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An Unfinished Project

Fridlund, Patrik

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

My Religious Identity

An Unfinished Project

Patrik Fridlund
Docent
Lunds Universitet
patrik.fridlund@ctr.lu.se

Abstract: The matter of identity is ever present in academic, and non-academic, discourses on religion and interreligious relations: identity as a category of something that can be nailed down, established and maintained with the help of definitions and logic; identity as a matter of something stable and even rigid. This is significant in deliberations regarding syncretism. In this paper, references are made to a previous study in which it is argued that a 'religious approach' to syncretism is wiser in several respects than what may be labelled a 'logical approach'. The opposition should by no means be pushed too far, and there are of course many interesting in-between positions. Nonetheless, fundamentally one could have one approach rather than another and this indeed forms a watershed: the one and not the other as the point of departure. This paper starts in the question of 'identity'. The aim is to bring light to a *different* approach altogether, an approach that is made possible through a reading of Emmanuel Levinas. Although interreligious relations and syncretism are not thematised in the texts read, it is suggested that reading them is fruitful. Giving space to the unexpected, the unforeseeable, the impossible, means also giving space to 'human' and to God. Here is a watershed, which has little to do with 'religion', 'religious belief and practice', religious belonging and adherence; what is at stake is whether there is a strong value in the unknown, the unknowable and the impossible, or not. The argument here is that this is crucial when issues of religious identity are tabled.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas, syncretism, identity, jealousy, logic.

Sammenfatning: Spørsmålet om identitet er alltid tilstede i akademiske og ikke-akademiske diskurser om religion og interreligiøse relasjoner: identitet som en kategori av noe som kan spigles fast, etableres og opprettholdes ved hjelp av definisjoner og

logikk; identitet som et spørsmål om noe stabilt og til og med rigid. Dette er viktig i overveielser om synkretisme. I denne artikkelen refereres det til en tidligere studie der det argumenteres for at en «religiøs tilnærming» til synkretisme er klokere i flere henseender enn det som kan kalles en «logisk tilnærming». Opposisjonen skal på ingen måte presses for langt, og det er selvsagt mange interessante mellomposisjoner. Ikke desto mindre kan man fundamentalt ha en tilnærming snarere enn en annen, og dette danner faktisk et vannskille: den ene og ikke den andre som utgangspunkt. Denne artikkelen starter med spørsmålet om 'identitet'. Målet er å bringe lys til en helt annen tilnærming, en tilnærming som er muliggjort gjennom en lesning av Emmanuel Levinas. Selv om interreligiøse relasjoner og synkretisme ikke tematiseres i de leste tekstene, antydes det at det er fruktbart å lese dem. Å gi rom til det uventede, det uforutsigbare, det umulige, betyr også å gi rom til 'menneske' og til Gud. Her er et vannskille, som har lite å gjøre med 'religion', 'religiøs tro og praksis', religiøs tilhørighet og tilslutning; det som står på spill er om det er en sterk verdi i det ukjente, det ukjente og det umulige, eller ikke. Argumentet her er at dette er avgjørende når spørsmål om religiøs identitet tas opp.

Nøkkelord: Emmanuel Levinas, synkretisme, identitet, sjalusi, logikk.

1. Introduction

The title of this paper has a rather personal touch, and may give the impression that it is about myself. That is not the case. This is *not* an auto-biographical paper, not even auto-fictional, which seems to be so fashionable these days. Still, in this paper, I do deal with My Religious Identity, and its three aspects: 'my', 'religious' and 'identity'. The topic 'identity' is, however, the most tangible.¹

Questions of religious identity transpire both within the academic context and outside it: Who am I, and who are you, religiously? These frequently appear, along with the related questions: Where do you belong? What can I expect from you? What should I feel obliged to do (religiously speaking)? Then are the questions – where am I at home, and where should I not feel at home? – which are likewise about religious identity, if obliquely. One can go on and also ask: what happens if someone pretends to be more at home somewhere they should not feel at home? Can one change one's religion, and does that imply changing one's *identity*? Identity as such, or at least

1 The text is a tribute to Aasulv Lande (1937-2019), Professor in Mission Studies at Lund University 1994-2005. As a colleague, Professor Lande was a dialogue partner for many years and I am so grateful for everything I learnt about interreligious and inter-personal relations through this dialogue. Professor Lande was very encouraging. In particular, he encouraged philosophical debates regarding interreligious dialogue and theology of religions. Hence, I dedicate this article to Aasulv Lande.

religious identity? And how stable must an identity be? A *religious* identity. Is it possible to have multiple belongings? To have more than one religious identity? Such questions are not innocent but reflect underlying assumptions about us as human beings and reveal a fundamental understanding of the phenomenon of religion. Consequently, even when the questions are not spelled out, they are embedded in many discussions on religious matters. In this paper, the intention is to look upon religion from a different perspective, however. The aim is to explore an approach in which ‘identity’ is secondary.

1.1 *An Obsolete Topic?*

Now, ‘religious identity’ could as a matter of fact be seen as a non-issue. Scholars agree, although sometimes only tacitly or only if explicitly asked, that all religions are syncretic, a mixture and blend, or, in other words, that all religions are composed of different ideas, and different practices with different trajectories.² Scholars agree that religious traditions are historically formed, which also means that they are always related to other religious traditions – either because they are similar and sympathetically close to each other, or because they are considered dissimilar and radically opposed, or somewhere in between.³ Indifference is seldom an option insofar as a *religious* component is acknowledged in the Other.⁴ Hence, if there is identity, it seems to be a moving target, highly dependent on variations of elements and on positions in relation to other currents; if identity, it must be unstable and shifting.

The religious mix, which implies instability, does not stop there. Mixture is found also on the level of individuals. People always have multiple belongings, in a way. There are multiple practices in the life of an individual. What come to my mind in my context are especially the great Christian feasts like Christmas and Easter. They are certainly Christian feasts, celebrating the birth of Jesus and commemorating Jesus’ death and resurrection, respectively, but so much of everything connected to them has other origins and testifies to other aspects in life than purely Christian ones. That is perhaps a bit trivial, as many of the traditions connected with Christmas, for instance, can be labelled ‘non-religious’. Yet even ‘religiously’ people have multiple belongings. Typically, people never really trust only one God; they also trust in what many call

2 See, for instance, Notto R. Thelle, “Interreligious Dialogue: Theory and Experience” in *Theology and the Religions. A Dialogue*, ed. Viggo Mortensen (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2003) or Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration. How Inter-faith Encounter Changes Christianity* (London: SCM, 2009), 67.

3 Patrik Fridlund, “Responding to Syncretism” in *Theological and Philosophical Responses to Syncretism. Beyond the Mirage of Pure Religion*, ed. Patrik Fridlund and Mika Vähäkangas (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2018), 41-42.

4 Patrik Fridlund, “The Rotten Syncretism That Opens The Spirit” in *Swedish Missiological Themes* 102, no. 2 (2014), 155-159.

superstition, as well as what is considered science, both at least partly in opposition to complete trust in God.⁵ Once again, the opposition is not absolute, but I insist on the point that, in practice, many people tend to accept complementary beliefs and ideas. Furthermore, there is not only one teaching. If need be, alternative narratives are brought forward. There is not only one ritual. Christians may have their funeral in Church, while going to pray in the Chapel; everyday religious practice may take place in one setting, while big religious feasts may be celebrated elsewhere, even if that implies leaving the home community and the congregation with which one otherwise identifies.⁶ It has even been suggested that syncretism is what *defines* 'religion'; it is simply a concept fundamental to the phenomenon of religion.⁷

Hence, determining 'religious identity' could be seen as a non-issue, as mixing and blending are always present, often fluid, although sometimes explicitly multiple – and, thus, not possible to grasp. At best, the result would be about a 'multiple religious identity'. Still, it seems that the question of 'religious identity', one entailing expectations of firm ground, is recurrent, forming a topic when talking about interreligious dialogue, for instance. I maintain that the issue of 'identity' lurks in the background of discourses that concern who can or should be in dialogue with whom, which touch on the requirements for dialogue and perhaps also refer to the purpose or the

- 5 Fridlund, "The Rotten Syncretism That Opens The Spirit," 154-155; Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion. Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 186, 198-200.
- 6 See e.g. Jan van Bragt, "Multiple Religious Belonging of the Japanese People" in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 7-10; Catherine Cornille, "Mehrere Meister? Multiple Religionszugehörigkeit in Praxis und Theorie" in *Multiple religiöse Identität. Aus verschiedenen religiösen Traditionen schöpfen; Symposium vom 20.-22. April 2007 auf dem Landgut Castelen in Kaiseraugst bei Basel*, ed. Reinhold Bernhardt and Perry Schmidt-Leukel (Zürich: TVZ Theol. Verl., 2008), 17-18; Claudio Monge, "La dialectique «dialogue et conversion» au cœur de la complexe histoire turco-ottomane: le regard d'un théologien catholique en terre d'islam," *Histoire et Missions Chrétiennes*, no. 23 (2012), 70, 77-78; Carl Sundberg, *Conversion and Contextual Conceptions of Christ: A Missiological Study Among Young Converts in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo* (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 2000), 149-150; Fridlund, "Responding to Syncretism," 45-46.
- 7 Jerker Karlsson, "Syncretism as the Theoretical Foundation of Religious Studies" in *Theological and Philosophical Responses to Syncretism: Beyond the Mirage of Pure Religion*, ed. Patrik Fridlund and Mika Vähäkangas (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2018).

character of interreligious dialogue.⁸ A neighbouring field is theology of religions, where identity plays a role in another way. The theological thinking here often presupposes distinct entities – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism – meaning that the theology of religions is then about how one entity can or should relate to another, religiously or theologically.⁹ Here, too, it is about some sort of firm and stable ‘identity’, I claim.

There is one particular field, in which ‘religious identity’ is very salient, that is precisely when talking about syncretism as an undesired phenomenon that theorists and practitioners alike often reject.

2. Syncretism

2.1 Syncretism Rejected on the Basis of Logic

Philosopher of religion Hendrik Vroom defines syncretism as an ‘incorporation of incompatible beliefs from one religion by another’; he continues by declaring that ‘non-compatibility is not a psychological or anthropological category, but a logical one. Nobody can believe that the earth is flat and round simultaneously, nor that people live only once and many times.’¹⁰ The prominent aspect here is that syncretism is perceived as problematic or condemnable, and that syncretism is a problem *per se*. Put differently, it is a *logical* problem.¹¹ This is a crucial factor, I maintain, and nothing new about it. This is not unfamiliar to the Bible, for instance: ‘And Eli’jah came near to all the people, and said, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Ba’al, then follow him.”’¹²

Now my suggestion is that criticising or condemning syncretism with reference to incoherence can be seen as a matter of ‘identity’. Let me return to Vroom, who

8 See for instance Aasulv Lande, “Purpose of Interreligious Dialogue” in *Plural Voices: Intradisciplinary Perspectives on Interreligious Issues*, ed. Patrik Fridlund, Lucie Kaennel, and Catharina Stenqvist (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), but even more explicitly in the *argumentaire* to the congress *Le dialogue des rationalités culturelles et religieuses* held in Paris 27-30 June 2016 where a number of distinct rationalities are presupposed (<https://calenda.org/359080> accessed 3 June 2022; see also Thierry-Marie Courau, ed. *Dialogue des rationalités culturelles et religieuses* (Paris: Cerf, 2019)).

9 See e.g. Robert McKim, *On Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

10 Hendrik Vroom, “Syncretism and Dialogue: A Philosophical Analysis” in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Jerald Gort, et al. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989), 27, 29; this definition corresponds closely with how ‘syncretism’ is described elsewhere; see e.g. André Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, 17 ed. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002), 1087-1088, and Pierre Gisel, “Syncretisme” in *Encyclopédie du protestantisme*, ed. Pierre Gisel and Lucie Kaennel (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2006), 1378-1379.

11 Fridlund, “The Rotten Syncretism That Opens The Spirit,” 152-153.

12 I Kings 18:21.

employs notions like ‘*incorporation of incompatible beliefs*’, and ‘*incompatible beliefs*’ (my italics); he also makes it clear that it is about something taken ‘from *one* religion by *another*’ (my italics). The point Vroom wants to make is that it is not possible that there can be one thing (being flat) and another thing (being round) at the same time. Thus, in Vroom’s understanding there is one set of beliefs (and practices) or another set of beliefs (and practices). One set constitutes a given identity in contrast to another set. This view can be backed up with arguments from other disciplines. Psychologist of religion Vassilis Saroglou underpins Vroom’s analyses. According to Saroglou, accepting syncretism entails a loss of valuable aspirations for coherence, which in turn destroys religious life, as religious life presupposes separate *coherent* entities, that is to say coherent sets of beliefs and practices.¹³

Identity indeed is a key concept. One can find it, for instance, in the work of John B. Cobb Jr., when he asks whether it is possible to change religion and remain the same person.¹⁴ This question is interesting and in my view pertinent. How much of ‘me’ is influenced by how I perceive myself religiously? And if I change religion, can I claim to be the same person? Such questions are indeed important, for several reasons. And I hold them to be interesting not the least because they put the finger on the issue ‘identity’.

I claim the underlying assumption is that identity is strongly linked to belonging. A person is religious in a particular manner rather than in any other way, and accordingly they rather belong in a certain community than somewhere else. The person has a specific identity, at least from a given perspective. This can be seen as mirrored in the idea that someone who belongs does so through some identity that exists and which is definable: that a number of defining beliefs (and practices) determine someone’s identity. Consequently, an identity stands in opposition to and is perhaps also challenged by that which is different, by that which does not correspond to the defined identity.

Now, one may say that I push the discourses in order to make identity emerge, and also that I am talking about ‘identity’ with very particular traits. Admittedly, there are other ways of describing theories of interreligious encounters - interreligious dialogue or theology of religions - other ways of analysing discourses on syncretism and belonging. I do not claim anything else. Nonetheless, I argue that frequently and significantly ‘identity’ is a crucial aspect and therefore merits further discussion. (That is why a congress like the one on dialogue between rationalities and a conference on

13 Vassilis Saroglou, “Religious Bricolage as a Psychological Reality: Limits, Structures and Dynamics” in *Social Compass* 53, no. 1 (2006): 112.

14 John B. Cobb Jr., “Multiple Religious Belonging and Reconciliation” in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 21-22.

multiple religious belonging seem natural.¹⁵) Furthermore, I suggest that the question of identity may block other possible ways of dealing with religion and relations between religious traditions. Indeed, one way of unblocking the discussion is to scrutinise the very idea of identity as the starting point. Even if the question of identity may be inescapable at some point, the analyses and the approach may be radically different if one places the initial emphasis elsewhere.

2.2 Displacement

French-Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1905¹⁶-1995) offers an interesting perspective. I find a stimulating approach in a talk given by him in 1985, published as *De l'unicité* in 2018, with an introduction by philosopher Danielle Cohen-Levinas.¹⁷ In this text, Levinas sketches a view of the unity of the notion 'human', 'human being' or 'human subject' in other terms than as an issue of 'identity', an identity formed in opposition to the Other, an identity formed by how the I is defined or an identity understood in relation to a concept. Thus, turning the question upside-down, Levinas argues that what makes me human is not an issue of definitions, in opposition to other definitions, or of me being an instance of a particular concept. Obviously, this reading does not exhaust the understanding of his rich and complex philosophical thinking. Nonetheless, it may serve as starting point for questioning established modes of thinking. At least, that is the aim here.

In his approach to the unity of 'human', Levinas acknowledges going against established European philosophical understanding of humanity, that is to say an understanding of 'humanity' or 'human subjectivity' precisely defined in terms of a set of necessary attributes forming a unified *identity*, characterised by initial freedom and original self-sufficiency. This implies that the Other must be seen as a potential threat to the original freedom of the human subject.¹⁸ Consequently, *autonomy* and *sovereignty* are characteristics of how human identity is conceived. The human subject must be autonomous and deciding for themselves as a *free* subject. Thus, what

15 The congress *Le dialogue des rationalités culturelles et religieuses* held in Paris 27-30 June 2016. <https://calenda.org/359080> (accessed 3 June 2022) and the conference *Multiple Religious Identities – A Conference in Memory of Prof Aasulv Lande* held in Lund 14 March 2022. <https://www.lu.se/evenemang/multireligious-identities-conference-memory-prof-aasulv-lande> <https://www.lu.se/evenemang/multireligious-identities-conference-memory-prof-aasulv-lande>(accessed 3 June 2022).

16 Born on December 30 1905, according to the Julian calendar, and on January 12 1906 according to the Gregorian calendar.

17 The short text *De l'unicité* has triggered the enterprise, but I am also relying on readings of Levinas major works *Totalité et infini* (1961) and *Autrement qu'être* (1974), and comments made by Danielle Cohen-Levinas in the preface. The text was previously published in *Archivo de Filosofía* no. 1-3 (1986) and in *Entre nous* (1991).

18 Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'unicité* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2018), 37, 47.

constitutes the identity of a human subject includes, in a fashion, being in control of one's own life - initially and basically - and thus possibly in conflict with others. Of course, it could be said that a sort of *identity* can also be formed in terms of *not* being autonomous, an identity construed upon the experience and feeling of dependence and limitation. It could be an identity as oppressed and *not* sovereign. It could be an identity based on being *unheard*. Still, I argue that it is simply the reverse side of ideas of autonomy and sovereignty. It is the negative side of being autonomous, sovereign and free; yet the categories are the same, and it is the same play.

Important in my reading of Levinas' analyses is that the human being does not derive its being from how it is defined. Hence, Levinas sees the human being as constituted *not* by frontiers in the sense of this, this and this as opposed to that, that and that; in other words, not by posing itself in opposition.¹⁹ This reflection needs to be unpacked, however. The reason is that in Levinas' analyses, there must be some separate entity in which the I finds itself with an inner life in order to become 'human subject', beyond positing the I in opposition to the Other or as free and unfree.²⁰

It is necessary to spend some time on this point, because, as a matter of fact, Levinas also presupposes a lonely and egoistic united I: in that sense, an entity that is self-sufficient and constituted by separation, an entity that holds together, which is, on its own in separation, at home with itself. The I is in itself, separate and enjoying what is around it that is not the I.²¹ The I simply lives - before reflection, before all forms of returning to oneself, without looking back or looking forward, without purpose, without categories and intention; the I just *enjoys*.²² Crucial here, is that the I is determined by enjoyment, not by freedom. This implies living an inner life that produces a self-sufficient creature imbued in itself - that is it.²³ What is important is that this separate self cannot be seen as an individuation of a concept or an idea. This self cannot be a simple instance of being in general, as that would make it absolute or total. In a parallel fashion, the I must be seen as a unified entity in opposition to *il y a*, the anonymous existence or being. Therefore, Levinas perceives the I as unique.²⁴

Now, in Cohen-Levinas' reading, as much as that is the case of the I, the human subject on the other hand is about relation; the human being as 'human', as 'subject' or as 'person' cannot be perceived as alienated from the non-identical's cry. The self who enjoys the enjoyment is not the human subject, as the human cannot be seen as isolated from the cry of the absolutely other, the complete stranger. Rather, hearing

19 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* (Paris: LGF, 1992), 57.

20 Levinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, 57.

21 Levinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, 57, 122-123, 152.

22 Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou Au-delà de l'essence*, second edition (La Haye: Nijhoff, 1978), 118-119.

23 Levinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, 158.

24 Levinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, 57.

the stranger's call is what makes the I human.²⁵ This inner life is important. Only the I who enjoys what is not the I can in this precise manner also become responsible for-the-other; it is only the I who eats to whom giving away that which is eaten can have meaning.²⁶ But 'human' or 'human subject' is precisely a person to whom something has meaning in relation to the Other, who is sensible to the cry of the Other.

Hence, subjectivity is not a unity fixed and ready that receives responsibility (as it were). It is the other way round; in the encounter with the Other, the I becomes responsible and the subject is constituted by this. In this fashion, meaning precedes essence. What makes a subject a subject is entirely dependent on the impossibility of taking away the responsibility for the Other. Meaning cannot be understood as a modality of being, but constitutes me as a subject.²⁷ This may be seen from the reverse side, Cohen-Levinas continues. If the 'established' Western philosophical tradition is maintained, and hence the logic of *identity* and the logic of *myself* are kept at the centre, this must be called by its proper name, that is to say, as overriding the unconditional welcoming of the Other. Yet this unconditioned welcoming of the Other is, in Levinas' analyses, exactly that which makes the human subject a human subject.²⁸ I suggest that this could be summarised in the word relationship. And there are consequences. The individual person as a subject is not characterised by a number of traits and characteristics, logically delimiting the one from the Other, as would be the case if being human were a question of 'identity'.

Now, Cohen-Levinas clearly sees that Levinas wants à tout prix to avoid a discourse on individual subjects based on logical identity. In Levinas' analysis, perceiving individual subjects as formed by logical identity implies alienation and isolation, and ultimately violence.²⁹ It is important to understand Levinas' approach as a way of resisting talking about *identity* and about the logic of *myself*; as to Levinas such discourse entails a threat: a threat of not being open to the Other's suffering, or in other words, a threat of violence.³⁰ Thus, a discourse built upon identity is also built upon objectification, upon regarding the human subject, the human being, as an object. The problematic part of seeing the human subject or the human being as an object is that the human being then must be seen as anonymous or, put differently, anybody can play any role in this description or in this analysis. That is also the very idea of *logical* analyses. In such analyses, relations are analysed precisely in general terms. The very point is to replace concrete and real names and contingent phenomena with logical symbols. The

25 Danielle Cohen-Levinas, "Préface. Nous autres Européens" in *De l'unicité* (Paris: Payot & Rivages), 14.

26 Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou Au-delà de l'essence*, 118-119.

27 Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou Au-delà de l'essence*, 29.

28 Cohen-Levinas, "Préface. Nous autres Européens," 19.

29 Cohen-Levinas, "Préface. Nous autres Européens," 18.

30 Levinas, *De l'unicité*, 48.

goal is precisely to see the relations and the implications of various moves regardless of the concrete person or the concrete historical situation. That is the strength of logical analyses and in many ways a logical approach is extremely illuminating, as it clarifies the *structures*, that is to say, how the analysed inevitably must be understood, given certain determined conditions.

And that is the strength of an identity discourse, as it is not about Charles or Mary but about a delimited and defined identity – what it means to be Christian can be *described* according to a number of attributes, or to be Norwegian, if the focus is on *identity*, and then – after – Charles and Mary can be categorised and classified as ‘Christian’ or ‘Norwegian’. It is difficult to see any reason to believe that Levinas would not agree. The point is that he finds it very problematic when it is about identifying what a human subject is, how to characterise a human person, what can be said to be ‘human’.

2.3 *The Vitality of Identity – and the Drawback*

The question is, then, if ‘identity’ implies violence, as Cohen-Levinas argues, why is it such a vital notion? It appears that putting ‘identity’ at the centre of the discourse is attractive and, in brief, it is rather understandable. For instance, Saroglou argues as a psychologist of religions that typically a religious person must be said to belong to a *specific* tradition, not to a tradition *in general*, and that is also because a religious person wants firm structure, that is to say something that is recognisable. Typically, Saroglou continues, a religious person wants to avoid ambiguity or, put differently, they want to know if it is this *or* that. Having structure is the very point of being religious; it implies clear identity borders, or a defined identity, a logically determined and limited identity, to which one belongs.³¹ Arguing according along these lines, a consequence is that *my* religious identity is an important topic, as the issue of my religious *identity* is also important.

This paper started with an exposé of how much we all agree in a scholarly discourse that religion is the fruit of blended sources, and that religious practice is a mixture of elements coming from various fields and having a number of different religious backgrounds; hence, if there is identity, it must be held to be unstable. And yet, at the same time, ‘identity’ is a key notion and cherished as something that clearly distinguishes one person from another. A consequence of the latter is that any mixing is problematic, and especially so in *religious* contexts. An example of this is the strong position *against* syncretism. Syncretism is seen as bad precisely because syncretism is perceived as abandoning intellectual and moral virtues - like coherence - and is held to be ruining the idea of religion and religious life.

31 Saroglou, “Religious Bricolage as a Psychological Reality: Limits, Structures and Dynamics,” 110.

I suggest that it is so because we are trained to look upon it this way. We are educated and formatted to look into this and perceive all the advantages in terms of logic, coherence, clear entities and a general clarity. We are drilled to see that the first question is how to distinguish the one from the other, using categories that make the separation logically solid. We are fostered to see identity as the key. And of course, categorising with the help of clear criteria and solid arguments is something that facilitates life. But it also has a price, Levinas seems to say. I suggest that Levinas can be read as challenging us by introducing a different perspective. What makes the I human, or constitutes a human subject, is not best and most accurately described in terms of an identity delimited by definitions and logical limitations, in one way but not in another: characterised as this but not that. Levinas starts at the other end. According to Cohen-Levinas, he perceives human subjects as constituted by their uniqueness.³² Subjectivity or humanity is the uniqueness that trumps the annexation of essence. The I as unique is without comparison and without communality, Levinas emphasises.³³ In his discourse on unity, Levinas suggests seeing the human person as characterised by *not* being reduced to a simple object, that is to say, as *not* being an individual among others. Even more, Levinas suggests seeing the human person as someone who is 'I am' through concrete encounter, in a relation in which I am unique.³⁴ This opens a different perspective onto how to consider identity and syncretism, I suggest.

2.4 Evaluating Syncretism

My suggestion is that Levinas' phenomenological analyses of human may help us question fundamental presuppositions in discussions of 'my religious identity', and of syncretism. It would be presumptuous to claim that Levinas addresses the question of syncretism and equally dishonest to read Levinas as a simple remedy for some concrete problems in interreligious relations. It is even less a matter of attributing any particular understanding of syncretism to Levinas. This said, I think that Levinas' philosophical efforts regarding unity, and how a human being must be perceived, may give strength and depth to reflection on how we deal with each other in interreligious situations. And Levinas' philosophy goes well with what I have previously dubbed a 'religious attitude'. In a previous study, it has been pointed out that there are lessons to learn from a 'religious approach' to syncretism, in opposition to a 'logical approach'. A religious approach may *reject* syncretism – acceptance or rejection is not at stake here – but if so, on *other grounds* and with *other* premises than pure logic.³⁵

Churches have *religious* arguments against syncretism. This can be seen, for instance, in the World Council of Churches' discourses. Syncretism is considered a danger,

32 Cohen-Levinas, "Préface. Nous autres Européens," 24.

33 Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou Au-delà de l'essence*, 20-22.

34 Levinas, *De l'unicité*, 51-52.

35 Fridlund, "Responding to Syncretism," 48-52.

but it is so if attempts to translate the Christian message go too far, compromising the authenticity of Christian faith and life. In the same vein, the World Council of Churches also identifies a danger when the interpretation of the message is made in terms of other faiths or ideologies - that is, when Christianity is presented as 'only a variant of some other approach to God'.³⁶ The point I want to make here, however, is that the argument *against* syncretism is less logic and more religious, or put differently, an argument based on jealousy.

I think that it is important not to romanticise religions or religious communities. Atrocities and 'bad behaviour' occur. It is certainly true that religions are *not* always about building relationships rather than condemning on the grounds of dogmatic *logic*. And yet, I maintain there are significant and interesting traits in a 'religious approach'. To be clear, contrasting 'logic' and 'religious' in this way should not be taken out of context. The contrast is of course not on all levels, and of course not complete. I do not claim that arguments should be illogical or that arguments must be avoided altogether. Still, the approach, the attitude or 'basic entry', is important and interesting.

What I am getting at is that syncretism and rejection of syncretism can be seen in another light, that is to say, primarily not about objectivity, not about the logical. That means also not primarily about *identity* delimited by a set of characteristics, or in terms of a concept.

3. My Religious Identity under Debate

The question of religious identity is present in discussions regarding interreligious dialogue and in theology of religions generally, but it becomes a burning issue in discourses on syncretism. Syncretism appears to be built on a multiple identity or a split identity or an oscillating identity. Syncretism is also often condemned on these grounds. Vroom for instance states that

[h]ow one views syncretism [...] depends to a large extent on one's view of the nature of a religious belief-system. If one regards the content of religions as a coherent entity, the religion A cannot adopt a belief from religion B, unless this belief is isolated from B and adapted (assimilated) to the entire belief-system of A.³⁷

36 World Council of Churches, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*. <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/interreligious-trust-and-respect/guidelines-on-dialogue-with-people-of-living-faiths-and-ideologies>. [accessed 21 September 2022], 24-29.

37 Vroom, "Syncretism and Dialogue. A Philosophical Analysis," 27, 29.

I suggest that a key here is *coherence / incoherence*, supplemented by *autonomy* and *sovereignty* as characteristics of identity. One who is incoherent in religious matters has a weak religious identity, which entails fragile belonging and incapacity to act clearly and with firmness. A solid religious identity requires that the human subject is sovereign and autonomous, initially and fundamentally. Or, I claim, so runs the argument.

In this paper, I suggest that Emmanuel Levinas challenges the idea that identity in this sense must be seen as the point of departure in analyses of the human subject. In Cohen-Levinas' reading, Levinas moves out of this discourse and looks upon 'human' and 'human being' from a different perspective. In fact, Levinas insists that the irreducibility of human being consists in the fact that being human is *not* an issue of *identity*.³⁸ In this reading, Levinas even asserts that the humanity of human being is without identity.³⁹ To be a human subject is not first and fundamentally about belonging to a coherent and well-defined category with a set of identified attributes. To be human is not primarily the mere possession of a set of characteristics and to be a human subject cannot be defined according to a checklist. Therefore, I argue that Levinas makes an analysis of 'human' or 'human subject' in which he insists on the idea that the humanity of being human, the 'human' of 'human being', is not identified in terms of logic, hence not in terms of an anonymous, alienated and separate entity. Rather, what constitutes a 'human subject' is identified as relations with and being for the Other. I suggest that potentially this has significant implications regarding 'my religious identity'.

It should be kept in mind however that even though Levinas emphasises the relational aspect of being human, the human subject as being for the Other, he acknowledges the role also of a formal and logical order in which the individual has rights as a result of being objectivised.⁴⁰ There is also an issue of *justice* and the human multiplicity makes it impossible and unthinkable to forget the third person, the one(s) who are not you nor me but the other of the other, and also another Other to me. In Levinas' analyses, some institutions and some political authority are required to implement justice. Still, this is done without forgetting the origin of justice in the uniqueness of the human subject.⁴¹

4. Philosopher's Contribution

One of the advantages and attractive traits of discourses on syncretism – and religious identity – in Vroom's and others' work is the emphasis on structure, order, clarity and stability. As has been pointed out above, Vroom defines syncretism as an 'incorporation of incompatible beliefs from one religion by another' and he underlines that

38 Cohen-Levinas, "Préface. Nous autres Européens," 7.

39 Cohen-Levinas, "Préface. Nous autres Européens," 30.

40 Levinas, *De l'unicité*, 37, 51-52.

41 Levinas, *De l'unicité*, 55-57.

incompatibility is a 'logical' category. That means that from a logical point of view one cannot hold two different religious views at the same time.⁴²

Now, if this kind of discourse is attractive, it also has a drawback. The drawback is precisely this emphasis on clarity and order. If everything is clear and ordered, it implies that things are one way or another, and ultimately that implies that ideally there is one single perfect subject that is in control of everything. There is, ultimately, one ruler and ultimately one answer. No other voices and only one true perception of the world, which ultimately precludes interpretation, otherness and the unexpected.⁴³

Therefore, the choice of perspective is decisive. In another context, Levinas asks whether sociability, the being-with-each-other, is seen or construed upon the principle that '*l'homme est un loup pour l'homme*' or whether the limitations results from the principle that '*l'homme est pour l'homme*'. In other words, does the living-together start in a striving to limit the consequences of war between human beings, or does it start in the necessity to limit the infinity that opens in the ethical relation between human beings?⁴⁴ I do not think that the point Levinas wants to make is that the choice of perspective is neutral and that one is as good as the other. Rather, what I believe Levinas is pointing out is that taking stands has implications and also that these implications must be considered. Thus, it is not innocent whether the analyses of 'human', 'human being' or 'human subject' are made in one way rather than another. I claim that similarly one must ask whether interreligious relations must be seen as a meeting of 'identities', which implies defined borders – clear and pre-limited entities inherently positioning themselves one against the other – as frontiers are required to *identify* the one or the other. The alternative is that deliberations regarding the attitude to the religiously other are served by a relational approach. Syncretism and religious variation are either condemned on logical grounds or they are considered from a relational perspective. I argue that Levinas' analysis of 'the human' and 'human being' find 'the human' as emerging or being created, shaped or being evoked in the encounter with the Other. Thus, the relation must be seen as primordial.

My contention is that it is very problematic if 'identity' is seen as the key because, in that case, there are no margins, no tolerance for instability and no place for vulnerability. This leads to a problem with the *Other* outside and different from me, a problem with the *event*, the unexpected and the unforeseeable, and with *death* and *eschatology*, which are beyond the graspable.⁴⁵ With no place for relations as constitutive, I argue

42 Vroom, "Syncretism and Dialogue: A Philosophical Analysis," 27, 29.

43 Cf. Derrida, *Voyous. Deux essais sur la raison* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 203.

44 Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethique et infini. Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo* (Paris: Fayard & France culture, 1982), 74-75.

45 Patrik Fridlund, "Post-truth Politics, Performatives and the Force" in *Jus Cogens* 2, no. 3 (2020), 228.

that ultimately there is no place for humans in unique relations. Ultimately, no place for God.

The work of Levinas brings a phenomenological analysis and a philosophical argument to a path that elsewhere has been identified as a 'religious path'. At best Levinas may then bring depth and anchorage to a way of doing or a way of being, which seems to be rooted in intuitive wisdom. The advantage is that reflexion and critical questioning are made possible when understanding of 'human' is articulated in the way Levinas does. Yet giving space to a 'religious view' and a 'religious approach' to interreligious relations does not solve all problems. In a parallel fashion, leaning on what has been dubbed 'religious wisdom' does not entail exclusion of reason, logic and argument. That would be silly. There is need for both a 'jealousy attitude' and 'intellectual argument'. The question is where to begin and where to find one's anchorage.⁴⁶

5. Final Remarks

The issue of religious identity seems almost omnipresent, and also for good reasons. Who I am and who you are – religiously – cannot easily be overlooked. Or so it seems. Interreligious relations, be it in concrete dialogue or in theological reflection, be it in a spirit of sympathy or hostility, presuppose that those taking part in the dialogue or those who are the object of theological reflection have an identity. The more clear and stable this identity is, the better. Concurrently, exactly such stability and clarity may entail a rigid conception of religious life, even of life in general. This feature transpires in evaluation of various forms of syncretism. I propose that, interestingly enough, *religious* arguments concerning syncretism can be seen as rooted in jealousy, that is to say, as based on relations rather than stringent logic. In this paper I suggest that Levinas' phenomenological analysis of 'human being' brings a new dimension to the discussion. If the ground for human being is not described in terms of 'identity', but in terms of becoming human in relation to the Other, the focus shifts in a very fundamental way. To me it appears odd if one excludes all identity discussion, but I maintain that it makes a dramatic difference if one bases the discussion otherwise. If interreligious relations first are understood not as dependent on identity but on relations, there is room for otherness, for the unforeseeable, the unexpected and the impossible. Here is a watershed, I think, which has little to do with 'religion', 'religious belief and practice' or religious belonging and adherence; rather, it is a fundamental question of whether there is a strong value in the impossible, or not. And it is crucial when issues of religious identity are tabled, or so, at least, I argue.⁴⁷

46 See Patrik Fridlund, "Le dialogue interreligieux est-il vraiment un dialogue des rationalités religieuses ou culturelles?" in *Dialogue des rationalités culturelles et religieuses*, ed. Thierry-Marie Courau (Paris: Cerf, 2019) passim.

47 I am most grateful for the highly constructive feedback from the anonymous reviewer.

Electronic Sources

- The conference *Multiple Religious Identities — A Conference in Memory of Prof Aasulv Lande* held in Lund 14 March 2022. <https://www.lu.se/evenemang/multireligious-identities-conference-memory-prof-aasulv-lande> [accessed 3 June 2022].
- The congress *Le dialogue des rationalités culturelles et religieuses* held in Paris 27-30 June 2016. <https://calenda.org/359080> accessed 3 June 2022 [accessed 3 June 2022].
- World Council of Churches, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*. <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/interreligious-trust-and-respect/guidelines-on-dialogue-with-people-of-living-faiths-and-ideologies> [accessed 21 September 2022].

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