



Editors' Page

Something is Happening

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GUEST EDITORIAL

*To insist on a spiritual practice
that served you in the past is to
carry the raft on your back after
you have crossed the river.*

Buddha

Helen grew up in a Catholic home. She married a Jewish man. They went to church and to synagogue together during special holidays of each tradition. Their children thought “all the better – we celebrate Christmas and Hannukah – twice the presents!” Then, as her children grew up, Helen “took up Buddhism in a serious way,” as she liked to say. If you are religious statistician, how do you count her? What questions do you ask? Better yet, what questions might you ask her children to determine their religious identification and preferences? And how should you portray her religious identity in comparison to someone who is steeped in one tradition?

Forces of globalization, hyper-consumerism, advanced communications,

modern transportation, inter-marriages and patterns of migration have led to a complex individualization and privatization of religious experience and identity. Cases like Helen’s are now less rare in our religiously pluralistic world. But what do we make of them?

Baptized and raised a Christian, I am “traditionist.” When I think of dialogue, I must admit that I often have in mind a picture of a person formed in a single tradition engaging with someone equally formed in another tradition. But, increasingly so, I am finding that not to be the case in actual practice. Every dialogue of any size that I have encountered includes at least some people who are carrying within themselves multiple religious identities, either now concurrently or historically spread across their journeys. Whichever, they bring those selves to the table, and it effects how they enter into the conversation.

For those who work in the interfaith movement, these distinctions have gotten frustratingly confusing. People who are mindfully “multipath” in their own

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journeys have adopted the term “interfaith” to refer to themselves, their communities, and even their seminaries. This use of the term confuses those who understand “interfaith” to refer to engagement between people with singular religious commitments. Time will determine how multipath people come to label themselves.

According to the 1990 National Survey of Religious Identification, the number of self-identifying Christians in the United States was around 86.2%. By 2001, in the follow-up American Religious Identification Survey, that percentage had dropped to 76.5%, a 10% drop in a decade in which the population as a whole grew by about 9%. Analysts at the Ontario Consultants for Religious Tolerance surmised that, if the pattern continued, Christians would be outnumbered by other believers as early as 2042.

David Roozen, the Director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, suggested that linear continuation of the same pattern is highly improbable, but that the pattern was sufficiently supported by other data sets to believe that by 2050 or 2060 a distinctly different religious mix would be undeniable. But I say the truth is that we really don’t know. Why? The questioning process in surveying has not caught up with conditions and complexity in real people’s lives.

“But where did the 10% go?,” you still may be wondering. Well, for one thing both the number of people refusing to answer questions about religion

and those claiming no religion at all doubled. By 2001, these two categories accounted for nearly 20% of those questioned. But how many of them are those whom we might call “multipath” people? We don’t know. Think about Helen again. Certainly, she might over-identify, as many do, with the tradition of her childhood and call herself a Christian. Or she might claim no religion at all. Alternatively, she might think of herself as “spiritual,” and refuse to answer a “religious” survey. Or she might proudly call herself a “Buddhist.”

On a clear day one evening as a child, I remember sitting in my living room with my family when enormous, earth-shattering rumbles overtook us. An eerie silence fell over my family. “Was that an earthquake?,” I wondered to myself. The silence was broken when a local police officer came over our police scanner saying slowly and repeatedly to the dispatcher, “something is happening out here.” We all laughed aloud at the sheer obviousness of it. The next day’s newspaper explained that a dynamite truck had caught fire on the highway.

We have all heard the rumbles. It is obvious something is happening on the religious landscape. We just don’t know quite what yet. We cautiously, slowly say back to dispatch: “something is happening out here.”