiming a superior access to religious truth for one's own tradition) have been widely spread, often drowning out attempts by intercultural theologians to come to a theology of religions based on pluralism, it could be argued that a Chinese type of pluralism has been the norm rather than the exception in Chinese religious history.

Religious participation in China has mostly been characterized by a remixing of various religious traditions. These days, such remixing is also rapidly becoming a reality in religion-as-lived in Western societies, opening up possibilities to new forms of social cohesion that are not informed by fixed and exclusive religious identities, a "new we." In a sense, Western religiosity may be becoming more like Chinese religiosity (see Hedges 2019). This is ironical in light of twentieth-century Chinese attempts at becoming more like the West by establishing exclusive religious identities such as the five religions paradigm (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism) and establishing Western church style institutions. But religion-as-lived keeps resurfacing in a bewildering variety of forms, outside such categories. This difference between formal religious identities and informal "religion-as-lived" in China has famously been conceptualized by sociologist of religion C. K. Yang as institutionalized and diffused religion (Yang 1961). These days, the notion of "popular religion" is frequently used to describe such religion-as-lived that falls outside formally recognized religious identities.

Making Sense of Religious Belonging in China

As part of the MRB project, Daan Oostveen spent several years at Renmin University in Beijing in order to study specifically Asian hermeneutic models

of religious diversity, such as the Chinese discourse of *sanjiao*, the unity of the three teachings (Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism). Characteristic of the *sanjiao* discourse is that, on the one hand, the unity of the three teachings is asserted, and their principles and concepts are affirmed as equally valid. On the other hand, no attempt is made to combine them in a conceptual synthesis (Ho 1995; Zhu 2013). This differs from the Western pluralistic-theological perspective, where different religious doctrines and practices are interpreted as historically and culturally determined expressions of a single transcendent reality that can always only be partially expressed (Baier 2008; Schmidt-Leukel 2008; Thatamanil 2020; Von Brück 2008). A critical confrontation of East Asian hermeneutical models of hybrid religiosity with Western pluralist-theological perspectives can be helpful in developing a pluralistic, intercultural hermeneutics of hybrid religiosity in the West (Oostveen 2020, 2026).

Oostveen describes historical and contemporary approaches to religious diversity in China. He argues that hermeneutical approaches to religious diversity in China do not consider the religious landscape to be populated by competing and exclusive religions with different ontological truth claims with regard to some Ultimate Reality, but by complementary pragmatic systems of thought with intrasystematic truth claims. Much more than on the differentiation of “religions” and their doctrinal content, the focus is on how religions work and what goal they serve. Therefore, even though China has known various pluralist hermeneutics of religion, they are very different from the various Western hermeneutics of religion.

Religious belonging in China for most people does not refer to being affiliated with any bounded religious tradition (except for monks and priests). One belongs to the family, the village and the country, and this is the context within which various religious practices, rituals and obligations are performed. This raises the question: can we truly speak of religious belonging in China, in the Western sense?

Oostveen argues that the religious behavior of most Chinese can best be described by a hermeneutics of religiosity. It is quite eclectic and syncretistic. They freely mix religious practices and teachings without caring much from which religious tradition they are taken. In fact, they might not even self-identify as being religious at all. In these respects, Oostveen argues, they resemble Western soft MRB-ers.

Religious elites in China have distinguished bounded religious traditions, not in the form of the World Religions Paradigm but in the form of the “unity of the three teachings” paradigm. This unity has historically been understood in three senses. First, the various teachings originate from the same source.

Second, the various teachings are complementary but functionally different. Third, the various teachings are different methods to reach the same goal, or medicines to cure the same illness. The three teachings paradigm is pluralist, but in a different sense than Western forms of pluralism.

The Chinese approach to religious diversity shares with Western forms of pluralism a commitment to interreligious harmony. As Oostveen notes, all three varieties of the “unity of the three teachings” paradigm seem at first glance compatible with a Western pluralist approach. First, that the various teachings originate from the same source is in some ways similar to the pluralist model of John Hick. Second, that the various teachings are complementary but functionally different is in some ways similar to Paul Knitter’s thought of complementarity between Christianity and Buddhism. Third, that the various teachings are different methods to reach the same goal is in some ways similar to Schmidt Leukel’s metaphor of all religions being travel guides for the itinerant religious seeker on his way to the mountaintop of ultimate reality. Yet, in spite of this seeming similarity to the Western pluralist approach to religious diversity in theory, in practice most teachings in China have actually held an inclusivist stance towards other teachings. An example of this is the *panjiao* systems of various Buddhist schools, that rank the various teachings, with their own school coming out on top.

The Chinese attitude towards the various teachings is that they are each considered to be a container of religious tools that anyone can combine to suit their needs. This attitude is similar to the one that Taylor describes as characteristic for the current “Age of Authenticity” in the West since the sixties, and to what Paul Hedges describes as Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape (Hedges 2017, 2019). Therefore, Chinese religiosity is relevant to making sense of contemporary religiosity in the West. Could this be how Western soft MRB-ers approach religious traditions?

As well as the West, China has known a gap between lived religion “on the ground,” where people freely mix and match religious practices and rituals without being concerned about to which teaching they belong (“folk religion” or “popular religion”), and an “official” pluralist hermeneutics used by religious elites, that speaks of various discrete teachings, each with their own adherents. However, this has not led to problems due to various reasons. First, religious institutions did not have as much power in society as in Europe. Therefore, the government could serve as an arbiter between religious teachings. Second, in China, there has always been ongoing lively debate on religious difference, because there was no ruling teaching that could define orthodoxy, like Christianity in Europe. This forced teachings to “get along.” Exclusivist approaches were absent (up until the rise of

evangelical Christianity in China due to US missionaries). Teachings were considered functionally different but complementary.

Modes of Doing Religion in China

The UK-based anthropologist Adam Yuet Chau, who was also somewhat involved with the MRB project, admits that there is religious diversity in China. However, this diversity is not of the type that refers to the presence of different discrete confessional religions, each with their own religious believers. He speaks about a wide variety of different modalities of doing religion in China (Chau 2013), that he divides into five types: (1) *Discursive/scriptural* (writing religious texts and engaging in religious debates); (2) *Personal/cultivational* (practices such as meditation, qigong and sutra chanting for cultivating and transforming oneself); (3) *Liturgical* (rituals conducted by ritual specialists such as Confucian or Daoist rites, or funeral rituals); (4) *Immediate-practical* (ritual or magic techniques such as talismans or offering incense, aiming at quick results); (5) *Relational* (managing the relationship between humans and divine beings through building temples, making offerings, going on pilgrimage, or religious festivals). Chau argues that these five modes of doing religion are far more relevant for describing the Chinese religious landscape than the confessional boundaries between Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism:

such attempts at arriving at cognitive, conceptual, and sometimes institutional coherence have not had much impact on how most people “do religion” on the ground, where they do not care which deity belongs to which religion or which religious tradition inspired which morality book. (Chau 2013, 142)

Most Han Chinese have historically not had confessional religious belongings, except for very small pockets of groups claiming Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and sectarian identities. And while temples and religious specialists may compete for clientele and donations, this competition doesn't take the form of one religion as a whole against another religion as a whole, except occasionally at the elite level, where it involves competition for patronage at the imperial court. However, these elite members of religions were always a very small minority.

Different modalities of doing religion produce different kinds of religiosity. Rather than the *dharma-based religiosity* that stresses religious belonging

(prominent in Buddhist traditions in Southeast Asia and Tibet, and in monotheistic religions), Chinese religion is primarily *efficacy-based religiosity*: it is the efficacy of the rituals that matters, not religious belonging. As a result, Chau concludes:

Religious diversity in China is not manifested as the coexistence of, and competition between, confession- and membership-based denominations and churches but rather primarily as the coexistence of, and competition between, various ritual service providers with different (though sometimes convergent) liturgical programs. (Chau 2013, 151)

Chinese religiosity does not have fixed borders between religions in the same way as the World Religions Paradigm suggests. It may be better, as Chau suggests, to speak of options or strategic choices within a single landscape of religious providers. Therefore, even the very term MRB seems to misconstrue the situation.

Towards an Alternative Pluralism

The Chinese pluralist approach to religious diversity is clearly different from Western forms of pluralism. This has led Asian theologians to look for alternatives to Western pluralism. Although many Asian theologians initially joined the pluralist approach to MRB, they became critical of its Eurocentric premises in later writings. Daggers has given an overview of their criticisms (Daggers 2013).

Jeannine Hill Fletcher has observed a “move beyond pluralism” towards an implicit combination of pluralist and particularist methods. She notes that such writers such as Mercy Oduyoye, Chung Hyun Kyung and Kwok Pui Lan are pluralist in finding soteriological resources for liberation across religious traditions, rather than only within one’s own home tradition. They could also be called particularist in the sense of recognizing the distinctiveness of these traditioned resources (Fletcher 2008, 147). First, they argue, religions should not be imagined as bounded and mutually exclusive traditions. Doctrinal boundaries, religious purity and the fear of syncretism are unimportant. Second, we should respect the distinctiveness and particularity of religions, rather than go along with the Eurocentric universalizing tendencies of the pluralist method.

Daggers discusses how various Asian feminist and postcolonial theologians move from a hermeneutics of religions to a hermeneutics of religiosity.

For example, the Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung argues to move from a Christo-centric Christianity to a life-centric Christianity. This seems similar to Hick's pluralist approach. However, Chung does not aim at a Christianity transcended (by the Real, or Truth), but at syncretism between religions.⁴ In her performance at the 1991 WCC Assembly in Canberra, Chung performed a woman shaman within indigenous Korean religion who, accompanied by drums and dance, invoked the Holy Spirit and a litany of spirits of named human beings (Chung 1992). Chung practiced Buddhism with Korean Zen master Seung Sahn for fifteen years, and was authorized by him as a Dharma teacher in 2008. Chung speaks about "ecumenical spirituality": a common search for healing and wholeness through combining elements from different religions. She gives the example of Filipina Catholic women worshipping Ina, the divine mother of Filipino folk religion as the form of the Virgin Mary.

Kwok Pui Lan affirms the importance of religious plurality and interfaith dialogue. She holds that Christian identity can only be spoken about in relation to, and not over against, indigenous traditions of the motherland. She affirms pluralism in the Chinese sense, where Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism have co-existed mostly peacefully throughout history. However, although she affirms religious pluralism, she rejects the specific pluralist methods that have been advanced by Western theological pluralists (Kwok 2005).

She differentiates two kinds of MRB: (1) a liberal or pluralist MRB in those of Western heritage, in which two religions or religious elements are merely mixed or juxtaposed, comfortably established and settled within their host culture; (2) a postcolonial MRB in those who have been colonized, who are dislocated or in the diaspora, for whom MRB is the only option. Oostveen sees a need for a double disentanglement with regard to approaching religious diversity. Religious studies scholars rightly argue for a disentanglement from Christian influences (especially implicit notions of Christian superiority), on the construction of religion. As Daggers argues, however, both theology and religious studies need to disentangle themselves from Eurocentric universalizing and generalizing tendencies (Daggers 2013, 144).

4 Kwok criticized the Western feminist pluralist theologian Rita Gross for recommending Buddhism to Western readers, without attention for the work of Chung and others. It is an example of pluralist universalism, assimilating non-Western religious resources into a universalist pluralist model, without proper respect for their historical and cultural particularity. Kwok's criticism runs parallel to much recent criticism of Buddhist modernism.

Kwok is critical of detaching religious diversity from the concrete cultural networks of relations that constitute lived religion (“religiosity”) by assuming bounded religions. However, she doesn’t want to sacrifice the notion of religious tradition. Following David Chidester, she understands religion as intrareligious and interreligious networks of cultural relations. Also, pluralists are critical of the particularists’ insistence on religions as bounded and unitary cultural systems.

As Daggers notes, Asian theologians criticize the pluralist projects for their “Western particularism,” caused by the fact that the pluralist approach is rooted in the liberal Christian appropriation of European modernity (*Christianity transcended*), which loses Asian distinctiveness. For example, the Sri Lankan Jesuit theologian Aloysius Pieris (Pieris 1996) claims that pluralist approaches to religious diversity do not sufficiently illuminate the lived interreligious religiosity in the Asian context. Pieris rejects a cognitive-propositional approach to religion and argues for a Christ beyond dogma. The criterion to orthodoxy should be commitment to the Reign of God, not purity of doctrine. Again, his notion of a common calling to God’s Reign seems similar to Hick’s pluralist approach. However, the commonality that he speaks about is rooted in the shared practices of common cosmic religiosity rather than in a universal essence. Pieris considers a “beatitudinal spirituality” as the common heritage of all religions (Pieris 1996).

According to these Asian theologians, even though Western pluralists were innovative in valuing religious diversity, opening up space for non-Western religions, they run the risk of repeating a Eurocentric universalizing logic, reading religious diversity in Western terms. When religious diversity is read in Asian terms, we see that religions are porous and overlapping, not bounded and mutually exclusive. They are not instances of a universal essence, but should be studied in their culturally and historically embedded particularity. There is a commonality in all religions, but this is the beatitudinal spirituality of the shared practices of common cosmic religiosity, not the universal essence of the Real. The commonality is not ontological but in shared practices. Religion consists of both intrareligious and interreligious networks of cultural relations.

Philosopher of religion Kenneth Rose defends an apophatic pluralism in his book *Pluralism: The Future of Religion* (Rose 2013). Rose distinguishes between strong and weak versions of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Strong exclusivism would exclude all other religious belongings outside the own tradition. Only single religious belonging would be acceptable. Weak exclusivism would support medium MRB, and participation in other religions. Strong inclusivism, which would lead one to view other religions

as deficient or incomplete expressions of one's own religion, would support medium MRB but not hard MRB. Weak inclusivism, that withholds judgment on other traditions while learning from them, would support both hard and medium MRB, although it would reject full and equal dual belonging.⁵

Strong pluralism constructs a universal way of life "beyond the Rubicon," based on multireligious teachings and practices, which affirms multiple religious participation but not MRB. Weak pluralism sees the existence of various religions as negating absolute claims for any of them, due to the limitations of language (Rose 2013, 9). This may lead to the rejection of all forms of religious belonging, but, since it does not consider it possible to cross the Rubicon (there is no common room where one could go to), it could also affirm the legitimacy of religious traditions and support all forms of multiple religious participation as valid.

In the collection of essays *Many Yet One*, both John Thatamanil and Mark Heim have argued to go beyond theology of religions (Heim 2016; Thatamanil 2016). Heim describes a recent turn from negotiating the problem of religious diversity toward positively valuing religious diversity as a richness to be explored. According to both Thatamanil and Heim, a recognition of the differences between religious paths is necessary in order to be able to accommodate religious diversity. If religions and their practices were essentially equivalent, there would be no reason for religious diversity. It rests on the perceptions that religions are not the same, that something is available in one tradition that is not available in another.

Thatamanil, speaking from a pluralist position, proposes to replace a theology of religions with a theology of religious diversity. He argues that, from the perspective of MRB, we need theologies of religious diversity that can affirm both the difference and the compatibility of the religious traditions that are being combined. He mentions open inclusivisms and versions of non-Kantian pluralism such as the deep pluralism of David Ray Griffin, the relational pluralism of Roland Faber and Catherine Keller, or Panikkar's nondualistic pluralism in which the mountain-climbing metaphor is transformed. Rather than religions being several paths to climb up the mountain, the mountain is not separate from the paths. The way and the goal are not separate (Panikkar 1981, 24). The mountain itself is what needs to be explored, rather than reaching the mountain top. Traversing the mountain is integral to the spiritual path (Panikkar 1981, 25).

5 For such strong and weak inclusivism, Griffiths 2001 uses the terms closed and open inclusivism.

Heim, speaking from an open inclusivist position, offers a similar proposal to speak of theologies of religious pluralism that will offer intellectual reflection on religious diversity and can articulate the value of the religious other. They can articulate why interreligious engagement is part of the normal Christian (or Buddhist) life, and they can be “the necessary ‘docking mechanism’ that allows *what* is learned from multiple religious participation to find a place within the ongoing life and wisdom of a community” (Heim 2016, 28). A theology of religious plurality would stress the need for learning from other religions. The new discipline of comparative theology applies itself to the practice of such deep interreligious learning.

Discussion

Theologian John Cobb has argued that in the West, religious belonging has a primacy over other kinds of social belonging. He explains: “The real Christian decides what it means to be an American as a Christian, not the other way around. Hence, belonging to a Christian community is a way of expressing one’s primary identity” (Cobb 2002, 23). For Chinese, it is exactly the other way around. The real Christian decides what it means to be a Christian as a Chinese: first love the country, then love Christ. They practice a Christianity with Chinese characteristics.

As we have seen in this chapter, in Chinese lived religion, there is not really such a thing as religious belonging as we understand it in the West. There is social belonging, family belonging (based on kinship), ethnic belonging, and national belonging. But religious affiliation is not generally a primary reason for belonging. Of course, elite practitioners such as monks and priests do belong to their religious traditions. But historically, such traditions have served as either teachings (*jiao*), or social movements.

This general absence of religious belonging and religions means that, although there certainly is religion in China, the Chinese have a different mode of being religious. Lived religion in China is diffuse. People participate in religious rituals, but they feel free to combine rituals from various sets of teachings and practices, depending on what the circumstances require.

In line with the assumptions of the World Religions Paradigm (religions are assumed to be bounded entities that stress belief in religious convictions rather than embodied practice, and that require exclusive belonging from their followers), the Chinese government approaches religion in China through a religious market model, according to which established religions and new religious movements compete for market share. However, a

hermeneutics of religiosity is used by anthropologists of religion to study lived, diffused religion in China. Either they adapt the market model to include the more messy and chaotic gray and black markets, or they use the metaphor of the religious ecosystem, in which people make use of various religious resources without committing to specific religions.⁶

We have seen that Hedges has noted that doing religion in East Asia has not primarily been about belonging to a particular tradition, nor adhering 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 (Hedges 2019, 167). 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” (Hedges 2019, 167). Such an East Asian strategic religious participation takes place in a shared religious landscape, Hedges argues, that is characterized by a fairly common cosmological system, so that mixing traditions or combining elements from them is not seen as violating core doctrinal systems (Hedges 2019, 168). Also, Adam Chau has argued that rather than being focused on religious denominations, people make use of ritual service providers (such as shamans or other ritual experts) that offer a toolbox of practices comprised of various elements from both established religions and forms of religiosity that are sometimes indicated as “folk religion” (Chau 2013).

David Hall and Roger Ames have famously claimed that the Chinese philosophical tradition is not truth-seeking (as in the West), but way-seeking: how to navigate reality is more important than discovering some theoretical foundation to it. Also, Western notions of ontological vertical transcendence seem out of place in China (Hall and Ames 1987, 1995, 1997). Chinese strategic religious participation involves strategically engaging with more-than-human beings without approaching such beings as ontologically transcendent. Historically, Chinese religious traditions have not considered themselves to be “true” religions, with believers that should “believe” in their doctrines. The Western processes of religionization, as described in chapter 2, have not taken place in China in the same way.

The findings of part 1 call the usefulness of MRB as a conceptual tool into question. The previous chapters have shown why MRB matters, but also why it cannot carry the full weight of what is happening today. MRB

6 Oostveen suggests that Chinese religiosity is best interpreted using a Deleuzian rhizomatic approach. Along with some feminist and postcolonial theologians, he argues that such a rhizomatic approach can lead to a transreligious perspective that offers new possibilities for conceptualizing MRB, especially soft forms of MRB (Oostveen 2020, 2025, 2026).

is analytically productive because it draws attention to religious lives that do not fit the “one person-one religion” model. At the same time, MRB still assumes that “religions” are clearly bounded entities and that the key phenomenon is *belonging* (whether single or multiple). Those assumptions fit some cases well, but they increasingly distort others.

The chapters in part 1 have progressively made this tension visible. The discussion of Buddhist-Christian belonging in chapter 3 has demonstrated both the explanatory power of MRB and the difficulty of treating traditions as stable packages. The current chapter on religious belonging in China has functioned as a decisive comparative lens: it has shown a religious landscape where participation, pragmatics, and situational engagement can matter more than belonging, and where a Western “membership” model becomes an awkward fit. This chapter also introduced the suggestion that, in some respects, contemporary hybrid religiosity in the West may resemble such Chinese ways of being religious.

These findings on strategic religious participation in China can make us more aware of our Western category habits in describing religiosity in the West. Perhaps our preconceived notions of bounded religious tradition, belief-based belonging, and ontological transcendence prevent us from seeing important aspects of lived religiosity in the West. Perhaps we need new conceptual frameworks that enable us to see past such limitations in order to take a new look at hybrid religiosity in the West. Whereas MRB remains valuable as a concept, it risks unintentionally reproducing a Western, often Christian-shaped expectation that the “normal” form of religion is confessional belonging to a discrete tradition that involves supernatural beings.

Throughout these chapters, we have distinguished between hermeneutics of religions (used to interpret hard MRB) and hermeneutics of religiosity (used to interpret soft MRB). We have described the tensions and battles between those two hermeneutics in various disciplines. Whereas chapter 3 started out firmly established in a hermeneutic of religions, we ended up with some questions about whether Buddhist belonging can truly be described with a hermeneutics of religions. And our investigation of religion in China has multiplied those doubts. It seems that a hermeneutics of religiosity is more fitting to describe the Chinese religious landscape. The question is, whether it is also more fitting to describe important new developments in the Western religious landscape. This is a question that part 2 of this study will explore.

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Part Two

Beyond Multiple Religious Belonging

5. Reimagining Religiosity as Remix

Abstract: This chapter proposes “remix” as a more adequate frame for contemporary Western hybridity than multiple belonging alone. Building on recent accounts of “the Remixed” and remix as interpretive metaphor, it describes religiosity decoupled from membership and stable self-identification yet oriented toward meaning, community, ritual, and transformation. It traces shifts in Christian belonging toward more practice-based forms and uses a case study of psychedelic spiritual communities to show remix as a concrete social and ritual formation, not merely individual choice. The chapter argues for practice-oriented definitions of religion that foreground engagements with more-than-human powers. It closes by naming a central puzzle: the rise of “immanent gods” in remixed religiosity.

Keywords: remix; Spiritual But Not Religious; multiple religious belonging; unbundling; practice-oriented religiosity; hybrid religiosity

In this chapter we will explore alternative framings of the religious hybridity that characterizes much of the Western religious landscape today. A useful alternative framework needs to take into account the findings of part 1: make room for practice-centered rather than belief-centered religiosity; avoid reifying bounded religions; allow for the practices of unbundling and rebundling elements from religious traditions. It also needs to accommodate the strategic engagement with more-than-human agencies without a dualistic ontology that considers them supernatural beings.

This chapter introduces the metaphor of the remix, by using the work of religion writer Tara Isabella Burton and religion scholar Seth Walker. It introduces the rise of the Remixed, and will illustrate this with a case study. Consequently, it will start exploring reimagining religion and religious belonging, using John Thatamanil’s work. It will adopt Riesebrodt’s definition of religion as practices involving superhuman powers.

The Rise of the Remixed

In her book *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, Tara Isabella Burton documents the new hybrid forms of religiosity that increasingly force us to reimagine the cultural and religious landscape of our postsecular and postmodern Western world (Burton 2020). She describes the emergence of a new type of quintessentially American religiosity that is “decoupled from institutions, from creeds, from metaphysical truth-claims about God or the universe or the Way Things Are” (Burton 2020, 3), but that still aims in various ways to provide meaning, purpose, community and ritual. She tells the story of the religious sensibility of a whole generation, that of the millennials, those who are not just rejecting religion but remixing it (Burton 2020, 9).

At first glance, empirical data seem to indicate that Americans become less and less religious. As of 2019, about a quarter of American adults said they had no religion. And among millennials, almost 40 percent said so. Those religious Nones outnumbered evangelicals (15 percent). There seems to be a Rise of the Nones (Drescher 2016). Also, established religions are in decline. In 2017, self-described mainline Protestants comprised just 10 percent of the American public. Of these, barely a quarter attended church (Burton 2020, 52). Just 8 percent of white millennials self-identify as evangelical, compared to 26 percent of seniors (Burton 2020, 239).

However, only 7 percent of Americans self-identified as “atheist” or even “agnostic.” Also, 72 percent of the Nones said to believe in a higher power or spiritual force, that they talk to regularly (46 percent), that talks back to them (13 percent), that has protected them throughout life (48 percent), that has rewarded (41 percent) or punished (28 percent) them. They believe in the presence of “spiritual energy” in physical objects (47 percent), in psychics (41 percent) or in reincarnation (38 percent). They experience a sense of “spiritual peace and well-being” at least once a week (41 percent).

Seen from the definition of religion as engaging with more-than-human powers, those Nones seem to be quite religious. Like fantasy writer Neil Gaiman wrote, new American gods are everywhere. In her book, Burton describes three new American faiths that provide such new gods among the full range of the political spectrum: the social justice left, more centrist techno-utopians, and the atavistic right. However, rather than Christianity, Judaism and Islam, that place the sacred (at least partly) outside the world, those new American faiths tend to locate the sacred more fully within the world. They aim to transform the world, not rooted in a transcendent meaning but in human thought, feeling and will, resulting in various utopias: “the techno-utopians’ dream of a world in which we are all rendered

optimally efficient machines, the social justice utopia of a liberated world, the atavists' vision of a purifying cataclysm that will bring us beyond the tyranny of civilization altogether" (Burton 2020, 246). Burton describes the Remixed, who

envision themselves as creators of their own bespoke religions, mixing and matching spiritual and aesthetic and experiential and philosophical traditions. The Remixed hunger for the same things human beings have always longed for: a sense of meaning in the world and personal purpose within that meaning, a community to share that experience with, and rituals to bring the power of that experience into achievable, everyday life. But they're doing it differently. [...]

Today's Remixed reject authority, institution, creed, and moral universalism. They value intuition, personal feeling, and experiences. They demand to rewrite their own scripts about how the universe, and human beings, operate. Shaped by the twin forces of a creative-communicative Internet and consumer capitalism, today's Remixed don't want to receive doctrine, to assent automatically to a creed. They want to choose—and, more often than not, purchase—the spiritual path that feels more authentic, more meaningful, to them. They prioritize intuitional spirituality over institutional religion. And they want, when available institutional options fail to suit their needs, the freedom to mix and match, to create their own daily rituals and practices and belief systems. (Burton 2020, 10)

Burton distinguishes three groups within the Remixed. The first group is those who self-identify as Spiritual But Not Religious (hereafter SBNR), 27 percent of all Americans (Pew Research Center 2017).¹ SBNR does not mean being without religious affiliation. Only 37 percent say they are. Fifty-one percent of SBNRs also self-identify as Christian (Burton 2020, 19). Burton suggests that for many SBNRs, although religious affiliation does play some role in their life, their primary sources of meaning and purpose come from outside their religious tradition, and even from secular sources such as music and other forms of art.

The second group is the faithful Nones: those who self-identify as Nones (having no religion) yet also say they believe in a higher power (72 percent

1 A 2023 Pew Research survey estimates that 22 percent of all Americans are Spiritual But Not Religious (Pew Research Center 2023).

of Nones). They overlap with SBNRs with one difference: they don't claim any religious belonging whatsoever.

The third group is the religious hybrids: "people who say they belong to a given tradition, and believe or practice a portion of it. But they also feel free to disregard elements that don't necessarily suit them, or to supplement their official practice with spiritual or ritualistic elements, not to mention beliefs, from other traditions" (Burton 2020, 22). As many surveys convey, for example, the personal beliefs and practices of self-identifying Christians are increasingly varied. And one in eight Americans say their spiritual life has been influenced by Buddhism, whereas just 1 percent of Americans actually identify as Buddhist (Burton 2020, 22). Duane Bidwell has called this group "the spiritually fluid" (Bidwell 2018). This process of hybridization has been called the "unbundling" of religious belonging, as we have seen in chapter 3 (see Van der Braak 2021).

These three groups comprise the individuals that remix their personal religious life. However, also on a cultural level, the religious becomes remixed with the secular. As Burton puts it: "we may not all be Remixed, but we all live in a Remixed nation" (Burton 2020, 25). Today's Western culture is a Remixed culture. Similar to how the Reformation was connected with the invention of the printing press, the Remixed religiosity is connected with the internet (Burton 2020, 11), which encourages a participative approach: finding various sources of information, mixing those together with different perspectives, and contributing in the comments section (Burton 2020, 23). Like our social media feeds, our religious "feed" becomes increasingly bespoke.

The notion of remixing religion has two meanings. First, it refers to remixing one's religious identity or religious belonging by mixing and matching various religious traditions. Second, it refers to the fact that religion itself is increasingly being mixed in with secular forms of meaning making such as wellness, social activism, art and sport. Many people in the West are increasingly not only remixing their own religious life, but also, their religious life is being mixed in with their secular life. In our postsecular age, the religious sphere and the secular sphere are no longer the mutually exclusive domains that they once seemed to be. The "turf wars" between Religion and Science seem to be over for more and more people.

The American religion scholar Seth Walker has argued that the process of continual borrowing between religious traditions and cultural practices, especially in a digital age of networked mediation, can be productively approached through the conceptual metaphor of the remix, and its associated notions of sourcing and sampling.

Walker sees his work as a response to Brent Nongbri's call for a scholarly redescription of religion (Nongbri 2013). According to Nongbri, the notion of "religion," as used in the World Religions Paradigm, is generally used to categorize anything that resembles Protestant Christianity. The implicit metaphor is "religions are protestant Christianities." Walker replaces this implicit metaphor with the explicit metaphor "religions are remixes." As Walker notes,

The term "remix" has a legacy extending back into the mid-twentieth century among Jamaican club artists in Kingston. These artists [...] began manipulating sounds from the disk plates ("test dubs") used in mastering a recording as dancehall culture continued to evolve. Similar to what is recognized today in "remix," dub compositions privileged the sampling of pre-recorded tracks as their starting points in creative dialogues with the machines and the tapes. (Walker 2025, 2)

During the 1990s, the remix metaphor was extended to "do-it-yourself" culture, participatory politics and open-source movements. The remix-metaphor became a way to think about "creative practices that self-consciously utilized resources from productions preceding them" (Walker 2025, 2).

In his study on "remix culture," Lawrence Lessig (2008) argues that the rise of digital media and the internet has facilitated a shift from read/only culture, characterized by passive consumption, to a more participative read/write culture, where cultural elements were rewritten to form something new out of the old. Within the past decade, Remix studies has emerged as a new paradigm to describe the processes of networked (re-)mediation in today's evolving digital age, with its communication technologies that are "instantaneous, global, multisensory, archival, transmissible, permutable, editable, networked, interoperable, customizable, and hackable." (Walker 2025, 4)

The metaphor of the remix can help to rethink religion and religiosity and the development of the contemporary religious landscape. Walker quotes Lakoff and Johnson, who have noted in their work *Metaphors to Live By*:

New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to. Much of cultural change arises from

the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones.
(Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 145)

As a result of the rise of the Remixed, traditional confessional belonging seems to be under pressure. Burton describes what she calls the catch-22 of traditional religious traditions:

More stringent, spiritually demanding traditions—like, say, Christian evangelism or Orthodox Judaism—may be more likely to retain the average member, but they’re conversely more likely to alienate those members who are unable to conform their identities and values to those of the community. Meanwhile, more progressive and liberal traditions, such as mainline Protestantism, are often capable of being more welcoming to those on the theological margins, but more often than not fail to retain members or fulfill their spiritual needs. Once you’re willing to relax some elements of your faith tradition, after all, what’s to stop you from seeking something even more specific to your personal needs, identity, and situation? Why not create a mix-and-match religious identity fusing, for example, Episcopalianism with yoga, tarot and poly community, or seek communal and spiritual fulfillment outside of organized religion altogether? (Burton 2020, 243–44)

A Shift in Christian Belonging: From Confessional Belief to Implicit Faith

The shift in religious belonging that characterizes the Remixed is perhaps more pervasive in the religious landscape as a whole. In chapter 3, we already commented on the type of belonging of Western convert Buddhists: their belonging is not primarily shaped by confessional belief in the Buddhist doctrines, but by faith in the validity of the Eightfold path to liberation that the Buddha taught. They don’t join a Buddhist sangha because they’ve dissected Buddhist sutras. They trust the community and the communal practice.

The American commentator on contemporary Christianity and spirituality Diana Butler Bass (2012) observes a similar change with regard to Christian belonging. It used to be that Christian confessional belief came first, Christian behavior and practices came next, and Christian belonging would be the result of embracing Christian beliefs and practices. As Bass explains:

Churches turned this pattern into rituals of catechism, character formation, and Confirmation. [...] Sunday schools and catechism classes taught Christian doctrine and the Bible, ensuring that each generation knew the intellectual content of the tradition. Eventually, children [...] learned how to pray, worship, sing, give alms, and act kindly. [Later], the church would offer a rite of full membership in the form of Communion, Confirmation, or (in the case of Baptists) adult-believers baptism. Believe, behave, belong. It is almost second nature for Western people to read the religious script this way. (Bass 2012, 201)

However, as we have seen in chapter 2, this seemingly self-evident script has only arisen since the Protestant Reformation, when the various denominations started to order and systematize their doctrines, and the emphasis shifted from emphasizing Christian practice toward articulating Christian teachings. As a result, Christian belonging began with assenting to a body of organized doctrines.

Today, Bass notes, this sequence of believing-behaving-belonging that makes Christian belonging the result of embracing certain beliefs and practices is giving way to the sequence belonging-behaving-believing: implicit faith in the teacher, priest or community is primary. Religious belief and participation come later.

Bass argues that the script of believing, behaving, and belonging is connected with religion-as-institution, whereas the script of belonging, behaving, and believing is characteristic of *religio* as a spiritually vital faith (Bass 2012, 204):

The confession is not an intellectually considered utterance of theological speculation. Rather, it is what the Bible refers to as “wisdom from above,” the sort of knowing that comes from engagement with God, others, and the world. It is credo, “You are the One whom I trust for healing and love!” [...] In the biblical pattern of faith, believing comes last. (Bass 2012, 209)

For the Remixed, a similar sequence applies. Implicit faith, religious belonging seen as feeling at home, comes first. In her case studies of the Remixed, Tara Burton emphasizes how strong the longing is to be connected to a community and feel at home. Such a shift in religious belonging constitutes a return to implicit faith. In chapter 2, we have seen that before the modern Western invention of religious belonging as the assent to doctrinal statements, Christian belonging was hardly related to religious beliefs. The belonging of Early Christians was based on implicit faith in the Church

and its teachers. Such implicit faith was condemned by the Protestant reformers, who demanded intellectual assent, not trust. This led to the framework of religions as competing sets of belief, and ultimately to the World Religions Paradigm.

As part of the Protestant strategy, the transcendentalist notion of the “supernatural” was carved out as the irrational remnant of implicit faith. “Religious believers” were those who still believed in miracles, angels and divine interventions. However, also the natural/supernatural binary is a modern invention. In the premodern world, the supernatural was part of the fabric of reality.

As historian Peter Harrison argues, however, such implicit faith did not disappear. It simply changed address. In the modern age, we implicitly trust science, even though most of us don’t understand quantum mechanics or vaccine development. The scholar of New Religious Movements Massimo Introvigne adds that today, implicit faith may be changing address yet again (Introvigne 2025). One example is that anti-vaxxers don’t abandon implicit faith either, they simply redirect it to conspiracy theorists and influencers. With regard to new religious movements, many of them are a renaissance of implicit faith: converts don’t join because they’ve dissected theological treatises (although some may read them later). They join because they trust a guru, a prophet, a community. Just like early Christians and Muslims. The intellectual scaffolding may come later—or not at all (Introvigne 2025).

This return of implicit faith seems an important new aspect of contemporary religious belonging, not only among the Remixed, but also among Western Christian and Buddhist believers.

A Case Study: Psychedelic Spiritual Communities

One interesting and growing new form of remixed religiosity is participation in psychedelic ceremonies (see e.g., Van der Braak 2023). As a case study, we can look at what belonging looks like in such new forms of psychedelic religiosity. Jeffrey Breau, program lead of Psychedelics and Spirituality at the Harvard Center for World Religions, researches novel psychedelic spiritual communities (NPSCs) in North America. Such NPSCs are heterogeneous new religious movements; they have distinct theologies, a range of ritual practices, and varied approaches to belonging (Breau 2025). As Breau notes, “in online worship services, weekend retreats, informal dinners, dance parties, in the hours before a ceremony, and in the light of dawn after,

it is common to hear people exploring, even debating, what makes their psychedelic experiences sacred” (Breau 2025).

David is a 44-year-old carpenter with a full, dirty-blond beard and a gentle demeanor. He is a longstanding member of the Church of Direct Experience (CODE), an NPSC founded in 2018 in Virginia. CODE’s psychedelic sacraments are psilocybin mushrooms, “Rosa Divina” (a smoked, plant blend that contains DMT), and *yagé*. *Yagé* is an ayahuasca-like brew originating from Colombia, and I met David during a weekend of *yagé* ceremonies.² (Breau 2025)

David grew up as a Christian but now described himself as a “doubting skeptic.” However,

David’s understanding of spirituality, psychedelics, and the psychedelic experience changed as he became more connected with CODE. He no longer considers himself an atheist or agnostic, which he attributes to his psychedelic experiences with CODE. He does not like to label his spirituality, but he describes it as awareness of and relationship to “something bigger.” (Breau 2025)

As Breau notes, “conversations about the nature of psychedelics and their sacrality bind members together and become a kind of hermeneutic practice. The psychedelic experience serves as a text that is discussed, interpreted, challenged, and reinterpreted. These conversations are almost never about advancing a single interpretation of the experience. Instead, they are a dynamic exploration of many possible interpretations” (Breau 2025).

Breau’s approach resonates with the lived approach in the multiple religious belonging (hereafter MRB) project. Remixed belonging is not a matter of affiliation or membership, but arises organically in shared religious practice and conversation. In *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*, Ammerman (2013) writes that “‘the sacred’ may be carried in individual minds, but it becomes real in conversations.” In NPSCs, the sacred becomes real because people ask and re-ask what makes a psychedelic experience sacred. Through these conversations, the sacred becomes real in different ways for different people. As John Thatamanil has argued,

2 Although CODE’s mushroom and Rosa Divina ceremonies are not conducted in accordance with an Indigenous tradition, these *yagé* ceremonies were led by a Colombian *taita*, or healer, which CODE considers essential for its proper and respectful use.

religious belonging does not necessarily mean finding the same answers to religious questions, but asking the same questions.

Reimagining Religion and Religious Belonging

The rise of the Remixed forces us to re-examine the notions of religion and religious belonging once again. We have decided to accept religion as a social fact. But when the social facts are changing, we may need to reimagine religion.

Religions as Repertoires of Resources

John Thatamanil argues that we need to find a way to reimagine religion beyond reification, essentialization and totalization that does not assume rigid and impermeable boundaries between religions, and does not erase the particularities within traditions (Thatamanil 2020, 149). He imagines religions not as communities of consensus, focusing on shared creedal beliefs, but as sites of internal contestation: “One knows that one belongs to tradition X if one is claimed by the arguments that consume tradition X and not by some supposed agreement shared by all” (Thatamanil 2020, 150). This fits in with the cultural-linguistic approach to religion.

Thatamanil proposes to understand religions not as unified systems but as repertoires of resources. They resemble, in the words of sociologist Ann Swidler, “a bag of tricks of an oddly assorted tool kit containing implements of varying shapes that fit the hand more or less well, are not always easy to use, and only sometimes do the job” (Swidler 2001, 24). A religious tradition contains “rules about how a shared repertoire ought to be employed in the construction of interpretative schemes” (Thatamanil 2020, 178), similar to how dishes are created using the stock of spices that a regional cuisine has available. What constitutes it are arguments about shared repertoires (Thatamanil 2020, 180).

Such shared repertoires include practices that shape our communal and personal relationship to the world. Apart from such therapeutic regimens, it includes interpretive schemes, which “are generated out of the ingredients of the particular repertoire of a religious tradition. A religious tradition is itself a long-running argument within a community about what ought to be in that tradition’s repertoire and how that repertoire must be responsibly used in order to arrive at right orientation” (Thatamanil 2016, 14).

Thatamanil’s view of religions as containers of cognitive and affective tools affords more cross-traditional conversations. Such interpretive schemes

and therapeutic regimens not only occur within traditions, but also across them. And many schemes and regimens that a tradition considers to be one's own have been the result of historical processes of borrowing and interreligious and intercultural learning. Traditions are always already multiple.

Religiosity as Existential Orientation

Thatamanil focuses not on belonging to religions but on being religious, which he defines as seeking comprehensive qualitative orientation. It is qualitative because it is both cognitive (beliefs) and affective (feeling at home in). A comprehensive orientation refers to “a quest to rightly and properly order our desiring to accord with the world as rightly interpreted” (Thatamanil 2016, 13). Thatamanil reimagines religiosity as a form of orientation. In the words of cross-cultural philosopher of religion Robert Neville, orientation

is how a self comports itself or takes up a stance toward some level or dimension of reality. [...] Orientations are made up of learned ritual conventions. Most are picked up unconsciously as we are socialized into our culture's rituals [...] The point of an orientation is to discern the important or humanly relevant nature of its object and to comport human life appropriately toward it. The ritual structure of an orientation includes both the discernment and the comportment. (Neville 2008, 151)

First, orientation is both a matter of discernment (truth-seeking) and comportment (Way-seeking). In Buddhist terms: wisdom and compassion. Second, the work of orientation is mainly done through ritual practices, not just through cognitive reflection and claim-making. Through such ritual practices, Thatamanil notes, “members of a given society might orient themselves to some dimensions of reality that are not valorized or even recognized by persons in other societies that employ other rituals” (Thatamanil 2020, 158). Therefore, orientation always involves ontological questions as well.

For Thatamanil, for an orientation to be called religious, it must be comprehensive. It transcends mere regional orientations that involve adaptation to topography or climate, or historical, political and economic orientations. And religious orientations differ from other comprehensive orientations, such as science and technology, in that they are qualitative: they involve some kind of “existential faith,” as defined by William Connolly:

An existential faith is a committed view of the world layered into affective dispositions, habits, loyalties, and institutional injunctions. The intensity of commitment to it typically exceeds the power of the arguments and evidence advanced on its behalf. (Connolly 2008, 69)

For Thatamanil, religiosity means that such an existential faith is “accompanied by a commitment to practices that shape communal and personal comportment in the universe as so interpreted” (Thatamanil 2020, 164). Religiosity is not confined to religions or religion: firstly, “human cultures engage in religious work even when they do not organize cultural space into those formations that contemporaries might recognize as ‘religion’ or ‘religions.’” (Thatamanil 2020, 172). Secondly, in modern Western societies, there are so-called secular institutions and activities that do religious work.

Religion as Practices Involving Superhuman Powers

Thatamanil reimagines religious belonging as qualitative existential orientation. However, in that case, what distinguishes religious belonging from nonreligious belonging?

The German-American sociologist of religion Martin Riesebrodt agrees with Thatamanil that, although it is indeed true that the Western concept of religion as privatized and individualized cannot be applied universally, we need an expanded concept of religion that makes room for premodern and non-Western manifestations of it. And this concept of religion needs to focus on religious actions and practices, rather than on religious beliefs and experiences. Religious practitioners tend to be involved with the influence of superhuman powers in their everyday life (Riesebrodt 2010, 45). For Riesebrodt, this last aspect distinguishes religious from nonreligious actions: “Religious actions involve personal or impersonal superhuman powers and thus commonly require charismatically qualified specialists, while nonreligious actions do not” (Riesebrodt 2010, 20).

Riesebrodt defines religions as systems of practices that aim at gaining access to superhuman powers.³ Such access can be gained for example through symbolic actions (prayers, chants or gestures), through manipulation (ritual acts or wearing amulets), through temporary interaction or fusion with superhuman powers (ecstasy), or through activating superhuman potential within oneself (meditative practices). All such practices are what he

3 Stephen Bush has similarly argued that religion should be understood in terms of social practices. Through a historical analysis, he shows that theories of religion that focus on either experience, meaning or power alone are too limited in their view (Bush 2014).

calls interventionist practices. They regulate access to superhuman powers. Such practices are always connected with discursive practices (theological views on what superhuman powers are and how they can be accessed) and behavior-regulating practices (practices that prescribe bodily and social behavior in the religious community). And whereas religious scholars often focus on discursive and behavior-regulating practices (religious worldviews and regulations), for Riesebrodt, interventionist practices (how are the superhuman powers accessed) are primary for the study of religiosity. This would mean: less focus on worldviews and theologies, and on the rules and regulations of behavioral ritual practices, and more focus on how interventionist practices provide meaning by enabling religious practitioners to connect to superhuman powers.

For Riesebrodt, there are three possible approaches to the study of religious practices: intellectual, subjectivist and liturgical (Riesebrodt 2010, 79–89). The intellectual approach constructs complex religious ideas that explain the beliefs of religious practitioners. Such an approach not only privileges the cognitive side of religion and attributes a secondary role to practices, but it also privileges the etic perspective of the researcher at the expense of the emic side of the practitioner (Riesebrodt 2010, 80). The subjectivist approach asks religious practitioners what their experience is. Such an emic approach yields unsystematic, unstable and incomplete answers. And, as Riesebrodt argues, “we understand a play or an opera not by interviewing the actors, singers, musicians, or spectators but by grasping the meaning of the action” (Riesebrodt 2010, 83). Such meaning is not based on religious worldviews or theologies (“belief”), nor on what the practitioners report (“experience”) but on “liturgies”: the rules and scripts that guide human’s interactions with superhuman powers: spoken words, symbolic actions, gestures, hymns (Riesebrodt 2010, 84). This is why Riesebrodt prefers the liturgical approach: the meaning of religion is not developed in theological discourse but in ritual performance.

How are we to understand the notion of superhuman powers? Are they merely symbolic, or could we see them as potentially existing? Sociologist of religion Christian Smith connects Riesebrodt’s theory of religion with critical realism, which provides a conceptual distinction between

the real, the actual and the empirical. The *real* is what exists, [...] even when parts of it are not expressed in actuality. The *actual* is what happens in the world, when entities that belong to the real activate their powers and capacities. The actual happens in time and space, whether any person experiences it or not (“If a tree falls in the forest ...”). The *empirical* consists

of what humans experience or observe, either directly or indirectly.
(Smith 2017, 9)

Smith notes that these distinctions can help us to understand that “certain entities can and do exist even if they are empirically not observable. Only when they activate their causal powers in ways that produce events in time and space do they become actual, and thus potentially observable” (Smith 2017, 9). As Smith notes, “The causal powers of other real entities may counteract or neutralize their causal powers, in which case their effects may not become actual, even though their real causal capacities are operating” (Smith 2017, 9).

This distinction between the real, the actual and the empirical allows for the understanding that more-than-human powers can exist, even if they are empirically not observable, and even if they do not actually exist all the time.⁴ The empirical (what can be perceived by the mind and the senses) is a subset of the actual (what is actually occurring at any given moment), which is a subset of the real (what ultimately exists, regardless of whether it is actually occurring at this moment or not). More-than-human powers are usually, for Westerners, not part of the empirical. However, that does not necessarily mean that they are not part of the actual. As Taylor has observed, although our buffered selves are no longer able to directly experience divine beings, medieval people with their porous selves lived in a universe where such beings were an actual presence with very real effects. The same is true for Chinese people. For them, more-than-human powers are part of the empirical. They don’t “believe in” such powers, they work with them by engaging with them in rituals.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the rise of the Remixed as an illustration of the ever-changing, ever-evolving religious landscape in the West. Burton and Walker have provided the new metaphor of the remix. This new metaphor does not replace MRB so much as reposition it: MRB becomes one recognizable pattern within a larger landscape of recomposed religiosity.

Whereas the framework of MRB presumes that the primary phenomenon in the contemporary religious landscape is *belonging* (even if multiple),

4 To equate what is real with what actually happens, is to engage in what critical realists call the fallacy of actualism.

much contemporary hybridity may be better described as *remixing*: an active, participatory, often pragmatic recombination of elements drawn from multiple repertoires. The Remixed are not merely between traditions; they frequently resist the need for religious self-identification at all, while still pursuing meaning, community, ritual, and transformation.

The metaphor of the remix highlights not simply that people combine elements from different traditions, but also suggests *how* they do so: through selection, adaptation, experimentation, and recombination. Much remixed religiosity is not merely “spiritual-but-not-religious” in a thin sense. It often involves a renewed openness to presences, powers, and agencies that are experienced as real—without necessarily being framed as transcendent or supernatural.

The rise of the Remixed suggests that many contemporary religious lives are not best understood as MRB. People may practice meditation without becoming Buddhists (as we have seen in chapter 3), engage ritual healing without joining a church, or draw on multiple repertoires without ever needing to name a stable religious identity. The metaphor of the remix names a mode of religiosity that is characterized by unbundling (detaching religious practices from their original institutional packages), re-bundling (creating new constellations of practice, meaning, and community), a shift from identity to participation, and a strong interest in practices oriented toward transformation, healing, or experiential depth.

This chapter has argued that in order to make sense of this new religious landscape, we need to reimagine religion and religious belonging. Remixed religiosity is not passive affiliation to bounded religious traditions, but active and participatory, fitting in with the notion of multiple religious participation. It blurs the distinction between religion and nonreligion. First, Thatamanil has proposed to reimagine religions as repertoires of resources, and religiosity as existential orientation. Second, Riesebrodt has proposed using participation in practices that involve superhuman powers as a way to demarcate religion from nonreligion. As Riesebrodt has argued, religion may not be about “the transcendent,” but about engaging with superhuman powers and beings through ritual practices.

The framework of the remix, as presented in this chapter, is more than “just a metaphor.” It makes visible aspects of hybrid religiosity that MRB hides: its practices of unbundling and recombining, its emphasis on ritual practices, repertoires and technologies, its new assemblages of belonging-without-membership, and its focus on authenticity.

However, there are also some challenges. The rise of the Remixed, as described in this chapter, contains a fundamental paradox. On the one hand,

a large part of the Remixed understands their own religiosity as various types of ritual engagement with more-than-human powers. As Burton notes, a new type of American gods has entered the scene. On the other hand, most of them do not believe in ontological vertical transcendence. They self-identify as Nones or SBNR. Those new gods are immanent gods. What is the nature of remixed religion? How to understand a form of religiosity that centers around immanent gods? Isn't religion always concerned with transcendence? Isn't immanent religion a contradiction in terms?

This paradox of immanent gods (many Remixed are oriented to powers, agencies, and presences, yet reject vertical transcendence) leads to the question: *How can such agencies be real without requiring a transcendentalist ontology?* Let us in chapter 6 turn to this question.

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6. The Return of Immanentist Religion

Abstract: This chapter reframes remixed religiosity by contrasting transcendence-oriented and immanence-oriented modes of being religious. It critiques Campbell's "Easternization of the West" account for remaining tied to world-religion templates, then develops Alan Strathern's distinction between immanentism and transcendentalism. Drawing on historical and comparative material, it shows how immanentism centers metapersons, ritual accessibility, and worldly efficacy rather than ontological verticality. The chapter reconstructs the emergence of transcendentalism and argues that several contemporary Western developments can be read as re-immanentization (e.g., therapeutization and renewed ritual experimentation). It concludes by motivating an ontological turn in analysis: rather than reducing metapersons to symbols, scholarship should ask what realities are enacted in practice.

Keywords: multiple religious belonging; immanentism; transcendentalism; Strathern; metapersons; ontological turn

Chapter 5 has registered a new empirical phenomenon with regard to religion in the West: the rise of the Remixed, a new generation that doesn't feel the need to self-identify through fixed religious belonging, not even through combining multiple religious belongings. The chapter argued that this requires a fundamental rethinking of the notion of religion, religions, religiosity and religious belonging.

This chapter will take a next step towards a hermeneutics of religiosity by considering two theoretical models, one from the multiple religious belonging (hereafter MRB) project and one that is more in line with the Latourian proposal of this study. It will first discuss sociologist Colin Campbell's attempt to apply Max Weber's typology of two fundamental religious worldviews, Eastern and Western, to contemporary religiosity in the West. Campbell's Easternization thesis claims that since the sixties,

Western religiosity has increasingly come to resemble Weber's ideal type of Eastern religion. In his magnum opus, *The Easternization of the West*, Campbell extensively presents his case and the empirical evidence. However, Campbell still remains within the World Religions Paradigm by focusing on worldviews and beliefs rather than practices and lived religion, and privileging "world religions" over forms of traditional religiosity.

The second section will introduce a new theoretical model of the British historian of religion Alan Strathern that attempts to overcome Weber's normative distinction between "world religions" and "traditional religions." He distinguishes two fundamentally different ways of doing religion: immanentist and transcendentalist religiosity. The various world religions can mostly be seen as primarily "transcendentalist" ways of doing religion, whereas most forms of traditional religiosity can be understood as "immanentist" forms of religiosity.

Immanentist religiosity is grounded in a monist worldview. It centers around maintaining relationships with more-than-human beings and powers through ritual practices, in order to realize human flourishing. It stresses religious participation rather than religious belonging. The third section will present a case study of such immanent religiosity on ancient Athenian religion. However, as the fourth section will recount, immanentism increasingly came under attack during the so-called Axial Age (the period from the eighth to the third century BCE). This led to the birth of transcendentalism. An ontological breach opened up between the immanent and the transcendent, heaven and earth, the natural and the supernatural. New transcendentalist religions arose such as Christianity and Buddhism, that aimed at various forms of more than human flourishing (salvation or enlightenment).

The fifth section stresses that religions have always been a mixture of immanentist and transcendentalist elements. Especially since what some have called the Second Axial Age (fifteenth to eighteenth century), religion in the West has become much more transcendentalist. The sixth section discusses the problem of transcendentalist bias in studying immanentism. Transcendentalist concepts and categories, such as the spiritual and the material, the natural and the supernatural, and human and spirit, often simply do not apply to immanentist religion. The seventh section presents the main argument of this chapter: contemporary new ways of remixing religion in the West can helpfully be understood as the return of immanentist forms of religiosity.

The Easternization of the West?

In her publications on her empirical research on MRB in the Netherlands, Joantine Berghuijs has interpreted her findings by connecting them to the “Easternization of the West”-thesis of the British sociologist Colin Campbell (2007). This thesis holds that in the Western religious landscape, an Eastern-type worldview, characterized by metaphysical monism, is increasingly replacing the formerly dominant Western worldview based on materialistic dualism. We don’t have to agree with all aspects of his thesis in order to still appreciate his empirical observations about the transformation of the Western religious landscape (which resemble Charles Taylor’s observations about the Age of Authenticity).

Campbell engages in a Weberian style cultural analysis as the study of worldviews. He adopts Weber’s two ideal types with regard to the development of worldviews. As summarized by Campbell, the “Western” dualistic worldview sees ultimate reality as separate from, above, beyond, this world (often in the form of a transcendent personal creator God), and sees a fundamental division between the secular and the sacred (Campbell 2007). Weber has also described an “Eastern” monist worldview that sees the world as a connected and self-contained cosmos, recognizes an immanent and impersonal principle of divinity in which humans can participate or adapt themselves to, and makes no fundamental distinction between the secular and the sacred: all activities can be spiritual exercises (Campbell 2007).¹

The Eastern worldview is characterized by “an immanent and basically impersonal principle of divinity, something that is part of the world from all eternity and in which humans actually participate” (Campbell 2007, 58). The Western worldview centers around “a personal, transcendent divinity, one that is in principle fundamentally separate from the world, controlling it from above, and in the extreme case, having created it *ex nihilo*” (Campbell 2007, 58).

The Eastern worldview belongs to the various Eastern nondualist mystical religions, associated with exemplary prophets that claim to be one with the divine. The world is seen as a completely connected and self-contained cosmos. There is no division between the natural and the supernatural. The Western worldview belongs to the dualistic monotheistic Abrahamic religions. They are associated with ethical prophets that do not claim to

1 Campbell does not use “Eastern religion” in a geographical sense, but as a Weberian ideal type. Also in Western religions, images of salvation as healing are not unknown. For example, the Western term “soteriology” originates in *soter*, which means to heal.

be divine themselves, but only a messenger of God. Both ideal types find their own solution to theodicy, or the problem of suffering. Eastern religion culminates in the notion of karma: ethical retribution is built into the cosmos itself. Western religion culminates in the Calvinistic notion of predestination: the transcendent God determines who is saved and who is not. Weber emphasized that all religions combine ingredients from these two ideal types in various mixes.

Campbell redescribes Weber's two ideal type worldviews as metaphysical monism (Eastern religion) and materialistic dualism, either religious or secular (Western religion) (Campbell 2007, 60). Metaphysical monism assumes the existence of

a fundamentally impersonal divine force that permeates all of creation, including mankind, the visible, material world being an emanation of this ultimate reality rather than the product of a self-conscious creator. It follows from this that the universe itself has the quality of a quasi-divine being, while humans themselves are an intrinsic part of this living entity. (Campbell 2007, 64)

This seems to imply the absence of a personal God or gods. However, the opposite is true. Gods are amply present; however, they are not transcendent but immanent:

Given that the immanent divine force manifests itself in innumerable divine forms, there is ample scope for these to become personified as gods or goddesses, some of which may appear to possess characteristics similar to the God of Western monotheism. However, no Eastern divinity resembles this figure in being a truly transcendent, all-powerful, and otherworldly creator figure. Rather these entities serve to testify to the immanence of the divine, being in effect representations of the many that are subsumed under the one. (Campbell 2007, 64)

Therefore, although such Eastern religion is based on a philosophical monism, in its religiosity it is in practice often animistic and polytheistic. However, these various gods do not have an independent existence but are expressions of the divine presence that pervades all things (Campbell 2007, 65).

Immediate personal experience has a greater centrality in such Eastern religion than either literal or historical truth. Truth must be experienced in order to be truly known (Campbell 2007, 65). The direct, personal experience

of divine reality is more important than any specific statement concerning its nature. Rather than turning to the ethical prophet, who proclaims God's message, one can turn to the exemplary prophet, who does not so much deliver a message as demonstrates his or her oneness with the divine (Campbell 2007, 66).

Campbell argues that the West is undergoing a process of Easternization. The worldview characteristic of the East is in the process of replacing the dominant Western view. Metaphysical monism is replacing materialistic dualism: "Church religion, and a concern with the division between believer and unbeliever, is being replaced by a pluralistic and diffuse spirituality in which the idea of seekership prevails" (Campbell 2007, 67).

Campbell argues that Western "dualistic" religiosity (separating the religious and secular spheres of life, the immanent and the transcendent, unbelievers versus believers) is giving way to an Eastern-style nondualistic spirituality (no separation between the sacred and the secular, the immanent and the transcendent). And this argument seems to be supported by those who investigate the fast growing group of Americans who view themselves as "spiritual but not religious."²

Campbell contends that by many today, redemption of sin is no longer viewed as a worthwhile religious goal, and that sin loses its meaning because of the demise of the ideas of a final judgment and a vengeful God (Campbell 2007, 257). In the new, "Easternized" understanding of religion there is no longer a separation between spiritual liberation and psychological and medical healing, and no boundary between the sacred and the secular.

Campbell's thesis of an Easternization of the West goes a long way to making sense of many of the empirical data that accompany the rise of the Remixed. However, due to its continued dependence on Weber's thought, it remains caught within the World Religions Paradigm, assuming bounded world religions whose worldview is primary.

According to the evolutionary sociology of religion of Weber and others, compared to traditional or indigenous religions, world religions represent a higher, more evolved type of religion. In Weber's evolutionary framework, the historical development of religious worldviews is driven by a process that he called rationalization: forming logical and coherent systems of belief. In this evolutionary framework, indigenous religiosity was "primitive religion," not yet rationalized but stuck in a magical and animistic phase (Campbell

2 Linda Mercadante notes how such Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNRs) have a surprisingly consistent worldview, in which the distinction between the transcendent and the immanent is absent (Mercadante 2014).

2007, 58).³ However, the anthropological and historical research of the twentieth century has made such a simple polarity between traditional religions and world religions hard to sustain. Various genealogical critiques of the nineteenth and early twentieth century have questioned the validity of such developmental schemas.

Campbell's thesis cannot explain the new ways of doing religion of the Remixed, with their emphasis on ritual practice and participation. Also, by focusing on worldviews and privileging the world religions, it neglects the importance of indigenous practices and rituals. Remixed religiosity is not only importing Eastern religiosity, but also importing ritual forms of religiosity from the South.

Immanentism

In his book *Unearthly Powers*, Alan Strathern has attempted to develop a new language to speak about religion, and about the kind of religious transformation that took place in the intellectual revolutions since the Axial Age (Strathern 2019, 2024). He distinguishes between two distinct religious phenomena, two different modes of religiosity. For example, the teachings and practices of Theravada Buddhism emphasize liberation from the wheel of rebirth (samsara), seeing through the illusion of self, and ending grasping and attachment. And yet, Theravada Buddhism as lived religion in Asia includes "deity supplications, astrologer consultations, healing rituals, buried charms, baleful curses, theatrical exorcisms, the evil eye" (Strathern 2019, xi).

Strathern calls these two modes immanentism and transcendentalism. Immanentism is a form of religiosity that centers around the presence of more-than-human forces and beings in the world, with whom one must engage in order to flourish in this world. Transcendentalism is oriented towards the transcendence of mundane existence and the imperative of salvation or liberation from the human condition.

Rather than speaking about traditional and world religions, Strathern argues that it may be more useful to speak about immanentist and transcendentalist modes of religiosity. However, immanentist religiosity does not simply equate

3 As Hefner notes, Western scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries assumed that "world religions could be distinguished by their greater intellectual coherence and moral rigor. Primitive religions, by contrast, were regarded as murky amalgams and fetishist taboo. They lack any real system of ethics, it was said, and develop their doctrines opportunistically as the needs of their practitioners require" (Hefner 1993, 6).

traditional religions, and transcendentalist religiosity does not simply equate world religions. The two concepts are more than a simple polarity.

Strathern has described immanentist religiosity through ten characteristics (table 6):

Table 6. Immanentism (adapted from Strathern 2024, 15)

Immanentism	
1.	A monist cosmology in which the afterlife is insignificant
2.	An emphasis on metapersons
3.	Fullness as human flourishing
4.	Morality is unsystematized and community-focused
5.	Ritual power is more important than ethics
6.	An empirical, pragmatic and experimental approach to ritual
7.	Orality and continuous revelation
8.	No religion, belief, belonging
9.	Unselfconsciousness
10.	Local, yet universalizable

1. *A monistic cosmology in which the afterlife is insignificant.* Immanentist religiosity tends to adhere to a monistic type of cosmology. There is one world, without a separate higher world. However, this does not mean that inhabitants of immanentist societies think that metapersons inhabit that one world in the same way that normal humans do. They exist in a different way.

Many immanentist forms of religiosity consider such metapersons to exist in special locations (otherworlds, underworlds, spirit worlds); however, these other worlds are always described as being similar to mundane reality. In immanentist societies, people feel themselves to live among metapersons, as empirical realities. Metapersons share their world, rather than inhabiting some distant other realm. For example, as the case study in this chapter will show, the gods of Ancient Greece were “entirely of this world. They may have dwelled on the most remote, elevated mountain in Greece ... they may have been capable of flight, but they nevertheless inhabited the same ecosystem as we do” (Whitmarsh 2016, 23). This is radically different from, for example, the transcendent Christian God.

2. *An emphasis on metapersons.* As Sahlins argues, immanentist traditions center around the existence of spiritual beings:

Until they are transformed by the colonial transmissions of the axial ideologies, Christianity notably, peoples (that is, most of humanity) are surrounded by a host of spiritual beings—gods, ancestors, the indwelling

souls of plants and animals, and others. These lesser and greater gods effectively create human culture; they are immanent in human existence [...] Although generally called “spirits,” these beings themselves have the essential attributes of persons, a core of the same mental, temperamental, and volitional capacities. (Sahlins 2022, 2)

Such more-than-human beings that are central to the immanentist mode of religiosity include “ghosts, spirits, demons, ancestors, gods, and the indwelling inhabitants of totems, masks, fetishes, and features of the landscape” (Strathern 2019, 4). They also include angels and bodhisattvas. Strathern follows Sahlins in calling them “metapersons,” because they also have agency and motivation, even though they do not exist in ways that are visible to the human senses. Such metapersons are seen as immanent in the world, and are capable of influencing it, for good or ill. They are often seen as having a greater range of powers than human persons. Engaging with them through ritual ceremony is necessary for human flourishing (which is the goal of immanentist religiosity).

Metapersons do not exist in the same way that normal persons do.⁴ Their existence is experienced as obscured and mysterious. Therefore, the wide variation of rituals serve as “an attempt to throw a rope bridge across the frustrating divide that separates person and metaperson” (Strathern 2019, 32). The metapersons must be connected to, one must establish alliances with them. For some purposes, Strathern argues, it may make sense to describe such metapersons of immanentist societies as existing “beyond” or “transcending” human society in some form. However, they do not transcend humans in a transcendentalist manner (Strathern 2019, 32). As Jan Assmann comments: “Transcendence in the sense of otherworldliness is common to all forms of religion and concepts of the sacred. These gods and spirits are, however, not extramundane. Their otherworldliness does not prevent them from being immanent in nature” (Assmann 2012, 403).

Metapersons are different, yet also related to, humans. There’s a liquidity between metapersons and humans. For example, in Yoruba ontology, “humans and orisa [deities] though early distinguished from each other in concept, were still seen as occupying different points on a single scale of power or life/spirit” (Peel 2003, 83).

4 The types of ontology in which such metapersons are central have been described (since Edward Tylor in 1871) as animism. The term had been rejected but has been revived to describe non-Western ontologies that consider the world to be full of subjects rather than objects. Such ontologies tend to be monistic: there is only one world, without a transcendent higher world.

Although the practices surrounding such spiritual beings are often called religious, Sahlins notes that, strictly speaking, “the term ‘religion’ is inappropriate where these metahuman beings and forces are intrinsic in and a precondition of all human activity, not a transcendental afterthought” (Sahlins 2022, 2).

3. *Fullness as human flourishing.* Charles Taylor has introduced the notion of “fullness”: the way in which this life looks good, whole, proper, really being lived as it should (Taylor 2007). In the immanentist mode of religiosity, such fullness can be found in ordinary human flourishing: health, wealth, social harmony. The purpose of immanent religiosity is to access the more-than-human power of metapersons for the flourishing of existence in the here and now. Achieving any objective is dependent on the approval or intervention of metapersons. Such more-than-human power “may at times be imagined as a unified impersonal force—like electricity—that can be accessed both with and without the intervention of metapersons” (Strathern 2019, 37).

4. *Morality is unsystematized and community-focused.* In immanentist modes of religiosity, morality refers to the maintenance of successful communal living. There are no abstract ethical concepts from which a system of morality can be deduced. Ethics is important for social cohesion but not so much in the relation with metapersons.

5. *Ritual power is more important than ethics.* Metapersons are not necessarily more moral than human persons. They are defined by power, not ethics. Therefore, the relationships with metapersons are more defined by power than by ethics.

6. *Empirical, pragmatic, experimental.* Immanent religiosity tends to be empirical, pragmatic and experimental. When the relations with particular more-than-human beings do not produce tangible results, when they fail to deliver, they can be set aside and traded in for others.

7. *Orality and continuous revelation.* Revelation is not defined and authorized by canonical written texts, nor is there a single decisive moment of revelation. There is a perpetual stream of knowledge that arrives into the world through anyone who claims to have experienced it. The content of such revelations does not have to conform to any uniquely authoritative set of written doctrines.

8. *No religion, belief, belonging.* Practitioners of immanentist religiosity do not have the sense that they “belong” to a particular “religion,” as if that would be one of the options on a menu, by holding particular religious beliefs. Often, even the very concept of “religion” is alien to their self-understanding. The relations with metapersons are not limited to a special “religious” sphere of life, but permeate all aspects of life. There is no sense of having a

religious identity, there is only religious participation in practices and rituals. “Religious belief” (in the sense of being convinced of the truth of certain ideas that other people may not be convinced of) has nothing to do with it.

9. *Unselfconsciousness*. There is no sense of religiosity as “going within” and critically investigating one’s own thoughts, feelings and motivations. Religiosity is about maintaining proper relations with metapersons through ritual activity.

10. *Local—yet universalizable*. On the one hand, immanentist religiosity is much more local than universal, in the sense that its metapersons are often embedded in the local setting (tree spirits, river spirits, ancestors). However, immanentist ritual practices involving metapersons may also travel long distances across immanentist societies. The immanentist religious field is borderless and elastic. It is not populated by competing “religions.” Jan Assmann describes how religious forms were translatable across different Mediterranean societies. There were translation tables that indicated, for example, that the Greek metaperson Zeus was equivalent to the Roman metaperson Jupiter.

Immanentism has been the default mode of religiosity, found in every society under the sun. For most of human history, this was the only mode of religiosity present. And Marshall Sahlins argues that even today, the religiosity of contemporary indigenous cultures is still mostly immanentist in nature. However, for a study on religiosity in the West, it may be more appropriate and convincing to present a case study that shows the presence of immanentism in our own Western religious traditions. Therefore, the next section will present a case study that is about religion in ancient Greece.

A Case Study: Ancient Athenian Religion

Greece is usually revered as the starting point of rationality, individuality, freedom and democracy. However, ancient Greek religiosity does not show any of those characteristics. Therefore, it is often either described through a transcendentalist lens (“the Greeks believed in their pantheon of Olympian gods, and worshiped them through public rituals and in private mystery religions”), or it is claimed that there was no religion in ancient Greece (see e.g., Barton and Boyarin 2016). The historical reality, however, is more complex. Ancient Greek religion was immanentist in nature, as historian Greg Anderson describes in his book on ancient Athenian religion, *The Realness of Things Past* (Anderson 2018).

As Anderson notes, religion was everywhere in ancient Athens. All members of society participated in religious practices, such as “consult oracles, seek initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries, or make healing offerings for themselves or others. Families ritually celebrated the arrival of new members, like children, brides, and slaves, made offerings at the graves of their ancestors, and maintained cults of their own household gods” (Anderson 2018, 19). However, religion was not only, or even not particularly, an individual and private affair. It was very much a public activity:

Religion was everywhere in the *polis*. The traffic of offerings to gods and other superhumans was more or less constant and ubiquitous [...] some form of prayer, oath, sacrifice, or other ritual act accompanied almost every significant human undertaking, from major life events, like conception, birth, and death, to citizenship enrollments, political deliberations, law court proceedings, commercial transactions, overseas voyages, and battlefield preparations. (Anderson 2018, 20)

The gods “governed all of life’s most critical sources and processes, from conception and birth to health, nutrition, prosperity, and ultimately death itself. Every time one’s prayers for, say, a successful childbirth, harvest, or sea voyage were answered, the truth of divinity’s immanence in the material order of things was confirmed by its own self-evidence” (Anderson 2018, 131). The world of the Athenians was

a world governed ultimately by a small multitude of ageless, primordial beings, all with their own distinctive powers, histories, and subjectivities, beings whose presence was largely unobservable, whose wills were all but unknowable, but whose actions impressed themselves visibly and continually upon the fabric of material existence. [...] it was a world where land, people, and gods were forever entwined in a single, symbiotic communion, essentially bound to one another by the very process of life itself. (Anderson 2018, 147)

For the Athenians, the business that we would call secular, “what they did in the assembly, council, courts, and other such ‘governmental’ institutions” (Anderson 2018, 153), was far less essential than “the endless essential business of engaging with gods in ways that might encourage them to secure the ‘health’ and ‘safety’ of the polis as a whole” (Anderson 2018, 153). Anderson stresses that these gods were experienced as *real*:

Even if not readily visible or even knowable, the gods of the Greeks were not insubstantial principles or ideas. Nor were they merely passive objects of worship and belief. They were real agencies, with their own independent wills and subjectivities, who were everywhere present in the material environment, actively and continually controlling the very conditions of existence [...] Manifestly, immortal gods were always already there, ontologically prior to mortal humans. (Anderson 2018, 131)

The Athenians did not “believe” in their gods. They ritually engaged with them, acknowledged them, that is, prayed to them and sacrificed to them. They did not have to believe in their gods since their existence “was a self-evident, a priori truth, not a matter of mere faith or belief. If there was a fundamental question for humans to ask, it was not: ‘Are there gods out there?’ It was: ‘Which particular gods are out there?’ and thus ‘Which gods can we induce to “hold” our land, to watch over us, and preserve our safety and well-being?’” (Anderson 2018, 131).

Again, for the Athenians, “the realness of divinity was not a subjective matter of personal faith or belief. It was an objective fact, the most fundamental, most indisputable fact of their existence. [...] divinity was manifestly present everywhere in their world, immanent in its very fabric, continually controlling the mysterious wellsprings of life itself” (Anderson 2018, 135).

Ritual activities were not the routinized expression of some simple-minded, irrational faith, belief system, or “‘religion,’ [...] they were highly rational devices of a most urgent, far-reaching ecological significance” (Anderson 2018, 153). Within such a religious ecology, religious knowledge, such as “knowledge about the appropriate ways to engage with particular deities, knowledge about how, when, where, and by whom offerings should be made to specific gods” (Anderson 2018, 154), served as “the functional equivalents of the various ‘sciences’ which inform modern biopolitics” (Anderson 2018, 153).

Anderson argues that the Greeks had very different notions of realness and truth than our modern sensibilities:

For example, to the modern eye, it may be self-evident that, say, the “Athenian economy” was an objectively real, material entity, while the goddess Athena was no less obviously a mere figment of “faith” or “belief.” But to an actual inhabitant of the Athenian lifeworld, something like the reverse would have been the case. The fact that the gods of Athens were not readily visible did not for a moment nullify the truth that they were

fully material agencies, the effects of whose actions were clear enough for all to see, in weather patterns, crop yields, bodily health, and so forth. By the same token, far from being a materially self-evident phenomenon, an “Athenian economy” would have made little sense at all to a classical Athenian. (Anderson 2018, 58)

Gods and other superhuman agencies were just as real, just as immediately present, and just as materially efficacious to the Athenians as all of our states, structures, systems, and sundry other man-made, world-ordering phenomena are to us today. The fact that we can never exactly see, say, an object like a state or an economy as such, in all its totality, does not cause us for a moment to doubt its objective, mind-independent existence as a hypostatic thing-in-itself, so long as we believe we can sense its presence and its effects all around us. So it was with the Athenians and their gods. (Anderson 2018, 132)

The Birth of Transcendentalism

Strathern (2019, 19–26), argues that transcendentalist religiosity arose through a series of intellectual revolutions that started in Europe and Asia in the “Axial Age” of human history. The term was coined by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers who was very influenced in his thinking by Max Weber and his notion of an evolutionary sociology of religion. The Axial Age (according to Jaspers between the eighth and the third century BCE) was a time in which traditional thought patterns, including traditional forms of religion, were destabilized through globalization and religious diversity. The taken-for-granted sources of meaning of local traditional religiosity, and the accepted efficacy of the local gods, gave way to a sense of contingency and relativism. The fact that truth and value varied across time and space meant that truth and value were merely culturally constructed, rather than universally valid. Local forms of religiosity were undermined; only universal solutions would do (Strathern 2019, 24). Such universal solutions were provided by the transcendentalist mode of religiosity, characterized by ten qualities (see table 7):

Table 7. The transcendentalist revolutions

	Immanentist	Transcendentalist
1.	A monist cosmology in which the afterlife is insignificant	An ontological breach between the mundane and the transcendent realms
2.	Emphasis on metapersons	Monopolization or inferiorization of metapersons
3.	Fullness as human flourishing	Fullness as more than human flourishing
4.	Morality is unsystematized and community-focused	Ethics as an individual, universal path to salvation
5.	Ritual power is more important than ethics	Collective ritual action is replaced by individual interiority. Ethics is more important than power.
6.	An empirical, pragmatic and experimental approach to ritual	The one true religion, that is offensive to worldly standards.
7.	Orality and continuous revelation	Revelation is written down, canonized and closed
8.	No religion, belief, belonging	Religion, belief, belonging
9.	Unselfconsciousness	Psychologization
10.	Local, yet universalizable	Universal creeds as total packages

1. *An ontological breach.* In the default immanentist mode of religiosity, a monistic cosmology is the standard. In the transcendentalist mode of religiosity, however, an ontological breach opens up between a transcendent realm and a mundane one. The sense of meaninglessness and relativism is seen as the defining feature of mundane reality:

Mundane existence is therefore not just afflicted by transience, corruption, unsatisfactoriness, and negligibility, it is defined by it. It is cast into the shadows by the pure light of the transcendent. This dimension of reality is now considered as inherently superior to that of normal life, but it is so distant from us that it is radically unknowable and ineffable. This is what the literature of the Axial Age means by the ontological breach that cuts previously monistic worldviews in two. (Strathern 2019, 48)

The American cultural anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1930–2021) similarly remarks that the still on-going cultural revolution that started in the Axial Age involved “the translation of divinity from an *immanent* presence in human activity to a *transcendental* ‘other world’ of its own reality, leaving the earth alone to humans, now free to create their own institutions by their own means and lights” (Sahlins 2022, 2).

2. *Monopolization or inferiorization of metapersons.* The existence of metapersons is not outright denied, but they are relegated to a lower status. Strathern notes that monotheisms tend to monopolize metapersons, whereas other transcendentalist religions such as Buddhism have a different strategy: the gods do exist, but they are as much subject to karma and samsara as human beings.

3. *Fullness as more than human flourishing.* The transcendentalist mode of religiosity aims at what Charles Taylor has called a “fullness beyond ordinary human flourishing” (Taylor 2007): a greater possibility, a greater sense of depth or completion, where life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. Salvation or liberation from mundane life becomes the highest religious goal. Ordinary human flourishing is seen as relatively worthless. All sense of ultimate purpose is drained from mundane existence.

4. *Ethics as an individual, universal path to salvation.* The religious path becomes ethical in nature. Ethics is usually connected to the attainment of transcendent fullness (liberation or salvation). Therefore, ethical norms are often codified (the ten commandments, the Buddhist precepts). But although such norms are about ethical behavior, true ethics is seen as interior rather than behavioral. Inner purity is seen as more important than merely keeping the precepts. The transcendentalist mode of religiosity knows little ethical ambiguity and introduces high and absolutist ethical ideals.

5. *Collective ritual action is replaced by individual interiority. Ethics is more important than power.* Transcendent fullness is incomprehensible by the standards of worldly existence. It cannot be obtained by the normal forms of human success. Transcendent ethical ideals are often an inversion of social norms. It is better to be good than to be healthy and wealthy. The highest values are transcendent, and an inversion of worldly values. In the immanentist mode, one becomes sacred by becoming more powerful, successful and brilliant through collective ritual action. In the transcendentalist mode, one becomes sacred by denying the quest for power, success and brilliance.⁵

5 This different approach to ethics led many, including Weber, to conclude that traditional religions had an underdeveloped sense of ethics, and therefore lacked a capacity for social change and social justice. For Weber, traditional religiosity was characterized by the magician. Instead of cultivating an ethical relationship with spiritual beings, the magician seeks to manipulate and control them through rituals. He only gives ad hoc answers to the problems of the meaning of life. Weber saw traditional religion as only instrumental, aimed at worldly concerns: health, long life, defeat of enemies, good relations with one's own people, and so on. World religions, on the other hand, proclaimed the existence of a transcendental realm vastly superior to everyday

Salvation or liberation is achieved by realizing ultimate truths about the nature and purpose of existence. Often such truths have been revealed to extraordinary teachers or prophets at a specific point in history. Such liberating insights can be realized through introspection, faith, the cultivation of compassion and ethical discipline, and spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation. The sacred, ultimate reality is seen as ineffable, transcending the capacity of the human mind.

Individual interiority becomes the privileged arena of religious life, rather than communal ritual activity. Immanentist ritual practices that require communal participation and the external observation of rules and regulations do not disappear, but are reframed and relativized by transcendentalism.

6. *The only true religion, that is offensive to worldly standards.* The norms of transcendentalist religions are often an inversion of the concepts and norms of the prevailing culture. For example, early Buddhism inverted the norms of the Vedic ritual, and early Christianity inverted the norms of Roman culture. This is why Jan Assmann has described transcendentalist religions as counter-religions (Assmann 2010). They assume that alternative ontologies exist, and often even predominate (either traditional ontologies, or competing transcendentalist ontologies). They are set up to challenge these alternative ontologies. Often, the prophet serves as the voice of anti-traditionalism.

7. *Revelation is written down, canonized and closed.* In contrast with immanentist religiosity in which the tradition is often the source of authority, the truths of transcendentalist religiosity are authorized by written canonical texts, that document single decisive moments of revelation.

8. *Religion, belief, belonging.* Transcendentalist religions create moral communities of religious belongings. These may be different from the communities that one de facto belongs to. Such moral communities, such as Christian congregations or Buddhist sanghas, are aimed at facilitating salvation or liberation. Not ritual, but ethics is the characteristic mode of religious activity in such communities.

9. *Psychologization.* The religious path becomes not a matter of fulfilling ritual obligations, but a matter of conscious individual self-scrutiny of one's

reality. Compared to such a superior realm, everyday life is found wanting. This creates pressure for societal reform, in order to help create heaven on earth. Therefore, whereas traditional religions passively accept the status quo, world religions have the capacity to remake the world. Also, by loosening the grip of tradition on the individual, the world religions were seen as laying the foundation for human freedom (Hefner 1993, 9).

thoughts, feelings and motivations, and the subsequent purification of such mental contents.

10. *Universalist creeds as total packages.* Transcendentalist religions are more universal than local. They offer universalist beliefs that are fashioned for export as coherent packages. That makes religions such as Christianity and Buddhism highly portable, and suitable for missionary outreach. It is possible to convert to a transcendentalist religion (to “accept the package”) and become a religious believer to that religion—a notion that wouldn’t make any sense from an immanentist point of view.

As Strathern notes, in a certain way, the immanentist mode of religiosity is more universal than the divisive transcendentalist world religions. It stays away from the transcendentalist worldview that there is a world of competing “religions,” that each claim their own way to understand Ultimate Reality and realize transcendent fullness (Strathern 2019, 47).

The Unstable Synthesis Between Immanentism and Transcendentalism

The typology of immanent and transcendentalist religion may tempt us to divide the religious landscape into transcendentalist religions such as Christianity and Buddhism, and immanentist traditional and indigenous forms of religiosity. However, as Strathern stresses, transcendentalism cannot exist by itself in a religious tradition: during its historical development, such traditions must always keep an unstable alliance with local immanentist modes of religiosity. The conceptual structure of transcendentalism is inherently paradoxical. The formless transcendental realm needs to manifest in the mundane world. Therefore, “the traditionalist traditions are forced to gradually make peace with the structure of mundane reality in order to thrive and survive” (Strathern 2019, 81). They must take on institutional forms that are socially and politically active.

Also, the structure of human cognition and human desires favor immanentist religion. People yearn for a paradisaical world, they have a deeply rooted tendency to attribute agency which favors ritual engagement with metapersons. The flow of revelation cannot be halted since people continue to have religious experiences and visions.

This means that all world religions contain not only the transcendentalist mode of religiosity, but also have to make uneasy compromises with various aspects of the immanentist mode of religiosity. For example, both Christianity and Buddhism during the course of their history had to make all kinds of

compromises with local, lived immanentist religiosity that centered around managing the relationships with more-than-human powers. They had to meet such immanentist traditions on their own terms.

The Christian strategy, Strathern argues, was to increasingly transcendentalize and monopolize such more-than-human powers. Only the Christian God, his angels, and the Christian saints were legitimate more-than-human powers. The Buddhist strategy was to inferiorize such more-than-human powers. While divine beings do exist, they are subject to *samsara*, just like humans and other nonhumans (Strathern 2019, 81–106).

Due to the various Axial revolutions, immanentism has time and again been superseded by transcendentalist religion. However, transcendentalist and immanentist modes of religion are always engaged in uneasy and unstable alliances. The victory of transcendentalism is never complete. Immanentist elements continue to survive and re-emerge. They never disappear completely. The transcendentalist otherworldly ideals need a grounding in this-worldly rituals and practices. And it takes effort to keep transcendentalist religion alive, because immanentist religion keeps on reappearing.⁶ From a transcendentalist perspective, this is like the ongoing re-emergence of weeds in a well-tended garden, a slide back into superstition and heresy that needs to be corrected through reform. However, from the perspective of philosophy of religion, immanentist religion may be, in a sense, more “natural.”

The period of the fifteenth to the eighteenth century saw a great shift towards transcendentalism, and could therefore even be called a second Axial Age. As our narrative from chapter 2 has recounted, during this period, “religion” became an autonomous domain. It emerged out of the confessional strife during the Protestant Reformation. It migrated from the infrastructure of the world (as in immanentist religion) to the superstructure of the world (as in transcendentalist religion). In order to show how, in the early Middle Ages, the holy was still intimately nearby and present, historian Peter Brown recounts a meaningful anecdote. If the priest that was serving at the altar needed to spit, they were required to do so on one side or behind them, “for at the altar the angels were standing” (Brown 1975, 141).

An example that may serve as an illustration of the unstable synthesis between transcendentalism and immanentism in Christianity (and its

6 The sociologist Eisenstadt, who has done much to revive the Axial Age discourse in the humanities, has affirmed that the series of revolutions that started in the Axial Age “have to do with the emergence, conceptualization, and institutionalization of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders” (Eisenstadt 1986, 1).

contemporary relevance) is a recent study by Paul Hedges on the possibility of a Christian polytheism (Hedges 2025). As a scholar of religion, Hedges takes apart the monotheism-polytheism distinction (dating to the seventeenth century), and shows how the conceptual tools of multi-devotionalism and mono-devotionalism may be more helpful. As a theologian, he asks the question: can a Christian be a polytheist?

Hedges notes the polycentric roots of Christianity. The ancient Israelites believed in many deities and came to have a singular devotion to one of them, Y*hw*h. And the monotheism of the New Testament existed in a cosmological world full of angels, archangels, powers, and daimons. In the Hellenistic-Jewish context of the early Jesus movement, multi-devotionalism was taken for granted, rather than the mono-devotionalism we typically imagine. Also, some later imaginings of the Trinity came close to the language of polytheism, with three quite distinct “beings” as the Trinity.

Hedges then discusses internal Christian debates, for example the notion that Christianity in Africa can be rethought as a form of ancestral theology, with Jesus as the proto-ancestor (Hedges 2025, 131). And process theologians such as Cobb and Griffin have argued for a polycentric pluralism, that recognizes multiple valid ultimates. Hedges ends with a suggestion that “we are seeing signs that our societies so long seemingly on a trajectory from polytheisms to monotheisms may be turning back to seeing the wisdom of the former” and that “perhaps, Christian polytheism is an interpretation of the tradition responsive to the wind of the Spirit as She shows the signs of the times in today’s world” (Hedges 2025, 168).

Going Beyond Transcendentalist Bias

In immanentist religiosity, the gods are real, but are located within this world rather than beyond it. In order to understand more about the way in which such immanent gods can be real, we need to think about ontological matters. This is why we will present the ontological turn that started within anthropology, and is now spreading to other academic disciplines. The ontological turn, as explained by Holbraad and Pedersen (2017), asks ontological questions without accepting any particular substantive ontology as an answer. It prefers to keep the ontological horizon open. It is not concerned with what the “really real” nature of the world is. We must not limit the horizon of our inquiry by assuming in advance some kind of ultimate reality or essence.

In the ontological turn, “the epistemological problem of *how one sees things* is turned into the ontological question of *what there is* to be seen in the first place” (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 5). For example, rather than merely trying to get a clear picture of metapersons, we may have to question our ontological assumptions about what metapersons *are*: “the ontological turn is not so much a matter of “seeing differently,” in other words. It is above all a matter of *seeing different things*” (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 5–6).

The ontological turn, therefore, involves a basic reversal in the understanding of the problem of tinted glasses. It is not our theological presuppositions that prevent us from grasping the religious landscape that we inhabit (e.g., misrepresenting Islam or Buddhism due to Christian bias); it is our ontological assumptions about the nature of this religious landscape (e.g., the World Religions Paradigm that assumes the existence of bounded world religions with each their own adherents) that is problematic. We don’t need a better or more inclusive grasp on religious reality; we need to allow ourselves to be grasped by religious realities that may escape our current ontologies, by keeping open the question of what religion *is*, and what religious belonging *is*.

As a cultural anthropologist, Marshall Sahlins is concerned about how the transcendentalist bias of anthropologists has disfigured the immanentist cultures they aim to describe. Such bias includes familiar distinctions between the spiritual and the material, the natural and the supernatural, and truth and belief. He gives many examples of the transcendentalist bias in his own discipline of anthropology. He shows how this bias distorts the description and interpretation of traditional, indigenous cultures.

As a historian, Anderson is also sensitive to the transcendentalist bias. As we have seen, he emphasizes that the Greek lifeworld was fundamentally different from our own, and therefore impossible to understand through the thought-shaping tools and categories of Western modernity. Categories such as public and private, state and society, and the sacred and the secular simply do not apply.

Viewed through modern tools and categories, Anderson argues, the “democratic Athens” of the standard academic literature remains confoundingly entangled with what seem like irrational religious elements. Athenian democracy “somehow coexists with a lingering, strangely uncritical attachment to ‘myths’ about earth-born ancestors, snake-tailed kings, monster-slaying heroes, and sundry other improbabilities” (Anderson 2018, 2). In this way, ancient Athens remains lost in translation.

Anderson shows in his book that such being lost in translation not only applies to ancient Greek lifeworlds, but generally applies to lifeworlds that

are geographically and temporally distant from our own. He discusses wide-ranging examples from Amazonia, South East Asia, precolonial Mexico, Ming China, and medieval Europe. He argues that we need to analyze each non-modern lifeworld on its own ontological terms. We need to stop translating those lifeworlds to our modern categories and start transcribing them in their own categories. These categories are often ontological in nature. They determine our sense of what is real. As Anderson notes, “the Olympian gods were just as self-evidently real to the Athenians as a free market economy is to ourselves” (Anderson 2018, 4).

Anderson mentions four different, but mutually supportive, metaphysical commitments that sustain our modern criteria for realness and truth: (1) materialism and Cartesian dualism, separating matter from mind, object from subject, being from knowing; (2) anthropocentrism; (3) secularism: the practice of religion is consigned to its own supernatural “sacred” realm, detached from the political, the social and the economic fields, that take place within the natural realm. He notes: “‘Religion’ is a category that makes sense only in our modern western world, a world that is already secular, a world where gods have been turned from subjects into objects” (Anderson 2018, 94); (4) Individualism: humans are unitary, integrated selves with a right to life, liberty and private property.

Because of our metaphysical commitments to materialism, anthropocentrism, secularism, and individualism, Anderson argues, western moderns “cannot make meaningful sense of worlds where gods and other superhumans were real subjects, perpetually active in the fabrics of immediate experience, not merely passive objects of faith or belief” (Anderson 2018, 100).

However, these four metaphysical foundations appear to be historically contingent, rather than universally true. They have been repeatedly challenged for more than a century, by quantum mechanics in physics, and by theorists such as Karen Barad and Bruno Latour. Such theorists can be considered as ethnographers of our present. As Anderson points out,

They are suggesting that realness itself is something that is always simultaneously “out there” and “in here,” so that one cannot definitively say where a subjective inside ends and an objective outside begins. [...] the contents of a real world cannot ultimately be disentangled from the contents of the minds of those for whom that world is real. (Anderson 2018, 113)

The Return of Immanentism Today

The battle between transcendentalism and immanentism continues until today. One way of viewing the changes in the contemporary Western culture is not in terms of secularization (a movement from belief to unbelief, or from religiosity to atheism), but in terms of immanentization (a return to the default immanentist mode of religiosity). We are witnessing not so much the demise of religion, but a gradual demise of transcendentalist religion. The contemporary return of immanentism can be schematically represented as follows (table 8):

Table 8. The return of immanentism

	Immanentism	Transcendentalism	Return of Immanentism
1.	A monist cosmology in which the afterlife is insignificant	An ontological breach between the mundane and the transcendent realms	The rising popularity of monist worldviews, at the expense of belief in the transcendental
2.	An emphasis on metapersons	Monopolization or inferiorization of metapersons	The return of metapersons
3.	Fullness as human flourishing	Fullness as more than human flourishing	From salvation to wellness (the therapeutization of religion)
4.	Morality is unsystematized and community-focused	Ethics as an individual, universal path to salvation	From sin to sickness (the therapeutization of religion)
5.	Ritual power is more important than ethics	Collective ritual action is replaced by individual interiority. Ethics is more important than power.	The return of ritual
6.	An empirical, pragmatic and experimental approach to ritual	The one true religion, that is offensive to worldly standards.	The rise of pragmatic and experimental forms of religiosity.
7.	Orality and continuous revelation	Revelation is written down, canonized and closed	People continue to have spiritual experiences and revelations
8.	No religion, belief, belonging	Religion, belief, belonging	A move from belonging to participation
9.	Unselfconsciousness	Psychologization	The return of communal ritual
10.	Local, yet universalizable	Universal creeds as total packages	The unbundling of transcendentalist religious packages

Immanentism is returning because it fits the general spirit of the times. Its empiricism and experimentalism overlap with the mentality of science. Its openness, flexibility, and innovation is a function of its entirely practical ends. Immanentism presents no preformed religions, doesn't demand religious belonging, does not present scriptures or dogmas that must be adhered to, and no soteriological frameworks. According to the immanentist approach to religiosity, new beliefs or practices may be added to an existing arsenal of ritual techniques, and deployed to see if they help to deliver results (see Strathern 2019, 224).

As Strathern notes, "there are features of modern capitalism, urbanization, and globalization which may propel a notably 'immanentist' and experimental approach to the manipulation of metapersons and supernatural powers—all in the expectation of enabling the individual to get ahead and gain mastery of the mysterious forces that propel some to fortune and others to inferiority" (Strathern 2019, 88).

Such result-focused forms of ritual practice make immanentism compelling in the various multiple modernities, especially in non-Western cultures, but increasingly also in Western cultures.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored various approaches to understand the rise of the Remixed. It has introduced a distinction between two broad orientations: a transcendence-oriented framing, where "the religious" is typically associated with a realm beyond the ordinary world; and an immanence-oriented framing, where agencies and powers are understood as operating within the world and through practices, bodies, places, and relations.

We have argued that immanentism provides a vocabulary for describing a remixed religiosity that is practice-centered, efficacy-oriented, and embedded in a monist cosmos where more-than-human agencies are part of "this world." Immanentism foregrounds metapersons, ritual power, pragmatics, experimentalism, and participation over confessional belonging, whereas transcendentalism foregrounds an ontological breach between the mundane and the transcendent, a horizon of salvation or liberation, and belief and belonging as key markers. Greg Anderson has provided a case study of such immanentist religiosity through a detailed discussion of the ways in which the immanent gods of the ancient Athenians were real to them. He shows how our modern preconceptions about religion are part of a transcendentalist bias that makes it difficult to understand such immanent religiosity.

This chapter extends Anderson's argument to our contemporary religious landscape: our modern notions of religion and religious belonging not only make it impossible to understand "other" religious lifeworlds from far away or long ago, they also fail to make sense of our own religious landscape in the West right now. It is impossible to describe the Remixed with the "religionized" concepts of religion, religious belonging, and transcendence, and the binary oppositions that result from them (immanence and transcendence, the sacred and the secular, believers and nonbelievers).

This chapter has argued that contemporary remixing can be read as a re-immanentization within Western contexts (often expressed as therapeutization, unbundling, and renewed ritual experimentation). Contemporary hybridity cannot be dismissed as "failed belonging" or "weak belief," but is a different mode of being religious—one that modern, transcendentalist categories routinely misread. Remixed religiosity is not a full-scale return to immanentist premodern religion, but it frequently carries an immanentist tone: religion appears less as doctrine and membership, and more as practice, efficacy, and relational engagement with what participants experience as more-than-human.

The conceptual tools of immanentism and transcendentalism have allowed us to conceive of remixed religiosity beyond the World Religions Paradigm. It has helped us to understand how a strategic ritual engagement with religious agencies is possible without a transcendentalist ontology. This can go a long way to relieve us from our transcendentalist bias. The arguments in this chapter serve as stepping stones in building up the Latourian proposal of this book. The next chapter will use the philosophy of Bruno Latour as one way to avoid transcendentalist bias, and come to an understanding of remixed religiosity that focuses on the absence of ontological transcendence, the presence of metapersons, and the relative absence of religious belief and religious belonging.

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7. A Latourian Proposal

Abstract: This chapter develops a Latour-inspired framework for interpreting remixed, immanentist religiosity without reducing it to psychology or reintroducing supernaturalism. Using Actor-Network Theory, it shifts attention from beliefs and institutions to mediations and practices through which agencies become effective. Drawing on Modes of Existence, it argues that domains operate with distinct truth-conditions rather than a single universal standard. This enables analysis of metapersons as “beings of religion” and “beings of transformation” that appear through forms of address, ritual, narrative, and communal practice. The chapter shows how participants learn to engage agencies in the “right key” and how scholars can avoid category mistakes (e.g., judging religion by scientific veridiction).

Keywords: multiple religious belonging; hybrid religiosity; Latour; actor-network theory; modes of existence; remix

When we look at today’s remixed religiosity without transcendentalist bias, how should we actually interpret what we see? How to make sense of contemporary religious participation? In this chapter, we will use Latour’s philosophy to provide a grammar and a vocabulary for describing and understanding an immanentist religiosity.

Bruno Latour has become well-known since the eighties, initially for his critical contributions to the new field of Science and Technology Studies, in which he showed that scientific knowledge is never pure and immediate but always constructed and even manufactured (Latour 1988, 1999). And in recent years he has been very influential with his studies on the climate crisis that look for new places where we can land after both the dystopia of the economy and the utopia of ecology have failed us (Latour 2017, 2021, 2024).

Latour has also, however, written much about religion. Not many people know that he received his PhD in 1975 in philosophical theology.¹ After writing mostly about science at the beginning of his career, in 2002, he published a very personal essay, *Jubiler* [translated in 2013 as *Rejoicing*], about his struggle with his being unable to talk about his religious faith (he is a Roman Catholic) to his loved ones, and even to make sense of it for himself (Latour 2013b).²

As an ethnographer of the present, Bruno Latour has extended Greg Anderson's argument to our modern lifeworld: the thought-shaping tools and categories of Western modernity not only make it impossible to understand "other" lifeworlds from far away or long ago, but they also fail to make sense of our own modern lifeworld right now. In *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, he has an imaginary foreign anthropologist do field work in contemporary Western societies (Latour 2013a). What she actually observes is completely different from what the theories predict. Latour uses this plot device to systematically deconstruct the set of categories that taken together form what he calls our Modern Constitution: the set of fundamental assumptions that may never be questioned.

Three such fundamental assumptions that are especially relevant for our discussion of religion and religious belonging are: (1) the Cartesian dualistic distinction between the external objective world (nature) and internal subjective consciousness (culture); (2) the distinction between the immanent realm (the natural) and the transcendent realm (the supernatural); (3) the distinction between the human and the nonhuman.

Latour offers two new conceptual tools to replace those transcendentalist categories: actor-network theory and modes of existence. Actor-network theory proposes to view the world as a collection of networks without essence or foundation. Such networks consist of various types of mutually interdependent actors, both human and nonhuman. They are continually under construction. Different types of actor-networks constitute different modes of existence: different ways in which the actors, or beings, in such networks can exist. Not all beings exist simply in the way that tables and cats exist. There are aesthetic beings, fictional beings, legal beings, and also religious beings: the gods and divinities of the various religious forms of life.

1 Latour's PhD thesis was called "Exegesis and Ontology: An Analysis of the Texts of Resurrection" (Latour 1975).

2 Latour's 2005 essay about science and religion, "Thou Shalt Not Freeze-Frame," was published in 2010 in *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Latour 2010).

This chapter will present a Latourian proposal, an attempt to reimagine religion and religious belonging, in order to answer three questions about remixed religiosity: (1) How to make sense of religion without vertical transcendence? (2) How to make sense of the existence of metapersons? (3) How to make sense of the ritual engagement with metapersons, based on implicit faith rather than doctrinal belief?

It will first introduce Latour's thought, focusing on his rejection of the ontological breach that characterizes transcendentalisms. After introducing his Actor-Network Theory and his modes of existence as an alternative for the Modern distinction between immanence and transcendence, it will introduce religion as one of the modes of existence. It will discuss Latour's notion of "beings of religion" as a way of describing and understanding metapersons. Finally, it redescribes the notions of religious belief and religious language.

Against the Ontological Breach: Actor-Network Theory

In his philosophy, Latour speaks out against the ontological breach between this world and a "beyond" that is so characteristic of transcendentalist religiosity. He critically engages with what he calls our Modern Constitution: the seemingly self-evident way in which we carve up the world in terms of immanence and transcendence, subject and object, and the human and the non-human.

Charles Taylor recounts in *A Secular Age* the religious history of the West over the last 500 years (Taylor 2007). He notes that 500 years ago in the Middle Ages it was completely obvious to everybody that God existed. It would have been outrageous to question God's existence because it was completely obvious. He was everywhere. It would be as absurd as someone today saying that oxygen might not exist. We are breathing it in every second, so we would be dead if there were no oxygen. This is the level of certainty that everyone had about the existence of God 500 years ago. Now, God has become one of the options on the menu. Some people believe in God, others don't, and that is just a matter of choice. It is optional.

Taylor locates the causes of this shift in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. During this "second Axial Age," the world came to be understood as divided into two distinct realms. Whereas in earlier conceptions reality resembled a single house—perhaps with multiple levels but ultimately unified—modernity reconfigured this house into two separate apartments: the upper and the lower.

In this model, divinity resided in the “upper apartment,” the realm of the supernatural, while the “lower apartment” was identified with the natural world. Religion, accordingly, was assigned responsibility for the former, while science took charge of the latter. This division of labor created a powerful framework for modernity, one in which science and religion were placed in tension. Both claimed access to truth, yet their assertions often contradicted one another. A pragmatic solution was established: questions concerning the natural world should be left to science, which demonstrated its strength in empirical investigation, while matters concerning the supernatural remained within the purview of religion.

Over time, however, this balance shifted. The domain of science—the “lower apartment”—expanded, while the realm of religion—the “upper apartment”—progressively contracted. Religion, increasingly on the defensive, was forced to retreat step by step as scientific explanations displaced claims to mystery. What remained for religion was a progressively diminished territory. This duality between natural and supernatural had significant consequences: science came to define nature as essentially mechanical, lifeless, and without consciousness, merely a sequence of blind material processes. Animation, soul, and transcendence were assigned exclusively to the supernatural realm. As a result, modernity produced a sharp divide between humanity, conceived as possessing soul and the capacity for transcendence, and the rest of the world, which was regarded as inert and soulless.

Latour challenges this seemingly self-evident framework, which he calls “the Modern Constitution.” While he acknowledges its historical utility, particularly in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, he argues that it has become increasingly inadequate, especially in the twenty-first century in the context of the climate crisis. For Latour, the dualistic model is no longer viable; it prevents us from thinking in ways that are adequate to our present challenges.

As an alternative, Latour proposes the concept of the actor-network. Rather than dividing reality into opposed domains, such as natural and supernatural, mechanical and living, inside and outside—he invites us to approach reality as a network. A network consists of multiple nodes; each connected in various ways to others. In such a structure, there is no “above” or “below,” no higher or lower; the network extends in all directions, with meaning and function arising from the interplay of its connections. A network only operates effectively when its nodes are properly linked, and when it does so, its functioning appears seamless, even effortless.

A helpful illustration is that of Wi-Fi. Under normal circumstances, it simply functions—we open our phones and have reception. Yet when it fails, its underlying complexity becomes apparent. One may wake up to discover that the internet connection is gone, and in response, must carefully examine each component of the network to identify the problem. This might involve checking whether the modem is properly plugged in, restarting it, verifying the power supply, or even confirming whether there is a general outage. Only through this process does one recognize that the entire system depends on the proper functioning and connection of multiple nodes. When every element is in place, the network appears to operate effortlessly; beneath that seamless operation, however, lies considerable effort. Similarly, a software program functions smoothly only when every line of code is free of errors. For Bruno Latour, this is an instructive metaphor for reality itself: it should be understood as a network of interconnected nodes.

Latour's model, however, goes further: it is not merely a network, but an actor-network. The various human and nonhuman entities that constitute actor-networks each possess some degree of agency. This is why Latour calls them actors.³ Each actor, he argues, is active and possesses some measure of capacity to exert influence. Conventionally, agency is attributed only to human beings, who deliberate, choose, and act. Yet Latour insists that non-human elements also exercise agency. Consider, for instance, a microphone. It may appear to be an inert object, yet in practice it directs behavior: its connection to a laptop restricts movement, effectively placing the speaker "on a leash." In this way, the microphone influences action and constrains possibilities, thereby demonstrating agency. Within the actor-network, distinctions between the conscious and the unconscious, or between the animate and the inanimate, are not absolute but rather matters of degree.

Another defining feature of the network is that it has no underlying foundation. When asked what a network "really" consists of, whether a Wi-Fi network or reality itself, the answer is simply the network itself. There is nothing behind or beneath it, no ultimate substance or fundamental ontology that determines what reality is made of. Reality, in Latour's view, is composed of interconnected phenomena, and it is this web of relations that constitutes existence.

In 1972, Latour had what he calls his "Saint Paul on the way to Damascus" experience. Driving back home late at night, he suddenly saw with great clarity that the world cannot be reduced to some special reality that explains all the others. He put the car to the side of the road and repeated to himself:

3 Latour also uses the more technical term "actants," but in this book, I will stick to "actors."

“Nothing can be reduced to anything else, nothing can be deduced from anything else, everything may be allied to everything else” (Latour 1988, 163). Latour calls this “the principle of irreduction.”

Based on this principle, Actor-Network Theory refrains from any axiomatic a priori decisions about the nature of the real. Latour refuses to ontologically pre-format the world. He rejects existing modern preformats such as the oppositional terms nature-culture, nonhuman-human, and object-subject. For him, the world is an irreducible plurality of actors that can best be described through the metaphor of the network (Latour 2005).

Latour rejects the notion of vertical transcendence. In the world of actor-networks, “it is transcendence that has become misleading, not to say diabolical, and it is immanence—that immanence scorned by centuries of ‘spirituality’—that is becoming desirable in moral and civic terms. From now on, the horizontal dimension has precedence over the vertical” (Latour 2024, 52). However, he does not reject transcendence altogether, only vertical transcendence and the opposition between immanence and transcendence: “‘immanence’ is no longer a direction whose opposite would be ‘transcendence’. This world of living things is as ‘transcendent’ as it could possibly be, in the very real sense that their interactions constantly ‘transcend’ themselves” (Latour 2024, 52). It is the opposition immanence/transcendence that is itself an artifact of the ontological breach that characterizes transcendentalisms: there is no higher transcendent world that is separate from the mundane world.

The Ontological Turn: Modes of Existence

Since Descartes, Western ontology has largely recognized only two kinds of existence: the material world and the immaterial realm of thought, with God as a separate category. Latour finds this binary inadequate and proposes a broader spectrum of modes of existence. Entities can exist in diverse ways, each with its own ontological status. Objects, for instance, persist tangibly over time, but other entities may exist as legal facts, social conventions, or collective practices. A legal fact, such as a court ruling, exists and exerts influence, even if it has no tangible presence; it shapes behavior and constrains action in the world. This expanded ontology allows for a richer understanding of reality, acknowledging the multiplicity of ways in which entities can act, interact, and hold significance. Bruno Latour uses this example to illustrate how the legal realm constitutes its own distinct mode of existence. In the legal sphere, something can be true or false in a legal

sense, which may not necessarily align with moral right or wrong. Ideally, legal truth corresponds with ethical correctness, but it can also diverge. Thus, the legal domain operates according to its own principles and logic.

Latour extends this reasoning to fictional beings. Consider, for instance, Harry Potter. While one might argue that Harry Potter does not exist in a literal sense, the character has nonetheless influenced millions of lives around the world. Similarly, Sherlock Holmes continues to receive fan mail at Baker Street, despite the obvious fact that the character is fictional. Latour contends that these beings possess a distinctive mode of existence. They do not exist as material objects like tables or chairs, yet they exert influence, adhere to internal laws, and can even be evaluated for truth or falsity. For example, a fictional character may or may not “ring true” to a reader. A character that fails to resonate or seems implausible can be considered false, whereas a character that deeply engages the reader and evokes identification can be considered true within the fictional mode. In this way, Latour expands our understanding of existence and truth beyond purely material or empirical categories.

In 2013, Latour publishes *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, in which he attempts to construct new ways of thinking ontologically that are more appropriate and fitting for our current time (Latour 2013a). For Latour, ontology is not the search for a univocal truth about being in general. It refers to a form of diplomacy that allows us to give to our different approaches to reality (science, religion, law, literature, politics, economics, and so on) each their proper weight and significance, rather than judging them all by the scientific approach to reality.

Ontology is no longer a particular theory or understanding of Being; it refers to *the ways in which* something can be determined as a being. For example, witches that murder people may not exist in Europe, but they may indeed exist in the Amazon.⁴ This is not simply a form of relativism that accepts that, whatever someone declares exists, does indeed exist (“to each their own”), but it is about a better understanding of how different things come to exist in different ways in different worlds. It calls attention to the set of operations that we must perform on our Western ontology in order to be able to understand why there are sorcerers in the Amazon but not in

4 The anthropologist Evans-Pritchard, who studied witchery in the Zande people in South Sudan, reported: “I once heard a Zande say about us: ‘Perhaps in their country people are not murdered by witches, but here they are’” (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 540). Of course, people that self-identify as witches do exist in Europe nowadays. However, they do not tend to murder people.

Europe (or why there might be divine beings during a religious ritual but not in a secular context). It is not a question of accepting the existence of divine beings or not, but of better understanding *how* they could exist, and understanding how different worlds, in which different kinds of entities may exist, may be disclosed by different forms of consciousness.

In order to remedy the anaemic understanding of reality of the Modern Constitution (acknowledging only two types of being, subjects and objects), Latour wants to subject modernity to some “ontological *fattening* therapies” (Latour 2013a, 177). Such fattening therapies would mean allowing more ontological answers to co-exist (an ontological pluralism). The temptation is always to presuppose one ontological realm (Being) that has many linguistic representations or interpretations. However, for Latour, reality itself is an incommensurable plurality of competing representations or construction projects. Being itself is always in the making, there is no ready-made reality. Instead of a variety of culturally determined languages and representations of a single shared objective external material world, we need a variety of ontological domains, of “modes of existence.” Each mode of existence co-constructs reality in its own way and has its own type of beings (Latour 2013a, 147).⁵ Latour acknowledges the existence of different type of beings that exist in different ways (Latour 2013a, 162). Although we do not have direct access to such beings, we can have indirect access to them by following the links of reference in the network that they are a part of.

Religion as a Mode of Existence

One of the striking aspects of *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* is the overwhelming and positive role played by religion as a mode of existence, including its gods and angels. One reviewer even called it an “onto-theological work” (Skirbekk 2015).

Latour takes the ontological dimensions of religion seriously. For him, religion is a particular mode of existence that can be analysed by describing the types of actor-networks that include religion-bearing entities, or beings of religion. As Latour notes, religious people of all times and ages have reported encountering beings of religion, and scholars of religion need to take that seriously:

5 Latour distinguishes beings of law, beings of politics, fictional beings (Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot), religious beings (gods, angels and bodhisattvas), economical beings (the global market), psychological beings (emotions, inspirations), and so on.

It appears infinitely simpler, more economical, more elegant, too, to stick to the testimony of the saints, the mystics, the confessors, and the faithful, in order to direct our attention toward *that toward which* they direct theirs: beings came to them and demand that they be instituted by them. But these beings have the peculiar feature of *appearing* to those whose souls they overwhelm in saving them, in resuscitating them. If we are to be empirical, then, these are the ones we must follow. (Latour 2013a, 308)

Just as he contrasts the actual practice of science (lowercase), the manufacturing of scientific facts through actor-networks, with the official ideology of Science (uppercase), the so-called discovery of pure and objective facts, Latour contrasts the actual practice of religion (lowercase), the actual lived reality of religious practice that is about learning to redirect our attention in order to navigate immanent religious types of actor-networks, with the official ideology of Religion (uppercase), the transcendentalized religious traditions whose institutions promise spiritual knowledge through direct access to a spiritual, supernatural world for the believers who believe in it. In order to study religion, he argues, those established transcendentalized religions are not helpful. We have to “look for the religious outside the domain of religion” and “renounce religion (as well as belief) so as to restore the beings of religion to their rightful place” (Latour 2013a, 300). Whereas religion is generally considered to be a matter of belief in some kind of ontological transcendence (God, the divine, or ultimate reality), in actuality, belief has never had that much to do with religion:

In ancient times, when people talked about the gods, believers were no more numerous than non-believers. The presence of divinities was obvious in the air or in the soil. They formed the common fabric of people's lives, the primary material of all rituals, the indisputable reference point of all existence, the ordinary fodder of all conversation. (Latour 2013b, 5)

Latour argues that belief, in the sense of trust, is indispensable for living, thinking and speaking. For example, when we say that we believe in the reality of global warming, we mean that we trust the findings of climate scientists. However, when we say that we believe in God (or Buddha Nature, or the existence of an ultimate reality) we use the word in a different sense. The issue is not that God is invisible and global warming is not: “global warming is exactly as invisible to the naked eye, to the eye not equipped by the sciences, as this ‘God’” (Latour 2013b, 38). The problem is, Latour argues, that belief in God “leads thinking astray into a virtual world, one

to which we ‘could’ have access ‘if only’ we had the means available to chains of information but of which belief actually remains forever deprived” (Latour 2013b, 30).

Religious language, used in this way, “engenders the illusion of another world to which religious discourse, by some miraculous somersault, would provide exclusive access” (Latour 2013b, 30). However, Latour argues, there is no higher “spiritual” world that comes on top of the “material” world. There are simply different types of actor-networks that are connected to the various modes of existence (Latour 2013a, 299). Such a division between the material and the spiritual world, the natural and the supernatural realm, was invented by believers in the eighteenth century as part of the Modern Constitution (Latour 2021, 50).

Latour argues that taking the notion of ‘believing in God’ in the sense of being convinced of his existence is a category error. The question “do you believe in God?” is closer to the question “do you love me?” than to the question “do you believe in global warming?” (Latour 2013b, 40). For Latour, belief is a caricature of religion. Religion is not about immediate belief but about mediated practice.⁶

As we have seen in chapter 2, rituals such as baptism in early Christian communities were not about belief. They involved elaborate ceremonial practices that served to demonstrate implicit faith. At a key moment, the person being baptized would call out *Credo!*, expressing, “I believe in Jesus Christ.” This declaration is better interpreted as a commitment: “Jesus Christ is my guide. I am loyal to him. I trust that he can help me in times of trouble.” Belief in this sense is relational and experiential rather than purely doctrinal; it is about relying on the values and presence of the divine to provide support.

Latour draws a parallel with everyday expressions of trust and fidelity. For instance, the Dutch singer André Hazes famously sings, “She Believes in Me,” capturing the notion of unwavering support: someone who will forgive, comfort, and be present regardless of mistakes. Christianity, similarly, frames belief as a form of trust and relational commitment to Jesus Christ, emphasizing practical fidelity over abstract doctrine. One may assert, for example, “Jesus Christ saved me; I was in despair, and I found someone who

6 Latour’s focus on mediated practices rather than on immediate beliefs gives his thought on religion an affinity with the “new materialism” in religious studies, as evident in the work of David Morgan and Birgit Meyer who stress, following Latour, the mediated nature of religious practice and experience (Meyer 2012; Morgan 2021).

would never let me down.” This is an experiential claim, grounded in lived reality, rather than a metaphysical or doctrinal assertion.

For Latour, religion is not about belief in transcendent realities, but about *reprise*: the continuous rearticulation of the sacred through religious-type actor-networks. Religious practices are about maintaining a connection with such actor-networks, in order to transform the self through mediated encounters with immanent divine presence. Religion is enacted: it is performed through practices that generate experiences. For Latour, such religious practice does not try to reach anything beyond. Rather, it “does everything to constantly redirect attention, by systematically breaking the will to go away, ignore, be different, blasé or bored” (Latour 2010, 110). It “attempts to break all habits of thought that direct our attention to the far away—to the absent, to the over-world—in order to bring attention back to the incarnate, to the renewed presence of what was previously misunderstood, distorted, and deadly” (Latour 2010, 111). Religious practice is about “dancing toward the present and the close: to redirect attention away from indifference and habituation, to prepare oneself to be seized again by this presence that breaks the usual, habituated passage of time” (Latour 2010, 122).

Religious practices do not primarily give us visionary experiences that present us with new truths *about* the world, but they serve as transformative performances that attune us *to* the world. We don’t see the same things in a different light, but we learn to see differently altogether. Our existing ontologies are negated in order to open up different modes of access to more modes of existence—new orientations to the world that give us new ways to participate (cognitively, aesthetically, bodily) in its ongoing co-construction. Religious practices further cultivate our capacity for enacting the world.

Religious participation (via practice, text, or ritual) is true if it alters the participants, false if it leaves them unaffected. This is why stories such as Paul’s encounter on the road to Damascus or Mary’s meeting with the angel Gabriel retain their force. Their significance lies not in their plausibility from a scientific perspective but in their transformative impact.

Metapersons as Beings of Religion

One of the challenges of describing today’s immanentist remixed religiosity is to make sense of metapersons. Latour writes extensively about such metapersons. For him, religious-type actor-networks are populated by “beings of religion”: beings whose way of existing is specific to the religious mode of

existence, such as angels and demons, spirits, buddhas and bodhisattvas, djinns, ancestors, and so on.

Latour notes that we cannot avoid the ontological question about beings of religion: are they real or not? He advises against “bracketing” the question of their existence in order to be able to speak freely about them without having to worry about their ontological status (the approach of methodological agnosticism). We have to address the question of their existence, but approach it with the right preposition, the right tonality. We must use a different ontological template to determine their exact weight of being.

Beings of religion seem to be the most nonmaterial and nonvisible of the different kinds of beings that Latour distinguishes. He criticizes two common misunderstandings of such beings. Firstly, secular critics often deny them true existence and reduce them to psychological phenomena: mere “projections” of the mind. The fact that the beings appear and disappear proves for such secular critics that they do not really exist. But for Latour, it is simply part of their characterization that their appearance and disappearance cannot be controlled. There can be no transaction or negotiation with beings of religion, and no guarantees of their appearance (Latour 2013a, 309). Latour uses the analogy with a love relationship. Between two lovers, affection may flourish through words and gestures, only to vanish suddenly with a single misstep, erupting into conflict and despair. Just as suddenly, a reconciling word can restore intimacy and closeness. Such shifts can also happen in religious practice.

Secondly, religious believers may elevate such beings to a lofty spiritual status (although often only the beings from their own religious tradition). They are seen as supernatural beings that somehow reside in their own spiritual world:

The religious will claim that there is something “beyond” Nature. They could not go further astray: given that NATURE is already an artifact, just think what the supernatural must be like! And to reach this supernatural world that has no existence whatsoever, they proceed as though religion were something like a ladder that allows access—a ladder without rungs or rails. (Latour 2013a, 320)

Latour offers a brief genealogy of this notion of a spiritual world. Following the Cartesian colonization of the ontological world through *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, the notion of Heaven as the “up above” became incomprehensible. Starting in the eighteenth century, therefore, believers invented a

spiritual world, which they claimed to be able to locate still higher than the up above, or at least very much above the ‘material’ world, and in which they could finally play at moving holy figures around at their leisure. It was in this higher “spiritual world,” placed like a bright horizontal layer above the darker layer of the “material world,” that the sequel to the “after-life” story was supposed to unfold. (Latour 2021, 50–51)

If beings of religion do not exist as psychological projections or supernatural heavenly beings, in what way *do* they exist? They exist in a fundamentally different way than material objects such as tables or chairs, which remain reliably present. By contrast, beings of religion appear and disappear, often in unpredictable or mysterious ways: Latour argues that they can be seen as beings with a capacity for metamorphosis:

These beings undergo metamorphoses such that one can surely not attribute to them the mode that would make them *persistent* entities, on the same basis as tables and stones. We may choose to call them occult, but as one says of planets or asteroids that they are undergoing “occultation,” for these beings, too, appear and *disappear*. They are peculiar aliens in that one can say, from one second to the next, “I thought it was *nothing*, but then I turned around and there it was, terrifying”; or, conversely, “I thought it was *something*, but then I turned around, and there was *nothing* there after all.” (Latour 2013a, 202)

Latour jokes that the special effects of horror movies (you look, and the ghost is there; you look again and there is nothing to see) may be the best description of this mode of existence.

Like all actors that are part of actor-networks, beings of religion do not exist “in themselves” but only have a relational existence. They are a tiny operational element whose exact determination depends on their local operation in a religious actor-network. They resemble elementary particles in a physics experiment that appear and disappear in different forms (particle or wave) according to the local operations of the experiment.

Beings of religion exist, in a relational and contextual way, within the actor-networks that make their appearance possible. Their way of existing is participatory. They are both constructed and real: constructed by the actor-networks that make their appearance possible, real within those actor-networks as long as these sustain them. They disappear when these actor-networks dissolve. They exist because they are being collectively re-enacted and reconstructed in rituals and ceremonies, over and over

again. Their existence can never be objectively verified, because it depends on their ongoing mediation through religious-type actor-networks.

How to determine the truth or falsehood of beings of religion? Just as with other types of being, Latour argues, we can find the answer by following the threads of the actor-networks that involve them.⁷ As Latour argues, this will do justice to the testimony of the saints and mystics (Latour 2013a, 308). Following the threads of the actor-networks involving such beings, distinguishing between the different paths of angels, demons and other spirits, is simply a responsible form of William James's radical empiricism.

Latour draws connections between beings of religion, and what indigenous cultures describe as spirits. Modernity tends to dismiss spirits as childish fantasies or as beliefs belonging to "primitive" peoples. Yet Latour argues that this dismissal is based on a false dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural. For him, there is no supernatural realm: all is natural. Spirits, in this sense, are not otherworldly beings but actors within the networks of existence, comparable to beings of transformation and beings of religion. Indigenous traditions, unlike Western modernity, recognize spirits as real forces with which one must engage in order to navigate life successfully.

Beings of religion continually transform themselves and us. They nourish and energize us. They make us exist as a unified person (Latour 2013a, 301). They transform subjects into persons, and bring persons into proximity to each other. They "*resuscitate* those to whom they are addressed, [...] they arouse them anew, get them moving again" (Latour 2013a, 303). They do not bear messages with specific information, but transform the person to whom they address themselves: transformation rather than information. Latour gives as an example the archangel Gabriel who comes to visit Mary. By greeting her, he saves her and impregnates her (Latour 2013a, 304). Beings of religion can convert, save, and radically transform people.

As we have seen, beings of religion appear and disappear, however, not in a way that can be controlled. We can never be completely assured by their presence and know for certain that we have seen them. The initiative always comes from them, Latour notes. For Latour, these are real and helpful beings whose existence depends on our ways of speaking (Latour 2013b, 121). They are both objectively existing and simultaneously dependent on speech acts (Latour 2013b, 142).

7 Latour notes that, although theology at a first glance seems unable to offer any assistance here, a Christian theology of love is actually a form of the love talk that he uses as a model for the kind of religious talk that involves beings of religion.

Religious Participation as Navigating Religious Actor-Networks

For Latour, religious participation is not about believing in the existence of supernatural beings, but about learning how to encounter beings of religion by accessing and navigating religious actor-networks. However, such access is always indirect. It is a matter of painstakingly following all the connections in the actor-network, and finding ways to address beings of religion. Beings of religion are highly sensitive to how they are talked about. They appear and disappear depending on how they are addressed. This is the sense in which religious ways of speaking can be true or false:

Either they transport the spirit from which they talk, and they can be said to be truthful, faithful, proven, experienced, self-verifiable, or they don't reproduce, don't perform, don't transport what they talk from and immediately, without any inertia, they begin to lie, to fall apart, to stop having any reference, any ground. (Latour 2010, 101)

Latour remarks that one ill-chosen word or misunderstood gesture can radically change their effect: they no longer free us, but imprison us (Latour 2013a, 197). Beings of religion need to be addressed in the right manner, the right tone, the right tonality. There is always the risk of being mistaken, and of mistaking them for another, Latour says. One can never be sure that they have truly appeared, and that one truly understands what they want (Latour 2013a, 310). Beings of religion need to be addressed, beseeched, engaged with, over and over again, just as the lover needs to hear again and again, “yes, I love you.” It requires constant practice to maintain the actor-networks that involve them. This requires ritual service providers with very specific ritual skills:

People rush to the office, the temple, the convent—to the laboratory of the rare souls who are capable of speaking about this effectively, that is, who are capable, through what they say and do to you, of taking care of you. [There is a] difference between a ritual that makes things better and one that makes them worse. (Latour 2013a, 197)

Latour likens engagement with beings of religion to romantic love. Just as love cannot be fully reduced to chemistry, psychology, or social convention, interactions with beings of religion involve invisible dynamics that are felt rather than proven. Love and belief can be fragile: a single misworded phrase or change in tone can disrupt the perceived reality of the relationship, only

for it to be restored later under the right conditions. Similarly, beings of religion operate in ways that require careful attention, practice, and ritual to access and sustain.

Whereas religious language is often thought to provide information and knowledge of a higher supernatural spiritual world, Latour argues that it is actually not about information but about transformation. Religious language doesn't provide any map, doesn't give access to a higher world: "the connection between a religious text and the thing it talks about is not the same as the connection between a map and its territory. [...] those texts, those words, do not provide access to anything whatsoever" (Latour 2013b, 20).

Instead, Latour says, religious words are meant to change, alter, shake up. They are not meant to provide access to the far and distant (a higher spiritual world) but to get closer to the person they are addressing. Latour uses the language of lovers as an analogy. For example, when a woman asks her lover "Do you love me?" it is not meant as a request for information. When her lover answers "I told you so yesterday already" he is missing the point of the question. His affirmative answer "Yes I love you" is a speech act that confirms their love. "No information is conveyed by the sentence and yet she, the woman who loves, feels transported, transformed, slightly shaken up, changed, rearranged, or not, or the opposite, alienated, flattened, forgotten, mothballed, humiliated" (Latour 2013b, 26).

Love talk is assessed "by the *transformation* it generates in the listener, as well as in the speaker. In-formation talk is one thing; trans-formation talk is another. When they are uttered, something happens" (Latour 2010, 102). Such sentences are not judged by their content but by their performative abilities: "do they produce the thing they talk about, namely *lovers*?" (Latour 2010, 102). In love talk, Latour argues, "attention is redirected not to the content of the message, but to the container itself, the person-making. One does not attempt to decrypt the sentence as if it transported a message, but as if it transformed the messengers themselves. Yet, it would be wrong to say that they have no truth value simply because they possess no informational content" (Latour 2010, 102).

For example, Latour argues, when we look at the messages of angels in the New Testament: "angels do not convey messages; they change those they address. What they transfer is not an information *content*, but a new *container*. They don't bring maps offering some hold to beings starved of knowledge—they transform their interlocutors" (Latour 2013b, 32). Latour argues that there are different forms of speech (not just language but also nonverbal or bodily forms) "that are able to transfer persons, not information,

either because they in part produce personhood, or because new states [...] are generated in the persons just addressed" (Latour 2010, 103). Love talk can transform both space and time. It can bring the lovers from being far away to being closer again. It can also overcome states of inertia and stuckness: suddenly, things start flowing again: "possibility arises; fate is overcome; you breathe; you feel enabled; you hope; you move" (Latour 2010, 103). The lovers are present to one another again.

For Latour, the truth or falsehood of scientific and religious statements is determined in different ways, using different criteria. A scientific statement is true when it corresponds with a state of affairs, when what it refers to is empirically or logically confirmed. Religious words, on the other hand, are true (or generate truth) when they shake up and transform their receiver, when they transform someone distant into someone close: Latour calls this conversion. Love talk brings the lovers together.

Learning How to Do Religion Again

Latour notes that for the Moderns, religion has become incomprehensible, both to "believers" and "nonbelievers" (Latour 2013a, 297). They have lost their interpretive key for such religious matters. Modern Western culture has largely lost the language to talk about beings of religion, and the rituals to engage with them. Modernity has alienated us from religious participation. The scientific mode has colonized it, reinterpreting religious experiences as natural phenomena. While scientific explanations have their place, Latour argues that they have obscured the religious mode's own language and technologies for relating to beings of religion.

As a result, modern Western societies find themselves deprived of a viable way of being religious. Traditional religious practices have lost their transformative power. The capacities once cultivated through religious practice—whether through church attendance, monastic life, or other ritualized means—have diminished. Contemporary therapy may approximate some aspects of this practice, but it lacks the depth and communal integration of traditional religious rituals. By insisting that such beings actually originate in the human psyche, Western psychology tells us that we must look not outside, but inside, into the mind, even into the brain, to make sense of such beings. However, Latour argues, the way to understand the language of such beings, and learn to talk to them, is through artificial ritual arrangements that allow us to compromise with these beings. We can install them, institute them, and turn them into helpful allies (Latour 2013a,

195). In the Western religious landscape, the Remixed are looking for such new tools and methods to access beings of religion and other actor-networks.

By contrast, many indigenous cultures possess both the conceptual tools and the ritual technologies to address them. They often speak of spirits: when someone is consumed by anger or grief, they are said to be tormented by spirits, and communal rituals serve as techniques to reestablish balance. They maintain rich ritual practices that allow participants to access actor-networks in ways that remain transformative and socially integrated. These ceremonies function as established technologies for engaging with these actor-networks.

For Latour, one of the central challenges of the present is to rediscover new possible ways of doing religion. This does not mean returning to traditional religions in their historical forms, which are no longer adequate, but revitalizing the religious mode of existence to construct new, more robust religious practices. He attempts to make what religious beings have to say audible, in their own language and in the right ontological tenor. For the task of ontological diplomacy such a re-articulation of religion is indispensable.

One of the preconditions for such a re-articulation is doing away with the ontological breach between immanence and transcendence, natural and supernatural. According to Latour, Christian theology made a fatal mistake around the time of the Scientific Revolution. It succumbed to the temptation of jumping into a competition with science over ontological questions. It should have refused to answer the question “what do *you* say about invisible beings?” (Latour 2013a, 319). It should not have responded because beings of religion cannot be defined theologically. They must be re-enacted, re-engaged, rekindled, over and over again through contemplative practices. Their existence can only be experientially justified through rituals, not through theological or philosophical arguments. Otherwise, religion will start to justify itself against its sceptical competitors and claim that it too can offer a way to access invisible beings (Latour 2013a, 319–20). At that point, religion becomes reduced to a belief in the existence of inaccessible invisible beings. And the next step will have to be for religion to claim that there is something “beyond” Nature. Religion becomes a ladder to the supernatural world, a ladder without rungs or rails. And once religion focuses on the beyond, it misses the here and now of the present (Latour 2013a, 319–20).

Latour argues that the conflict between Science and Religion has never been about replacing Belief with Reason (Latour 2013a, 321). Science and Religion were equally mistaken. Whereas Science was looking for the substance of the material universe, Religion was looking for God as a substance

(Latour 2013a, 321). However, as Latour says, “God” is not a substance that persists across time. It is a name that is given to what circulates within the actor-networks that involve beings of religion (Latour 2013a, 315).

Latour argues that, over the past few centuries, the hegemony of science has pushed religion into a defensive position. The consequence has been that religion often retreats to the notion of the “supernatural,” a domain presumed to lie beyond the reach of science. Yet Latour regards this as a mistaken strategy: the supernatural is, in his view, a losing proposition. What is needed instead are new narratives. Ecology, he suggests, provides precisely such an opportunity, offering a way to revisit central religious themes such as the Incarnation and the sacredness of the world. Unfortunately, most religious authorities remain bound to outdated dogmas rather than embracing the possibilities that Gaia opens. One notable exception, for Latour, is Pope Francis, whose encyclical *Laudato Si’* he greatly admires. There, the Pope reinvents a religious narrative by invoking “our sister, Mother Earth.” For Latour, this is an example of how the religious mode can remain vital today: not through appeals to the supernatural, but by reactivating its transformative power.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a Latourian proposal for making sense of a remixed religiosity with regard to three questions: (1) how to make sense of an immanentist remixed religiosity without vertical transcendence?; (2) how to make sense of the existence of metapersons?; (3) how to make sense of ritual engagement with metapersons, based on implicit faith rather than doctrinal belief?

(1) Latour’s Actor-Network Theory aims to approach the world as a co-constructed collection of actor-networks in which the immanence-transcendence distinction plays no role. In this way, he takes a stand against the ontological breach that has taken place throughout all Axial revolutions, especially those during the second Axial Age (fifteenth through eighteenth century). He shows how the defensive posture of Religion against Science led in the eighteenth century to the creation of a higher spiritual world that was separate from the mundane world.

Latour’s actor-network approach shifts the focus from religious beliefs and institutions to an analysis of the relations, mediations, and practices through which such immanent agencies become effective. His framework of modes of existence clarifies that different domains (science, law, fiction,

religion, etc.) have different truth-conditions (veridiction). “Truth” is not one-size-fits-all; it is mode-specific.

(2) Latour supplies the philosophical grammar for taking immanent agencies seriously without collapsing them into either “mere psychology” or “supernatural metaphysics.” His approach to religion as one of the Modes of Existence that is populated by actor-networks containing beings of religion explains how metapersons are crucially important in the actual practice of religiosity. Latour’s work connects to recent developments in the academic study of religion: an ontological turn, in which a “rhetoric of absence” (taking for granted that the metapersons that religious practitioners engage with of course do not exist) gives way to a “rhetoric of presence”⁸ that acknowledges the possibility for metapersons to exist.

Beings of transformation and beings of religion name the sorts of agencies that operate through address, ritual articulation, and transformative encounter—appearing and disappearing according to how they are engaged. The upshot is an ontological diplomacy: learning to hear religious claims in the right “key,” avoiding category mistakes (e.g., judging religious beings by the veridiction of science, or reducing them to inner states).

(3) In this chapter, Latour’s ontological approach is used to reimagine religiosity and religious rituals. Ritual engagement with metapersons takes place through indirectly accessing religious-type actor-networks. Such engagement creates a sense of religious belonging. Latour compares religious language to the language of lovers, to explain how engagement with beings of religion creates intimacy and connection.

The Latourian proposal of this chapter aims to help understand why certain religious claims and experiences make sense within the worlds that participants inhabit, and how those worlds are sustained and transformed. In this way, it opens up a new kind of pluralism: one that does not treat “religions” as sealed containers, but attends to the multiple ways religious life is assembled, negotiated, and enacted.

In studying remixed religiosity with an immanentist tone, scholarship often falls into one of two traps. It either treats immanent religious agencies as *mere symbols* or psychological projections, or it treats them as proof that “supernatural belief” has returned. The Latourian proposal of this chapter has explored a new way to describe such new immanentist religious realities in a way that is attentive to *how* they are made present—through practices, mediations, narratives, ritual forms, and communities—without either dismissing them or forcing them into a single, universal standard of “what is real.”

8 The terms are from Orsi 2016.

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8. Conclusion

Abstract: This chapter draws together the book's argument and clarifies its implications for religious studies and theology. It recaps how part 1 established multiple religious belonging as a productive but limited heuristic: empirical mapping, hermeneutical critique, exploration of Buddhist-Christian belonging, and a comparison with Chinese religiosity show that belonging is neither stable nor universal. Part 2 reframed hybridity as remix—recomposition of practices, meanings, and agencies—and identified “immanent gods” as a central interpretive challenge. This conclusion reiterates why a Latourian approach is proposed: it supports a non-reductive account of religious realities and truth without relying on transcendentalist assumptions. It closes by sketching implications for research on pluralism, post-institutional religion, and more-than-human entanglements.

Keywords: multiple religious belonging; remix; pluralism; Latour; ontology; religious hybridity

This book has discussed the changes in the Western religious landscape in two parts. Part 1 has presented the results of the six-year research project on multiple religious belonging (hereafter MRB) at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam (2013–2019). Part 2 has presented an alternative Latourian proposal for making sense of contemporary remixed religiosity in the West.

We began with a familiar Western diagnosis—declining institutional affiliation alongside proliferating spiritual practices—and have argued that the latter should not be read as “religion’s disappearance,” but as a reconfiguration of how religion is done. The conceptual journey in this book has run from MRB (as a first attempt to name hybridity within a “belonging” grammar) to remixing religion (as a better description of contemporary practice). Its main argument is that the contemporary Western religious landscape is increasingly shaped not primarily by *multiple belonging* but by

remixed participation, often marked by a renewed immanent orientation. It has provided a conceptual framework for studying these developments without reducing them to either institutional religion or private spirituality. Latour's plural ontology has served as a tool for understanding how "immanent gods" and more-than-human agencies can be *real* without being placed in a vertical, supernatural beyond.

Retracing Our Steps

The four chapters of part 1 have discussed, from different angles, MRB as a possible conceptual tool for making sense of religious diversity in the West.

Chapter 1 has approached MRB belonging from an empirical point of view. The representative survey in the Netherlands from 2014 indicated that 23 percent from the population can be seen as MRB-er. However, this chapter also showed the problems around defining, operationalizing, and measuring MRB. Taking into account the differences between religious identity, belonging and participation, it introduced a conceptual distinction between hard MRB (combining two religious identities), medium MRB (combining one religious identity with religious participation in other religious traditions), and soft MRB (religious participation).

Chapter 2 further investigated the hermeneutical problems around the notions of religion and religious belonging. It first presented a brief exploration of how the concept of MRB is used differently in the discourses of theology, social sciences, feminist and postcolonial studies, and intercultural studies, connected with different definitions of religion and religious belonging. A brief genealogy of the notions of religion and religious belonging showed that both terms have a rich and complicated history that can be connected with processes of religionization (Moyaert 2024) and the invention of religious belief (Harrison 2024), culminating in the established contemporary World Religions Paradigm as the default way of speaking of religion for both laypeople and many academics. We followed Daan Oostveen in making a distinction between such a hermeneutics of religions and an alternative hermeneutics of religiosity. At the end of the chapter, we made a strategic decision to use both religion and religious belonging as "essentially contested concepts."

Chapter 3 investigated one of the most common forms of MRB: combined Christian and Buddhist belonging. Empirically, such dual believers are mostly Christians who have embraced an additional Buddhist belonging. In the course of this investigation, it became apparent that the various types of

Western Buddhist belongings tend to be of a different nature than Christian belongings. Whereas Christian belonging usually involves embracing “the whole package” of Christianity, modern Buddhist practitioners in the West increasingly tend to only embrace certain aspects of Buddhism such as meditation practice: the unbundling of Buddhism. This causes some cracks to appear in the hermeneutics of religions. Hard dual Buddhist-Christian belonging in the West increasingly seems to turn into medium MRB (combining one’s Christian identity with Buddhist participation) and especially soft MRB (Christian and Buddhist participation), which is essentially multiple religious participation. This raised the question: is MRB still useful as a conceptual tool?

In chapter 4, that described the lived religion of the Chinese religious landscape, the hermeneutics of religions broke down even further. Even though the Chinese government actively encourages such a hermeneutics of religions, it became clear that the Chinese way of doing religion can be described in terms of five modalities, in which efficacy-based religiosity is more relevant than dharma-based religiosity (Chau 2013). Such religiosity can be more accurately described as Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape (Hedges 2017, 2019). If there is any MRB in China at all, it seems to be less a matter of individual commitments to multiple religions and more a matter of communal belongings that involve multiple religious traditions (Rajkumar and Dayam 2016).

Part 2 of this study has presented its Latourian proposal for describing and making sense of hybrid religiosity, in three steps.

Chapter 5 has described the rise of the Remixed that practice their religiosity in a new way that doesn’t conform to the World Religions Paradigm. They resist confessional religious belonging and orthodox religious belief. Furthermore, their religiosity often seems to lack a sense of vertical ontological transcendence. Their engagement with their gods tends to be immanent in nature. This calls for new conceptual tools for describing religion and religious belonging.

Chapter 6 has presented immanentism and transcendentalism as such conceptual tools. It followed Strathern in his historical analysis of religious traditions as a process of increasing transcendentalization that is part of ongoing axial revolutions. We can recognize such transcendentalization in the process of religionization (the creation of religions as fixed packages of doctrine that require exclusive belonging) that we discussed in chapter 2. And the unbundling of Buddhism, that we discussed in chapter 3, can be recognized as part of the process of re-immanentization that characterizes the rise of the Remixed. It is not *per se* Buddhism as a transcendentalist package of doctrines and practices leading up to nirvana that is attractive for

the Remixed, but Buddhist meditation practice as an empirical, pragmatic and experimental way to improve human flourishing.

Looking back to chapter 4 with our newfound conceptual tools, we can recognize many immanentist elements in Chinese religiosity: the shared monist cosmology and the absence of any ontological breach, the continuing importance of metapersons, the focus on fullness as human flourishing, the importance of ritual power through ceremonies, and the general absence of religious belonging as a separate form of belonging. China's efficacy-based religiosity is basically an immanentist religiosity.

In chapter 7, we presented Latour's philosophy of religion as a way to productively make sense of the remixing of religion today towards a return to immanentist features of religiosity. As Latour stresses, from our Modern Constitution (and the World Religions Paradigm which is an expression of it), we have lost the capacity to make sense of religion. The Latourian proposal runs counter to the processes of religionization that we have discussed in chapter 2. It also runs counter to the focus on religious belief as a marker of religious belonging. It explains immanent religiosity without vertical transcendence, involving ritual engagement with metapersons.

MRB or Beyond MRB?

From the perspective of part 2 of this study, using MRB as a conceptual tool runs the risk in many cases of turning into a form of transcendentalist bias that imposes confessional boundaries on a much more fluid religious field. Furthermore, the term has little emic resonance with those that practice a remixed form of religiosity. The term MRB was an attempt to absorb and interpret certain changes towards immanentism in the religious field. But today, this process of immanentization seems to deepen with each new generation. Multiple religious participation, rather than MRB, seems to be the new social reality.

Many scholars find that MRB leans too heavily on the World Religions Paradigm. For example, Thatamanil (2020) prefers the term multiple religious participation to MRB, since the boundaries of those multiple religious traditions are not always clear. As Thatamanil puts it, "religious traditions are fluid, malleable, and intrinsically impure; traditions are like rivers [...] that have flown into and out of each other and not discrete, reified, and homogenous entities" (Thatamanil 2020, 7).

Also Heim (2016, 30–31) argues that MRB is not a suitable term. First, he says, it is a passive, mainly sociological term, referring to those that are born

into more than one tradition, or have cultural affinities with more than one tradition. Second, it has a strong community dimension and typically requires a certain kind of mutual recognition. It may involve steps of adherence and formal membership. Heim prefers multiple religious participation because it is a more fluid term and covers a spectrum. In his view, MRB would be one possible form or outcome of multiple religious participation.

Whereas Thatamanil and Heim take issue with “belonging,” others attempt to find alternatives for “multiple.” For example, McEntee has proposed to use the term “interspiritual belonging.” Kalsky has proposed the term “transreligious belonging.” Both solutions fit within the pluralist project of crossing the Rubicon of bounded traditions. One belongs no longer to a particular bounded tradition, but to one’s ultimate concern. Religious hybridity is not about becoming bilingual but about learning Esperanto. Interspiritual or transreligious believers might say that they belong to religion itself. They have transcended the limitations of bounded religious traditions.

Whereas some argue that we should stop using the terminology of MRB, Kalsky argues that, just as a good compromise is characterized by the fact that none of the parties feel that they received what they wanted, MRB is a sufficiently broad terminology to capture a broad range of phenomena (Kalsky 2017). Using the MRB paradigm can facilitate dialogue between theologians and scholars from widely different disciplines and of widely different persuasions. She defines “religious belonging” as “feeling at home with regard to one’s ultimate concern.” When we feel we belong in a place, a group or a tradition, we feel at home there. We feel truly met, accepted and supported with regard to our ultimate concern. Some feel at home within multiple religious traditions (hard MRB-ers), albeit perhaps not to the same extent. Some feel at home in a single religious tradition but also like to visit other traditions (medium MRB-ers). Some do not feel at home within religious traditions at all (soft MRB-ers). However, they do feel at home with other groups, platforms and people, so they do possess a religious belonging, just not in the traditional sense.

The notion of MRB certainly continues to have a future, but not as a conceptual tool for characterizing the religious field in the West as a whole. That would be a form of transcendentalist bias. However, MRB can be a useful heuristic for a particular task, such as getting certain parts of the religious landscape better into focus. Any analytical study of religious diversity requires the drawing of boundaries between this group and that group. However, such boundaries may have to be drawn in very different ways depending on the research question at hand. Working on a large scale, it

may be useful to speak in terms of Christian and Buddhist believers, and do quantitative empirical research into the number of single and dual belonging.

MRB continues to be a social fact. People will continue to combine religious belongings, either by choice or by family circumstances (e.g., mixed marriages). However, with these conceptual tools we can no longer claim to capture the entire religious field. For other parts of the religious field, we need to use alternative imaginings of religion and religious belongings. We need to remix religion. As the Pew research from 2025 indicates, there are 1.9 billion Nones world-wide (Pew Research Center 2025b). Many of those may not be atheist but Remixed. They no longer believe in transcendentalist Religion, but may still practice some kind of immanentist religiosity. Other than what the secularization thesis argues, religion is not disappearing but is everywhere—just increasingly often in an immanentist mode.

Why a Latourian Proposal?

At first glance, it may seem peculiar to use the work of Bruno Latour to gain conceptual tools for making sense of remixed religiosity. After all, Latour is not an established theologian or religion scholar. However, as this work has made clear, Latour has written much about religion. Although Latour's wide interdisciplinary impact on anthropology, philosophy, sociology, and climate theory is widely recognized, his contributions to the study of religion have been less well-known, although they are increasingly recognized.¹ For various reasons, a Latourian proposal is a good idea for studying hybrid religiosity (see Robertson and Wildcroft 2025).

First, Latour's Actor-Network Theory (hereafter ANT), which emphasizes networks or assemblages and decenters human agency in the study of religion, has been adopted by scholars of the ontological turn, and has impacted discussions of enchantment. Approached in terms of ANT, religion involves a range of actors, only some of whom are human. Rather than focusing only on questions of religious belief, scholars can use ANT to study the entangled dynamics of religious devotion, in which human and non-human actors interact.

Second, his "Catholic" approach to religion is an alternative to the Protestant assumptions of the World Religions Paradigm. Latour does not focus on individual beliefs in transcendence but on shared immanentist practices and

1 See for example the recent special issue of the journal *Implicit Religion* on Bruno Latour and the Study of Religion.

traditions. For Latour, religion is not a matter of speculating about far-away things (that is the domain of science), but concerns the near and intimate things (resonating with the lived religion approach of the MRB project): “religious speech does not appeal to a transcendent, far-away God, but instead seeks to transform human beings” (Robertson and Wildcroft 2025). For Latour, the Protestant theologians made a mistake by removing God to a far-away supernatural realm, completely separate from human agency.

Third, Latour agrees with both of the two positions in the study of religion: “the fact position and the fairy position” (Latour 2010, 237). The fact position is taken by those (such as J. Z. Smith) who see religion as socially constructed. For them, “categories of belief are merely empty terms onto which power is projected” (Robertson and Wildcroft 2025, 121). The fairy position is taken by those who assume that “there are in fact forces which dominate and motivate individuals, albeit without their conscious acquiescence” (Robertson and Wildcroft 2025). For Latour, religion is both real and constructed: “I have to be able to talk about religious elaboration without threatening voices, coming from inside as much as outside, immediately asking me to choose: ‘Is it real or is it made up?’ I have to be able to answer once more: ‘Both’” (Latour 2013b, 144).

Rather than the “Gods-eye view” of the traditional sociologist of religion, who aims to map the contemporary religious landscape from an all-knowing higher perspective, Latour prefers the opposite and humble position of the “ant,” (playing with the acronym of Actor-Network Theory), patiently performing ethnographic research, following the links in the actor-networks, painstakingly focusing on the little details. In such a “sociology of associations,” he recommends: “go slow, don’t jump, keep everything flat” (Latour 2005, 190).

However, in spite of his repeated pleas for painstakingly detailed ethnographic work, based on his radical empiricism, Latour doesn’t shy away from normative statements. Just as he distinguishes well-constructed science from badly constructed science (e.g., conspiracy theories), he would distinguish well-constructed immanentist religiosity from poorly constructed transcendentalist Religion. Some religion scholars therefore critically approach *Rejoicing* as a work of theology in which Latour’s voice “comes across almost like a lecture from the pulpit” (Latour and Robertson 2013, 5). For some, this renders his approach not very useful to a methodologically agnostic social-scientific study of religion.

This distinction between well-constructed and poorly constructed forms of religion, however, makes Latour’s work very suitable for a contribution to a new theology of religious diversity. Rather than only mapping out

new forms of religious hybridity through the metaphor of the remix, the Latourian proposal in this book also allows us to consider some forms of religious hybridity as better constructed than others.

The Future of (the Study of) Religion in the West

The Latourian proposal of this study puts forward the thesis that, in the contemporary Western religious landscape, transcendentalist types of dharma-based religiosity are increasingly giving way to various more immanentist forms of efficacy-based religiosity. Religion may be returning to its immanentist roots. As an empirical hypothesis, this would need more empirical confirmation through fieldwork by sociologists of religion.

However, from a hermeneutical point of view, this study argues that an immanentist Latourian framework is much more suitable to redescribe—and to understand—the religiosity of the Remixed. It helps to overcome the Modern Constitution and its World Religions Paradigm, and reverses the process of religionization. In this way, remixing religion is not only what seems to be happening in the religious landscape today; it is also a way to keep the study of religion and religious belonging relevant for our postmodern and postsecular times.

Such a remixing of religion may also be useful for making sense of new forms of transcendentalist religion, which of course is still flourishing worldwide. People will still say that they believe in a transcendental God. However, in such surveys, people are mostly asked *whether* they believe in God or not, not *how* they believe in God. It may be that also within transcendentalist religiosity, implicit faith is on the rise. It seems a fair hypothesis that, for example, many African and Chinese Christians embody their Christian belonging in an immanentist way (see e.g., Hedges 2025). It would be an important task for a new theology of religiosity to make theological sense of such immanentization of religious belonging in general, and here the Latourian proposal of this study may be useful as well. As Latour has noted, the ending of the 400-year-long Modern parenthesis also offers new opportunities for new, more immanentist versions of Christian theology (Latour 2024).

The study of remixed religiosity requires philosophical diplomacy for bridging various conceptions of religion, religious belonging and religious participation. And Latour sees himself as such a philosophical diplomat. He attempts to build bridges between different ontological regimes. In such ontological diplomacy, the aim is not to arrive at any particular ontology, nor to go beyond ontology altogether, but to open his audience up to

multiple ontological possibilities (modes of existence). He acknowledges many possible ontologies without privileging any of these as the ultimate answer to the ontological question. There is no single conceptual framework, not even a pluralist one, that can account, once and for all, for everything that exists. Latour's experimental metaphysics does not present a new pluralist ontology but an ontological pluralism that is used *diplomatically* for negotiating encounters between ontologies.

A diplomat, says Patrice Maniglier in an article about Latour, "tries to dissipate misunderstandings by forcing *everyone* to think of themselves differently" (Maniglier 2014, 40). The misunderstandings with regard to being have arisen because we have given science the monopoly on the truth of being: only what can be scientifically established truly exists. The rest is a matter of belief. However, things do not exist in one single way but in many different ways.² The point is to learn to not confuse these different modes of existence. That would be a category error, such as expecting a legal decision to provide emotional closure or trying to establish the existence of invisible beings through scientific procedures.

Latour's ontological pluralism serves as a protocol to clear up such ontological misunderstandings. It delineates the conditions under which ontological questions can be asked. As Holbraad and Pedersen stress, the point of the ontological turn is not to find new alternatives to what the world is like, but to allow the world to show us how things could be otherwise. In that sense, ontological questions are not about what *is*, but about what *could be* (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 68).

The Latourian proposal of this work situates itself within a broader significant shift that is currently taking place across the sciences and arts. This "relational turn" challenges binary distinctions such as nature-culture, human-nonhuman, mind-matter, subject-object. It problematizes human exceptionalism and highlights interconnectedness, mutuality, kinship, and the entanglement of all beings within complex ecological and cosmological networks.

Remixed religiosity entails a growing recognition of the interconnectedness of our human world with the non-human, the sacred, and the more-than-human worlds. This is a far cry from the notion of religions as human-centered belief systems that involve a separate supernatural and transcendent Being.

2 As Maniglier says, "'To be' does not mean the same thing for a Higgs boson as it does for the Argentinian peso, but both equally *are*, and the task of the metaphysician is to exhibit that equality and that diversity" (Maniglier 2014, 42).

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