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## RESPONDING TO SYNCRETISM

by Patrik Fridlund

### INTRODUCTION

What responses, theological or philosophical, can be given to *syncretism*? What may there be in syncretism that one can respond to? Syncretism may be defined as an activity that consists of combining and blending various elements in a systematic way, elements that are often in conflict.<sup>1</sup> It seems to me that this is a commonplace understanding of the term 'syncretism.' It also seems to me that the first part is rather unproblematic. Syncretism is about combining, mixing, and blending. The intriguing parts are the second and the third parts of the definition. Must syncretism be about *systematic* blending of elements? And, in particular, must these elements be in *conflict*? Perhaps a distinction to be made is the one between *difference* and *conflict*. It seems unquestionable that syncretism has to do with *different* ideas, or practices with different origins, but do they have to be *conflicting* ideas or practices? If they are in conflict, what does it mean? In what way are they in conflict? What character does the conflict have? Is it a serious conflict or a trivial one? A fatal conflict? Or rather a constructive one?<sup>2</sup>

Now, one may wonder, why are these questions asked at all? It is widely accepted by scholars that all religion is syncretic. Simply speaking, a given religious tradition never comes from nowhere. There are always various sources, and various influences. A particular religious tradition necessarily has a history, which implies that it is always related to other religious traditions.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, all religious traditions integrate elements from other traditions—positively or negatively.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, syncretism is to be found everywhere.<sup>5</sup>

This blending goes for individuals too, as it were. If religions always have a mixed history, individuals tend to have mixed or multiple belongings, including in

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<sup>1</sup> Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration. How Inter-Faith Encounter Changes Christianity* (London: SCM, 2009), 74. See also Pierre Gisel, "Synchrétisme," in *Encyclopédie du protestantisme*, ed. Pierre Gisel and Lucie Kaennel (Paris: PUF, 2006). A definition of 'syncretism' is given in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (Cologne, Könnemann, 2000): 'union of conflicting [religious] beliefs' or 'eclecticism that is illogical or leads to inconsistency.'

<sup>2</sup> Patrik Fridlund, "On Difference and Conflict in Theologies of Religion," in *Theology and the Religions. A Dialogue*, ed. Viggo Mortensen (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Stephen O'Leary, *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 14, 169; Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism, and Power. A Radical Ecclesiology: Toward a Militant Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 89-90; Mika Vähäkangas, "Mission Studies, Syncretism and the Limits of Christianity During the Time of the Heretical Imperative," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 98:1 (2010): 8; see also 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).

<sup>4</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration*, 67.

<sup>5</sup> André Droogers, "Syncretism. The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem," in *Dialogue and Syncretism. An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Jerald Gort, et al. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989), 12.

terms of religion. People have always had a tendency *not* to trust one single religion. For various reasons, they have always been prepared to bank on different religious resources and so profit from a variety of traditions. In general, individuals do mix and blend. In a religious setting, this is a salient trait. In what sociologist M. B. McGuire calls 'lived religion,' people have indeed several loyalties, employing various religious sources in their religious lives. In this respect, people are most unorthodox in their approach to religion. Or so McGuire argues when applying the term *bricolage* (borrowed from Levi-Strauss) to individuals' creative combinations of different elements into a unity, even of elements that seem uncombinable. In this way, individual and collective religious hybridity emerges as a very common phenomenon, she says.<sup>6</sup> And still, syncretism is often held to be an undesirable phenomenon, something to condemn and repudiate.

## INCOMPATIBILITY

Above, a first tentative definition of syncretism was presented, that is to say syncretism as an activity that consists of combining and blending various elements in a systematic way, elements that are often in conflict.<sup>7</sup> Philosopher of religion Hendrik Vroom has a similar understanding although he does not speak about 'conflicting elements' but about 'incompatible beliefs.' Vroom defines syncretism as an 'incorporation of incompatible beliefs from one religion by another.'<sup>8</sup> To Vroom

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.<sup>9</sup>

This is an important move, I think. Here, syncretism is by definition a contradictory activity. Therefore it has to be criticised and condemned. It has to be so, on the basis of logic. This kind of *logical* argument regarding religious mixing is not new:

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."  
[I Kings 18:21]

Here, the *problem* of syncretism is a problem of *logic*, thus perceived as a problem *per se*. Psychologist Vassilis Saroglou draws the conclusion that if mixing and blending of

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<sup>6</sup> Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion. Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 195. See also my account in Patrik Fridlund, "The Rotten Syncretism that Opens the Spirit," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 102:2 (2014): 151, 154.

<sup>7</sup> Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration*, 74.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

religions are allowed, then it must be accepted 'that search for coherence and integration is not necessary,' which Saroglou finds utterly disturbing and eventually harmful to the very idea of a religious life.<sup>10</sup>

The issue of logic, of coherence or incoherence, and the harmful consequences when coherence is lacking, may be approached from another angle. Theologian John B. Cobb, Jr. raises the issue of whether it is possible to enter into a new religious community while remaining the same person.<sup>11</sup> The underlying assumption, when raising this question, seems to be that identity is so strongly linked to belonging to a particular community that one must ask whether it is possible to perceive oneself as the same person if one changes one's belonging. Consequently, it seems that an existing identity is under attack, threatened, or at least seriously challenged and defied when encountering other traditions forming other identities. Such unavoidable clashes, on at least certain points, seem to form a background for rejecting syncretism. For instance, Vroom holds that if one wants to keep the identity and avoid modifying the belief system, it is legitimate and necessary to reject syncretism.<sup>12</sup>

## SYNCRETISM CONDEMNED

True enough, syncretism is indeed most often rejected. Interestingly enough, syncretism is often condemned on other grounds than logic, however; that is to say, on other grounds than pure logical incompatibility *per se*. In the Roman Catholic document *Ad gentes* it is stated that '[...] every appearance of syncretism [...] will be excluded.'<sup>13</sup> The World Council of Churches sees syncretism as a danger when attempts to translate the Christian message go too far and as a result may compromise the 'authenticity of Christian faith and life.' Another danger is held to be when the interpretation of the message is made in terms of another faith or ideology, that is to say, when Christianity is seen as 'only a variant of some other approach to God.'<sup>14</sup> Hence, the reasons why the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches spurn syncretism are not strictly logical. They are of another type, I suggest. Perceptions of sin and the error are, rather, primarily related to infidelity:

Very often, deceived by the Evil One, men have become vain in their reasonings, and have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and served the creature rather than

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<sup>10</sup> Vassilis Saroglou, "Religious Bricolage as a Psychological Reality: Limits, Structures and Dynamics," *Social Compass* 53:1 (2006): 112.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> Vroom, "Syncretism and Dialogue," 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ad gentes* 22.

<sup>14</sup> World Council of Churches, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, 24-29, accessed 11 August 2015. <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>.

the Creator. Or else, living and dying in this world without God, they are exposed to ultimate despair.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, fidelity and unity are valued:

Moreover, within the Church particular Churches hold a rightful place; these Churches retain their own traditions, without in any way opposing the primacy of the Chair of Peter, which presides over the whole assembly of charity and protects legitimate differences, while at the same time assuring that such differences do not hinder unity but rather contribute toward it.<sup>16</sup>

Hence, in various church documents where syncretism is rejected, explicitly or implicitly, the main argument seems *not* to be that mixing *per se* is problematic. The rejection of syncretism is *not* based on logic. In this paper, I will argue that it is even *wise* to avoid arguments based on logic, if syncretism should be rejected. When singling out 'logic' in this fashion, I do not claim that judgements about syncretism should be, or even could be, illogical or that all kinds of arguments must be avoided. The point I want to make here is simply that using purported logical relationships between various phenomena as the grounds for judging syncretism seems to be unwise. I suggest that starting in logical analysis is even problematic in at least two interrelated ways: first, there is a gap between the logical analysis and lived religion; second, logical analyses tend to say either yes or no. A response to syncretism should therefore be either total embrace or total rejection. At least it has to be so within the framework stipulated by the analyser.<sup>17</sup>

Let me start with the first aspect. A strictly logical analysis of syncretism does not at all correspond to what is taking place on the ground, as it were, where there are many examples of religious blending. In Japan, people seem to take advantage of the Shinto religion in certain contexts, they are Buddhists in others, and perhaps they feel attracted to Christianity in still other situations.<sup>18</sup> In Congo, for instance, people may have a clear religious belonging as Christians while finding it uncomplicated to take part in religious life elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> This represents what has been called a syncretic

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<sup>15</sup> *Lumen gentium*, 16, quoted in *Catéchisme de l'Église Catholique* (Paris: Mame/Plon, 1992) §844, which refers back to Rom 1:21-25.

<sup>16</sup> *Lumen gentium* 13.

<sup>17</sup> It appears possible to delimit the field in such a manner as to make total embrace or total rejection tenable, but then the field tends to be narrow and eventually uninteresting.

<sup>18</sup> 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, 2008), 17-18.

<sup>19</sup> 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. See also Carl Sundberg, "Kongo, Republik," in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*.

attitude, that is to say, a way of augmenting chances to gain symbolic profit by the use of elements from various religious traditions.<sup>20</sup> If practices of this kind are evaluated, accepted or condemned, logical arguments seem insufficient, as that would imply that widespread practices in various contexts and at different times in history must be condemned rather off-hand, or alternatively be uncritically accepted regardless of contents. Either A and B are compatible or they are not. Whether the combination of A and B is *desirable* is a question that is left out by logic.

Moreover, there is not anything very peculiar in the fact that people in various contexts mix and blend elements from different traditions. Mixing and blending in a seemingly incoherent manner is not particularly strange from the point of view of cognitive science. For instance, D. Jason Slone demonstrates how it is possible to follow a 'double track,' so to speak. Human beings are fully capable of adhering to a given understanding of how things work in one context while having a contradictory representation in another.<sup>21</sup> An illustrative example is what is called 'object permanency,' a basic cognitive function that enables us to presume that things exist even when they are not visible. An important implication, among others, is that people can rather easily represent dead people as being alive after death.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, Slone says, much of our knowledge is counterintuitive. One example of this is that most educated people know that the Earth orbits the sun. However, intuitively it is easy to think that it is the sun that moves around the Earth, and people think and talk accordingly. Hence, that one may possess such counterintuitive knowledge yet concurrently express oneself according to the intuitive view, is a simple indication that it is easy to hold contradicting ideas simultaneously, Slone maintains.<sup>23</sup> This is at odds with Vroom who maintains that '[n]obody can believe that the earth is flat *and* round simultaneously, nor that people live only once *and* many times.'<sup>24</sup> In fact, on the contrary, there is nothing peculiar in people having cognitive double tracks and parallel beliefs that seem to contradict each other, according to Slone.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, it could be claimed that one cannot *believe* two contradictory things at the same time; it should be impossible to hold two contradictory positions to be true simultaneously. Nonetheless, it could be said that the point is that it is not about

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*Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Saroglou, "Religious Bricolage," 112. For a discussion of this, in which examples from other historical, geographical and cultural contexts are also referred to, see Patrik Fridlund, "Double Religious Belonging and Some Commonly Held Ideas about Dialogue and Conversion," *Mission Studies* 31 (2014). and Fridlund, "The Rotten Syncretism that Opens the Spirit."

<sup>21</sup> D. Jason Slone, *Theological Incorrectness. Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 66. Cf. Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration*, 82-83.

<sup>22</sup> Slone, *Theological Incorrectness*, 76-77.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem.*, 92.

<sup>24</sup> Vroom, "Syncretism and Dialogue," 27, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Slone, *Theological Incorrectness*, 92.

*abstract* belief in a pure state, as it were, but always in relation to behaviour, to enactment, to doing something.

This is a debate in its own right. For this paper it suffices to say that a 'logic argument' regarding syncretism, in Vroom's fashion, tends to declare widespread and perfectly normal human behaviour logically impossible. It should be noted that I am not trying to say that the majority can never be wrong, or that all practices that are widespread are good practices. What I am saying is simply that it is problematic to claim that frequent practices are logically *impossible*. Vroom may counter this by saying that sometimes people do what they do not aim to do and that they sometimes do things that are not in accordance with what they actually believe. Contradictory beliefs occur even though no-one wants them. In that case it should be legitimate to point it out and help people see the contradictions. One cannot but agree. And yet, I maintain that the value of the argument out of logic is weakened if it does not at all resonate with actual practice. For example, some people do consciously partake of different religious traditions, using different sources, relying on a variety of religious practices. It may be interesting for scholars to analyse such comportment and show where various contradictions can be detected. Nonetheless, it has also to be stated that there is nothing abnormal about living along two parallel tracks in such way.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, those who are agents in these matters do not necessarily see any contradiction or incoherence of belief, behaviour, ideas, and practice. To *them* it all enters into coherent behaviour patterns undertaken by a healthy and sane person or group.<sup>27</sup>

This brings me to the second point, which is that the binary character of logic in Vroom's and Saroglou's fashion can only say 'yes or no,' 'on or off,' 'accepted or condemned.' Logical arguments seem insufficient, as syncretism *per se* must be condemned, even though its practice is widespread in various contexts and at different times in history. Or it has to be unconditionally accepted. Consequently, logic appears to be either too rigid, or too open. In this respect, it is similar to 'circumstantial evidence,' as Sherlock Holmes points out in the short story 'The Boscombe Valley Mystery':

It may seem to point very straight to one thing, but if you shift your own point of view a little, you may find it pointing in an equally uncompromising manner to something entirely different.<sup>28</sup>

This is thus my second point. Using logical analysis as the foundation and the starting point appears to be unhelpful. Perhaps it does give a clue to analysing and understanding aspects of syncretism. It does not help in responding to syncretism,

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<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Bourdieu on the functioning of the family or the Church in Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques. Sur la théorie de l'action* (Paris: Seuil, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> See Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration*, 74-75, 82-83, and McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 195.

<sup>28</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Amersham & London: Transatlantic Press & Hyde Park Editions, 2014), 94.

however. Therefore, the arguments against syncretism appear rather to be religious, or theological. I suggest that they can be seen as an issue of *jealousy*.

## JEALOUSY

In many religious traditions, at least in the Abrahamitic variants of monotheism, there is, I suggest, a dominant aspect of *jealousy*.<sup>29</sup> Mixing and blending are seen as instances of infidelity; other religions and other gods are wrong and abominable. When exegete Gerhard von Rad explicitly discusses syncretism in Ancient Israel in his classical *Theologie des Alten Testaments*,<sup>30</sup> many of the Biblical texts referred to express precisely this type of jealous reaction to syncretism:

Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves molten gods: I am the Lord your God.  
[Lev. 19:4]

You shall make for yourselves no idols and erect no graven image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land, to bow down to them; for I am the Lord your God. You shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the Lord.  
[Lev. 26:1-2]

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.  
[Exodus 20:7]

In this way, the patriarchal God makes it plain that He is the Lord, no-one else.<sup>31</sup> No one else is allowed even to share this position. It does not mean to say that idols do not exist. It is not primarily an issue of incompatibility. It is a jealous reaction. God reacts with wrath and indignation even to the thought of allowing anybody or anything compete for the position of superior, of Lord. Furthermore, anybody who makes a move in this direction will be punished. Infidelity is not permitted. Jealousy is glaring. In the following quotes, all others who would pretend to having any position are ridiculed. They are vain things.

[...] and do not turn aside after vain things which cannot profit or save, for they are vain.  
[1 Sam 12:21]

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<sup>29</sup> My suspicion is that conflicts also between, say, different Buddhist schools may be analysed in the light of jealousy, as I would likewise be curious to see whether academic cock-fighting is not, at least partly, jealousy based too.

<sup>30</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments I: Die Theologie der geschichtlichen Überlieferungen Israels* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1982), 70-82, 193-200, 216-232.

<sup>31</sup> Throughout the text, I also apply stylistic means to emphasise what I say. Here, for instance God presented as a masculine god, with capital 'H', in order to stress a number of aspects in this discourse, as opposed to other variants of a Christian or Jewish discourse in which God is female, neutral or simply beyond sex- and gender- distinctions, and variants of Christian and Jewish discourse in which *power*, *might*, *force* and alike are not perceived as attributes to God.



And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves; they have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" And the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation."  
[Exodus 32:7-9]

The anger stems from the fact that his people do things without consultation, without letting God know. Jealousy is patent. And the idols are described in ridiculous terms, as man made. They are adored but God the Lord declares them to be nothing but dust: broken and useless.

They made kings, but not through me.  
They set up princes, but without my knowledge.  
With their silver and gold they made idols  
for their own destruction.  
I have spurned your calf, O Samar'ia.  
My anger burns against them.  
How long will it be  
till they are pure in Israel?  
A workman made it;  
it is not God.  
The calf of Samar'ia  
shall be broken to pieces.  
[Hosea 8:4-6]

And similar reactions can also be found in the Qur'an, where worship of statues is held to be abominable:

Recall that Abraham said to his father Azar, "How could you worship statues as gods? I see that you and your people have gone far astray."  
[Qur'an 6:74]

That is ridiculous. God has shown saving force, God alone. Those who turn elsewhere are declared ignorant. It is not about the impossibility of combining various elements but pure wrath and sheer jealousy.

We delivered the Children of Israel across the sea. When they passed by people who were worshiping statues, they said: "O Moses, make a god for us, like the gods they have." He said: "Indeed, you are ignorant people. These people are committing a blasphemy, for what they are doing is disastrous for them."  
[Qur'an 7:138-139]

And in the New Testament Jesus states that *he* is the sole and unique way to God.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."  
[John 14:6]

There is no space for other concerns.

To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."  
But he said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."  
[Luke 9:60]

God alone is the master. One may try to add something, or change something, but the reaction will be strong. Not because of what precisely is added. The addition itself is enough. No one should tamper with the word of God; whatever is said must be wrong simply because it does not come with God's consent.

I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.  
[Revelation 22:18-19]

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already.  
[1 John 4:2-3]

Talking in terms of jealousy entails introducing a relational aspect, giving space to *anger* and *wrath*. It gives space to *deception*, for instance; God feels abandoned, and complains that humans do things without permission although: 'I am the Lord!' The jealous God requires humans to follow, to leave everything they think they have to do and go along. Old family structures do not count any longer. The responsibility to care for dead parents, according to customary morality, has no weight.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, the relational side, the side of sentiments and feelings, is unpredictable, but it is precisely this unpredictability that also offers the possibility of *redemption*, *forgiveness*, and a new start, in quite a different way from *logic*. If

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<sup>32</sup> See my forthcoming article on Jacques Derrida's reading of Genesis 22 and the binding of Isaac (Patrik Fridlund, "Derrida, Abraham and Responsible Subjectivity", forthcoming). In this text, responsibility, ethics, and subjectivity are discussed in the light of my reading of Jacques Derrida, "La littérature au secret. Une filiation impossible" in *Donner la mort*, ed. Jacques Derrida (Paris, Galilée, 1999).

syncretism is an issue of jealousy, investigations can be made—once the offended and deceived God regains equilibrium and calms down a bit. God can then say: 'Let's talk! What happened? Why did it happen?' When the exchange turns on key words like 'idols' or 'statues as gods,' or about giving up everything right now, it is not about logic, but a jealous god who speaks. Consequently, it is possible to discover more precisely what the problem is with this particular mixing and blending. Hence, a remedy is also possible. Negotiations may be undertaken in order to find an agreement concerning what can be taken up, and what is unacceptable. It is about a subject who is hurt and who suffers (it is a different issue entirely whether it is correct, for good reasons, and justifiable or not). This is based on a relationship, on the needs and the sentiments involved. Accordingly, what is an acceptable blending, and what is not, has to be decided in a process at a certain place at a given time, and through a judgement made by someone—God or a religious community, a church or some other body. I mean to say that 'God' in the quotes above may be read as *God* of course, but not necessarily. It is equally possible to see the quotes as expressions of a community of religious believers or practitioners. In other contexts, the Party, the class—or *Reason*—could play this role.<sup>33</sup> 'Do not turn to anybody else!' 'Only we can save!' 'Ingratitude!' 'Our version is the only correct one, and therefore the only one permitted!' 'Absolute loyalty is required!' Requests of this type have been enunciated by political parties, representatives of social groups, and by philosophers claiming access to Rationality.

If the approach to the issue of syncretism is perceived in terms of jealousy, it has to do with a relationship in which someone (God in a most symbolic sense, or God's spokesperson) deems it necessary to say no to certain ideas or practices. The interesting thing is that, in consequence, not all forms of syncretism are excluded *a priori*. Some sort of syncretism is possible or allowed. Or, put differently, the question does not have a given answer; each case and each situation is a new case. In a jealous reaction to syncretism, what is at stake is not whether there is contradiction, incoherence, and practices that in general appear disturbing to the ordered mind. Jealous responses are made as judgements of acceptance or rejection depending on the relationship and the situation, which is something different entirely.

## **DISTURBING ORDER**

The crucial point is that there is a desire for order that finds various types of syncretism problematic or disturbing, generally speaking. Syncretism is a potential threat. It seems to disturb, and make uncertain what is taken for granted. Whether this problematic or disturbing side is a problem of 'logic' or of 'jealousy' is important in my reading. The polarisation here is not between reason and good arguments on the one hand, and

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<sup>33</sup> See Patrik Fridlund, *Mobile Performances. Linguistic Undecidability as Possibility and Problem in the Theology of Religions* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 76-78, and Fridlund, "Förnuftets gränser," in *Religionsfilosofisk introduktion. Existens och samhälle*, ed. Catharina Stenqvist and Eberhard Herrmann (Stockholm: Verbum, 2010).

irrational belief in, for instance, the Bible or the Qu'ran as absolute authority, on the other. What is central to my paper's argument is how the two attitudes towards syncretism, as primarily a problem of *logic* or as principally an issue of *jealousy*, reflect two different ideas about religion.

Vroom rightly observes that

How 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.<sup>34</sup>

As Saroglou puts it, a certain discourse on syncretism is given '[u]nless we radically change our paradigms of understanding religion...'<sup>35</sup> What I am getting at here is that Vroom gives weight to things like *belief-systems*, *belief*, *content*, *coherence / incoherence*, and *religion as coherent entity*. And I suggest that this is significant. In the same vein, Saroglou underlines similar notions, namely *specific belief*, *coherence / incoherence*, *belonging*, and *intolerance of ambiguity*.<sup>36</sup> It is significant, I argue, as ultimately they tend to identify the *theoretical and intellectual aspects* of religion as its basic, fundamental or even sole significant features.

Such theoretical or intellectual characterisations of religion are not restricted to academic philosophers or psychologists. In a survey made in Swedish schools, teachers' and pupils' views on religion tended to include in the description of religion such things as faith (rather than practice), intellectual convictions (rather than dress codes, food regulations or rules for eating), and belief (rather than rituals). All this has direct consequences for what is held to be acceptable and unacceptable in religious education.<sup>37</sup> Researcher Jenny Berglund's intuition that this has to do with a Lutheran heritage may be questioned. On the other hand, there are in fact other scholars who argue in the same vein, and in other academic contexts. Theologian Lucie Kaennel, for instance, makes clear in her analyses of the German tradition of *Bildung* that the Protestant heritage is important. As focus moved from the Church as an institution to the Word during the Reformation, personal faith and inner convictions based on the Word of God became the norm, Kaennel argues. Hence, it was then easy to talk about religion in terms of something for the 'inner life' and something 'spiritual'<sup>38</sup> and, as a

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<sup>34</sup> Vroom, "Syncretism and Dialogue," 27, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Saroglou, "Religious Bricolage," 112.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Jenny Berglund, "Swedish Religion Education. Objective but Marinated in Lutheran Protestantism?," *Temenos* 49:2 (2013): 166, 178-179. See also Åsa Trulsson, *Cultivating the Sacred. Ritual Creativity and Practice among Women in Contemporary Europe* (Lund: Centrum för teologi och religionsvetenskap, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Lucie Kaennel, "Les juifs et l'idée de *Bildung* dans l'Allemagne de culture protestante. Chronique d'un mésamour à travers le long XIXe siècle" [diss., 2013], 235.

corollary, also about religion as an issue of belief, as a belief-system with an intellectual content. Such intellectual content could be coherent or incoherent.

I suggest that this approach to religion is also wide spread outside Protestantism, and I therefore suggest that it should be perceived as an independent factor. For example, liberal interpretations of human rights tend to see religion as something that has to do with faith rather than with particular practices; they tend to perceive religion as being a private rather than a public matter, and an issue of individual attitudes without societal aspects.<sup>39</sup> In this view, religion is about morality but should not inform politics.<sup>40</sup>

A crucial point in Saroglou's argument seems to be that the very definition of being religious is built upon the idea of belonging to a specific tradition of belief. Religious people search for firm structures, and they typically seek to avoid ambiguity; they are typically conservative and a typical trait of being religious is the desire to join an existing structure with clear borders; that is one of the points of being religious, Saroglou maintains. So, it is doubtful whether one would really find any mixing in *religious* contexts, Saroglou claims.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, syncretism would entail abandoning intellectual and moral virtues like coherence, and the deeply religious attitude that religious beliefs are central, important, intense and integrated into the whole being.<sup>42</sup> Saroglou does not deny that it is very likely to see that many beliefs may be 'limited in their scope, intensity, and mobilizing force,' but this would not apply to religious beliefs. '[T]he interest of symbolic benefits of religious beliefs, ideas, and practices, is precisely their centrality, intensity, and integrative character.'<sup>43</sup> If these attitudes are transformed, the most basic understanding of religion is shaken and transformed too, Saroglou concludes.<sup>44</sup>

According to Saroglou, it is fundamental that religion has to do with belonging to a specific tradition of belief, avoiding ambiguity, and maintaining clear borders. The intellectual and moral demand of coherence is a core element, as is the idea that religious beliefs are central, important, intense, and integrated into the whole being. To others, religious mixing is a vital part of the life of many religious people. Theologian Claudio Monge, for instance, reports from Turkey that it is not uncommon for religious people to go to another tradition's places of worship, take part in religious rituals in another setting, and so blend practices. In this sense, they *bricolent*, they utilise and

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<sup>39</sup> Dominic McGoldrick, "Religion in the European Public Square and in European Public Life—Crucifixes in the Classroom?," *Human Rights Law Review* 11:3 (2011): 454. See also Pamela Slotte, "Huvuddukar, krucifix och högtidsfirande: Religiöst och sekulärt i europeisk människorättsdiskurs," in *Mot bättre vetande. Festskrift till Tage Kurtén på 60-årsdagen*, ed. Mikael Lindfelt, Pamela Slotte, and Malena Björkgren (Åbo: Åbo akademis förlag, 2010), 221, 228.

<sup>40</sup> Patrik Fridlund, "The Fragility of Religious Freedom," *Agathos. An International Review of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 3:1 (2012): 144.

<sup>41</sup> Saroglou, "Religious Bricolage," 110.

<sup>42</sup> *Idem.*, 112.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

combine elements from different sources, although they formally partake of one single given tradition. There is simply a large religious elasticity, Monge says.<sup>45</sup>

Somewhere here there is a watershed. Belief *or* practice, logic *or* feeling, argument *or* jealousy. I will have to make clear that I do not mean to exclude all forms of beliefs, or all kinds of argument, and I do not intend to claim that logic can never be helpful. Belief does not preclude practice, logic does not exclude feeling, for example, but the issue here is what has precedence, what comes first, how the matter is approached. The watershed, I suggest, is identifiable as lying between two fundamental approaches in which the one side tends to start in intellectual belief, arguments in favour of this belief and logical structure as the measure; religions are conceived of as coherent systems. The other side would thus tend to be more interested in practice and in feelings, in seeing the porous borders and internal fluidity, and in accepting jealousy as a key component when other religions are evaluated.

## **RELIGIOUSLY REFUTING SYNCRETISM**

As was suggested above, there are many religiously grounded refutations and condemnations of syncretism. I would like to promote the idea that *jealousy* is a key term. I also want to claim that jealousy as grounds for judging syncretism, syncretic comportment, or syncretic ideas entails a relational aspect, giving a place to sentiment and to emotion. Jealousy, with its sentiments and emotions, requires judgements when a purported syncretic phenomenon is excogitated. Making a judgement implies possible negotiations, changed views, and compromise. A judgement invites ethical perspectives.

One could recall the story about the first King of Israel. God was reluctant about this as the desire to have a king was seen as a rejection of God as king. A jealous reaction to their demand was therefore to say no. But a jealous reaction also entails the opportunity to re-think what has been said, and what has been decided. Eventually God accepted the idea of a king over Israel. There seem to have been some deliberations or negotiations before God changed position:

But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." And Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, "Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds which they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, hearken to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."

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<sup>45</sup> 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* 23 (2012): 70, 77. See also McGuire, *Lived Religion*, Fridlund, "Double Religious Belonging," and Fridlund, "Du syncrétisme en religion: un enjeu indispensable pour penser la tension entre dialogue et conversion," in *À l'écoute de l'autre. Penser l'altérité au cœur du dialogue inter-religieux*, ed. Henri de La Hougue and Anne-Sophie Vivier-Muresan (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2015).

[1 Samuel 8:6-9]

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; and they said, "No! but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles." And when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, "Hearken to their voice, and make them a king."

[1 Samuel 8:19-22]

At the end, God acknowledged the kingdom and anointed the king.

"Has not the Lord anointed you to be prince over his people Israel? And you shall reign over the people of the Lord and you will save them from the hand of their enemies round about. And this shall be the sign to you that the Lord has anointed you to be prince over his heritage.

[1 Samuel 10:1]

And Samuel said to all the people, "Do you see him whom the Lord has chosen? There is none like him among all the people." And all the people shouted, "Long live the king!"

[1 Samuel 10:24]

Similar traits are found in the Creation story. An interdiction to eat of the tree of knowledge is broken. There is punishment, but also care.

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

[Genesis 2:16-17]

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate.

[Genesis 3:6]

The wrathful and jealous God punished Adam and Eve.

[T]he Lord God [---] drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

[Genesis 3:24]

And yet, God took care of the humans, in spite of the punishment laid upon them for their disobedience:

And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them.

[Genesis 3:21]

Hence, to the extent that refutation of syncretism stems from jealousy rather than being based on logical arguments, the *prise de position* is taken by some subjectivity who makes a judgement and who decides (possibly following negotiations), and such judgement may be re-negotiated afterwards as well. Change is possible.

I will now turn to yet another interesting aspect, namely to the issue of diversity and mobility. It appears that if logic is the basis for refuting syncretism, the positions vis-à-vis syncretism would be similar in all religions—a structure that is incoherent is so, regardless of specific content, and is not dependent on contingent circumstances. Understanding a condemnation of syncretism on the grounds of jealousy would be a different matter. A divinity in one religion may be jealous, unlike other divinities in other religions. The structure of one given religious tradition may be more inclined to jealousy than another religious tradition.

### **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TRADITIONS, AND WITHIN**

Perhaps it is so that some religious traditions have fewer problems with syncretism than other religions have. Perhaps some religions are in this sense more tolerant, others less so. Perhaps there are some traditions in which jealousy plays a more prominent role, and other traditions in which its role is less prominent. It has been suggested that this could be the case in monotheistic contexts. In various forms of monotheism there seem to be stronger and more explicit claims of exclusive truth as compared to other traditions, in which truth claims may be limited to specific fields. If truth were limited in scope, some variation in truth claims would be accepted.

In monotheistic contexts there is also only one god, one single God who requires obedience, one single god who may be jealous. In other religious traditions several gods, forces or principles are seen as having their share, and no one has the total power. Perhaps. The implication could be that a plurality of religious traditions is not automatically seen as a problem. There is not necessarily competition. Syncretism would be less of a threat.<sup>46</sup>

Once this is brought to the fore, yet another step could be taken. It is likely that there is variation *within* a given religion as well. Some branches and denominations may be more prone to accept syncretic aspects than other branches and denominations. Such variation would be related to theological orientation and philosophical preferences.<sup>47</sup> There is perhaps a relationship between images of God and jealousy, between what role God is supposed to play and the relation of this to other religious

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<sup>46</sup> See Catherine Cornille, "Introduction. The Dynamics of Multiple Belonging," in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Maryknoll: Orbis books, 2002), 2. See also Jan van Bragt, "Multiple Religious Belonging of the Japanese People," 16, Droogers, "Syncretism," 17, and my own account in Fridlund, "The Rotten Syncretism that Opens the Spirit," 164. In a slightly different context Harari argues in a similar way, see Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper, 2015).

<sup>47</sup> See Fridlund, *Mobile Performances. Linguistic Undecidability*, 23-42.



traditions.<sup>48</sup> How is religion in general perceived? What are held to be central characteristics? A vital point concerns the idea of 'total commitment.' What are the observations and the expectations? Is a given religion supposed to require total commitment or not? Must a given religion be perceived as constituting the lenses through which everything is seen and interpreted? If a religion is supposed to have all-encompassing claims in this fashion, it appears to be less prone to let the community mix with other traditions.<sup>49</sup>

## THE TWIST

This brings me back to the issue of *jealousy*. Is there healthy and unhealthy jealousy? Probably yes. As in any relationship, there are some aspects of jealousy that are sane and healthy, and some that are not. Two partners in a relationship may have some legitimate demands on each other, some that appear illegitimate and some that are somewhere in between. There may be good and sympathetic reasons for jealousy, as well as bad and ugly reasons.

In the religious sphere, there is a complicating factor, namely God, or the divine. What if other rules apply in this context? Perhaps the jealousy that would be seen as unhealthy, filthy, freaked-out domination in other relationships must be considered a normal and a sane one in relation to God? Perhaps it must be considered a normal and a sane one in relation to a good God who wants nothing but the best for all human beings. In order to achieve the best, limits have to be set up so that people are protected from evil forces within and outside the human community, although people may remain free to respect these limits or not.<sup>50</sup> In order for human beings to live their lives in the best way possible, they should obey God—or the divine force or cosmic principle—if this structure is accepted. Here an ethical aspect is introduced. If God is presented as an egoistic sadist, it seems less obvious to accept the jealousy. If there is nothing good coming out of this domination, it is also questioned. Or so it seems at least.

Elsewhere I have suggested that ethics is the backbone of evaluations and judgements.<sup>51</sup> 'The Ethics of Belief' (1879) by philosopher W. K. Clifford is a classic text in the philosophy of religion in which Clifford argues that we are responsible for having good and right beliefs, for holding justifiable, or justified, beliefs, as every single belief has moral consequences.<sup>52</sup> There is an ethics of belief, as it were. Other philosophers have been on the same track when talking about 'epistemic duty', for

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<sup>48</sup> Patrik Fridlund, "Le dialogue entre les religions et ses défis," *Théolib* 21 (2003).

<sup>49</sup> Fridlund, "Double Religious Belonging," 268-269, 272, 274. See also Cornille, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>50</sup> See for instance Christopher J. H. Wright, *Thinking Clearly About the Uniqueness of Jesus* (London: Monarch, 1997), and Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 2004).

<sup>51</sup> Patrik Fridlund, "I See That from Both Sides Now: On the Intricate Relation between Dialogue and Conversion," *Australian Religious Studies Review* 25:3 (2012), and Fridlund, "The Rotten Syncretism that Opens the Spirit."

<sup>52</sup> William Kingdon Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *The Ethics of Belief. Essays by William Kingdon Clifford, William James and A. J. Burger*, ed. A. J. Burger (CreateSpace, 2008).

instance.<sup>53</sup> In previous studies I also argue that one may agree with Clifford that there is a fundamental ethical dimension, without agreeing with him on the criteria for right and good beliefs, or that all beliefs have traceable consequences that makes it necessary to justify each one of them.<sup>54</sup>

Now, one aspect that Clifford appears to neglect, while I find it of utmost importance, is that ethics has to do with values. But what values? Moreover, the *kind* of values that play a role appears to be decided by a view of life or a general view of the world. Such a view of the world and of life may positively include some principles or divinities, or positively exclude anything of that sort. It may manifest an inclination to neutrality in this domain, or not. By *worldview* is simply meant some underlying assumptions, some values, some images of the world, and some view of how things are and how they ought to be. Such worldviews are not necessarily fundamental, but *some kind of view* seems to be there.<sup>55</sup> It could be a stable one, or not. It could be based on reflection or intuition. They have to do with the role of *justice*, the place of *authority*, *power*, *structure*, the idea of *law*, of *love*, the place of *acting* and *will*, and hence of *determinism*. The point I would like to make is that there is an intricate relationship between jealousy, ethical criteria and worldview broadly understood.

In brief, I conclude that jealousy seems to be evaluated against ethics. Ethics expresses and formulates, as well as is informed by and formulated within a particular worldview which may well, but does not have to, include a god or a divinity who overrules normal moral intuitions. At the same time, one could see that a given worldview is seen in the light of ethics. A worldview including immoral divinities tends to be seen as problematic. Thus, it is indeed a multifaceted issue.

## A PHILOSOPHICAL ENDNOTE

What responses are made, and can be made, to syncretism? The answer depends on what syncretism is understood to be. It depends thus on how the problem is identified and to what one is supposed to respond. I argue that jealousy is a primary key to understanding responses to syncretism. I also argue that it would be unwise to rely on logic as the basic approach, which is presented as a distinct alternative in this paper. In scholarly treatises, syncretism is sometimes defined as an activity involving the systematic blending of incompatible elements from two or more religious traditions. The crux is that the binary logic of 'incompatible elements' appears to offer a maximum of two possible responses to syncretism—acceptance or repudiation.

Certainly, the achievement of binary logic is that there is order. From this logical point of view it is not possible to believe that 'the earth is flat *and* round

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<sup>53</sup> See Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge [Mass.]: Harvard University Press, 1985), and Roderick M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

<sup>54</sup> Fridlund, "I See That from Both Sides Now," and Fridlund, "The Rotten Syncretism that Opens the Spirit," 165.

<sup>55</sup> Fridlund, *Mobile Performances. Linguistic Undecidability*, 132-133.

simultaneously, nor that people live only once *and* many times.' From this logical point of view, mixing different religious belief systems is inconceivable. (*Some* foreign elements may of course be integrated: if they are 'religiously neutral,' if that is possible, or if they express something that already exists in the host religious belief system.) The drawback is that this reasoning is uninteresting to religion, and perhaps also to other issues. If the verdict is 'yes' in response to syncretism, there is no way to prevent unwanted mixing; there is simply no logic to counter it. If the verdict is 'no,' many widespread practices must be described as impossible, which seems odd. This binary logic is uninteresting on its own, as a starting point, as a point of entry or a first approach. However, at a later stage logic is of course useful. One may make comparisons with other situations when it is indeed crucial to find, as far as possible, a cool ambience using rational arguments, following logical structures, and objective and neutral descriptions. In many contexts it is decisive to be non-emotional and not to let oneself be carried away by feelings. Clarity, not confusion, is needed. And yet, first one has to see that people involved have precisely that: *interests, needs, feelings*, and that they are human beings, not machines or some abstract entities.<sup>56</sup>

In this paper, I contrast jealousy with logic, and I argue that jealousy makes a place for sentiments, which in turn makes negotiation, compromise, and change possible. Yet, the approach that is preferred seems to be related to worldview, and to images of the divine and its relation to human beings. Furthermore, there seem to be ethical standpoints, which in turn fall back in a spiral manner on some kind of worldview.

The choices of basic approach to the issue of syncretism, and the principle tools to be applied in the evaluation, are not innocent choices. The path chosen has implications beyond the first-hand issue. It also influences the role of the investigator, for example. In a logical analysis the outcome must be one; ultimately, there is one answer. The logical structure is one. It is of course possible to juggle with parameters and tamper with ingoing components of the analysis. Various 'facts' may be brought in or out of the calculus, or they may be given one position rather than another. Nonetheless, the very idea is that the result of a logical analysis is stable. In the context of evaluating syncretism, syncretism must be accepted or spurned. The mixing and blending of non-trivial elements are declared possible or not. This evident and logical character of the evaluation and judgement also means that there is no place for any dynamic relationship between God and human beings, and perhaps not even between humans, as there is only *one* answer. One answer that is *necessary*. Ultimately, the consequence is that there can only be one single subject, so to speak. There may be

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<sup>56</sup> One example of this combination of objectivity, neutrality and rationality, on the one hand, and the acknowledgment of human sentiments, psychological needs and the like, is found in successful negotiations of various kinds; see Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes. Negotiating Agreement without Giving in* (New York: Penguin, 2011), and William Ury, *Getting Past No. Negotiating in Difficult Situations* (New York: Bantam, 1993).

many people, but only one reason. Acting against reason implies *error*, not choice or desire.<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, if syncretism is primarily held to be an issue of jealousy, the analysis of syncretism is challenged in a different way. Evaluating syncretism would have to accept that there is a multitude of paths and no ultimate answer (accessible to humans<sup>58</sup>). This leads into a perception of human beings and divinities as subjectivities, or in other words, to the negation of determinism. This may sound attractive, but does it not imply unpredictability and caprice? Yes, in a sense it does. Does it mean that the consequences are disorder and chaos? Not necessarily, but that is a different matter, discussed elsewhere.<sup>59</sup> What I would like to emphasise here is that talking about responses to syncretism is not a simple affair. Whatever approach is chosen, there is a thorny path with certain pitfalls. That seems unavoidable. The question is, rather, what kind of pitfalls one prefers to encounter and what kind of risks one is prepared to live with. It is also a question of whether unpredictability, for instance, is a source of despair or of hope; whether stability and order are desired as forming necessary grounds for action, or whether they take away human and divine agency.

I would like to end this paper by indicating some consequences well beyond the initial question regarding responses to syncretism. Perhaps there is even a fundamental displacement of the initial question. Obviously, queries regarding responses to syncretism lead to further reflections: What *is* syncretism? How is syncretism analysed and understood? What is religion? What role do we expect religion to play in people's lives? But, consequently, also to questions like: is syncretism a *problem*, and if a problem, is it a problem that needs to be solved? Perhaps it is a problem like a conundrum or a puzzle is a problem, that is to say, something that is both demanding and stimulating but that, once a 'solution' is found, becomes uninteresting. Moreover, even if a *solution*, defined in a broad sense, is sought, one must ask *how* a solution best comes about; is it through *rational reasoning*, or is there an alternative? What if *jealousy* is perceived as a key factor, as suggested in this paper? If jealousy is attributed a prominent position in the analyses, *relationship* is brought to the fore. This may transform the inquiry in a fundamental way. In a relational perspective, the issue of syncretism is better understood as an issue in which talking, finding common interests, and making compromises are prominent elements. In a logical perspective, as represented by Vroom and Saroglou, there is a definite answer and an absolute response to syncretism.

Unsurprisingly, there are implications for academic studies of religion, but also for scientific and academic theory and method in general. To what extent, and in what

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<sup>57</sup> Fridlund, *Mobile Performances. Linguistic Undecidability*, 76-78, 134-137, 145-147.

<sup>58</sup> This qualification is not unimportant; see for example Fridlund, *Mobile Performances. Linguistic Undecidability*, 51-52, with references to Serge Boulgakov, *Philosophie du verbe et du nom* (Lausanne: l'Age d'homme, 1991), and Ronald N. Giere, *Scientific Perspectivism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> See Fridlund, *Mobile Performances. Linguistic Undecidability*, 153-159, and Fridlund, "The Fragility of Religious Freedom," 157-161.

manner, do we evaluate and judge on the basis of *ethical* convictions? Explicitly, but very often also implicitly, there seem to be demands for 'intellectual *honesty*.' Some philosophers talk about 'epistemic *duty*.' '*Ethics* of belief' is central to Clifford's evaluation of religious beliefs. There appears to be an *obligation* to be rational, as well as a *moral requirement* to use sound arguments. To what extent and in what fashion are such ethical perspectives connected to particular worldviews? Is it possible to disconnect obligations from worldviews, or does any attempt to separate the two simply imply that underlying metaphysics remains unthought?<sup>60</sup> Such questions surface in theological attempts to respond to syncretism. In this sense, what appears to be a strictly *theological* issue – viz. the question: how to respond to syncretism? – has much wider implications. To be further explored elsewhere, though.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some parts of this paper have been published in a different context in *Swedish Missiological Themes* ('The Rotten Syncretism' 2014). There are similarities between the two texts. They are also very different. The argument in the present paper is in favour of *jealousy* while in *SMT* this term plays no significant rôle. Is this an example of contradictory views held by the same author? In one sense, yes. It may also be understood as the result of different contextual standpoints, an issue of perspective, and perhaps also of evolution of the argument.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Gavin D'Costa for a number of questions raised around this paper. I am also indebted to the research team *Dialogue et conversion* at Institut de Science et de Théologie des Religions (Catholic University of Paris), and to the Centre for Theology and Religious studies (Lund University) for encouraging and facilitating my work in several respects.

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<sup>60</sup> See Fridlund, "Förnuftets gränser".

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