

Chapter 3

Idiosyncrasies of Syncretism

Christianity, in its initial stage, was tolerant of and open to Greco-Roman philosophical thought in formulating its own theological and legal framework. As it was initially a minority faith gaining converts from all walks of life, syncretism – borrowing and mixing other religious and cultural elements – took place naturally. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Church, as the sole authority of authentication of doctrines and practices, decided whether borrowing was legitimate or illegitimate. The syncretistic strategy was also used by Roman emperors to appropriate the religious beliefs of those they conquered. Syncretism, whether in its positive or negative sense, is a typical feature in religion. The different interpretations of the term reflect the changing historical contexts and political agendas. The bottom line is that syncretism refers to a politics of difference and identity, where the possession of power allows one to dictate which a doctrine or practice is true or false.

Over time, syncretism became a contentious term that is often, but not always, associated with inauthenticity, adulteration or infiltration of a pure tradition. In the writings of Christian missionaries and Church officials, it often has a critical connotation. Theologically, syncretism has a pejorative sense, but in anthropological research, syncretic practices are considered as a natural development of religion and its ritual. Viewed with optimism in anthropology, syncretism has a neutral or even positive overtone. Scholars have generally agreed that different religious traditions have borrowed from each other in the past through a process of amalgamation.

Due to conflicts that occurred during the Protestant Reformation, syncretism acquired value-laden connotations. Some scholars believe syncretism has now become a useless and ambiguous term. Nonetheless, it continues to be used in a negative or positive sense. Given the vagueness, elusiveness, and shifting semantics of this important term, this chapter attempts to present a more comprehensive view of religious syncretism by examining how it has been historically constituted and reconstituted, especially analyzing the practice of multiple religious adherents in the Asian context.

Syncretism and Salvation

From an anthropological point of view, Christianity is a syncretic religion made up of a combination of Judaism and the teachings of Jesus. Judaism, too, is a syncretic religion influenced by the beliefs of surrounding regions, adopting practices such as circumcision and spring sacrifice, which later became the paschal sacrifice. The cultural debt includes the adoption of creation stories, agricultural feasts such as the unleavened bread, art, wisdom literature, Phoenician craftsmanship and liturgy. Furthermore, the Jewish legal and political systems were borrowed from outside. In fact, Israel was syncretic.⁹⁵ This means that God's plan for the salvation of his people is achieved when cultures encounter each other in a fruitful exchange of ideas and customs.

In fact, 'the "fertile crescent" of the Middle East was a veritable crossroads of cultures from the earliest times. The Jewish people and their traditions were, humanly speaking, the product of this remarkably varied cultural interaction, and contributed to the on-going intercultural process.'⁹⁶ Originally, Yahweh was a pagan deity while Baal was the most powerful god in the Levant. In Biblical times, Baal was the god of fertility and harvest. Yahweh was invoked during war but Baal was worshipped for success in agriculture.⁹⁷ The prophets in the Old

⁹⁵ Luzbetak, *The Church and Culture: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*, American Society of Missiology Series; No. 12 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 360. See also Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), pp. 109–11, 115.

⁹⁶ Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 106.

⁹⁷ Luzbetak, *The Church and Culture*, p. 368.

Testament proclaimed Yahweh as absolute Lord of all because the God of history (Exodus) was more important than the God of agriculture for the Israelites. Yahweh could also be tolerant and forgiving. Jonah accepts a syncretic view of Yahweh by acknowledging the existence of other gods. In spite of his pagan belief, God forgives and accepts Jonah.

Early Usage

The earliest usage of the term 'syncretism' appeared in the writing of Plutarch (AD 45–120), *Moralia*, in the chapter 'On Brotherly Love', where he said it was necessary to be friendly with the friends of a brother and likewise to be hostile to his enemies. He was referring to the Cretans who, he felt, instead of constantly fighting against each other, should put aside their differences and be united against the enemies from outside. This coming together of the Cretans in a united front is 'syncretism'. Thus, from its earliest usage, the word 'syncretism' suggests the setting aside of differences in a political context. Erasmus (1469–1536) also viewed syncretism in a positive light when he supported the idea that Christianity is enriched by classical thought. His preference for early church writings exposed him to Platonic and NeoPlatonic thought.⁹⁸

Syncretism is also related to the idea of naturalistic religion, a belief in a supreme being among humankind, highlighted by Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648) in his study of comparative religion. Herbert maintained that the great truths of religion are universal. Related to natural religion, genuine faith was open to reason and not tied to a specific historical event of revelation. It was this emphasis on one's uniqueness that led to so much conflict.⁹⁹ This idea challenged the teaching of the Catholic Church that there is only one absolute truth authorized by the Church and deviations from this truth were heresies.

The basic disposition of natural religion is syncretic and pragmatic. It is a positive development because natural religion fulfils basic human needs for a good life, for communion with God, for an experience of love, enlightenment and final liberation. Manifested in different forms, natural religions arose to satisfy humanity's longing for a more fulfilling

⁹⁸. M.A. Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (London: Duckworth, 1980), p. 21.

⁹⁹. Peter van der Veer, 'Syncretism, Multiculturalism, and the Discourse of Tolerance', p. 197.

and meaningful life. Natural religion is thus relativistic and subjective when it comes to the question of truth: its emphasis is on *experience* rather than *truth*. In fact, the standard to measure the value of a religion is the experience. The Dutch missionary scholar Henrick Kraemer wrote, 'Why should one pose the question of truth? ... Religion as manifest in different systems and ways, all belonging to the relative sphere of this phenomenal world, stands by the nature of the case outside the question of absolute truth.'¹⁰⁰ This may explain why pentecostal Christianity is the fastest-growing church in Latin America: people want to experience the Holy Spirit's power rather than to understand the truth of liberation theology. Pragmatic psychology has overshadowed the question of truth and ultimate reality.

Religion deals with the juxtaposition of the illusory world, empirical existence, and the real world of pure essence. The idea of *absolute truth* belongs exclusively to this sphere of pure essence, which is unattainable for human beings living in the relative sphere of this phenomenal world. At best, a religion may have 'accommodated truth'. Doctrines are established to convey relative truth: 'From the standpoint of Pure Essence all is sameness; from the standpoint of accommodated truth all is difference. Monism and pluralism, polytheism and monotheism can equally be true, while equally false, and they have therefore the right to coexist.'¹⁰¹ In its emphasis on experience rather than on doctrinal purity, we witness the openness and tolerance of naturalistic religion, which also includes Asian religious traditions.

In the seventeenth century, George Calixtus (1586–1656), a German Lutheran theologian, attempted to reunite his church with Roman Catholicism, but his contemporaries were more concerned with the problems of dissent. Like Erasmus, Calixtus saw the rational proof of truth in Christianity in classical Greek, which he believed would unite all Christians. Supporting the Reformation, Calixtus wanted to return to the Church of antiquity, which he believed had been corrupted by the powers of the papacy. He worked hard to bridge the differences but was criticised by both Lutherans and Catholics.

¹⁰⁰. Hendrik Kraemer, 'Syncretism', in *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, edited by Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen (Sheffield: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), p. 42.

¹⁰¹. Kraemer, 'Syncretism', p. 45.

Standing between the two sides, Reformed and Roman, Calixtus' effort to reconcile theological differences sparked the so-called Syncretic Controversy.¹⁰²

Calixtus wanted to use syncretism as a strategy to contain conflict and promote dialogue. But his critics condemned it as 'an illicit contamination' of the true faith, a 'betrayal of principles, or as an attempt to secure unity at the expense of truth'.¹⁰³ Since then, this negative meaning of syncretism, suggesting a confused mixing of religions, has become the dominant understanding in modern discourse. Christian literature has been critical of syncretism sometimes for the wrong reasons because of its myopic vision of faith.

Clash of Civilizations

It is natural for religion to avoid syncretism, especially when it claims it possesses the truth. Syncretism, narrowly defined, occurs when two religious beliefs or messages are merged in such a way that the core of each or both is completely transformed into something else. Syncretism naturally poses a threat to the survival of the religion when its original form has been completely modified. The Church has the responsibility of preserving the integrity of the gospel message. Anything that threatens Christian teachings and the structure of the Church is vehemently opposed. The problem arises when the Church believes it has the monopoly on truth and regards other religious traditions as inferior or false. Racial superiority, a colonial mentality deeply engrained in the Western culture from which Christianity grew became a stumbling block to acknowledging the presence of the divine in other religions.

Originating in the Middle East and institutionalized in the West, Christianity is itself shot through with pagan ideas. The global influence of Europeans as a result of aggressive imperialism led to the vision of the Christian faith becoming the norm: 'This habitude of self-consecration made the Western Church prone to view the displacement of other

¹⁰². Christian Thorsten Callisen, 'Georg Calixtus, Isaac Casaubon, and the Consensus of Antiquity', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 73, no. 1 (2012), pp. 1–23.

¹⁰³. van der Veer, 'Syncretism, Multiculturalism, and the Discourse of Tolerance', p. 197.

religions and culture as the only admissible resultant of its encounter with them and correspondingly to classify *any other* outcome of such encounter as *ipso facto* syncretic.¹⁰⁴ In other words, syncretism in itself is not an issue, but the pride and prejudice of Western Christianity are stumbling blocks inhibiting the incarnation of the word.

Looking at the rise of Spanish, Portuguese, British and Dutch colonialism, which resulted in Latin Christianity becoming dominant, normative Christianity became conditioned by political power and not biblical truth.¹⁰⁵ Thus, the scholar of religion Paul Hedges contends that the Vincentian canon about the universality of the Church is doubtful. Although we must not give up all traditions, he thinks they are very much related to power struggles. Tradition, therefore, must not be taken as 'normative in the absolute sense'.¹⁰⁶ In other words, Hedges stresses that, like most systems, Christianity as a religion is tied to its cultural context, and there is no such thing as universal truth coming down directly from God. Consequently, Hedges believes that we must allow different expressions of Christianity to exist, and this implies that the normative pattern of Western theology must be challenged.¹⁰⁷ This includes the issue of syncretism and raises the question: how do we draw the line between illicit syncretism and the licit syncretism (inculturation) promoted by the Church?

The point made by Hedges and particularly by Robert J. Schreiter is that all theology is 'contextual'.¹⁰⁸ As taught by the Magisterium, we cannot assume that Latin Christianity is normative, while the Asian

¹⁰⁴. Jerald D. Gort, 'Syncretism and Dialogue: Christian Historical and Earlier Ecumenical Perceptions', in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, edited by Jerald D. Gort, Hendrik M. Vroom, Rein Fernhout, and Anton Wessels (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), p. 38.

¹⁰⁵. Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), pp. 38–9.

¹⁰⁶. Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, p. 42.

¹⁰⁷. Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁸. Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, p. 48. See also Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Cultures* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 66.

approach, for example, is contextual in relation to Rome. Schreiter, in fact, argues that plurality is normative: ‘The universal theologies ... were in fact *universalizing* theologies; that is to say, they extended the results of their own reflections beyond their own contexts to other settings, usually without an awareness of the rootedness of their theologies within their own contexts.’¹⁰⁹ This point is also highlighted by the Document of the Office of Theological Concerns of the Federation of the Asian Bishops’ Conference (FABC) which states: ‘The impressive unity in the theological enterprise could only be achieved at the expense of theological pluralism. It is striking how Eurocentric, and even parochial, this theology now appears. The claim of being *the* universal way of doing theology is negated by the obvious limitation that it really is restricted to the particular context in which it originated.’¹¹⁰

In other words, we cannot favour one theological style such as the so-called normative, orthodox Christianity, over and above others. Schreiter insists that all theologies must be in relation to other cultural contexts so that we can attend to local needs, while at the same time, developing a theology that is ecumenical.¹¹¹ In the religiously pluralistic societies of Asia where Christianity is a minority religion, there should be room for more adaptation and accommodation in the liturgy as well as in theological formulations. Unfortunately, the early missionaries from the West were often driven by an excessive fear of syncretism which was rooted in their sense of superiority and self-righteousness.

During the seventeenth century, the encounter with Asian cultures and religions raised new challenges for foreign missionaries regarding syncretism. In fact, the ancient civilizations of India, China and Japan raised questions about Christian identity and its place in the continent – was there room for Christ in Asia?¹¹² The Rites Controversy about whether Catholics could take part in ceremonies honouring Confucius

¹⁰⁹ Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 2. See also Peter C. Phan, ‘Doing Theology in the Context of Cultural and Religious Pluralism: An Asian Perspective’, *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002): pp. 53–4.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Phan, ‘Doing Theology in the Context of Cultural and Religious Pluralism’, footnote no. 42.

¹¹¹ Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, p. 49.

¹¹² Ambrose Ih-Ren Mong, ‘Is There Room for Christ in Asia?’ *Toronto Journal of Theology* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2015): pp. 223–37.

and family ancestors foregrounds the question of syncretism. Approved initially as a method of accommodation, the Chinese rites were later forbidden by the Vatican in the early eighteenth century because of excessive fear of religious syncretism.

With the publication of *Ad Gentes* by the Vatican, the Catholic Church attempted to restore Matteo Ricci's method of evangelization, bridging the gulf between culture and religion. The Catholic Church now encourages the development of local theologies, which again raises the question of syncretism. In other words, to what extent should a local church be contextualized? What are the limits? One of the challenges facing the Church regarding syncretism is the practice of double religious affiliation where people follow the teachings of two distinct faiths, for example, a Christian who is utilizing Buddhist meditation techniques. The adherent of double religious affiliation does not mix the two religions but keeps them discretely apart. Such practices are popular in Japan, Taiwan, and parts of Asia with Chinese populations. People in these regions wish to experience all channels of divine mediation.

Affiliation with Multiple Religions

The Japanese religion Ryōbu Shintō (Dual Aspect Shintō), also called Shingon Shintō, is a syncretic school that combined Shintō with the teachings of the Shingon sect of Buddhism. Developed between the eighth and fourteenth centuries, this syncretic faith teaches that the Shintō deities are manifestations of Buddhist divinities.¹¹³ In this syncretic faith, there is a mixture of Buddhism and Shintō-based natural kinship. Worshipping in Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, the adherent is neither a pure Buddhist nor a pure Shintoist. The person participates in Shintō festivals as well as funeral rites performed by Buddhist monks. Japanese religion, which is nation-centred, serves as a means to satisfy the needs of the people either as individuals or collectively.¹¹⁴ Syncretism is normal and to be expected in Eastern religious traditions; it is in their fundamental structure and practice.

¹¹³. 'Ryōbu Shintō', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 19 July 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ryobu-Shinto>.

¹¹⁴. Kraemer, "Syncretism," p. 40.

The Chinese approach to religion is pragmatic and universal in the sense that the three dominant religions, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, are treated as one.¹¹⁵ Their religious allegiance is not to a particular creed but involves participation in the rites and rituals of the three religions. This practice of belonging to several religions simultaneously is a challenge to the Abrahamic faiths that claim exclusivity. Belonging to multiple religions occurs as a result of trying to focus on the ultimate spiritual experience that forms the core of all religious traditions rather than on a given religion itself. It also means remaining faithful to the 'symbolic framework' of one's own religious belief while adopting the 'hermeneutical framework' of another faith. For example, the Mahayana Buddhist tradition has been used to reinterpret Christian theology.¹¹⁶ There is actually a lot of borrowing between religions: 'religious ideas are fluid and flow into different religions, at times consciously and at times unconsciously, rendering the notion of religious property almost vacuous ... Since all religious borrowing presupposes a certain affinity to particular teachings or practices, it is often difficult to determine where one religion begins and the other ends.'¹¹⁷

Increased awareness of religious pluralism in today's world has given people the ability to choose which religions they want to belong to and how many. This practice of belonging to more than one religious tradition appears to be a recent phenomenon in the West. However, in Asia, belonging to more than one religion is very much a part of the history of China, Japan, India, and Nepal. In the East and elsewhere in the ancient world, belonging to multiple religions may have been the norm rather than the exception. Membership in several religions means

¹¹⁵ Leo Lefebure has pointed out to me that 'Chinese history has seen many different stages and differing views of religious diversity, and not all have been open and welcoming to all three traditions. I have heard Buddhists who collectively remember the times when they were persecuted in China.' (E-mail correspondence on June 14, 2021).

¹¹⁶ Catherine Cornille, 'Introduction', in *Many Mansions?*, edited by Catherine Cornille (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 5. The material in this section is taken from Ambrose Mong, *Are Non-Christian Saved?: Joseph Ratzinger's Thoughts on Religious Pluralism* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015), pp. 228–9.

¹¹⁷ Catherine Cornille, 'Introduction: On Hermeneutics in Dialogue', in *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, edited by Catherine Cornille and Christopher Conway (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), p. xviii.

accepting the theory and practice of other religions and incorporating them into Christianity in a modified form. It involves adopting and living out the beliefs, moral rules and rituals of various religious traditions in the midst of the community of the faithful of yet another religion.

In contrast to the Western context, where belonging to more than one religion implies membership in two or more religious belief systems, in Asia, religions have specialized functions, each responding to different needs and circumstances in a person's life. Asians go to temples, churches, shrines and pagodas to pray and worship, and the basis for their choice, at any given time, depends on their needs and on what a particular deity or spirit is reputed to be able to grant. In this case, it is not religious syncretism in the pejorative sense but a pragmatic approach to the practice of religion.

If non-Christian religions contain 'elements of truth and of grace', belonging to multiple religions is not only desirable, but is also acceptable to many people. The teachings of non-Christian beliefs can be considered a means of salvation from whose traditions and practices Christians can learn and benefit through dialogue. Hence, there should not be any objection or censure if a Christian wishes to follow some doctrinal teachings and religious practices of Buddhism, Confucianism or Hinduism, as long as they are not contrary to or incompatible with Christian faith and morals.¹¹⁸ One of the most prominent religious scholars who practiced multiple religious belonging was Raimon Panikkar.

Raimon Panikkar

Born in 1918 in Barcelona, Spain, Raimon Panikkar's father was a South Indian of Hindu faith, and his mother a Catalan Catholic. Thus, at an early age, he cultivated two traditions, in which he felt very much at home. Ordained as a Roman Catholic priest in 1946, he became a theologian and sought to integrate Hinduism and Buddhism with his Christian faith. He obtained a PhD in philosophy and a PhD in chemistry from the University of Madrid in 1946 and 1958 respectively, and a PhD in theology from the Lateran University in Rome in 1961. In 1954, he made his first trip to India and studied Hinduism at the University of Mysore and Banaras Hindu University. Regarding his spiritual journey

¹¹⁸. Peter C. Phan, 'Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church', *Theological Studies* 64, no. 3 (2003): p. 504.

on earth, he writes, 'I "left" as a Christian, I "found" myself a Hindu, and I "return" a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian.'¹¹⁹ His book on Christianity and Hinduism entitled *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, first published in 1964 and subsequently revised in 1981, was a groundbreaking work in modern interfaith dialogue.

The letter to the Hebrews tells us that in times past, God had spoken to our ancestors in many ways through the prophets and in these days he has spoken to us through his Son (1:1–2). From this statement, Panikkar concluded that the son had inspired not only the prophets of Israel, but also the Hindu sages. In other words, God has been present through all the works of humankind. He believed the *Logos* itself is speaking in Hinduism, a religion which has been inspiring people for tens of thousands of years.

Since Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, he is also present at the beginning and at the end in Hinduism for 'his grace is the guiding, though hidden, force impelling Hinduism towards its full flowering'. Though the *Logos* is called by many names, his presence and work remain the same. For Panikkar, 'the encounter is not an ideological one, but takes place in the deepest recess of reality – in what Christian tradition calls the Mystery'.¹²⁰

Acknowledging the failure of Christianity and Hinduism to meet at various levels, Panikkar suggested 'interpenetration, mutual fecundation – and a mutation in the self-interpretation of these self-same religious traditions'.¹²¹ Such an encounter, however, required sincerity

¹¹⁹ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 42. I was informed that Panikkar was sent to India in 1954 by the founder of Opus Dei to work for them in India, which he then did not do, and he later left the organization. The material on Raimon Panikkar is taken from Ambrose Ih-Ren Mong, *Accommodation and Acceptance: An Exploration in Interfaith Relations* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015), pp. 102, 111–13.

¹²⁰ Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ in Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), p. 3.

¹²¹ Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ in Hinduism*, 35. See also Jyri Komulainen, 'Raimon Panikkar's Cosmotheandricism: Theologizing at the Meeting Point of Hinduism and Christianity', *Exchange* 35, no. 3 (2006), pp. 278–303.

in searching for the truth, ridding oneself of one's prejudices, and affirming a commitment towards one's own religion. This is syncretism in the most positive sense.

Dialogue between religions is becoming more important and imminent today because we are acutely aware that we are dependent on one another: 'The religion of my brother becomes a personal religious concern for me also.'¹²² Thoughtful religionists from various traditions realize their need for mutual enlightenment because of conflicts between established religions. There is also an intellectual curiosity to know the other. Panikkar, however, believed true encounters between two living faiths can occur only at the 'existential' or 'ontic-intentional' level.¹²³ Christianity claims to have special knowledge, a 'gnoseological intentionality', which means the knowledge of God as trinitarian and that our union with him is in Christ. Panikkar believed this 'ontic-intentionality' corresponds to a belief in Hinduism in the 'self-same oneness with the Absolute'.¹²⁴ Simply put, both Christians and Hindus seek to be united with God or the absolute at the end of their earthly existence.

This ontic-intentionality may be expressed as 'oneness with the Absolute', 'pure isolation' (*kaivalya*) or *nirvāṇa*, as the Buddhist calls it. Others may even deny the existence of an absolute that one can be united with. Nonetheless, Panikkar maintained that this 'ontic-intentionality' is one and the same: it is this goal or final stage, which all faiths are aiming towards from various perspectives. As such, Christianity and Hinduism have the same beginning and also the same ontic-intentionality. Panikkar also claimed that there is a 'single *terminus a quo* and one *terminus ad quem* in the ontic order'.¹²⁵ In other words, they have similar starting and finishing points in spite of differing interpretations regarding them.

¹²². Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ in Hinduism*, p. 35.

¹²³. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ in Hinduism*, 36. Perhaps worth noting in all this is that, as Panikkar insisted, religions do not dialogue, people do! Also, he was not speaking of a philosophical or theological symposium, nor the meeting of religious officials to come to some level of common agreement on a particular point (whether theological or political). Instead, he meant the mystical meeting of religious persons for whom the meeting is a religious event. See Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1999).

¹²⁴. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ in Hinduism*, p. 37.

¹²⁵. Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ in Hinduism*, p. 37.