

Smorgasbord religion on the grow throughout United States

April 3, 2009

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Friday afternoons find Ann Holmes Redding at the Al-Islam Center in Seattle, reciting Muslim prayers. Come Sunday, she heads about two miles south to kneel in the pews of St. Clement's of Rome Episcopal Church.

"My experience and my call is to continue to follow Jesus," said Redding, an Episcopal priest for the past 25 years, "even as I practice Islam."

Redding insists she is both Christian and Muslim, fully following both faiths.

And for that, Redding [expects to be defrocked](#) by the Episcopal Church, which has warned the 57-year-old to renounce Islam or leave the priesthood.

Some Episcopalians are urging the church to take a similar stand against Kevin Thew Forrester, who was elected bishop of the sparsely populated Diocese of Northern Michigan in February. The only candidate on the ballot, Thew Forrester, 51, has practiced Zen meditation for a decade and received lay ordination from a Buddhist community.

Incense and a candle burns during a Zen Buddhist meditation group led by Sister Rose Mary Dougherty in Silver Spring, Md. Dougherty says the meditation does not conflict with her Catholic faith. (RNS PHOTO/David Jolkovski)

Conservatives are outraged at the election of this “openly Buddhist bishop,” as they call him, charging him with syncretism—blending two faiths and dishonoring both.

The bishop-elect and the Lake Superior Zendo that ordained him say the angst is misplaced. The ordination simply honors his commitment to Zen meditation, they say. He took no Buddhist vows and professed no beliefs that contradict Christianity.

“I am not a Buddhist, nor an ordained Buddhist priest,” he said in an interview. “I am an Episcopal priest who is grateful for the practice of Zen meditation.”

While people like Redding, who claim membership in two religions, are quite rare, scholars say the number of Americans who borrow bits from various traditions is multiplying.

Current sociological surveys, with their one-size-fits-all categories, don’t tell us exactly how many Americans hybridize their spiritual lives.

Sociologist Barry Kosmin, co-author of the recent, massive [American Religious Identification Survey](#), said “the tendency of academics and everyone else is to try to disabuse them of this syncretism.”

For sure, “syncretism” is a dirty word to many Western monotheists; in Asia, “multiple religious belonging,” as scholars call it, is common.

Kendall Harmon, an Episcopal theologian from South Carolina, argues that Thew Forrester is a greater threat to his church than the openly gay bishop whose 2003 election has led four dioceses to secede.

“It’s the leadership of this church giving up the unique claims of Christianity,” Harmon said. “They act like it’s Baskin-Robbins. You just choose a different flavor and everyone gets in the store.”

The store, in this metaphor, is that big ice-cream parlor in the sky.

Fewer than three in 10 Americans claim their religion is “the one, true faith leading to eternal life,” according to data from the [Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life](#), and 44 percent say they’ve switched religious affiliations since childhood.

At the same time, traditional religious boundaries are falling and interfaith marriages are rising, meaning Americans increasingly are likely to attend a grandmother’s church funeral and a cousin’s bar mitzvah.

It’s little surprise then, that people who pledge allegiance to two traditions are proliferating.

John Berthrong, a Boston University scholar whose book, *The Divine Deli*, explores multiple religious belonging, said: “While churches are still having formal discussions about religious pluralism, the laity has bolted down the street to a Buddhist temple where they’re learning meditation.”

Sometimes those temples house Catholic nuns like Sister Rose Mary Dougherty, who leads a multifaith group of Zen students in Silver Spring, Md.

A nun for 50 years, Dougherty also is a sensei in the White Plum Lineage of Zen Buddhism, meaning she is entrusted to teach meditation to others.

Like many Christians who practice Zen, she uses its meditation techniques to clear the mind and focus on the present moment, but she doesn’t consider herself a Buddhist.

But at a recent conference in Boston on multiple religious belonging, theologian Catherine Cornille argued it’s logically impossible to adhere to more than one religious tradition.

“It just doesn’t make sense to say you’re fully Buddhist and fully Christian.

They make competing claims," said Cornille, a professor at Boston College and editor of *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*.