

16. SYNCRETISM

"The "Dialogue Between Men of Living Faiths", functioning as an internal sign of hope, introduced most of us to a new spirituality, an interfaith spirituality, which I mostly felt in common prayer: who actually led the prayer or meditation, a Christian or a Muslim, or a Hindu, or a Buddhist, did not much matter, what actually was said during prayer was not all important, whether a Muslim would say 'Amen' after a Christian prayer mentioned the sonship of Christ, was not the question, what we really became aware of was our common human situation before God and in God"

(Stanley J Samartha, "Dialogue Between Men of Living Faiths", World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1971)

Introduction

Syncretism is the name given to practices that combine different religious elements into a new system of faith and belief. It tends to "blunt" all claims to "exclusive" religious truth and "blend" the teachings of different religions in such a way as to produce a common religious experience.

In a world full of religious expression, it is not surprising that some people decide the best approach to spiritual issues is to take the parts they like from different religions and create their own hybrids.

Examples of Syncretism

- ∞ Ancient Israel/Judah were syncretistic; instead of worshiping and serving God alone they adopted and added the gods of the heathen nations they conquered; for hundreds of years a tension existed between worship of Jehovah and local deities such as Baal.
- ∞ Ancient Rome (always polytheistic) tolerated private superstitions; "mystery religions" (eg based on Isis [Egypt], Mithras [Persia] and Cybele [Asia Minor]) operated along-side the official religion/s of the state.
- ∞ Hinduism is syncretistic. Polytheism lends itself to syncretism because new deities can easily be introduced into a pantheon- where there is a myriad of gods, a few more can only enhance the system. "The more the better." Hindus can easily "accept" Christ as another of their multitude of gods.
- ∞ *Baha'i* (begun in nineteenth-century Persia) declares that all religions teach the same truth and that Baha'u'llah, was but the latest in an ever-continuing series of revelations from God. In Baha'i, there is room for the teachings of all religions, since all are "one". Baha'is believe that God sent a series of prophets to teach eternal moral truths and to reveal new social principles suited to the times. Their prophets include Abraham and Moses; Jesus Christ; and Muhammad. Baha'u'llah declared that all religions honour the same God, and that the highest form of worship is service to other human beings. He also taught that God wants all people to form a united society based on mutual acceptance Of one another. Baha'u'llah opposed discrimination based on age, race, or sex, and favoured a federated system of world government.
- ∞ Many Eastern cults are syncretistic, eg Jesus features alongside a Hindu figures in the Divine Light Mission.

Communicating Christ in a Multicultural World



"Christian" Syncretism

Those who claim to follow Christ sometimes incorporate pagan ideas into their faith.

- ∞ In Latin America, one of the most famous symbols of Mexico is the Virgin of Guadeloupe in Mexico City. A church is built over the site where Mary is said to have appeared in 1531, and thousands of Catholics make pilgrimages there every year. But whom are they holding in such reverence? Mary? Or an Aztec goddesses? Historians believe a temple to an Aztec goddess - Tonantzin - stood on the site before it was destroyed by the local Catholic bishop. That goddess was known by the same title Catholics use for Mary, "Our Holy Mother." The goddess was associated with the moon. The Virgin of Guadeloupe is pictured standing on a crescent moon and is not shown with baby Jesus. In many Latin societies the ever-present virgin eclipses Christ even as she veils the Father. The "saints" take on the role of ancestral spirits. The Biblical significance of communion is lost in the mystery of the *force vitale* that somehow resides in the bread. The Sacred Heart may become a fetish that brings good fortune.
- ∞ Syncretism was often used by colonial powers to speed the conversion (and subjugation) of indigenous peoples, eg Christ child in Buddhist repose in Goa.
- ∞ In Africa and Asia, new Christians often struggle with the proper place of cultural traditions that have their source in pagan religions.
- ∞ The Rastafarians, with a strange mix of Christianity and African nationalism, and the Black Muslims, a cross between revivalist Christianity and Islamic theology, have provided members with a new sense of identity.
- ∞ The Unification Church, founded by Sun Myung Moon, combined Christian ideas and terminology with Taoist notions of God and with Korean nationalism. The Church sees its aim as the unification of all world religions under a coming Messiah, who may well be Sun Myung Moon.
- ∞ In today's world, one of the most pervasive forms of syncretism is universalism. This doctrine contends that through Christ's death, all people will ultimately be saved. If everyone is going to be saved, there is no need for missions. And if all are to be redeemed, regardless of what they believe or do, the door is open for each individual to create "his or her own religion."

The Bible rejects any syncretistic accommodation of Christianity and non-Christian religions - 1 Corinthians 10:21; 2 Corinthians 6:14-17.

Ultimately, syncretism is but another form of rejection of Christ.