

Syncretism and Identity

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Introduction

There is wide agreement that syncretism refers to the mixing of religious indicators but not to whether this is a *negative judgment on a religious outcome* or a *neutral commentary on a cultural process*.

This situation is complicated by a history of *negative associations* in religious contexts and *the need for analytical concepts* for the formation of religious identity. In pluralist environments syncretism seems an obvious word to use for the processes involved in religious change.

Fusion may be trendy in cuisine and the creative arts, but not in theology, ritual, and religious symbolism. As in the expectations of responsibility to an employer, a political party, one's country in war, never mind brands, sports teams or a commitment to love - in many contexts having mixed loyalties equates to consorting with the enemy.

The importance to Christian identity of avoiding syncretism may seem too obvious to state. Christians have often quoted Joshua 24:15 "Choose you this day whom you will serve" and fought for the "uniqueness of Christ" and of Christian revelation. It has been common to assert exclusive commitment to Jesus Christ in contexts which value multiple religious traditions and symbols. Syncretism suggests impurity. Within the ecumenical movement the views of Hendrik Kraemer and especially Visser't Hooft¹ appeared unequivocal.² How could this possibly be wrong?

Christianity shares many religious practices with other faiths. Christians are not the only ones who pray, worship, and follow a religious leader. In a multi-religious environment it is difficult to avoid expressing identity without reference to ideas and rituals which also have meanings for other religious groups. Those meanings

¹ Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft, *No other name; the choice between syncretism and Christian universalism* (London,: SCM Press, 1963). See also Lesslie Newbigin, "The legacy of W. A. Visser 't Hooft," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16, no. 2 (1992).

² Kraemer noted that syncretism "has been much used in such a way as to tend to prevent an unprejudiced approach to the problem of adaptation." He may have been alluding to Visser 't Hooft. Adaptation was the term he himself preferred to use. Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956). 387. He also believed that "missionary people should not merely treat syncretism as a theological bogey but should acknowledge the fact that *all* historical religions in their concrete manifestations are syncretistic in different respects." ———, "Syncretism as a theological problem for missions," in *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, ed. Gerald H Anderson (London: SCM, 1961), 180.

cannot be ignored.

If there is a categorical distinction between religions which point to the same being and those which appear to deal with different or opposing realities, then the analogy of political and social loyalty requiring an absolute avoidance of syncretism is weakened. However the borrowing of ideas symbols and rituals goes way beyond the same family of faiths. Despite his hostility to syncretism Kraemer's recognised that an indigenous church had to adapt its language to its culture. In 1970, out of his experience of African Indigenous Christianity, Harold Turner defined religious syncretism as what occurs where elements related to another religion are absorbed in the church and "what is drawn from local sources retains its original religious meaning."³

Turner's position that syncretism occurs not simply when religious mixing takes place but when the meaning of the result incorporates elements from each, shifted the problem of syncretism towards issues of hermeneutics.

For Turner a personal element was his spiritual curiosity⁴ and long interest in theology and culture which helped him see that African Indigenous Churches could not be dismissed *á priori* as syncretistic. They needed to be studied for what their practices meant to those involved, not just for how they were perceived by those from European cultures who found them a political and religious threat. Turner retained the view that syncretism was undesirable, but helped create the possibility that it be seen as a stage in a longer process and one which could be talked about in other than a moralistic way.

Contextualisation and Inculturation

Not long after, in 1972, the word contextualisation was coined to deal with the fact that not all mixing is inappropriate. Earlier language such as accommodation and adaptation, long associated with Jesuit policies in China, Vietnam and India, was tainted by accusations of religious compromise. Contextualisation was linked to culture, allowed for the same faith to have different expressions, and appeared consistent with incarnational theology. This language was paralleled in Jesuit and other Catholic circles from 1975 by a concern that evangelization should include inculturation – and the term appeared in a papal document in 1979.⁵ Inculturation

³ Harold W. Turner, "Syncretism," in *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission*, ed. Stephen Neill, Gerald H. Anderson, and John Goodwin (London: Lutterworth, 1970).

⁴ It is also possible to see Turner illustrating the contrast that is commonly made between prophetic religions which are under threat being more concerned about compromise than mystical traditions which value human experience as a point of revelation which can be found outside the gates. Harold Turner in the 1930s had been a member of Moral Rearmament which had a strong mystical tradition alongside its ethical interests.

⁵ Aylward Shorter, *Toward a theology of inculturation* (Chapman, 1988). 10. Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel : an inculturation handbook for pastoral workers* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990); ———, *Culture, inculturation, and theologians : a postmodern critique* (Collegeville, Minn.:

addressed the need for non-Western churches to develop their own cultural identities in which the Christian message “becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation’.”⁶

There was still a need for an improved taxonomy of dynamic religious and cultural processes, but the widening acceptance of contextualisation in Catholic, conciliar and eventually evangelical missiology appeared to remove the need to look further at syncretism. Even those without a theological axe to grind continued to find the term problematic⁷ and its confused associations meant that there were different views.

In 1992 Peter Schineller wrote that the word syncretism “cannot be redeemed”.⁸ A year later Robert Schreiter felt that without the pain represented by religious mixing we would be tempted to cease to struggle with the role of culture in theological formation and responded: “We need to keep the term, come to grips with its history, and work toward a new definition.”⁹ In 2011 he stated a preference for Christian theology to “distinguish between ‘good’ syncretism and ‘bad’ syncretism” and follow anthropology where the term is “more neutral,” though he also accepted that typically for Christian theology syncretism “means an unacceptable admixture of ideas and practices that transgresses the boundaries of Christian identity.”¹⁰

Roman Catholic concern for inculturation, and Evangelical and other interest in contextualisation are among the factors which may at length be tilting opinion towards a wider acceptance of syncretism as a relatively neutral¹¹ term for processes which of themselves do not determine the meaning or the value of their outcome for the hermeneutical communities involved. This year the Catholic University of Louvain is hosting a colloquium entitled “Syncretism: Failure or Opportunity for Inculturation?”¹²

Liturgical Press, 2010); Christine Lienemann-Perrin, "Catholicity and Inculturation," in *Reformed and ecumenical : on being Reformed in ecumenical encounters*, ed. Christine Lienemann-Perrin, H. M. Vroom, and Michael Weinrich, *Currents of encounter* (Amsterdam ; Atlanta, Ga.: Rodopi, 2000).

⁶ Fr Pedro Arrup SJ, cited by Shorter, *Theology of inculturation*: 11.

⁷ Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, *Syncretism/anti-syncretism : the politics of religious synthesis* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁸ Peter Schineller, "Inculturation and syncretism : what is the real issue?," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16, no. 2 (1992).

⁹ Robert J. Schreiter, "Defining Syncretism : An Interim Report," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 17, no. 2 (1993).

¹⁰ ———, "Cosmopolitanism, Hybrid Identities, and Religion," *Exchange* 40(2011). p.31.

¹¹ I accept that complete neutrality is not possible and that there is always some element of value judgement by the commentator. Yet, like commentary in general there is some distance between efforts to describe situations in terms which those involved would accept as fair, and those which express the views of an authority, presumed or real.

¹² "The colloquium will seek to draw a thorough comparison, both on the level of presuppositions as on the level of facts, between, on the one hand inculturation, which presents itself as a legitimate goal, and syncretism, which is usually perceived of as an amalgam or a failed opportunity, on the other." "UCL Le

The cultural forces requiring language which distinguishes objective and evaluative usage have become more pressing as anthropology has begun to take religion more seriously in its own terms and like other disciplines come to recognise that cultures and religions are dynamic fluid entities. In *Beyond conversion and syncretism* David Lindenfeld and Miles Richardson address “serious conceptual roadblocks” to the study of religious and cultural interaction in order to “point to a more nuanced and differentiated picture of such interchanges.”¹³ A recent study by Jonas Jørgensen supports the view that some quite startling forms of syncretism among Muslim followers of Jesus and Hindu devotees to Christ may be formally orthodox.¹⁴

A number of surveys explore multiple phases and dimensions of syncretic religious interaction¹⁵ and are important for alerting us to the complexity of social processes and power relationships. However a major issue for missiology, theology and religious studies still lies with whether or not syncretism as such has to imply a judgement of any kind beyond the observation that there is an interpenetration of religious language taking place. If syncretism is seen primarily as about syncretic processes¹⁶ rather than compromised outcomes, can it assist a more careful hermeneutic of the meaning for Christians of practices common to other faiths?

Some responses to the phenomenon of “hybrid identities” and explorations of “multiple religious belonging”¹⁷ suggest that the mixing of religious cultures is becoming less threatening even in evangelical constituencies.¹⁸ The late Ralph Winter promoted “insider movements” which encouraged acceptable forms of syncretism precisely because of his commitment to evangelism.¹⁹ It is recognised that conversion usually presupposes some continuity of religious language and values and syncretism is a necessary part of the process.

programme - The program - Het programma. Colloque Omnes Gentes 2012," <http://www.uclouvain.be/394887.html>.

¹³ David F. Lindenfeld and Miles Richardson, *Beyond conversion and syncretism: indigenous encounters with missionary Christianity, 1800-2000* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012). p. 2.

¹⁴ Jonas Adelin Jørgensen, *Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas: Two case studies of interreligious hermeneutics and identity in Global Christianity*, vol. 146, Studies in the Intercultural history of Christianity (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008).

¹⁵ Theo Sundermeier, "Syncretism," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2008).

¹⁶ Carl F. Starkloff, *A theology of the in-between : the value of syncretic process*, Marquette studies in theology (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002).

¹⁷ C. Cornille, *Many mansions? : multiple religious belonging and Christian identity*, Faith meets faith (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002).

¹⁸ Kang-San Tan, "Dual belonging: a missiological critique and appreciation from an Asian Evangelical perspective," *Mission Studies* 27(2010); ———, "Can Christians belong to more than one religious tradition," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 34, no. 3 (2010).

¹⁹ Rebecca Lewis, "Promoting movements to Christ within natural communities," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24, no. 2 (2007); ———, "Insider movements: Honoring God-given identity and community," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 26, no. 1 (2009).

Nevertheless syncretism remains for many a risky process and an undesirable outcome or at best a neutral process and an ambiguous outcome. It may be part of a liminal state, but it should not be a permanent feature of the identity of an individual, the language of the liturgy or the symbolism of church life.

What then are the major options when the concerns of theology and missiology for more accurate understanding apply alongside those of anthropology and religious studies for dispassionate objectivity?

A: Syncretism represents a risky process and an undesirable outcome

Inculturation, contextualisation and syncretism all refer to synthetic processes, but in the case of contextualisation and inculturation the emphasis is on the interaction with context and culture and the outcome is regarded as positive.

In the case of syncretism the emphasis is on interaction with one or more other religions and the outcome is regarded as negative. It has been common in missiology to affirm contextualisation and inculturation and to warn against syncretism.

Syncretism thus appears as a “good *bad word*” which is useful for describing inappropriate religious mixing and its outcome. Pairing it with the positive association of contextualisation or inculturation has a symmetry which communicates easily. It also has continuity with the assumptions that syncretism is something to be avoided and that the intended function of the language of contextualisation and inculturation is for forms of cultural adaptation which are to be encouraged.

There is a related usage of syncretism for contested religious mixing. If we disapprove of the outcome we call it syncretism. If we wish to draw attention to being on side with a cultural trait that is approved of, then we call it contextualisation. Edwin Zehner observed evangelicals in Thailand who juxtapose a rhetoric of anti-syncretism alongside the acceptance of some syncretistic practices by saving the term syncretism only for what they regard as inappropriate.²⁰

So syncretism is bad, or at least contested, religious mixing, and contextualisation or inculturation is what happens when it is considered desirable. One can note similar usage with the terms modernism and post-modernism. For some they represent everything they do not like about an era, for others, they represent traits and values which may be variously evaluated.

The difficulties with this set of views however are that syncretism and syncretic processes are sometimes theologically inconsequential, or even positive (as

²⁰ Edwin Zehner, "Orthodox Hybridities: Anti-Syncretism and Localization in the Evangelical Christianity of Thailand," *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (2005).

restricting the term syncretism to contested mixing acknowledges), and some contextualisation and inculturation is inappropriate to the Gospel, to the life of the church or to the culture (which it can be politically incorrect to draw attention to).

As *processes* all three terms are essentially the same whether or not they are contested. Schreiter is not alone in considering that “a syncretistic idea in Christian theology is not formed by a process different from authentically Christian one.”²¹ Droogers notes that syncretism “refers to both unquestioned and controversial interpenetration of religions.”²²

Contextualisation and inculturation need a language of criticism just as syncretism needs a language of observation, but it seems difficult to criticise something described as contextualisation or affirm something described as syncretism. Schreiter has observed how mention of syncretism has a way of stopping conversations²³ needed for the considered formation of Christian identity.

B: Syncretism is a neutral term for religious mixing not a judgement of value. Contextualisation and inculturation are also about engagements with culture which need to be critiqued.

Church history includes many examples of syncretism – Christmas, Easter, the instructions of Gregory the Great to Augustine of Canterbury to build churches on the sites of temples, the Thomist synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and theology, folk religion and the place of Mary, Calvinism and capitalism, the prosperity Gospel, interest in spiritual warfare and territorial spirits, which have been accepted into the life of significant parts of the church even if they have been contested in others. This makes it impossible to fair to others and sustain the idea that it is religious mixing alone which determines that something is unacceptable. It would be more consistent with the lived story of the church to see syncretism as religious mixing but not as a judgement of value. At the same time if the church tends to be over-critical of syncretism, it also appears to be insufficiently critical of the similar processes which have popular support – contextualisation and inculturation.

Oddly enough, if we look more carefully at the ages when we thought the questions were simpler, we find that the complexities existed then as well. The problem is not church history; it is the simplification, romanticization, and idealisation of the past which has contributed to a failure to hone the tools needed to do the task in our time.

²¹ Robert J. Schreiter, *The new catholicity : theology between the global and the local*, Faith and cultures series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997). 71.

²² André Droogers, "Syncretism: The problem of definition, the definition of the problem," in *Dialogue and syncretism: an interdisciplinary approach*, ed. Jerald Gort, et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), 8.

²³ Schreiter, *New catholicity*: 83.

Anthropology has long sought to avoid taking “sides” in religious issues and its attitude towards the use by churches of the terms contextualisation and inculturation would also be that of critical but neutral observer of the social implications.

So, is it desirable or possible for theology and missiology to take the same position even if their interests extend further? If the role in a university is to engage respectfully with other disciplines of human knowledge, can it be done in relation to disciplines which are closer to home? Objectivity is important to theology and missiology as well even if as disciplines they may wish to assess critically the understanding of God in different hermeneutical communities.

Having different words for religious and for cultural processes preserves a distinction between symbols and practices which are primarily religious and those which are primarily cultural. Even if this distinction is difficult, and the cultural or religious connotations may be fluid and contested, it helps make it possible to talk about degrees and directions of religious significance. This is still the case when one sees religion as embodied in culture and culture as an indicator of religion. Whether something is primarily cultural or religious has long been an issue for church debates, even if it only a small element in larger discussions.

These are also issues for the local Christian community wishing to establish an identity both in solidarity and through points of difference with its culture and with other faiths who share that cultural space.

Being matter of fact about religious and cultural interactions and acknowledging that the appropriateness of outcomes is not just a matter of what is obvious should improve engagement with decision making processes, ownership of decisions, and their quality. By placing a pause between description and evaluation it makes it possible to think more carefully about what is going on and what it means to whom.

Of course stakeholders in a particular situation may agree on the process but have different views, but taking the pejorative element out of syncretism and signalling the need to evaluate contextualisation and inculturation increases the prospects of better understanding.

Religions are not defined by tidy geographic, ethnic or political boundaries. Religious interfaces and interactions are everywhere. Multiple religious belonging is a fact of life. Multi-cultural and multi-religious societies where people in their own families connect across religious and cultural boundaries need language to describe their situation objectively, as does the academy. Inter-faith marriages demand pastoral responses.²⁴

²⁴ Berlin (ENInews)--The Protestant Church of Hessen-Nassau in Germany has published guidelines for interfaith ceremonies to help clergy deal with the modern reality of communities where Christians and Muslims live side-by-side. "The number of mixed faith couples is increasing," said Susanna Faust

While the negative associations of the term syncretism may be felt to be deeply entrenched, researchers can make a case for whatever definitions they intend to follow and in a university context objectivity is required. Here at least there would seem to be the possibility in missiological and theological analysis of a neutral view of syncretism gaining wider acceptance alongside more critical views of contextualisation and inculturation in the lived faith of the church.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

So for theology and religion, is syncretism a good *bad word* or a bad *good word*?

Terminological disagreements are hardly unique. Definitions are contested in all disciplines, but they still need to be made - even in periods of semantic instability. Academic study demands terminology which differentiates between different types of behaviour and while life has to go on whether the words are sorted out or not, some attention does need to be paid to these issues.

Part of the answer is that we cannot consider the meaning of any single concept on its own. Eugene Heideman has noted that it is not just syncretism, but also contextualisation, which is often heard as a code word "designed to maintain the traditional authority of missionaries and leaders of Western Christianity."²⁵ Although inculturation has been widely embraced by Catholic communities, one senses its acceptability in practice is not secure. Perhaps after 40 years, syncretism's alter egos are themselves turning out to be bad good words. Further development in their usage is also needed.

If syncretism, contextualisation and inculturation can shift from being theological assumptions of value to types of human behaviour in religious contexts they can assist the church more accurately engage with culture and help people understand what is happening to them as they make theological and practical decisions in complex interfaith situations.

This is not about precluding the possibility of critical theological and pastoral evaluation; it is about making it possible.

Kallenberg, secretary for interreligious affairs for the church in an interview. "There is a challenge and a question that you have to answer, you can't ignore it." [ENI-12-0145]

²⁵ Eugene P. Heideman, "Syncretism, Contextualization, Orthodoxy, and Heresy," *Missiology* 25, no. 1 (1997). p.37.

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Questions asked

- 1) Do we not still need a word for bad syncretism? (Paul Trebilco)
- 2) What do we do with emerging church / fresh expressions?
- 3) Is not syncretism too much tied to static view of culture?
- 4) What do you do in Hindu societies which seem to place a *value* on syncretism?
- 5) What would Calvin say?

Points which arose

Discussion important for our reading of church history because of the questions and distinctions it helps us ask of the past.

Appendix: John Roxborough, "Syncretism: VI. Church History"²⁶

In 1519 D. Erasmus used the word syncretism in the sense of overlooking differences in order to address a common cause. In the 17th century, because of his efforts to promote unity among Christians, G. Calixt was accused of syncretism meaning indifference to truth. This negative association was reinforced in the 19th century by the use of the word syncretism in religious studies to describe the way in which the names and myths associated with Graeco-Roman gods were transposed. Like Jews, and to a certain extent, like Muslims, Christians saw themselves as holding an exclusive loyalty to God. Defence of truth required the rejection of religious mixing.

In 20th century ecumenical circles H. Kraemer and W. A. Visser't Hooft were faced with the challenge of other faiths for churches in Asia and Africa, and the threat of totalitarianism and secularism in Europe. The danger of syncretism in a cultural expression of faith presented itself starkly in the German church under the Nazis. Those addressing this crisis were fortified by the Barmen Declaration and the theology of K. Barth but found it difficult to see how syncretism needed different treatment in other contexts. Syncretism appeared as an intrinsically dangerous threat to the integrity of Christianity, and this political reality was reinforced by philosophical and theological assumptions about the relationship of faith and culture that gave little weight to actual processes of conversion to Christian faith and the dynamics of cultural and religious change.

The seriousness of the European situation, the worldwide influence of Ecumenical figures dominated by those concerns, and the slow development of non-Western theology and historiography as valid in their own right, delayed the development of the theological and cultural tools that could make the critical discussion of syncretism possible. The coining of the term "contextualization" in 1972 produced a new word for the human processes that syncretism had come to describe, but with a positive connotation associated with culture instead of a negative one attached to religion. For both words there remains some confusion about whether they are primarily about a process or a judgment on its outcome. For many syncretism is still a religious danger to be avoided rather than a natural process of cultural interchange whose outcomes can only be evaluated by attention to meaning, context, and the voices of interpretive communities.

As a result in church history syncretism continues to be most frequently associated with events in which the contribution of a non-Christian tradition to Christian faith and practice has been contested. These include the origins of Christmas and Easter, the missionary instructions given by Gregory the Great to Augustine of Canterbury, the Iconoclast Controversy, T. Aquinas' use of the philosophy of Aristotle, the Jesuit policies of accommodation in China, Vietnam and India, the policies of Pius IX and Pius X towards modern culture, and concerns about the orthodoxy of new religious movements including African Independent Churches. J. E. L. Newbigin's critical analysis of Western Christianity seen as a syncretic legacy of Christendom and the Enlightenment is consistent with these concerns. It is less common to point out that openness to syncretism may help prepare cultures for conversion to Christianity and protect the faith from the distortions of

²⁶ John Roxborough, "Synkretismus: Kirchengeschichtlich," in *Geschichte und Gegenwart : Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2004). English translation in Hans Dieter Betz, et al, (eds.) *Religion Past and Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion*, (Leiden, Brill, 2012.) 12, 419,

missionary and colonial cultures. A key strategic issue in Christian mission is to consider which local world-view and name for God it is most appropriate to relate to. Here the fundamental risk to be weighed is not syncretism, but misunderstanding.

That there are issues of appropriate contextualization in all these situations is not in doubt. However what is far from clear is how the concept of syncretism may help critical discussion. The events mentioned are not the only ones where culture has significantly shaped the expression of Christian faith. It is possible to discuss religious syncretism as a process in most eras and events of Christian history. If Christian historiography becomes less concerned with the simple fact of syncretism as a mixing of traditions, and more open to exploring those processes and the meanings attached to them by different groups, some fruitful avenues of enquiry should be opened up.

The shift from modern to postmodern values in a changing appreciation of syncretism is clear, but historical studies themselves indicate that religious syncretism as a process is not a reliable indicator either of agreed truth or of its absence. Syncretism's place in the polemical history of contested interpretations should itself make us suspicious by the way it has so often been part of a negative judgment by those with power. Yet Christianity believes in incarnation. Christian mission involves religious change. In the process of change, continuity with previous religious associations (or earlier Christian understanding) in the use of language, symbol, place and practice is simply the nature of the case. It is the responsibility of church history to explore these processes without making à priori judgments about their value. In so doing its discussion of syncretism can help make considered evaluation possible.

Jerald D. Gort, Hendrik M. Vroom, Rein Fernhout, and Anton Wessels (Eds.), *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, 1989

I. R. Levinskaya, Syncretism – the term and the phenomenon (*Tyndale Bulletin* 44.1, 1993, 116-128)

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S. M. Greenfield and André Droogers, *Reinventing Religions. Syncretism and Transformation in Africa and the Americas*, 2001