

THE CONCEPT OF SYNCRETISM
DEFINED AND APPLIED

by

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The concept of syncretism is studied from the viewpoints of different authors. The valid viewpoints are redefined in the light of Scriptural evidence. This amalgamation shows syncretism to be that which is built into the very nature of man, caused by his alienation from God. Man becomes ambiguous as he seeks to delineate between factors of his culture, such as religion, politics and philosophy and their interrelationships one with the other.

In an attempt to validate the definition, a survey study is made of the Old Testament showing that the innate characteristic of man has been toward a syncretistic practice in religion. The New Testament not only validates the definition but shows that the problem has not been nullified by the work of Christ. A brief overview of the history of the Christian church makes it quite evident that syncretism as defined has been a plague both in the past and now in the present.

The danger of syncretism in modern Evangelical thought, in the light of such concepts as "contextualization," is raised. Though these ideas seem pro-culture they lay the foundations for an anti-Biblical approach to missions. Man needs very little to ignite the spark of syncretism within him.

A scathing conclusion is thrust in our direction as we study the definition and estimate the resulting effects of syncretism. We are syncretistic by nature and therefore must seek very carefully by the Word of God to find where and how syncretism has affected our religion.

Accepted by the Faculty of Grace Theological
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Advisor

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INTRODUCTION

Syncretism is a word which is not a part of most Christian's vocabulary. Yet the practice is carried on by most without a conscious awareness of its presence. Years of acceptance and practice has blurred the distinction between that which is Biblical and that which we have integrated from our society, or other societies, into our Christian practice.irate cries are often raised, but as quickly the positions are justified through philosophical logic or Scriptural gymnastics. Often, like the children of Israel ignorance is the plea, "How have we despised Thy name?"¹

In a day of many new terms such as contextualization and cultural adaptation, an urgent need is apparent to examine syncretism and related concepts. The danger of continuing development of, and leaning toward, syncretistic practices could lead to the abolition of the mission of the church. As John Mackay wrote, "The Christian Church were it to admit syncretism as a religious ideal, would lose any

¹New American Standard Bible, (hereinafter all Biblical references will be taken from the NASB), (Glendale: Lockman Foundations, Gospel Light Publications, 1960).

compelling sense of missionary obligation."¹ But the danger not only lies in an aborted mission but also in the folly that ignorance or acceptance can bring. As Capps points out, "When left unexamined syncretism allows many allusions to lurk unchallenged."² The challenge of the Church today is defining and understanding the concepts which are a key in clarifying the syncretistic problems. The historical battle will be briefly reviewed, mostly through a Biblical perspective, and some of the modern glaring representations. Conclusions will be drawn and applications with suggestions will be made for modern problems. As McGavran reminds the Christian the fight is a never-ending battle, "It seems clear that the next decades, Christians again, as in the first two centuries, will fight the long battle against syncretism and religious relativism."³

¹James L. Stewart, "The First Century Heresy and its Modern Counterpart" (hereinafter referred to as "Heresy"), in Scottish Journal of Theology, (London, England: Cambridge Press, November, 1970), vol. XXIII, no. 4, pp. 420-36.

²Walter H. Capps, "George Widengren on Syncretism" (hereinafter referred to as "Widengren"), in NUMEN (An International Review for the History of Religion), (Netherlands: International Association for the History of Religions, December, 1973), vol. XX, fasc. 3, pp. 163-85.

³Byang H. Kato, Theological Pitfalls in Africa, Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), p. 172.

CHAPTER I

GENERAL DEFINITION

In seeking a definition of terms and especially the term syncretism itself the search must move into the wider arena of thought concepts, and through the derived definition seek to evaluate the situation. The evangelical, often with smug complacency sees syncretism as the plague of only the Liberal and Roman Catholic. Yet, it will become evident that many of the missionary endeavors are being built on humanistic philosophies or reactionary attitudes. The evangelical overreacts when confronted by liberal and nationalistic accusations. The picture painted of the evangelical is that of cultural destroyer or non-communicator. The ultimate necessity is to return to the common denominator which is the Word of God.

A dictionary definition would be as follows:
"Reconciliation of, or attempt to reconcile, different systems of belief, fusion or blending of religions, as by identification of gods, taking over of observances, or selection of whatever seems best in each."¹ This would seem

¹Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary, 1954 ed., s.v. "Syncretism".

to fit the general concept of the definition of the word, syncretism. Dr. J. H. Kamstra uses the word to mean "the coexistence of elements foreign to each other within a specific religion, whether or not these elements originate in other religions or for example in social structures."¹ He then further divides the concept and places his attention in two areas,

(1) The theological approach to syncretism: the real roots of syncretism (2) The phenomenological approach to syncretism: the dynamics of syncretism.²

In his analysis he seeks to move away from theological ideas in defining syncretism. Continually he returns to religion to prove the direction of his thoughts. The conclusion of the matter for Kamstra is summed up as follows:

After all that we have said, syncretism is therefore also the result of alienation in an existing religion. This alienation can rise as a result of all kinds of structural changes. The criterion for syncretism therefore is alienation: something which either comes in as alien from without or which is alienated from within - whichever it is.³

Kamstra at this point seems willing to grant the possibility of the fact that the affects of syncretism can

¹Michael Pye, "Syncretism and Ambiguity" (hereinafter referred to as "Ambiguity"), in NUMEN (An International Review for the History of Religions), (Netherlands: International Association for the History of Religions, August, 1971), vol. XVIII, fasc 2, pp. 81-93.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

come from without. Yet it must be understood that he sees syncretism as phenomenological rather than theological. "To be human is to be syncretistic,"¹ are the words of Kamstra. This leaves the conclusion that because of an inherent propensity toward syncretism, man must also move naturally toward alienation.

Michael Pye in his paper on "Syncretism and Ambiguity"² finds that rather than alienation the problem is one of ambiguity. He bases his evaluation on the study of syncretistic problems within different religions. It is then made clear that most religious practices can have two or more meanings. This then is aligned with Kamstra's view of syncretism from within,

To take ambiguity as the main characteristic of syncretism is consistent also with Kamstra's view that it stems from man's very nature in the sense that each man is a limited being unable to grasp the revelation of the divine or the ultimate truth except in so far as this or these are refracted in terms of his own situation.³

Pye then goes beyond Kamstra at this point. Kamstra sought to separate the theological and the phenomenological but at this point Pye draws them together. "The nature of syncretism clearly is to be found in the nature of

¹Pye, "Ambiguity," pp. 81-93.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 91.

religion and the nature of religion in the nature of man."¹

Pye's final evaluation demonstrates that the syncretistic affect on religion is not only affected by another religion but its effects must include political, philosophical and many other secular elements. He finally defines syncretism as "The temporary ambiguous coexistence of elements from diverse religions and other contexts within a coherent religious pattern."²

Walter Capps points out that Widengren,

is disposed toward treating syncretism as a dynamic process of fusion, union or coalescence which sometimes occurs when a variety of religious themes interact or when one or more religious traditions join together. In Widengren's view, the syncretistic process is traceable; its ingredients can be distinguished and sorted; the dynamism of the phenomenon can be penetrated, or at least partially.³

Capps finds this a very difficult idea to accept. He feels this is a very simplistic view which is caused by Widengren's Swedish religious background and the philosophy behind Swedish studies. This, he feels, is the concept of strict economy in interpretations and claims. They believe, "what can be explained on fewer principles is explained needlessly by more."⁴

¹Pye, "Ambiguity," p. 91.

²Ibid., p. 93.

³Capps, "Widengren," p. 183.

⁴Ibid., p. 176.

The necessity of finer distinction and more explicit evaluations and examinations leads Capps to the conclusions that syncretism of necessity must be redefined and explained in the narrow context of its own characteristics.

Religious syncretism is different from cultural contact, and that these two differ from cultural influence and cultural continuity. Syncretism has a very specific meaning and does not refer roughly to all sorts of religious and cultural interaction. Syncretism takes on a contextual meaning: one can detect and describe it when it occurs.¹

The validity of his thought on this point would depend on our acceptance of his concept of the total necessity for distinction in definition.

Definition Clarified and Adjusted

It seems from this perspective that the thoughts considered have only added to the confusion. A careful examination of the facts will show that certain foundational understandings have been laid to help in the understanding of some of the evangelical concepts in vogue, accommodation, gospel in context and contextualization, to name a few. It will also give access to an understanding for the reason these problems have been a plague throughout history. As evangelicals there must be a sense of agreement with Kamstra

¹Capps, "Widengren," p. 184.

that syncretism comes from within. The source or reason that it comes from within can again be seen as alienation. But this is not alienation as Kamstra sees it, that of religions against each other and philosophies which are contrary. This rather is an alienation that has come between the creator and creature. It is this alienation which makes man syncretistic by nature. Paul makes it clear in the twenty-third verse of the first chapter of Romans. Man was willing to exchange the true worship of God for some invention of his own mind. The inventions were different and varied, "an image in the form of corruptible men and of birds and four footed animals and crawling creatures" (Rom. 1:23). The natural outgrowth was a syncretistic exchange and so it has been through the millenniums of time.

Pye, with his definition of ambiguity, feels the pulse in a different area yet he is touching the same stream. Again, because he has no Biblical convictions, he cannot follow through to a proper conclusion. As religion is natural in man, because he was created in the image of God to have fellowship with Him, so his natural ambiguity, the source of his syncretism, is because of his alienation from God. Man's mind is not only confused by religious factors, political influences, philosophy and other issues, but his mind is ambiguous because of its depraved condition,

"God gave them over to a depraved mind" (Rom. 1:28). Pye moves in the right direction but his conclusions fall short because he seeks to totally avoid religion in his definition.

The thoughts of Widengren as discussed by Capps expands the definition of syncretism. A study of the history of religion makes it quite clear that most religions have always been affected by, or effected, the environment in which they live. As Latourette points out, one question which must be answered in our study of the expansion of Christianity is, "What bearing do the processes by which Christianity spread have upon the effect of Christianity on its environment, and of the environment upon Christianity?"¹ He continues to state later in the same paragraph, "Again the answers are often difficult or impossible of determination."² As one of America's, and Christianity's outstanding historians Latourette is willing to admit, in a historical reference, the same conclusions to which Widengren came. The total environment can have its effect on religion. Environment would include all non-religious concepts, such as politics and philosophy, as well as religion.

¹Kenneth Scott Latourette, The First Five Centuries (hereinafter referred to as First), in A History of the Expansion of Christianity, 7 volumes, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), vol. I, p. 15.

²Ibid.

Capps becomes so distinctive in his delineations as he seeks to define syncretism it seems that he fails to see the unity of effects. His basic purpose seems to be a desire to correct Widengren's philosophy, rather than correct his definition on syncretism. This danger of missing the intricately interwoven nature of syncretism is not only a problem of Capps, but of many who promote the modern evangelical ideas of contextualization and accommodation. Later discussion will deal with these issues, seeking to discover some of the problems with these ideas. Anthropologists seek to deal with a culture which is very syncretistic and derive answers from a culture that is very syncretistic.

In light of the above discussion syncretism could be defined as, that which is built into the very nature of man, caused by his alienation from God, which makes him ambiguous as he seeks to delineate between all factors of his culture, such as religion, politics and philosophy and their inter-relationship one with the other.

CHAPTER II

SYNCRETISM THROUGH THE AGES

The Old Testament

The survey of the Old Testament will seek to demonstrate the validity of the definition formulated in the previous chapter. Can man be in a state of rebellion against his creator and still maintain a proper perspective in his religious life, despite all the pressures that are against him?

The information that we possess of the pre-Noachian history is scant at best. The first six chapters of Genesis deal with creation, the fall, the story of Cain and Abel and the genealogy of man. The details of the degeneration of mankind are not delineated but in the sixth chapter we have God's capsule comment on the situation, "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5).

Peters makes the following observation:

From the Biblical records we gain the impression that mankind was free from idolatry at least up to the Tower of Babel experience. No mention of the idols, images or gods is found in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. We have already noted that Paul gives a theological interpretation in Romans 1:18-32 concerning the general religious deterioration of this period and that this is the beginning of the great historical religious systems. Mankind is on the road downward in its

history of religion and is moving rapidly away from God into self-devised systems of religion.¹

There are many weaknesses in this argument on the silence of the first eleven chapters. An argument from silence is always a weak one and usually does not prove anything either way. A careful study of the first eleven chapters will make it quite evident that God is not interested in the detailed sins and practices of the people on the earth but is rather giving a general overview of the flow of history. When God does refer to the sin of man it is in general rather than specific terms, "wickedness of man" (Gen. 6:5), "thoughts and intents of his heart" (Gen. 6:5), "the earth is filled with violence" (Gen. 6:13). To seek for archeological evidence would be to seek in vain, for God states His purpose to be "to destroy" (Gen. 6:13) all former things.

The effort to pinpoint Romans 1:18-32 as post-Babel leaves some theological problems. The phrase "since the creation" (Rom. 1:20) could indicate a lapse of time or just a point of time from which the knowledge was accessible. For our argument there is a more important factor and that is the progression which Paul follows as he explains man's

¹George W. Peters, A Biblical Theology of Missions, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), p. 92.

responsibility before God. Man moves from the knowledge of God (Rom. 1:20) to the creation of his own religious systems of worship (Rom. 1:23). From there he moves on to moral impurity (Rom. 1:24). As the rest of Romans chapter one is surveyed it is evident that this corruption grows continually. Paul writes, "God gave them over in the lust of their hearts to impurity" (Rom. 1:24), and God in Genesis uses a similar phrase, "that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). The corruption of man had reached an intolerable level in Genesis six and according to Paul all this begins with a rejection of the truth about God. Then comes the initiation and creation of man's own religious system. Peters' view would have to hold to man's moral corruption without a religious corruption. This would seem impossible as man's moral corruption springs out of his rejection of God.

Another reason for the rejection of Peters' thesis is the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis four. We find in Cain a foreshadowing of all religious rebellion. God gives directions for worship and presentation of offerings. Cain comes along with a religious system suited to his own way of life, "but Cain was a tiller of the ground. So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground" (Gen. 4:3-4). God did not accept the offering, "but for Cain and for his

offering God had no regard" (Gen. 4:5). God then gives Cain the opportunity to bring his religious practice in line with what has been demanded (Gen. 4:7). Cain, then unwilling to conform to the religious directives of God in his rebellion, moves into moral corruption. This moral corruption is demonstrated through the murder of his brother. This evident shadow so early in the history of man gives us reason to believe that the description of Romans chapter one, was from the beginning. Because of his alienation from God man would set up an ambiguous system of religion that would ultimately lead to the immoral living. This is the immorality which lead God to destroy the world by the flood.

In the eleventh chapter of Genesis the evidence of the outcome of man's alienation from God is seen. Man had lost his understanding of an infinite creator and had plans to make himself the center of the control of heaven. The confusion of languages fostered a diversified multiplicity of religious ideas, rather than a unified effort of religious defiance. This was the seed-bed of our modern religious practices. Each was individual, yet syncretistic, because each was seeking to fulfil the inward desire of worship by their "futile speculations" (Rom. 1:21).

The intent of God in the call of Abraham was to separate for Himself a people of faith who would be pure from the religious corruption of the world in which they lived. It becomes quite evident in Genesis thirty-one that the family of Abraham's father, Terah, were idol worshipers. When Jacob beats a hasty retreat from his uncle Laban it is not without carrying the infectious religious practices of Paddan-aram with him. Rachel had stolen her father's idols and was able to keep them as part of her religious repertoire.

The children of Israel at the time of the Egyptian captivity seem to be aware of the uniqueness of their God. This is demonstrated by the terminology God uses to define Himself to Moses and the children of Israel at the burning bush. He calls Himself the "I AM" (Ex. 3:14), the self-existent, self-sufficient, immutable One. It is on the basis of this definition and the demonstrations of Moses that the children of Israel agree to leave Egypt. It becomes evident before long that Egypt and its religious practices did not leave them. With the benefit of all the demonstrations of the power of God, they revert to that innate syncretistic characteristic. They built a calf of gold and cried out, "This is your god, O Israel which brought you up from the land of Egypt!" (Ex. 32:8) That dangerous syncretistic bomb exploded within the bosom of man.

God then gives these people, and us, His explicit intentions regarding this matter, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or likeness of what is in the heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth" (Ex. 20:2-4). The Lord very clearly describes the social and political system under which Israel was to operate. God was to be their leader and they were to follow His directions. God knew that men were so innately syncretistic that He demanded the total destruction of all the people and their possessions as Israel conquered the promised land. When the Gibeonites deceived Israel it was because of the knowledge they had of God's command to Israel (Josh. 9:24). The children of Israel were disobedient to God and suffered consequences. "As for you, you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land: you shall tear down their altars. But you have not obeyed Me; what is this you have done? Therefore I also said, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become as thorns in your sides and their gods shall be a snare to you" (Jud. 2:2-3). Syncretistic religion became the blight of Israel. There was a constant battle for the maintenance and survival of a pure and genuine faith. The history of Israel seemed to be a constant see-saw battle: victory -

defeat, victory - defeat.

This becomes very evident with a cursory reading of the book of Judges. The nation rose and fell on the waves of its syncretistic practices. When syncretism was growing, the strength of the nation was at an ebb, and viceversa. Even some of the historical greats like Gideon ended up defeated under the hammer of syncretism. "And Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household" (Jud. 8:27).

The transition of Israel from a theocratic nation to a monarchy was another evidence of their rejection of the religious-political system which God had ordained. The people said; "Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:5). The syncretistic bent is evident and God interprets it as such, "but they have rejected Me from being king over them. Like all the deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day - in that they have forsaken Me to serve other gods - so they are doing to you also" (1 Sam. 8:7-8).

With few exceptions the reign of the kings is a story of overt syncretistic practices in open defiance to the prophets of God. The words of the prophets are echoed in Elijah's challenge on Mount Carmel, "If the Lord is God then follow Him; if Baal, follow him" (1 Ki. 18:21). But the

call went unheeded and kings went from bad to worse. Finally God's wrath was poured out on their syncretistic rebellion and they were punished and driven into exile. We find God's summary in Hosea chapter four verse six, "Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being my priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children." That final judgement upon syncretism is so dark and fearful that it should cause God's people to do the utmost to detect and destroy it. But it comes so naturally and moves so close that men are not willing to admit to it even as the children of Israel, "But you say, I have not sinned" (Jer. 2:35).

Peter Beyerhaus makes the following observation, "After the exile Nehemiah and Ezra consolidated the Jewish community socially and religiously."¹ He contends that syncretism was then conquered as a religious problem. An honest evaluation of the religious practice of the Israel of the intra-testamental period and during the time of Christ would prove his evaluation incorrect. Syncretism according to Beyerhaus "equates heterogeneous religious elements and thereby changes their original meaning without admitting such a change."² The situation at the time of

¹Peter Beyerhaus, "Syncretism in the Old Testament" (hereinafter referred to as "Beyerhaus"), in Christianity Today, July 5, 1974, p. 49.

²Ibid., p. 49.

Christ could not be validly placed under this definition and be seen as non-syncretistic. The transformation could validly be defined as one from polytheism to monotheism. Monotheism cannot possibly be equated with freedom from syncretism. Islam is a definitely monotheistic system but it is very syncretistic in its development and practice. By 200 B.C. the Jews had been strongly influenced by Greek thinking. "The Jews themselves made a wide use of this appreciation and did not hesitate to speak of their worship as a philosophical religion."¹ It becomes quite evident that what external syncretistic forces were not producing were being produced by the internal syncretistic tendencies within man. The Jews were practicing monotheism but the alienation that stood between them and their God caused them to develop their religious practices controlled by their own humanistic tendencies.

The New Testament

Much time could be spent on the situation of Jewish religion during the time of Christ. A careful study would show the syncretistic tendencies within the religious system. These were tendencies which Christ openly opposed.

¹J.H. Bavinck, An Introduction to the Science of Missions, trans. David H. Freeman, (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), p. 27.

The question that must be answered is, "Did the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost and the establishment of the Church end this inherent tendency toward syncretism?"

One does not have to read very far into the book of Acts to realize that within the new Church, the new concept of Christianity was being crippled by the invasion of Judaism. Paul's letter to the Galatians deals very effectively and clearly with this problem. The whole issue comes to a confrontation in the fifteenth chapter of Acts. There the distinction is definitively stated, as elsewhere in the New Testament. Because Christianity came through the Jews it is not a Jewish religion or cult, with the trappings of Christianity, but rather the final revelation from God of what true religious worship is intended to be.

The problem of Jewish syncretism is one which did not trouble the church for long. As the gospel spread into non-Jewish areas the scene shifts and the syncretistic problems come from the environment into which Christianity began to move.

A short survey of the situation of the church at Corinth makes clear that the problem was present and very diversified. The issues dealt with moral, social and theological problems. Paul has to make a clear and definitive statement, "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry"

(1 Cor. 10:14). Christianity is clearly defined and its distinctiveness clearly upheld by Paul. He had no room for, nor could he tolerate, anything syncretistic within the church.

Paul's battle was made more difficult because of the society from which the church was being formed. The cults and religious sects of the day were avidly syncretistic. Many of the groups had taken many other gods to add to the religious potential of their cult. It had become very fashionable to become a member of many cults. Those in certain circles felt that there was security in numbers. This is clearly displayed in Athens as seen in Acts seventeen. These intellectual minds of this Greek center were totally enamored by the syncretistic possibilities of life and religion. When Paul narrowed down the possibility to one man and evidenced this by the resurrection, they thought this was ridiculous. From this mentality came the people that formed the body of the church. It was this freedom of thought that brought them into the church, but it was this subconscious syncretism that brought the possibility of a weak and sick Christianity.

Paul in writing his letter to the church at Colosse is facing the same problem. As Stewart points out,

Reading the letter, it is not difficult to disentangle the sources - Greek, Oriental, Jewish, Christian - from

which the composite teaching derived. The basis, of course, was Christian. In other words, the movement was not a non-Christian attack on the Church - it was a Christian heresy.¹

The difficulty is that these elements had been fused into one and become a syncretistic mass. Paul is not dealing with a Jewish deviation and a Hellenistic group but rather an intricate complex system of belief. Paul came down hard on the problem demonstrating his attitude of no syncretism at any price. As Stewart so aptly puts it,

there was a superb intolerance, specially towards the easy-going moral broadmindedness and religious assimilation that were rotting the world. The cults could have welcomed Jesus as a syncretistic ally, but to Paul this would be treason.²

The History of the Church

The church from the time of the apostles to our day has fought this battle with syncretism. There have been varying degrees of success and failure. The problem for the church, and for us today, is that the assessment can be made much more easily from a historical perspective than when involved in the situation. It always seems easier to see the splinter in someone else's eye than to recognize the pole in your own eye. The church throughout its history has been confronted by philosophies which when assimilated

¹Stewart, "Heresy," p. 429.

²Ibid., p. 431.

into Christianity have caused a deterioration in the body. Imperceptibly, one after another, traditions and humanistic impressions have filtered into Christianity syncretizing it into an unidentifiable, ambiguous system.

By the year 300 A.D., at the time of the council held at Elvira, we see, "a Christian community which compromised with idolatry, homicide, and adultery, and yet with sufficient conscience to legislate against these departures from accepted standards."¹ With the conversion of Constantine in 312 the church moved into a new era. Persecution ceased and Christianity became the religion of the state. Slowly it became the popular thing to become a Christian and this popularity led to an intermingling of the past religious experiences with ill-defined Christianity. Theological questions which would have run their course became momentous political issues.

By the time of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) the key word in missionary endeavors was the principle of accommodation. The days and feasts of the pagans were used and the pagan rites were replaced by Christian celebrations. Pagan temples were invaded, idols destroyed and Christian worship set up in the temples. During the

¹Latourette, "First," p. 97.

following centuries in Europe the faith was spread through force and the emphasis on leadership conversion. Missionaries sought to win the rulers with the resulting success of winning the nation to a form of syncretistic Christianity. The final result was that the death of a monarch would lead to a reversion to paganism.

By the time of the reformation Christianity had passed through its darkest period. The church had gone through the conflicts of religious and political struggles. Though ebbing in political power at this time she still held sway as the dominating religious force. The problem, clearly analyzed by Luther, Calvin and Knox, was that the church had become so infected by the political shrine building and false theological teachings that it could not distinguish the true from the false. Syncretism had once again eaten the heart out of the church.

The church of the next few centuries went through an internal purging. The division between the false and the true seemed to be delineated. Protestantism seemed to be purging itself of the syncretism of the Roman Church. Then in the eighteen hundreds the ugly head of syncretism appeared again in the form of humanistic Liberalism and the variation known as Neo Orthodoxy. At the same time there appeared a counter movement seeking to purify the church of this false philosophy and bring the church back to a

purified unsyncretistic form. Out of this great fundamental movement came the missionary church of today.

A Survey of the Present Situation

With the effective spread of the world wide mission of the church has also come evident movements of syncretistic Christianity. Tanner has done a very effective study to show the affect of traditional rites on the newly created independent church in Tanzania. The syncretistic trends in Africa can be followed in many areas. To name a few; a look could be taken at the Jamaa movement in Katanga, formerly the Congo. This religious group bears a marked resemblance to the Gnostics of the early century. The syncretistic effects of the Yorubas in Nigeria is quite interesting. Their beliefs and philosophies have had effects not only upon Christianity but Islam also. One of the fastest growing religious movements in the world is Kimbanguism. This self-styled religion was founded by an African prophet named Kimbangu. The religion though basically Christian bears the scars of cultural syncretism. As William Reyburn so beautifully puts it;

Africa has long demonstrated its supreme genius for absorbing the outside world by transforming it, recombining its parts, and expressing the results in unique

ways. Mission Christianity, as the outside world in this case, has been undergoing its African transformation.¹

The Far East has not escaped the curse of syncretism. The church among the animistic Iban of Sarawak, Malaysia, is being taught to build its Christianity on positive accommodation. Using as a basis the social, agricultural and religious systems, building on some Christian ideals, a new religious system has been developed. In the Philippines,

Though most Protestants recognize and reject the overt doctrines and practices of official Roman Catholicism, they readily and unsuspectingly fall into syncretism with features of Filipino animism and the blend of animism and popular Roman Catholicism which is widespread around them.²

The problem though critical and of major importance to the Christian is not a problem localized to Christianity. In Thailand great concern is being expressed by students of the Theraudada society about the syncretistic effects on the Buddhist.

Among the Mexican Mayo Indians an unusual Easter ceremony is carried on. The Capakoba festival is carried

¹William D. Reyburn, "Review Article," Practical Anthropology; May-June, 1970, p. 137.

²Ralph Toliver, "Syncretism, a Specter among Philippine Protestants," Practical Anthropology, September-October, 1970, p. 210.

on within the context of the celebration of Easter. The Capakoban, the protector of customs and society, goes through an elaborate well-defined pagan ritual. The final culmination is a symbolic representation of the death and resurrection of Christ. The Aymara Indians of Peru have been a place of experiment for the concept of accommodation in the area of liturgical adaptation. The Roman Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council has taken this direction. They do not see this as syncretistic practices in religion. They visualize the program as the accommodation of supernatural revelations within other religions with that revelation which has come through Christ. This not only denies the historical stance of the Roman Church but belies Christ when He claims to be the only way to God.

This simple highlighted review of these situations makes the problem of syncretism quite evident. Man by nature is syncretistic. His alienation from God causes him to be ambiguous in the formulation of his religious practices.

CHAPTER III
SYNCRETISM AND MODERN
EVANGELICAL THOUGHT

Evangelical missions today have been reeling at the blows which have come accusing her of ineptitude in carrying out its mission to the world. Many valid observations have been made about the effect of missions on national culture. The problem has been that those who have made the evaluations have usually made them from a biased or hostile attitude. As Kato points out,

The constant cry one hears is that 'missionaries have destroyed our culture.' The accusation is made in spite of the fact that some of the articles destroyed were charms or objects of idol worship. It is often forgotten that the twentieth century convert is not the first Christian to burn up the bridges linking him with his past life of idol worship.¹

We are being constantly bombarded by statements from Dr. Mbiti, "It is unfortunate that the early missionaries demanded cultural circumcision as a precondition to conversion,"² and Stephen Neill, "It is commonplace today that

¹Byang H. Kato, Theological Pitfalls in Africa, (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), p. 174.

²Richard Bakulumpagi Kabuzzi, "PACLA-Part of a Movement or Cornerstone of a Monument?", Preception, no. 8 (Nairobi, Kenya: Baptist Publishing House, April 1977), p. 5.

the missionary methods of the churches need to be radically overhauled, since the methods of the past are today neither valid nor viable."¹ Among the many, a counter-offensive has been set up. The counter-offensive has been launched in the concept known as "contextualization". An evaluation will demonstrate that this concept is syncretistic or lays the foundation for a dangerous form of syncretism.

An interesting consideration at this point is to realize that this accusation is not new or common to the last two decades of the twentieth century. The same accusation is brought against Stephen, "We have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs" (Acts 6:14). Again Paul at Philippi was accused of teaching "customs which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe being Roman" (Acts 16:21). The accusation was and is valid because the gospel is a change agent. To deny or take away this property is to open the door to syncretism.

From the time of the reformation the strong view has been held that the whole man, in his thinking, and in every aspect of his life, has been affected by sin. This does not

¹Stephen Charles Neill, "Syncretism and Missionary Philosophy Today." Expositor and Review, vol. LXVIII, no. 1, (Winter, 1971), p. 65.

deny the fact that things of value lie within a culture. But on the other hand it must be recognized that the totality of man's culture is infiltrated by his sinful religious practices.

It is extremely difficult to differentiate religion from culture; nevertheless, a careful discernment is imperative. If religion is what gives direction to life, Christianity must necessarily change the life-style or culture of the African. Where such a differentiation is not possible two alternatives are called for. Either the culture is abandoned or Christianity is compromised.¹

The emphasis in contextualization is on the cultural setting rather than the message,

Kraft said that when he came to Africa as a missionary he apologized for what other missionaries had done. He did not come to teach the Bible because he did not know what it meant to Africans. He found that Africans already knew God.²

Dr. Kraft is Associate Professor of Anthropology and African Studies at Fuller Seminary. Much of the thought and teaching of contextualization comes from Fuller Seminary and is built on a very humanistic and neo-evangelical approach to the Scripture. Those fostering these concepts are now talking about a culturally adapted gospel

¹Kato, Theological Pitfalls in Africa, pp. 174-75.

²Kabazzi, Preception, p. 6.

message geared to meet the felt needs of the nationals to whom the message is communicated.

The philosophy seems sound at first glance. At a closer inspection it becomes evident that the point of emphasis, culture and felt need, leave the gospel message ambiguous in content and reception. Theology and application is a nonvariable base that must dissect both culture and religious consciousness. Communication when culturally controlled can lead to a false concept of the truth and a security in a false savior. The burden of communication becomes very heavy at this point and underlines the importance of keeping a pure theology and precise communication. The key to remember is that Biblical truth is supracultural and therefore its message and content must remain the same in every culture. There is only one true Biblical theology. We cannot and must not present a Latin American or African theology and call it Christian. In the area of church forms, the national has a broader scope of choice. Though even here the danger of pagan religious assimilation is very real. The most important matter is that Christianity must be kept in the place of prominence.

The matter of either/or affects only the questionable instrument of religio-cultural heritage. Culture as such can be baptized by Christianity. But once it is

done the other way around, compromise has set in. Syncretism will be the end result and the unique salvation of Christ will be made non-effective.¹

Contextualization must always be related to the bearer of the message and this only in the primitive areas of evangelism. When the message or recipient is moved into the area of contextualization, then the message becomes ambiguous. The foundation is laid for the innate syncretistic nature to surface and Christianity becomes an unintelligible enigma. Those who promote the concept of contextualization when carefully studied are only promoting syncretistic religion under another banner.

¹Kato, Theological Pitfalls in Africa, p. 175.

CONCLUSION

The enigma of syncretism is clearly evident in history and present religious activity. As syncretism has been defined in this paper one is almost forced to a sense of despair. Yet, within the definition one also finds some guidelines to help in this constant battle.

The recognition, that religion is affected by more than one force, other religions, will make one aware that attacks come from every area of the social structure. On this basis a careful evaluation can be made of all our religious practices and beliefs.

Recognizing the fact that at its best religion is ambiguous in its practice will give another tool for examination of both belief and practice. God is very definitive in outlining the content and behavior of Christianity but does allow certain freedoms in the practice or expression of worship.

How to delineate the ambiguous and recognize the social intervention is the core of the problem. A willingness to admit is the first step to victory. Can Christians honestly evaluate the Christian festivals, Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving and recognize the pagan influences? Do theological systems mean so much to the theologian that he is not prepared to admit areas where false philosophies

have infected the interpretation? The only way ultimate victory is available over syncretism is to deal with the alienation the creature has to his creator. Scripture clearly teaches that even to the Christian alienation will come through the infestation of sin. Man prodded by the barbs of sin can only move to a syncretistic life-style. The degree of his syncretism will vary in proportion to his capitulation to sin. The victory over this alienation will give a vivid and distasteful picture of the syncretistic practices carried on. The closer one walks with God the more uncomfortable one becomes in this syncretistic religious evangelical society. The result is a compromise which leads to a slow undetected cancer called syncretism.

The ideal, the non syncretistic life, by definition is: being static, according to Biblical directives, in religious experience, unaffected by society because of a right relationship with God.

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