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1. THE SCANDAL OF SYNCRETISM

Let me begin by laying out the downside of the term syncretism. Syncretism seems to propose two (or more) discrete religious systems, like Christianity and Heathenism, or Judaism and Hellenism, or Persia and Greece. And this is problematic because none of these systems or traditions was ever discrete and pure. Syncretism thus relies on a romantic fantasy of the pure culture: apostolic Christianity, biblical or rabbinic Judaism, Pharaonic Egypt.

Syncretism, then, implies *mixtures* that are ad hoc, base and commercial, intellectually unsophisticated, travesties and distortions of those pure traditions. The pure religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Platonic Hellenism gain only cheap mystification, even pollution, when mixed with Persian or Berber traditions. Thus the very epitomes of syncretism in Late Antiquity can be found in the Greek Magical Papyri, in Mystery Cults like Mithraism, in pseudo-intellectual ritual schemes like Hermeticism and Gnosticism, and in those latter-day Christianities that used to strike Protestant scholars as rife with “pagan survivals”: Greek Orthodoxy, Italian Catholicism, Haitian Vodou, and so on.¹ So overall, syncretism mistakenly imagines pure religious traditions in haphazard collapse and regards their mixture in terms of

1. See in general Jonathan Z Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Classic recent examples might include A.A. Barb, “The Survival of Magic Arts,” in *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 100–125; Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000).

degradation and pollution. Why would one ever want to revitalize such a category?²

Well, given that there were *no* “pure” traditions in antiquity (and that apostolic Christianity is a Protestant origins-myth), we historians of religions need some term or dynamic category to conceptualize religious confluences under some comparative rubric. Every category has its intrinsic limitations and spin: “mixture” implies only mixing without meaning, dynamic context, or agency; “hybridity” as Homi Bhaba meant it represents a self-conscious self-styling in colonial guise, while in popular parlance it simply reinscribes what I have already said about syncretism; and “creolization,” which anthropologists drew from linguistics some decades ago, says much about cultures as a whole, but applied to religion again reinscribes fantasies of purity and mishmash. “Acculturation,” like many of these terms, is a process without explanation or context. In essence, whichever synonym we choose, we tend inevitably to describe syncretism anyway.³

2. RECTIFYING SYNCRETISM

But like many problematic categories that we find ourselves depending on, syncretism can be rectified—that is, defined and used in a way that is helpful and insight-producing rather than casting data in simplistic, biased terms. Moreover, rectifying the term rather than simply replacing it with a word that ends up producing the same errors reminds us of and holds us accountable for those misuses and romantic biases in the history of the term syncretism.⁴ “Hybridity” makes people feel politically-correct when they use it, but when they start applying it to mixtures of Christianity and Roman culture they invariably end up doing syncretism by another name. Let us then keep syncretism, but establish what we mean.

Syncretism should cover the ongoing process by which a religious tradition—in the form of lore, materiality, authority, and charismatic

2. See esp. the selection of learned objections and critiques in William Cassidy, ed., “Retrofitting Syncretism? [Special Issue],” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions historiques* 27, no. 3 (2001): 365–509.

3. Charles Stewart, “Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture,” *Diacritics* 29, no. 3 (1999): 40–62.

4. On rectification of categories as a component in the comparative project, see Jonathan Z. Smith, “When the Chips Are Down,” in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, ed. Jonathan Z. Smith (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2004), 28–30; Oliver Freiberger, *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 158–60.

figures—is indigenized and rendered comprehensible in particular cultural domains.⁵ Those cultural domains extend from the domestic sphere to the lordly estate, from the craftsman’s workshop to the culture of the saint’s shrine, from the scribal collective to the independent ritual specialist. Each brings its customs, gestural traditions, needs and interests, and particular forms of expression to the religious tradition, selecting and reformulating, celebrating, ignoring, and inventing that tradition as it sees fit, according to the exigencies of locality and history. Christianity may become tantamount to the charismatic power of the cross, or the protective power of the holy man, or a body of stories and names, or a means of expressing prestige. Or it may serve as a medium for revitalizing older spirits or symbols or songs or shrines.

At the center of this notion of syncretism is a conception of the cultural domain as site of *agency*: agency in selecting and interpreting Christianity in the local context.⁶ Syncretism should constitute an active process with particular agents: the mother seeking to guarantee a pregnancy at a martyrion, the scribe retelling the story of an apostle in the guise of popular epic, the holy man inscribing an ostrakon to protect livestock. Agency implies a basis, a motivation, for selection and interpretation: from domestic crisis to the maintenance of local performative tradition (like a festival or a dance style), to simply the customs of craftsmanship. But in this sense syncretism extends to gesture: the *habitus*, the ingrained, embodied ways that people in various cultural domains have for talking, singing, working, dancing, comporting themselves at a holiday or a feast, or recognizing charismatic authority. Gesture in this sense becomes both the means of integrating new religious stuff and the very basis for people’s selection and reinvention of religious traditions. Finally, it need hardly be stressed that the components of Christianity—lore, materiality, authorities, symbols, even doctrine—were hardly uniform in their historical introduction to particular places in the late antique and early medieval worlds, so that syncretism could *only* involve particular agents working with what they encountered, *not* with what far-off bishops or modern reformers would like them to have learned.

5. David Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017). I expand on these methodological points in David Frankfurter, “Syncretism,” *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2022; online 2021: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2589-7993_EECO_SIM_00003315).

6. I am inspired here by Fritz Graf, “Syncretism [Further Considerations],” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 8937.

Lastly, it is worth emphasizing that syncretism is an *ongoing process*. That is—there is no point when one can say a culture or town “is Christianized” or the like. Medievalists know well the very particular, local forms of religion that inquisitors discovered across Europe from the fourteenth century on.⁷ Syncretism continues as historical situations, ecclesiastical pressure, economic worlds, technology, and so on inspire local agents to rethink and reconstruct religion in its local and regional milieux. Syncretism, then, is “non-teleological.”

But why do we *need* the term syncretism when we could justly use all these observations simply to nuance the category “Christianization” itself? This question gets to the benefits of the comparative term. Syncretism pertains to Hellenization, Christianization, Persianization, and Judaization, of course, but also to Buddhism and Islam as “great traditions” that underwent exceedingly diverse forms of indigenization following many of these same patterns. To place the local dynamics of Christianization during the late antique and early medieval period in a comparative framework like this, with Buddhization and Islamization, illuminates our (already diverse) cluster of cases—as evoking broader patterns in the history of religions.⁸ While each of these three religious movements differed in important ways in their interaction with local cultures, we gain much from considering how Islam also presented a sacred text and Buddhism a magical iconography as they moved through cultures.

3. EXEMPLIFYING SYNCRETISM IN FORMATIVE CHRISTIANITIES

Having laid out the definition and theory of syncretism as the ongoing process of a religion’s indigenization, let us turn to some examples from late antique Christianity: first, a type of oracle procedure in Egypt; second, a type of ritual figurine manufactured around Christian Egypt; third, a particular type of possession performance exemplified in Egypt but common around the late antique world; and fourth, the innovation of the cross amulet in Scandinavia. Methodologically, we should look at each type of evidence not as

7. E.g., Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

8. See esp. Victoria Bonnell, “The Uses of Theory, Concepts, and Comparison in Historical Sociology,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1980): 156–73; David Frankfurter, “Comparison and the Study of Religions of Late Antiquity,” in *Comparer en histoire des religions antiques: Controverses et propositions*, ed. Claude Calame and Bruce Lincoln (Liège: Presses universitaires de Liège, 2012), 83–98; Oliver Freiberger, *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), esp. 126–27.

“pagan survival” but as traditional means for interpreting and indigenizing Christianity.

1. THE TICKET ORACLE

The ticket oracle was a peculiar ritual that took place at some early Christian saint shrines in Egypt. A visitor would deliver a question to God in the vicinity of the entombed saint, written in the form of two possible answers. The shrine attendant or oracle specialist would return the answer chosen by the saint according to some hidden rite we have yet to reconstruct. Thus one half of two tickets submitted to the Leontius shrine in Tripolis asks, “O God of St. Leontius: If I (should) stay at this house where I am and remain inside with [my] mother, (such that) my heart will be at rest and shall bear a living child...(deliver this ticket).”⁹ The other half presumably asked whether she should return to her husband’s house. Another one of an original pair asks (and answers), “God of the Christians: is it your will [that] we give your handmaid Theodora to Joseph? Yes.”¹⁰ The other one would have read “no.”

The ritual process that produced these answers was fundamentally textual (using the authority and promise of the written word), locative (transpiring at a saint’s shrine), and paraenetic (advocating a strict monotheism on top of the authority of the local saint).¹¹ There are no literary or ecclesiastical witnesses to this procedure besides the tickets themselves.

But what is especially remarkable is that this same “ticket oracle” procedure goes back over a thousand years in Egyptian temple religion. In fact, it had really taken off in Egypt some five centuries before the Christian cults were in operation. In this diachronic context, we can be confident in regarding the ticket oracle as a longstanding Egyptian tradition; and yet, again, no Christian authors censure the ticket oracle as a “heathen” practice. Thus, when we study it as one particular feature of the overall process of Christianization and acculturation—rather than simply as a “survival”—this oracle practice could be described as a kind of syncretism. It is not a holdover from the age of the Pharaohs but a traditional Egyptian form of Christian practice, a kind of gesture basic to the region, part of the *habitus* or repertoire of communication

9. Rylands 100, from Marvin W. Meyer and Richard Smith, ed., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), 125, #65.

10. Berlin 21269, from Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 54, #34.

11. David Frankfurter, “Voices, Books, and Dreams: The Diversification of Divination Media in Late Antique Egypt,” in *Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination*, ed. Sarah Iles Johnston and Peter T. Struck (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005), 233–54; Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 130–32, 186–89.



FIGURE 1. Female figurines found at Apa Mena site. Molded terracotta. Fifth to seventh centuries CE. From Kaufmann, *Die Menasstadt*, taf. 73. Photo in public domain.

at a holy site. It is through traditions like the ticket oracle that Christianity gained legitimacy, authority, and quotidian relevance in Egypt.

2. FIGURINES

Of all the material artifacts of Christianity in late antique Egypt, perhaps the most curious are the great numbers of terracotta figurines of women: pregnant, nursing infants, or standing with arms raised in the *orans* position (Fig. 1). While most of these figurines are unprovenanced, exhibited in museums as examples of post-Pharaonic religion, many do come from archaeological sites, found in private homes, cemeteries, and, most significantly, from Christian pilgrimage shrines like the great complex devoted to St. Menas southwest of Alexandria. Here even some of the figurines' molds were found.

The figurines are extraordinarily diverse in their craftsmanship and representation of the female figure. Some are nude, some dressed modestly; some hold babies, others are only *orans*; some are free-standing, others can be hung or laid down in some space; some are crudely hand-modeled, others are products of molds. The diversity is regional: the St. Menas selection is different from those found in Thebes or in the Fayyum. This diversity suggests that their manufacture and use was stimulated in local, indigenous context. It is almost as if the figurines served some purpose general to people in Egypt.

But who are these figurines supposed to represent? They bear no explicit identities or symbols, either as saints (or the Virgin Mary) or as earlier Egyptian goddesses. Their various attested find-sites—homes, tombs, shrines—might even suggest a flexible identity: sometimes a saint, sometimes an extension of a principal saint's blessing, sometimes the pilgrim herself, to be left *ex voto* in some designated corner of a shrine, or sometimes an image associated with a house *jinn*. As with the ticket oracles, no written documents of the period, neither miracle collections nor sermons nor saints' lives, even mention such figurines. And yet, in their varying emphases on breasts, bellies, infants, and even vulvas, the figurines clearly convey a concern for procreative fertility, the bodily capacity to produce and safeguard a new generation. And as artifacts modeled and used across Egypt even into the Muslim period, they reflect a determination to assert this concern on their environments: whether in the act of carrying figurines out to shrines or back to homes, or stimulating craftsmen at shrines to produce familiar forms to sell to pilgrims.¹² Thus again, the figurine tradition served as a means for indigenizing Christianity, stimulating its media, its crafts, and its ritual purposes. These figurines exemplify the syncretism that is Christianization.

3. POSSESSION, DREAMING, AND THE RECOGNITION OF NEW SAINTS

There are reports in hagiography, letters, and sermons from around the late antique world of local people becoming possessed with demons or spirits and in that state performing various beneficial tasks for communities.¹³

12. David Frankfurter, "Terracotta Figurines and Popular Religion in Late Antique Egypt: Issues of Continuity and 'Survival,'" in *Le myrte et la rose. Mélanges offerts à Françoise Dunand*, ed. G. Tallet and Chr. Zivie-Coche (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry-Montpellier III, 2014), 129–41; David Frankfurter, "Female Figurines in Early Christian Egypt: Reconstructing Lost Practices and Meanings," *Material Religion* 11, no. 2 (2015): 190–223; Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 58–60, 162–67.

13. David Frankfurter, "Where the Spirits Dwell: Possession, Christianization, and Saints' Shrines in Late Antiquity," *Harvard Theological Review* 103, no. 1 (2010): 27–46; Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 138–44.

Now, there are many ways to analyze possession, especially in the integration of new religious regimes, but here I would like to consider it as an indigenous performance for the recognition of new saints—that is, a type of *habitus* or custom that certain people initiate at opportune historical moments. Two examples from late antique rural Egypt show that one goal of this direct contact with spirits was the gaining of certainty about the saints: which are “real,” and what they can tell us. Shenoute of Atripe points to “those who sleep in the tombs to gain visions and who question the dead on account of the living: what are they other than those who admit it and practice it. There are other sorts of places of divination or spirit-possession [*engastrimythos*] that have emerged at this time in the rush for corpse parts found in the earth.”¹⁴ But even a century earlier Athanasius was already complaining that local people

seek to see the demons that are destroying them. These people give glory to them and ask them about what will happen. After these words, will they dare to question the unclean spirits?...They [think] that the demons are the prophets of the martyrs. But the martyrs did not confess that they would speak through the demons...Why do they even go to the tombs? For they are doing this annoying thing, not because they want them to pray in their behalf to God, but so that they might question demons.¹⁵

Athanasius’s insertion of *daimones* (or *n-daimōn*) for the spirits sought among the tombs is his way of condemning these practices. We may presume that the participants regarded the spirits of the martyrs as beneficial in nature.

Overall, both testimonies offer examples of indigenous agency in the domestication of the cult of saints, according to traditions concurrent in late antique Egypt. In other cases (the shrine of St. Martin of Tours, for example), we see supplicants at saints’ shrines entering possessed states as demons to “perform” affliction from the saint and thus demonstrate the saint’s potency in the local world of spirits.¹⁶ Syncretism in these cases

14. Shenoute of Atripe, “Those Who Work Evil,” ed. E Amélineau, *Oeuvres de Shenoudi I: Texte copte et traduction française* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1907), 220. See esp. L.-T. Lefort, “La chasse aux reliques des martyrs en Égypte au IV^e siècle,” *La nouvelle Clío* 6 (1954): 225–30.

15. David Brakke, “‘Outside the Places, Within the Truth’: Athanasius of Alexandria and the Localization of the Holy,” in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 445–82.

16. Sulpicius Severus, *V. Mart.* 18.1–2; Gregory of Tours, *VM* 1, ch. 2; cf. Sozomen, *H.E.* 7.24; see also Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 106–27; Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 138–44.



FIGURE 2. Soapstone mold from Trendgården in northern Jutland for making both Christian crosses and Thor's Hammers. Copenhagen Museum.

involves active performance through dreaming, consultation, bone-collecting, and possession.

4. CROSSES AND HAMMERS IN VIKING SCANDINAVIA

My final example of syncretism as the essence of Christianization is a small soapstone silver mold found in Jutland, in northern Denmark (Fig. 2). The craftsman intended the same mold for making both simple crosses and a popular inverted T-shape amulet known as “Thor’s Hammer.” Scandinavian archaeology has for some time noticed a concurrent rise of evidence for *both* amuletic symbols in hoards and burials from the late Viking Age—that is, the tenth to twelfth centuries CE. Indeed, scholars of this period debate whether this evidence reflects a broader cultural juxtaposition of Christ and the god Thor at the time, or that the incursion of the cross itself into Scandinavia stimulated a cultural revival of an older symbol as a kind of antithesis to the cross, or that the Thor’s Hammer amulet simply triggered cultural recognition of the amuletic

cross.¹⁷ Certainly both symbols were worn with similarly amuletic functions, and their craftsmanship in both cases could convey prestige as well as protection.

One of the benefits of the rectified category of syncretism is that we do not have to jump to unanswerable questions about Thor and Christ or large-scale “pagan revivals” to see the significance in the mold itself. The mold shows the integral role of the artisan—the silver or goldsmith—in the interpretation of the cross in the context of northern amuletic craft-traditions. As with every region that integrated Christianity, there were also more elaborate images of the crucifixion developed as prestige and processional items, for the cross had many domains and lives in late antique and medieval cultures. But the soapstone mold shows the specific role of the artisan, that “entrepreneur of materiality,” in the process of Christianization: making connections and juxtapositions that others might not have thought about, or that people sought out in material form; interpreting the cross as apotropaic, or even as a cultural badge.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The criticisms of the term syncretism are all well-taken, but like all terms for particular social dynamics, syncretism can be redefined for acceptability and profit. I would even make the case that it is essential to the study of Christianization to get out from purely insiders’ (bishops’) perspectives on mission and to study the realities and dynamics from the ground up, from the perspective of indigenous appropriation.

I have emphasized the social sites of syncretism, and the examples covered here include several such sites, or cultural domains: (A) the scribal attendant at a saint’s shrine, who develops and performs the ticket oracle; (B) craftsmen in clay and silver, who develop the media by which people engage with Christianity: figurines, crosses, and maybe even Thor’s Hammers; and (C) particular folk in communities who are credited with mantic powers—to dream or to enact a saint or demon—and thereby function to authenticate a saint. Around these particular cultural domains of syncretism there is also the agency of villagers or supplicants, those who seek the consultation of the

17. Thomas A. DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 158–63; Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 134–35.

ticket oracle, or who regard figurine or cross as a potent materialization of the religion, or who participate in the *inventio* of a local martyr through the mediation of a local diviner.

Obviously, none of these domains is particularly unique to Egypt, even if most of my evidence comes from there. The selective engagement with Christian traditions on the part of such domains and their agents took place everywhere. This is how Christianization happens: how sacraments are accepted, older symbols preserved, saints domesticated, bishops ignored, festivals developed, churches built, and magical charms composed. Of course, syncretism was not the only thing going on in the assembling of Christianity on the ground. There was also, occasionally, a phenomenon anthropologists have called “anti-syncretism”—that is, the purifying, reformist movement to excise from culture elements that some authority (like Shenoute) deemed heathen.¹⁸ But that is another story. ■

18. See Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, “Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism,” in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, ed. Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart (London: Routledge, 1994), 1–26.