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## Bi the Way

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# Bi the Way: Rethinking Categories of Religious Identity

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*Abstract: A single category of religious identification no longer serves a significant and growing segment of the U.S. population. The percentage of people describing themselves using a single religious term such as “Lutheran”, “Jewish”, or “Hindu” is shrinking. Identification by religious affiliation no longer reflects how many Americans view the complexity of their religious beliefs and practices. Younger generations in particular are identifying with broader, more general terms such as “spiritual” or “spiritual but not religious”. Despite these trends, the field of religious studies continues to use religious affiliation as its primary way to categorize religious identification. In contrast, the discipline of gender studies has worked for more than half a century to re-conceptualize how gender is defined and categorized. This article explores what type of religious studies research might be generated if concepts from gender studies such as bi and trans were also used to investigate new patterns of religious identification.*

*Keywords: Religious Identity, Comparative Religion, Lived Religion*

## Introduction

A single category of religious identification no longer serves a significant and growing segment of the U.S. population. The percentage of people describing themselves using a single religious term such as “Lutheran”, “Jewish”, or “Hindu” is shrinking. Identification by religious affiliation no longer reflects how many Americans view the complexity of their religious beliefs and practices. According to a 2012 Pew Center for Religion in Society survey, “The number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling.”<sup>1</sup> Younger generations in particular are identifying with broader, more general terms such as “spiritual”.

Despite these trends, the accepted framework used by researchers and participants alike for describing religious identity continues to be religious affiliation. Even phrases of non-affiliation, such as *Spiritual But Not Religious*, or *Nones*, operate within this larger conceptual framework because the terms define themselves against the norm of religious affiliation. Religious studies would benefit from considering how other fields address contemporary trends in their disciplines. Gender studies is a good example because it began with fixed and discrete categories that proved to be less descriptive in modern times. In contrast to religious studies, however, gender studies has actively worked for more than half a century to re-conceptualize how gender is defined and categorized. This exploratory essay considers what might be gained if concepts from gender theory such as *bi* and *trans* were applied to research on new patterns of religious identification.

## Religious and Gender Identification

In contrast to the study of religious identification, the study of gender identification has dramatically shifted over the past fifty years. Gender theory scholarship has actively sought to dislodge older theories of gender and sexuality as fixed and biologically determined. Gender is

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Nones on the Rise: One in Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2012), 9.

no longer seen as simply male and female, and acceptance of homosexuality and bi-sexuality has also risen. A foundational early book in this regard is Judith Butler's 1989 *Gender Trouble*, which proposed a more fluid concept of gender being performed across a spectrum of possible behaviors rather than being biologically determined. For more than twenty years, gender scholars have debated and nuanced theories of gender performativity as well as new theories of sexuality, but there is no doubt that terms such as bi and trans have become more accepted as categories for describing people's sexual behavior and gender identity, both academically and in social usage. Bi and trans mean "two" and "across" respectively, and they are used in a variety of other subjects such as *biannual* and *transatlantic*.

My interest in exploring how the concepts of bi and trans could inform religious studies was piqued during a recent qualitative research project I conducted on four Christian communities that pray with female imagery of God. For the study, I documented the worship of these Lutheran, Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian congregations as well as interviewed over one hundred worship community members.

Respondents offered their understanding of gender when trying to explain the meaning of the female imagery used in the worship service. Some described a fluidity of gender, stating that God was neither male nor female and that God could be represented in a variety of gendered ways. Others continued to make meaning using only two categories of male and female in their explanations. Often participants did not use specialized terms, but as a scholar I could use the theories of gender performativity and gender essentialism as theoretical framings to interpret their responses.

When the conversations turned to religious identity, the theoretical classifying became less clear. Some participants defined their religious identity with just one word, such as Presbyterian, or Methodist, and some included the religious denomination, such as ELCA Lutheran, United Methodist, or Roman Catholic. Other worshippers, however, added political modifiers to their religious affiliation, describing themselves with such phrases as "liberal Catholic" or "conservative Christian". Some Lutherans identified themselves as "Open and Affirming", using recognized church language for supporting LGBTQ members and lifestyles. Still others added modifiers based on their agreement with church doctrine, calling themselves "marginally Christian", or "Cafeteria Catholics". These modifiers appeared to be added to religious identity when individuals held political or religious positions different from their denomination as a whole, or when they strongly identified with one side of a church debate. Some participants even described themselves as "bad" church members, but this usually had more to do with inconsistent attendance at Sunday worship rather than a dispute with church doctrine.

For these participants, church affiliation alone did not adequately describe their personal religious identity. As Manuel Castellos explains in *The Power of Identity*, an institution can provide a point of origination for personal identity, though it only becomes a personal identity if the person internalizes it, and also constructs meaning around this internalization.<sup>2</sup> Peter Herriot supports this view in his work applying social identity theory to religious fundamentalism. He suggests that if a social identity is of central importance and frequently used by someone to describe themselves, then it is likely to be salient in the adherent's mind in a wide variety of social situations.<sup>3</sup> My research suggests that for some worship participants, only when a hyphenated religious label was constructed, did they identify with it and use it inside and outside of church.

While these worshippers were constructing their own descriptors for their religious identities, they still tended to reference one religious tradition. To be fair, the religious communities I studied all had formal institutional affiliations, so one might well expect most participants to identify with that one, particular tradition. However, in seeking out Christian

<sup>2</sup> Manuel Castellos, *The Power of Identity*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Herriot, *Religious Fundamentalism and Social Identity* (NY: Routledge, 2007), 117.

communities that prefer worshipping with female images of God, I was seeking participants who identified with liminal and marginal ritual expressions of that tradition. Their worship already contained some element of distancing, reform, and even protest regarding their denominational affiliation.

In addition, other religious traditions often inspired their innovative worship rituals and their sense of truth about them. Religious influences also extended to Eastern religious traditions as some participants incorporated Eastern meditation techniques and yoga practices into their Christian prayer lives. Some participants were reading religious scripture from other religions as well. Because of the focus on female imagery, many participants prayed with art created for the Neo-pagan Goddess movement. Some even described interacting with Goddess or Pagan groups, and some continued to participate with these groups along with their Christian worship. Some described these interactions with other religious teachings and practices as deepening their Christian faith. Others found it uncomfortable yet revealing to discover what they personally believed and valued. Nonetheless, these participants hyphenated their religious affiliation not with other religious terms but with political terms such as “liberal Methodist” or value terms like “bad Catholic”.

## Bi Identity as Theoretical Lens

This finding suggests that many of us are more religiously bi and trans than we care to admit. We may be bi-religious if we are inspired and possibly participate in more than one religious tradition. We might be trans-religious if we combine these traditions in innovative and personal ways. We might also give ourselves permission to perform different religious identities in different contexts and at different times. We may not talk about ourselves this way because personally identifying with more than one religious tradition may still be considered taboo by many, much like the attitudes towards bi-sexual and transgendered people were fifty years ago.

Scholars have not typically characterized religious identity as bi or trans, but perhaps we should. Theories of gender now acknowledge a spectrum in the gender one performs, the gender one identifies with, and the bodies one is attracted to, as opposed to simplified and discrete categories predetermined by biological and cultural norms. Theoretical blurring of distinctions in gender and sexuality may suggest ways that religious identity could be re-conceptualized as well.

Fortunately, we are in an era when categorization of religious identity is beginning to be challenged and transformed. According to The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), social researchers in the past have classified individuals by their religious affiliations or beliefs while today individuals are invited to place themselves within these categories.<sup>4</sup> Christian Smith and others have highlighted the strength of religious self-identification because it allows the individual to classify themselves within a pre-defined typology rather than being assigned by the researcher.<sup>5</sup> This trend now extends into popular culture as web sites offer personal belief questionnaires for respondents to answer, which are then matched with the religious beliefs of various religions.<sup>6</sup>

While the approach of religious self-identification is an improvement, it still needs further development. Even with the advancement of people placing themselves within categories, the categories are still predefined by others and they are still discrete categories defined primarily by religious affiliation. If we were to apply the flexibility and freedom found in gender performance

<sup>4</sup> “Religious Identity”, The Association of Religious Studies Archives, accessed March 3, 2013, <http://www.thearda.com/rrh/bestpracticescenter/concepts/concept17.asp>.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 233.

<sup>6</sup> Belief-O-Matic Quiz, [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com), accessed September 8, 2013. Beliefnet gives spiritual melting pot new shape By: Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA Today, 07347456, OCT 2006.

theory to religious identity, we would acknowledge a spectrum of unlimited combinations of religious beliefs and practices instead.

There has been some initial movement to destabilize the religious affiliation convention in research. Recent studies now acknowledge that religious identity no longer presupposes formal membership, and formal membership or affiliation does not assume a level of active participation. According to a 2007 Pew report, a majority of those who said they seldom or never attended religious services continued to describe themselves as belonging to a particular religious tradition. Five years later in the 2012 study, the group that affiliated while seldom attending dropped 10 percentage points to 50% while those who acknowledged seldom or never attending a religious service actually rose from 25% to 29%. In interpreting these findings, the researchers of the Pew study suggested that Americans today are more willing to drop religious affiliation from their identity altogether if they rarely attend services, choosing instead to identify as “nothing in particular,” or “Nones”.<sup>7</sup>

Sociologist Rodney Stark also supports decoupling religious affiliation and beliefs. Based on his research using the Baylor Surveys of Religion, he found that irreligious Americans are most likely “unchurched” but not atheists.<sup>8</sup> Not affiliating with a religious institution no longer means no belief in God. The phrase “spiritual but not religious” has entered our lexicon as a way for those who do not identify with a specific religious tradition to still self-identify as having some form of spiritual belief. In the U.S. it is estimated that between 10% and 33% of the population describes themselves as spiritual but not religious, with even higher percentages for younger generations.<sup>9</sup> In 2010, LifeWay Christian Resources conducted a study of American young adults age 18 - 29 and found that 72% described themselves as more spiritual than religious.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of religious beliefs and practices, the 2012 Pew study found that those who identify as unaffiliated are a diverse group, and far from uniformly secular. Just 5% say they attend worship services on a weekly basis. One-third of the unaffiliated, however, say religion is at least somewhat important in their lives. Two-thirds believe in God, and a majority at 55% describe themselves either as a religious person or as spiritual but not religious.<sup>11</sup>

## Future Possibilities for Bi-Identity in Religious Identity Research

Given these emerging trends, what might the lens of religious bi-identity or trans-identity produce in religious studies scholarship? I offer a few possibilities here on religious bi-identity to begin the discussion. This list is by no means exhaustive. It is meant to provide a starting point for the conversation as well as to demonstrate how I see the concept of religious bi-identity being useful in the field.

Overall, the research focus on religious bi-identity invites exploration of those individuals who inhabit spaces in-between traditional categories of religion. These individuals can be studied not as operating on the margins of established religious traditions, but rather as inhabiting new spaces, spaces that fully acknowledge all the religious traditions, beliefs, and practices that have informed their unique religious identities. Their unique cluster of religious beliefs and practices may or may not be considered a new religious movement (NRM), even if they choose to express this understanding together within some kind of community. In fact, religious bi-identity suggests that the individual may feel wholeness in identifying their numerous influences without making any claim on a larger institutional space at all.

<sup>7</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Nones on the Rise,” 13.

<sup>8</sup> Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe*. (Baylor, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 145-146.

<sup>9</sup> Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Survey: 72% of Millennials More Spiritual than Religious,” *USA Today*, October 14, 2010, accessed February 2, 2013, [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-04-27-1Amillfaith27\\_ST\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-04-27-1Amillfaith27_ST_N.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Nones on the Rise,” 41.

The concept of religious bi-identity could also help researchers look at the secondary religious influences on a person's life, and reveal how a person integrates multiple influences into their personal religious identity. At the college where I teach, our students are predominantly Christian, yet many are intrigued with elements and ideas from other religions, particularly the concept of reincarnation. It would be interesting to examine how much a particular religious belief or practice has influenced the religious self-understanding of individuals, regardless of how, or if, they religiously affiliate. This concept could also help in studying children of multi-religious families, or children of parents with different religious backgrounds who raise them in both traditions.<sup>12</sup>

Religious bi-identity also offers the possibility of studying how individuals combine their religious influences, not just what they are combining. There are many possibilities for how a person could be bi-religious. Some individuals may consciously and simultaneously inhabit elements of both traditions equally, while others may inhabit one more tradition more than the other. Some may act out or perform one side of their religious or spiritual identity publically while privately studying or participating in something else. In my research, one respondent described herself as having an inner and outer church. We are also seeing the possibility of these patterns in other religious contexts as well. Many wiccans describe themselves as solitary practitioners. A concept of religious bi-identity might encourage researchers to explore the possibility that these individuals have a different religious tradition they practice publically, and not assume 'solitary wiccan' is the only way the person identifies religiously.

In conclusion, it is time we acknowledge that religious affiliation is becoming an increasingly weak way to categorize religious identity. More individuals today are willing to identify as None, or as spiritual but not religious. Because there are unlimited possibilities of how a person might identify with more than one religious tradition, concepts of bi and trans from gender theory offer a way to begin to re-conceptualize this religious identity landscape. Religious bi-identity, in particular, offers scholars an approach for exploring the nuance and complexity of religious identity of this growing American religious trend.

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<sup>12</sup> Cokie Roberts and Steve Roberts, *From This Day Forward* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 23.

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***The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*** aims to create an intellectual frame of reference for the academic study of religion and spirituality, and to create an interdisciplinary conversation on the role of religion and spirituality in society. It is intended as a place for critical engagement, examination, and experimentation of ideas that connect religious philosophies to their contexts throughout history in the world, places of worship, on the streets, and in communities. The journal addresses the need for critical discussion on religious issues—specifically as they are situated in the present-day contexts of ethics, warfare, politics, anthropology, sociology, education, leadership, artistic engagement, and the dissonance or resonance between religious tradition and modern trends.

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