

Religious Syncretism as a Syncretistic Concept: The Inadequacy of the “World Religions” Paradigm in Cross-Cultural Encounter

by H. L. Richard

This paper focuses on syncretism in Western Christianity as seen in the paradigm of “world religions” that is assumed in both popular thought and in missiological scholarship. Syncretism is a complex topic with various usages and nuances, yet in Christian circles the term is most often used as a pejorative against developments in non-Western churches that do not neatly align with Western Christianity. But, alternatively, this Christianity of the West is itself syncretistic, and never more so than when employing the distinctly Western construct of “religion.”

My intention is to survey different definitions of syncretism in order to provoke discussion of the meaning of “religion” and of the concept of “world religions.” I will then introduce current scholarship that demonstrates the Enlightenment origins of this established perspective on “religion,” calling for a fundamental shift in intellectual paradigm. Traditional Christian thought is indicted as syncretistic due to the infusion of this Enlightenment worldview, yet this analysis also opens stimulating perspectives on issues of crucial concern for missiology. I will conclude with some practical suggestions for beginning to move beyond the syncretistic “world religions” paradigm.

Thinking about Syncretism

Perusing standard reference works on religion and missions reveals definitions of syncretism with subtle differences of meaning. Mark Mullins in the *Dictionary of Asian Christianity* points out a difference between standard usages in the social sciences and in missiology.

Syncretism is usually understood as a combination of elements from two or more religious traditions, ideologies, or value systems. In the social sciences, this is a neutral and objective term that is used to describe the mixing of religions as a result of culture contact. In theological and missiological circles, however, it is generally used as a pejorative term to designate movements that are regarded as heretical or sub-Christian....The legitimate cultural reshaping of Christianity is referred to as the “inculturation” or “contextualization” of the Gospel, though most social scientists would also include these cultural adaptations as examples of syncretism. (Mullins 2001:809)

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S. R. Imbach in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* is clearly in accord with this, but note the centrality of the concept of “religion” in this definition.

Syncretism. The process by which elements of one religion are assimilated into another religion resulting in a change in the fundamental tenets or nature of those religions. It is the union of two or more opposite beliefs, so that the synthesized form is a new thing. It is not always a total fusion, but may be a combination of separate segments that remain identifiable compartments. (Imbach 1984:1062)

It is tempting to base this entire paper on this definition, as the assumptions about “religions” and their “fundamental tenets or nature” goes to the very heart of what this paper is addressing. It is certainly ironic that some Western Christian definitions of syncretism are demonstrably syncretistic in their use of the category “religion.”¹ Before laying out the case for this observation some further comments on syncretism will be noted.

In a major work on syncretism and dialogue, Andre Droogers laid out a basic definition that is again rooted in assumptions about religion and which brings together elements of the two previously cited definitions.

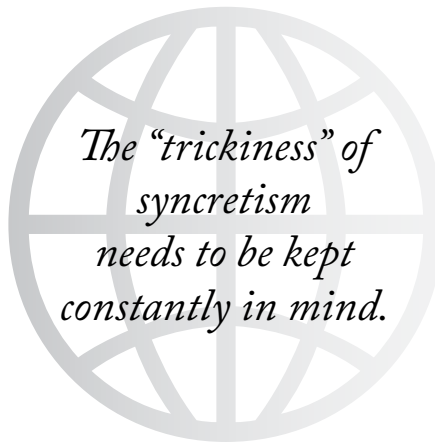
Syncretism is a tricky term. Its main difficulty is that it is used with both an objective and a subjective meaning. The basic objective meaning refers neutrally and descriptively to the mixing of religions. The subjective meaning includes an evaluation of such intermingling from the point of view of one of the religions involved. As a rule, the mixing of religions is condemned in this evaluation as violating the essence of the belief system. Yet, as will be shown, a positive subjective definition also belongs to the possibilities. (Droogers 1989:7)

The “trickiness” of syncretism needs to be kept constantly in mind. This paper is dealing with a very slippery concept that is “generally used as a pejorative term” (Mullins above), and seeks to

turn the pejorative back on the Western churches that all too often casually see a sawdust speck of syncretism in the non-Western churches while missing the plank that is in their own eye.

D. A. Hughes in InterVarsity’s *New Dictionary of Theology* points out a major problem with the broad use of syncretism as including a positive sense of borrowing from other religious traditions.

[Syncretism] is also used in a broader sense to describe the process of borrowing elements by one religion from another in such a way as not to change the basic character of the receiving religion. It is questionable, however, whether such a broad definition is helpful, since it makes every



religion syncretistic to some extent. (Hughes 1988:670)

The positive sense of syncretism certainly “makes every religion syncretistic to some extent,” but one could also argue that every religion is syncretistic even in the negative sense. The issue, of course, is what one means by “religion.” The lack of discussion of that term in these various definitions is troubling at best and perhaps empties their points of any clear meaning. Scrutiny of paradigms for religion and world religions are the focal point of this paper.

Finally, for this initial discussion of syncretism, Scott Moreau presented a carefully nuanced definition in the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*.

Moreau avoided “religion” talk, referring rather to “idea, practice, or attitude.”

Syncretism. Blending of one idea, practice, or attitude with another. Traditionally among Christians it has been used of the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements....Syncretism of some form has been seen everywhere the church has existed. We are naïve to think that eliminating the negatives of syncretism is easily accomplished. (Moreau 2000:924)

Moreau, by avoiding talk related to essences of religions, was able to acknowledge both positive and negative syncretism in every church, and his further discussion of those points in the article referenced is highly recommended.

The Concept of “World Religions”

Numerous books and academic courses introduce the major religions of the world with varying levels of sophistication.² In missiological circles it is also common to speak about the *world religions* as if that was a meaningful term, even though world religions textbooks often challenge that traditional language.³ This alone is a massive problem that needs to be addressed, but as the roots of this imprecision or distortion are traced out below, it will be seen that what is at play here is syncretism.

Current academic work has challenged the commonly understood sense of “religion,” although without the development of an acceptable alternate paradigm. Richard King traced the concept of religion to the Greco-Roman world, where the meaning focused on “tradition” with a recognition of the plurality of traditions (1999:35f.) With the rise of Christianity the term was redefined as “a matter of adherence to particular doctrines or beliefs rather than allegiance to ancient ritual practices” (King 1999:37). This meaning was then exported

and underlies the present concept of “world religions,” but this interpretation involves a “Christian” reading of different sets of data that really do not fit the paradigm. Fritz Staal powerfully made this point.

The inapplicability of Western notions of religion to the traditions of Asia has not only led to piecemeal errors of labeling, identification and classification, to conceptual confusion and to some name-calling. It is also responsible for something more extraordinary: the creation of so-called religions. (1989:393, quoted from King 1999:144)

In light of these realities King suggests that

...it is important to realize that the “world religions” as they are usually portrayed are idealized and largely theoretical constructs that bear some relationship to, but are by no means identical with, the actual religious expression of humankind, especially in the pre-modern era. One should also note that such “universal” faiths are simultaneously the homogenizing and imperialistic ideologies of a religious world. In effect by focusing upon the brahmanical strands of Indian religion, the theological treatises of Catholicism, or the scholarly Qu’ranic commentaries of Islam, one inevitably marginalizes a significant proportion of human religious experience and expression. (1999:67-68)

The Enlightenment Roots of the Concept of “World Religions”

In 1962 Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote *The Meaning and End of Religion*, a seminal work critiquing the very concept of religion. He traced the roots of the modern usage of the term to the Enlightenment, where the centrality of the intellect indicated that truth and doctrine were most important in religion.

This is the view of the Enlightenment, evinced not only in the religious realm but as a comprehensive world outlook which stressed an intellectualist and impersonalist schematization of

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things. In pamphlet after pamphlet, treatise after treatise, decade after decade the notion was driven home that a religion is something that one believes or does not believe, something whose propositions are true or are not true, something whose locus is in the realm of the intelligible, is up for inspection before the speculative mind. (W. C. Smith 1962:40)

Smith adamantly objected to the intellectualizing and reification of religion, seeing personal faith as the vital reality which was obscured by this idealistic construct. “There is nothing in heaven or on earth that can legitimately be called *the* Christian faith,” he asserted. “There have been and are the faiths of individual Christians...” (Smith 1962:191; italics original). This certainly seems to be an over-reaction, as there are clearly confessional communities and not merely individual faith expressions; but Smith’s critique of religion as an inadequate (or erroneous) Enlightenment construct has been reaffirmed by later scholarship.

This intellectualizing of religion also began the compartmentalizing and trivializing of it. Jonathan Z. Smith pointed out that

religion was domesticated...the Enlightenment impulse was one of tolerance and, as a necessary concomitant, one which refused to leave any human datum, including religion, beyond the pale of understanding, beyond the realm of reason. (J. Z. Smith 1982:104)

W. C. Smith returned to his theme of Enlightenment distortions thirty years later and had an even more harsh conclusion.

When I wrote *The Meaning and End* I knew that “religion” was a Western and a modern notion. I had not yet seen, but now do see clearly, that

“religion” in its modern form is a secular idea. Secularism is an ideology, and “religion” is one of its basic categories....It sees the universe, and human nature, as essentially secular, and sees “the religions” as addenda that human beings have tacked on here and there in various shapes and for various interesting, powerful or fatuous reasons. It sees law, economics, philosophy (things we got from Greece and Rome) as distinct from religion.⁴ (W.C. Smith 1992:16)

More recently this point has been powerfully outlined by Timothy Fitzgerald, who traced in detail the transition from a medieval focus on religion as Christian Truth that covered all of life to the modern sense of dichotomized and compartmentalized religion that stands in contrast with the secular.

One thing which has presumably always been clear, even to scholars in religious studies who tend to attribute to every culture “a religion,” or even several: the English-language category religion has for almost all its history been inseparable from the Christian incarnation and Christian theology, and required a process of abstraction and modern fetishism and animism before it was ready to incarnate in different manifestations in different cultural contexts. But when this contested term is projected onto other peoples, who think in entirely different languages, there is always ambiguity about whether the projector is imagining “religion” to encompass all institutions on analogy with medieval and early modern ideas, therefore seeing it as indistinguishable from holistic culture; or whether “religion” is imagined in the Calvinistic mode as radically separated from the profane world; or whether “religion” is more simply a projection of the Western religion-secular dichotomy whereby religious

practices are assumed to be different in kind from political, economic and technical/instrumental ones. (Fitzgerald 2007:104-105)

Thomas Idinopulos likewise documented the compartmentalization and trivialization of religion when secularism became dominant.

The word, religion, acquired its own distinct meaning when the forces of secularization became so dominant in western culture that religious belief and practice became distinctly human acts. For once secularity became fully evident in society it was possible to speak by contrast of the religious way of life. (Idinopulos 2002:10)

Idinopulos objected to this development, suggesting that in both “archaic” peoples and in modern life there is evidence of “the interweaving of religion with everything else in life” (2002:10).

Richard King provides a good summary statement for this discussion.

As a number of scholars have pointed out, both our *modern* understanding of “religion” as a “system of beliefs and practices” and the academic field of religious studies are a product of the European Enlightenment....As such its [the term “religion”] continued unreflective use cross-culturally, while opening up interesting debates and interactions over the past few centuries (and creating things called “interfaith dialogue” and “the world religions”), has also closed down avenues of exploration and other potential cultural and intellectual interactions. (King 2011:39; italics original)

This line of analysis leads to King’s conclusion that

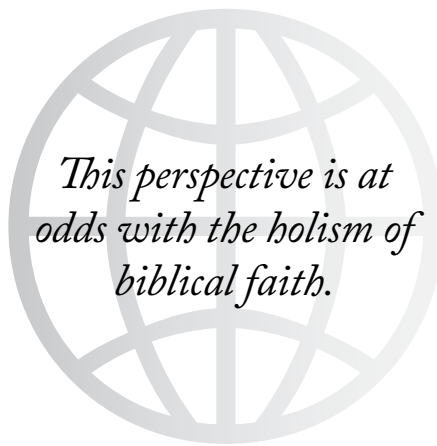
The continued unreflective use of the category of “religion,” however, does not carry us forward in our attempt to understand better the diverse cultures and civilizations of the world. (King 2011:43)

This is not a conclusion that can be merely observed by a missiological world which purports to wrestle with understanding and communicating into

the diverse cultures and civilizations of the world. If King is right, radical change of missiological paradigms and terminologies is required. Since King speaks for a considerable consensus in the academic world, if he is wrong the missiological world must enter the fray and, at the very least, defend whatever it is that it might think to be the true understanding of “world religions.”

Missiology, the Enlightenment and World Religions

I have attempted a brief summary of the case that a “world religions” paradigm developed out of the Enlightenment compartmentalization of religion within a dominantly secular world. This is a



perspective at odds with the holism of biblical faith, yet Western Christians, many of whom boast of a biblical worldview, seem to have embraced terms and ideas from this alien worldview.

It is not as if missiology has completely failed to notice the significance of these discussions. Over thirty years ago Harvie Conn objected to the dichotomization of religion and culture, calling for a biblical missiology which puts all of life under the Lordship of Christ, not merely “religious” life.

Cultural anthropology has increasingly refuted the bifurcation of religious from cultural life, of the sacred from the secular in the world’s ethne. But the Pietist mythologization of individualism

into a theological construct has hindered the church from incorporating that insight into missionary methodology. (Conn 1979:214)

The example of this Western syncretism with Enlightenment thought on religion is by no means singular. Andrew Walls implicated the entire nineteenth century missionary movement as fundamentally syncretistic, although he did not use that pejorative label.

...nineteenth century missions were part of an Enlightenment project, stamped by Enlightenment ideals; the evangelical Christianity that underlay them had made its peace with the European Enlightenment and operated in its categories. (2002:244)

In a lecture Walls later applied this perspective to current Western missiological thought.

One of the things we have to get beyond in the next stage of Christianity is the Enlightenment. We can’t give it up ourselves because it is part of our identity. But we have to realize it is not part of everyone’s background. (Walls 2011)

The supposition of syncretism among Western Christians is not new.⁵ The process of rooting out Enlightenment-related syncretism will be so complex that it may never be fully achievable, as Walls noted. But as Western missionaries call other peoples to battle against syncretism, they must engage battle with their own hearts and minds regarding their own homegrown varieties of syncretism.

This paper barely introduces the complex issue of “world religions” as an example of Enlightenment-rooted syncretism in missiological and popular thought.⁶ A thorough analysis of “Hinduism” and “Buddhism” and “Christianity” as empty reifications should be presented here, but space and time forbid.⁷ But be forewarned that many practitioners of these traditions will likely object to this deconstruction of their reified paradigms. The resistance experienced in inter-religious encounter

often forces mission practitioners to grip even tighter their own syncretistic paradigm. Thus, the vital question, who speaks for any of these traditions? Who has the right to speak for Hinduism, or for Christianity? Which of the many Hinduisms is the truly valid expression; which type of Christianity is the legitimate one, when each seems to claim that for itself?

Missiology all too easily employs the binary language of “religion” and “culture” without any recognition of the problems involved, let alone a serious grappling with numerous profound implications. When syncretism is discussed and defined in terms of religions and their intermixing, particularly when “cultural” elements are considered acceptable for adaptation but “religious” elements are viewed as tainted, this is itself an expression of the syncretism within Enlightenment constructs.

Paradigms or terminologies that suggest that there is an essence of Hinduism or Islam are likewise syncretistic, reflecting the Enlightenment reification of masses of disparate and even contradictory ideas and practices into the neat package of “world religions.” Paradigms or terminologies that define syncretism based on religious concerns without recognition of the presuppositions involved in Western use of religious phraseology are also syncretistic. These lines of thought can lead one towards despair, because Westerners are deeply, even subconsciously, implicated in Enlightenment thought, as pointed out by Andrew Walls.

A Way Forward?

Is there a way forward for missiology and missiologists (not to mention popular parlance and lay Christians)? Scott Moreau is certainly right that, “We are naïve to think that eliminating the negatives of syncretism is easily accomplished” (Moreau 2000:924), and this is most definitely true in relation to our own syncretisms.

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Three steps can be taken to begin extricating our understanding of Christian faith from syncretistic bonding to Enlightenment-rooted paradigms and terminologies related to religion. These steps are just a beginning towards long term solutions that might root out the depths of this syncretism based on deep reflection and interaction with ongoing discussions of these matters in the secular academy.⁸

One first step towards transcending the inadequate paradigm of “world religions” as it is expressed in both academic and popular discourse would be *to insist on always speaking in the plural and never in the singular*. “Buddhism” gives a false impression of unity; speaking of “Buddhist traditions” avoids the suggestion of unity and takes a significant step away from the false reification of the “world religions” paradigm. Similarly, Christianity should not be referred to in the singular; there is too much diversity present for the usage in the singular to carry any substantial meaning.

Second, rather than being content with the lazy use of these broadly general terms (even in plural forms), it is decidedly preferable that *contextually specific terms be employed*. “Hinduism” does not consider the world to be an illusion, and it would be simply erroneous to affirm this about “Hindu traditions.” The Advaita Vedanta tradition, one school among the Hindu traditions, has often suggested that the world is an illusion, with contested understandings of not only that term but also of how truly representative it is of Advaitic thought. Similarly, one can speak quite *meaningfully* about even such a broad category as American Evangelical Christianity, although more *meaningfully* about American Evangelical Anglicans/Presbyterians/Baptists, etc. Each of the

major “religious” traditions has “confessional” groupings that can be *meaningfully* spoken about (many of these claim to be the true spokespersons for their “world religion.”) Careful thought is needed to speak *meaningfully* in terms of these sub-groupings, avoiding the broad (and usually demonstrably false) generalizations often used for world religions in the singular.

Third, *the change of religion terminology needs to be abandoned as a meaningful way to speak of someone becoming a disciple of Jesus*. This seems to be increasingly the trend, even as the meaning of *Christian* is deeply distorted even in the *Christian* world, let alone among Muslims or Hindus. This represents a significant departure in missiological parlance, as a “convert” from Hinduism or Buddhism to Christianity is just the normal way to think and speak about many people historically and in the present. Yet this traditional terminology has been questioned by many outside the Western world, with an increasing exploration and embracing of “multiple religious belonging” and of “insider movements” that reject the “change of religion” paradigm.⁹

A recent statement from leaders of Roman Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical thought on witness and dialogue illustrates the assumption that Christians expect people of other faiths to “change religion,” without reflecting on the roots or implications of this terminology.

Christians are to acknowledge that *changing one’s religion* is a decisive step that must be accompanied by sufficient time for adequate reflection and preparation, through a process ensuring full personal freedom.¹⁰ (WCC 2011:5; emphasis mine)

The intent of this impressive inter-confessional statement is clearly to reduce inter-religious tensions

and to call Christians to high ethical standards. Yet, by yoking itself to the “change of religion” terminology Christian bondage to Enlightenment categories is perpetuated. If the argument of this paper is valid, this entire “change of religion” paradigm also represents a syncretistic concession (albeit subconscious) to an Enlightenment worldview. Certainly great respect needs to be shown to individuals who under the current paradigm want to change religions and religious labels, whether into or out of Christianity, but this should no longer be seen as normative when the basic paradigm in play has been exposed as syncretistic.

The challenge of “religion” and of transcending the Enlightenment worldview that dominates the Western world (and that increasingly influences all the world through modernization and globalization) is a complex matter that defies easy solution. The discipline of missiology should be in the forefront of confessional Christian efforts to grapple with these constructs. Yet it hardly seems to be on the agenda, as Enlightenment-speak about “world religions” and “changing religions” is ubiquitous, suggesting that missiology as a discipline has not yet adequately engaged discussions and controversies in the field of religious studies.

May those who interact with this paper embrace the three suggested steps and contribute to deeper and abler developments towards better paradigms and terminologies for the future. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Larry Posten, in an appeal for contextualization without syncretism, is more deeply implicated in syncretism by his strong emphasis on the centrality of religion. “First, we must *determine to the best of our ability what are the actual religious practices and religious objects of a particular culture that are purely religious in nature*” (2006: 252; italics original).

² Some books and courses, in line with the approach of this paper, now present what John Stratton Hawley calls a “guerilla

warfare” against their own basic structure. “One clear-headed approach is to wage a steady program of guerilla warfare against the hapless [world religions] textbook—perhaps even against the stated subject matter of the course itself” (Hawley 2006:118).

³ Note Friedhelm Hardy’s comment in *The World’s Religions* as an example of this. “The conventional labels of ‘Buddhism,’ ‘Jainism’ or ‘Sikhism’ neither exhaust the (very large) range of the traditions we can identify outside the most unhelpful title of ‘Hinduism,’ nor do they, for the most part, even define proper ‘religious systems.’” (1988:573-574)

⁴ This focus on the Enlightenment’s contribution to a reductionist understanding of “religion” is not meant to suggest that there were no positive results from the Enlightenment, even in the area of “religion,” particularly religious tolerance.

⁵ For example, see Hesselgrave 2006: 79ff., Jennings 2006, and other studies in Van Rheenen 2006.

⁶ David Bosch painted a devastating picture of Enlightenment influences on Christian missions, but did not focus on the “world religions” paradigm (1991:262-345; cf. 477-483). This paper could be considered a further application of Bosch’s principles to an area not yet clearly seen when he wrote.

⁷ The power that these reified categories manifest is a point not overlooked in scholarly analysis, and qualifies the “emptiness” of the reifications. See, for an example in cross-cultural contexts, Arvind-Pal Mandair’s reference to “someone for whom the concept of religion may not have existed in their language(s) prior to their accession to the dominant symbolic order imposed by the colonizer/hegemon, but for whom this now exists as if it had been an indigenous concept all along...[necessitating] distancing oneself from the concept of religion while fully acknowledging that the vestiges of ‘religion’ continue to haunt their very existence and the possibilities of cultural formation” (Mandair 2009:434).

⁸ Is there sufficient representation from the missiological field in the discipline of religious studies? Is there even adequate interaction with ideas generated from within that discipline?

⁹ On multiple religious belonging, see Cornille 2002 and Tan 2010, 2012. On insider movements see the papers collected in Winter 2007 and Travis and Talman (forthcoming). I have a forthcoming paper (Richard) on “New Paradigms for Religion, Multiple Religious Belonging and Insider Movements” that further explores these matters.

¹⁰ The language of religious freedom, development and universal human rights are all rooted in Enlightenment constructs; see Dallmayr 1998:247ff. for discussion of this.

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