

Multiple Religious Belonging

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Flexible Believers in the Netherlands: A Paradigm Shift toward Transreligious Multiplicity

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Abstract: The Netherlands has undergone a radical religious transformation through secularization, individualization and migration. Expressions of Christian belief are no longer strictly defined by the Church and hybrid forms of religiosity incorporating other religions have emerged. After a brief sketch of Dutch religious plurality, the author focuses on interviews with ‘flexible believers’, people who combine elements from different religious traditions and worldviews. Through interviews, she discovers a number of characteristics of these multiple religious believers (MRB) – interviewees – such as ritual praxis, identity-making processes and belonging – and reflects on their impact for the wider picture of religiosity in today’s post-Christian Dutch network society. She concludes that hybrid forms of lived religion like mrb, present a challenge to traditional concepts of religious identity and belonging. They require a paradigm shift from an ‘either/or’ to a relational ‘as well as’ approach within a rhizomatic network of meaning.

Keywords: multiple religious belonging; hybrid religiosity; religious transformation; transreligious diversity; lived religion; rhizomatic thinking

1 Introduction

Many citizens in secularized European countries have become ‘spiritual pilgrims’, as the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor in his magnum opus, *A Secular Age*, rightly observes and describes.¹ They have turned their backs on traditional religious institutions, seeking a spirituality beyond the hierarchical forms and superiority claims of monotheistic religion, such as Christianity, the religion most of them grew up within. Religion has not disappeared in secularized Western Europe, as the secularization theory suggested, but instead shows itself in many forms that go beyond the established frameworks of belief. Often elements from various religious traditions serve as varied sources of spiritual inspiration, giving rise to transreligious ways of living.

The Netherlands is a good example of the spiritual pilgrimage in (post)modern time which Charles Taylor writes about. Before addressing what may be called ‘flexible believers’ in the Netherlands and how they live their spiritual life in between different religious traditions and worldviews, I will first take a look at the religious landscape in this country, which has changed dramatically in the past hundred years.

While in the late 19th and early 20th century only two percent of the Dutch population did not belong to a church, nowadays 67.8 percent of the Dutch citizens indicate they have no affiliation with a church community. The number of church members is constantly declining. Even among the people who

1 Taylor, *The Secular Age*.

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still go to church the traditional belief in a theistic image of God is shrinking. Within barely a lifetime the Netherlands has transformed from a deeply Christian nation to a post-Christian society. But church membership is not a precise indication for religiosity, as the results of the research ‘God in the Netherlands’ in 2015 clearly indicate. Even if the number of people calling themselves atheist (2006: 14 percent; 2015: 24 percent) or agnostic (2006: 26 percent; 2015: 34 percent) has increased, still 28 percent of the Dutch professing a spiritual pilgrimage believe in ‘something’ (Dutch: iets), although it is becoming clear that this number of ‘ietsists’ (“somethingists”) has declined by eight percent over the past ten years.² Many of these ‘unaffiliated spirituals’ abandoned the well-organized and normative religious organizations in favour of a more experiential and subjective spirituality, patching together elements from the wisdom sayings of different religious traditions and worldviews and unfolding religious flexibility.³

A representative sample survey of the Dutch population in 2015, which was carried out as part of the research project at Vrije Universiteit into ‘Multiple Religious Belonging’ (MRB), showed that 23 percent of Dutch adults, about three million people, see themselves as combiners of elements from various religious traditions.⁴ In this research the survey participants are split up in hard, medium and soft MRB adherents. Three percent of all respondents (almost 400.000 people) are so-called dual belongers (hard MRB adherents). They are embedded in two or more religious traditions. Twelve percent of all respondents (1.5 million people) adhere to one religious tradition – in this case mostly Christianity, the tradition most of the respondents were raised in – and next to that tradition they are using elements from other religious traditions (medium MRB adherents). Eight percent of all respondents (about 1 million people) combine texts, rituals and other elements from different religions (soft MRB adherents). While the dual belongers are consciously embracing two or more religious traditions, the soft belongers use fragments of it. They seem no longer aware of the religious tradition that is behind the religious elements they make use of. Can we still call their attitude ‘religious belonging’? The answer to this question is disputable. Before I go deeper into this, let us first have a look at the religious context of the Netherlands.

2 Mapping *terra incognita*

Under the impact of secularization and individualization, the Netherlands has undergone a radical transformation of its religious identity.⁵ The Dutch have become articulate citizens and will no longer be told what, or how they have to believe. Instead of a firm foundation guiding a person from cradle to grave, the principle of *panta rhei*, the fluidity and multiplicity of being, has come to the fore. One’s life is subject to continuous changes and moments of choices. What was a firm conviction yesterday is subject to doubt today; life appears as a process acquiring form and contents in the course of what people encounter along the way. In this attitude towards life, religion is seen as open and dynamic. It acquires a personal colour, not anchored in an institution but pragmatic and changeable.

How to do justice to the pitch of each individual voice? Can we still talk about religious ‘belonging’ when, for many people, this no longer means belonging to a faith community? Isn’t ‘participation’ a much better denotation than ‘belonging’ for what is going on in these hybrid forms of religiosity?⁶ Or do we discern a new form of belonging which, in a network society, can be translated rather as ‘feeling at home’ instead of ‘binding oneself’? What seems to be a fact in Dutch society is that Christianity as an institutionalized religion has lost its connective function in society. Church-related Christian belief has become weak in the Netherlands and boundaries between religions and worldviews are fading in the life of postmodern Dutch believers. The big challenge confronting researchers is to how best examine fluid belief and belonging. How

² Bernts and Berghuijs, *God in Nederland 1966-2015*; Bernts, Dekker, and De Hart, *God in Nederland 1996-2006*.

³ Kalsky, “Religiöse Flexibilität”; Van IJssel, “Meer geloven op één kussen?”.

⁴ For more details and results of this research in the Netherlands, see the article of Berghuijs, “Multiple religious belonging in the Netherlands”. According to the data of the Religionsmonitor 2008 of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, 22 percent of all Germans combine elements from different religious traditions. See: Zulehner, “Spirituelle Dynamik in säkularen Kulturen?”, 152-156.

⁵ Nissen, “The Holistic Revolution”.

⁶ Thatamanil, “Eucharist Upstairs, Yoga Downstairs”.

to map in a scholarly manner a phenomenon whose very aim is the blurring of the boundaries of clearly defined concepts and thus defying the principles of scientific work? What does an academic paradigm look like that does not focus on religions as clearly-defined entities with corresponding communities but rather as a network of changing relations in what gives peoples' lives value and meaning? These are some of the challenging questions and contested issues of the concept of 'Multiple Religious Belonging' that we aim to find answers for in our research.

This much is clear: where religion is concerned in Dutch society, it means that those involved in institutionalized religion – churches, theological faculties, spiritual care – will have to find other ways of looking at 'new spirituals' and 'flexible believers'. In theological and ecclesiastical circles it was all-too-easily assumed in the past that a focus on an inner source of knowledge could be translated into navel gazing for the sake of satisfying egocentric needs; and drawing from various religious traditions was often dismissed as 'superficial shopping'. By now, researchers have come to question assumptions such as these.⁷ Not only the Netherlands but all countries in the North-Western part of Europe are facing the transition from homogeneous to heterogeneous culture and religiosity and the challenge of a paradigm shift from a mindset of unity to a mindset of multiplicity. I want to clarify this necessary change by means of the example of the Netherlands' capital: Amsterdam.

3 Superdiversity

In 2011 Amsterdam became a majority-minority city. Just as did New York and Toronto and other big cities in the world, Amsterdam gained the designation of 'superdiverse'. Superdiverse means that there is no longer one ethnic group forming a majority in the city. The majority of the population belongs to a minority. Forty-nine percent of Amsterdam citizens are so-called Dutch natives and 51 percent of the inhabitants have a migration background. Amsterdam has become a city of minorities – and so the question arises: If integration is a requirement, into what should one integrate? Only one-third of Amsterdam youth below the age of 15 is native Dutch in origin.⁸ Cultural and religious diversity is a fact of daily life in Amsterdam where people from 180 different nationalities live together. One of the burning questions is, how to find social cohesion among them and avoid conflicts.⁹ But not only quarrels arise between people with different ethnic and religious or nonreligious convictions. There are also love affairs and mixed marriages. The children of these bicultural and dual-faith families are often raised with both cultures and religious traditions of their parents and are bearers of hybrid identities.¹⁰ According to statistics, one third of the residents in all larger cities of Europe have a migration background. European societies have entered a new era, which requires a paradigm shift from a mind-set of unity to a mind-set of multiplicity. Intercultural and interreligious dialogue – learning how to live together with people of different faiths and worldviews – has become a necessity.

4 Multireligious pilgrims

In 2005 a book of essays of fourteen women of various religious backgrounds was published as part of a research programme 'The transformation of religion in the Netherlands' at the theological research centre of the Dutch Dominicans¹¹. In these essays the women wrote about how their beliefs changed in the course of their lives. Television host Annemiek Schrijver and journalist and Rabbi Tamarah Benima revealed they were inspired by two different religious traditions. Schrijver combined the orthodox protestant tradition

⁷ Bernts and Berghuijs, *God in Nederland 1966-2015*, 93-180.

⁸ Crul, Schneider, and Lelie, *Superdiversiteit*, 18.

⁹ See also: Geldof, *Superdiversity in the heart of Europe*. In 2014 the capital of Belgium, Brussels, became superdiverse as well.

¹⁰ Katz Miller, *Being Both*.

¹¹ For more information about the Dutch Dominicaans Studiecentrum voor Theologie en Samenleving (DSTS), see: www.dsts.nl.

that she was raised in with Tibetan Buddhism. Looking through Buddhist glasses she rediscovered her Christian roots in a refreshing way. Christian values were revived for her and the figure of Jesus, too, was revealed in a new light. Similarly, Benima appeared to be not only an adherent of Judaism but also a practitioner of Sufism. She compares her connectedness to these two traditions with speaking various languages: “Just as I enjoy speaking both English and German fluently and being able to get along in French and Hebrew, I also enjoy speaking various religious languages so that I can communicate with others in their religious language.”¹² Two different religious traditions were merging in the lives of these two women, complemented each other and thus enriched their spiritual lives.

We decided to pay more attention to this phenomenon. The internet project Reliflex.nl followed in 2007.¹³ It focused on the issue of religious flexibility. Six people from different religious traditions have been portrayed on this multimedia platform. Five of them embodied a multiple religious identity. Simultaneously, twelve scholars from various disciplines inquired into the workability of the concept of ‘religious flexibility’. They shared their findings with the visitors of Reliflex.nl by means of a blog and published a concluding book.¹⁴ With the current DSTS-research programme ‘Multiple Religious Belonging: The future prospect of religion in the Netherlands?’ (2013-2017), which is carried out in cooperation with a NWO¹⁵-funded research project at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam and Renmin University of Beijing on the same topic, we resumed the earlier research on flexible believers at the Dominican Research Centre for Theology and Society.¹⁶

5 Flexible believers

The first output of the new research project were eleven interviews published in a book, called *Flexibel Geloven* (‘Believing Flexibly’).¹⁷ Six of the interviewees combine elements of different religious traditions and worldviews; the other five converted to a different religion in the course of their lives. Their ages vary, as well as their cultural and religious backgrounds. All of them are very candid about the course of their religious quests and their old and new convictions. They explain the religious discoveries they gradually made, what they wanted to leave behind of their religious traditions or worldviews, in which they grew up, and how they give shape to their new ways of believing in their daily lives.

The first six interviewees in the book we called ‘flexible believers’. Diana Vernooij is a Minister of a Christian community and a Buddhist, Kaouthar Darmoni combines Sufism with elements from Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism and Timo Bravo Rebolledo, raised an agnostic, is a frequent visitor of Taizé and a druid. Daniël van Egmond finds inspiration in the mystical core he has discovered as a connecting element in all religions and Rohan Rattan Hoeba was brought up bi-religiously, as a Christian and a Hindu. Cabaret performer Nilgün Yerli calls herself multi-religious. She grew up in a liberal Muslim family. The five other interviewees are called ‘converts’. In the course of their lives, they changed their religion or worldview: from Christianity to Hinduism, to Buddhism, to Judaism and to Islam and from atheism to Christianity. The youngest among them is Anne Dijk. As a daughter of a protestant Vicar she grew up in the Christian faith. During her years as a student she converted to Islam as, for her, “the perfect middle course between Christianity and Judaism”. Naud van der Ven felt relieved when he became a Jew and left his Christian faith behind. The focus on Jesus in his childhood faith troubled him enormously. Dimitri Woei converted from Christianity to Hinduism and Anja Meulenbelt, a well-known feminist and publicist, bid farewell to her atheist life after fifty years to be baptized as a Christian. Oldest in this group is Jotika Hermsen. She bid farewell to her life as a Christian nun and became a Buddhist meditation teacher.

¹² Benima, “Twee handen op Gods buik”, 38 (transl. MK).

¹³ The website Reliflex.nl is offline, but the English trailer of Reliflex.nl can still be found on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMWoWvdOjIk>.

¹⁴ Doude van Troostwijk, *Buigzame Gelovigen*.

¹⁵ The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research.

¹⁶ For more information about the multimedia projects of the DSTS and their theological implications, see: Kalsky, “In Search of a ‘New We’ in the Netherlands”, 169-179.

¹⁷ Kalsky and Pruim, *Flexibel geloven*.

6 Spiritual choices

All interviewees in *Flexibel Geloven* could be called spiritual pilgrims, but each of them in his or her own way. Some of them combine more than one religion or worldview, or at least elements of them, as do the flexible believers. Others experience a shift in religion in the course of their lives, like the converts, but even they do not all dispense with their ‘first’ religion. Actually, Naud van der Ven is the only one to have made a radical break with his first religion, Christianity.

What is striking is the curious openness and wonder with which all interviewees approach the religion(s) that were initially alien to them. Their way of relating to these is playful yet serious, narrative and reflexive, individual and at the same time connected to a greater ‘whole’ and a network of people. Spiritual and religious traditions are approached from this connecting attitude. “The heart of all beliefs is love, so why would I have to choose?” Nilgün Yerli wonders. Even when an Indonesian customs officer protests when she answers his question about which religion she adheres to by stating “my religion is Love”. She grew up with Islamic faith, but names as her religious conviction the spiritual power in oneself, a mystical connection of eternity and now, transcendence and immanence, feeling and knowing. Yerli lives her life multi-religiously, since all beliefs are coming together in her heart. Her wedding-ceremony, for example, was performed by ‘ministers’ from four different religions.

Individual life stories appear to have a decisive influence on the spiritual choices of the interviewees. Yerli is convinced that everyone should find his or her own God and consequently encourages her son to seek for this. This is permitted since God is everywhere and cannot be caught in a single image. No one has a monopoly on God, so she says. For her, God, humanity, nature and cosmos are interconnected in a synergetic dance of love. Love wants to be passed on. Her concern is believing by heart, not by religious rules or sacred texts. As a motto for her interview she chooses an adage of Sufi mystic Jalal ad-Dim Rumi: “Each day I reveal a different face. Sometimes a Christian’s, sometimes a Jew’s, sometimes a Muslim’s. Just so I can fit into everyone’s heart.”¹⁸

Kaouthar Darmoni, born and bred in Tunisia, does not want to be bound by traditional religious rules either. Even as for Yerli, God is love and Darmoni emphasizes that this is the case in all religions. She rejects to use patriarchal images of God. So she makes sure that in the Quranic education for her son, which he receives when they stay during holidays in Tunisia, no texts hostile to women are included. Similarly, fear-inspiring texts about God should be left out. Just like Yerli the texts of Sufi mystic Rumi are important spiritual guideposts to her. Where images of God are concerned both prefer images expressing wholeness and connectedness. In their imaginations of the mystery, God as a person on one hand and the divine as an energy or power on the other hand are not mutually exclusive. They are used next to each other and mixed as well. In this, Yerli will mainly trust to intuition while Darmoni searches for scientific deepening.

In contrast, Buddhist and Christian Diana Vernooij expresses in her interview that God as a person has no appeal to her. She prefers to connect the word God with ‘the absolute’. When she preaches to her religious community *De Duif*, however, she has trouble finding words for the non-personal image of God which fit the faith experience of her mostly-Christian audience. Then she chooses a middle course and addresses God as the Powerful or Tender One, emphasizing the qualities of God over the personal. She considers the tension between a theist image of God and a pantheist image as unsolvable, but also for her, even as to Yerli and Darmoni, both images are acceptable and not mutually exclusive. In her view, they complement each other in the function they fulfil for the faithful. As a philosopher and Minister, choosing the names for God is an important issue for Vernooij, while the other interviewees barely give this a thought.

Most of the flexible believers in the book indicate that theological and dogmatic distinctions are not relevant to their way of believing. For them, different images of God in the religious traditions are compatible. Those who have studied the doctrines of religious traditions, like Vernooij, do see the tensions, but they know how to bridge the different images fairly smoothly. They ‘just don’t make a fuss about it’ and apply them next to each other, just like the concepts of ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’, for that matter. They display a both-and attitude, a connecting way of thinking. The spiritual dynamic which is revealed in the interviews

¹⁸ Ibid., 14.

with the flexible believers has also been demonstrated in people in other European countries: they both pray and meditate and the reproach by churches and theologians who consider the mixing of religious traditions as an improper syncretic practice is of no concern to them.¹⁹

7 Rituals

The practising of rituals is important to the interviewees. Often there are no official religious rituals, but still they form the connection between present and past. Yerli for example mentioned the ‘serving tray’ ritual. It was passed on from mother to daughter and from daughter to son.²⁰ On the serving tray are rice, money, flowers, wheat and a cup of honey. Rice represents fertility, money wealth, flowers life, wheat means hope and the good things and the sweet taste of honey symbolizes the value of life. Feeling, smelling and tasting, all the senses are part of this ritual. When faced with disappointments in life, so Yerli says, she thinks of this ritual and draws hope from it. She also continues the tradition of her grandmother, who was actually Jewish, a fact nobody knew because she was married to an Imam. Each Friday there was a family dinner at home and her mother made special bread buns. Fridays were ‘sacred’. Later, Yerli realized that these meetings strongly resembled the celebration of the beginning of the Jewish Shabbat. For her, eating together is a connecting ritual, which also had a central place in the celebration of the Islamic holidays. Nilgün prays every evening, without connection to a specific faith, always ending with an Arabic prayer she learnt from her grandfather: “In the name of God, the Almighty, I give thanks for the body, the spirit, health and love.”²¹

For the other interviewees as well, rituals provide continuity, order, and bodily and spiritual wellbeing. They exist to celebrate life and provide comfort in hard times. Like a ‘safe cosmic womb’ rituals provide security in everyday life. Here religion is not a system of commands and prohibitions, but a spiritual space of living where conscious attention is paid to daily occupations, like cooking meals and eating together, prayer, meditation, dance and erotic power.

Tunisian-Dutch Kaouthar Darmoni emphasizes in particular the physical and ecstatic-erotic aspect of her religious experience. She encounters God while dancing. She practises Sufi rituals to let go of her ego, but also to communicate emotions non-verbally with others, like with her young son: a non-verbal emotional communication arises by ‘whirling’ together.²² She was put on this trail by Greek-Armenian mystic George Gurdjieff who combines Buddhism with Sufism and dance. This Sufi ritual provides her, in her own words, “with peace in body and heart”. And her meditation exercises and regular visits to a church, where she dwells in silence and lights candles, provide her with a peaceful mind. Religious symbols and rituals are an indispensable part of her daily existence. The same mystic led Daniël van Egmond to the Subud movement. He practises the *latihan*, a spiritual exercise, in which mystic experiences can be evoked by means of movement and sound. In the beginning, the power present in this literally knocked him to the ground. He still practises the exercises, next to his frequent meditation. They open his heart and assuage his intellectual arrogance, as he puts it.²³

In Darmoni and Van Egmond, practising rituals frees a transformative power on a cognitive and emotional level. It is a kind of cross-ritual sharing without being part of the two different religious communities.²⁴ For both it is an individual ritual performance or play of their own. Sometimes the individual shares ‘light belongings’ with another person – a kind of small particular ‘we’, just as in the story of Darmoni with her son or at other moments with the participants in her school for Goddess Belly Dance, a ritual playful expression of sacred erotic embodiment of women.²⁵

¹⁹ See note 47.

²⁰ Kalsky and Pruim, *Flexibel geloven*, 19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²² *Ibid.*, 89.

²³ *Ibid.*, 59-67.

²⁴ See voor interreligious ritual sharing: Moyaert, *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue*; in particular, see the contribution to this volume by Reis Habito, Maria. “Bowing before Buddha and Allah”, 33-42.

²⁵ See: <http://kaouthar.com/>

The other flexible believers also highly value the practising of rituals. Rohan Rattan Hoeba, for instance, regularly recites mantras for luck and health, sometimes 108 times, especially during the weekend. He trusts that God will understand it is not possible during weekdays – he simply lacks the time. For the ‘converts’ in the book, as well, rituals are important. In the morning, Christian convert Anja Meulenbelt combines prayer on her balcony with yoga exercises. And Anne Dijk tells that prayer has always been important to her, as it was when she was still a Christian.

The “right” way for everyone is no longer determined from the outside, but rather experienced from the inside. Whatever corresponds spiritually or religiously with one’s own feeling and thinking is acknowledged as salutary. The heart of religions is “awakening the inner person”²⁶, so Daniël van Egmond says. In this, the body is the place of transformation – the ‘I’ moves to the background in order to enable the soul to bloom.

All flexible believers interviewed in the book are highly (self)-reflective. Themes like karma, reincarnation, enlightenment and salvation are passing in review. Nevertheless they think the content of their respective religious traditions is not primarily an intellectual-theological affair, which requires ‘scholars’. They do not express the meaning of their faith primarily by means of knowledge but rather by rituals, in which words, dance, meditation and music are interwoven – an experience of reality which stirs all senses.

8 Religious identity

Rohan Rattan Hoeba is the only one of the interviewees who did not consciously choose his religious polyphony but, instead, grew up bi-religiously.²⁷ His mother was a Christian (Catholic) and his father a Hindu. In Surinam, where he was born and bred, he was the object of both a Christian baptism and Hindu naming ceremony. Together with his family he celebrated the Christian and Hindu festivals in church and temple, and he and his seven siblings grew up with stories from the Bible and the Vedas. His attitude differs from that of the other flexible believers. He is more pragmatic and the choices he makes seems to be less conscious. For him both religions resemble each other: we are one another’s equals and should respect and help one another, he or she is human as you are. His attitude reminds of the Golden Rule: ‘Treat others as you would want them to treat you.’ In short, this is the practical ethics of his way of believing. In his view, peace is a higher value than truth.

He gives shape to his life from this thinking in terms of equality. He would like to reform the caste system within Hinduism. In his father’s mantra, which resembles a Christian prayer when translated into Dutch and which he recites daily, both religions come together:

O merciful God, You are gracious and protect us always. You have compassion on your servants. O omnipresent blissful God, you are most blessed and pure. You alone are our support in life, O Lord of all and source of all virtue, give us wisdom and enlighten our path of life. Amen.²⁸

For Rattan Hoeba, the common humanity is the connection between people. He emphasizes not only the equality between religions, but also between men and women. His motto is: differences should be respected. His wife, for instance, adheres to a different Hindu tradition than he does himself. While in his tradition no gods are worshipped, his wife practises worship of gods at her house altar. He regularly participates in this and prays to Shiva as his wife does. He is flexible in this. He sees this as similar to ‘praying to God through praying to Jesus’. For him, as well, the freedom to make one’s own choices is highly important. He and his wife are making their own choices about which rituals to practise. They do not, for instance, practise the worship of their ancestors.

Rattan Hoeba gives his own interpretation to concepts which are characteristic of Hinduism and Christianity. When he can put his worries before God, he experiences relief. He believes in karma rather

²⁶ Kalsky and Pruim, *Flexibel geloven*, 62.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 71-79.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

than in Christian forgiveness. To him, wealth is a gift from God, and he believes heaven and hell are part of this life. Combining Hinduism and Christianity has never presented him with a problem, he said. It does not matter which religion one adheres to, for in his eyes there is only one God; and he, just as Darmoni and Yerli, is convinced: All religions are about love. From his both religions, he draws what appeals to him and he thinks one does not have to comply with ‘all old rules’. He explains: If a marriage does not work out it must be possible to divorce, even when Hinduism actually does not permit this. For him different truths exist alongside each other: his truth is not *the* truth. One should respect this. Most interviewees, including Naud van der Ven, share this opinion. He converted from Christianity to Judaism. He thinks that Christianity is far too much founded one ultimate truth ‘in which everyone should march along’. For him this was one of the main reasons to bid farewell to Christianity and convert to Judaism. Truth in his opinion is many-faceted and elusive. He feels more confident with Jewish faith at this point, emphasizes the radical otherness of the Other. In his view, this is why Judaism is more comfortable with respecting religious differences.²⁹

Rattan Hoeba’s story makes clear that practising two religions in daily life does not allow dogmatic hair-splitting. He is practical and pragmatic while connecting the two religions he grew up with. British scientist of religion Rose Drew points out in her research on ‘dual belongers’³⁰ that people with a double or multiple religious connection do not find conflict in religious truth claims. By seeing reality through two or more ‘pairs of glasses’, dual belongers are able to find truth in other traditions as well.³¹ Rattan Hoeba confirms this image of a dual believer. Even so, Hinduism takes a larger space in his life than Christianity does. People in India are giving him more of a feeling at home; he has the impression that they understand him better. In light of the current debate on integration of cultural and religious minorities in the Netherlands this is a striking and insightful statement.

For other flexible believers who have integrated two or more religions later in life, it seems that the tradition they grew up in lies at the basis of their multireligiosity. Yerli and Darmoni grew up as liberal Muslims and Darmoni herself indicates that Sufism as her basic tradition. Yerli is less outspoken about this, even though Sufism plays a decisive part in her daily life. For Vernooij, Christianity, her childhood religion, provided the foundation. From here she made, in her own words, “the leap to freedom” by embracing Buddhism. Of all the interviewees she tries hardest to connect both traditions in her life and to do justice to both. In that sense, next to Rattan Hoeba, she belongs to the three per cent of the Dutch who fits in the category of dual belongers, as mentioned in the research of Joantine Berghuijs in this journal. Vernooij’s answer to the question of whether or not she would accept the concept of syncretism as describing her way of believing comes from a quotation of Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who characterized syncretism in this way: “I simply love fruit salad, all the different tastes coming together.” Vernooij concurs. She explains: “I enjoy creating something new based on insight in and respect for the old traditions. It starts as shopping, there is no alternative if you want to find something new. This is how I started with Zen and Vipassana. Only when you get the feeling: this is really something for me, you will start going deeper in.”³² In this way, she indicates that the two traditions she feels at home with are not separated ‘entities’, but neither do they just merge into one another. She does not want to follow the ‘logic of the one’³³ and abolish the differences. No matter how difficult these differences may be at times, she wants to make both of them fruitful. Her description evokes the image of a DNA: different traditions are intertwined, cross each other, but they also go separate ways. Both traditions are interwoven in daily life, but they are also different and stubborn.

From a scholarly perspective, the question of the relation between the various religions from which the interviewees are drawing imposes itself. Are they on the same level or is the German theologian Michael

²⁹ Kalsky and Pruim, *Flexibel geloven*, 125-134. Van der Ven’s view of Judaism, notions of truth and ‘the other’ are strongly influenced by the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. For a short excellent comment of these notions from the perspective of Levinas, see: Meir, *Differenz und Dialog*, 19-49.

³⁰ Rose Drew defines ‘dual belongers’ as “people who are firmly rooted in – and identify themselves as committed adherents of – two traditions”. Drew, “Chasing two Rabids”, 13.

³¹ Drew, *Buddhist and Christian?*, 211ff.

³² Kalsky and Pruim, *Flexibel geloven*, 49.

³³ Laurel C. Schneider uses this notion as a critique of the fixation on the One in Christianity, see Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 17-104.

von Brück right to state that the worldview a person grew up with from childhood as their ‘mother tongue’ is eventually the foundation and all other religions are added to it? In this context, Von Brück refers to a ‘historical asymmetry’ in building an interreligious identity. He thinks that the different religious identities are not on the same level, but rather build on top of one another, thus forming a multi-layered identity. This is why he does not call himself Christian and Buddhist, but rather a Christian who is changed and enriched by a Buddhist identity.³⁴ Could it be that ‘feeling at home’ in a religion – and possibly the memory of the feeling as a child – is eventually decisive in the question, which religion people will choose as the basis in their lives – or, in contrast, possibly what they are rejecting, because of the lack of a safe ‘home feeling’? Would it be the rituals that provide the security of ‘the cosmic womb’ and thus confirm and transcend one’s own existence? These are questions that require further research. For the daily practice of the flexible believers, the answers to these more abstract scholarly questions will probably be of little concern.

9 Belonging

As I mentioned before, for the majority of the flexible believers in this present research, bonds to religious communities play a minor part, at first glance. Their religious and spiritual experiences seem more solipsist; a faith community in the traditional sense is hardly involved. Are they *believers without belonging*?³⁵ Or is it possible that other types of commitment are involved? Their narratives indicate that they do value relations with friends and relatives, some of them form small ‘we’s’ with kindred spirits. The frequency of their attendance varies widely. Van Egmond attends his ‘secret society’ every week. For twenty-one years he has been a member of this theosophical society. Yerli certainly does not want to commit herself to a community and others, as well, only sporadically seek out religious community life. Only Vernooij has made the conscious choice to become part of the Theravada tradition. She officially became a Buddhist and seeks connections with other Buddhists in group meditations over Skype, yearly retreats and courses in the Vipassana centre in Amsterdam. Yoga exercises, bows and meditation are part of her daily routine. She chooses for Buddhist way of life and values being part of a larger whole. But, as she states, she feels most connected with the ecumenical base community *De Duij*.³⁶ Both her heart and her mind are challenged there. The liturgy is a help to her: prayers, hymns and religious texts. They enable her to distance herself from daily worries and egocentric emotions.

Both religious traditions help her to find a balanced and realist view on life. She describes her discovery of the power of ‘being gently present with others’. By embracing them both she finds room for what she calls ‘her whole story’. For her, it is not the authority of a sacred book or of religious scriptures that is normative but rather, and much more, her own personal history – the stories, encounters and experiences in her life – which she explicitly mentions as the enrichment of her life. Christianity inspires her when it comes to charity and commitment to the world. Buddhism restrains her from running off into an activism which used to tire her so much. It is as Rattan Hoeba observes: the two religions complement each other.

But Vernooij also underlines the tensions and differences between the two religious traditions when it comes to doctrine, for instance the Buddhist focus of the here and now as contrasted with the Christian notion of a ideal “hereafter”, or the relation between Buddhist enlightenment and its view of “salvation” as freedom from earthly attachment and the Christian concept of “salvation”. She looks creatively for bridges between both beliefs, even when they may be hard to find. For instance, she expresses *karma* into Christian terms: do as you would be done by. And if you do not learn from your mistakes you will encounter them again, in this life.

Vernooij and Rattan Hoeba are interesting cases for the ongoing discussion among (mainly Christian) theologians about the legitimate use of ‘belonging’ in the concept of dual and multiple religious belonging.³⁷ Rattan Hoeba was born into two traditions as a child of a mixed marriage. He grew up bireligiously. Where

³⁴ Von Brück, “Identität und Widerspruch”, 326.

³⁵ Davie, “Believing without Belonging”.

³⁶ <http://www.deduif.net>

³⁷ See: D’Costa, *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging*.

does he religiously belong if not in these two traditions? And Vernooij is deeply committed to Buddhism and Christianity by choice. The members of the Christian church community ‘De Duif’ and the members of her Buddhist groups accept her as part of their communities. Who has the authority to judge if these two people are real ‘belongers’ or ‘just’ participants?”³⁸ The church? The theologian? The believers? Catherine Cornille, who gave the first input for the discussion about ‘multiple religious belonging’ with her publication *Many Mansions* wrote in the introduction of her book:

Religious belonging implies more than a subjective sense of sympathy or endorsement of a selective number of beliefs and practices. It involves the recognition of one’s religious identity by the tradition itself and the disposition to submit to the conditions for membership as delineated by that tradition.³⁹

Again, questions of power arise: Who speaks in the name of “the tradition itself”? Isn’t it a case of nostalgia for religious homogeneity for one to speak of tradition instead of traditions? The Christian tradition itself is a living hybrid reality, with its beginnings coming from a variety of religious resources, such as Jewish and Egyptian traditions, Greek and Hellenistic influences *etcetera*. Who is considered ‘we’ in what Cornille calls ‘the tradition’ and who is labeled as ‘the others’?⁴⁰ In my theological view, inspired by a Protestant Lutheran background, religious belonging does not, in the first instance, carry the connotation of Church tradition nor institutional church membership, but of ‘feeling at home’ as an individual believer in relation to God and the people you “belong” to. Here the existential choice of the individual believer plays a more important role than Cornille suggests in her statement. Like Martin Luther said: “Woran du dein Herz hängst, das ist dein Gott” (To what your heart is committed, that is your God). From this perspective religious truth is not seen as a static concept in the history of the church(es) but a truth-seeking enquiry of the people, a process of becoming.⁴¹ Such a concept of truth supposes a willingness to surrender and trust. It opens not only the doors and windows of the church(es) to let the Spirit in, but also the hearts and minds of people in search for a spiritual response to one’s ultimate concern, as the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich observed. It seems to me that this existential-emotional aspect of ‘feeling at home’ should not be neglected in the discussion about belonging.

10 Paradigm shift: From patchwork to network

The flexible believers I mentioned in this article are attempting to believe in a non-dualistic way. That means: they go beyond what Schneider called ‘the logic of the One’.⁴² They are shaping their religious way of living not in opposition to different religious traditions but in relation to them. Elements from various traditions, side by side with those they found in the tradition they grew up with, are serving them as building blocks for their own religious identity. All those elements are welcome, which can enrich a life-giving spirituality and cast new light on their own religious or spiritual path, striving for love and peace for themselves and others. For the flexible believers knowledge is not only a matter of cognitive ability but also of intuition, of knowing by heart. They are not looking for fixed sets of static religious do’s and don’ts from an external authority. They are ‘drawing outside the lines’ of religious structures. This applies to Vernooij as well, even where she, as a ‘dual believer’, remains faithful to specific characteristics of the religious traditions she practises. None of them is crossing borders between religions, because they do not experience them, and if they do, as Vernooij mentioned from time to time, these borders seem to be, at the end of the day, permeable. No crossing over to another ‘religion’ and coming back to their own, as is often mentioned in theological reflections of interreligious dialogue practices. Of course these multireligious ways of practising religion invite further theological reflection. They clearly challenge the defined borderlines of theological

³⁸ Thatamanil pleads for ‘multiple religious participation’. Thatamanil, “Eucharist Upstairs, Yoga Downstairs”.

³⁹ Cornille, *Many Mansions?*, 3.

⁴⁰ See for the different views on multiple religious belonging: Oostveen, “Multiple Religious Belonging”.

⁴¹ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 27-43.

⁴² Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 18-104.

thinking and related God-talk. What does this mean for the concept of truth and religious identity, and how does it affect the concept of inter-religious dialogue? Do people who are deeply involved in interreligious dialogue still experience demarcation lines between the religious traditions in which they are engaged? Is interreligious dialogue the first step on the road to hybrid religious identities? If this is the case, then it would be no coincidence that the dual believers researched by Rose Drew are intensively involved in interreligious encounters. Of course, this is an assumption with no empirical evidence (yet), but it makes clear that the multireligious behaviour of flexible believers is a challenge to the perception of religious traditions, the formation of religious identity and theology in the context of a globalized world.⁴³

All flexible believers show a great spiritual creativity in combining rituals, symbols and old and new texts. They are playing with religious elements in a serious way, like a practised juggler.⁴⁴ Rituals seem to fulfil the function of signposts or pickets, to remind them of the path they want to go. Sacred texts are no longer the property of religions. Rather they are open sources of wisdom, sources to drink from, nourishment during the pilgrimage. When asked how they would describe their religion, three out of the six flexible believers spontaneously said: love, a religion of love and compassion.

It is clear that those who tend more towards dual belonging, like Vernooij and Rattan Hoeba, would be more likely to see themselves as belonging to two religious traditions, rather than call their religiosity a patchwork, as Darmoni and Yerli do. To them gender, ethnicity and family tradition in a religious and cultural sense play an important role. Oral history within a family as in the case of Yerli shows a transreligious blending, in which it is not clearly recognizable where some elements of her rituals are coming from. As immigrants Yerli and Darmoni take with them their religious and cultural elements of meaning and ritual practices.⁴⁵ Is their hybrid mingling of ritual and liturgical elements from various religious and cultural backgrounds a syncretistic behaviour? Can such a habit be called syncretistic if the practitioners are not conscious of religious borders at all?

The use of the term syncretism in relation to religious blending is a contested one.⁴⁶ While combining different beliefs and religious practices is seen as a matter of fact in the religious sciences, from a theological point of view this behaviour has not merely been described but also evaluated in a dogmatically normative sense. Reinhold Bernhardt shows how the term syncretism has become a ‘fighting concept’ in Christian theology against what is seen as the destruction of the core-identity of Christian faith: ‘the self-communication of God in Jesus Christ’.⁴⁷ Bernhardt pleads for a deconstruction and reconstruction of the concept of syncretism by using a process-oriented understanding of ‘Christian identity’, which feeds on a web of stories from the Christian tradition, and the openness to stories from other traditions. As does Michael von Brück, who prefers to speak of ‘creative integration’⁴⁸ instead of syncretism, Bernhardt is searching for a relation-oriented hermeneutical approach towards the adherents of two or more different religious traditions, without letting them melt into one. He quotes Von Brücks’ example from the area of acoustics, to show that multireligious identities are not necessarily a threat to the core of Christian identity:

We place a symbol or term in the resonance space of the other and observe the vibration pattern, which reveals the specific relationship of both, insofar as the respective overtones and undertones are only audible by this mutual resonance. In this way, different religious experiences and concepts can “enlighten one another” without being dissolved. (...) The resonance-like penetration reveals the respective identity at an extended-explicit level. By accepting certain qualities of the other, one’s own thinking can develop a stronger, inherent luminosity.⁴⁹

⁴³ Kalsky, “Interreligious Dialogue and the Development of a Transreligious Identity”; Kalsky, “Bausteine für eine dialogische Theologie”, 340-343; Zock, “Religious Voices in the Dialogical Self”.

⁴⁴ See for the function of play: Droogers, *Religion at Play: A Manifesto*.

⁴⁵ The eclectic combination of various religious and cultural traditions of the flexible believers reminds me of the Christian-Buddhist-shamanistic performance of the Korean-American theologian Chung Hung Kyung at the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1991 in Canberra, Australia. See: Kalsky, *Christaphanien*, 245-264.

⁴⁶ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 188-193.

⁴⁷ Bernhardt, “‘Synkretismus’ als Deutungskategorie multireligiöser Identitätsbildungen”.

⁴⁸ Von Brück, *Einheit der Wirklichkeit*, 362.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

Bernhardt identifies authentic Christian voices by bringing them into dialogue. The criterion is whether the content of these voices is an expression of the liberating presence of God or not. But who is in charge of answering the question what is liberating and what is not? Or in other words: What role does power play when it comes to the interpretation of what was heard?⁵⁰

This article reflects the way the flexible believers live their religiosity reflects their individual multi-layered and complex identities. Within the diversity of religious and cultural resources, they make their own choices in creating meaning for their lives. The social connections and belongings they have are important to them. They provide a feeling of being at home, a ‘sense of belonging’, within the large range of options they have in a globalized (post)modern society. However, their identity as individuals is not limited by their belongings, but is always in process and on the move. Even when the flexible believers commit themselves to small we’s, where they find shared values of life and inspiration, these we’s are not fixed. They remain open for new encounters, curious about new experiences and elements that they can gain in favour of their belief that the aim of their religious path is love, compassion and peace. Meredith McGuire writes:

In the very process of living and experiencing their religious identities, individuals creatively adapt and change, expressing their lived religion differently in changing life-stage, relationships, and cultural settings.⁵¹

The ‘subjective turn of modern culture’⁵² has brought about drastic changes how religions and religiosity play a role in secularised societies, like the Netherlands. In the narratives of the flexible believers reflected in this present work, there is no doubt: the individual is the decisive agent. No religious institution or religious leader is involved when it comes to deciding whether elements from the various religions can be combined or not. The crucial questions are: which elements and values from the various religious traditions contribute in a helpful way to my spiritual quality of life? Can they comfort me, enrich my limited view, give me insights and take me forward on my path of life? The focus on the ‘I’ is clear, but this does not automatically mean that they don’t want to have an equal quality of life for their neighbours, friends, and others.

Where new eclectic forms of religiosity are concerned, some use the image of patchwork religiosity or patchwork spirituality to describe what happens. But is this picture of patches, pieced together to form a blanket, doing justice to the dynamic and multi-layered character of the various religious identities shown in the interviews? I would prefer to draw a network of lines – lines that are crossing and diverging, and at other moments are converging, so that boundaries between one and the other are hardly visible. This reveals the dynamics and complexity of developments of religious identity with its converging nodes, overlaps and branches.

In our research we used the image of a rhizome, a root braid, to describe the identity-making process of flexible believers. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the psychoanalyst Felix Guattari have brought us to this track.⁵³ They chose the rhizomatic network as a model for their view of the world and of non-hierarchical knowledge: a ‘multi-rooted’ system that does not originate from dichotomies. Instead of creating a new self-contained unit, relationships arise. A rhizome is a process and represents interconnected multiplicity, a reciprocal exchange, no transmitter and no receiver. Lines find their own way and form new connections. With the help of so-called plateaus the rhizome spreads out. Each rhizome has ‘segmented lines’, whereby it appears layered, organized and assigned, and it also has ‘lines of flight’ that escape territorializing power. There is no tribe – the center can be everywhere. An open structure that invites to interdisciplinary thinking.

So, the question arises: is it possible in theology to view religious identity as a part of a transcultural and transreligious rhizomatic process? Not a rooted tree structure, not a solid anchoring in confessional ground, but a broader and relational process of mutual connections of religious and non-religious worldviews. Or, to put the question in other words: Is it possible to imagine a theology of the good life for all, in which

⁵⁰ See for power and play in religion: Droogers, *Religion at Play: A Manifesto*.

⁵¹ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 209.

⁵² Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 26.

⁵³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Tausend Plateaus*.

the call of Deleuze and Guattari can be heard: ‘Make rhizomes and no roots! Do not be one or many, be multiplicities!’⁵⁴?

Today’s post-Christian and secularized Dutch society, where cultural and religious hybridity are taking shape through migration and internal processes of transformation, requires such a new paradigm of diversity and multiplicity not only in politics but also in theology. The aim is to provide room to all forms of belonging beyond othering. It requires a different way of thinking, which adds up and constitutes relations. A different attitude towards ‘the other’ is needed, which feels more at home in a non-dualistic thinking of ‘both... and’, than in ‘either... or’.⁵⁵ The theologians Laurel Schneider and Catherine Keller plea for ‘multiple forms of right belief’, a polyvocal coherence in a web of living embodied interactions⁵⁶ and a logic of fluid multiplicity, which is at the same time constructive and critical.⁵⁷ In an increasingly diverse Europe this new paradigm should be developed from a transcultural and transreligious perspective. By utilizing the term ‘trans’ instead of ‘inter’ I want to underline the dynamic and moving character of meaning-making.⁵⁸ From a theological point of view, inter-religious dialogue is usually seen as an encounter is usually seen as an encounter between people with clearly-defined identities firmly rooted in their own religious tradition. However, isn’t it quite conceivable that when by hearing and learning more about other religions and worldviews through encounters, dialogue and internet, reciprocal influence and the takeover of religious ideas and customs happen more often than the given pattern of religious identity formation would lead us to believe? The prefix ‘trans’ emphasizes the flowing and flexible shape of hybrid religious identities with in a rhizomatic network.

The demand for a paradigm shift from religious unity to transreligious multiplicity is close to the requirement of John Thatamanil and Wesley Wildman for a transreligious theology beyond confessional borders.⁵⁹ Thatamanil writes: “Transreligious theology, as I understand it, is constructive theology done in conversation with and drawing from the sources of more than one tradition”⁶⁰ Their aim is a theology of mutual transformation which could make a contribution to the development of new sustainable connections to work together for gender justice and to end global poverty and injustice.

Theology Without Walls is a stimulating interdisciplinary approach to encourage mutual acceptance and equality.⁶¹ Together with the groundbreaking work of earlier-mentioned Catherine Keller and Laurel Schneider, the theological search for ways to deal with the complexity of religious transformations and the “Nones” (those without religious affiliation) in secularized societies in the Western world has just begun. The flexible believers in this article exemplify the need to reconsider the conceptions of religious identity and belonging. They challenge us to see hybrid forms of lived religion not as a threat, but as a chance to revise theology by removing the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – the binary split of dualistic thinking. They offer ‘touches of truth’⁶² in their multiple religious way of living, a many-faceted network of meaning.

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⁵⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Rhizom*, back cover (transl. MK).

⁵⁵ Kalsky, “Embracing Diversity. Reflections on the Transformation of Christian Identity”.

⁵⁶ Keller, *Polydoxy*, 3-4.

⁵⁷ Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 89

⁵⁸ See for the discussion of ‘trans’ and ‘inter’: Grung, *Gender justice in Muslim-Christian readings*, 27-29.

⁵⁹ See: Thatamanil, “Transreligious Theology as the Quest for Interreligious Wisdom”; Wildman, “Theology Without Walls”.

⁶⁰ Thatamanil, “Transreligious Theology as the Quest for Interreligious Wisdom”, 354.

⁶¹ Feldmeier, “Theology Without Walls: *Sic et Non*”.

⁶² This metaphor is used by Keller, *On the Mystery*, 11-14.

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