

Being a Scientist and a Christian:

Lessons from Religious Dual Belonging.

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Abstract

ASA members share a dual commitment to Christianity and the scientific enterprise. The result is both an external and internal dialog between science and Christianity. Many authors have discussed the relationship, between science and religion. This talk addresses the internal dialog between science and Christianity for those of us that share a commitment to both.

There are individuals who have a commitment to two differing religions, a dual belonging. I am not referring to inculturation, syncretism or the rejection of all truth claims. Rather, the acceptance of the “totality of religious practices and beliefs” of two different religions resulting in “the encounter with conflicting or incompatible claims to absolute truth.”² One difference between dual religious belonging and a commitment to science and Christianity is that science holds all truth to be provisional, until new experimental evidence results in an improved theoretical understanding. With this caveat there are lessons to be learned from both those with dual religious belongings and those committed to inter-religious dialog.

This paper draws on the experience of both of those with dual religious belonging and those committed to inter-religious dialog to understand: the nature of our internal dialog and ways of conducting that dialog. Catherine Cornille’s five attitudes to inter-religious dialog (humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and hospitality) and several suggestions for exploring the tensions in the science and religion dialog will be explored.

Introduction

To be a full member of the ASA requires at least an undergraduate degree in science, as well as affirmation of either the Apostles or Nicene Creed. Our identities are grounded in two

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² Catherine Cornille, "Double Religious Belonging: Aspects and Questions," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23 (2003): 45.

communities: the Christian community and the scientific community; a dual belonging. It is not unusual for articles in ASA publications to address issues involving science and Christianity. For many of us this external dialog reflects an ongoing internal dialog. This paper is about the nature of this internal dialog.

As I use the term “dual belonging” it refers to an individual who is living in BOTH communities, with a real commitment to both communities, and struggling with the conflicts that arise. The struggling is important here. The quest for truth is a characteristic of both science and religion. When truth claims seem incompatible an internal struggle seems inevitable. I would like to talk about that internal struggle by drawing on the experience of those with dual religious belongings. I will be drawing on the works of; Paul Knitter, a Buddhist – Christian; Catherine Cornille, a professor of comparative theology, who has written extensively on the subject, and John Thatamanil, whose course in Hindu Christian dialog started my thinking along these lines.³

In this paper I am not considering science as a religion, but rather as an epistemological enterprise with an attempt at exploring metaphysics. That is to say: science as a search for ultimate reality. One characteristic of science is the attempt to hold all such understandings provisionally. There are some truth statements in orthodox Christianity that are not held provisionally, but absolutely.⁴ Science and Christianity make some truth claims that overlap. Lessons from interreligious dialog and dual religious belonging can help with managing the internal dialog.

I will start by exploring what dual belonging isn't, drawing from the work of Cornille. Then I talk about what dual belonging is, drawing from both Cornille and Knitter. I will close with five suggestions for dealing with an internal dialog.

³ Taught in the spring of 2014 at Union Theological Seminary in NY City. It was from this course that much of the practical advice given at the end of the paper is derived.

⁴ For instance the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

What Dual Belonging Isn't

Dual belonging isn't Inculturation

According to Cornille, inculturation⁵ is *“the attempt to reformulate one religious tradition through the worldview and philosophical framework of another.”*⁶ Within science-Christian dialog this admits to two forms: reformulating science through a Christian framework, or reformulating Christianity through a scientific framework.

Examples of viewing science through a Christian world view include attempts to critique; evolution, geology, physics, and psychology using the Bible.⁷ The conflicts are often handled by either reformulating the science, or rejecting the science. This amounts to an apologetics for religion in the face of a perceived threat.

Viewing Christianity through the lens of science can take the form of Biblical accommodation or a symbolic interpretation of troublesome Biblical passages. Another example might be the interpretation of the law against eating pork as an enlightened practice to avoid the possibility of trichinosis, reducing a divine commandment to a piece of practical advice.⁸ This approach might see the tumbling of the walls of Jericho as an example of structural resonance. The miraculous nature of the event is therefore eliminated and replaced as a clever application of physics.⁹

⁵ Inculturation, enculturation and acculturation have different meanings. Acculturation is the process of assimilating to a different culture. Enculturation is the acquisition of the norms and characteristics of one's own culture. Inculturation can be used as an alternative spelling of enculturation. It has a technical meaning within the Catholic tradition where it is used to refer to how modify the presentation of teaching to other cultures. Those cultures in turn had an influence on those teachings within those cultures. Cornille is generalizing the term to a meaning closer to the idea of contextual theology.

⁶ Cornille, 46.

⁷ There are other more subtle instances of interpreting science and technology through a Christian lens. One example is those that see a Biblical mandate for humans to have dominion (of various interpretations) over all the Earth and therefore see science as a divinely sanctioned endeavor to fulfill this mandate.

⁸ This also implicitly assumes that the other cultures didn't understand the necessity of cooking pork thoroughly.

⁹ The Sabbath for the land in the Old Testament is often portrayed as advancement for agriculture by letting a field lie fallow so as to replenish the soil. The idea that there was a natural cycle of seven good years followed by seven bad years is attested to in Gen 41:26-32 (Pharaoh's dream) as well as in Mesopotamian sources (see the story of Aqhat tablet 3, column 1, lines 43-48 James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts & Pictures* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 143.) By letting the land lie fallow in the seventh year, perhaps the gods were believed to be tricked into thinking that the seven bad years had come to an end, resulting in the start of a new cycle of seven good years. This has been suggested as the setting for the Ugaritic

In these cases a prior commitment to either Christianity or science is the dominant commitment and the other is reinterpreted in an attempt to harmonize the two. The person involved with inculturation has a home (either science or Christianity), visits the other, taking and interpreting what they may, and then returns home.¹⁰ Those with dual belonging view **both** science and Christianity as their home.

As practicing scientists, we cannot impose our Christian beliefs onto the scientific metaphysics.¹¹ As Christians we cannot impose our science on the faith.¹²

Dual belonging isn't Syncretism

Syncretism selects parts of our scientific understanding and rejects other parts of our scientific understanding. Syncretism also selects parts of our faith, and rejects other parts of the faith. Careful selection allows for consistency. Often, the parts that are selected are combined into something that is neither scientific nor orthodox.¹³

One example is a branch of process theology closely tied to the work of Alfred North Whitehead.¹⁴ One example of a process idea not supported by science is the assumption that the smallest elementary particle has some degree of self-causation. Unacceptable to orthodoxy is a process God that is not omnipotent.^{15,16}

As Christians, we are not free to pick and choose what elements of Christianity we like and which we do not. Scientists are not allowed to choose which pieces of scientific evidence, procedures and results we would like to ignore. Taking only those elements from Christianity

text *The Birth of the Gods*. Cyrus. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature* (Roma: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1949), 5, 57.

¹⁰ There is an interesting question about when does this become cultural appropriation, and when is such appropriation ethically acceptable.

¹¹ Any attempt at using a theological justification in a scientific journal would be met with an immediate rejection by any competent peer review.

¹² For example, there are those who reject the resurrection of Jesus on scientific grounds, and yet continue to regard Christian teaching as normative. Such Christianity is beyond the limits of Orthodoxy, at least as codified in the Apostles Creed.

¹³ In the context of dual religious belonging see Cornille, 45-46.

¹⁴ See for instance, Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, (New York: The Free Press, 1978).

¹⁵ Also Whitehead's work in *Process and Reality* does not include *creatio ex nihilo*

¹⁶ For a more complete discussion of the scientific implications of process see David A. Larrabee, "Intrinsic Value: A Dialog with Birch and Cobb's Process Meta-Ethics" (Union Theological Seminary in NY, 2015).

and science that harmonize and leaving the rest on the trash heap may lead to harmonization, but it risks being neither Christian nor science. Thomas Merton, expressed this idea, in a religious context

“There can be no question of a facile syncretism, a mishmash of semireligious verbiage and pieties, a devotionism that admits of everything and therefore takes nothing with full seriousness.”¹⁷

Dual belonging isn't holding that “truth” is socially or individually determined

Another approach is to reject all universal truth claims on the grounds that all truth claims are social or personal constructions. A new age outlook rejects all truth claims that do not correspond to one's personal opinion or experience. Once this path is chosen one is free to accept or reject any truth claim as no longer relevant to a modern world. This approach also allows one to create new “social truths,” that might be useful today, and discarded tomorrow.¹⁸

The humanities view of science has been influenced by the publication of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas Kuhn in 1962¹⁹. In this view, each new revolution in science creates a new paradigm that is totally divorced from previous understanding. Since paradigms are human construction each new revolution reconstructs science as a new human creation.²⁰ In this view, science has no unique claim to truth.

The rejection of truth claims in religion results in religion being reduced to sociology, psychology, and cultural adaptation. Truth becomes opinion, some opinions being more

¹⁷ As quoted by Bonnie Thurston, "Waking from a Dream of Separateness: Thomas Merton's Principles of Interreligious Dialogue.," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2015): 91.

¹⁸ In the context of New Age multiple religious belonging see Cornille, 43-44.

¹⁹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1962, 1970). For an introduction to the problems with Kuhn's analysis see the essays by Ernan McMullin and Larry Laudan in Martin Curd and J.A. Cover, eds., *Philosophy of Science: The Central Issues* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).

²⁰ Science theories are provisional, so there is an element of truth here. Data however is not provisional, but is subject to error. The interpretation of the data is influenced by our theoretical understanding, but the data itself remains. Any new theory will have to explain any divergences from the past interpretation and understanding of the previous results. Thus the incommensurability of new vs old is a problematic interpretation of the History of Science.

socially acceptable than others. It should be obvious that the extreme versions of this approach are unacceptable to both Christian belief and the scientific endeavor.²¹

Summary

If we are to have one foot firmly planted in Christianity and the other firmly planted in science, there will be differences. It is the scientist's natural inclination to want to harmonize all knowledge. But if we are going to be committed to both the scientific enterprise and Christian orthodoxy, this temptation should be resisted.²² There are differences and dual belonging lives within the tension.

What Dual Belonging is.

The dual belonging scientist who is Christian engages both Christianity and science in their search for ultimate reality. The theologian does not have this luxury. She can cross over and explore science, she can learn from science, she can understand science, but in the end she has to return home to speak from the perspective of the church.²³ A scientific atheist might explore religion for insight into spirituality, esthetics, or moral guidance. But the true atheist must return home and search for a scientific basis for what they found.²⁴ To quote Paul Knitter

*"A double believer no longer feels the need to "return home" and to identify with one's original tradition. Home becomes both one's original religious context as well as the new context one is exploring. One finds oneself, surprisingly, at home in both."*²⁵

Although his statement is for religious double belonging, I think it applies to the religious scientist as well. We cannot return home, either to a purely Christian or a purely scientific view, but are at home, with feet firmly planted in both worlds.

I think it is precisely this willingness to live with the tensions that is characteristic of the person with double belonging, be it double religious belonging or to someone committed to

²¹ Interestingly enough both Christianity and science now how to defend the idea of that some observations are more reliable than others against the more modern idea that reality is what you think it is.

²² At the very least, an attempt to prematurely harmonize science and Christianity will likely miss opportunities for exploring differences that may yield greater insight into science or Christian understanding, or perhaps both. It is in examining the differences where real growth becomes possible!

²³ This begs the question if a theologian can exist without a community to speak into and to speak out of.

²⁴ An example might be the search for moral principles being derived from evolutionary trends.

²⁵ Paul Knitter, "Without Walls = Multiple Belonging?," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 51, no. 4 (2016): 493.

both science and Christianity. Given that this will result with a living a life with some tension between the two, how do we manage the internal dialog?

Managing the internal dialog

Knitter's Guidelines

In his paper "Without walls=Multiple Belonging?" Knitter gives four suggestions that have relevance for this discussion.²⁶

Dual belonging has a pluralistic starting point.

This assumes that neither Christianity nor science has total and complete access to a description of reality or truth. A belief that the search for meaning and understanding is richer and more complete in the combination of science and religion, than it is in either singularly.

Dual belonging is an identity

Knitter talks about functioning in the borderlands between two religions. I do not feel that way. The scientist who is Christian can claim to function fully in both worlds, to be fully Christian and fully scientist. I do not shed my science when in church, and I am no less a Christian when I am doing scientific work.

Dual belonging involves two practices and two communities

To avoid inculturation, someone with dual belonging needs to be a full member of both communities, participating in both communities, dual citizens as it were. This puts the person with dual belonging in a unique position to act as a bridge between the two communities. But this is only true so long as the temptations of inculturation and syncretism are avoided.

Dual belonging searches for functional analogies

There are areas where science and Christianity make claims on the same topic. The more common ones are intensely debated; evolution, creation, miracles, etc. The person with dual belonging must bring both science and Christianity to bear on these issues, jointly, in dialog.

²⁶ Ibid.

To quote Knitter, we need to identify:

*“... metaphors, symbols, practices, and teachings within each tradition that appear to have the same function – the same intent or purpose – or that were trying to answer similar questions ...”*²⁷

When these commonalities are understood, the exploration of similarities and differences can then meaningfully be explored.

Cornille’s attitudes

Catherine Cornille casts doubt on the ability of a person with dual religious belonging to be faithful to both religions without *“a real struggle, and a source of suffering and confusion.”* Her reasoning is that both traditions make conflicting truth claims.²⁸ Her publications emphasize interreligious dialog, the dialog between two religious traditions. In her book *the im-possibility of interreligious dialog* Catherine Cornille lists five attitudes that are necessary for a successful inter-religious dialog: humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and hospitality.²⁹ I think these five attitudes will also serve well in an internal science and Christian dialog.

Doctrinal or Epistemic Humility

Like Knitter’s pluralistic starting point, this requires

*“a certain degree of admission of the finite and limited ways in which the ultimate truth has been grasped and expressed within one’s own religious teachings, practices, and/or institutional forms.”*³⁰

Science and Christian dual belonging makes a similar acknowledgement that science and Christianity both grasp aspects of truth, and that the search for meaning and truth is enhanced by putting the two together.³¹

²⁷ Ibid., 498.

²⁸ Cornille.

²⁹ *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialog* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2008).

³⁰ Ibid., 4.

³¹ This has long been debated within Christianity. One early classic exchange was between Tertullian and Augustine. To quote Tertullian (155-240 CE) “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What

Commitment

In Cornille's understanding of interreligious dialog the individual "*remains rooted in the particular religious community from which they speak*"³² A theologian might venture into dialog with another religion and gather insights into her own religion, but that theologian must return to their own tradition, perhaps taking the insights gained back to her community. The person with dual belonging remains rooted in both traditions. They might bring insights from science to the Christian church, and might bring religious insights to the scientific community. An example of a religious insight into science is the identification of boundaries in which science starts acting and behaving like a religion, or the ethical and moral presuppositions within a scientific investigation. Science informs Christianity through such fields as archaeology, cosmology, and physics.

Interconnection

For Cornille interconnection is "*the belief that the teachings and practices of the other religion are in some way related to or relevant for one's own religious tradition.*"³³ This is the heart of dual belonging in science and Christianity: the belief that science and religion are meaningfully related around important issues, with the provision that the relevance occurs in both directions.

concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from "the porch of Solomon," who had himself taught that "the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart." Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.." Turtullain, "Prescription against Heretics," in *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, ed. Philip Schaff, Chapter 7. The position of St. Augustine (354-430 CE) to such a criticism was "For we ought not to refuse to learn letters because they say that Mercury discovered them; nor because they have dedicated temples to Justice and Virtue, and prefer to worship in the form of stones things that ought to have their place in the heart, ought we on that account to forsake justice and virtue. Nay, but let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master; and while he recognizes and acknowledges the truth, even in their religious literature, let him reject the figments of superstition,....." Augustine, "On Christine Doctrine," ed. Philip Schraff, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), Book 2 Chapter 18 Par 28. This argument continues to the present day. For an interesting discussion of the role of literal vs. accommodative approaches in history see Alister E. McGrath, *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science & Religion* (Malden Mass: Blackwell, 1998), 122-29.

³² Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialog*, 4.

³³ Ibid., 5.

Empathy

“It is only to the degree that one is able to resonate with the religious meaning of particular teachings and practices of the other religion that they may have an impact upon one’s own religious tradition”³⁴

One of the key themes here is impact. For the person with a dual science and Christian belonging, science has an impact on their religious views, and Christianity has an impact on how they do or view science. Without this attitude it is hard to see how one could claim dual science and Christian belonging.³⁵

Hospitality

“.. The possibility for genuine dialogue still demands ultimately the recognition of the other religions as potential sources of genuine and distinctive truth.”³⁶ Dual belonging to science and Christianity requires an understanding that both Christianity and science address genuine and distinctive truth. This hospitality has to extend to areas of disagreement and tension as well as those cases of similarity.

“to make progress – to grow – is to immediately push the limits of religious hospitality towards still greater openness to truth in difference, which is also to say, to a truth that makes a difference.”³⁷

Summary

Both Knitter’s guidelines and Cornille’s attitudes place the person with a dual belonging in a unique position. Their humility, empathy and hospitality can make those with dual belonging effective advocates for Christ in the scientific community and for a better understanding of science within the religious community.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Such an impact can be threatening to those who see Christian orthodoxy as stagnant and only the application thereof being contingent on context. In the scientific community there has been a worry that someone with a religious commitment cannot be fully committed to scientific methodology. I worry that the current attacks on science by the extreme right will drive more of the scientific community to this position.

³⁶ Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialog*, 5-6.

³⁷ Ibid., 210.

Handling the dialog

1. Half the battle is asking good questions. Both science and Christianity need a stake in the question, as well as the capabilities of addressing the question. If you find yourself wondering aimlessly on big questions” perhaps narrow the focus.³⁸
2. Dialog requires a solid understanding of both science and Christianity. Do we know enough about the science or the theology of what we are considering? A brief perusal of the science and religion dialog in public will reveal that all too often knowledge of either science, Christianity, or both is limited. Being honest with ourselves can direct us to acquire a better understanding of what is missing. There is no guarantee that a better grasp of the fundamentals will solve the tension, but it may prevent us going down unnecessary pathways. We must be willing to embrace our ignorance: “faith seeking understanding.”³⁹
3. Remember to engage science as science and Christianity as Christianity and let them speak to each other.⁴⁰
4. True dialog, even if internal, always presents the opportunity of our being affected by the experience. Be open to this.
5. We need to recognize when we have lapsed into apologetics rather than dialog, trying to defend science or Christianity, rather than putting them in conversation. Having dual belonging, we need not internally defend one against the other. Understanding this may help us do apologetics during external dialogs.

Summary

Dual belonging isn't inculturation, syncretism, or the denial of any universal truth claims.

³⁸ Some big topics, like theodicy, have been investigated by many theologians and science. Understanding what others have said before is a significant research task. One approach is to ask smaller questions, or more focused ones. Rather than the entire field of theodicy, one could ask about earthquakes, ...

³⁹ There should not be two standards for scholarship one for science and one for theology. Theologians need to learn to do the science with the same scholarly dedication as other scientists. Scientists need to do the theology with the same scholarly standards as other theologians. Being a theologian does not excuse poor scientific scholarship. Being a scientist does not excuse poor theological scholarship.

⁴⁰ There is a tendency in science and religion dialog to fail to formulate the question in such a way that the science is treated as a science (and not as a religion) and Christianity is treated as a religion (and not as a science).

Dual belonging requires:

- Epistemic Humility for a pluralistic starting point,
- A commitment to Christianity and science, two practices and two communities,
- The search for Interconnection within functional analogies allowing for the exploration of similarities and differences,
- An identity that views both science and Christianity as home that results in a natural empathy and hospitality towards both.

We can guide our inner dialog by:

- asking good questions,
- being knowledgeable in both science and Christianity,
- Keep science as a science and Christianity as Christianity,
- Be willing to be affected by the results,
- Be willing to replace apologetics with dialog.

Conclusion

Serving Jesus does not mean that we cannot be fully committed to both the Gospel, as expressed in the Christian Church, as well as to the scientific enterprise. At ASA I hope this is preaching to the choir. We can gain insights into what it means to have a science Christian dual belonging if we listen to others that are engaged in other dual belongings. We can also use principles of inter-religious dialog to help us with our internal dialog, preventing us from going down fruitless pathways and avoiding unnecessary internal struggle.

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