

Multiple Religious Identities: The Experiences of Four Jewish-Buddhist Teachers

Emily Sigalow and Wendy Cadge¹
Brandeis University
September 2012

Objectives

These materials are designed to stimulate and facilitate discussion about how individuals experience multiple religious identities. We suggest background readings about this issue generally and among people who combine aspects of Judaism and Buddhism in the contemporary United States. Case study materials focus on four well-known teachers of Judaism, Buddhism, or a combination of the traditions. All four were born in the Jewish tradition and have adopted elements of Buddhism in their teachings and personal practices. By comparing how these four teachers relate to Judaism and Buddhism and construct identities within the traditions, we aim to a.) help students develop a typology that describes how people experience multiple religious identities b.) situate these four individuals on that typology and c.) consider the extent to which the typology is unique to people in Jewish-Buddhist traditions or might be applied more broadly.

We suggest that students read the background materials below before coming to class. We then outline a suggested plan for one or more class sections (it probably requires about ninety minutes to complete). Questions for further discussion could be used either for class discussion, individual writing or future assignments.

Background Reading

- Cornille, Catherine. 2003. "Double Religious Belonging." *Buddhist-Christian Studies*. Vol 23, p. 43-50.
- "Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths." *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*. December 9, 2009. URL: <http://www.pewforum.org/Other-Beliefs-and-Practices/Many-Americans-Mix-Multiple-Faiths.aspx>
- "Jews and American Buddhism" *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*. February 27, 1998
- Weinberg, Shelia. 1994. "Many Voices in One Mind" *The Reconstructionist*. Fall. p. 53-58.

Class Exercises and Discussion

¹ The research on which these materials are based was made possible by a generous grant from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation. Sara Shostak, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Brandeis University, assisted with that research. Philip Gallagher assisted with these teaching guides.

We suggest you begin class by saying that we will be talking today about people who understand themselves to be connected to more than one religious tradition. You might have the class brainstorm about the ways they see people combining religious traditions, what they see about this topic among their friends and colleagues, in the media, etc., what kinds of dilemmas or challenges people face who combine religious traditions, etc. You could put key terms on the board as a way of keeping track of the brainstorming and seeing where students start when they think about this topic. You might also raise questions about whether there is something about particular religious traditions that makes them easier to combine than others.

You might then outline the objectives for this session as described under “objectives” above. About a quarter of Americans indicate that they sometimes attend religious services of a faith different from their own. You might note that people combine religions in many ways and explain that we will be looking at this today by focusing on one group, people who combine aspects of Judaism and Buddhism. If it would be helpful, you might briefly talk about the history of Jewish-Buddhist relations in the contemporary United States based on the background readings.

Then explain that we want to help students think about how people experience Jewish and Buddhist identities by focusing on particular individuals. We have selected individuals who are leaders and teachers in these traditions to encourage discussion both about how these teachers experience their identities and about how they relate their identities to others in their teaching.

Please start by dividing students in to small groups and asking each group to focus on one of the following four teachers: Sylvia Boorstein, Norman Fischer, Joseph Goldstein, and Alan Lew. Ask each group to spend 15-20 minutes reading the biographical material provided about the teacher they were assigned, listening to or watching the clip, and then discussing the following questions:

- How does this person identify religiously?
- How does s/he explain her Jewish identity? Buddhist identity? How does s/he make sense of his/her dual religious identity?
- How does she/he think about the importance of religious identity?
- Based on the materials you have, what factors do you think shaped his or her religious identity?

Then bring the class back together and have each group report to the whole about the person they focused on. Make a list on the board that describes the different ways people experience multiple religious identities. Some approaches that might be helpful for discussion are:

- Draw three boxes on the board. Label the boxes “primary/sole identity,” “compartmentalized identity,” and “blended identity.” Ask students which of the boxes the teachers would likely fall into and have them explain why.
- Make a list of the words students use to describe these teachers’ Jewish identities.
- Make a list of the words students use to describe these teachers’ Buddhist identities.
- Ask students to think about whether these teachers’ identities are based on their family, their practices, their beliefs, something else.

- Ask students to list the factors they think shaped the teachers identities.

After talking about each teacher, ask the group whether they can think about a typology or set of categories that might describe these teachers and help them understand others who combine religious traditions. For example, are there teachers who are mostly Jewish, mostly Buddhist or a hybrid they can name in particular ways (i.e Jewish by birth, Buddhist by practice, Jewish and Buddhist by practice, something else). Please encourage students to think about whether these categories are unique to Judaism and Buddhism or could be applied to other combinations of religious identities.

Questions for Further Discussion

1. If all four teachers were sitting in one room together discussing their Jewish and Buddhist identities, on what points would the group likely agree on and on what points would they disagree?

Our sense is that Alan Lew felt strongly that he had to have a primary religious identity; Joseph compartmentalized his identities; Sylvia felt that she was always who she was, that is, a blend; and Norman felt that the question of identity wasn't actually all that important.

2. Sylvia Boorstein feels that Judaism is “such a part of her upholstery” and an indelible part of who she is. To what extent do you see religious identity as indelible and to what extent a matter of choice?

3. How would Shelia Weinberg, the author of “Many Voices In One Mind” respond to the experiences these teachers describe based on what she writes in this article?

4. Pick one of these four teachers and write the blog post she or he might put on the Religion and Ethics Newsweekly site after reading the 1998 exchange.

5. The people we have focused on here are teachers. How do you think non-teachers involved with Judaism and Buddhism experience the relationship between the two traditions?

6. How do you think people experience Jewish and Buddhist identities in countries where one or both are not minority religious traditions?

7. What role does religious community play in religious identification based on how these four teachers experience it?

8. To what extent do you think the combinations of Buddhist and Jewish identities evident amongst this group are unique to people involved with the Jewish and Buddhist traditions? How do you think people involved with Christian and Buddhist or Jewish and Hindu traditions experience their identities? What factors make some traditions seemingly easier to combine than others?

