

SYNCRETISM OR FAITH

By Rev. Dr. Jakob Jocz, Ph.D., D. Litt.

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Built into the very structure of our civilization is a dichotomy which modern man is unable to resolve. The tension in which he moves derives from an inherent antagonism between life and science. Life demands commitment, science calls for suspense. To live means to make decisions, to take up positions, to presuppose purpose, to move in a certain direction. The underlying principle of living is that it makes sense. But scientific man is not prepared to take meaningfulness for granted; in fact, he is not too sure whether life does make sense. He stands to life as he stands to science, in a calculating, non-committal mood. He knows that all his decisions are interim decisions, that the discoveries of tomorrow will alter or modify his views of today. He is professionally an agnostic: he must not commit himself by reason of the fact that the ultimate is never known.

The all-pervasive influence of science profoundly affects modern man's attitude to life. Twentieth century man is torn in two directions: by the pull of life on the one hand and the pull of science on the other. This bifurcated existence results in a schizophrenic mentality with all its attending evils: a feeling of insecurity, loss of direction, morbid introspection, a sense of futility. Modern man, in spite of his great achievements is most vulnerable in his inner life and flees to the psychologist for succour. These secular priests of the new religion are engaged in the task of working out a synthesis which will provide a sense of wholeness to disorientated humanity. This paper is written with the purpose of showing that Syncretism is the predominating mood of our age.

1. Syncretism as a scientific principle.

Because the scientific mood is so important to our age we turn first to this area of human endeavour.

The gathering of scientific facts is never a completed task. No individual can cope with the multitude of data brought to light by science. Co-operation in any given field by many scientists is necessary to achieve a measure of wholeness.

The true scientist is thus already an eclectic by his very make-up. Science of necessity is a social achievement in that knowledge consists of a gradual accumulation of facts covering centuries. As a legacy of civilization it transcends the confinements of colour, class and culture and draws unashamedly upon every available source. Because scientific knowledge is by its very nature composite, its mood is naturally syncretistic.

Scientific man has his own code of values and speaks a language adapted to his own purpose. The language of science is mathematics. Mathematics, originally served as a form of linguistic shorthand but has since evolved into an independent international language. George Steiner has shown how the present development of the mathematical sciences is a radical departure from its original purpose as a form of shorthand. Now it is not any more an aid to language but a language of its own: "A modern chemical formula does not abbreviate a linguistic statement, it codifies a numerical operation."¹ What

¹ cf. George Steiner, "The Retreat from the Word", **The Listener**, July 14, 1960, 57; cf also Geof Hoyland, **The Tyranny of Mathematics**, 1945, 22, 24ff.

Latin was to the medieval world, mathematics is to the modern world: it is the *lingua franca* of the scientific fraternity. By means of mathematical formulae scientists can understand each other no matter what native tongue they may call their own. Scientific data mathematically expressed require no personal decision, they exist as a matter of fact. Mathematical symbols carry no emotional content and require no personal commitment. Cold reason is the only condition required for deciphering the hieroglyphics of scientific research. It is by means of the language of mathematics that science has managed to evolve as an international influence permeating the whole of life. The innermost principle of the scientific attitude is the principle of syncretism, for science thrives upon synthesis.

2. Syncretism as the modern mood.

All human development hinges upon man's ability to assimilate insights, knowledge and skills from others. Man is essentially a learner all his life and depends upon the experience of others for his own enrichment. The eclectic attitude is therefore not a modern phenomenon, it is as old as humanity itself. Civilization grows by an appropriation of the experience of past generations and the desire to improve upon it. Every civilization therefore lives by assimilation and synthesis. This is a natural process and occurs almost unobserved as a matter of fact. Man's very ability to learn depends upon his ability to imitate. For this reason no culture is truly homogeneous.

In our own times the assimilatory process is greatly facilitated by an extra-ordinary development in technology. Never before was humanity so exposed to the *Zeitgeist* on so global a scale and with such concentration in time as it is today. The mass-media of radio, television and the press, make it virtually possible to address the human race at breath-taking speed. In addition, modern locomotion, specially air travel and the development of tourism, enables large groups of people to visit remote places all over the globe.² There is an unprecedented intermixing of races and cultures on a colossal scale. The world's capital cities have become truly international centres and so are the great universities. Such mixing of peoples and cultures has a relativizing effect upon the human mind. Customs, values and ideals hitherto accepted as the unquestionable foundation of society, begin to be seen in a different light. The discovery that other people hold different views and practice different customs loosens one's own hold on accepted tradition. Hitherto unassailable values become questionable and fluid. Under such circumstances the syncretistic attitude is the result of a self-defensive mechanism to create order out of chaos. The eclectic temper of our time is an effort to achieve wholeness from the kaleidoscopic pattern of modern life.

This universalist tendency is aided by other factors of similar importance.

In spite of the deep cleavage between races and ideologies, modern civilization exerts a unifying effect upon the nations. Industrial development, food production, medical care, birth control, to be effective, require planning on a global scale. The United Nations Organization, UNESCO, the World Bank, and many other agencies of an international character, greatly contribute towards a unified world. On the cultural level, music, painting, the cinema, exert a powerful influence on an international scale, for better or worse. Women's fashions, the culinary arts, and many other factors contribute towards the mixing of culture and custom. There is thus a true *quid pro quo* relationship between nations and continents, so much so that we may speak of the Americanization of Asia, and to a lesser degree, the Asiaticization of America. In the field of music, it is remarkable how the Negro rhythm has captivated the popular song.

² cf. **The Toronto Globe & Mail**, Dec. 26, 1966: "Beatniks invade Nepal." About 200 beatniks, "from the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Britain, the Netherlands and Scandinavia" found their way to Katmandu for Christmas (!).

An additional factor is the large displacement of populations as a result of war and the steady stream of immigrants to receiving countries, such as Canada. As a result we have a mixture of cultures living side by side in the process of integration. Here Mosque, Church and Buddhist Temple may be met in the same street, all held in equal respect and enjoying the same rights. The syncretic mood is thus a sheer necessity for peaceful co-existence. Modern civilization is the great melting-pot from which a uniform world is slowly arising with all the attending pains.

3. Syncretism as a religious principle.

Religion cannot be isolated from the rest of life. It is always closely related to the culture from which it evolved and is profoundly affected by the changing patterns of life. At the same time it is a major factor in the building of a civilization. Even when that civilization has reached the stage of secularism as in ancient Greece and Rome, and now in our own era, its basic structure still rests upon religious presuppositions.

Religion is a universal phenomenon. According to Emile Durkheim "it is the natural product of social life."³ Philosophers, theologians and psychologists have tried to isolate the basic principle behind the religious experience, and in different words, they always arrive at the same result: religion is a psychological need peculiar to man. Lucretius sees the origin of religion in *timor*,⁴ Schleiermacher associates it with the sense of dependence (Abhängigkeitsgefühl),⁵ Rudolf Otto brings it down to the experience of the numinous.⁶ From a psychological point of view all definitions describe the same fact of the human situation: man knows himself "thrown" (to use a Heideggerian expression) in an alien world with which he has to come to terms. Religion is man's response to the puzzle of existence in terms of emotional experience. Before Julian Huxley defined religion as man's reaction to the "experience of the Universe as a whole,"⁷ Lucretius had already put it down that true piety "consists in the power to contemplate the universe with a quiet mind."⁸ Such an experience is possible each time man is confronted with the grandeur of nature. In this setting God is not a necessary premise, as Huxley has incontrovertably shown. Since Feuerbach, psychologists have mainly interpreted the God-concept as a projection of the human ego. Even Freud could not better Feuerbach's formulation: "The divine essence is the glorified human essence transfigured from the death of abstraction. In religion man frees himself from the limitations of life; here he throws off what oppresses, impedes, or adversely affects him; God is man's self-awareness, emancipated from all actuality; man feels himself happy, blessed only in religion . . ."⁹ This ability to surmount the trials of life inwardly, psychologists have acknowledged as a therapeutic element and for this reason they benignly acquiesce to the religious illusion. Some people cannot do without religion. T. S. Szasz quoted K. A. Menninger to the effect

³ E. Durkheim, **The Elementary Forms of Religious Life**, 1926, 422.

⁴ Lucretius, **De Natura Rerum**, 1, 93ff; VI, 24ff.

⁵ F. Schleiermacher, **On Religion**, (Harper Torchbook ed.) 1958, 106.

⁶ R. Otto, **The Idea of the Holy**, 1923. Otto is by no means a pioneer in this field; Schleiermacher speaks of the "pious shudder". (op. cit. 69), and the mystics knew all about it, cf. the concept of **pahad** in the second triad of the **sefiroth** (Ernst Muller, **History of Jewish Mysticism**, 1946, 96); also Plato, **Euthyphro**, 12, where Socrates discusses the connection between fear and reverence.

⁷ Julian Huxley, **Religion Without Revelation**, 1957, 92.

⁸ Lucretius, op. cit. V, 11 97.

⁹ Ludwig Feuerbach, **The Essence of Christianity**. The Essence of Christianity, 181 ff.

that religion is the only hope left for the hopeless.¹⁰ Freud appears to hold a minority view when he states that religion is a harmful illusion;¹¹ on the whole psychologists look upon it as a necessary evil. Like other narcotics, religion soothes man's rattled nerves and helps him along the path of his pilgrimage. Jung, in his clinical practice, discovered that most people over 35 years of age suffer neurosis as a result religious problems and cannot be cured without religion.¹² But this fact in no way affects Jung's own position: there is no transcendent reality that corresponds to this inner God of religion.¹³

The removal of God from the area of religion creates the perfect background for a religious synthesis. It is always the intractable nature of dogmatic theology which stands in the way of a syncretistic compromise. Once religion becomes detached from a particular God and is found to stand on its own merits, without support from the outside, there is nothing in the way to prevent the emergence of a world-religion. God is the only obstacle and is experienced as a burden, impeding man's autonomy. Ernst Horneffer tells us that the presence of God "is a heavy load upon the world", and that faith in him reduces man to insignificance. In God's presence man finds himself humbled and cringing with fear. Man to redeem himself, must be made proud again. This can only be achieved by freedom from God. "Man must believe in himself," he tells us; this is the only way to "true religion".¹⁴ In fact, Gerhard Szczesny chides the Church for tenaciously hanging on to the old-fashioned idea of a God. Irreligion will prosper, he says, as long as Christianity insists upon belief in a personal God.¹⁵

This new emphasis upon religion as a unifying principle, of which Huxley writes, is free of all accretion of theological jargon and historical confinement. Man comes to the religious experience fresh and unimpeded. Because men everywhere face the same universe and require the same sense of completeness and unity,¹⁶ religion can transcend all national divisions and become the common bond. Huxley quotes Lord Morley: "the next great task of science will be to create a religion for humanity."¹⁷

4. Syncretism and Gospel.

The change in the cultural climate has left the Church in utter bewilderment. The pressures from within and without are still mounting: pressure towards conformity with prevailing views; scientific syncretism as a working principle: the psychological approach to religion; atheistic religiosity as a viable possibility. The result is that the Church is giving way on many fronts. In the foreign mission field the swing is away from direct preaching towards cultural and economic help to underdeveloped nations. At home, there is a concentration upon the cultivation of religious feeling and an emphasis upon liturgical worship, while the central truths of Christian doctrine are skipped over. In relation to Judaism, always an indication of the depth of Christian conviction, there is an unwritten agreement: no

¹⁰ cf. T. S. Szasz, **The Myth of Mental Illness**, 1961, 287 n3.

¹¹ cf. S. Freud, **The Future of an Illusion**, 1949, 85ff.

¹² cf. C. G. Jung, **Psychology and Religion: West & East**, 1958, 334.

¹³ cf. *ibid* 58.

¹⁴ Ernst Horneffer, **Vom Starken Leben**, 1912, 50ff.

¹⁵ Gerhard Szczesny (Fr. Heer), **The Future of Unbelief**, 1961.

¹⁶ cf. Huxley, *op. cit.* 95.

¹⁷ *ib.* 85

evangelism any more. Gradually but surely the Church is changing from a Christian community to a religious institution.

In this process of change the dominating factor is the search for a synthesis. This becomes apparent in a hundred ways. In our seminaries philosophy of religion has acquired the status once accorded to Christian doctrine. Theological handbooks treat "universal truth" as synonymous with biblical revelation. In some scholastic circles the Death of God is contemplated as a serious theological possibility. Renowned Church publishing houses put on the market atheistic literature as if it were part of the Christian task to spread godlessness.

Much fuzzy thinking dominates not only the man in the pulpit and the man in the street, but the hierarchy itself. Christian leadership has gone off the rails. The situation is best described as complete theological disorientation. Here is an outstanding example: the Theme Address at the Anglican Congress in Toronto (1963), on analysis, is a complete surrender to the syncretistic ethos of our age, but no one even noticed it. M. A. C. Warren, an outstanding churchman and the foremost representative of the greatest missionary society unambiguously declared himself at unity with the world religions: "God has revealed himself in divers manners. We should be bold to insist that God was speaking in that cave in the hill outside Mecca; that God brought illumination to the man who once sat under the Bo tree . . . indeed the God of a hundred names is still God." Apart from the rhetoric, how accurate is this statement? How does it coincide with the uniqueness of biblical revelation?

1. Muhammed knew himself superseding Christ.
2. Buddha founded an atheistic philosophy of life.
3. In biblical tradition God names Himself (cf. Exod. 3:14). There is only one Name given unto men by which they must be saved. (Acts 4:12.)
4. The reference to Hebrews 1:1 is torn from the context and utterly inapplicable outside historic revelation.

Canon Warren's admission that he does not know how best to insist on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, deserves special notice. He is certainly in a difficulty here, for one cannot have it both ways: hold to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and at the same time maintain that "'in the beginning' of every religious experience is God".¹⁸ Canon Warren does not appear to know that there are also false gods beside the one true God and that it is possible to enjoy a genuine religious experience from idol worship, from the use of mescaline or LSD. St. Paul seems to be better informed; he knows that there are many so-called "lords" and "gods" but they are the figments of human imagination (cf. I Cor. 8:5f).

Canon John V. Taylor, Warren's successor to C.M.S. leadership, somewhat improves upon his colleagues with a turn towards pantheism. His convocation address to Wycliffe College on The Two Paganisms, leaves one with the impression that African paganism is nothing else but disguised godliness. He is specially impressed with the fact that "God is not so much transcendent as inherent". He is "the God whom man's primal awareness has in all parts of the world always recognized and known." As an example he quotes the Shona who speak of God as "the great pool contemporary of everything." Here is a typical sentence of pantheistic naturalism: "Immanuel of every forest path, the

¹⁸ cf. **Anglican Congress, 1963**, Report of Proceedings, 20: It is a startling discovery to find Warren and C. G. Jung talk the same language. "Is it not conceivable," asks Jung, "that God has expressed himself in many languages and in manifold phenomena and that all these statements are true?" (quoted by W. A. Wissert Hooft, **No Other Name**, 1963, 32). Warren's allusions to Scripture in alien contexts is equally misleading.

great I AM of the thorn bush."¹⁹ The mystical lyricism behind this sentence easily camouflages the radical difference between biblical revelation and pantheistic sentimentality.

The impersonal god of the African forest who as we are told "is in the great trunk and in the low branches", is as far removed from the living God of the Bible as is heaven from earth. Moses did not worship the burning bush but heeded the Voice of Him who is the God of the Covenant.

We have referred to these two outstanding men to show the incursion of syncretism into the very structure of missionary orientation. The problem we have to face in all earnestness was formulated by Visser't Hooft: "if Christianity can dispense with the deeds of God, the events of the history of salvation, then it is possible to arrive at a synthesis on the basis of a timeless mysticism."²⁰ But can it?

5. The passion of faith.

The offence of biblical revelation derives from its narrow particularity. Henry Chadwick in his analysis of Lessing's philosophy has shown that his objection to the Christian faith centred upon two main issues:

1. Events cannot prove "truths". For this reason historic revelation is a contradiction in terms. Truth is timeless, events are time-bound.
2. Truths have universal application: the biblical claim to particularity and uniqueness contradict truth as a universal principle.²¹

Theologians who think of revelation in terms of impersonal truth will do well to ponder Lessing's objections. Christian revelation, however, is not a general principle, but a Person. The answer to syncretism is a renewed concentration upon the main fact of the Christian faith: God so loved the world that He gave His only Son. Jesus Christ is the heart and centre of the Christian Gospel. Faith in Christian terms means first and foremost a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. To use Kierkegaardian language, we must advance from religion A to religion B - from the religious experience to the Absolute Paradox, or what S. K. called Paradoxical Religiousness. The result will be "the annihilation of all immanence." The immanentism of modern theology, which has led us into the *cul de sac* of false religiosity, stems from a christological flaw in our thinking.²²

Such concentration upon loyalty to Jesus Christ does not mean flight from the world. On the contrary, it means facing the world, and specially the religious world, with the challenge of the Gospel. For this we need the passion of faith. Our lukewarm Laodicean loyalty will cut no ice. Faith here must mean a personal dedication to Jesus Christ. Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith is motivated by a passionate love for the Master. No religious sentiment can take the place of this "quiet passion of faith." It is only when we are able to thank God "for His inexpressible gift" (II Cor. 9:15) that we will cry out "woe to me if I preach not the Gospel." (I Cor. 9:16). Once we have attained to the intimacy of faith we shall not be ashamed of biblical particularity which is expressed in our dogmatic formulations. We will discover that dogma is not an unnecessary accretion impeding our flight into the unknown. Dogma serves the

¹⁹ The Two Paganisms", 1964; printed by the Missionary Division of the Anglican Church of Canada for the edification of future generations.

²⁰ W. A. Visser't Hooft, **No Other Name**, 1963, 34.

²¹ cf. H. Chadwick, **Lessing's Theological Writings**, 1956, 31. Anyone interested to know what happens when the claim to "eternal verities" meets a counter-claim to "eternal verities" should read Prof. Kenneth P. Landon's article in **Faculty Forum**, Oct. 1966: "Eternal Verities".

²² For an example of christological deficiency see John T. Robinson's **Honest to God**, 67, 70, 72, 74f. 77, etc.

wholesome purpose of keeping us in the area of historic revelation. Pierre Berton's preference for "faith without dogma", is nothing but an idealistic illusion. We might well ask: faith in what?

Louise Driscoll's verse "Spring Market", is here apposite:

There you will find what
Every man needs,
Wild religion,
Without any creeds. (stanza 5)

Revolt against dogma is part of the syncretistic temper of our times. The scientific mood is impatient with any definite affirmations: man cannot know the ultimate. In the last resort it is rebellion against God.²³ By denying dogma we not only deny the past but deny the ultimacy of Christian revelation.

We are pressed as never before to make our choice: to float on the broad sea of syncretistic religiosity or stand loyally by the Cross of Jesus Christ. There can be no compromise.

²³ cf. Harry Blamires, **A Defence of Dogmatism**, 1965, 130.