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Multiple Religious Belonging and Theologies of Multiplicity: Confluences of Oneness and Porosity[1]

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Though interreligious engagement is not necessarily a given for those who identify with or belong to more than one tradition, attending to the question of interfaith participation might help scholars and practitioners recognize the central issues that emerge in both the theory and practice of Multiple Religious Belonging (MRB), especially in participants' relation between and among traditions. Multiple religious belonging directly challenges this ethos of oneness and underscores the need for postures or logics that do not, in the end, revert to an absolute unity. Interpreting MRB through the lens of theologies of multiplicity, in particular those from Laurel C. Schneider and Catherine Keller, may provide a remedy that diverges from a politics of representation that too often focuses on unitary or fixed manifestations of both individual religious identities and communal religious traditions. Ultimately, this paper will show how concepts from constructive Christian theologies that are attuned to ontological and epistemic multiplicity—in their attention to how the rhetoric of oneness operates—may be helpful in supporting the project of thinking of multiple religious belonging as coherent, as it relates to both individuals and to traditions.

keywords: multiple religious belonging, multiplicity, interfaith dialogue, oneness, porosity, constructive theology, coherence, power relations, logic of the one, Christian hegemony, chaplaincy

We stumble or we dance under quantum conditions writ large.
− Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*

The more closely you look at any body, culture, language, or religion, boundaries blur, categories falter…
− Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*

Opening

"Separation is a sham," Catherine Keller intones throughout *Cloud of the Impossible*.[2] Keller makes this proclamation in view of the quantum entanglements that comprise our physical existence. Though many physicists are hesitant to make ontological claims based on the physical

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[1] I want to express gratitude for the communities and persons whose questions and *thereness* influenced the writing of this essay: the Multifaith Working Group at the University of Chicago Divinity School, especially Cynthia Lindner; Alternative Epistemologies (workshop and salon) at the University of Chicago Divinity School; colleagues in the theological studies cohort in the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University; Elena Lloyd-Sidle, PhD candidate in theological studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School; Laurel C. Schneider, professor of Religious Studies and Culture at Vanderbilt University; and the many students and friends whom I have worked alongside in the field of multifaith university chaplaincy.

[2] Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 158. Keller takes this phrase from Jeanette Winterson's novel *Gut Symmetries* (New York: Knopf, 1997); the phrase appears in the epigraph at the beginning of Keller's chapter "Spooky Entanglements," and it is also employed for conclusive effect at the end of the chapter. *Cloud of the Impossible*, 127, 167.

data they gather, discoveries from the past century are ripe for interpretation. Theologians, like Keller, interpolate from these discoveries that our very being and practice (action) are constituted by relations. Just as there are multiple creation stories invoked in the book of Genesis, there are many scientific stories that we tell to help us narrate the nature of our existence.[3] We experience this existence as somewhat separable creatures, I in my being and you in yours. Yet as Catherine Keller indicates, these are different tellings of creation, different variations on the theme of how to interpret our existences—and indeed our embodiments—in view of the larger cosmos and everything in-between.

Setting up the Problem: Pluralism as a Context for Multiplicity?

Interfaith dialogue and similar kinds of pluralistic programs, as much as they attempt a positive response to religious diversity in the United States, can certainly have harmful and silencing aspects as well. And these aspects can undermine the diversity—in fact more complex than the framework allows—which they aim to highlight. Though some of these dialogues and programs are ostensibly organized to create peace among traditions or to mobilize toward a common goal, they can also reify or reproduce logics that reinforce stereotypes, privileges, and power differentials between and among religious, spiritual, and philosophical traditions in moments when those with more political clout (or power) determine how a religious other represent themselves in pluralistic contexts.[4]

These power dynamics and relations, in turn, can become increasingly complex when the question is not just how multiple religious traditions can exist peacefully in society, but how or *whether* they can exist peacefully (or at all) within an individual's (embodied) existence. That is, built on the original "problematic" of societal pluralism, interfaith spaces can become difficult and fraught when the spaces are organized by representation models based on the construct of religious identity as only or primarily monolithic, which excludes those who belong to more than one tradition. What is the place of a person who identifies as "plural within" and locates more than one tradition within their (embodied) existence, an experience that may be unimaginable or disallowed by those who create and participate in these spaces?[5] Or, if multiple religious belonging is allowed, must it be confined by strict modes, categories, or identities such as "Christian" or "Muslim"?

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[3] Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physic*s, trans. Simon Carnell and Erica Segre (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016), 33. Rovelli writes: "This is the world described by quantum mechanics and particle theory. We have arrived very far from the mechanical world of Newton, where minute, cold stones eternally wandered on long, precise trajectories in geometrically immutable space. Quantum mechanics and experiments with particles have taught us that the world is a continuous, restless swarming of things, a continuous coming to light and disappearance of ephemeral entities . . . a world of happenings, not of things." Ibid., 40.

[4] I explore this theme, in the context of multifaith college chaplaincy in the United States, in "Lessons in Multifaith Chaplaincy and Feminist Thought: Making Room for Multiple Religious Belonging in Interfaith Praxis," *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, Issue 20 (March 2017): 71-79, http://irstudies.org/journal/lessons-in-multifaith-chaplaincy-and-feminist-thought-making-room-for-multiple-religious-belonging-in-interfaith-praxis-by-rachel-a-heath/.

[5] I have used the phrase "plural within" in the past to describe the experience of MRB, and I am indebted to Jem Jebbia, colleague and at-large representative on the executive board of the National Association of College and University Chaplains (NACUC), for this term.

The practice of interfaith and multifaith[6] engagement, as well as my positionality as a chaplain and scholar, form the foundation in this essay for emerging questions related to the phenomenon of belonging to or identifying with more than one tradition. Approaching these questions from the perspective of multifaith engagement allows us to think multiply (or multiplicity) from the ground up. A chaplain takes what a student brings at face value: if multiple religious belonging is something experienced and articulated, then the goal is to render the experience coherent rather than explain it away. As for multifaith contexts, it is one thing to meditate on multiple belonging in a general society or community in which religious pluralism can be characterized as something that happens incidentally through day-to-day interactions, and another thing entirely to ask these questions from within a context that is already—and *intentionally*—interactive in its religious and philosophical pluralism. As I will explore, it is my sense that any resistance to belonging multiply within these intentionally pluralistic settings reveals that this resistance is less about multiplicity itself and more about the allure of a subterranean logic of oneness that presumes notions of stable, monolithic categories for traditions as a whole. Any breakdown of that stability on a micro-level (as with an individual participant) begins to poke holes in the assumption that unity can be had on a macro-level (tradition), a notion that can be deeply unsettling and threatening as it breaks down how many of us in the West have been taught to think of the category of religion and religious identity.

Taking as a given that practices of multiple religious belonging exist, that people positively claim such belonging or identities, and that this experienced reality can be a life-giving one[7] clears a pathway for us to attend to the unmistakable ***thereness*** of those who belong multiply.[8] *Thereness*, a term used by constructive theologian Laurel C. Schneider, attends to what is happening "in the middle"; it does not return to stories of origin nor does it skip toward notions of the eschaton to explain away the how or why of multiple belonging. *Thereness* confronts the reality at hand, the experience being experienced. It encounters, right here, right now. As comparative theologian Michelle Voss Roberts articulates in her own interpretation of *thereness*:

> The plural and hybrid practices of multiple religious belonging are *there*, embodied in persons and communities. Imperialistic urges to divide and conquer or to impose a unifying ideology run roughshod over these lived realities. If we follow

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[6] On terminology: I will intersperse multifaith and interfaith throughout this essay. There is ongoing conversation within the fields of practice (chaplaincy) and theory (interfaith and interreligious studies) on definitions and preferred terminology, but generally speaking, *multifaith* refers to the practices that focus on offering resources to distinct traditions while not expecting them to interact, while *interfaith* connotes interaction between and among traditions. In addition, some scholars, like Monica A. Coleman, prefer the term "multi-religious" to multifaith or interfaith.

[7] From a small group discussion with Paul Knitter, Paul Tillich Professor Emeritus of Theology, World Religions and Culture at Union Theological Seminary (New York), in which he emphasized that theologians and religious studies scholars attend not only to the reality of MRB, but that it has been a "good thing" in some people's spiritual experience. Conversation occurred on October 26, 2016, immediately following Knitter's lecture at the University of Chicago Divinity School entitled "Good Neighbors or Fellow Seekers? Dealing with the Plurality of Religions in the Twenty-First Century," hosted by the Multifaith Working Group, a group of students and scholars focusing on questions of diversity, pluralism, multiple belonging, and divinity education.

[8] The term *thereness* is used by Laurel C. Schneider in *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 5; 90. Michelle Voss Roberts picks up on the use and application of this term (see below, n. 9), as do I.

> [Laurel] Schneider [in *Beyond Monotheism*], we can cognize multiple religious involvements according to other logics.[9]

So, amidst this *thereness,* how can we begin to theorize or theologize about multiple religious belonging?

It is here that theologies in the field of constructive Christian theology that are attuned to ontological and epistemic multiplicity may be helpful in supporting the project of thinking of multiple religious belonging as coherent, as it relates to both individuals and communities.[10] This multiplicity and coherence must be markedly different than a typology of multiple belonging in which coherence means abiding by the limits of constructed categories and boundaries that are articulated as natural, normative, and/or final. In other words, I am not arguing for a final answer about multiple religious belonging, in which we can easily delineate how a person conscribes and bounds their religious identity and through which we can assume, with a kind of knowing finality, those who identify with more than one tradition do so with the same patterns, same logics, and the same definitions and practices of those traditions. An argument of this kind would end with a logic that might say, "If multiple religious belonging exists, then it has to exist in this particular way; identities can be parsed and categorized in the same way across different contexts, so a Buddhist-Jew will have a similar mixture of religious identity and practice as a Hindu-Muslim-Christian." Instead, *coherence* in this essay refers to something that speaks to the wholeness of a particular person (or being) while taking into account their inherent, irreducible multiplicity—a multiplicity that is open and porous, in which unities are provisional and not final.[11] Taking a cue from Catherine Keller, wholeness in this sense "does not signify a one, a fixed, perfect, or homogenous totality" but, instead, "its elements are ensembles, not ones."[12]

With the aim of lending coherence defined in these terms, I will first touch on critiques and concerns related to multiple religious belonging, particularly through the lens of interfaith engagement. I will next transition to theologies of multiplicity, by initially positing that the logic of the One, as delineated by Laurel C. Schneider in *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*, is at work in pluralistic settings that resist multiple religious belonging. We will then explore how multiplicity presents theoretical inroads for dismantling or decentering hierarchies of power and privilege in interreligious contexts—contexts that can assume, require, and even desire the monolithic over the multiple.

Multiple Religious Belonging

Multiple religious belonging, as a phenomenon and reality, has indeed been characterized *multiply* by scholars. Multiple Religious Belonging, Multi-Religious Belonging, Dual-Belonging, and Religious Hybridity are all ways of referring to the experience of those who identify with

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[9] Michelle Voss Roberts, "Religious Belonging and the Multiple," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 58 (italics in the original).
[10] Current trends in constructive theology suggest that this is an emerging conversation, marked significantly by the work of Laurel Schneider, Catherine Keller, and Mayra Rivera—though many others are contributing to the conversation as well.
[11] See Schneider, 202ff, for the concept of provisional, proximal, and/or functional unities.
[12] Keller, 158. Keller, in this passage, is drawing together conceptions from theologian Nicolas of Cusa and quantum physicist David Bohm.

more than one tradition.[13] Though no universally agreed-upon, umbrella terms exists (which is probably a good thing), as scholars treat this phenomenon, their characterizations have generally fallen into three general categories: multiple religious belonging as inherent (positive), as functional (neutral), and as optional (negative).

Approached with a positive outlook, multiple religious belonging has been described as a culmination of a pluralistic framework of relationality, reciprocity, and transformation. Syncretizing or synthesizing religious beliefs, in this sense, is the logical end of attending to the pluralistic relationality that comprises daily life. In this view, all religious orientations are inherently syncretic and relational. Approached more neutrally, multiple religious belonging is the logical outcome of a globalized society where there are interfaith marriages and increased access to the theologies, frameworks, and practices of religious others. The emphasis here is less on relationality as constitutive and more about functional plurality or multiplicity; our families, partners, and children come from different traditions, which naturally leads to blending and mixing those traditions. Finally, approached more negatively, multiple religious belonging is described as being a manifestation of relativistic and individualistic "cafeteria-style" identities in which individuals have the prerogative to choose with whom and what they identify at any given moment. Multiplicity, here, is less about inherent relationality and more about individuality, autonomy, and the free market of neoliberal capitalism.[14] It should be emphasized that this more pejorative description of multiple religious belonging is used to characterize Westerners in particular who, unintentionally or not, appropriate practices and concepts from other traditions without being acquainted with or mindful of the theological or philosophical grounding for those practices and concepts, the accompanying diverse interpretative traditions, and/or the ethical and ritual traditions that support the chosen practices and concepts.[15] For scholars of comparative theology like Catherine Cornille, multiple religious belonging thus poses a problem of "modern subjectivity" in which agential capacities are prioritized far more than "total commitment and unitary belonging."[16]

With each of these portrayals possibly containing an element of descriptive relevance, the basic concept remains—that of a person engaging in some substantive way with more than one spiritual or religious tradition. Scholars interested in theorizing about this phenomenon are approaching it from different angles, including defining, delineating, or categorizing what kinds

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[13] For a fuller treatment of the ways that Multiple Religious Belonging (MRB) has been characterized, particularly from the lens of those who primarily center themselves in Christian traditions, see Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002). The initial sections of Michelle Voss Roberts's article "Religious Belonging and the Multiple" are also quite helpful for an overview of how belonging is characterized and who can be seen as legitimately belonging to more than one tradition.

[14] The notion of cafeteria-style identities for Multiple Religious Belonging comes from Peter C. Phan, "Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church," *Theological Studies* 64, no. 3 (2003): 495. However, we should also acknowledge that "cafeteria style" has been a common way of negatively describing the "marketplace" of religious pluralism. See, for example, chapters 6 and 7 of Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

[15] An all-too-common example of this is the white, American "soccer mom" who goes to a Christian church on Sundays, a yoga class on Tuesdays, and a mindfulness meditation class on Thursdays. A more in-depth discussion of how this lived reality may, or may not, fit a category of multiple belonging would be the subject of a different essay. A helpful discussion of models for belonging can be found in Roberts, "Religious Belonging and the Multiple," 46–52.

[16] Cornille, *Many Mansions*, 2.

of engagement count as substantive or multiple. The contribution of this essay is to explore how theologies of multiplicity might contribute to our theorizing about multiple religious belonging: how the former can help us think multiply through the latter. Since I have begun with the assumption that the practice (or reality) instantiates possibility, my attention will focus on lending a kind of coherence to multiple religious belonging by articulating what its inherent multiplicities might reveal for interfaith contexts in particular.

Theologies that turn our attention to multiplicity, following in the lineages of philosophers and poets of multiplicity in the last half century, offer ways to think beyond dualisms or binaries that collapse into oneness or unity and beyond descriptions of human *being* and *practice* that are produced and reproduced by religious and theological hegemonies.[17] In these accounts, I see openings and fissures, pathways toward an orientation of coherent multiplicities rather than unities that are too easily perceived or interpreted as stable, homogenous categories that are situated, powerfully, in relation to one another. This powerful situated-ness of traditions in juxtaposition (and comparison) to one another can be seen in practice most clearly in contexts of interfaith dialogue. At least in the West, these dialogues and programs are often dominated by Abrahamic traditions that, in their declarations of monotheism, tend toward more monolithic ways of conceiving both human beings and their divinities.[18] In the sections that follow, I will focus on Laurel C. Schneider's narration of the logic of the One from *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*, because it speaks of power and the way that Oneness asserts itself in religious imaginaries. I will then explore whether porosity and its relation to embodiment, which Schneider imagines to be an aspect of a logic or mode of multiplicity, may help us conceive of multiple religious belonging as coherent.[19]

The Logic of the One

As Schneider articulates, the Logic of the One has deep roots in Western philosophy and epistemology, from Plato and Aristotle to Aquinas and Newton. Modern science tells us that human brains need to categorize to survive, in order to determine our priorities for interpretation in a diffuse world. Lacking certain kinds of natural instincts, humans need to separate what we absorb and/or perceive in order to live, move, and have our being alongside other beings. Those from the West, however, have inherited a troubled legacy of distilling this (perhaps) benign instinct for categorization and separation into a desire for pure Oneness (an inclusive or exclusive unity) upon which empires and religions have been built and through which some cultures and peoples have been eliminated or dispossessed. In relation to religion, the logic of the One is expressed in the desire for monotheism, manifest most prominently by divine conceptions from Abrahamic traditions. Though monotheism as a term was coined much later than we might expect, it has (and continues) to "[labor] in the classifying and cataloguing enterprises of western

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[17] My context is Western epistemologies, theologies, and frameworks for practice, so I want to be clear that it is Western contexts in particular to which this essay is related.

[18] For a compelling account of how concepts of monotheism colluded with imperial power, consult Part 1 of Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*.

[19] Schneider, 157–163; 202ff. Porosity, fluidity, transience, interconnection, heterogeneity, and a-centered relationality are aspects of ontological multiplicity for divinity, as explicated by Schneider. I am choosing to focus on porosity as a way of thinking "multiply" about multiple religious belonging because of the way it relates to the body, or embodiment. It may pave a possible pathway because the multiple belonging is, in a sense, contained in the proximal/functional unity ("agreement of atoms") held together in an individual body.

social science" and act "as a transport vehicle for ideologies of European cultural and religious superiority."[20] Oneness in itself is not the most harmful thing here; it is the claim of *absolute* oneness, of a whole that consumes everything else in the end and admits no gaps, that is of concern.

Practically speaking, this logic of the One can be seen through the push by interfaith organizations to gather representatives who have discrete religious identities and traditions; the supposition is, simply, the gathering of these discrete ones into a group for dialogue—the grouping of "ones" into a "many."[21] The logic of the One rears its totalizing head when there is an assumed one-to-one ratio between an individual and a tradition, since this ratio presumes that a relation between entities (person and tradition) can be whole or complete. I would argue that those within pluralistic or interfaith contexts who deny the coherence of multiple religious belonging ultimately trip over their own push for pluralistic harmony along the way, as the logic of Oneness at work in their denial is the same logic that would also deny the coherency of maintaining a pluralistic worldview/orientation in the first place. Consider, for example, the well-known concept within the Christian tradition that a person must be Christian (and exclusively so) to be saved. Christian traditions that reinterpret this soteriological claim in order to support the flourishing of other traditions often do so through denying Christianity's claim of exclusive truth and asserting that there are many "ones" (traditions) that can claim truth. Pluralism conceived in this way, then, still depends on oneness—just on a scale of manyness. What I am drawing attention to here is that, in this case, assumptions of truth's oneness or manyness are integrally related; *to assert a manyness of truth for traditions and then to retreat from the possibility that an individual can belong to or inhabit many traditions is to deny the application of the logic that makes an engaged pluralism possible*.

Religious traditions constitute each other through their comparison of similarity and difference, just as the number one is rendered understandable through its being one in relation to others, not one in itself.[22] We can only conceive of the number one through its relation to all that is not-one. Similarly, we could assume that plural means multiple, or that many ones leads to a logic or posture of multiplicity, but this is not necessarily the case. In fact, the plural has historically been used to reinforce the logic of the One by way of inclusion or exclusion, whichever applies in a given context. It is my contention, with the example above in mind, that multiple religious belonging may be the best way, in religiously plural contexts, to push through the One and the Many—because it defies both and embraces a multiplicity that is not dependent upon the absolute separability of discrete ones.

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[20] Schneider, 20.

[21] Michelle Voss Roberts briefly discusses Schneider's logic of the One and connects it to the "irreducible thereness," or multiplicity, that it denies. Roberts, "Religious Belonging," 57–58, referencing Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 89–90. Roberts acknowledges that Schneider's discussion may help lead us to better imagine multiplicity metaphorically. I take a slightly different path, staying more focused on what the logic of the One and "constitutive multiplicity" could do theoretically and practically (and perhaps even theologically) for those who belong multiply.

[22] Schneider, 142–149. This is a mathematical concept that philosophers of multiplicity, as summarized by Schneider, have expressed in different ways.

The logic of the One also manifests through the desire for proper *representation* in contexts of interfaith dialogue, on both parliamentary and local levels.[23] The bounded-ness of representation denotes who is qualified to exemplify a given tradition in a public setting; it also underscores the drive to gather *valid* adherents who can adequately represent what are "agreed" upon to be the major world religions. More explicitly, for an interfaith program to be *good* (in a pluralistic sense), then that program must gather as many representatives from the world's traditions as possible in order to adequately render diversity visible.[24] There is much that could be said here about the problems of categorization and visibility as they relate to representation, especially in light of the recent colonial era in which religious difference was defined and categorized by the West in contradistinction to Christianity.[25] Though this cannot be fully explored here, suffice to say that scholars of comparative religion have convincingly shown that the very definitions of religion and religions, as well as the differences between and among them that are commonly understood as being essential or basic, were formulated during the period of Western colonial expansion. This reality should trouble, or complicate, our notions of discrete religions and requisite total commitments to these discrete religions, since "others" were defined, catalogued, and referenced in comparison to Christian traditions. Both the boundaries of Christianity and other religious traditions were created during this era.[26]

What bears mentioning is that assumptions of monolithic representations of religious belonging unearth a real fear of syncretism in belief and practice *and* multiplicity in orientation. Monica A. Coleman, womanist and process theologian, identifies the "value judgement[s]" associated with syncretism in both plural and non-plural environments. She writes:

> Syncretism or syncretic faiths have been understood as bastardized or lower forms of an authentic faith, one that was presumably the "real Christianity." Syncretic

[23] Parliamentary dialogue is a way of referring to gatherings of (usually important) religious leaders, rather than a gathering of lay participants of various traditions. One example is the dialogues hosted by the Parliament of the World's Religions; another example would be inviting the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu to have a dialogue with one another. Diana L. Eck, founder of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, clarifies these designations in her chapter "Dialogue and Method: Reconstructing the Study of Religion" in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 131–152.

[24] I want to emphasize that the expansion of diverse religious representation in pluralistic and interfaith programs is a good intention; however, there is still a long way to go in ensuring balanced representation. Too often in United States history, *interfaith* has been an umbrella term for ecumenical Christian gatherings or Abrahamic programs. (The history of military chaplaincy in the United States attests to this, as does the history of the Hyde Park-Kenwood Interfaith Council in Chicago, Illinois, which is one of the longest-running interfaith community organizations in the United States. Only in recent decades did the group expand its membership beyond Abrahamic traditions and paradigms). This is a reality that should continue to be appropriately explored and addressed in current interfaith gatherings. For more on this, see Heath, "Lessons in Multifaith Chaplaincy and Feminist Thought."

[25] Another issue that cannot be fully explored in this essay is the resistance/inability to encounter intersectionality in a holistic way. A Muslim's experience of practicing Islam and being part of a Muslim community, for example, will be marked by other aspects of her identity, including her gender, sexuality, where she lives, first language, regional origin, ethnicity, class, and ability. These aspects of identity, which are fully present when one participates in religious community, are often not afforded an obvious space (at best) in many interfaith (dialogical) models because of the intention to provide a space for "positive" engagement between and among religious traditions, unintentionally compartmentalizing the religious experience of the participants in an a-contexual way.

[26] For more extensive arguments on these points, see David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996) and *Empire of Religion: Imperialism & Comparative Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

> faiths are the things that poor people and colored people practice, while a more "pure" or "axial" faith is something to which dominant white communities adhere. My language is intentional because syncretic faiths are referred to as things people *practice*; "real Christianity" is referred to as something that one *believes*.[27]

There is a concern, which can be inferred from Coleman, that stable or "pure" traditions, "something to which dominant white communities adhere," will be destabilized and melt into an indistinguishable mass. Fear of multiple religious belonging (and syncretism) is akin to feminist theorist and physicist-trained Karen Barad's description of humans' fear of the blob (of early cinematic fame), and more recently in our fear of amoebas. Fearing an indistinguishable collective mass, like a blob or an amoeba, captures our "fear of being consumed by the Other in a xenophobic panic over the spread of foreign elements."[28] What is at stake is not only stable identities of a person within a religious tradition, but the stability and bounds of the religion—and in Coleman's example, whiteness—itself.

Significantly, and from another perspective, there is also a legitimate concern that power concentrates itself in an all-consuming, blob-like oneness. That is, this idea of melting into an indistinguishable mass is just another way that the religions with more cultural import and power—so, Christianity in a United States context—imperialize and appropriate that which is considered exotic or Other. In a context of religious hybridity or multiple religious belonging, then, theologian Kwok Pui-Lan rightly critiques Jeannine Hill Fletcher's assertion that we are all "hybrids" by arguing that *not all identities or hybridities are equal in a postcolonial contextual history*. There are indeed power differentials at work in interreligious and interfaith contexts, and hybridity for all does not erase this reality.[29] In this way, saying "we are all hybrids" yields the same result as claiming "we are all queer"—in highlighting difference as universal, that which comprises the margins is absorbed into whatever is considered normative.[30]

Multiple religious belonging, I would argue, resists this normative impulse arguably more than any other phenomenological reality in interfaith contexts, by beautifully disrupting this problem of representation. Those who belong multiply reveal that identities do not necessarily have strict, neat bounds and, in so doing, draw attention to the possibility that perhaps traditions

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[27] Monica A. Coleman, "The Womb Circle: A Womanist Practice of Multi-Religious Belonging," *Practical Matters*, Issue 4 (Spring 2011): 9, http://www.academia.edu/10265881/The_Womb_Circle_A_Womanist_Practice_of_Multi-Religious_Belonging (emphasis in original).

[28] Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," *Kvinder, Køn og Forskning (Women, Gender & Research)* No. 1–2 (2012): 27.

[29] Kwok Pui-Lan, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding: The Future of Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 46–64. Kwok is critiquing an argument that Jeannine Hill Fletcher makes in chapter four of her book *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

[30] An earlier version of this article argued that Multiple Religious Belonging can queer any sense of normative religious identity delimited by oneness, i.e., only belonging to one religious tradition. This argument started from the "Critical Edges" identified at the conclusion of my earlier article ("Lessons in Multifaith Chaplaincy and Feminist Thought: Making Room for Multiple Religious Belonging in Interfaith Praxis"). We not only need queering of religious identity in general, but also positive constructions of religious identity that relate to the fluidity of gender and/or sexual orientation, and perhaps even taking these experiences and realities as a starting point for reflection on religious identities. This is still a theoretical pathway that I think may have some traction and will be explored in a later project.

in themselves are more porous and flexible than we desire or assume. Yet at the same time, we cannot assume or require multiple religious belonging to be unendingly flexible. It can be quite discrete in its embodied experience; fluidity, here, does not imply ultimate unintelligibility or the absence of a unitary, seemingly fixed identity as experienced by a person or community. What I am drawing attention to is this: having a strict label or category for what "multiple religious belonging" entails troubles monolithic representation while, at the same time, brings to light the reality that a person who belongs multiply may have a unique experience of a bounded religious representation that works particularly for them but cannot (and should not) be universally—or categorically—applied.

These potential disruptions are important because of the questions that Catherine Cornille has raised about evaluating multiple religious belonging in terms of its theoretical and theological coherence. "One of the characteristics of the experience of multiple religious belonging is its focus on this-worldly efficacy, rather than theological coherence," Cornille writes. "The truth and efficacy of particular teachings and practices tends to be measured in terms of personal or subjective needs and fulfilment, *rather than in terms of their theological or philosophical coherence*."[31] Cornille's underlying assumption is that to identify or embody more than one tradition is difficult or impossible because the propositional truth claims and even practices of various traditions are mutually exclusive, both from the standpoint of the individual who wants to reconcile those traditions within themselves and from the perspective of the institutions that acknowledge who belongs to a tradition and who does not. The logic at work in both of these examples is the logic of the One: belonging to one tradition is more internally, philosophically, theoretically, and theologically coherent than belonging to more than one.

Yet, as we have already discussed, this emphasis on oneness may be related to more than just tradition, but also to the assumption that the multiple can or should be contained in discrete categories. What I offer instead is the argument that multiple religious belonging, as a practice and as a concept instantiating the multiple, can question and/or undo our drive for categorized, representational coherence in interfaith contexts *if we allow this multiplicity to shift both our epistemological frameworks and related practices*. Exclusive identities—in their emphasis on sameness over difference, in their insistence on this not that, in their reification that this is Christian and that is Muslim, this is Buddhist and that is Hindu, or, for example, this is theology and that is ritual practice (categories that are delineated and related differently in different traditions)—become sites of normativity and reproduced performativity, wherein we must perform the perceived identity of a particular tradition in order to participate in interfaith contexts. And what can normativity related to religious traditions and identities do? It can reproduce a false ontology of oneness, unity, and sameness that ultimately excludes difference; normativity, in this way, tells us what categories and identities are *valid* and *coherent* and which are not. And, finally, these sites of normativity can reproduce the very power differentials (one religion over another) that interfaith dialogue and engaged pluralism seek to decenter or dismantle.

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[31] Catherine Cornille, "Multiple Religious Belonging," in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, ed. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 338 (emphasis mine).

Porosity and Multiplicity

What does an awareness of the logic of the One do for theories and practices of multiple religious belonging? Perhaps it hints at the need for an alternative logic, or mode, by which we can perceive that multiplicity is everywhere: within our traditions, within ourselves. The problem is not oneness itself—but a oneness that asserts itself as the final answer, the final story for "belonging." And any assertion of finality denies our multiplicity of relations and tends toward a hegemonizing, totalizing sameness that erases difference, which can be a silencing and violent travesty for many. In the context of the United States, any assertion of Christian ultimacy runs this risk the most, especially in the face of traditions that are beyond the Abrahamic paradigm. A logic of multiplicity here does not collapse the idea of Oneness entirely, but the reality of multiple religious belonging could help those engaging in interfaith contexts not only to be more aware of the possible experiences of the people in the room, but also, as Catherine Keller reminds us, to be "mindful" of the "entangled" multiple relations in which our traditions already subsist, internally or otherwise.[32]

Multiple religious belonging, in light of this narrative of our physical existence, is resistant to the dream of totality, the dream of separability in interfaith contexts—where each participant occupies and represents one tradition, one religious identity.[33] And in this way it is more responsive to the "quantum ontology" of entanglement that, in actuality, may be a better way of characterizing the world and our experiences of the world.[34] To assert that any tradition is one, and thereby any participant is one, is to assert a faith in the separability of things, to assert that there are discrete separations on both macrocosmic and microcosmic levels. However, as quantum physics has revealed, this is just not the case.

We have already acknowledged that Christianity is not one and in fact has relied on the categorizing of other traditions to further differentiate, define, and particularize itself.[35] It is porous and multiple in history, manifestation, and practice, far from an exclusive unity. Christianity has always been syncretic, still "bearing the imprint" of the "encounter among Judaism, North African worldviews, and Greek philosophy," as Monica A. Coleman argues. No "real Christianity" exists, just as "there are no pure cultures."[36] The next step in giving epistemological priority to multiplicity, then, is to circle back into our interfaith practices, to not multiply our identities and categories into an indiscernible mass in any final sense, but to disrupt any logic of the One that continues to support or produce power differentials between and among diverse traditions, postulated as absolutely discrete and impermeable to change and flux. As Schneider says, "Theologians have tended to forget that categorical distinctions and absolutes are conveniences; they are not the world, not incarnation."[37]

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[32] Keller, 24. Keller uses "mindful" and "entanglement" throughout *Cloud of the Impossible*.
[33] Schneider, 9; 58; 127. Language of "dream" is used throughout the text to speak of the desire for purity, solidity, unity, and so on.
[34] Karen Barad argues for a quantum ontology, as distinct from classical ontology. Quantum ontology begins with the "existence of phenomena"—of relating and colliding entities—rather than an "independently existing thing" that exists *a priori*. Classic ontology relies on separable and discrete entities that exist prior to the relation. Barad, 45.
[35] I am again referencing David Chidester, who argues in *Savage Systems* that the field of comparative religion grew and expanded by comparing "indigenous" and "savage" religions to the theology and practices of Christianity.
[36] Coleman, 9.
[37] Schneider, 162.

A logic (or dialect or mode) of multiplicity, to which *Beyond Monotheism* aspires, uses our bodies as scripts for comprehending the local porosities that speak more of a continuous (infinite) multiplicity than of a final, closed unity. The body is perhaps the best place for locating the multiplicity of multiple religious belonging as well, or at least helping us to think analogously about the porosity of relations that make up our existence. For what body is ever static, unchanging and eternally the same? Even on an atomic level, we know our bodies are more porous than we think, picking up molecules from objects around us and containing multitudes that intermingle within. As physicist Carlo Rovelli writes, "We are made up of the same atoms and the same light signals as are exchanged between pine trees in the mountains and stars in the galaxies."[38] In our inhalations and exhalations, we never quite maintain the solidity, unity, closure, and finality that we assume exists; the oxygen we breathe into our bodies was recently inside a leaf, a reality that speaks to the incredible interconnection that constitutes life, that produces (bio)diversity.[39]

Taking the body's porosity as a site for multiple religious belonging helps us identify a possible response for one concern levied against the phenomenon, especially as it appears in relation to other traditions. The concern is that multiple religious belonging is not a natural (or good) way of embodying commitment to a tradition; the tradition is seen as a unified whole, as is the desired or required commitment from a practitioner. However, if we take into account that bodies naturally exchange with one another, that our natural porosity precludes any sense of ultimate impermeability in relation with others, then we could flip what is perceived as "natural" in relation to other traditions. Perpetual syncretic relations would be considered natural—as "simply the process of change that occurs when multiple cultures, languages, or religions encounter one another."[40] Multiple religious belonging is interpreted on this point as part of the naturally occurring interactions and change that comprise the body and that speak to our "natural" way of existing in relation.

We would be remiss, though, to only speak of porosity as a good and not acknowledge that the idea of impermeability, while not ultimately possible, can in the meantime create boundaries that are considered—and experienced—as positive. Boundaries prevent complete absorption into the other; they help maintain the "I" in the midst of the "we." In the face of violence, manipulation, or other unequal power dynamics, boundaries—such as a clear "I"—can actually be a matter of life or death. In fact, the ability to say with conviction, "yes, I do belong to multiple traditions" *in a context that might preclude that possibility* is dependent on a healthy boundary between one's experience of self and the framework and normative cues of a space that would seek to deny, discount, or suppress that kind of religious experience.[41]

With both accounts in mind, I am suggesting that the incarnations—the embodiments—of those who belong to more than one tradition can teach us something about the nature of the

[38] Rovelli, 66.
[39] This image is taken from Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).
[40] Coleman, 9.
[41] Schneider uses Jean Baudrillard's concept of "impossible exchange" to speak of the oneness of a person that is unable to be repeated. Schneider, 165–179. I am indebted to Elena Lloyd-Sidle, PhD candidate in theological studies at the University of Chicago, for helping me think through the consequences, especially for those most vulnerable, of identities without (self-asserted) boundaries.

world, our traditions, and perhaps, in some cases, about divinity or divinities. In the most basic sense, my overarching point is that evaluating the *coherence* of multiple religious belonging, at least in interfaith contexts in the United States, seems to be more often about filtering traditions, identities, and practices through the logic of the One than about rejecting multiple belonging altogether. As a response, then perhaps what is needed is a logic of multiplicity—which is a "challenge to think 'after' the dominance of European thought, which is a challenge to think 'after' oneness as a principle norm."[42] I might also add that multiplicity is a challenge to think after the exclusive, religious "total commitment" of which Cornille writes. Revelation of multiplicity here is not final or ultimately unifying or even ontologically secure: it is hearing another parable, writing a piece of a narrative, tracing another tuber, starting in the middle.[43]

(Provisional) Conclusion

Theologies of multiplicity offer important insights for beginning to think of multiple religious belonging as coherent, especially in contexts that are intentionally plural. The implication, or undercurrent, of these theologies from Christian traditions is that if God is multiple, then perhaps human experience and being are characterized by multiplicity as well. Searching for a mode, or logic, of multiplicity helps us uncover the ways in which the logic of the One may be at work in pluralistic settings that emphasize discrete traditions and discrete identities. Multiple religious belonging directly challenges this ethos, however, and underscores the need for postures or logics that do not, in the end, revert to an absolute unity. The theo-ethical implications of these arguments trouble the waters of an inclusivity based on discrete religious identities, the politics of representation and religious performance that rely on oneness, and various privileges that surface in interfaith engagement because of this conception of inclusivity. Perhaps multiple religious belonging reveals something important about the nature of religious traditions and religious identities in general: that there are no final answers, no ultimate stories, but rather the fluid intermingling of provisional unities that have depth of meaning but never the final say.

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[42] Schneider, 148.
[43] Ibid., 151.

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