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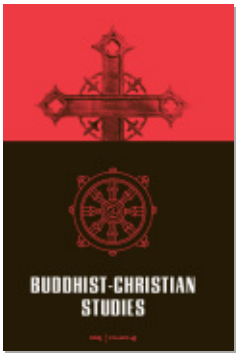

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Multiple Religious Belonging and Community Leadership from a Buddhist-Christian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

How does multiple religious belonging (MRB) affect the leadership of religious communities and the religious communities themselves? Specifically, when the leader is a dual belonging person, what repercussions does it have for the ministry? As a Buddhist-Christian local (Christian) church pastor and an Assistant Teacher at a Zen temple, the questions above form a kind of "koan" at the heart of my calling and my practice, that is, the koan of dual belonging. This paper draws from my own experiences of MRB in my leadership roles, the effects of MRB leadership on the communities I serve, and the broader implications for the practice and theory of multiple religious belonging. The paper engages selected literature to sketch a "practical coherence" among strands of the two traditions to which I belong.

How does multiple religious belonging (MRB) or, in my case, "dual belonging," affect the leadership of religious communities? Answering this question is a real challenge because it would require, at a minimum, a qualitative study of leaders who identify as multiple belongers and their respective faith communities. I hope to have the opportunity to do that work at some point in the future. In the meantime, I will be relying on a couple of related qualitative studies—namely Meredith B. McGuire's *Lived Religion* and Rose Drew's *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging*. I will also turn to the theological analysis of John Thatanamil and Rita Gross. I will bring these theoretical frameworks into conversation with the case study of my own ministry.

To summarize my findings: MRB as a religious leader can be difficult. Even so, I have found that Zen has completely transformed my approach to Christian ministry, and Christianity continues to inform and enrich my Zen practice. The challenges around MRB as a religious leader include doubts and questions, both practical and theological: Is my loyalty divided? Is this compromising my practice of both

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religions? Can Zen and Christian practices be integrated in ways that preserve the distinctiveness of each? What effect is MRB having on my leadership in my respective communities? Among the benefits of MRB as a religious leader are a creative tension that allows me to go deeper into my practice of both traditions, fresh perspectives on familiar situations, and a vital connection to the Source of energy that carries me forward in my ministry. How does MRB affect the religious communities to which I belong? I hope that it brings more benefit than detriment. Further research could involve interviews with members of communities led by MRB leaders. From the anecdotal evidence available to me, I would guess that some would say MRB has little to no effect, and some would say it has a positive effect. I haven't heard any negative comments about my own MRB. Most of the people I encounter haven't met a self-identified dual belonger. I get the sense it's just kind of odd or unusual. Folks don't quite know how to react.

With my own experience as the test case, this paper will address three questions about dual belonging that I frequently encounter: (1) Are Christianity and Zen theologically compatible? (2) How does the MRB person handle the religious demand for exclusive loyalty? And (3) Isn't MRB syncretistic? First, I will offer a brief description of how I came to practice both Christianity and Zen. Why? In my case, biography is inseparable from spirituality. The spiritual trauma I suffered as a young adult raised in a conservative, Christian, evangelical community opened the door to consider alternate spiritual paths and profoundly shaped the contours of my ongoing spiritual journey.

How did I come to practice both Christianity and Zen? My path, like many in the West, begins with Christianity. I was raised in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), a conservative Protestant denomination founded in the nineteenth century by Dutch immigrants in the United States. My family and I were very involved with the church. My connection with the CRC began to loosen when I was in high school. My mom decided to follow her call to ordained ministry. At that time, women weren't allowed to be ordained in the CRC, so mom left the denomination and joined the Reformed Church of America (RCA), which did ordain women. Mom is now retired after serving 20 years as an ordained minister in the RCA. At about the same time, my dad came out as a gay man living with AIDS. Being gay was and still is against CRC teaching, so dad left the CRC as well. Dad eventually joined a Presbyterian church that welcomed gay people. He died of AIDS in 2012. Because for us, faith and family were so closely intertwined, these shocks led me to question myself and the beliefs I was raised with, including Christianity itself. I found my way back to the church and Christianity in graduate school at the University of Chicago. I met another ministry student, Nicole Grant, who introduced me to the United Church of Christ. This denomination both ordains women and affirms LGBTQ people. Nicole and I married after graduate school. We've been together for over 30 years now and have 2 adult daughters. We're both ordained UCC ministers currently serving in Connecticut.

My journey with Zen began in 1999—several years after I began professional ministry. I was serving for the first time in the role of Pastor at a small German Reformed

congregation in the railroad town of West Chicago. Things weren't going well. There was a lot of unhealthy behavior at the church. My anxious, reactive responses to the behavior were escalating the tensions in the pastor-congregation relationship. I was at loose ends, scanning the bookshelf in my church office in search of answers. I came across a book that was actually from my wife's collection. She had been a religion studies major as an undergraduate. It was during those studies that she acquired the book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, by Shunryu Suzuki. I began reading it right then, and after reading it began meditation practice right there in the office. Even though I didn't understand much of what I was reading, on an intuitive level, it made sense to me. From that initial encounter, I continued with individual meditation practice for several months, when I noticed an advertisement for a Zen-Christian meditation retreat at a local retreat center. I signed up and spent the weekend on my very first *sesshin*. From that time on, I've continued my Zen training at Upaya Zen Center (Santa Fe, NM), Indianapolis Zen Center, and Boundless Way Zen Temple (Worcester, MA). I am currently an Assistant Teacher at Boundless Way Zen Temple.

In his book, *The Intimate Way of Zen*, James Ishmael Ford, who describes himself as having a "Buddhist brain, a Christian heart, and a scientific-rationalist gut,"[1] writes that the question driving him forward on the spiritual path was "Is God real?"[2] My driving question has been, "How can I meet God?" Viewed from this lens, Zen practice seems to have emerged quite naturally from the spiritual practices I learned as a child. The Christianity I grew up in emphasized personal piety, and a big part of that personal piety was the regular practice of what my church called "quiet time." In fact, as a child, I clearly remember my grandfather engaged in quiet time. I don't remember how long he spent in quiet time, but I do remember that he took time every day to sit in his recliner, read from a small devotional book, and close his eyes, his hands folded in his lap. Was he sleeping? Was he meditating? Was he praying? I never asked him the details, but I do remember this daily practice and connecting it to the "quiet time" that my church taught. So, as a young child, I too, took up the practice of quiet time. Every day before bed, I would read from the Bible and pray like I had been taught. I was told praying was "talking to God." So I talked. The only problem was that very soon, I ran out of things to say. Prayer felt dull, trite, and repetitive even to a young kid, so with great disappointment and guilt, I gave up on the practice of quiet time. I still longed for a personal and direct way of encountering God, of "spending time" with "him." Looking back, I can see how Zen meditation was the practice I had been seeking. Zen practice has given me the tools to meet the sacred in every moment. It has taught me that silence is the "supreme speech."[3] It has given me the tools—in the words of twentieth-century evangelist Oswald Chambers—to "soak" in God.[4] Speaking of God, are Christianity and Zen theologically compatible?

ARE CHRISTIANITY AND ZEN THEOLOGICALLY COMPATIBLE?

In 1 Corinthians chapter 2, the Apostle Paul writes at length about how the Corinthians came to faith. He writes,

> When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:1–5, NRSV)

These and other passages, for example, verse 9: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"—suggest a transmission of faith that has happened at a level that is somehow beyond language. Indeed, the implication seems to be that God is beyond human language and conception. God is to use Paul's word, "mystery." In Christian theology, this is referred to as the "apophatic tradition." What is really Real and what is truly true cannot be comprehended.

These and other Biblical texts that point to the ineffability of the divine remind me of a koan from the compilation *The Gateless Gate*. Koans are teaching stories of the Zen tradition. Koan number 6 from *The Gateless Gate*—"The World-Honored One Twirls a Flower"—tells the story of the first transmission of the Dharma:

> Once, in ancient times, when the World-Honored One was at Mount Gridhakuta, he twirled a flower before his assembled disciples. All were silent. Only Mahakasyapa broke into a smile. The World-Honored One said, 'I have the eye treasury of right Dharma, the subtle mind of nirvana, the true form of no-form, and the flawless gate of the teaching. It is not established upon words and phrases. It is a special transmission outside tradition. I now entrust it to Mahakasyapa'.[5]

These and other Zen texts point to the ineffability of essential Truth with a capital "T," in other words, what is really "Real." It's at this level of theology, what in the Christian tradition is called "negative theology"—that is, we can only say what God is not—that Zen and Christianity begin to converge in terms of what theologian Paul Tillich called "ultimate concern."[6] So, are Christianity and Zen theologically compatible? The answer to this question depends entirely on which strands of Christian theology we're talking about and which schools of Zen teaching we're talking about. I find overlap in the texts of both traditions. And some strands of the traditions are completely incompatible. This actually isn't a problem in terms of MRB because, as we will see below, the criterion that Drew identifies for pursuing authentic MRB involves the paradoxical work of spiritual integration while preserving the distinctiveness of each tradition.

So, do I believe in God or not? Christianity is theistic. Buddhism tends not to be. Of course, it depends on what one means by "God." I agree with the conclusion that Drew comes to in *Buddhist and Christian?* that certain strands of classical Christian

theology, which emphasize the nature of God as being beyond a human understanding of "person," are compatible with Zen teachings on "Buddha nature" as that all-pervasive dimension of reality.[7] Once again, it's a matter of emphasis, and I find both emphases valuable for my spiritual path. I appreciate the "impersonal" or more-than-personal language of Buddha-nature. Despite all of the harmful and destructive ways it has been used throughout history, I still love the God language of the Bible. I love the way that God is completely entangled in the mess that is human existence. The God of the Hebrew Scriptures is subject to feelings of anger, jealousy, and heartbreak, as well as love and compassion. The God that we meet in the New Testament is fully incarnated in an individual named Jesus. The embodied divine we meet in Scripture seems entirely compatible with the Zen teaching, "without beings there is no Buddha." So, theistic or non-theistic, in both Zen and Christianity, the place where we encounter the sacred is right here, right now.

There's another interesting resonance between Christian theology of the Trinity and the Buddhist teaching of *anatman*, or "no-self." John Thatamanil, in his book *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Study of Religious Diversity*, draws connections between the Trinity as an expression of the composite nature of God—that God is both one and multiple—and the Buddhist teaching that all "selves" are multiple.[8] Thatanamil writes, "God is multiplicity." *Anatman* is commonly misunderstood as the teaching that the self does not exist. This is not the case. Rather, *anatman* claims that there is no *abiding* self. The self, like all of reality, is made up of many parts that come together to form what we might provisionally call an "I." And what is made of parts falls apart. In this reading, the absolute dimension of reality—what Christians provisionally call "God"—is this endless coming together and falling away. Buddhists call this endless arising and falling "emptiness" or *sunyata.* Classical language of the Trinity as "three-in-one"—an eternal flowing of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, or whatever words one might want to use starts to sound very much like the *anatman* as an expression of *sunyata* that Buddhists talk about. So, yes, I do believe in God—in fact, Trinitarian language about God—as this eternal flow that is the same as the eternal arising and passing away of all of life. And, at least in the Zen school where I practice, this understanding of God is not a problem. Nevertheless, both Zen and Christianity are incredibly demanding all-inclusive practices. How does the MRB person handle the religious demand for exclusive loyalty?

HOW DOES THE MRB PERSON HANDLE THE RELIGIOUS DEMAND FOR EXCLUSIVE LOYALTY?

The God of the Bible demands exclusive loyalty. Exodus 20:2–3 says, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (NRSV). While attitudes around exclusivity are different in Zen, there remains skepticism about the ability to practice more than one religion. One famous Zen saying is that the person who pursues two rabbits ends up catching neither. The distinctiveness of both traditions and the

demand for whole-hearted devotion give rise to the critique that dual belongers have a "divided loyalty." I take this critique very seriously. Especially as a religious leader, I place a high value on loyalty to institutions. Indeed, if the goal of religious leadership is to achieve certain professional goals and status within an institution, then dual belonging may indeed be a hindrance. If, however, the goal of religious leadership is to invite individuals and communities into an encounter with sacred mystery, then dual belonging can be a support to that work. Of course, in order for any of this to make sense, we have to adopt a theological understanding that there is just one ultimate reality and that both Buddhism and Christianity point toward it.

This is not the only option. Some argue that there are many ultimate realities and that different religions point toward these different realities. In this way, one can argue both for exclusivity and for pluralism. Both Rose Drew in her 2011 book, *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging* and John Thatanamil in *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* argue that both the exclusivist position and the "many ultimate realities" perspectives are not compatible with dual belonging. Although I cannot find the source, years ago, I remember watching an interview with dual-belonger Prof. Ruben Habito in which he was asked about dual belonging. I remember him defining it as "one path, two traditions." Whether or not he actually said these words, it's my shorthand for what Drew calls the task of dual belongers "to meet both the demand for integration and the demand to preserve the distinctiveness of each tradition."[9]

The "one path" of this phrase is really important. In *Buddhist and Christian?* Drew interviews a number of dual practitioners, each one of whom has a different approach to the situation. The dual belonger who "experienced the greatest degree of tension between Buddhism and Christianity" was Roger Corless.[10] Corless' "polycentric" approach tries to take seriously the claims within each tradition that each gives uniquely superior and exclusive access to the ultimate. This leads Corless to the conclusion that Buddhism and Christianity each point to a singular, unsurpassed ultimate truth. Christians call this truth "God." Buddhists understand "the ultimate" in non-theistic terms. Ironically, Corless' commitment to maintaining exclusive truth claims for each tradition leads him to develop a completely idiosyncratic third religious system that is an amalgamation of Christianity, Buddhism, and other traditions—a kind of all of the above and none of the above. This is clearly out of line with Drew's definition of MRB, which is pursuing integration while preserving distinctiveness. Corless' example seems to point to the conclusion that indeed one person can't walk two spiritual paths to two completely distinct ultimate destinations. The "many ultimates" may work for some academic theologians; however, as a practical matter, it does not seem to be a feasible path for dual belongers. This leads me to the conclusion that for this dual belonger, the exclusive truth claims in each tradition have to be let go.

I am sympathetic to the desire to maintain the distinctiveness of each tradition. When practicing Christianity, I need it—that is, my Christian practice—and my parishioners need it to be authentic. Looking back, I think I concluded long ago—in my middle school catechism, in fact—that belief in exclusive truth claims

was not necessary for living authentic Christianity. Likewise, the Zen school to which I belong does not make exclusive truth claims for its teachings. Instead, I believe there is one ultimate reality that both the teachings of Zen and the teachings of Christianity point to. They are, in the words of comparative theologian and dharma teacher, Rita Gross, "*upaya*." *Upaya* is a Buddhist term that means "skillful means."[11] Buddhist tradition teaches that the Buddha tailored his teachings to each person to facilitate most effectively their awakening. In the Zen that I have learned from my various teachers, teachings are understood as tools. My understanding is that in both cases—Christianity and Zen—doctrines, teachings, and truth claims point us along the one path toward that which is—in the words of the Christian hymn— "beyond all knowledge and all thought." Even so, if one drops the exclusive truth claims of both traditions, are we in danger of what Prof. Habito calls "cafeteria religion?"—in other words, an inauthentic syncretism or worse, callous cultural appropriation?

ISN'T MRB SYNCRETISTIC?

The Bible, particularly the Hebrew Scriptures, is full of cautionary tales about worshipping other gods alongside YHVH. And yet it is clear that throughout Biblical history, other options besides God existed and that the temptation to worship "other gods" was a persistent danger. The quotation above from Exodus is a great example: "You shall have no other gods *before* me." Does that mean that "other gods" were permissible as long as one didn't hold them in as high regard as YHVH? The Biblical record documents many different attitudes about "other gods"; nevertheless, it's clear that monotheism, while a Biblical ideal, was not consistently practiced. When I think about the issue of syncretism from the Zen perspective, I'm reminded of the video of a talk by Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh—known by his students as "Thay"—from many years ago. A member of the audience asked Thay if it was possible to be both Buddhist and Christian. Thay gave an answer rooted in the emptiness teaching. He said something like, "Buddhism is made of many non-Buddhist parts. Christianity is made of many non-Christian parts." The implication being that is when we look very closely at Buddhism, can we point to any one thing and say, "That's it?" What about Christianity? I take Thay's point to be that from the "emptiness" or "absolute" perspective—what Christians might call the "divine" perspective—the boundaries between Buddhism and Christianity get fuzzy. Thay, a teacher of "inter-being," might say that Buddhism and Christianity "inter-are." And yet, from the "relative" or we might say "human" perspective, we have these traditions and definitions and boundaries, and these traditions appear to us as very real, and very solid and so we contend with this issue of "syncretism."

In her book, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, Meredith McGuire documents the "lived religion" of her interview subjects, who represent many different, primarily Christian religious traditions. What she finds is that syncretism—that is, the blending of traditions—both religious and secular—is the norm rather than the exception for religious life in United States.[12] And this is OK! Even the

Evangelical Christian tradition, which I grew up in, continually blends and borrows from other traditions despite the repeated warnings from the pulpit about worshipping "idols" and serving "false gods" that I heard as a child. McGuire critiques the idea of "religion" as a concept developed by Western religious elites as a tool to set boundaries and define areas of power and control. Historical documentation shows that the actual lived religion of individuals never neatly fit into "religious" categories, and so the study of "religion" came to be a study of texts, doctrines, institutions, and politics—an ideal with a tenuous connection to lived religious practice. It's been the role of religious elites—scholars, pastors, and priests—to patrol the borders of religion and to pass on idealized religious forms—in other words, to guard against syncretism. McGuire's argument for the study of religion and, I think, her invitation to religious professionals is to engage more deeply in the lived religion of individuals, which tends to be messy, pragmatic, and, yes, syncretistic. In fact, McGuire argues that the concept of syncretism needs to be interrogated as a tool to empower elites at the cost of the lived religion of countless ordinary practitioners. McGuire's sociological research into lived religion reminds me of the theological insight of John Thatamanil that all of us live hybrid identities with multiple commitments to various "ultimate concerns." For example, one "ultimate concern" that almost none of us escape from is global capitalism. Thatanamil asks, "Is a Buddhist-Christian identity so different from, say, a Capitalist-Christian identity?"[13] So syncretism remains a live and lively conversation. What is a pragmatic blending of traditions that is culturally appropriate and an effective means of generating purpose and meaning? What is inauthentic cultural appropriation? These are ongoing questions for MRB leaders and their communities.

For me, the guard against inauthentic appropriation is practicing and receiving authorization in authentic communities. I have no doubt that the church that ordained me and in which I continue in good standing is an authentic expression of Christianity (once again, recognizing that other institutional expressions of Christianity might disagree!) I also have no doubt that the Zen of the temple that has authorized me as an assistant teacher is an authentic expression of Buddhism (though, again, others might disagree). Both of these authorizations are incredibly demanding of time, energy, and devotion. Deep and authentic practice requires it. These are my guards against inauthentic appropriation and cafeteria religion: community, commitment, and devotion.

THE PRACTICE OF MRB AND RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

Now, let's turn to a description of how MRB and religious leadership express themselves in my practice context. I guess that, on the surface, my leadership in my current context looks pretty conventional. As a Christian leader, I am a solo pastor of a 200-member congregation located in Old Saybrook, CT. I do preaching, pastoral care, administration, and all of the other things a typical pastor does. In addition to my work as a local church pastor, I serve as the UCC representative to the National Council of Churches Buddhist-Christian and Hindu-Christian dialogue, and I am a

Professional Certified Coach with the International Coach Federation. As a coach, I work with individual ministers and congregations in supporting them through times of transition. I consider all of these as aspects of my ministry. When I show up in a Christian context, I show up wholeheartedly as a Christian committed to following in the way of Jesus, which, at its deepest levels, is not different from the way of Zen. When I'm in a coaching relationship, I show up wholeheartedly as a coach. The interfaith dialogue space is a little more complicated. As a dual-belonger, I'm aware that the structure of dialogue assumes that the dialogue partners are speaking out of one tradition with belongers of a different tradition. I've gotten the sense in Buddhist-Christian dialogue contexts that the folks in the room, at times the dialogue partners, are wondering whose "team" I'm on. That's not a criticism of anyone involved in the dialogue. Everyone I've met has been very warm and welcoming, and I've made wonderful friends. It's just another context in which the underlying assumption of exclusive religious belonging has become apparent to me.

At Boundless Way Zen Temple, I am an Assistant Teacher. This means, on a practical level, that I lead liturgy once a week for Zoom meditation. I offer talks on the Temple Zoom and at affiliate meditation groups. I meditate with the Temple and affiliate groups 6 days a week for anywhere from 30 minutes to 2 hours a day. In my home, I maintain two altars, each with a seated Buddha and a standing St. Francis, where I light candles and incense before each meditation session. And I generally attend at least two meditation retreats a year. I am currently working through the Temple's koan curriculum. I meet regularly with the guiding teachers and dharma holders who provide support and guidance for my practice. I also support the Temple through charitable donations and serving on various committees. At the temple, there are a number of us who identify with more than one religious tradition—most often, the other tradition is Christianity, but not always. There are also Unitarian-Buddhists, Jewish-Buddhists, and Hindu-Buddhists. As a part of my leadership at the Temple, I lead an MRB discussion group. Folks in the group have a range of experiences as dual-belongers. Some see no tension whatsoever between their commitments. Others seem to struggle with how to integrate the traditions. All appreciate the chance for conversation and mutual support on their spiritual journeys. I appreciate the fact that at Boundless Way Zen Temple, there is space to bring forward our multiple and hybrid identities.

How do my Zen commitments show up in my work as a Christian pastor? On a deep level, Zen practice has shifted my entire approach to Christian ministry. I approach ministry as a spiritual practice. In other words, each activity I engage in has spiritual significance and is, in itself, an opportunity to meet God. Whether it's administration, pastoral care, preaching, organizing community events, or providing some other kind of social service—these are not simply means to an end but ends in themselves. The goal isn't simply to get to heaven someday. The invitation is to encounter the sacred now. This means that I can be more gracious with whatever is happening in my ministry. If something didn't turn out as planned, which is more often the case than not, all is not lost. As we say in Zen, "This, too, is *it*"—"*it*" is the great mystery revealing itself as this particular and passing form. Much of my

ministry has been with congregations in decline and distress. Declining congregations tend to look outside of themselves for someone or some new program or some new approach to worship to "save" them. They jump from this thing to that thing. They look here and there and miss the God who wants to meet them right here and now. Zen practice has helped me bring fresh energy to declining congregations by inviting them to consider the possibility that they have everything they need to practice a vibrant and vital faith right here and right now because this circumstance—whatever it might be—is exactly the circumstance in which God is meeting them. So stop looking around at the other congregations with their large choirs and full coffers and their armies of volunteers. What's right here? How can we be faithful in this time and place? This is what Zen has taught me about my work as a Christian minister.

Looking back, this brief history points to the first effect of MRB on my leadership: it helps me make space for ministry-related reactivity without allowing that reactivity to drive my decisions—or at least it gives me the chance to make a less reactive decision. To borrow the words of Rabbi Edwin Friedman, family systems theorist, MRB helps me maintain a "non-anxious" or, more realistically, a "less anxious" presence as a leader. In fact, it's my belief that without Zen practice, I would not still be in professional Christian ministry. The pressures of professional ministry are great. The practice of zazen helps me stay grounded in the present moment. It gives me a fresh perspective on whatever situation I'm facing. And the sangha is a vital support to my work. I rely on the guidance of the teachers at Boundless Way Zen Temple not only for my Zen practice but also for my ministry in general. In this aspect, MRB has not only been a benefit to my ministry, but it has also been key to "keeping me in the game"—so to speak. Without it, I could not do what I do.

Bringing formal Zen practice into a Christian space has been a bit trickier. A number of years ago, I invited my Zen teacher to lead a day-long meditation retreat at my church. There were a number of church members who participated in the retreat; however, most of the folks were local Zen students who were not members of the church. Church members were, for the most part, appreciative, although one did express some discomfort with the parts of the liturgy that included bowing. We had set up an altar in the space with an image of the Buddha, and even though we had explained that in Zen, bowing isn't an expression of worship, it was nevertheless a little much for her. Some years later, at my wife's invitation, I led a Zen meditation class at her church. A small group of church members attended. I led a modified version of the daily meditation practice and liturgy that we use at Boundless Way Temple. I included detailed explanations of the forms and invited conversation afterward to help participants process their experience. I could sense that folks were experiencing some discomfort with the forms. At one point during the walking meditation, one of the participants actually burst out laughing. All of this serves as a reminder that while Zen mindfulness, and Buddhist iconography have made their way into popular culture when people actually encounter Zen practice, it can feel very strange. Even though the number of people who identify as Christian in the United States is declining, Christianity has so thoroughly shaped the American context that Zen just feels very different. For the most part, on a formal

level, the gap between my Christian practice and my Zen practice remains. My next attempt at bringing formal Zen and Christian practice together will be an interfaith meditation group, which I hope to start in the coming months. I hope that this experiment will not only deepen the integration of my MRB practice and leadership on a personal level but also generate more data for this study!

How does Christianity show up in my Zen life? On occasion, some of the skills and knowledge I've gained through serving Christian congregations are useful for the Temple. For example, I've served on the leadership board and the fundraising committee. Although each organization—the temple and the church—has its own distinct culture and way of doing things, there is overlap in some of the basics of being a religious institution in United States. For example, whether it's a Christian congregation or a Zen sangha, both depend on donations and volunteers. Raising money and organizing volunteers are skills that cross faith lines. Sometimes, references to the Bible or my Christian ministry show up in my dharma talks. On a deeper level, practicing Zen has raised my awareness of how thoroughly Christianity has shaped me. I think it comes down to this: I know in every cell of my being that—in the words of Zen master Hakuin—"This very place is the Lotus Land. This very body, the Buddha." And yet something deep within me says, "No! There must be something more. This can't be all there is." And so my mind yearns and searches and casts about for where this joy, where this salvation, where this heaven or nirvana or pure land might be. And I drive myself. If I just did a little better, if I just tried a little harder, if I just sat a little more . . . Maybe if I quit Christianity and devoted myself entirely to Zen . . . Or the other way around . . . maybe if I quit Zen and resumed the neurotic path I developed in childhood of incessantly striving: Am I being a good Christian now? Am I being a good Christian now? I don't know if this is Christianity showing up in my Zen or simply a baseline human neuroticism that's twisted up with the faith of my childhood. And yet I pray with the father of the epileptic son who approached Jesus and said, "I believe, Lord, help my unbelief." So, this is the embodied tension I sometimes experience—even more so than in theology—of authentically practicing two traditions while walking one spiritual path. Valuing distinctiveness while pursuing wholeness: this is the dance of my dual belonging path.

So, where does this leave us? Dharma talks are followed by "dharma dialogue" at Boundless Way Zen Temple, during which sangha members can respond to the talk. During the dharma dialogue following a talk I gave on my experience of being both Buddhist and Christian, one of the guiding teachers said the goal was "integration." And I agree that, for me, the energy that propels religious practice regardless of tradition is wholeness. As the second-century church father, St. Irenaeus, wrote, "The glory of God is the human being fully alive." In my practice, integration is an ongoing process. Mostly, it means oscillating between the Christian and Buddhist communities to which I belong. It means wholeheartedly showing up in whatever circumstance I find myself. It means that Zen shapes my approach to leading my Christian congregation, and that Christianity shapes how I show up as a Zen teacher at the Temple. More broadly, I hope that this path, supported by two traditions, allows me to serve the world with kindness, humility, and respect.

If I'm honest, however, the tension between the traditions remains. This, following Drew's insight that dual belongers maintain both distinctiveness and integration, will likely remain as I walk this path.

I guess that I might feel this tension more acutely than some due to my leadership role in both traditions. After all, as McGuire points out, it has been the religious leader's role to define and defend the borders of the tradition they represent. Am I failing in a key duty of the religious leader? On the other hand, my dual belonging has created a space where both parishioners and fellow sangha members feel safe sharing with me about their own blended lived religion. I feel that this space for open and honest conversation about what is "working" and what is "not working" in their practice creates an opportunity for an authentic connection that I wouldn't otherwise have. John Dunne, a peace activist at home in both Christian and Buddhist traditions, calls the oscillating "passing over and coming back" movement of dual belonging the "spiritual adventure of our time."[14] Likewise, it is my experience that religious leadership as a dual belonger is an ongoing adventure into the unknown.

NOTES

1. James Ishmael Ford, *The Intimate Way of Zen: Effort, Surrender, and Awakening on the Spiritual Journey* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2024), 6.
2. Ford, 7.
3. Hongzhi Zhengjue, "Guidepost for Silent Illumination," from *Cultivating the Empty Field*; tr. Taigen Leighton, used with permission in Boundless Way Zen Temple Liturgy Book, 2018, 39.
4. Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1935), 835.
5. Wumen Huikai, *The Gateless Gate*, John Tarrant and Joan Sutherland, trans., unpublished translation for use at Boundless Way Zen Temple, 4.
6. See Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2011), 50ff. for further exploration of the question of God and Zen as it relates to the tradition of negative theology.
7. Drew, 72.
8. John Thatanamil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 214.
9. Drew, 13.
10. Ibid., 45.
11. Rita M. Gross, *Religious Diversity, What's the Problem? Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 14.
12. Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 190.
13. John Thatanamil, "Search for Home in the World's Religions," *The Christian Century*, December 2023.
14. Drew, 4.