

Beyond Contextualisation Dual Religious Belonging as a Contextualised Faith?

by Kang-San Tan

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Various Christian bodies are beginning to address the issue of belonging to more than one religious tradition. The World Christian Council, in their recent publication, "Religious Plurality and Christian Self Understanding," reflected on the phenomenon of "double belonging" as a pastoral issue:

Many Christians seek ways to be committed to their own faith and yet to be open to the others. Some use spiritual disciplines from other religious traditions to deepen their Christian faith and prayer life. Still others find in other religious traditions an additional spiritual home and speak of the possibility of "double belonging."¹ (Italics mine)

I am writing as a Christian theologian who subscribes to the confessions stated in the Lausanne Covenant 1974 and who has been an active member of the Lausanne Theology Group as well as the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission. The Lausanne Movement's mandate is, "The Whole Church bringing the Whole Gospel to the Whole World," meaning it is the task of the whole church (clergy and laity) to witness to the whole gospel (word and deed) to the whole world (to all nations). They convened the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Cape Town (October 16–25, 2010) which brought together 4,200 evangelical leaders from 189 countries, and thousands more participated through online meetings around the world.

In preparation for the Lausanne Congress Cape Town of 2010, the Lausanne Theology Working Group hosted a consultation in Beirut, Lebanon, 14–19 February, 2010. Together with twenty-three key theologians from fourteen countries, they worked together on four plenary papers and sixteen case studies. I had the privilege of presenting one of the plenary papers which contributed toward a new recognition among Evangelical theologians on this phenomenon of dual religious belonging. The findings of the Beirut Theological Statement

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on “The World of Cultures and Religions” were published in part, and in paragraph four it presented a new focus on dual religious belonging:

1. We are committed to bearing witness to Christ in the whole world, which means among all people on the planet. The world of humanity exists, by God’s clear intention, in nations, tribes, and languages—in other words, in cultures. Human cultures are religious in varying forms and degrees. The distinction between religion and culture is far less clear than often portrayed. For all religions exist within cultures, permeating and shaping them. For that reason, religions also share in the radical ambiguity of all human cultures.
2. We recognise that cultures and religions are neither monolithic nor static. Both change and vary throughout history and therefore should not be counted as “given” or absolute. The church also changes, is influenced by, and influences the cultures within which it is birthed and grown. The process of discernment within the local church is fundamental if Christians are to understand the ways (positive and negative) in which the cultures around them shape their witness and their calling.
3. If religions are fundamentally human cultural constructions and if cultures are also part of the created order, then we can be sure that at least three elements are intertwined within religions as cultural phenomena. First, because all human beings are made in God’s image and receive God’s general revelation, there will be some evidence of God’s revelatory work within the religious elements of any culture. But second, because all human beings are sinners, such revelation will also be distorted and darkened by our wilful disobedience, and that too will take religious forms. And third, because Satan is also at work in the world, there will be elements of satanic deception and evil in all culturally embedded religions. In short, religions can include elements of God’s truth, can be massively sin-laden, and can be systems of satanic bondage and idolatry.
4. We recognize that all followers of Christ experience the challenge of dual belonging: we are Christians who belong to Jesus, *and* we find ourselves within a culture to which we belong by birth or circumstance (and such cultural belonging may be static or it can be fluid and changing through life). The challenge is that while we cannot escape the fact of such dual belonging, we are called to single covenantal loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ. Western Christians face the dual belonging challenge of being disciples of Jesus while living within cultures of consumerism and militarism. They need to be aware of the idolatrous and quasi-religious power of those dominant forces in their culture and the extent

to which believers can be subverted by unconscious syncretism and cultural idolatry. There are some groups of people in other cultures, previously unconnected with established Christianity, who are now following Jesus Christ while living within their original religio-cultural traditions. As they seek faithfully to follow Jesus, they meet together with other followers of Jesus in small groups for fellowship, teaching, worship and prayer centred around Jesus and the Bible. At the same time, they live their lives socially and culturally within their birth communities. This phenomenon of following Jesus within diverse religio-cultural traditions needs careful biblical, theological and missiological evaluation. We are well aware that it is a complex phenomenon drawing conflicting evaluative responses, and we do not seek to take a position on it here. Our point merely is that it is a challenge that affects not only those who become followers of Jesus in the context of what are commonly called “other faiths.” The dangers of syncretism are worldwide, and so are the complexities of careful, biblically faithful contextualisation. We commend the work of other groups who are studying the latter in depth, but we would urge Lausanne to sponsor a more thorough biblical theology of religions within cultures and what following Jesus means in such contexts.²

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An important assumption of this paper is that the goal of Christian mission is to participate in the ushering in of God’s kingdom on earth by inviting people of other faiths to share in God’s love for the whole of creation. The presence of God’s kingdom is to be understood in terms of bringing all things under the kingship of God. With regard to the function of religions, it would involve the transformation of non-Christian religious systems with gospel values whenever Jesus is encountered as Lord. Therefore, instead of compromising discipleship, I am arguing for a radical following of Jesus’ model of ushering in the Kingdom of God, which includes “inreligionisation.” The goal of mission is not just evangelism and church

planting, but a worldview transformation of whole cultures and religious life in such a radical way that Jesus is confessed as Lord over every aspect of life, including past religious cultures.

Can someone be both Christian *and* Buddhist? In the recent best seller, *Life of Pi*, when it is discovered that the main teenage character, Piscine Molitor Patel, is a practising Hindu, Christian, and Muslim, the religious leaders all agree that “in these troubled times, it [is] good to see a boy so keen on God. . . . But he can’t be a Hindu, a Christian *and* a Muslim. It’s impossible. *He must choose.*”³ (italics mine)

Can Christians belong to more than one religious tradition? What are the arguments put forward for dual religious belonging and how do Christians develop a theological assessment of such a dual phenomenon, particularly when it exists among Christians who hold on to the finality of Jesus Christ as their unique saviour for salvation?

What kind of theology of dual belonging can best sustain the phenomenon of dual religious belonging? What are some contributions of dual religious belonging theology toward Evangelical contextual missiology? In addressing these vital questions I want us to rethink the Christian theological debates surrounding “religions” and “insider movements,” specifically for those coming to Christ from other faith traditions.

Christian identity

Before discussing any Christian theology of dual religious belonging, it will be helpful to deal briefly with the complex idea of identity. *Webster’s New World Dictionary* defines identity, among other things, as “the condition or fact of being a specific person or thing; individuality.” Identity can be personal, group, cultural, national, and also religious. Identity will be determined not only by an individual perception but also in relation to and by the perceptions of other groups.

We are now witnessing an emerging social condition of “hybridity,” whereby one’s identity is now shaped and facilitated by the mixing and interactions of diverse cultures.⁴ Traditional and strict boundaries between cultures are increasingly becoming more difficult to maintain in global cities. Christian understanding will need fresh theological categories in order to take into account or reflect the reality of active diffusions of beliefs, practices and influences between religions.⁵

Writers such as Stuart Hall challenge a traditional concept of identity as a self-contained and fixed concept.⁶ Hall distinguishes between three different conceptions of human identity: the first being the “Enlightenment subject” which

conceived of the human person as “a fully centred, unified individual . . . whose ‘centre’ consisted of an inner core . . . remaining essentially the same . . . throughout the person’s existence.”⁷ This view saw identity as individualistic, autonomous and fixed. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, with the complexity of the modern world, there was a

growing awareness that the idea of a self-contained,

fixed identity was not adequate. Instead, identity was formed “in relation to ‘significant others,’ who mediated to the subject, the values, meanings and symbols—the culture—of the world he/she inhabited.”⁸

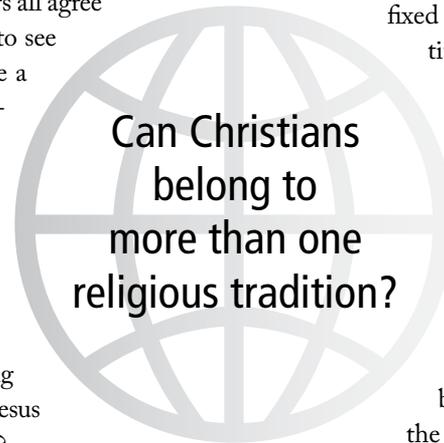
This second concept of identity is called the “sociological subject” whereby an individual’s inner core was continually being formed and modified in dialectical interaction with his or her society and culture. Identity in this conception bridges the gap between the individual and the society, between the private and the public selves. Such a dynamic view of identity demands a rethinking of theological categories when Christian theologians analyse complex phenomenon such as dual belonging.

By the late twentieth century, a third, postmodern conception of identity emerged, the “postmodern self.” The fragmentation of the self-identity occurs when the self is “composed not of a single, but of several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved identities.”⁹ Therefore, identities are contested and negotiated between competing loyalties and circumstances. Likewise, the modern social landscape is also breaking down, resulting in “the very process of identification, through which we project ourselves into our cultural identities, has become more open ended, variable and problematic.”¹⁰ It is possible that people will assume different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent self:

The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the system of meanings and cultural representations multiplied, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, anyone of which we could identify with at least temporarily.¹¹

It is part of an assumption of cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall that the modern, pluralist societies allow (indeed require) their members to adopt multiple social identities concurrently. This is seen in the different *roles* one person may play as she or he interacts with different groups (in the family, workplace, leisure group etc.).

Manuel Castells writes primarily on *collective* rather than *individual* identity and observes three kinds of meaning-making by collective groups in modern societies. Firstly, *legitimising identity* is “introduced by the dominant institutions



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of society to extend and rationalize their domination.” A second type is where countercultural groups build “trenches of resistance and survival” as a form of *resistance identity*. A third kind of meaning-making is *project identity*, formed when groups come together to “seek the transformation of overall social structure” (with feminism as a case in point).¹²

Therefore, identity should always be thought of in the plural and as fluid, especially in the global exchanges of cultures and religions in both Asia and megacities today. Discussion of religious identities cannot be separated from power relationships in one’s sociopolitical, regional and global context, because religion is always being used as a political or economic tool. It is beyond the scope of this research to engage with further sociological study of identity, but focuses instead on the theological nature of religious belonging, as constructed and debated within the field of theology of religions.

Christian identity refers to how Christians have understood themselves as a group, both historically and within any contemporary society. Christian identity is rooted in the person of Jesus Christ, whom Christians believe is the Son of God. From that basic orientation or identification with Jesus, there are at least four factors which are crucial to the construction of a Christian identity:¹³

1. Christian “memory” (interpreted in the Scripture)
2. Traditions, theology and liturgy as mediated through historical constructions (e.g., an Orthodox faith, or Anglican denominational identity)
3. Local Christian communities (especially when they function as hermeneutical communities)
4. Social, political and religious contexts of the Christian.

The first two categories played a greater influence in identity formation, especially during the first two centuries or so. This is because Christian identity had to survive the initial onslaught of competing ideologies and emerge as a distinct Christian community. However, indigenous Christian and contextual identities (numbers three and four) only emerge and mature as local Christian communities grow in theological self-understandings and communal discernment. These two factors—local identity formation and an engagement with other socio-historical realities—will shape a given Christian identity.

Evangelicals and Dual Religious Belonging

Dual religious belonging is a phenomenon of individuals who identify themselves as followers of more than one religious tradition. People of faith may find themselves in various dual or multi-religious conditions due to growing up in pluralistic societies, to the inter-religious marriages of their parents, to an exposure to multi-religious traditions through

social networks, or to their conversion to another faith. In the West, the phenomenon of dual religious belonging occurs because a growing number of Christians are attracted to Asian religions. While some become Buddhists or Hindus, others decide to retain their Christian belonging, while at the same time seeking to incorporate elements of Asian religions into their life and practices. At some point in their journey of faith, these individuals may decide to retain both faith traditions, more or less equally, as part of their religious identity or religious belonging.

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Multi-religious identity is defined as having *one unique identity* (instead of two religions), but “one that is formed and developed under the influence of several religious traditions.”¹⁴ Identities cannot be compartmentalised but are developed based on historical, social and cultural conditions, including drawing on sources of traditions from various religions. In contrast to the radical pluralist model, this multi-religious identity of a double believer group may not belong to two or more religious communities simultaneously. However, these double believers exhibit openness to the grace of God in different religions, and are interested in incorporating the teachings of these religions as their own. They have no problem maintaining identification with different faith communities and worshipping in different temples and churches at the same time. However, we do acknowledge the trend is towards a decline of religious identification among people from younger generations in urban cities. While different world religions might still exert a profound influence on global societies, individuals have freedom to choose not only which religion but also no religion.

For Christians in Asia, *belonging* to two or more religious communities externally as a conscious choice can be problematic both theologically and socially. In terms of Corning’s second criteria of acceptance by a religious community, double religious belonging (external identification) is generally not acceptable to Christians, Muslims and Hindus in Asia.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it does not mean that it is impossible for a certain form of multi-religious *identity* to be nurtured among Christians. For *dual religious belonging*, (in contrast to

double belonging) the emphasis tends to be on dual religious belonging *within* oneself. It is neither a conscious maintenance of two or more religious systems or an external social identification with two or more religious communities at the same time. If the first category of double religious belonging finds its source (although not exclusively) in a pluralist theology of religion, one suspects that this second type of internal multi-religious identity draws its theological inspiration from within an inclusivist framework. While holding on to the centrality of Jesus, an openness to the revelation and efficacy of other religious truths allows practitioners of Christianity to develop a new identity that is not exclusively from the Christian tradition. Normally, such an inclusivist double believer

has one dominant religious affiliation and a second one which is secondary to the first but one in which the person draws in a continuous manner. The second religion may provide teachings, beliefs, and/or religious practices/customs. The degree to which the relationship between the dominant and the secondary is asymmetrical can vary.¹⁶

Can Exclusivist Christians Sustain Dual Religious Belonging as a Contextualised Faith?

Missiologists, such as Ralph Winter, compare insider movements with the transitions in early Gentile mission:

It is just as unreasonable for a Hindu to be dragged completely out of his culture in the process of becoming a follower of Christ as it would have been if Paul the Apostle had insisted that a Greek become a Jew in the process of following Christ. . . . In the New Testament there was no law against a Greek becoming a Jew. However, Paul was very insistent that that kind of a cultural conversion was not necessary in becoming a follower of Christ.¹⁷

It may be helpful to delineate key differences between the radical model of Multiple Religious Belonging from our current contextualisation model of exclusivist Dual Belonging. First, rather than a pluralist appreciation of other religions as salvific structures of salvation, dual belonging stems from a growing recognition that Muslims and Hindus need not leave behind their past identities and cultures. Whenever new converts of Jesus Christ become Christians, they are encouraged to remain within their cultural identifications. Due to the intimate link between culture and religious identities and a new understanding of postmodern identities as not fixed and complete, followers of Jesus from different religious traditions may take on a dual belonging identity. Second, promoters of insider movements seek to avoid negative connotations of “Western Christianity” (i.e., labels such as imperialism, anti-nationalism and other foreign influences). For Asian converts to Christianity, Jesus could be the centre of their faith but they may not want to be identified with Western forms of Christianity. Third, unlike the first radical proposal of combining two

or more religious systems, many of the proponents of insider movements include conservative Christian mission groups who are firmly in the exclusivist camp, with regards to their theology of religions. Fourth, while the first two models tend to consist of *individuals* without a single identifiable community, insider movements tend to consist of *mass movements* of Hindus or Muslims toward Christianity.

One fine example of such an interdisciplinary approach to this phenomenon is found in, “Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas. A Qualitative and Theological Study of Syncretism and Identity in Global Christianity,” a doctoral study presented at the University of Copenhagen by Jonas Petter Adelin Jørgensen. Jørgensen studied two groups of insider movements: Muslim background believers *Īsā imandars*, meaning “those faithful to Jesus,” and Hindu background believers *Christ bhaktas*, meaning “devotees of Christ.” Both groups are self-consciously not Christian, although their religious faith shares a deep family resemblance to the larger Christian community. The religious life of the imandars and bhaktas are found to be a mixture between Christian theological ideas and forms from other religious traditions (Islam and Hinduism respectively). Instead of branding these groups as syncretistic, Jørgensen argues that the practice of the imandars and bhaktas could be viewed as new and creative manifestations of Christianity in a global age. The study concluded that theologically, the imandars and bhaktas identified Jesus Christ as central and essential although their dual identification with Islam and Hinduism respectively is based on a rather free interpretation of culture and symbols revolving around this fundamental relation.¹⁸

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Syncretism and Hybridity

Syncretism is a contested term and could be based on the assumptions that religions are bounded entities— that every religious tradition has clearly defined doctrines and practices. Scholars may often specialize on one religious group, on textual traditions and maybe elite members who are not seeing syncretistic elements in their own traditions. Christians may approach these religious others with a view to determine what is syncretistic rather than with a readiness to embrace ambivalence and dynamic interchanges between faith practices.

There are those who view the mixing and borrowing between religions as having both negative as well as positive effects on Christianity—negatively, when Christianity is subsumed under the rubric of another religion, for example in the syncretistic practices of witchcraft or pagan worship; positively, when the mixing of the two faiths resulted in the transformation of Christian faith. For example, Christians can learn from meditation practices arising from the value of silence in Buddhist meditation. If we redefine our concept of syncretism not based on the mixing of religions but rather on evaluating its intended meaning using appropriate biblical criteria, we will have a different perspective on syncretism. In this biblical view, the syncretistic mixing of two religions is judged negatively only when the mixing of Christianity with incompatible elements of other religious beliefs or practices resulted in the gospel of Jesus Christ losing its integrity, such as pagan worship or the denial of the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Robert Schreiter suggests we view syncretism as the necessary synthesis of identity formation.¹⁹ Syncretism is inevitable as we live in a global flow of constant interactions with different cultures and religions. When dual religious belonging is viewed as a process of identity formation, then we understand both synthesis and syncretism happening together, as two sides of the same coin. Syncretism then is not viewed as something negative but as an inherent process of identity formation in a dual religious context.

In real life, the process of synthesis and syncretism will take place as Christians read non-Christian scriptures such as the Qur'an or Tao Te Ching as part of their intertextual readings of religious scriptures. Increasingly, new and imaginative Christian identities could be nurtured as Muslim background believers read the Bible alongside the Qur'an, and as Chinese Christians reinterpret Confucian texts through Christian theological lenses. K. K. Yeo, Professor of New Testament at Garreth-Evangelical Seminary, in *Musing with Confucius and Paul*,²⁰ demonstrated how an Evangelical Chinese Christian identity can be constructed without capitulating to dominant Western Christian values. For example, the Confucian ideal of filial piety and honouring ancestors are important aspects

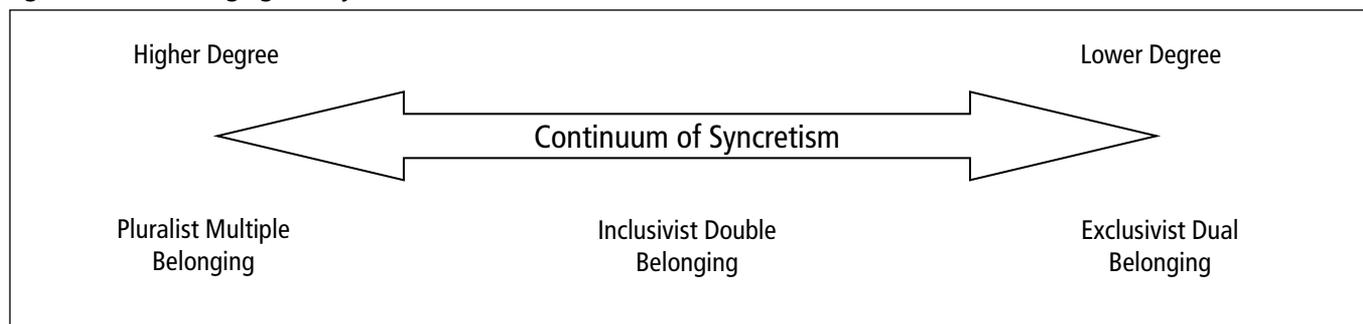
that Chinese Christians may have to rediscover as part of the construction of Chinese identity. On the other hand, the high value attached to individual rights and freedom (which is foreign to both the Christian gospel and the Chinese culture) extolled in the West becomes problematic for constructing a harmonious Chinese self. Yeo's intertextual Pauline-Confucian studies, while demonstrating a hybrid identity, become a quest for an authentic Chinese Christian ideal.

In the final analysis, in contrast to a comparative study, Christian theology will then need to engage more seriously with the total revelation of God, as revealed in the Bible as well as theological perspectives within the Christian community. It also needs to engage with insights and values from the different religious traditions. For example, what kind of new Christology and new ecclesiology are developed out of these three models of multi-religious belonging? Until we have more developed theologies coming out from these contexts, ongoing dialogue and continued creative thinking build a missiological appreciation for these new movements.

Though tentative, a missiological framework could be suggested. While I recognize the ambiguities alongside the continuum from Multiple Religious Belonging (external combination of two religious systems), Double Religious Belonging (within oneself) to Dual Religious Belonging with one's past religious heritage, the diagram below tries to illustrate both the dangers of syncretism as well as possibilities for enrichment when dual religious belonging is anticipated. (See Figure 1.)

So, to the question whether it is theologically possible for a Christian to follow Christ while retaining some form of identification with one's previous religion such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Chinese religions, one must say a tentative but qualified "yes." The answer seems to depend on what kind of multi-religious belonging is being considered. Certainly, a positive yes for dual religious belonging, but a tentative yes if we are referring to an external identification of faith and loyalty to two religious systems of thought. Evangelicals will need to reject multiple religious belonging as a liberal modernist

Figure 1. Dual Belonging and Syncretism



approach that is untenable with biblical faith. However, Asian Christians need not reject everything of past religious beliefs, as long as they are compatible with Christian Scripture. Alan Race pointed to the teaching of the early Church Father, Justin Martyr, who clearly taught on the operation of God's grace outside Christianity:

It is our belief that those men (sic) who strive to do the good which is enjoined on us have a share in God; according to our traditional belief they will by God's grace share his dwelling. And it is our conviction that this holds good in principle for all men (sic).²¹

Just as Augustine learned from Neoplatonism, Thomas Aquinas learned from Aristotle, and John Calvin learned from Renaissance humanism, then it can be argued that Asian Evangelicals may be able to learn from the Buddha—and other great religious thinkers and traditions—perspectives that can help them more clearly understand God's revelation in Christ.²² These early Church Fathers learned from the knowledge of the world's philosophies of their time, and they were transformed by their learning, but they also challenged those aspects which were not true or compatible with Christian doctrines and beliefs. If the key lesson is about mutual learning between religious traditions, then we must also raise the question as to why Western Christians may not also learn from the great non-Christian teachers of the non-Western world.

Asian Christian spirituality can recognize and affirm those elements that are “good, true, and holy” within one's past religious faith, whether it be Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam. Regardless of one's answer or inclination, dual belongers will need to continually reflect and exercise discernment, through the help of Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and the local community of dual belongers. In the process of critical reflection, there will be elements within one's previous religious beliefs and practices that can be retained and there will be other elements within one's past religious beliefs and practices which need to be rejected. Identification with one's past religion requires the convert to hold in tension those elements of continuity and discontinuity. Over time, an intra-religious dialogue between

insider movements and the established church traditions (past and present) as *equal partners* will further shape the development of insider movements' theologies. Meanwhile, we approach the new phenomenon of dual religious belonging not as a final product or outcome but a dynamic process of negotiating identities between Christianity and past religious belongings and a dynamic negotiating between an emerging indigenous form of Christianity and an apostolic faith whereby, as highlighted by Kathryn Tanner, the “. . . distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed *by* the boundary as *at* it.”²³

Dual religious belonging allows different perspectives to flourish within one and the same person by encouraging inculturation and promoting understanding between two religions. In interreligious dialogue, a dual believer is able to enter into past religious belief systems and draw insights which may not be available to an “outside” observer or partner. In a sense, both *etic* and *emic* perspectives may be appropriated. A key notion in anthropological research is the distinction between the imposed (exported) *etic* perspective and the (indigenous) *emic* perspective. The emergence of a dual belonging community enables both the imported Christian perspective as well as the indigenous Asian religious perspective to intersect and interact—in particular, when the local community of dual belongers, such as that of Muslim background believers, becomes a hermeneutical community. One can only pray and hope for the emergence of such indigenous Christian communities that will bridge the temple and the mosque. Their growth presents unprecedented promise for the development of authentic Asian Christian identity and will contribute to the reconciliation of religious communities worldwide. Dual belongers may then contribute to the project of self-theologising and the development of indigenous Christian communities. **IJFM**



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Endnotes

¹ “Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding,” World Council of Churches, accessed on 12/08/2011, Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding | World Council of Churches (<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/religious-plurality-and-christian-self-understanding>).

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- ²² Race, *Christian and Religious Pluralism*, 42–44; also on Clement, the early Church Father’s view on the presence of divine truth in Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism.
- ²³ Jørgensen, “Jesus Imandars,” 40.