

The Problems of Syncretism

By HELMER RINGGREN

The term syncretism is often used without a clear and unambiguous definition. Now, definition is often a difficult enterprise, and especially so in the area of religious research. Neither etymology, nor a historical analysis of the use of the term appears to be particularly illuminating. The etymology is doubtful, the historical use of the word includes that of the reformation age with reference to mediating formulations of protestant doctrine. One might even ask if exact definitions are always useful in the study of religion. After all, terms are labels which we put on phenomena; they are necessary and useful as long as they serve the purpose of clarity and exactitude. But in a case like this (or in the case of, e.g., Gnosticism) it is questionable that the phenomenon under discussion is so homogeneous that it is capable of exact definition.

Roughly speaking, in actual language the term syncretism is used to denote any mixture of two or more religions, as for instance, in Hellenistic syncretism, where elements from several religions are merged and influence each other mutually. It might also be used to refer to cases when elements from one religion are accepted into another without basically changing the character of the receiving religion (because of the relatively small quantity of adopted elements).

It may be that this definition is too broad to be scientifically useful and that it would be preferable to start from the empirical fact of encounter of religions and to examine the various types, conditions, and results of such encounter.

That which happens when two religions meet is obviously different from case to case. It is possible for two "organized" religions to exist side by side for centuries without any exchange taking place. But otherwise, we are obviously moving along a continuum, the one pole of which is the repression of one of the two religions, the other a complete fusion of them. From

another point of view, the results of syncretism may be grouped according to the degree in which the foreign elements are felt as essential or less essential.

On this broad definition, the topic before us is vast. As a matter of fact few religions are totally "pure" or homogeneous and free from elements of syncretism or traces of an encounter with other religions. What we call "Assyro-Babylonian religion" is in reality an amalgamation of Sumerian and Semitic elements, which are often difficult to distinguish since they seem to have come to form an organic totality. The religion of the Old Testament is a mixture of Israelite and Canaanite elements, and it is hard to determine the exact origin of each of them, since neither of the two original components is completely known. The religion of historical Greece differs so markedly from those of other Indo-European peoples that it must reasonably be assumed to contain a strong element of non-Greek, i.e. pre-Greek, religion. In the history of ancient Roman religion there are at least two syncretistic stages: the adoption of Etruscan beliefs and practices and the influence of Greek religion; in addition, there is the intrusion of Hellenistic-Oriental elements. Even such a "homogeneous" religion as Islam contains a peculiar combination of elements from pre-Islamic Arabian paganism, Judaism and Christianity.

In these cases we are able to look at the phenomena in the perspective of historical distance. It may not be as easy to distinguish the components while the process is still taking place before our eyes. I suppose that in some cases it is possible to single out African and Christian traits in modern prophetic movements in Africa, but it is considerably more difficult to define the role played by the various components in the "new religions" of Japan. In many parts of the world to-day we can observe a revival of domestic beliefs with new elements which are not really "borrowed" but still must be understood as a reaction to other religions and/or cultures. The influence is rather indirect than direct. One might perhaps speak of the reaction of the domestic religions or their surviving patterns to Western culture in general, not necessarily to Christianity in particular. Cargo cults and various nativistic movements are cases in point.

Our topic can be regarded from several aspects. First, there is the *historical* aspect. The task is to determine what elements derive from the one or the

other source and how they have been merged with each other. This is fairly easy if we know both components even if there may be problems of detail. It is considerably more difficult when, as is often the case, only one component and the result, or only the result is known in some detail. Israel and Greece again furnish some good illustrations of this.

Most of the work done in the area of syncretism has remained within the framework of historical research. It should not be denied that this method can attain results which are both interesting and valuable. But it must be admitted that somehow it carries us only halfway. If we want to understand what syncretism is and really to grasp its problems, we have to ask some additional questions. In this respect the science of religion cannot be content with philological and historical methods, but it has to learn from sociology, psychology and social anthropology to a much greater extent than is usually done. This point should be stressed especially, since there is a deplorable lag in the methodology of religious research in many respects.

The first question concerns the *conditions* that make a mingling of religions possible. This question can be viewed from two aspects. One is that of *the points of contact* or *similarity*. At times, I think, the concept of "borrowing" has been applied a little too rashly in the history of religions. The religion of Israel provides a good example. Reference is frequently made to "borrowings" from Canaanite or Babylonian religion, or to Iranian "influence". But seldom the question is asked what a religion is like, which freely borrows ideas and customs from all directions. One has to ask: what are the conditions for a borrowing to take place at all? It is obvious that if there are no points of contact between the borrowing religion and the borrowed idea, the latter will at best remain a *Fremdkörper* in its new surroundings and never really form part of the receiving religion.

The belief in resurrection in Judaism is probably the result of Iranian influence, but there were doubtlessly points of contact in Israel's own religion, namely, the conviction often expressed in the Psalms that Yahweh is stronger than death, and perhaps also lingering motifs from Canaanite religion with its belief in the dying and rising god of vegetation. Some expressions in the so-called Isaiah apocalypse echo in a remarkable way ancient Canaanite stylistic forms and formulas while introducing the statement that "your dead shall live" (Is. 26:19).

But perhaps this positive condition is not the most important. Even more essential is the negative condition: a religion has no answer to a question that for some reason or other becomes a burning issue, another religion offers a solution which is accepted and incorporated into the former. Here, too, the belief in resurrection in Israel is a case in point.

But this raises a new problem: what causes this unanswered question to arise? Or: what makes the hitherto accepted answer feel unsatisfactory and inadequate? As a rule it seems that changing conditions (economic, social etc.), pose new problems and create new demands, which crave to be satisfied. When the established religion is not able to meet the needs of new conditions, an atmosphere of dissatisfaction and unrest is created, which makes people look in different directions for new answers.

A simple, maybe even somewhat commonplace example is again furnished by ancient Israel. When the people of Israel entered Canaan, they found before them a settled agricultural population with a religion designed to meet the needs of the farmer. The Israelite invaders brought with them a religion that had taken shape in the conditions of a seminomadic pastoral culture and was consequently unable to meet the needs that arose out of Israel's new situation in Canaan. As a result of this, Israel, while still worshipping their own God, Yahweh, adopted a great deal of the fertility cult of the Canaanites.

We might also mention the total change of political and cultural conditions in the Greek world during the Hellenistic period, which certainly contributed to create willingness to accept from abroad new forms of belief and cult: new solutions to the problems of a new era. Similarly, the loss of security that results from the disintegration of African tribal society today prepares the soil for all kinds of new religious creations. In Japan the decadence of Buddhism was felt as one of the main causes of the unhappy outcome of World War II. No doubt, this feeling is a major condition for the cropping up of the "new religions" during the last decades.

Comparable to this are various kinds of revitalization movements. They are obviously rooted in and conditioned by the experience of "deprivation", i.e. the feeling of inadequacy and discontent, the sense of living under worse conditions than necessary. In most cases the cause of this feeling is the confrontation with superior "Western" culture and technical progress. In the

case of nativistic movements the remedy is sought in a return to a purely domestic cult, a revival of the native religious heritage (or at least, what is considered to be the native heritage; in ancient Israel the merger of Canaanite and Israelite elements finally reached the point where the prophets were no longer able to distinguish clearly between the two). In other cases there is a conscious adoption into the native culture and religion of foreign elements which are felt as good. This is true of cargo-cults, the peyote cult etc. As far as its teaching is concerned the latter is clearly syncretistic: God is the Great Spirit, Jesus is the culture hero or the Guardian Spirit, the devil and the angels are spirits in the Indian sense; in other words, the heavenly beings of Christianity have been fit into an Indian frame of reference. Obviously, all these movements have one thing in common, namely, the experience of the inadequacy of the present traditional religious system in a new cultural context.

Another question concerns the *way of contact* when two religions meet. There may be a kind of unreflecting coexistence which results in a certain infiltration of ideas and customs from one religion into the other. There is also the relation between conqueror and defeated, which far from always results in the latter's adopting the former's faith. On the contrary: the politically victorious Babylonians and Assyrians took over a considerable part of the religious ideas and rites of the Sumerians. The invading Kassites were obviously entirely babylonianized, and in a similar way the Hyksos accepted the gods of Egypt, though retaining at the same time some of their own gods. The relation between Romans and Greeks in this respect is too well known to be discussed in detail here.

Another form of contact is created by the *missionary situation*, i.e. a religion with claims of absoluteness, or at least of superiority, strives consciously to push aside and replace other religions. Theoretically, the methods can roughly be grouped in two main types:

1. The superior attitude: "you are wrong, we have the truth". This presupposes a feeling of superiority, the missionary has behind him a powerful, well organized community, and he addresses himself to people who are unsophisticated with little self-confidence. It would also apply to a very self-confident sect in a pluralistic environment.

2. The attitude of amelioration: "our views are basically the same, but they

are better and deeper than yours". There are several variations of this attitude, but they all presuppose a fairly developed, more intellectual or sophisticated culture on both sides. Paul's speech on the Areopagus represents this type. The Hellenistic Isis religion with its claim that all religions basically worship Isis, though under different names, is another example. The missionary program of the so-called Christian presence movement is a modern representative of this attitude: If correctly understood, the non-Christian religions all in their own way point to Christ; the questions they pose are fully answered only in Christianity.

Missionary activity often, maybe mostly, creates a kind of syncretism. In most Muslim countries pre-Islamic ideas and customs survive under Islamic disguise: old local shrines become tombs of saints, at which worship continues in much the same way as before, old customs remain, sanctified by the principle of *'ādat*, etc. The way in which newly Christianized people understand Christianity is structured by the thought pattern of their old religion, since there is no other frame into which they could fit the new ideas. The only forms that offer themselves to describe the new religion are derived from their previous religious traditions. African Christians who choose the ministry, almost regularly experience their call in a dream, because it belongs to the African pattern of life to do so. Christian rituals take over the function of pagan rituals and are understood in the categories of the latter. (There are of course also extremistic movements with prophets who preach a syncretistic religion based on African patterns of behaviour and with Christian elements.)

It is obvious that there are several social factors involved in the syncretistic process that takes place when two religions meet. These factors probably determine to a considerable degree the course of the development. But we are not yet in a position to describe in detail the various groupings of such sociological facts and the way they influence the religious process. On the other hand, there is certainly also a personal element, which in some cases may be of a decisive importance. I shall revert to this question.

We have already touched upon the next problem: *the final product*, the result of syncretism. What is it like? How does it function? It *may* become an artificial product without many followers, at best an eclectic philosophy, but not a functioning religion. But it may also function and become a real

religion, if it meets the need of a number of people. One might say, perhaps, that when the final product becomes functional, it is no longer syncretism in the narrow sense of the word. It all depends on whether you look at the phenomenon from a historical or from a functional point of view. It is questionable, whether any follower of a syncretistic religion experiences his faith as a mixture of elements from two or more religions.

We know very little about questions of this kind. Under what circumstances does an eclectic product develop, and under what other circumstances will the result be a functional religion? We are hardly in a position to explain why one syncretistic religion succeeded, while another failed, much less to formulate general rules that would enable us to make predictions in this respect. Why was Christianity successful, while Gnosticism and the mystery religions died? (By the way, Gnosticism represents a very peculiar form of syncretism in so far as a dominant basic system of ideas utilizes Biblical and mythological material, which is given an allegorical interpretation in order to express these ideas. Rudolph speaks of a "parasitic religion".)

Finally there is the *psychological* problem. Quite frequently, it escapes our judgment. But in cases when we can trace the syncretistic process to the mind of an individual, the psychological aspect invites us to an interesting study. I should like to mention just two examples, Muhammad and Rudolf Steiner—as a matter of fact the two have much in common.

Both of them experienced a situation which they felt as one of crisis. Muhammad saw the values of tribal life being destroyed in a society which was getting more and more commercialized. Steiner saw old spiritual values being dissolved by scientific thought, which he felt obliged to accept on principle, and he experienced intensively the need of uniting the two modes of thinking.

It is easy to show how Jewish and Christian elements form an essential part of Muhammad's teaching. It is also obvious that he tried to tie them up with ancient Arab tradition. But to himself this did not appear as an eclectic selection of ideas that were already extant, but it was all a divine revelation of an organically consistent and homogeneous religious truth. It is just as easy to point up a number of sources for Steiner's thinking:

Greek philosophy, Paracelsus, Goethe, Western occultist tradition, and not the least, theosophy, a movement to which he actually belonged for some years. But Steiner differs from Muhammad in that his teaching is far more complicated, forming a grandiose system of ideas. For Steiner himself, however, his system was not the result of elaborate thinking but a revelation of spiritual facts, seen in a state of clairvoyance. Any similarity with earlier doctrines was either incidental or due to the fact that earlier thinkers caught some glimpses of the truth.

Just as it became a dogma that Muhammad was an illiterate man, who was not able to achieve knowledge of Judaism and Christianity by reading their books, Steiner maintains vigorously that his results are not based on the study of books but on spiritual vision. Yet nobody can deny, that there are Christian and Jewish elements in Muhammad's teaching, nor that the doctrines of Rudolph Steiner agree on a great many points with e.g., those of theosophy. However, it would be entirely wrong to maintain that either of them was conscious eclecticist, who only pretended to be in contact with the spiritual world. It seems safe to assume that in both cases we have before us an unconscious reproduction of material that had been taken up in memory earlier and was now felt as coming from the outside as a revelation.

This subjective experience of the truth of syncretistic eclecticism must not be overlooked, if we do not want to end up in a mechanistic view, that is not understanding at all. At the same time Muhammad and Steiner are excellent illustrations of the personal element in the syncretistic process.