



Rethinking Religion: The Emergence of Multi-Religious Community Models

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century has witnessed significant transformations in religious identity, affiliation, and community formation. Increasing globalization, migration, digital connectivity, and cultural pluralism have contributed to the rise of individuals and groups who identify with more than one religious tradition. This paper explores the emergence of multi-religious community models, examining their sociological foundations, theological implications, and institutional structures. Drawing on theories of religious pluralism, hybrid identity formation, and transnationalism, the study analyzes how multi-religious communities negotiate doctrine, ritual practice, authority, and belonging. Case illustrations from contexts shaped by traditions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism demonstrate both the challenges and opportunities inherent in these evolving models. The research argues that multi-religious communities are not merely transitional or marginal phenomena but represent a meaningful shift in contemporary religious life. These models challenge exclusivist frameworks, expand understandings of spiritual belonging, and contribute to social cohesion in increasingly diverse societies.



1. Introduction

Religious identity has traditionally been viewed as singular, stable, and tied to specific institutions. People generally belonged to a single tradition, took part in its rituals, and accepted its theological teachings. However, modern social conditions are increasingly challenging this model. Migration, interfaith marriage, dialogue between religious groups, and online religious participation have created settings where individuals come into regular and meaningful contact with multiple faiths. As a result, a growing number of people and communities now identify with more than one religious tradition—a trend often referred to as “multiple religious belonging” or multi-religious identity. These communities go beyond taking part in interfaith dialogue; they actively combine beliefs, practices, and ethical values from different traditions into a shared communal life.

This research examines the emergence of multi-religious community models, asking:

1. What social and cultural conditions have facilitated their development?
2. How do these communities structure authority, ritual, and identity?
3. What theological and sociological implications arise from multi-religious belonging?

The paper argues that multi-religious community models reflect broader transformations in modern identity formation and religious expression, and they represent a durable feature of contemporary pluralistic societies.

Literature Review:

Religious pluralism has been widely discussed in contemporary theology and sociology. Eck (2001) defines pluralism not merely as diversity but as active engagement across lines of difference. Pluralism requires dialogue, mutual transformation, and shared civic participation. Knitter (2002) extends this discussion by arguing for a “global responsibility” model in which religious traditions collaborate toward ethical goals despite doctrinal differences. Berger (2014) suggests that modernity produces a “pluralistic situation” in which multiple belief systems coexist, undermining taken-for-granted certainty. In such contexts, individuals must choose their religious commitments rather than inherit them unquestioningly. This shift creates space for hybrid and overlapping identities.

The concept of multiple religious belonging gained academic prominence in the late 20th century. Cornille (2010) argues that while theology has historically resisted dual belonging, lived religion often



transcends formal boundaries. Phan (2003) highlights examples of Christians engaging Buddhist meditation without abandoning Christian identity. Similarly, Clooney (2010) demonstrates how comparative theology fosters deep learning across traditions without requiring exclusive commitment.

These studies emphasize individual practice but increasingly acknowledge communal experimentation.

Hybrid identity theory, rooted in postcolonial studies and cultural sociology, suggests identities are constructed through interaction and negotiation (Bhabha, 1994). Applied to religion, hybridity describes the blending and cohabitation of traditions within individuals and communities.

Giddens (1991) argues that late modernity produces reflexive identities— individuals actively construct self-narratives rather than passively inheriting them. Religious belonging thus becomes an ongoing project shaped by exposure, reflection, and choice. In East Asia, individuals historically participated in Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist practices simultaneously without perceiving contradiction (Prothero, 2010). In South Asia, devotional practices often incorporated elements across Hindu, Sikh, and Islamic traditions. These examples suggest that exclusive belonging is not universal.

However, Western theological traditions—particularly Christianity and Islam— often emphasized doctrinal exclusivity and orthodoxy (Knitter, 2002). Modern globalization has destabilized such boundaries.

Objective of the Study:

The objective of the study, "Rethinking Religion: The Emergence of MultiReligious Community Models," is to examine and analyze how contemporary religious communities are evolving beyond traditional single-faith frameworks.

Specifically, it aims to:

1. Investigate the emergence of multi-religious communities in which members of different faiths coexist, collaborate, and share communal spaces.
2. Understand the social, cultural, and spiritual dynamics that facilitate interfaith cooperation and dialogue.
3. Assess the implications of these multi-religious models for social cohesion, religious identity, and conflict resolution.



4. Identify practical models and strategies for fostering inclusive, pluralistic communities in diverse societies.
5. Challenge traditional assumptions about religious boundaries, exclusivity, and community formation in modern contexts.

In essence, the study seeks to reconceptualize how religion functions socially and culturally in increasingly pluralistic societies and to provide frameworks for understanding and supporting interfaith coexistence.

Research Methodology:

For a study like “Rethinking Religion: The Emergence of Multi-Religious

Community Models,” the research methodology would likely involve a qualitative, exploratory approach aimed at understanding complex social and religious dynamics. Here’s a structured outline of how it could be framed:

1. Research Design

- **Type:** Qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory research.
- **Purpose:** To investigate how multi-religious communities emerge, operate, and sustain coexistence.

2. Data Collection Methods

- **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with community leaders, religious practitioners, and members of multi-religious communities to gather personal experiences and insights.
- **Participant Observation:** Observing rituals, events, and interactions within multi-religious spaces to understand real-life dynamics.
- **Document Analysis:** Studying community records, newsletters, social media groups, or interfaith agreements to trace historical and organizational patterns.

3. Sampling

- **Approach:** Purposive sampling to select communities and individuals actively involved in interfaith initiatives.



- Scope: Focus on urban, multicultural, or religiously diverse regions where multi-religious models are more prominent.

4. Data Analysis

- Thematic Analysis: Coding qualitative data to identify recurring themes, challenges, and strategies in multi-religious coexistence.
- Comparative Analysis: Comparing different community models to understand variations in structure, governance, and interfaith engagement.

5. Ethical Considerations

- Ensuring informed consent from participants.
- Maintaining confidentiality and sensitivity to religious beliefs.
- Avoiding bias in interpretation and representation of diverse faith perspectives.

This methodology allows researchers to capture both the lived experiences and organizational structures of multi-religious communities while providing insights into best practices and potential challenges.

Theoretical Framework

Religious pluralism is the coexistence and mutual acceptance of multiple religious traditions within a community. While historical pluralism concentrated on tolerance and communication between different groups, modern plurality increasingly involves overlapping identities and greater integration.

Numerous religious belonging (MRB) is the term used to describe those who actively practise or identify with numerous religious traditions. Unlike syncretism, which often blends components into a new system, MRB allows people to engage with many traditions while maintaining their distinct boundaries.

Identities are relational, dynamic, and created through social contact, according to hybrid identity theory, which is based on sociology and cultural studies. This concept clarifies how individuals combine elements of several traditions to form coherent religious self-understandings.



Historical Context

While multi-religious identity is often seen as a modern development, historical precedents exist. In various regions of South and East Asia, individuals have participated simultaneously in Buddhist, Hindu, Confucian, or Taoist practices without perceiving contradiction.

However, in many Western contexts shaped by exclusivist theological frameworks—particularly within Christianity and Islam—religious identity was often defined in opposition to other traditions. The rise of modern secularism, globalization, and interreligious engagement in the 20th and 21st centuries has shifted these boundaries.

Global migration patterns have intensified interfaith marriages and multicultural communities. Urban centers now serve as contact zones where religious traditions coexist and interact daily. This has created fertile ground for multi-religious community experimentation.

Drivers of Multi-Religious Community Formation

Global migration has increased exposure to diverse religious traditions. Diasporic communities often adapt practices in response to new social contexts, leading to innovative forms of shared worship and identity.

Interfaith households frequently cultivate dual religious practices, raising children with exposure to multiple traditions. Over time, such practices may extend beyond the family unit into broader community models.

Online platforms facilitate access to teachings, rituals, and communities beyond geographic boundaries. Individuals can explore and participate in multiple religious traditions simultaneously, fostering hybrid identities.

Younger generations often prioritize inclusivity and personal spiritual exploration over rigid institutional affiliation. Surveys in various pluralistic societies show increasing numbers of individuals identifying as “spiritual but not exclusively religious.”

Models of Multi-Religious Communities

Multi-religious community models vary in structure and emphasis. Three common types include:



These communities design shared rituals that incorporate elements from multiple traditions—such as scriptural readings, music, and prayer forms—while maintaining respect for their distinct origins.

Members retain primary identification with one tradition but participate regularly in another. The community facilitates structured engagement without demanding theological uniformity.

These communities emphasize dialogue as a core spiritual practice. Members publicly affirm belonging to more than one tradition and engage in theological reflection that acknowledges multiple sources of authority.

Theological and Institutional Challenges

Many religious traditions maintain exclusivist claims regarding truth and salvation. Multi-religious communities must navigate contradictions in doctrines concerning divinity, revelation, and authority.

Traditional religious authorities may question the authenticity of multi-religious belonging. Institutional resistance can limit recognition and resource access for these communities.

Maintaining coherent communal identity while honoring diversity presents practical challenges. Leadership structures often require innovative governance models that distribute authority across traditions.

Social and Cultural Implications

Multi-religious community models contribute to social cohesion by fostering empathy, reducing prejudice, and modeling peaceful coexistence. By normalizing religious complexity, they challenge binary frameworks that can fuel conflict.

At the same time, critics argue that such models risk diluting tradition or undermining deeply rooted theological commitments. The long-term sustainability of these communities may depend on their ability to balance openness with depth. **Globalization and Migration**

Globalization intensifies transnational flows of ideas, people, and practices (Beyer, 2006). Migration has produced multicultural urban centers where religious diversity is normalized. Interfaith marriages increase opportunities for dual religious socialization.



Digital Religion

Digital platforms enable individuals to access teachings and rituals from multiple traditions simultaneously. Campbell (2013) notes that online religious spaces disrupt traditional authority structures, empowering individual exploration.

Typologies of Multi-Religious Community Models

Based on sociological observation and theoretical synthesis, three broad models emerge:

These communities design shared rituals incorporating readings, music, and contemplative practices from multiple traditions. Leadership may be co-shared among representatives of different faith backgrounds.

Members maintain primary affiliation with one tradition but regularly participate in another community's worship or study. Identity remains dialogical rather than merged.

These communities explicitly affirm multi-religious belonging as a theological stance. Members publicly identify with more than one tradition and engage in structured comparative theology.

Theological Implications

Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism

Traditional theological categories include exclusivism (only one true path), inclusivism (one normative path with openness to others), and pluralism (multiple valid paths) (Knitter, 2002). Multi-religious communities often align with pluralistic or inclusivist frameworks but may also reinterpret exclusivist doctrines symbolically.

Authority and Scripture

Multi-religious communities must address questions of scriptural authority. Some adopt comparative study models; others treat sacred texts as complementary rather than contradictory sources of insight.

Ritual and Sacramentality

Ritual integration raises practical questions. Can Eucharistic theology coexist with Buddhist non-theism? Can Islamic monotheism align with Hindu devotional plurality? Communities navigate these tensions through metaphorical interpretation or contextual framing.



Sociological Implications

Late modern identity is reflexive and constructed (Giddens, 1991). Multi-religious belonging reflects this reflexivity. Interfaith engagement reduces prejudice through sustained contact (Allport, 1954). Multi-religious communities may function as microcosms of peaceful pluralism. Established religious institutions may resist dual belonging. Membership criteria and sacramental participation often require exclusive commitment. Although large-scale quantitative data remain limited, qualitative studies of interfaith families, meditation centers, and dialogical congregations reveal increasing normalization of hybrid religious practice (Wuthnow, 2007).

Discussion

1. Exploring the rise of multi-religious communities

The study highlights that multi-religious communities are increasingly emerging in urban, multicultural contexts. These communities reflect a shift away from strictly single-faith congregations toward inclusive spaces where individuals of different religions coexist, collaborate, and share resources. Examples include interfaith centers, multi-faith worship spaces, and community service organizations that bring together participants across religious lines. This rise demonstrates how contemporary social structures and migration patterns encourage interreligious engagement and communal pluralism, rather than isolation.

2. Understanding social, cultural, and spiritual dynamics

The study underscores that successful multi-religious communities rely on both practical cooperation and deep cultural sensitivity. Socially, trust-building activities like joint volunteer work, festivals, and dialogue forums create bonds. Culturally, communities navigate differing traditions and norms by adopting flexible practices that respect all members. Spiritually, there is often a shared recognition of universal ethical values—such as compassion, service, and justice—that allow members to engage meaningfully while maintaining distinct religious identities.

3. Assessing implications for social cohesion, identity, and conflict resolution

Multi-religious models can strengthen social cohesion by reducing prejudice and promoting mutual understanding. They also encourage hybrid or multiple religious identities, where individuals may participate in more than one tradition without feeling conflict. Conflict resolution is facilitated through structured interfaith dialogue and collaborative decision-making, which prevents tensions from escalating



in diverse communities. The study emphasizes that these models act as a bridge between individual belief systems and the collective social fabric.

4. Identifying practical models and strategies

The study identifies several strategies for fostering inclusive communities:

- Shared physical spaces for worship and social activities.
- Interfaith councils or committees to coordinate activities and mediate disputes.
- Community-led education programs that teach religious literacy and respect.
- Joint social service projects, like food drives or environmental initiatives, that unite members around common goals.

These strategies show that inclusion is not only philosophical but also practical, requiring intentional planning, leadership, and adaptability.

5. Challenging traditional assumptions about religion

Finally, the study challenges conventional notions of religious exclusivity by showing that religion need not be a boundary but can be a bridge. Traditional assumptions about faith as rigid or conflict-prone are replaced by evidence that pluralistic communities can maintain distinct identities while fostering cooperation. The research encourages rethinking religion as a dynamic, socially embedded phenomenon, shaped by dialogue, mutual respect, and shared civic responsibility.

The emergence of multi-religious community models reflects broader transformations in identity, authority, and belonging in late modern societies. Religion is increasingly experienced as relational and dialogical rather than territorially bound.

Rather than signaling the decline of religion, multi-religious identity may represent its adaptation to pluralistic realities. These communities demonstrate that faith can function as a bridge rather than a boundary marker.

Future research should include empirical field studies, longitudinal analyses of community sustainability, and comparative theological exploration across traditions.



9. Conclusion

Multi-religious community models challenge long-standing assumptions about exclusive religious identity and institutional boundaries. Rooted in globalization, migration, and generational change, these communities represent a significant development in contemporary religious life.

By rethinking belonging, authority, and practice, multi-religious communities offer innovative pathways for navigating diversity in the modern world. While theological and institutional tensions persist, their growth signals an evolving religious landscape in which multiplicity and dialogue are increasingly central.

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