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Paul Hedges*

Multiple Religious Belonging after Religion: Theorising Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape as a Chinese Model

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Abstract: It is argued that the concept of Multiple Religious Belonging as normally conceived relies upon a problematic construction of “religion” which can be expressed as the World Religions Paradigm. This relies upon a modern Western Protestant bias as to how “religion” should be understood. It is argued that religion can be understood otherwise, and looking at the Chinese context an argument is made that participation in different religious traditions relies upon a very different construct from Multiple Religious Belonging via the World Religions Paradigm model. This is termed Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape. It considers the way that Chinese religiosity does not have fixed borders in the same way as the World Religions Paradigm suggests. Indeed, asking whether there is Multiple Religious Belonging in traditional Chinese thought seems to misconstrue the situation. A final reflection asks whether this new paradigm, of Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape, may be appropriate to look at the contemporary Western context amongst a number of religious “nones”. Although no definitive answer is given to this question, the issue highlights that the World Religions Paradigm which shapes our sense of Multiple Religious Belonging may need to be rethought within different contexts.

Keywords: Multiple Religious Belonging, Chinese religion, World Religions Paradigm, Quanzhen Daoism, Rose Drew, East Asian religion, sanjiao, Three Traditions, Strategic Religious Participation

1 Introduction

Within the sphere of Interreligious Studies as a broad field it can seem something of a cliché to approach a subject with the suffix “after religion”.1 It may seem a passing nod to the fashion of critical theory which has challenged the very concept of “religion” as a reified entity that exists “out there”. Rather, it locates religion as a fictional category of the scholarly imagination, as famously expressed by Jonathan Z. Smith:

“While there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterised in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious – there is no data for religion. Religion is solely

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1 I would note particularly Thatamanil, “Comparative Theology after Religion” as a paper which has already asked this question. As the term Interreligious Studies is a relatively new one, I would direct the reader to the following description, Hedges and King, “Is the Study of Religion Religious”, 48-49.

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This paper is written into that space, and against the backdrop of such critical theory. It is an area into which the current author has extensively forayed, both in terms of asking how we should rethink, or whether we can still think, “religion” after its deconstruction. It would therefore be useful to briefly note both what this article does and does not intend to argue. First, against the strong deconstructivist camp that says we should see “religion” as a category of a Western Enlightenment Christian heritage with no general application, this paper argues that with suitable nuance and understanding the term remains useful as a heuristic device and referent point. Second, this does not mean that there is a univocal sense of religion, or set of “religions” which can be studied, and therefore we need to carefully unpack the sense in which we use and apply the term, especially picking out the way the now discredited “World Religions Paradigm” construits our sense of religious traditions. Third, this has particular application when we come to speak of Multiple Religious Belonging as any sense of “belonging” is dependent upon quite specific notions of religious traditions, identities, and structures. Fourth, a distinction will be made, already well established in literature around Multiple Religious Belonging, between “Western” (largely inherited from a North Western European Christian model) and “Eastern” (often intending specifically East Asian models) perceptions and modes of speaking about this phenomenon. However, fifth, it will seek to expose the reifications and fault lines created by developing such a distinction. As such, sixth, the paper will challenge certain existing theoretical and methodological categories within the field asking how we rethink the conception of Multiple Religious Belonging “after religion”, noting, however, that we do not simply need new ways of envisaging Multiple Religious Belonging but rather need to be aware of the context and framework in which we choose to deploy it. For instance, asking if Multiple Religious Belonging is common amongst folk religious practice in China may simply distort or ask the wrong question. Again, suggesting that in place of models of Multiple Religious Belonging fashioned after the World Religions Paradigm we should adopt models inspired by “Eastern” conceptions we may simply be replacing one totalising narrative structure with another.

The structure of the paper will largely follow this six fold pattern, although not in a point by point manner, as discussion on some of the points is woven into different parts of the paper as noted below. It begins with a review of the literature and arguments about the term “religion”, then proceeds to see how this maps onto how we construct our sense of Multiple Religious Belonging and the creation of categories. We will ask whether it fits the Chinese context and propose that Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape works better. We conclude with some reflections on whether this terminology

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2 Smith, Imagining Religion, xi.


4 I will use the term Multiple Religious Belonging in this paper in line with the terminology of this special edition and will later address some differences between using this or alternatives, such as “dual” or “hyphenated” and “identity” or “participation”.

5 It is fully recognised that neither the terms “West/ern” nor “East Asian” are entirely unitary in any sense. Even with the provisos of this paper that the focus is on a West that implies a modern, Enlightenment, Protestant tradition which is primarily Anglo-American, but with a strong North-Western European input, and that China is used as the primary example from East Asia each still to some degree includes great diversity. Some of this diversity will be recognised and contained within the space of this paper, but it is written with this in mind. As such, to some degree each operates as an idealised concept mediating certain dominant, often elite, strands of intellectual thought. For instance, the way a largely scholarly body of writing has portrayed “religion” from the Western context, and noting some broad and general trends in Chinese thought. Given that the paper wishes to contend a very general set of ideas from this conception of West, i.e. Multiple Religious Belonging and the World Religions Paradigm this broad brushstroke approach is advanced as permissible, especially as it is sometimes applied wholesale to an East Asian context, which the argument advanced is that it should not be. Certainly more detailed close readings of specific traditions would be one way to extend the argument of this paper.
is helpful to look at the contemporary Western context, and a conclusion that returns to our six points. To help map out the argument, the first and second points about the category “religion”, its meaning, and the World Religions Paradigm are largely dealt with in the section “Before and After Religion” and is returned to in “A Note on Some Terminology” where we revisit some problems of using the term in the Chinese context. The third and fourth points about the way that Multiple Religious Belonging is conceptualised through the World Religions Paradigm and also the way that a distinction is made between “Eastern” and “Western” versions of it are in the section “Shaping the Discourse of Multiple Religious Belonging”. However, to help frame the discussion we initially address point three just below in this introduction, while it is brought up in the section “Before and After Religion” as we consider the construction of the World Religions Paradigm and its consequences. The fifth, which as noted seeks “to expose the reifications and fault lines” created by these distinctions, of “Western” and “Eastern” forms of Multiple Religious Belonging, is to some degree an underlying thread in the other arguments. The sixth, to challenge the categories and rethink concepts is very much the work of the section “Multiple Religious Belonging as Strategic Religious Participation in East Asia”, and some implications are thought through in the penultimate section “Suggestions”. In the paper, it will be argued that we need a new way to approach the discussion, which may well lead us to rejecting or adapting the terminology of Multiple Religious Belonging in certain contexts. However, our usage of any other terminology will likely lead to equal problems if we assume a one-size-fits-all model. As such, the paper will suggest ways we can deal with thinking the problem “after religion”, although not offering a simple solution. Therefore, while I will suggest the terminology of Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape I do not envisage this as an alternative to Multiple Religious Belonging, nor as a better way of speaking about the phenomenon. Rather, I will suggest that in different contextual situations each may help us see, or conceal, different aspects of the praxis described and theorised by these terms.

Before proceeding it would be useful to consider the way that Multiple Religious Belonging is used in different contexts, and to look at how it is used within this paper. Seeking to map out some trends in the literature, Michelle Voss Roberts defines three models of Multiple Religious Belonging.6 These are: model 1, “The Great Pioneers” which defines the elite virtuoso attempts of largely male Christian theologians or monastics to combine an understanding or practice of two or more religious traditions. She mentions figures like Abhistikananda, Bede Griffiths, and Aloysius Pieris. Model 2 is “Popular Practice” which involves the use of different rites or practices in one’s own religious life. This she notes may be conscious or unconscious and more or less communal. She notes examples like using the rosary or Christmas trees, or specifically within India the incorporation of things like chariot festivals into Christian practice. Her third model is “the Hybrid” which she sees as those who do not fit comfortably within a single identity but exist somewhere at the intersection between traditions. Invoking Homi Bhabha she sees it as moving from a “binary” focus to one which looks at everyday practice and may challenge traditional religious boundaries. To sum up her models she suggests: “The first model of multiple religious belonging focuses on doctrinal synthesis, the second on practices, and the third on intersections of identities.”7 In another survey, Rose Drew notes that in “the historical record and contemporary trends, we find a range of different kinds and degrees of multiple religious participation in various contexts.”8 She lists six phenomenon which fall under this broad focus: cultural identity and particular religious functions; dual religious upbringing; occasional ritual participation; adoption of particular practices or ideas; contemporary bricolage religiosity; and intercultural and interreligious dialogue.9 Amongst these, she suggests, not all warrant the term “multiple belonging”.10 She suggests that: “Although softer forms of multiple religious identity are likely to become increasingly common, multiple religious belonging seems too spiritually, intellectually, and practically demanding

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7 Ibid., 52.
9 Ibid., 248-51.
10 Ibid., 251, italics in original.
a vocation to ever become widespread.” As I will argue more fully below this seems to reflect a sense that Multiple Religious Belonging is envisaged as a hard and difficult problem within the World Religions Paradigm. This dictates that standing in the way of Multiple Religious Belonging are issues like “Doctrinal Tensions” (that it entails holding differing beliefs), “Mutually Exclusive Ways” (forms of practice and ways of life may pull in different ways), and the “The Assumption of Superiority” (that one religion must be the primary identity). Roberts, however, questions the way we think about the terms “religion”, “belonging”, and “the multiple” concluding that: “Multiple religious involvements… need not be ranked hierarchically but can coexist in a centred relation.” However, while her argument moves to some extent towards the direction of this paper (suggesting the World Religions Paradigm can be challenged) her reflections are based in Christian theological reflection, and so does not really challenge the way that Christian categories shape the Multiple Religious Belonging debate (which is not a criticism per se as that is not her aim).

The surveys offered by Roberts and Drew suggests though that within the remit of academic discourse on Multiple Religious Belonging a large number of different phenomena are being discussed, or at least seen to be related. Therefore, within this paper I would wish to include, even if not directly, the whole range of phenomena described here, and even suggest it may be wider. The reason for this wider discourse is that much of the discussion is based upon primarily Christian categories (it is often Christians who seek a second religious identity) or Western practices (notwithstanding that both Roberts and Drew mention cases beyond this). In as far as this paper discusses the Chinese context I do not wish to presume that the practices described within the mainstream discourse provide the limits or conceptualisations which will be useful to encapsulate everything that might be understand, in some sense, as Multiple Religious Belonging within that situation. Broadly, therefore, for the purposes of this paper what is termed Multiple Religious Belonging (or Strategic Religious Participation as I will suggest we should use in the Chinese context) refers to a wide range of participatory acts, behaviours, identities, and beliefs whereby someone engages with what we would ordinarily define as at least two different religious traditions. The person may or may not identify wholly or primarily with one particular religiously named identity.

As a final note, I primarily refer to Multiple Religious Belonging (and Strategic Religious Participation) as phenomena; that is to say it is something that happens. I do not thereby intend, however, that it would normally be named this way by those involved. Multiple Religious Belonging is essentially an analytic and scholarly category (those who would, perhaps, be most likely to identify with the category tend to be the more scholarly Multiple Religious Belongers). I also refer to Multiple Religious Belonging as a discourse, by which I mean the way that it is defined and discussed by scholars. That is to say in creating the descriptive analytic category of Multiple Religious Belonging scholars fill this with various meanings which make it seem more or less tenable or acceptable. This constitutes the discourse on the phenomena so named. We turn now to our first two issues about the way that the deconstruction of “religion” need not lead us to abandon the term, but also that keeping it may cause problems especially if we retain the “World Religions Paradigm”.

2 Before and after religion

The academic literature and arguments which show that the contemporary usage of the term “religion” is primarily a modern European model inspired by Enlightenment and Protestant Christian norms is well established. It may be briefly summarised. The term “religio” meant something like “piety” or “devotion” in European usages prior to about the sixteenth century, while the next few centuries saw it becoming capable of meaning, firstly, two separate forms of Christian piety (“Catholic religion” and “Protestant religion”), and subsequently referring to a number of different types of things out there in the world: “the

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11 Ibid., 266.
12 Ibid., 256-63.
14 I would note the discussions in Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?*, on the way her interviewees define themselves in these terms, and also for instance, Paul Knitter’s own self-classification.
world religions”. The evolution of this usage is not entirely linear, but by the late eighteenth and certainly into the nineteenth century it became fairly clear that a number of separate religions could be referred to. These were often subdivided in various ways, perhaps as “national religions” and “universal religions”, or “primitive religions” and “world religions”. The naming and classification process followed various trends or prejudices of the particular classifier and their cultural presuppositions, however, certain central aspects of this new category of “religion” started to become quite clearly demarcated.

The features of “religion” could be enumerated in various ways but would normally include the following. That there is a single common genus of the type “religion” of which any particular tradition (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, etc) was simply a regional manifestation. Given this, “religion” was a universal and common human experience that could be found, traced, and determined in any society, historical period, or cultural form. This meant that the “religious” aspects of that culture/society could be set out and studied separately from the other (“secular”) aspects, such as economics, politics, and so on. Within the largely Protestant liberal milieu in which it develops (but one, we should note, not out of kilter with the evangelical drive for evangelisation of the world which inspired many from the late eighteenth century onwards) it also becomes seen to be an innate feature within the human species. As Mircea Eliade would put it, we are homo religiosus: all humans, in all places, at all times, have inherently looked to the transcendent and infinite such that to be religious is almost a sine qua non of being authentically human.

In other words, “religion” becomes an aspect of reality, a form of human civilisation and even of the way things are. It can be clearly pinned down, located, identified, studied, classified into types, and has defining characteristics. Hence we can speak of the “invention” of “religion”. However, before I proceed I should note that such scholarship pulls in two directions one which says that therefore we see simply an imagined and largely false premise of Western, European modernity. It is simply a scholarly classificatory system which has no relation to reality: there are no religions. In contrast other scholars have argued that it is actually a useful and meaningful term. While recognising the process of invention of a certain posited genus (“religion”) populated by certain assumed species (“Buddhism”, “Hinduism”, “Daoism”, etc.) it can be argued, despite this, that this term can be reclaimed and employed as a useful heuristic classificatory tool. Indeed, while no single definition of “religion” can prove definitive it does not show thereby that the term itself is entirely moribund. Every word has a history, and every concept was “invented” at some time. I would like to suggest that Walter Gallie’s concept of “essentially contested concepts” is useful for looking at this. According to Gallie, there are various terms or words which we cannot find a universally agreed definition for, and which may be contestable in certain ways, and which may certainly have first been “invented” at some point. But, this does not mean that these words and terms do not fulfil a certain function. Indeed, they do not just fulfil a function but it can be argued that they provide an essential function within our communication system. We would be worse off if we didn’t have them. Amongst the types of essentially contested concepts which Gallie suggests are such things as “art”, “social justice”, and “democracy”. None of these has one clearly defined pure type but all only exist with grey borders such that we do not know what is inside its boundaries and what is outside. Again, it is not always clear where

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15 On the development of the concept of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s work still stands as a classic, see The Meaning and End of Religion, while Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions, is the best study on the development of a sense of “world religions”.

16 Especially on the Protestant basis of the conception, see Fitzgerald, The Ideology of Religious Studies. For a discussion on the wider Religious Studies background, see King and Hedges, “What is Religion?”

17 However, we should not overplay the sense of Western “invention” because this suggests an essential Saidian orientalist ontology in which the “East” is seen as a passive recipient of Western domination and power play, which was far from the case. For a classic study on the issues behind such an assumption, see Clarke, Oriental Enlightenment. Further, for a case study of the way that both Buddhists and Christians recognised each other as involved in “religion”, see Pascal, “Buddhist Monks and Christian Friars”, while the way that the emerging language of religion was also a challenge to Christian norms is discussed in Hedges, “The Old and the New Comparative Theologies”.

18 See, Hedges, “Discourse on the Invention of Discourses”, Riesebrodt, The Promise of Salvation, and Schilibrack, “A realist social ontology of religion”. While the latter says we should not see the term “religion” as heuristic (only) the main thrust of the argument there accords, I believe, with the sense in which “religion” is used here.

19 Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts”.

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the category ends and spills over into other areas of life which we may define in other ways. Interestingly, among the terms which Gallie includes in his list is “Christianity”, showing an awareness of the contested nature of language about religion. It is important to raise this point here to show that I am not advocating, like some radical critics of the term “religion” appear to do, that the term is entirely empty, vacuous, and meaningless; as has been convincingly argued such critics normally backtrack or else seek to employ some other equally contested term to play the role that this essentially contested concept does (whether that be using the adjective “religious”, using “sacred” or “faith”, or suggesting that everything is just “culture”).

Nevertheless, as I have suggested, the way that “religion” has come to be used and employed is certainly problematic. I would like to encapsulate the problematic of this term in what I will, following established usage elsewhere, term the World Religions Paradigm. Just because “religion” may be a useful essentially contested concept does not mean that it always illuminates more than it distorts (just as speaking about many neoliberal capitalist societies as democracies can serve to hide the fact that marketing strategy, the deployment of capital, and the personal social and wealth connections of elites are often far more dominant than anything else in determining the result of elections). I will argue the World Religions Paradigm has shaped discussion on Multiple Religious Belonging, and that this may not enable us to understand all aspects of that phenomena. Notably, though, I will not be claiming that the typical construction of religion is “wrong”. It has in many ways shown us how a certain construction of “religion” works well to talk about this within certain limits often prescribed within the dynamics of the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions. It is, however, not the only or best definition of religion, nor the only one that can apply across the traditions mentioned.

To define the World Religions Paradigm, I will take some key features noted by scholars about the way that the concept religion has typically been constructed and manufactured within the last couple of hundred years, importantly drawing upon largely Western (often Protestant) Christian perspectives. This is not, however, the only way that we can speak about how “World Religions” have been constructed nor a definitive list of everything that the literature suggests has become a defining aspect of the broadly Western conception of “religion”. Rather I will draw out some main aspects which are useful for looking at it in relation to Multiple Religious Belonging. I will suggest three main aspects which will have two main consequences which together constitute what I mean here by the World Religions Paradigm.

Firstly, religions are understood to be bounded territories of belonging. That is to say that there are quite clear lines of demarcation between each one such that Christianity, Islam, or Zoroastrianism are understood to be clearly separated and demarcated. For instance, the religious elite of each will be different, the laws and regulations governing behaviour will be ones which exist just for that community and will be different from those of others (this would be the case not withstanding occasional borrowings or what are sometimes seen to be common ethical imperatives, e.g. the Golden Rule), while each will have its own set of texts.

Secondly, the act of being in a religion is understood to be primarily about believing in a set of principles. That is to say there will be some form of belief system or creed which is adhered to and which will be distinct between religions. Hindus will, for instance, be seen to believe in reincarnation, karma, and a variety of deities in a way which marks them out from a Muslim who recites the shahaddah and adheres to the basic beliefs of Islam in such areas as prophets, the last days, and angels. Importantly, because these
belief systems are different, it is seen as simple and straightforward that one cannot adhere to more than one religion at any one time.

Thirdly, and inherent within points one and two, every religious tradition is seen to be its own internally coherent and regulated entity. That is to say, it comes with its own set of meanings and a clearly defined set of beliefs and practices. To go to the Hindu temple is an activity of the Hindu associated with the beliefs, deities, and rituals of that religion, this is seen to be distinct from the temples, rituals, beliefs, and practices of Daoism, Islam, Jainism, or any other religious tradition.

These three points I take to be key markers of the classical World Religions Paradigm, and which as noted has two consequences which can also be elucidated. These, we should note, relate to point three of our argument about how the World Religions Paradigm shapes the discourse on Multiple Religious Belonging. I should note that the consequences are not in and of themselves logical consequences, though some would argue that they are. Rather, they are what appear to be the mainstream normative judgements found within the literature, and in the Multiple Religious Belonging discourse. Certainly, even if they do not make Multiple Religious Belonging impossible they make it at least suspect, or a problem to be explained (how can this happen?). The two consequences are:

First, each religion, therefore, is a distinct and discrete unit to which sole allegiance is required. Being a member of one means that intellectually and coherently it is only possible to sign up for the beliefs, practices, and deities that adhere to it and not to any other. To belong to two religions in this paradigm would seem to bring to mind at least some form of “spiritual adultery”.

Second, therefore, you can only be an “insider” of one religion (at a time), to use the well known terminology of the “insider-outsider” debate. If you wish to convert then you will leave behind the beliefs, practices, and deities of your former tradition and adopt the beliefs, practices, and deities of another tradition – or you will drop all religions and take the beliefs, practices, and non-deity stance of being an atheist. It is about complete packages: you are either in or out. To try and be both is to hold two potentially, if not actually, conflicting practices, worldviews, or beliefs in tension.

Before noting how this affects discourse on the literature on Multiple Religious Belonging it would be useful to look at some ways in which the scholarship in Religious Studies has taken issue with what may seem a “common sense” Western Christian stance over the previous few decades. This will help to show why the World Religions Paradigm is not a stable structure and also why it may be particularly inappropriate for constructing the discussion in particular contexts.

Firstly, moving from largely textual analysis and elite discourses, scholars of religion have more and more turned their attention to what is often termed “Lived Religion”. This refers to the ways that actual groups of people live out their lives and express their religious identities in practice. We could draw on many points here so I will simply note a few. One of them is that most believers simply do not seem either invested or overly concerned with the supposedly correct and orthodox beliefs laid out in their texts or expounded

23 As noted, I do not see this as definitive of everything which could be said of the World Religions Paradigm and am simply taking those points most relevant to this study. For instance, we could also mention the textual bias, the emphasis on founders and hierarchies of structure, or the notion of beliefs as foundational. On this see especially Cotter and Roberson, After World Religions.
24 As I will note below Catherine Cornille (“Introduction”) certainly argues that the fixed “container” conception of the World Religions Paradigm means that belonging to more than one is in some senses nonsensical.
25 See Knitter, Without Buddha, 213-17.
27 To take three examples: the biography of, for instance, Abhistikananda is suggestive of this in terms of the clear dichotomy he felt between his Advaitic experience and his Christian dualism; Drew’s study of Buddhist-Christians shows that they generally feel the need to find some way to hold this tension together or seek a way to resolve it; in the particularist theology of religions figures like Paul Griffiths argue that it is “performatively impossible” to belong to two different religions at the same time (see Hedges, Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue, 156-157). However, the fact that people still do identify with two or more religions arguably shows that Multiple Religious Belonging in the World Religions Paradigm model is not impossible simply problematised.
28 There is a growing literature on this, but see especially McGuire, Lived Religion.
by their elite leaders. Rather, seemingly throughout time, people have constructed their religious beliefs through the resources around them. As such the idea of defined boundaries of belief is not what religion is primarily about when it comes to many practitioners. This often includes adopting elements of existing or indigenous cultures, and applies especially to those, including women, often marginalised in religions.29 This can be manifested in various ways from sacred trees and wells to particular festivals which may be more or less adopted or prescribed by the elite hierarchy of the religions. A different but related point is also that for many religions the kind of creedal or belief statement is simply not what they are concerned with. Within the Far Eastern context this is particularly true with a number of aspects of everyday religion being focused upon efficacy of practice – is the ritualist a good exorcist? – rather than asking what creedal affirmations they affirm.30

Secondly, syncretism which has very negative connotations from a theological heritage has often been seen as a dirty word in the study of religion too.31 It has been used to suggest a form of the religion which has become “impure” or “tainted” in some way. However, it is increasingly clear from the history of religions that all religion is syncretic. Every religion has, even at its elite levels, learnt, borrowed, adapted, or modified the texts, beliefs, practices, or customs of another religion. This may involve incorporating it within a particular system such that early Christianity drew on elements of the surrounding Greco-Roman mystery religions and Neo-Platonic philosophy at various points in creating its own distinctive system. Elsewhere, it may mean a very active and dynamic border region between religions. The North Indian Sant tradition out of which Sikhism emerged is a case in point. Figures like Kabir are revered by Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs and drew on elements from the Bhakti and Sufi traditions, while festivals and saints and celebrations were shared and held in common. In such a situation even asking if something is really either Hindu, or Muslim, or Sikh may just be asking the wrong question and imposing a particular World Religions Paradigm on a situation to which it does not really apply. To take a Chinese example, one of the two major surviving Daoist traditions Quanzhen Dao, saw its founder explicitly incorporating Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist texts into its central corpus. In this situation and others trying to look for a pure Daoism which doesn’t contain elements of the other religions may be problematic.32

Thirdly, we can further ask questions about the borders of religion. The notion that somebody is clearly within one religion or another has been questioned to some degree by the two points above, but it also inheres to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. For instance, as studies have shown we have texts and groups for at least the first four hundred years of the Common Era that we cannot clearly identify as Christian or Jewish. The separation of the two traditions clearly took far longer than the traditional narrative or the standard depiction of demarcated traditions has suggested.33 Meanwhile, early Islam was drawing on elements from both its older cousins and it can be suggested that Muhammad may well have seen his community as a form of Judaism in its earliest stages. Again, particularly in areas like Baghdad and Al-Andalus we know that there was much sharing and crossover in parts of their history. While few may have been unsure of their identity we do nevertheless see, a tradition which still exists or has been revived today, Jewish Sufis who clearly exist in a category which a strict drawing of the World Religions Paradigm as traditionally envisaged would see as untenable.34 Again, the border line of culture and religion is often not fixed and so,

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29 This issue is discussed by McGuire, *Lived Religion*, but see also Roberts, “Religious Belonging and the Multiple”.

30 On issues relating to the pragmatic use of services in Chinese religion, see Chau, “A Different Kind of Religious Diversity,” and Yao and Zhao, *Chinese Religion*, 170-3, and for a broad overview of Chinese religion, see Hedges, “China”. On the lack of concern over this in contemporary Chinese religion, see Herrou, *A World of Their Own*, 76. We discuss this further below, especially in terms of how it may be characterised.

31 For a brief discussion of this in the Chinese context, see Braak, “Introduction”, 13, for a wider discussion of how syncretism can be seen in a positive way at least in theological terms, see Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 39-60 (on Christianity as inherently syncretic), 218-220 (on feminist theology and syncretism), and 237-241 (on overcoming negative connotations).

32 Many of these issues are discussed in Hedges, “Why Are there Many Gods?”

33 For a summary of this, see Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, 33-36.

34 On Jewish Sufis and some of the historical relationships, see Randall, *Sufism and Jewish-Muslim Relations*. As noted, the World Religions Paradigm while not making this logically impossible seems to make it perhaps ill-founded, problematic, or some form of erroneously syncretic venture.
especially in many parts of Asia, Christians have often sought to claim part of this religio-cultural heritage as a foundational part of their Christian identity. We may note questions raised about Hindu Christianity in particular: can the Vedas take the role of the Old Testament?; can Sat Cit Ananda be a way to express the Trinity? These and other questions have become areas of intense discussion. Taking specifically Chinese examples, it is arguable that no strict demarcation existed between Daoism and Confucianism before around the beginning of the second millennium CE. Certainly they were generally not seen as contrasting traditions to which somebody could belong to one until the rise of the Neo-Confucian synthesis. However, Neo-Confucianism drew heavily from both the Buddhist and Daoist devotional and spiritual traditions, and despite many proponents repudiating both as superstition for the masses it arguably became more like them. We should note here that while we will talk about much shared commonality and crossing over between China’s religious traditions this often occurred in situations marked by power disparity and political contestations which saw certain traditions favoured or more able to shape (at least official) narratives on the relationship between the traditions.

I have argued so far that the term “religion” has a particular history and that, while not discrediting the term, the hegemonic elite Western Christian discourse behind this has shaped a perception of what we see “religion” to be that has led to a distinctive World Religions Paradigm. This World Religions Paradigm may usefully name certain perspectives in the way that official Christian (certainly Protestant, and at least to some degree many Islamic and Jewish) traditions have envisaged themselves. However, it may not be so helpful when we look both at popular practices and also outside the Western world. I shall move now to further considering how discourse on Multiple Religious Belonging has been shaped by this kind of language, which is our third point which will also lead us to note the distinction already made about the way that so-called “Western” and “Eastern” ways of doing Multiple Religious Belonging are already distinguished and problematised (point four).

3 Shaping the discourse of Multiple Religious Belonging

In as far as much of the literature on Multiple Religious Belonging has taken place from the context of Christians taking on other religious identities, drawing on the World Religions Paradigm may seem to make sense. The way that elite Christian paradigms, which have informed the majority of Western nations over recent centuries, see religious belonging as unitary, and only capable of being such, means it describes a reality. Theological writing certainly has existed in a context where acknowledging religious Others is often hardly on the agenda, as John Thatamanil has noted: “Christian theological production” has been “largely blind to the reality of religious multiplicity.” Indeed, where Christian theology has looked at the possibility of Multiple Religious Belonging it has often suggested it is “theologically unintelligible” or that the response is likely to be negative.

Despite the often negative assumption about its possibility, often from a particularist-style stance, Paul Knitter has noted many people have looked to the reality of people doing it; a focus on Lived Religion rather than ideological theological presumption. Amongst the growing literature, however, I think it fair to say that even in the instances where it has been assumed that Multiple Religious Belonging happens it is still nevertheless taken to be a problem; something which does not fit the World Religions Paradigm and therefore in need of explanation. I should carefully separate two aspects of this discussion which are sometimes interlinked in the discourse but are utterly different. These are, on the one hand, Christian theological discussion on what Multiple Religious Belonging is and whether it is legitimate within the terms

35 A good overview of Christian inculturation in India is Collins, Christian Inculturation in India.
36 See Hedges, “China”.
37 Thatamanil, “Eucharist Upstairs, Yoga Downstairs”, 7.
38 See Beltramini, “Can One Person Belong to Two Faiths”, 104-105.
39 This quote seems to some this up: “To the insistence that you can’t speak two different religious languages, many people are responding: ‘But I think I’m doing it. And it seems to work’” (Knitter, Introducing Theologies of Religions, 228). On the particularist paradigm, see Hedges, Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue, 146-196.
of that tradition. On the other hand, is more phenomenological description of the process. Given that the World Religions Paradigm is shaped by inherent Christian theological presuppositions about the proper nature of religion we should expect the former to influence to latter, and to some extent I believe that this has happened. Moreover, given that so much of the literature is, as noted, analysing Christians who have adopted another religious identity the assumptions of the World Religions Paradigm and the Christian theological agenda may seep, almost unseen and unquestioned, into the wider discussion.

I will take some representative samples from the literature to discuss the situation. This will look firstly at some Christian theological and philosophical discussion on the issue. Here I will particularly draw on the work of Drew on the Christian situation as she has produced what is a landmark study in the area. Secondly, I will pick up the way that, particularly in the West, the contemporary context has been categorised by something of a religious supermarket theme, using Peter Phan and John Berthrong. Finally, I will note some commentary on the situation in China and East Asia taking some writing by Catherine Cornille and Jan van Bragt as representative. I will suggest that although taking Multiple Religious Belonging seriously may undermine aspects of the World Religions Paradigm its assumptions still haunt the discussion and affect the way it is represented.

Drew’s study of Multiple Religious Belonging focuses on a number of case studies of, and interviews with, people who have, at least started with, a primary Christian identity and who have integrated a strong Buddhist identity or belonging alongside this. She sees it as about developing a “process of integration” whereby these two essentially different, and to some degrees alien, traditions can be combined. While she sees them as capable of being meaningfully integrated such that it does not entail a confused or problematic betrayal of either tradition, the position and argument of her book assumes – from a traditional Christian stance that resonates with the World Religions Paradigm – that this is a problem that needs explaining. Drew, taking the viewpoint of the Christian theologians involved, sees “assimilating a truth from one context into another [as] a complex process”. As such, it assumes an essential problem to be explained as different worldviews are brought together. This comes logically from within its context within the Christian situation but may then affect the way Multiple Religious Belonging as a whole is discussed and theorised. As discussed above, Drew suggests a range of issues (the incompatibility of doctrine and lifeways, and the need for one to take precedence in one’s identity) as reasons to find the venture if not illegitimate, then as at least too hard for all but the most elite. Cornille, is perhaps a good spokesperson for the most hard-line view seeing the very logic of religion as making it actually impossible: “the very nature of religion” entails a “total commitment” to just one tradition.

Berthrong and Phan take their starting point from the diversity which exists. For Berthrong this is the “divine deli” in which we live in a context where increasingly people feel free to pick and choose amongst religious options found in situations of religious diversity. He notes, though, that such “[p]romiscuity has never been highly regarded by the guardians of religious orthodoxy, and this would hold for Zen and Catholic priests as well as Protestant pastors and Orthodox rabbis.” While Berthrong suggests we should not reject Multiple Religious Belonging he places it, I would suggest, within a context that assumes the World Religions Paradigm; for him separated identities are the norm. We should note here that we include a range of different phenomena under the term Multiple Religious Belonging. In Berthrong’s “divine deli” we are not discussing figures like Drew’s elite virtuosos who seek or struggle with two strongly held religious identities of beliefs. His discussion notes a religious landscape where bricolage – a term for one of Drew’s

40 In terms of literature the majority comes from people writing from or about Christian traditions, e.g. Cornille, Many Mansions?, Drew, Buddhist and Christian? - the question mark in both these works’ titles may be telling. While there is some literature from other perspectives, for instance, on the JewBu phenomenon it is much less cited and sparser.
41 Drew, Buddhist and Christian?
42 Phan, Being Religious Interreligiously, and Berthrong, The Divine Deli.
44 Drew, Buddhist and Christian?, 206.
47 Berthrong, The Divine Deli, xvi.
categories – is found. Those who may be termed in other language spiritual but not religious (SBNR) or religious “nones” are often seen to be engaged in such religious bricolage. \(^{48}\) Commenting on this André van der Braak notes that: “In the scholarly literature, this phenomenon is often described in a negative way, as a form of consumerism, spiritual shopping, or ‘patchwork religiosity’”. \(^{49}\) Indeed, for Phan this situation is what he terms “a contemporary, postmodern form of syncretism in which a person looks upon various religions as a supermarket from which, like a consumer, one selects at one’s discretion and pleasure... without regard to their truth values and mutual compatibilities.” \(^{50}\) As such, for Phan again, an assumption is that these different options actually are, authentically, incompatible so the picking and choosing he speaks of ignores “truth values” and “mutual compatibilities”. Certainly unlike Berthrong, whose context is explicitly North American, Phan writes into an Asian context; although, like Drew, his work is explicitly Christian theological reflection. Therefore Phan also theorises Multiple Religious Belonging as a difficulty, writing: “A final word of caution: Multiple religious belonging is not for the faint hearted or the dilettante.... It is a demanding vocation... which up until now God has only granted to a few. It is not unlike martyrdom.... It is a gift to be received in fear and trembling and in gratitude and joy.” \(^{51}\) Hardly a call to such a way of life and contrasts with Berthrong’s somewhat more receptive note that the mainstream religions should not reject it outright. Nevertheless, Berthrong also appears to believe that those following this path do not have a proper sense of belonging within the particular religions; essentially they are separated from the religions they take their deli choices from. Multiple Religious Belonging discourse treats the religions as bounded territories of belonging following the World Religions Paradigm. For both Berthrong and Phan, I would suggest in line with Braak’s analysis, the Multiple Religious Belonging of the bricolage model is seen as not truly authentic to the religions, because my contention is that it is found wanting by the World Religions Paradigm standard. Without being so judgemental, Drew as we noted earlier also prioritises the World Religions Paradigm noting that these “softer” forms may occur but are not properly Multiple Religious Belonging. However, the notion that one must belong in some “hard” sense while ingrained within the World Religions Paradigm as part of what religion should be seems out of kilter both with Far Eastern traditions and also the growing norms of Western society. \(^{52}\) With this noted, we turn to point four, to see that way the discourse distinguishes “Eastern” (East Asian) and “Western” forms of Multiple Religious Belonging.

I turn now to Cornille who observes that: “The idea of belonging to only one religion has been more or less alien to most of the religious history of China and Japan....” \(^{53}\) She certainly notes, as I will argue below, that at the popular level we do not see the assumption of Multiple Religious Belonging as a problem. Nevertheless, I still see a problem with the way that her approach is developed because it does not challenge the framework of the World Religions Paradigm within which Multiple Religious Belonging is seen to work. As such she claims: “In the end, most religious traditions expect a total and unique commitment, if not from their followers at large, at least from their specialists or spiritual elite.” \(^{54}\) Against this, in the same volume Jan van Bragt argues that Multiple Religious Belonging may not be the right term to use in the East Asian context, in his case Japan is the example used. \(^{55}\) I will briefly elucidate his argument as it has some parallels to what I will say here, but first we should note that assuming the Multiple Religious Belonging framework within the World Religions Paradigm Cornille further applies her argument directly

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48 On some of the ways in which such religious non-affiliation is discussed in the literature and the contemporary situation, examining this in various contexts, see Davie, *Religion in Britain*, Jeung et. al., “Redefining Religious Nones”, King and Hedges, “What is Religion?”, 22-4, and Singleton, “Are religious ‘nones’ secular?”


52 See Kalsky, “In Search of a ‘New We’ in the Netherlands,” 169-70. We discuss this further below.


54 Ibid., 3.

55 Bragt, “Multiple Religious Belonging of the Japanese People”. That we may need to understand the Chinese conception of religion to understand Multiple Religious Belonging in that context, but also the contemporary Western context, is suggested by Braak, see “The Secular and the Sacred as Contested Spaces?”, 288. I return to this argument at the end of this paper.
to the Chinese context which I will argue below is different: “Whereas the Chinese might have experienced a sense of simultaneous belonging to Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, scholars or monks of each of these traditions were expected to demonstrate unswerving and single-minded commitment to their own tradition.” The words with which she follows this are also very telling: “This may be seen to flow from the very nature of religion, which might be understood – ideally – as the total commitment of will, feelings, and intellect to the ultimate reality.” As such, Cornille places her claims very much within the classical World Religions Paradigm where the “essence” of religion is seen as being a totalizing regime of belief and commitment defined by a specific creedal and belonging identity.

By way of contrast to Cornille’s argument, Bragt suggests that Multiple Religious Belonging is “very near being a complete misnomer.” I will pick out some key points that he makes: first, that religion is considered not so much on the question of truth and doctrine, but on ritual and practice where “boundaries tend to blur”; second, religions are considered situationally and complementary; third, a single worldview pervaded much religiosity such that a sense of different “religions” (as bounded territories) would often not enter into the equation. Bragt does certainly note that exclusive belonging did occur and takes Nichiren and Shinran as two examples of people who proclaimed a single religious way which excluded others. Notably, though, this was not so much about excluding other religious traditions, as we would term them, so much as an intra-Buddhist dispute and so even in this example it defines a narrow form of a single religion as (for want of a better term) “the one true faith”; however, as Bragt notes they both go against the general spirit and tenor of Japanese religiosity. Bragt therefore gives us a context in which at least one East Asian example does not fit the concept of Multiple Religious Belonging under the World Religions Paradigm. I wish to take this further, arguing against Cornille both that the kind of exclusive rejection of Multiple Religious Belonging is found in elite conceptions or identities in China, and also theorising an alternative to Multiple Religious Belonging and the World Religions Paradigm by examining the Chinese case more closely.

We can see clearly here that speaking of Multiple Religious Belonging in the East Asian context, especially under the World Religions Paradigm, may lead to fault lines in how we speak, while we may reify certain conceptions (point five). This is a matter which will be further explored in what follows as we explore the territory of Chinese religiosity. Here I will challenge the regnant discourse and propose an alternative (point six): to speak of Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape as a way to conceptualise the situation in the traditional Chinese religious ecology.

4 Multiple Religious Belonging as Strategic Religious Participation in East Asia

As I have suggested those things which we label religion have operated and behaved very differently in East Asia, at least at the level of everyday practice, than has been the case in the Western world, at least over the last few centuries. Indeed, the very term Multiple Religious Belonging may be the wrong phrase to use as it may simply distort the conversation. To suggest that we see Multiple Religious Belonging in China when a villager goes to the Buddhist temple one day, hires a Daoist exorcist the next, and prays at a folk shrine in the afternoon would seem to suggest that something equivalent is going on to the situation when a Catholic theologian decides to adopt Buddhist meditation and maybe even take refuge in the triratna (Triple Refuge of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha). I would suggest that this distorts the situation. Firstly, I am not disputing that something related to our essentially contested concept of religion is going on, but what we are seeing

60 See the references in note 31, but also note Cornille, “Introduction” and Bragt, “Multiple Religious Belonging of the Japanese People”.
is very different. In the second case we see somebody who clearly sits within one religious tradition (the Catholic theologian), in a way more or less prescribed by the World Religions Paradigm, yet decides for a variety of reasons to seek some form of dual or multiple religiosity. There is simply no comparable kind of decision-making process or even framework taking place in the former case (the Chinese villager). In as far as I have suggested that theorising on Multiple Religious Belonging envisages some form of World Religions Paradigm as its basis we need to rethink the way we speak and talk about this. To take one aspect, it entails recognising the very limited scope of the way that we use religion; like many other essentially contested concepts it does not have a single definition, and in different contextual situations may mean different, even contradictory, things. To take another aspect, what we mean by “belonging” or “identity” in relation to religion sit very differently within this context. As a further point our use of the word “multiple” itself raises questions. On an etic level we can certainly impose this language, something which may be accepted by some of those inside the particular traditions we name in these ways. However, on the level of Lived Religion we may be better off speaking of options or strategic choices within a single landscape of religious providers. This, further, raises the question of how to speak about religion in the Chinese context. Recent theorising on this suggests that market models of religion have been dominant in American sociology as well as popular in China. In the latter, associating the potentially suspect category of religion with the market may seem to associate it with a powerful and dominant narrative. However, it may not be the best way to describe the situation. This theorising, following Vincent Goosaaert and David Palmer, prefers to speak about a “religious ecology” which fits well with the metaphor of a “religious landscape” which I employ in this paper. They suggest that the term ecology does not involve a one-size-fits-all model, as describing Chinese religious choices as market based does (which may apply in some contexts but not others). Rather, it suggests a broader field which is evolving and changing, and where changes to one part of the ecology can have dramatic knock-on effects elsewhere. Extending the ecology/landscape metaphor,

61 It should be faced head on here that the term “religion” is not native to East Asian. The modern Chinese term zongjiao was coined in nineteenth century Japan, and means something like, literally, “traditions of ancestral rites”. It carries very different connotations. Moreover, as has been argued when it was enforced on Japan by gunboat diplomacy is radically forced the Japanese to try and box their cultural framework into shapes which it simply didn’t fit. An issue which continues till today, see Fitzgerald, The Ideology of Religious Studies, 159-80, and Josephson, The Invention of Religion in Japan. Equally it created problems in China, not least in determining what was “religion” and what was another newly created term mixin, superstition, or what should be otherwise categorised; a matter which again has ongoing ramifications, see e.g. note 63. As Braak has noted: “Our familiar Western notions of what religion is breaks down when confronted with Chinese forms of religiosity” (“The Secular and the Sacred as Contested Spaces?”, 279). On the terminology in traditional Chinese thought with particular reference to Confucianism, see Yao, An Introduction to Confucianism, 38-47; generally on issues around China and the terminology of religion, see Hedges, “China”.

62 Falun Gong may be taken as an example. Benjamin Penny has analysed Falun Gong as a “religion” showing that it meets many of the criteria that would commonly be associated with this term, and under his analysis it seems quite compelling (The Religion of Falun Gong). However, as Xinzhong Yao has noted the connotations of the term “religion”, or zongjiao, in China are quite different. There it is often seen as “a superstructure which consists of superstition, dogmas, rituals and institutions” (Yao, An Introduction to Confucianism, 40-1, see also the dictionary definition in Braak, “Introduction”, 12). While this may in some ways fit Falun Gong its association with qigong means that to many Chinese it is linked more to traditional practices of self-cultivation which are not innately tied to the term “religion”. Indeed, it is notable that generally Falun Gong has never claimed to be a religion, which may make sense in the Chinese context because in the period from its formation to repression such a claim would automatically make it an illegal organisation as it is outside the five recognised religions. Nevertheless, in international terms defenders of it have seen what has happened in China as coming under the mantle of freedom of religion, with the right to manifest being denied. Despite this, Falun Gong has not commonly at least accepted this epithet, which considering that it would bolster its claims to illegitimate repression may be suggestive that its leaders too do not see it as a religion. This arguably is because of an association with other categories in Chinese thought. For a discussion on some debated discourse around Falun Gong as a religion, see Hedges, “Burning For a Cause”, and for more on the way that the Chinese government’s language on it, see Fitzgerald, The Religious Question in Modern China, 336-42.

63 For a discussion on these problematic terms, see Roberts, “Religious Belonging and the Multiple”, 53-56.

64 For some theorising on “the multiple”, see Roberts, “Religious Belonging and the Multiple”, 56-59.

65 See Chau, “A Different Kind of Religious Diversity”. I discuss this further in what follows.

66 See on this question Goosaaert and Palmer, The Religious Question in Modern China, 8-13, and Braak, “Introduction”, 10-14.

67 The connection is one that Goosaaert and Palmer also employ, see The Religious Question in Modern China, 13.
I may suggest that various habitats of religious practice may exist with their own distinctive characteristics, and which this theory suggests are interrelated as part of religious and social practice, organisation, and the dynamics which exist. As such, in speaking of religious providers I do not suggest that we simply see a market model in play. Certainly some forms of practice, such as Neo-Confucian spirituality, would be available only to limited elites, while in villages the providers may simply be based upon whatever choices become available or are based around socialised norms rather than competitive market principles. I use the term providers, therefore, with this proviso.

To return to the Quanzhen Dao tradition, this adopted a number of texts from different religious traditions as core: the Heart Sutra (Buddhist), the Classic of Filial Piety (Confucian), and the Daodejing and Qingjingjing (Daoist). Adopted, consciously, from the Three Traditions (sanjiao) by Wang Zhe this represents an elite formulation, but I do not see Multiple Religious Belonging as being a useful way to describe this. It was certainly clear that these were texts representing three different traditions, however, if we suggested that Wang created a synthetic blend of three different religions we are suggesting a comparable situation to somebody today (in a Western context at least) taking, for example, the Qur’an, the Bhagavad-Gita, and the Talmud to create a new religion. It may be better to see his intention as more like an ecumenical endeavour, or as a synthesis of different philosophical schools instead. Of course, neither analogy works particularly well. Nevertheless, the point is as much that envisaging this as some form of Multiple Religious Belonging though the World Religions Paradigm will distort our understanding, as will other analogies based on our perceptions of religious/ non-religious terminology employed within a Western (or Western Christian) context. I do not intend here to conduct an analysis of medieval Chinese religion, for which I lack the skill and expertise, rather I am aiming for a more modest argument: that not just at the level of Lived Religion, but also at more elite levels, the concept of Multiple Religious Belonging as typically used does not fit the Chinese context. What is often termed the Three Traditions (sanjiao) are better seen as three different versions of Chinese religiosity rather than entirely distinct traditions, a point I will further outline as we proceed. As noted above, though, this does not mean that they existed in a simple or equal context, but one in which political and power contestations often marked the relationship, understanding, and identity of each one.

To note a key point, I return to Cornille’s suggestion that the East Asian context cannot be taken as a model for a place where Multiple Religious Belonging happens or is possible. Against such a perspective she argues that actually, at an elite level, it was as much frowned upon there as in her own Catholic tradition. This, I argue, presupposes the World Religions Paradigm is in operation in traditional China. Today, it must be acknowledged the changing ecology has patterns that may more closely fit the World Religions Paradigm. However, in traditional China while the Buddhist monk, the Confucian literati, or the Daoist monk is clearly one and not any of the others it rests upon a different worldview. The Quanzhen

68 See note 70 below.

69 On his use of these, see Eskildsen, The Teachings and Practices of the Early Quanzhen Taoist Masters, 6 and 14. Other Buddhist and Confucian texts were also quoted by Song dynasty Daoists, see Robinet, “Syncretism”, 22.

70 While I do not develop the issue of the Chinese so-called sanjiao (三教) or “Three Tradition” further in the main text we should note some key points. Either a specifically blended form of the three traditions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism) was made in explicitly sanjiao traditions (see Dean, Lord of the Three in One) or else some understanding of the specific arenas of life governed by each one was present (see Hedges, “China”, 48-49). A general survey can be found in Yao and Zhao, Chinese Religion, 11-15 and Gentz, “Religious Diversity in the Three Teachings Discourse”. On the sanjiao within a Daoist context see Komjathy, The Daoist Tradition, 33, 137, and Eskildsen, The Teachings and Practices of the Early Quanzhen Taoist Masters, 60-61. The political contestations are noted in various places, but on the general issue of power and authority between and within religions, see Hedges and Welch, “Charisma, Scriptures, Revelation, and Reason”, while for some general points on government authority in China, see Hedges, “China”, 63-64, and Yao and Zhao, Chinese Religion, 73-76, 78-86, 123-144.

71 As suggested in the case with Japan, to some extent China has adopted Western expectations, and certainly at the governmental level there are different and distinct religious organisations with their own respective and clearly demarcated boundaries. Legally and politically a World Religions Paradigm may seem dominant, see Goosaeart and Palmer, The Religious Question in Modern China, 315-50. See also note 92 which observes that this model appears also to have entered some of the thinking of religious bodies themselves. It is unclear how it may relate, but in Fujian Province some Sanjiao/ Three-In-One tradition temples have registered as Daoist (Goosaeart and Palmer, The Religious Question in Modern China, 348).
Dao monk or nun understood the Buddhist and Confucian scriptures/classics as being part of her or his own tradition.\textsuperscript{72} It was a different way of being, or choosing, within the landscape of religiosity; certainly she or he no doubt felt that their chosen path was better. But, for what?\textsuperscript{73} Our Quanzhen religious would not repudiate the value of, for instance, Confucian values and mores in public life. Likewise, while Daoist funeral rites existed and were thought proper for a nun or monk and were used in community events, there would be no objections to a lay person taking a Buddhist funeral.\textsuperscript{74} Further, when Confucian literati retired as they sometimes did from public life to a monkly existence they would often become a Buddhist or Daoist.\textsuperscript{75} Despite the often high-profile polemics against these traditions as superstition for the masses we generally cannot see such a move as a “conversion” from one tradition to another, or moving from being an “insider” of one tradition to an “insider” of another; with the concomitant sense of thereby becoming an “outsider” to their previous home tradition. Certainly we do see some instances of this, where we see examples of somebody explicitly leaving, for instance, the Buddhist or Daoist tradition to become an “outsider” to their previous home tradition.76 One only has to note the plethora of traditional temples that hold statues of Buddhas, Daoist deities, and Confucian exemplars to see that the sharp World Religions Paradigm of bounded territories are not operating either at an ideological or a practical level.

I will suggest that within this framework the terminology of Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape is more useful. I see these dual terms as providing an alternative to both Multiple Religious Belonging, through the terminology of Strategic Religious Participation, and of the World Religions Paradigm, through the usage of Shared Religious Landscape. Notably, I am not claiming that this is a correct or better set of terminology, simply one that will help us to better understand the activity of the essentially contested concept of religion within this landscape of religiosity. As such, rather than seeing a Confucian who engages in Zen meditation or Daoist bio-spiritual techniques as doing something essentially comparable to a Catholic theologian who engages in these activities, as both doing forms of Multiple Religious Belonging, we see a related but different activity taking place.\textsuperscript{77} The choice of activities is not, for the Confucian, about a potentially illegitimate or dangerous crossing into another

\textsuperscript{72} On the role of the texts within the Quanzhen tradition see note 69, while the following on Wang Zhe is insightful: “Wang established five communities (hui) in Shandong. Each community considered itself to be founded on a synthesis of the three teachings: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. He was committed to the synergy of the three teachings in doctrine and practice, and he stands as one of the most important representatives of what is known in China as “harmonizing the three teachings’ (sanjiao heyi)” (Littlejohn, Daoism, 153). A Quanzhen Dao priest I discussed this with in 2015 has also suggested that the fusion of the three traditions and reading the texts of all three remains an important part of what he understands Daoism to be today.

\textsuperscript{73} It should be noted here that the precise state of relations between the three traditions was never fixed and stable and also remains under studied such that no precise statement can be definitively made on this subject, see Barrett, “Taoism and Neo-Confucianism”, Barrett, “Taoism and Chinese Buddhism”, Barett, “Confucianism and Daoism”, Barrett, “Confucianism and Buddhism”, Kirkland, “Taoism and Confucianism”, Nickerson, “Taoism and Popular Religion”, and Robinet, “Syncretism”.

\textsuperscript{74} A Daoist funeral would, in some respects, be seen as part of the whole package of spiritual practices within which the religious lived their lives. Certainly, Buddhist funeral rites became the mainstay of Chinese practice, but this was always mixed in with devotion to the ancestors which may combine both Confucian, Daoist, and traditional Chinese aspects. Moreover, the views of the afterlife were a conflation of views from traditional Chinese thought and Buddhist introduced concepts of reincarnation. On some of these issues, see Berling, “Death and Afterlife in Chinese Religions”, Bokenkamp, Ancestors and Anxiety, Hedges, “China”, 61-3, and Watson and Rawski, Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China.

\textsuperscript{75} On some of the traditions of retirement from public life for officials see Kohn, Monastic Life in Medieval Daoism, 194, and Taylor, The Religious Dimension of Confucianism, 93-98.

\textsuperscript{76} On some polemics and debates in traditional China see Littlejohn, Daoism, 104-105, 156-157. This needs to be understood within the context and framework where a shared cosmology existed, and in light of the sanjiao tradition as discussed above. Furthermore, as Livia Kohn has pointed out both Buddhists and Daoists freely listened to each others teachings and learned from their techniques, something which continues, today, see Kohn, “One Dao – Many Ways”, 59, where she references and discusses Herrou, A Way of Their Own.

\textsuperscript{77} For a discussion about the way such traditions are used in Confucianism, see Taylor, The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism, 77-114, and specifically on how Confucianism would interpret religious diversity, see Yao, “Confucian Approaches to Religious Diversity”.

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\textsuperscript{71} On some polemics and debates in traditional China see Littlejohn, Daoism, 104-105, 156-157. This needs to be understood within the context and framework where a shared cosmology existed, and in light of the sanjiao tradition as discussed above. Furthermore, as Livia Kohn has pointed out both Buddhists and Daoists freely listened to each others teachings and learned from their techniques, something which continues, today, see Kohn, “One Dao – Many Ways”, 59, where she references and discusses Herrou, A Way of Their Own.
bounded territory, but a strategic participation in useful techniques: Strategic Religious Participation. This takes place, as noted, in a landscape which is not composed of hermetically sealed borders of mutually exclusive religious belief-based territories. Rather, it is one where much of the basic religious territory is shared and held in common, even if it is valorised or evaluated as more or less worthwhile in different ways: it is a Shared Religious Landscape.76

It will be useful to further outline what is meant by these two terms. Firstly, Strategic Religious Participation denotes the fact that much Chinese religiosity involves making choices that are suitable. As discussed above this is not primarily, or principally, about a market-driven context in which various religious providers “sell” their “products”. Part of the choice, often a large part, will be socialised. This may be localised or family based, for instance, using the local temple or one that has an association with a family or clan tradition. There is also a knowledge about which providers are suitable for specific purposes, and so Celestial Masters Daoist priests have a reputation for exorcisms. One wishing to pursue the internal self-cultivation of neidan, or internal alchemy, would, however, become a Quanzhen Dao monk or nun. These choices are strategic therefore in that while a range of options exist the most fruitful, or those which specific customs dictate, will be sought out or employed. Moreover, it will not on the whole be based upon a sense of following a particular tradition. Indeed, as we have noted, even Daoist and Buddhist monks would seek to learn, or be sent to learn, from masters in another “religious” tradition. A renowned master is a renowned master. Of course, sectarian battles would be fought often rhetorically and quite bitterly between Buddhists, Confucians, and Daoists, but we must not overlook that internal (intra-religious) disputes would also be fought. Meanwhile in most cases learning, borrowing, or adapting from another religion would not seem out of the place. To some extent the sanjiao/Three Traditions conception allowed this.79 Further, because we are not normally talking about fixed or monolithic senses of belonging or identity to one tradition I have used the term participation. A Confucian scholar who employed Chan mediation would not, it seems fair to say, see himself as a Buddhist, or see himself as having a partial identity as a Buddhist, he would still be a literati.

I have discussed above how the language of religious ecology, which is preferred by a number of scholars, links well to the metaphor of landscape, and hence speaking of a “religious landscape” seems to make sense of the Chinese context. Including the concept “shared” in this extends a number of points made already, that much cosmology was shared in common between the traditions, as well as books, spiritual figures, rituals and much else. Ancestor veneration or funerary rites, though differing (as much by region as anything else) between religious traditions, but also between social classes provides a sense of the aspects of a common heritage and practice. Again, the Three Traditions conception while not held by all was a powerful unifying factor in many periods. Certainly it was almost certainly not rationalised intellectually at the level of local temples where Buddhas, Daoist deities, Confucian figures, and local folk deities would be seen side by side on altars – as they still are today – but this thought-less-ness to the practice can help indicate that conceptions of fixed traditions did not exist but rather we saw shared traditions. Again, at elite levels, the Three Traditions would be rationalised, and this would be both in traditions such as Quanzhen Dao, Three Tradition traditions, and even by imperial decree.80 As such within the broad ecology of Chinese religiosity it makes sense to speak of a Shared Religious Landscape.

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78 When I say much of the basic religious territory is shared, this ranges from aspects such as a shared cosmology and worldview to other aspects. On some of what is held in common, see Hedges, “China”, especially 47-8, Yao and Zhao, Chinese Religion, 94-102, 148-153, 171-177.

79 As Mary Garrett has noted of Tang Dynasty imperial religious debates between the traditions even where fierce disagreement was seen between the debaters it did not stop rulings, and therefore a strong “official” position, that there was a harmony between the three traditions, see “The ‘Three Doctrines Discussions’ of Tang China”. In relation to discussions on Multiple Religious Belonging it is worth noting that Braak cites Joachim Gentz’s description of official sanjiao as a “behaviourist religious policy” (“Chinese Chan Buddhism in the Netherlands”, 165) which denotes that the concern is not whether we see a coherence of belief and doctrine (a World Religions Paradigm model, which is mirrored by the kind of concerns of consistency we have seen Drew express), but rather “looks in a pragmatic way at their efficiency” without trying “to solve doctrinal differences.” In this way Braak speaks of sanjiao as a “hermeneutical paradigm” focused on pragmatic effect not doctrinal truth. This accords well with my concept of Strategic Religious Participation which could be described as a pragmatic hermeneutics of religious choice.

80 See note 79 on this last point.
As discussed above, this is not to suggest that some comparable sense or usage of “religion” as an essentially contested concept is done away with. Clearly, while those things we call “religion” are doing different things in different ways, we are nevertheless still dealing with the territory of “religion”.81 (Much as whether you are in a democracy or monarchy it is still about “politics”). However, to describe the crossing of borders using the World Religions Paradigm language of Multiple Religious Belonging will misconstrue the situation. The Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, or folk traditionist does not see their behaviour as about doing several different “religions” (bounded and belief-defined territories). Rather it is about Strategic Religious Participation so that in a situation where religions can be freely crossed and adapted (a Shared Religious Landscape) we see people engaging in those activities that make most sense to them (within their communal context) as part of a plethora of activities they could meaningfully choose from; so we see Strategic Religious Participation.

We have now engaged all six of the key points of the argument, and will seek to explore some possible objections which made be made against the proposals put forward here. This will see us revisiting the formulation of the term Multiple Religious Belonging and also the contested concept of religion (points one, two, and three) to show the utility of the reformulation (point six).

5 A note on some terminology: possible objections

A matter not yet attended to is the terminology, and different scholars in the area have suggested why they think we should prefer dual or multiple, or belong or identity, such that we may have Dual Religious Identity rather than Multiple Religious Belonging, or again others have suggested hyphenated as the first term.82 Each of these will obviously give a slightly different perspective or emphasis: for instance whether it is about group belonging to a religion or a personal identity with a religion. However, I do not see that this makes a huge difference to my argument. Whichever term is used, the discussion is generally couched within the World Religions Paradigm and it is this which is the primary problem as outlined here. Certainly, while most people in much of East Asia would not traditionally have a sense of belonging to a particular religion so that Multiple Religious Belonging is a problematic phrase, simply changing that to Multiple Religious Identities would not solve the issue as it would still suggest they are identifying with different bounded and belief-based territories of religious practice. Again, hyphenated identities while it is been suggested as something which can be used in non-Western contexts where forms of multiple religious practice or participation (Multiple Religious Participation) may be more common does not seem to entirely solve the issue as it simply seems to state, or may imply, that people may exist between different religions without challenging the World Religions Paradigm framework.83 Again, while I have opted in the use of Strategic Religious Participation to use participation by simply changing Multiple Religious Belonging to Multiple Religious Participation would still not challenge the usage of a World Religions Paradigm. We need an entire paradigm shift.

The next question that may come up is about my using religion. As a number of authors have argued specifically with reference to an East Asian context, and as noted above in relation to Japan, the very term “religion” is itself a distorting factor.84 This raises two issues. One is that my insistence that we can

81 I have not directly raised and discussed the question of the meaning of the term “religion” in China at length, but it is discussed in for instance, notes 30, 61, and 62 and the references therein. On its application in such places, see also Schilbrack, “A realist social ontology of religion”.
82 Some discussion of preferred different terms from different perspectives can be seen in Drew, Buddhist and Christian?, 243, and Williams, “The Four Chalcedonian Adverbs”.
83 Looking specifically at Christian and Islamic practices in Indonesia, see Laksana, “Multiple Religious Belonging or Complex Identity?”. Certainly while showing the porous nature of the borders of these traditions in that context, and thereby pushing the limits of the World Religions Paradigm, nevertheless by exploring Islam and Christianity Laksana is addressing traditions where there are, traditionally, more clearly demarcated senses of religious identities and borders than may exist within the Chinese context. Hence showing shared participation may not lead us to radically rethink the entire paradigm as I am suggesting is needed within the context of traditional Chinese forms of religion.
84 See note 61.
continue to use “religion” in some way will inevitably distort the discussion. The other about where and how, assuming that we can employ it, that “religion” is deployed within the discussion.

The first point is very much a specific instance about the problems with, and arguments against, the term “religion” that was discussed earlier and it is simply impossible here to debate every point in detail. Nevertheless, I would largely agree that the enforcement of the term “religion” through the World Religions Paradigm did force the Japanese to do violence to their traditional way of thinking about traditions like Buddhism, Shinto, Confucianism, and in effect the entirety of their culture. It was the implementation of a Western model of modernity onto another society. However, it was not simply “religion” which was enforced here but also terms like “secular”, “politics”, “economics”, etc. Things which in a traditional Japanese worldview had been parts of unified wholes, or envisaged in very different ways, were grouped or boxed otherwise by this set of classificatory terms. Certainly this helps to make clear that many modern Western terms, such as “secular”, are as much created and “unnatural” (not part of an existing order of how things are or should be) as “religion”, and that to some degree we can only think one because of the existence of the other. Yet, I would make a further point: it does not show either that any one of these terms (or even all of them) are inherently “wrong” or entirely illicit. Rather what we need to do is to realise that an explicitly and exclusively modern Western interpretation of that term is a problem. Much as if we equally insist that there is only one model of democracy, secularism, culture, civilisation or many other things. To return to Gallie we are talking about essentially contested concepts. As noted above, alternatives suggested such as “sacred” or simply using the adjective “religious” simply swaps one essentially contested concept for another. The features of the cultural landscape we term “religion” can be meaningfully spoken of together. However, we need to realise that in many contexts (both historical and contemporary) they operate in ways quite unlike the imaginary of the World Religions Paradigm.

If we take it that we can strategically use religion within an East Asian context, and I have focused here on a Chinese case study rather than a Japanese one (each of course being distinct, much as understandings of “religion” are distinct within the modern Western conception) we must ask how to use it. I would point out that a number of scholars have suggested that we should speak not of Chinese religions but rather Chinese religion. This resonates well with what I have described above about China having a Shared Religious Landscape rather than the World Religions Paradigm. In many ways, a basic harmony of metaphysics and worldview underlies China’s major indigenous or adopted religious traditions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and folk religion); notwithstanding some very diverse inter-tradition and intra-tradition disagreements of course. Nevertheless, we see a landscape where it makes sense for people within one tradition to adopt the texts that in certain terms belong to others. A landscape in which temples, while nominally of one religion, will often hold statues of the leading figures of other religions, and where despite claims of superiority there is an underlying sense of, if not unity, then at least shared conceptualisations and interconnections. It may be noted as an aside, that a very specific history with various political, social, economic and other factors shaped the dynamics of Chinese religiosity whereby it was possible to speak of this landscape in which the traditions interacted and related as they do. However, it would be the work of another paper (if not an extensive monograph) to try and chart this, as such I will not address the question here.

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85 For instance, seeing “economics”, “politics”, “culture”, etc. as distinct areas which sit within a “secular” sphere, and which all sit apart from a “religious” sphere that can be clearly distinguished.

86 On the imbrications of “religion” and “secular” as co-created and intertwining terms, see Fitzgerald, Discourse on Civility and Barbarity.


88 See Yao and Zhao, Chinese Religion, 6-11.

89 There is certainly not shared unanimity amongst the traditions, and fierce debates to overturn the rivals took place, see Garrett, “The ‘Three Doctrines Discussions’ of Tang China”, nevertheless we must not forget that such fierce rivalries, and even inherent contradictions, exist within traditions we would normally identify as a single religion such as Christianity. One need only turn one’s mind to the Reformation and its ramifications in Europe to get some sense of the bitter nature of such intra-religious debates. Certainly one may say it is as equally impossible to be Lutheran and Catholic, or Baptist and Amish to put some perspective on this.
Of course, as raised in the critique of using “religion” in Japan we should not see the terminology as denoting a clear and defined arena of religiosity which is different from much else. Traditional notions of cosmology have infused politics, whether this be in ideas like *tianming* or the Mandate of Heaven, and areas of culture such as painting, the tea ceremony, and even day to day interaction. Of course, what is often termed philosophy is also not demarcated distinctly from religion, but this is a distinction that equally infects the Western discussion where clearly “religious” thinkers like Plato are often shoehorned into a supposedly “secular” philosophy curriculum and studied in that way. This speaks more of the need to understand and use the terminology of “religion” well I would suggest rather than suggesting we cannot use it; else we may equally need to jettison “philosophy” and a host of other terms whose boundaries are contested. This returns us to our discussions around such words and phrases as essentially contested concepts.

6 Suggestions: how does the language work in different contexts?

Several issues are raised by this paper that extend what I have argued so far. I would like to raise two of these as somewhat speculative discussions, although without the pretence of offering a definitive answer. These will be the questions of whether the religious ecologies of both China and the West may be changing. As I have suggested, our traditional usage of Multiple Religious Belonging is dependent upon a notion of the World Religions Paradigm that was forged within a particular context and may well make sense within many situations where we look at certain traditional Christian, Islamic, and Jewish identities. It has also affected the way that other religious identities and belonging, and options for participation, are understood. As Elizabeth Harris has noted in the Sri Lankan Buddhist context, Western colonialism forged a situation in which indigenous Buddhists have moved from seeing no contradiction in interchange and engagement between themselves and Christians to one where, following a World Religions Paradigm perspective, one can only be one and not the other in a strong sense. As such, I do not want to suggest that the paradigm of Multiple Religious Belonging founded upon the World Religions Paradigm exists now, or even in the past, only in an Abrahamic and Western context. My argument is simply that in a traditional Chinese perspective it does not work and we need to speak about Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape. I would like, though, as a brief thought experiment to ask whether Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape model might actually make more sense of certain contemporary Western phenomena than the Multiple Religious Belonging in a World Religions Paradigm model.

As noted, people are doing it, and it seems that many, especially younger, people seem to feel free to move within and between religions without a fixed sense of belonging or identity to a specific tradition. It has been suggested this is becoming the norm in Europe. Indeed, the idea that such traditions are fixed and bounded such that one can only ever belong to one at any time seems to many, it seems, increasingly passé. Are some contemporary Western bricolage/ New Age Multiple Religious Belongings like Chinese Strategic Religious Participation? Certainly, I think it is not entirely comparable because I have suggested that in the Chinese Shared Religious Landscape we see a comfort level of moving between “religions” (or I may better say across traditions) within the religion landscape that is both available at the popular and elite levels. It is both lived and elite religiosity. While this may to some degree be seen in figures like Wayne Teasdale, who with scholars such as Ursula King speak of interspirituality, it is certainly not a

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90 See, for instance, Hedges, “China”.
91 See Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter*, 191-212. The present author has noted the same phenomenon in contemporary China, see *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, 95, and see also Harris, “Double Belonging in Sri Lanka”. See also note 71 on the way this has penetrated governmental and legal conceptions. We may envisage this as part of a changing ecology.
92 We have discussed this above, but that it is now seen as more normative and not simply for “elite virtuosos” as Phan suggested is discussed by Bernhardt, “Religious ‘Multi-Identity’”, and Kalsky, “In Search of a ‘New We’ in the Netherlands".
normative elite perspective. A medieval Chinese Buddhist monk would certainly see no problem with a lay person using Confucian ethics, Buddhist funerary rites, Daoist exorcism, and folk shamanic rites. This contrasts with the way a Catholic priest would not, in most cases, be happy with his laypeople equally using strategic participation according to need. Whether outside of these institutional contexts, however, such a prescription against such an attitude exists is debatable. In at least one context, Braak has in fact suggested that Buddhists in the Netherlands seem to participate within multiple traditions in a way that seems more attuned to Chinese modes of religiosity than Western ones. Meanwhile, as noted earlier, those commonly labelled as SBNR or “nones” may also be seen to inhabit a space which may not be delimited by the classic World Religions Paradigm. Whatever we make of the data of people not being tied to one tradition, it seems many feel more freedom to choose those aspects of traditions which meet their needs. I would suggest it may be possible to term this Strategic Religious Participation. As noted, such practices have often been dismissed by scholars operating within a World Religions Paradigm as not properly Multiple Religious Belonging or having some improper identity vis-à-vis the traditions from which they take their options. We may ask though whether it is simply another way of being religious or doing religion. However, exploring this question would involve considerable research and argumentation and would be the work of another paper. As stated, my aim here is simply to raise the question which alerts us to the fact that our standard usage of Multiple Religious Belonging may not always be the best terminology to employ to describe religious practise even within a Western context.

As second discussion point, I would like to emphasise a certain dynamic within the religious landscapes of China which has been suggested by aspects of this paper. Indeed, the employment of the term religious ecology helps enable this because as noted it refers to an inevitably changing and shifting environment, not one which is fixed and stable. My argument has been that speaking of Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape makes more sense in a traditional Chinese context than using the language of Multiple Religious Belonging shaped by the World Religions Paradigm. However, is it true to say that Strategic Religious Participation still operates within the contemporary Chinese religious world? As I have suggested both political and legal systems, as well as some changes within religious traditions themselves, are moving in this direction, or more exactly are already operating under the World Religions Paradigm system. As such, am I speaking about a historical context rather than a contemporary one? Is my analysis obsolete or invalidated by this? I would suggest not for several reasons. First, as noted, my concern has been with traditional Chinese understandings. Of course, there is not simply one traditional Chinese concept on any matter. Nevertheless, I think the analysis offered here shows that across a broad spectrum of traditions and inclinations something that we can usefully conceptualise as Strategic Religious Participation occurred. Second, while it would take us beyond the scope of this paper some scholars have argued that while Christianity is making strong inroads into China, and may be suspected of being a driver in promoting the Multiple Religious Belonging paradigm that crossing traditions is a problem, it has been argued that in various ways Christianity has actually been adapted to Chinese traditional religion in many popular manifestations. As such, we see two-way flows of interaction. Third, a matter which would need extensive fieldwork, would be to see what happens at the local level, and in relation to everyday lived religiosity. It may well be the case that something like the traditional Chinese conception of Strategic Religious Participation is still going on. As noted, studies of Lived Religion have shown that elite paradigms often do not match actual practice. Therefore, government and legal strictures may not be a good indication of religious performance. These points, however, are noted as areas which would need further research and go beyond the specific arguments of this paper. Likewise, while I have speculated that in some ways aspects of contemporary Western religious performance may seem more inclined to what we term Strategic

93 While not a notion found in the hierarchies of most traditions, Teasdale’s representation of himself as a monastic engaged in interspirituality and King’s writings as a Western academic at an elite university make the discourse on this something of an elite practice. On the concept, see for example Teasdale, “The Interspiritual Age.”

94 Braak, “The Secular and the Sacred as Contested Spaces?”, where he notes of these Western Buddhists: “they can be more properly understood through the Chinese notion of religion than through Western notions of religion.” For a more detailed study of this, see his “Chinese Chan Buddhism in the Netherlands.”
Religious Participation it would require considerable further studies to make any definitive comments in that area. As noted earlier, my aim has not been to replace one set of vocabulary with another, or to claim that I have a new and better conceptualisation. Rather, my argument has been that in specific contexts, and in relation to certain practices, both sets of terminology may be a more useful indicator of the types of practice we have typically lumped under the rubric “Multiple Religious Belonging”. Furthermore, each may hide or illuminate certain facets of the phenomena under investigation.

### 7 Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the standard employment of the discourse on Multiple Religious Belonging rests very firmly within a traditional World Religions Paradigm which shapes the way that the literature and arguments have functioned. It also has seemingly distorted the questions and debate, with particular reference to an East Asian context, at least within China as I have argued here.\(^{95}\) There, I suggest, instead of asking whether we see Multiple Religious Belonging we need to understand that Strategic Religious Participation within a Shared Religious Landscape takes place. The presumptions of using the rites, rituals, and practices of one religion, even while holding a primary identity which may seem to be another religion does not necessarily mean that we see something comparable to what is normally called Multiple Religious Belonging. To some degree therefore asking if Multiple Religious Belonging (or Strategic Religious Participation) is possible within a Western Catholic or Protestant context by reference to Chinese patterns of religiosity may not reveal the results expected. Nevertheless, I think it reveals both more and less.

This can be contextualised in relation to the six points of the argument raised at the beginning. If I may recap them: first, while taking on board the deconstruction of religion it remains a useful heuristic device and referent point; second, however, there is no univocal sense of religion, or set of “religions” which can be studied, so we need to define what we mean and also avoid the problematic World Religions Paradigm; third, Multiple Religious Belonging has been predicated on this; fourth, it is established that there is a difference in the way that Multiple Religious Belonging is done between “the West” and East Asia, but; fifth, when we explore the discourse we see reifications and fault lines developing from such a distinction; sixth, existing theoretical and methodological categories of both religion and Multiple Religious Belonging need to be challenged and rethought, in particular I have developed the notion of Strategic Religious Participation as a way to think of such phenomena “after religion”, reflexively aware of the contexts in which we deploy it. In relation to the first two points we have noted that despite the clear fact that the concept religion has been constructed within a particular historical, linguistic, and political context, this does not of and by itself necessitate abandoning it. This is an argument that has been variously made and references to such arguments have been given, however, here a particular new angle is given to these arguments by the use of Gallie’s notion of essentially contested concepts. As noted, what may be classified as “religious” or a “religion” may differ greatly in China; certainly using the World Religions Paradigm will greatly distort the way we perceive those traditions which have developed within that context. Nevertheless, this is not in itself an argument against its usage. Certainly this is so if we still want to keep using other equally loaded and contested words, which also distort if applied in simplistic ways that assume Western norms, such as Chinese philosophy, politics, culture, society, etc. As has been indicated there are sound classificatory and theoretical reasons for keeping such terms as “religion” just as we use other broad classificatory terms.

In relation to points three and four it has been shown that the dynamics behind moving between traditions is very different in China compared to the standard model associated with the so-called Abrahamic traditions. This raises the possibility that the boundaries drawn by the Multiple Religious Belonging perspective are neither normal, natural, nor fixed. While I have not argued the point directly here, I have noted some cases where Lived Religion in specific situations may well show that Multiple Religious Belonging is far from illegitimate within a Christian worldview, and certainly in non-Western

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\(^{95}\) As noted above, it is also suggested that it distorts the situation in Japan too, see Bragt, “Multiple Religious Belonging of the Japanese People.”
contexts it may also be a way to envisage related phenomena. This has raised the way that the standard theorising is based on a World Religions Paradigm, and that even when we try to ask whether we can speak of Multiple Religious Belonging in a Chinese context we may simply be asking the wrong question. As such, as we have problematised the relations (point five), we then asked how to theorise border crossings and shared religiosity in the Chinese context, our point six. Through exploring the nature and forms of Chinese religiosity it has been suggested that we need not just new terms but also a new conceptualisation; even I argue an entire paradigm shift. This I have termed Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape, replacing both the way we think about Multiple Religious Belonging, but also the concept of “religion” behind it in the World Religions Paradigm. A point also raised, although we have not explored the dynamics behind it at length, is the power-play and political factors which shaped perceptions of such things as religion, the Three Traditions conception, and the relationship between traditions. There is never a clear and level field on which these are negotiated. Such factors are nevertheless always part of the study of any contextualisation of these issues in a specific situation.

Meanwhile, I have also suggested that contemporary Western lived religion may be moving to a position in which Strategic Religious Participation may be closer to describing behaviour and attitudes than the concept of Multiple Religious Belonging within the World Religions Paradigm. However, whether we can speak of a Shared Religious Landscape in the Western context is another matter: certainly traditional elite religious conceptions would mitigate against it, however, whether those termed SBNR or “nones” may see a range of traditions or practices which relate to some generic “spiritual” or “religious” framework as in some sense a Shared Religious Landscape is another matter; certainly this Shared Religious Landscape would be a very different ecological system from the Chinese one whatever the case. Given this, certainly at the level of Lived Religion, we may well expect that Western Christian norms may themselves also change. However, the terms are simply used here in a phenomenologically descriptive sense and are not used to give specific theological value to either case. Whether Multiple Religious Belonging or Strategic Religious Participation is possible for a Christian would primarily be a theological debate within the boundaries of that tradition as it evolves. Also, as noted, there are also reasons to suspect that at certain political and legal levels, at least, China may be seeking to adopt a World Religions Paradigm, within which we would see Multiple Religious Belonging as a normative possibility. However, as I have suggested we would need further research on both questions to see how such things were moving in the Western and East Asian contexts. My aim here has rather been to suggest that we need to expand our terminology and consider that the mainstream debate on Multiple Religious Belonging has given us concepts which work well in specific contexts but may misconstrue the discussion if applied elsewhere. Speaking of Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape makes more sense within a traditional Chinese context.

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96 See in particular Harris, “Double Belonging in Sri Lanka”, and also Laksana, “Multiple Religious Belonging or Complex Religious Identities” who discusses Christian-Muslim shared practices.
97 I am grateful to André van der Braak for feedback on an earlier version of this paper which has helped solidify my arguments and discussion, especially on the concept of the ecology of the Chinese religious landscape. My thanks also go to the two anonymous peer reviewers for useful and encouraging remarks that have helped me revise and improve the paper.


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