Dual-faith practice

An increasing number of people are beginning to identify themselves as belonging to more than one spiritual tradition – not merely in the sense of selecting attractive ideas from each tradition, but trying to be faithful to both traditions.

Questions that might arise about dual or multi-faith practice are whether and how it is possible to combine them, especially if there is potential conflict between their worldviews, or their worldviews are mutually exclusive; how a particular person came to follow more than one tradition; what constitutes membership of a tradition; whether identification with a tradition is sufficient; and whether practising more than one faith is merely part of the 'subjective turn' of modern culture.

There has been criticism of dual-faith practitioners (e.g. Thurston, 1994). In many religions, the idea of practising more than one tradition is uncontroversial – for example, many people practice both Wicca and Druidry (Carr-Gomm, 2002), or Paganism and Unitarian Universalism (Sealy, 2006), or Buddhism and Shinto (Kuroda, 1981: 3) – but for those faiths which claim the exclusive loyalty of their followers, practising more than one tradition may be seen as deeply problematic.

Combining worldviews

Hayes (2003: 8) identifies four models for an encounter between a missionising religion and an indigenous one:

1. Rejection. The traditional knowledge is rejected as purely evil.
2. Dvoeverie. Two incompatible beliefs or worldviews are held side by side, with little or no interaction between them.
3. Syncretism. The two different beliefs are mingled, to make a third, and new belief, which is different from either component.
4. Inculturation. Where the original local culture is transformed, and the incoming belief becomes part of it.

He is writing from the perspective of Orthodox Christian missionary endeavours, which seek to respect as far as possible the pre-Christian beliefs of the culture being
evangelised, acknowledging that there is good in indigenous traditions. Nevertheless there is a fifth possibility, that instead of trying to convert people of other religions, the traditions co-exist, whilst engaging in dialogue.

A similar example of an encounter between a missionising religion and an indigenous one can be found in the interaction of Buddhism and Shinto. According to Kuroda (1981: 3), Shinto was not a distinct religion prior to the arrival of Buddhism; the term applied to any folk religion in China, Korea and Japan. In Japan, one can be both Buddhist and Shinto at the same time, because neither world-view denies the other. This is perhaps similar to Hayes' (2003) model of inculturation, whereby the incoming tradition transforms the indigenous one (though the process may be one of mutual transformation).

There have been various historical instances of rejection, syncretism, dvoeverie and inculturation. An example of rejection is the Protestant evangelisation of indigenous cultures, where there is a tendency to view the indigenous culture negatively (Hayes, 2003: 8). An example of dvoeverie is the simultaneous belief in Christian and Pagan entities allegedly held by many Russian peasants (Crummey, 1993: 701). An example of syncretism is the mixing of Buddhist and Shinto themes in Japanese culture (Grayson, 1992: 202). Examples of inculturation include the continuation of pre-Christian ideas within Christianity (McGinn, 1999: 282), or the incorporation of Bön practices within Tibetan Buddhism (Kvaerne, 1972).

It seems that, whenever a religion encounters another religion, each needs to respond to the truth claims of the other religion, sometimes by denying them, sometimes by recasting them in their own terminology, and sometimes by assigning the other religion's holy figure a position in one's own tradition; for example, Hindus regarding Jesus as a supremely religious soul (Woodburne, 1927). The outcome of this process depends on the willingness of the faith communities to co-exist.

At the level of the individual, religious belief is always more 'messy' than a cursory examination of the creeds and teachings of the religion would lead one to think. (Morgan, 1995: 163)

More than one form of syncretism can be identified, depending on the relative political and cultural status of the two systems being syncretised. Grayson (1992: 200)
defines syncretism as the accommodation made by a world missionary religion (in the context he is discussing, Buddhism) to an 'autochthonous religion' (in this case, the indigenous folk religion of Korea). He outlines two forms of syncretism, 'high' and 'low'. In high syncretism, the core values of the indigenous religion are retained, with only a veneer of the foreign religion. In low syncretism, only the surface trappings of the indigenous religion are retained, and its core values are replaced by those of the foreign religion; this latter form seems similar to Hayes' (2003) idea of inculturation.

In reverse syncretism (Grayson, 1992: 205), an indigenous religion begins to voluntarily incorporate elements of foreign religion into its practice.

Another form of syncretism is 'coinherence' (Corless, 1994: 182), where two religions that both make sense to the practitioner are followed side-by-side. Corless (1994: 183) holds the traditions of Buddhism and Christianity in creative tension. This may sound superficially similar to dvoeverie, but in dvoeverie there is said to be little or no interaction between the two faiths in the mind of the practitioner, whereas in coinherence, the two are held in dialogue.

There have also been examples of deliberate syncretism, such as Ryōbu Shinto, a formal mixture of Buddhism and Shinto (Grayson, 1992: 202); the reorganisation of Roman paganism in response to Greek and Etruscan paganism (Grayson, 1992: 201); the Romanisation of indigenous deities, for example the cult of Mercury and Rosmerta (Webster, 1997: 326); and the creation of the syncretistic Din-I-Ilaahi religion by the Mughal emperor Akbar (Lawrence, 1973: 61).

Unitarianism could be argued to be syncretic. According to the British Unitarian (2007) website, “Unitarianism has its roots in the Jewish and Christian traditions but is open to insights from world faiths, science, the arts, the natural world, and everyday living.” The Unitarian Universalist statement of principles and sources acknowledges six sources and seven principles (UUA, 2007).

In a global and post-colonial culture, encounters between faiths no longer occur at the boundaries of their traditional heartlands, but everywhere. The interfaith movement is growing, partly in order to make peace between conflicting groups (Morgan, 1995: 163).

At the same time, there seems to be a widening polarisation between liberal, tolerant
and inclusivist views of religion, and ecstatic or evangelical practices which are frequently associated with fundamentalist and exclusivist views. So it seems there are a range of possible responses to diversity: to embrace it and celebrate it; to tolerate it; or to reject it and seek to impose norms. However, no matter how a particular tradition responds to it, it is impossible to ignore it.

**The 'subjective turn'**

The theory of subjectivisation proposes that “the massive subjective turn of modern culture” favours and reinforces those forms of spirituality which resource unique subjectivities and treat them as a primary source of significance, and undermines those (life-as) forms of religion which do not.” (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005: 78)

'Subjective-life' is life lived as a unique individual with an emphasis on self-expression, whereas 'life-as' is life lived according to a specific role or identity (wife, mother, Christian, etc.) (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005: 79).

'Subjective-life' spirituality is often characterised as a pick-and-mix approach (Stephenson, 2005), whereas practitioners of dual faith appear to desire fidelity to the traditions being followed (Corless, 1994: 182). Clearly, in feeling a vocation to follow both faiths, such practitioners are responding to a subjective inner feeling, but trying to do so within the framework of a tradition.

Heelas and Woodhead (2005) make much of the oppositional tension between 'subjective-life' spirituality and 'life-as' religion, but Thomas (2000: 42) suggests that the distinction between spirituality and religion – the “assumption that whereas religion deals with the outer life, that is, institutions, traditions, practices, doctrines, and moral codes, spirituality treats the inner life, which thus tends to be individualized and privatized” – may in fact be a false dichotomy, arising out of Western discourse. Taylor (1989: 111) explains:

In our language of self-understanding, the opposition "inside-outside" plays an important role. We think of our thoughts, ideas, or feelings as being "within" us, while the objects in the world which these mental states bear on are "without."

. . . But strong as this partitioning of the world appears to us, as solid as this localization may seem, and anchored in the very nature of the human agent, it is in large part a feature of our world, the world of modern, Western people. (cited in Thomas, 2000: . . . . . . )
Thomas (2000: 43) adds that there is both a tradition of inwardness and a tradition of outwardness in Christianity, but argues that the outward should be considered primary, and a major source of the inner.

'Subjective-life' spirituality seems mainly focused on the inner as the primary source for validating experience. Hence it is likely to conflict with solely outward-focused religions (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005: 18).

However, dual-faith practitioners seem to be answering an inner call whilst attempting to be faithful to the whole of their chosen traditions. Corless (1994: 181) says:

Both Buddhism and Christianity recommend that practice be done for others rather than oneself ... Insofar as the coinherence practitioner looks for the practice to aid him- or herself on the way to salvation or liberation, or to be of benefit to oneself in any way whatever, just to that extent is one's practice faulty, deficient, or sinful. Insofar as the coinherence practitioner seeks only to be of service to the Christian and Buddhist traditions, and whatever aims they wish to set forward, just to that extent is one's practice meritorious, authentic, and righteous.

What is significant here is the way in which Corless denies that the practice is intended to be of benefit to himself; instead it is about benefiting others.

In a discussion of her dual-faith practice of being a Quaker and a Pagan, Cat Chapin-Bishop (2007) says:

But that's just what keeps me Quaker--we center down, and I can find you, Friend, in the shining place: you and the sea of limitless Light. And that's what keeps me Pagan--I go out into the woods, and the trees are not things but friends, and the moonlight makes what is sacred shine out all around me.

... No matter how the labels fit or don't fit, my job is to keep walking... just keep walking. ... Just... keep going the way I'm led.

Here, it seems, the emphasis is on the path rather than on the one walking it, and on making connections with others which is as important as the inner sense of vocation.

Peter Chapin-Bishop (2007), also a Quaker Pagan, echoes the idea that the Divine is outside and permeating inwards, and is more important than the social norms and conventions of the respective faiths, and that the core or defining aspect of belonging to the tradition is that a connection to the numinous happened in that context:
God (the Divine, the Gods...whatever you want to call Him/Her/It/Them) calls to us. Divinity “bleeds through” from the realm of the Divine into our world. ... When I say I am a Quaker, it is because I have been a conduit for the Divine in that context. Once I’d had the experience of...well, call it “drawing down the Light,” the rest was just a formality. My clearness committee tested that leading and concurred, but I’m not a Quaker because they said so. I’m a Quaker because I listened for the presence of Spirit in the silence, and It spoke through me, and that’s what Quakers do. Just like I’m Wiccan because I invoked the presence of the God in circle and He came to me, and that’s what Wiccans do.

What these people are doing does not seem to be 'pick'n'mix' spirituality, or even dvoeverie (the practice of two faiths side by side without any mutual feedback – if this is even possible). It is much more like Corless’s idea of coinherence, whereby the two traditions mutually inform and enrich each other, thereby serving both communities, or it involves serving the Divine, which encompasses both people and nature. Corless makes it clear that the practice of coinherence is painful, not something that anyone should choose deliberately (Corless, 1994: 181). Dual-faith spirituality is not merely eclectic or inner-directed, nor is it entirely outwardly directed: it is about the connection of inner realities with outer numinosity.

From the evidence of people’s explanations of what they are doing in their coinherence practices, it would seem that they may well be evidence for the 'subjective turn', but that the practitioners are not entirely subjectively led or inner-directed, as they still feel the need for a community of practice and have a sense of the external promptings of the numinous.

**Criticisms of dual-faith practice**

Much of the criticism of dual-faith practice centres on the issue of authority, and whether this is derived from the individual, the group, the tradition, or the Divine.

Other possible criticisms include the idea that each tradition is complete in itself and does not require input from outside (Bloom, 1994: 164-5); and the possible danger of ‘pick’n’mix’ spirituality, which might mean that dual-faith practitioners choose only the parts of each tradition that appeal to them, and avoid aspects which seem difficult or repellent now but may later turn out to be useful, or which the tradition insists are
necessary.

There are also issues like loyalty to one’s tradition and to the martyrs who died for the principles espoused by that tradition (Thurston, 1994: 178).

The degree of difficulty in combining two or more traditions depends on how exclusive the truth claims of each tradition may be. Bloom (1994: 164-5) distinguishes between exclusivism (claims of completeness) and sectarianism (claims to sole possession of the truth):

Exclusivism may appear to be a negative feature of religious faith. However, I believe it can be distinguished from sectarianism, which is more an attitude that denies any validity or truth in other views. On the positive side, the exclusive character of a religious faith may indicate the conviction that the faith is comprehensive, complete, needing nothing from the outside to justify itself. It is my personal observation that religious traditions are integral wholes, growing up out of the experience of founders and members and evolving through the centuries. Though they may appear to outside observers as lacking in some dimension, the participants in these traditions may not experience that lack. What appears to be lacking to some observer may, for historical or other reasons, be latent, though not fully articulated within a tradition.

People who have had direct mystical experiences of the numinous often find it difficult to fit them into the norms of the traditions they are following. Various mystics, particularly women (Herzig, 2006: 25), attracted the attention of the Inquisition to determine whether or not their mystical revelations fitted in with Catholic doctrine, or whether their miracles or stigmata were genuine (Herzig, 2006: 31). Some revelations cannot be accommodated in the existing paradigm: new religions were founded on the teachings of Buddha and Jesus because they were not accepted by the traditions from which they emerged (Case, 1913: 64). Sometimes people will break away to form or join a new tradition because of dissatisfaction with some feature of their existing tradition; this may involve a total rejection of the existing tradition, and/or a return to an earlier tradition – as, for example, Goddess feminists’ rejection of Christianity on the grounds of its patriarchal associations and their creation of new traditions (Harvey, 1997: 74). Alternatively, the new tradition may be a syncretic amalgam of the old with the new, as early Christianity was an amalgam of the new insights of its founders with its Jewish
heritage and the Graeco-Roman religions that were contemporary with it (Case, 1913: 66).

Another possible criticism of dual-faith and syncretistic practice is the charge of cultural appropriation. This issue was first raised by Native Americans in objection to the 'borrowing' of Native American ideas, rituals and practices. They objected that this was just another form of imperialism. If using ideas from other cultures is not done respectfully and with a sensitivity to their original context, it can seem like theft to the originators of those ideas (Harrison, 1999: 11).

**Membership and identity**

Dual and multi-faith practice can also bring up questions of membership and identity.

Many people identify as being of a particular religion; but what constitutes membership? In Christianity, the boundary between membership and identity is fairly blurred – it could be measured by attendance, baptism, belief, or adherence to the Nicene Creed. Traditionally, Christianity has expected a clearly demarcated religious identity (Thurston, 1994: 177). In Paganism, identity and membership of the community are largely negotiated at festivals, which people attend both to discover the self and to develop the self (Griffin, 2001: 499).

Peter Chapin-Bishop (2007) believes that membership in a tradition consists of having received divine communication in that setting. Liz Opp (2007) writes that identity is a sense of one's personal values being close to the group identified with, whereas membership is participation in that group, its norms, values and social life. She adds that identity is the ground of a person's being, and may come into conflict with membership of a group. In her formulation, identity seems more important than membership; but she also talks about experiencing an inner call. There is clearly a subtle balance between membership and identity whenever people participate in a group. Perhaps people join groups because they admire the values of those groups and want to become more like those who are in them. Perhaps people join because they admire the practices of the group, but then find that the values are different to what they are expecting, or that they are expected to transform their own identity, values and insights to conform with that of
the group and its traditions to a degree which violates their identity. Either way, the formation of a person’s identity happens in a social context (Edwards, 2005: 116), and groups in which someone becomes involved will reflect that identity.

Cat Chapin-Bishop (2007) comments:

> Pagans, I think, look to bestow membership where identity as a part of a group already exists. Quakers, at least to judge by Liz and Marshall’s discussion, look to develop identification with a group through the formal relations of membership. It’s probably a chicken and the egg type of issue, really--membership shapes identity shapes membership.

It seemed to me that Liz Opp’s view was that identity was the most important thing, and membership sometimes changes to accommodate it; but clearly membership involves dialogue among the members of a group, to ascertain what the core values of the group are, and how those are played out in the lives of its members – and often this does involve some kind of formal commitment to the group.

The issue of membership and identity is important in any discussion of a dual or multi-faith practice. A person may identify with a group, but if the membership requirements of that group are that its members do not belong to other groups perceived to be in conflict with its values or beliefs, can that person be said to be a member of the group? It could be argued that if a person identifies with a group, the criteria of membership need to expand to include that person; on the other hand, it might be held that the person must adjust to the mores of the group in order to belong. However, if the practices of the group contradict its stated ideals and values, perhaps the newcomer is the very person best placed to call attention to that contradiction, since they are bringing a fresh perspective.

The process of “conversion” (a rather loaded term) often plays a part in a change of religious allegiance. However, if the person finds truth in both their new group and their previous group, and the old group emphasises one thing that the person finds worth in, and the new group another thing, it will be difficult for the person to make a choice to leave the old group and join the new group; indeed, such a choice may not even be considered (C. Chapin-Bishop, 2007).
Lewis Rambo’s (2000) model of conversion is more complex than the "road to Damascus” experience that most people think of when they think about conversion. In phase one, he says, people go through some kind of crisis (which could be dissatisfaction with their current belief system, or a mystical experience). In phase two, they go on a quest to find something that fits their new model of the world. The third phase involves interaction (learning how to do their chosen religious practice). The fourth phase is commitment ("rituals that create a new identity, a new set of relationships, a new set of roles that lead to a new and different kind of life"), and the fifth stage is consequences - the transformation effected by the commitment (which could be lifelong development in the chosen faith, or it could be disillusionment and going back to phase one).

In the case of dual or multi-faith practice, the conversion process may be experienced as an expansion of understanding, rather than a change of direction. Michelle Guinness (1994: 15), who was brought up Jewish, read the “forbidden bit” of the Bible and decided that Jesus was the Messiah – but when she became a Christian, she introduced many Jewish ideas and practices to her family and her church, feeling incomplete without the Jewish side of herself. The contrast between the life-affirming Judaism she grew up in and the asceticism of the Christianity she joined was too great; she had to find a compromise.

Ann Holmes Redding is an Episcopalian priest who became a Muslim (Tu, 2007). She was drawn to Islam after an introduction to Islamic prayer; she was profoundly affected by seeing a Muslim man in total surrender to God. Many Christians and Muslims cannot accept that she can be both; others (including her local church and the Muslim centre she worships at) are happy for her to be both.

Rambo’s conversion model seems a good fit for her situation; she was experiencing dissatisfaction with Christian doctrine, and then had a profoundly moving encounter with Islam (the crisis phase); this led to a quest for a new paradigm, and making a commitment; now she is experiencing the consequences of that commitment. However, her conversion experience is clearly an expansion of her worldview to include the truth claims of both religions, rather than an abandonment of one in favour of the other.

Cat Chapin-Bishop’s crisis moment was the destruction by terrorists of the World
Trade Centre in 2001, when she “knew in my body as well as my mind that deep and absolute conviction that war was just not the answer for anything”. However, the crisis was an occasion for the expansion of her worldview, not a change of direction; she says, “I am still Pagan--my love for the earth and the Old Gods does not change. But other Quaker testimonies and practices have grown in me, about oaths, clergy, simplicity... and they have changed how I worship, if not what or why.” The quest phase was very short (between 11 September and 12 October), and the commitment phase began when she sought formal membership of the Religious Society of Friends. The consequences are still being worked out in the internal dialogue of the two faiths.

Roger Corless’ conversion experience was occasioned by a growing awareness that both Buddhism and Christianity were true (Corless, 1994: 182); again, this seems like an expansion of his understanding, rather than a change of direction.

Christianity and Buddhism have sought to privilege external revelations over the subjective promptings of the body and the inner life (Corless, 1994: 181); Paganisms and Judaism seek to integrate the life of mind, body and spirit by following the round of seasonal festivals (Harvey, 1997: 223). When someone who follows inner promptings engages in dialogue with someone who follows an external authority such as a tradition or a book, the result is usually mutual incomprehension (King, 1994). Those who experience an inner guide often relate it to an external entity which can also be found in the depths of the self (Harvey, 1997: 212).

Conclusion

Whatever models are used to describe or explain dual-faith practice, it is clear that fidelity to the traditions being followed (or to the spirit of them, if not the letter) is of paramount importance to dual-faith practitioners. They are not merely 'spiritual shoppers', but rather people who are attempting to follow what they have experienced as a call, coming from a source perceived to be external, but heard inwardly.

It seems that it is possible to follow two or more traditions simultaneously, but never easy, and sometimes painful, both because of contradictions which may be felt internally, and because of hostility from people whose religion is almost entirely a matter of external
authority.

Various models may be offered to describe practising more than one faith: *dwoeverie*, inculturation, syncretism, and coinherence – but in reality, experience, practice and belief are always more complex than theology and theory might suggest. Beliefs and practices vary dramatically *within* faith traditions as well as between them, so it is sometimes hard to draw accurate boundaries on a map of faiths.

In the end, I would argue that dual faith practice is worthwhile, in that it challenges people’s preconceived ideas about the nature of the Divine and of the religious experience, and has the potential to break down boundaries between traditions.

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