

One person, two faiths

Double belonging

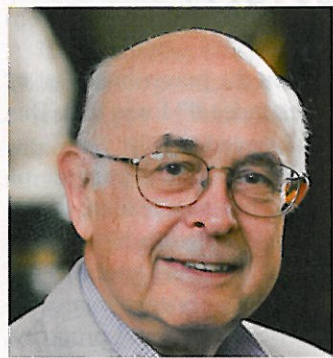
by Amy Frykholm

AMERICANS HAVE BECOME accustomed to picking and choosing among various religious traditions and practices, selecting whatever is most useful, meaningful or intriguing at the moment. While such cafeteria-style religion is frequently criticized as superficial, it is common in a pluralistic culture with a wide-open religious marketplace. A person may occasionally attend a Christian church but also find meaning in yoga and in forms of meditation inspired by Eastern traditions—and enjoy attending a Seder at Passover. None of this seems extraordinary.

But some people have taken religious pluralism in a deeper and more radical direction. They have embraced two distinct religious traditions and have tried to be faithful to both at the same time. This is a demanding and in some ways confounding path—hardly a cafeteria-style spirituality. If, as John Dunne says in *The Way of All the Earth*, religious pluralism is the great spiritual adventure of our time, these

people are the frontline explorers.

One such “double-belonger” is Paul Knitter, whose 2009 book *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* has had a large impact on theology and on interfaith dialogue. Knitter taught for many years at Xavier University in Cincinnati and now teaches at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He was a Catholic priest when, in his thirties, he began to struggle with the Christian



Paul Knitter

faith. Much of what he recited in creeds on Sunday morning gradually stopped making sense to him. He was facing a crisis of faith and vocation. He left the priesthood in 1975, though he remained a devoted Catholic.

In those years, Buddhism became a dialogue partner for Knitter. He studied Buddhism and then began to practice Zen and later a Tibetan Buddhist form of meditation. For many years, he was both a practicing Catholic, active in his parish, and a student of Buddhism, engaged in Buddhist meditation practice. Knitter describes this integration of Buddhism and Christianity as “passing back and forth.” He would “cross over” to Buddhism and then, using what he learned there, pass

back to Christianity, usually, he says, with a richer understanding. Both the study and the practice of Buddhism enriched his Christian faith, and he passionately came to embrace the idea that engagement with other religious traditions is imperative to 21st-century Christianity.

In 2009 he extended his commitment to Buddhism by taking vows at a Buddhist community in New York. As Buddhists would say, he took refuge in the Buddha, in the dharma (the teachings) and in the sangha (the community).

“I realized,” Knitter says, “that I was a Buddhist-Christian. I wanted to acknowledge that. I understood that I was part of two communities.”

Knitter is adamant that this experience has not fundamentally changed his relationship to Christianity: “This felt natural. It didn’t feel like a watering down or diminishment of my commitment to Christianity or my commitment to a Roman Cath-

These believers have taken pluralism to a deeper level.

olic identity. I really do belong to both communities.” For a long time, he says, Buddhist practice made his Christian practice possible, preventing him from becoming a burned-out believer and enabling him to deepen his understanding of the mysteries of Christianity. “Buddhism was a gift,” Knitter says. “It has helped me to maintain my spiritual and intellectual integrity.”

Knitter has frequently employed the metaphor of marriage in talking about his commitment to the two faiths. “I have a primary relationship to Christianity and specifically to Jesus of Nazareth that is central to my life. Christianity is both the vehicle and the sacrament through which I feel and experience and practice the Divine.

“At the end of the day,” he said, laughing at the direction the metaphor was taking him, “I come home to Jesus.”

Knitter said that his students at Union sometimes challenge him by suggesting that his involvement in Buddhism and Christianity is like a “spiritual sleeping around.” Is his crossing over into Buddhism a form of promiscuity? Does it show a lack of faithfulness? Is it a transgression?

Knitter has struggled with such questions. But he stresses

COURTESY OF PAUL KNITTER

that he means it when he says, “Without Buddha, I could not be a Christian.” Otherwise the crisis of faith that he experienced was such that he likely would not have remained a Christian. Buddhism offered a spaciousness and freedom that enabled him to explore Christianity in a different way. He feels that through Buddhism he became a more faithful Christian, not a less faithful one.

Knitter himself is no fan of “spiritual hooking up”—the casual treatment of other religious traditions. Perhaps the difference between Knitter’s experience and that of what he calls the “divine deli” is that he looked to Buddhism not for self-confirmation but for self-transformation.

“I really do belong to both communities,” says Buddhist-Christian Knitter.

Said Knitter: “It is one thing to double-belong if you are studying, making an intense intellectual effort, working with a teacher and making an effort to understand what the Buddha taught. It’s another thing if you are dabbling, and if by dabbling you are using another tradition as confirmation or justification for what you already think. One is assimilation and the other is exploitation.”

Part of engaging another tradition deeply is grappling with aspects of it that you don’t like, Knitter said. An important part of the Christian tradition for him has been the social justice tradition. He values the gospel’s “strong stress on justice and working toward the reign of God.” In engaging Buddhism, he had to confront the idea of nonaction—what Buddhists might call “right action.”

In the 1980s, Knitter was actively engaged in political struggles in El Salvador, and he was disturbed by Buddhism’s proclivity for what seemed to be passivity in the face of injustice. He remembers asking a Buddhist friend, “You mean that you will wait, even with dead bodies piling up in the street? Even when people are being dragged out into the street and shot?”

“Yes,” she answered. “We wait for openings.”

It took a long time before Knitter could see her point. “Now I think of how many times we rushed to ‘action,’ our egos flaring, and ended up nipping at each other and accomplishing little. Being in dialogue with Buddhism has helped me to see the paradox.”

As this example shows, Knitter does not think that Buddhism and Christianity are at root the same. For Knitter, the claim that religions are “all the same” easily becomes a way for people to inject their own “perspectives and beliefs into another religion.” Instead of respecting and pondering the differences, they rush to paper them over.

At the same time, he would say that both Christianity and Buddhism, with their very different logics, traditions and practices, have helped point him toward the “one Holy

Mystery,” even if the two faiths understand that Mystery differently.

Knitter finds the concept of “dual belonging” apt for his experience. He belongs to two communities—one Christian, one Buddhist. While Christianity remains a primary source of identity for him, Buddhism has an important role as well.

For Deborah Risa Mrantz, who embraces both Judaism and Christianity, the phrase “double belonging” is not helpful. “My religious identity is not split or fractured. I inhabit two grounds of belonging concurrently.”

The closest parallel that Mrantz can draw is an anachronistic one: the apostle Paul who “preached Christ crucified” was a Jew and remained a Jew but was converted by revelatory encounter with Christ. Mrantz sees herself as an “intertestamental” figure.

Mrantz is descended from Eastern European Jews. Her father was born in Shanghai, China, after his family fled from Eastern Europe. Amid the communist revolution in

China, the family immigrated to Israel, where her father served in the Israeli air force. Her mother and father met in Hawaii.

In Hawaii, Mrantz attended Punahou School (the boarding school that Barack Obama attended). She describes Punahou’s chaplains as spiritual mentors who helped her form a prayer life from a very young age. The school’s Christian character deeply influenced her. Living in the “prevailing ecumenism” of Hawaiian culture, her parents saw no reason to intervene. Mrantz remembers participating as an eighth grader in a Christmas oratorio and being taken by the theme of Advent and the incarnational theology of the Gospel of John.

Her early formation in both Christianity and Judaism percolated as Mrantz went to college and worked as a designer. For years she attended Christmas Eve mass at the St. Francis Cathedral Basilica in Santa Fe, where she had made her home. At a mass on Christmas Eve 2007, she felt a strong call to change her vocation. She embarked on an artistic and religious endeavor that she calls “LOGOS Divinity: Guildworks and Ministries,” in which she finds expression for her religious syntheses.

“My religious and spiritual life is dimensional,” Mrantz explains, “not linear.” For her, Judaism and Christianity are not two distinct faiths but two ways that the one God comes to be known. Her art works articulate biblical passages from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, interweaving themes through layers and typographic dimensions.

Part of Mrantz’s challenge is to articulate a multi-dimensional religious faith in a linear and dualistic culture. Her art expresses what she calls “the essentially conservative custom and content” of the mystical traditions of both Judaism and Christianity. While she is experimental as a designer and an



Deborah Risa Mrantz

COURTESY OF DEBORAH RISA MRANTZ

personal crisis, along with my mom's death, and I really felt like I was up against a wall. The only solution was to surrender myself to God, to surrender my whole life, all of my dilemmas, to God." At this moment, Redding received what she calls an invitation.

Redding noted that the date was March 25, the feast of the Annunciation and the anniversary of her ordination. The mystery of the invitation deepened. It felt startlingly specific. If she would surrender to God, God would teach her to love without hurting other people. "I realized that surrender had to become my mode of being. That, of course, is what a *muslim* is—one who is surrendered to God. I had become a person who is characterized by surrender. At that point, I said the *Shahada*. I became a muslim—with a small *m*. I was not joining a religion."

All this could have been a private matter, but upon returning to Seattle, Redding concluded that she was also becoming a Muslim.

"I am," she says, "unlike many of my fellow Pacific Northwesters, both spiritual and religious." She sought more knowledge of Islam, began to pray five times a day and follow the faith's five pillars as well as to meet regularly with other Muslims. She also continued, as she always had, to attend church, take communion and study the Bible. As a priest, Redding's lifelong calling has been to be both personally spiritual and publicly religious—to be a visible representation of the work God was doing in her life. "We are all signs to each other," she says. Now her vocation is to hold these two identities together in a public realm in which Christians and Muslims struggle to find what they have in common.

She acknowledges that the relationship between Christianity and Islam is not always a peaceful one, even inside her own head. Few people have been able to understand her attempts to reconcile the two faiths. Her rejection by the Episcopal Church was particularly painful, although not unexpected. One church official said to her, "It is as if you have two bedfellows. This comes down to a question of faithfulness."

Redding finds the marriage metaphor inappropriate. Faithfulness has been a central priority for her. "If you want to use a familial or kinship metaphor," she says, "try that of siblings. I feel like the mother of two children. Christianity is the older child who taught me how to be a mother. Islam will always be my baby. I learn about one child from what the other teaches me."

Sometimes the two siblings don't speak to each other, and sometimes they fight. But Redding works toward reconciliation. Islam, she said, has given her new insights into the Trinity, and she is able to use her theological training to speak to Muslims about the personhood and divinity of Jesus.

She believes that she can stand at the "fault lines" of the two religions and speak about how Christianity and Islam might find common ground. Becoming a Muslim was just the beginning of a very

long journey, and she hopes that she might be of use in a very large, God-inspired work of reconciliation.

Each of these stories is unique—a product of unusual cultural conjunctions and individual perceptions. Each of these individuals is drawn toward a kind of fulfillment that seems yet to be realized. They all feel called to integrate two traditions both of which are crucial to their identity.

Mark Heim, professor of theology at Andover Newton Theological Seminary, notes that compatibility of traditions is a huge issue for "multiple-belongers." Though it is difficult for people to live with the tensions between different faiths, some people turn to another tradition because they find themselves needing something they aren't finding elsewhere.

Said Heim: "If you look at a multiple-religious culture like China, where Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism have lived side by side for thousands of years, people tend to look to a particular tradition for a particular need. You don't look to Buddhism for reflection on political and social structures, and you don't look to Confucianism for an understanding of rebirth. Each tradition offers something different."

Heim contends that the phenomenon of multiple-belonging suggests that religious traditions are not, finally, expressions of the "same" divinity. The uniqueness of each tradition is what makes a person reach out to embrace it.

Can a person be attached to two sets of beliefs at once? Mark Swanson, professor of Christian-Muslim studies at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, notes that people can mean very different things when they claim multiple religious belonging. For some, it means that they claim two different kinds of practices. For others, it refers to an eschatological vision of the time when God brings the various religions together. For others, multiple belonging is a kind of mystical experience that resists cognitive and linguistic characterization.

"The call of God is very strange," Swanson said. Some ways of constituting a religious identity do not make sense to him, but he is careful not to reject them out of hand. "Lots of things are hard to imagine and are also true." CC

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