

Preface

Several years ago I was listening to a radio program about Islam in post-revolution Iran. A shepherd was being interviewed, and he said an astonishing thing: Islam had been healthier under the Shah. When the Shah was in power and someone prayed, the shepherd explained, you could be sure he did so from conviction. After the Islamic Revolution, when everyone had to pray, you could no longer be certain who prayed from conviction and who prayed from fear. This statement was extraordinarily perceptive. The Islamic revolution in Iran was meant to create an Islamic state and to form a more just and equitable society than the Iran of the Shahs. But there was an unintended result: enforcing religious practice condemned the authentic expression of religion. The very attempts to inculcate a sense of religious duty into an entire population all but doomed Islam in Iran to ignoble failure. In a state where everyone must practice a religion or be punished, there is the danger that the legitimate observance of that religion will be undermined or even destroyed. Indeed an Islamic state, which means to foster Islam, can often kill it. This paradox was the central motivation for writing this book.

The rise of fundamentalism in the three Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - has long been noted as one of the conspicuous features of the late twentieth century and early twenty first-century. The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 is only one part of this overall trend, albeit an important one. Almost everywhere, fundamentalist versions of the Abrahamic religions have been on the rise. They are finding a place in debate about all sorts of matters: political, ethical, social, scientific, and medical. The role of religion in the West seems to be taking on a new, vital importance.

What has been missing in this debate is a more nuanced view of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The stunning variety of these faiths and the astonishing range of their expression are difficult to summarize or condense. Capturing some of this variety was a further motive for the writing of this book. I wanted bold examples, and could think of none bolder than those of religious syncretism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Syncretism, or the phenomenon of one religion borrowing elements from another religion, has long been recognized as a nearly universal phenomenon. But few works have tried to tackle the subject alone. For one, there are conceptual problems. Although many scholars of religion will concede that syncretism occurs in all religions, at all times and places, how to study this phenomenon proves daunting, both hopelessly wide and broad. Still some areas of religious studies have long been accustomed to examining syncretism. Gnosticism, an ancient and varied religious movement has been recognized as syncretistic in nature, drawing together traditions as diverse as Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Greco-Roman philosophy, and mystery cults, among others. Similarly, a staple of the study in Greco-Roman religions is the examination of their syncretistic nature. Ancient Greek and Roman religions went through radical transformations both during Alexander's expansion into Asia and also in Rome during the long period of its Empire, when much was rapidly and effectively borrowed from Eastern religions to enliven old Greco-Roman cults with incredible vitality.

But other, more mainstream areas of religious studies have hardly examined syncretism at all. Part of this may be political squeamishness. "Fringe" and dead religious movements such as Gnosticism and Greco-Roman religions can be examined as syncretistic far more safely than the alive, warm bodies of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Calling a religion "syncretistic" is often a way of saying that it

is the sum of its parts, or of beginning to reduce or dissect it. Religions that are still practiced are not often subjected to such scrutiny, either from habit, fear, or reticence, despite the interesting and unusual fruit the examination would bear for the study of religions.

The SCM Core Textbook on Religious Syncretism is an investigation of just this area, and begins to examine some forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and their relationship to syncretism. It does so with two goals. One is to illustrate that syncretism occurred in the Abrahamic religions and continues to occur today, as syncretism is a vital element in the formation of a religion, and continues to play a role in a religion's transformation through time. The second goal is to show that while the three Abrahamic faiths have borrowed heavily from one another, they have also been quite affected by that wide and diverse group of religions that have been practiced that are known as "pagan."

Primarily, this is a book of examples. It is not a book that sets out a systematic, theoretical model of how syncretism works and then attempts to show how this theory conforms to examples. I have set out to show what syncretism is, rather than lay out a lengthy theoretical discussion about its nature and dynamics. Of course, in the discussions of these examples some theoretical analyses are necessary. But I have endeavoured to make these as brief and few as possible, and to let the story of syncretism begin to unravel itself, to allow readers make their own judgements.

The growth of so-called "fundamentalism" has pushed religious debate into the forefront of popular culture and people are beginning to ask hard questions about the role of religion in the post-modern world. In ways this book will illustrate, syncretism is often the opposite of fundamentalism. So with the idea in mind that comparison is part of the process of forming judgements, each chapter of this book begins with an

example of modern fundamentalism, followed by the main topic under discussion. At the conclusion of each chapter, the fundamentalist example of the religion and the syncretistic example are compared and contrasted. The connections between the “fundamentalist” introductions to these chapters, and the syncretistic chapter topics, are not meant to be strictly related by cause and effect. Rather, they illustrate contrasting views on the nature of religion, in order to spur debate and examination of some of the varying ways that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have been practiced and expressed. Most of all, they are meant to show the diversity of responses to changing circumstances that people have had in these three faiths, and how people have moulded the religions to suit the times in which they were living, the social and political circumstances by which they were surrounded, and cultural crises they were facing, and above all, the unique needs of their different communities of believers. Finally, this book was written as a textbook, and as such, it is overwhelmingly didactic in its goals. It was written for a general audience and for undergraduates taking introductory courses in religion. The subject matter is intended as a primary text for classroom work, or to supplement the material handled in introductory religious courses. The topics under discussion complement the more mainstream studies of the Abrahamic religions, and provide unusual and even exotic versions of these faiths that may have a direct bearing on how we study and define religious movements. Movements on the “fringe” of mainstream religions often have a great deal to show us about these religions as a whole. The SCM Core Text on Religious Syncretism is structured as a learning tool, the main goal of which is to foster more interest in the study of syncretism. Each chapter ends with a series of questions designed to stimulate discussion and debate, and some suggestions for further reading. It is my hope that this work will contribute to ongoing debate about the nature of the

three largest religions the West has produced, and invite an atmosphere of subtle and nuanced investigation among scholars, students and the general reading population.

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