Hyphenated Christians: Towards a Better Understanding of Dual Religious Belonging

Gideon Goosen

Hyphenated Christians is an exploratory work of what is considered to be a relatively new phenomenon: dual (or even multiple) religious belonging. However, as the author notes, the first Christians still considered themselves Jews; and later ‘converts’ to Christian faith often retained beliefs and practices of their former traditions. Nonetheless, it is only in recent times that focus has been given to the possibility of truly belonging to more than one religious tradition, especially from a Christian perspective. This is due to two reasons:

1. the fast-changing landscape in which the interaction of religions and cultures has exploded in a time of mass emigration and global movement of peoples, and;

2. the pioneering work of interreligious practitioner/scholars such as Henri Le Saux, Jules Monchanin, Bede Griffiths, Raimon Panikkar, Thomas Merton and Roger Corless who seek to embrace other religious traditions from the standpoint of professed Christian faith.

The author notes the notion of dual, double or multiple religious belonging is contentious, especially in the West—even if, in the East, it is quite common and easily accepted. He is also careful to distinguish it from New Age syncretism which borrows from various religions and spiritualities without commitment to any one tradition. In fact, he argues that our deepest sense of selfhood/personhood emerges from our initial experiences within a particular tradition. This leads to his definition of dual religious belonging: “when a person has a first major religion and draws on a second to a greater or lesser degree, according to the three criteria of doctrines, practices and actions” [27]. Dual religious belonging demands profound roots within a primary tradition prior to engagement with another.

He then explores notions of self and person in relation to classical and contemporary theories, both East and West. Whereas the Greek understanding of human persons emphasised rationality, Christian Trinitarian theology moved towards a much more relational notion, as “embodied persons in community” (49), further developed in modern philosophy (inter-relationality) and psychology (levels of consciousness). These dimensions of human person or selfhood are further extended by the Buddhist notion of ‘no-self’ (anatta) and the Hindu experience of non-duality (advaita). All this has profound religious implications in relation to our human experience of the divine mystery which is exquisitely expressed in Christian theology of the self-emptying God (kenosis).
All this leads to an important discussion of human identity with its personal, social, cultural and religious expressions. Whereas identity is connected to homeland or ‘sense of belonging’, it is equally the case that identity is dynamic, open to change in relation to one’s life experiences with and connections to family, friends, occupation, ethnic-cultural/religious group, place and country. Certainly, the relationship between one’s cultural and religious sense of belonging is intertwined, and mediated through the power of symbols. The author is convinced that “all religious language is symbolic” (112), along with the notion that “revelation occurs in all world religions” (72), so there is space to embrace dual religious belonging through encounter with another religion’s symbols.

No approach to dual religious belonging can avoid theological questions and challenges. The author recognises this in his discussion of “God’s truth” and the specific question of Jesus Christ who, in orthodox theology, is the one and only universal Saviour. He deals with these issues by ascribing to a dynamic, historical, relational and partial understanding of truth avoiding extremes of both absolutism and relativism. I was reminded of a remark of one of his oft-cited authors, Raimon Panikkar, who stated: “Truth is not something that we possess; but something that possesses us or besets us, something in which we find our being”. Be that as it may, the author’s distinction between Jesus Christ and Christianity, along with his encouragement to further develop a theology of the Holy Spirit in all creation, are indications of how dual belonging could be elaborated.

The author suggests that dual religious belonging is best understood in terms of ‘transformation’ rather than ‘conversion’. This entails a new synthesis or shifting of horizons rather than rejecting one tradition prior to the acceptance of another; indeed, it represents a movement from “a spiritual immaturity to a spiritual adulthood” (146). Presumably, this does not mean to imply that dual belonging is a requirement for spiritual maturity. Yet, the implications of dual religious belonging for Christian theology and spirituality will be profound as the church seeks to redefine its mission and identity “in the (post)modern, multifaith world” (159). This will include the deepening and extension of a communio-ecclesiology and new emphases on mysticism, intra-religious dialogue and acculturation. It will also be a catalyst for the church’s rethinking its theologies of revelation and religions.

Some readers will find this work too sanguine or over-optimistic. Others will question if dual religious belonging does not undermine
the very essence of Christian faith. There is also the question of the relationship between interreligious dialogue (to which the Catholic Church is committed) and dual religious belonging (about which the same Church is silent): Are both necessary? Does one lead to the other? Are these even the best terms to describe these newly emerging realities? This work does not, and cannot, claim to answer all these questions. What it does achieve is the communication of a religious phenomenon that is taking on increasing importance in our pluralistic, multifaith world. Theology’s task is to reflect on the meaning, challenges and possibilities inherent in Christian faith and its expressions. This work provides theological and spiritual insight into the complex journeys of faith that many Christians (and other religious believers) are undertaking.

Reviewer: Gerard Hall, a Marist priest, was Associate Professor of Theology on the Brisbane Campus of Australian Catholic University. He is a member of ACU’s Centre for Interreligious Dialogue and Brisbane’s Archdiocesan Commission for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue.

Email: gerardhall@bigpond.com