**The Syncretism of Tradition:
Reappraising Cultural Mixture in Christianity**

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For Liz

Jesus said to the disciples, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

—John 16:12-15

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Abstract

This dissertation probes use of the term syncretism in Christian theology, with an eye toward constructing a pneumatology for an increasingly global and plural church. First, I show that present-day usage of syncretism demonstrates latent colonial legacies in the academy that continue to inhibit appreciation of new theological insights emerging beyond the West. Engaging history of religions and anthropological literature on syncretism as well as Kathryn Tanner's work on culture, I reframe syncretism to highlight ways in which Christianity constantly mixes with its surrounding culture in contested ways, such that syncretism becomes an aspect of Western Christianity as much as anywhere else. To say that syncretism is ubiquitous in Christianity is not to say that it lacks normative self-understanding, however. Thus I offer a defense of the term "tradition", understood not as a static edifice of doctrine but as a moving continuity.

In order to provide a theological account of the pervasiveness of such contested Christian mixture with culture, as well as tools for discerning when to incorporate such syncretism and when to challenge it, I employ Rowan Williams' account of the Holy Spirit incorporating newness and strangeness into the Logos across the vicissitudes of history. Whether in 4th century debates between Arius and Athanasius or in contemporary Africa, contested mixture of religion and culture has continually shaped the identity of Christianity. My concluding theological claim is that the Holy Spirit often builds knowledge of Christ by way of Christianity's contested transmission, a claim that I display through accounts of new theological insights emerging from places like South Sudan and Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Imagine if the first written language of the Christian scriptures had not been koine Greek.

Imagine, for example, Christianity without the notion of the Logos. Before Christians took hold of it, Logos was a Stoic and Neoplatonic idea used to express how a God free from time and chance relates to the material cosmos. Greek-speaking theologians adapted it to become a means of comprehending Jesus' relation to God the Father. In the process of this reflection, the idea of Logos transformed and Greek conceptions of God transformed. Greek Christians came to understand God as more purposive than standard Greek accounts like Plato's and Aristotle's, for example. But understandings of Jesus transformed too. Without the notion of Logos, Christians would have surely struggled even more than they did to express mature Christologies like those of the 4th century Cappadocians.

Imagining Christianity without koine Greek acknowledges at least two things. First, Christianity's first written language was not that of Jesus' own teachings in Aramaic. Early disciples seemed quite untroubled by the fact that their foundational documents were expressed in a language different from Jesus' own. This point is no small matter. Muslims in their own first century chose to retain Arabic as the language of their own sacred scriptures, for quite appropriate reasons. Moving between languages is not simply a matter of neutrally translating ideas from one language to another. As philosopher Kwasi Wiredu writes, "a language, most assuredly, is not conceptually neutral; syntax and vocabulary are apt to suggest definite modes of conceptualization."¹ Early disciples assumed that Christianity could mix with another thought-world and thrive there. They did not seek an original, unadulterated purity when spreading the

¹ Kwasi Wiredu, "Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion," *African Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1998): 17.

message of Jesus. Christians mixed the gospel with various cultures from the very start. Second, to imagine Christianity without koine Greek is to feel a quite noticeable gap. Many Christians rightly feel that a great deal would be *lost* had Christianity not been expressed in Greek. This is not to lift up Greek philosophy and language unduly; it is simply to recognize that Christianity gained something from its translation into another culture. The Greek language and the notion of Logos showed Christians aspects of Jesus that they might otherwise not see. Christianity's syncretism with Logos theology improved what Christians know of Jesus.

To imagine Christianity without the Greek language and Logos is not to suggest that doctrines of the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ would not play the role they do in Christianity, had Christianity moved primarily eastward rather than westward in its early centuries.² Monotheistic pressures from its Jewish origin alongside Christians' experience and worship of Jesus would have required careful working out regardless of Christianity's cultural and philosophical environments. Nonetheless, Christian missionaries of the 7th century moving into East Asia and writing in Mandarin, for example, found themselves at great pains trying to express Christology and the Trinity without the resources of the Greek language.³ The difficulty of this effort does not suggest any "lack" in Mandarin, for familiar Greek Christological vocabulary only became familiar after centuries of Christian usage and refinement. Rather, it to say that Mandarin, like Greek, carries resources for seeing something of Jesus that Christians have not noticed before.

² For arguments along this line, see John Hick, "Jesus in the World Religions" in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 167-185. I return to Hick in Chapter 5.

³ See Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: An illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Trent Pomplun, *Jesuit on the Roof of the World: Ippolito Desideri's Mission to Tibet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1984).

Such an approach, however, has proven all too rare through much of Christian history, particularly in more recent centuries as Christianity has become a truly global religion. 19th century British missionary Robert Moffat, for example, when encountering the Sechuana language of southern Africa, wrote, “the language was deficient in theological terms.”⁴ Leaving aside the cultural presumption that surrounded this statement, what Moffat overlooked is that one can say this about any human language. Since there are no words appropriate for God, since humans are always only approximating God with our language, humans are always borrowing words from temporal and profane life and applying them to God. The translatability of Christianity is one of its core features, a point rightly noted by Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls.⁵ This dissertation’s primary claim builds upon theirs: I am arguing that translation and transmission stand to *enhance* the gospel and that these processes inherently involve syncretism. The more Christians share our borrowed words, the more we will see of Jesus.

The early centuries of Christianity again provide an initial example. As Christianity moved westward in the ancient world to Greek-speaking regions of the Roman Empire, Christian missionaries could have demanded that Greek conceptions of God be left behind as people converted. Such a demand could never have been fulfilled for epistemological reasons, of course, since humans bring our old reasoning with us when we encounter new ideas. But more importantly, Christian missionaries and theologians decided to listen to these non-Hebraic ideas about God and ask, “what’s useful here? How might this add to our understanding of Jesus?”⁶

⁴ Quoted in Paul S. Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 91.

⁵ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: the Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989) and Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

⁶ Certainly such incorporations required defending because Christians had to justify employing resources beyond their scriptures given the highly exegetical character of early church reflection. Early theologians compared their use of Greek theology to the Israelites “looting the Egyptians” in the Exodus. See, for example, Augustine, *On Christian*

Such a posture of receptivity enhances Christians' abilities to see new emerging insights about Jesus, especially as Christianity continues to grow in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The other side of this argument, however, is that common Christian understandings of syncretism—or lack of understanding, more often—block Christians' ability to appreciatively interpret other Christians.

Indeed, one may wonder whether the notion of syncretism is the most appropriate entry point for a discussion of cross-cultural challenges confronting an increasingly globalized and plural church. For many, syncretism simply conjures up inappropriate boundary-crossing and unfamiliar blending. Other terms like inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization would seem to describe the same phenomena but with less pejorative connotation (these terms I address in Chapter 3). Yet syncretism proves the most helpful entry point for two reasons. First, no other word quite captures the contested processes of Christian transmission in any and all cultural environments. While Christian theologians often use syncretism pejoratively, scholars from the history of religions and anthropology have used the notion intending a more neutral sense, and thereby discovered numerous insights that can substantially improve theological understandings of Christian transmission. They show that all religious traditions syncretize, that blending with one's cultural environment is not the exception but the rule in religious life, and that contestation pervades the process of religious mixture. Exploring this literature in conversation with Christian theology thereby provides the working definition of syncretism I use throughout this dissertation, *phenomena of contested religious mixture*, in the sense of religion mixing with culture and/or another religion. Second, the fact that syncretism is a “ten-letter four-letter word” in much of

Doctrine, II.40-42 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Volume 2: Augustin: City of God, Christian Doctrine*, transl J. F. Shaw (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

Christianity tells Christians something about ourselves.⁷ After all, theologians do not have a great many swear words all their own—“heresy” is one of the few others. The fact that one of our few theological swear words is a term for religious mixture, largely applied to combining non-Western religions with Christianity, indicates how unreceptive many Western Christians remain to theological insights from outside Western Christianity. Why does mixing Christianity with Hellenism or with contemporary European continental philosophy require so little defending, but once we leave European or North American soil such mixture suddenly proves troublesome? In this regard, the key ethical concern of this dissertation is that Western theologians have not fully moved beyond, or even recognized, the extent to which colonial legacies still imbue our theology. Too often, “syncretism” becomes a way of refracting one’s own theological concerns through a hasty interpretation of another’s Christianity. If syncretism is still a “ten-letter four-letter word” in much of Western Christianity, then I am arguing that Western Christians can learn quite a bit about ourselves from our swear words.

Acknowledging the ubiquity of syncretism in Christianity by no means suggests that anything goes, however, hence the other notion I explore in depth is “tradition”. Indeed, a secondary aim of this dissertation is a defense of the concept of tradition. Unlike the term “invention”, as in the popular text *The Invention of Tradition*, syncretism assumes that something substantial has been passed along, not simply concocted.⁸ To say that all Christians syncretize their tradition is a quite different claim than to say that they invent it. Indeed, tradition has become a favored term for many theologians in the last generation, particularly those influenced by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, in part because of the continuity it portrays. Late 20th

⁷ The phrase “ten-letter four-letter word” comes from Carl Starkloff, *A Theology of the In-Between: the Value of Syncretic Process* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002), 10.

⁸ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

century social theory and philosophy emphasized the continual fluidity and flux of human knowledge, and did so in increasingly pluralistic Western contexts. For theologians wanting to make claims that pertain to all of human life—even amid constant fluidity, flux, and pluralism—“tradition” provided substantial intellectual resources. At times, the term even seemed a refuge amid the instability of human knowing so keenly felt in this intellectual environment. Yet while theologians who employed “tradition” claimed to acknowledge the many changes and contestations within Christianity over time, tradition still often became a static, preserved core of doctrines and beliefs, potentially unreceptive to new insights. If not carefully employed, tradition simply avoids those intellectual questions about constant flux and change. Worse still, tradition can too easily become something like Adolf von Harnack’s essence of Christianity, a core preserved over time that escapes the vicissitudes of history.⁹ This approach ignores the constancy of syncretism in Christianity, thereby potentially missing new insights from other regions of the church and obscuring vital questions facing contemporary Christians.

The most important question it obscures is that of historicism. By historicism I mean a confluence of factors. First and primarily, I mean the worry that historical contingencies have been the determining factors of Christian scripture and doctrine, rather than God’s revelation in Christ and the continuing illumination of the Holy Spirit. Related to these concerns, addressing historicism for modern theologians has also generally entailed an increased awareness of historical consciousness as part and parcel of human experience, recognition of challenges posed by historical critical studies of the scriptures and early Christian history, as well as modern preoccupations with the notion of “authenticity”. Taken together these concerns have made modern theology reassess its understanding of divine revelation. The question is more than

⁹ I address this point in further detail in Chapters 1 and 4.

asking how to make sense of the scriptures if, for example, Paul did not write the book of Colossians. Embedded within questions like uncertain authorship of scriptural texts are questions relating to the mixing of divine revelation with seemingly contingent human culture. In the case of Paul and Colossians, the human culture of pseudographic authorship in the first century would seem, to moderns, to take away from the “authenticity” of the message. Divine revelation has mixed with a human practice in such a way that would seem to diminish or discredit the perceived purity of the message. Put differently, the embedded question is how God speaks to humans amid our historical limitations, within our finitude, the question of how a divine eternal being communicates to material creatures who express that revelation within the context of our own non-eternal moment in time. God is eternal and the gospel is eternal, yet humans keep having to express God’s revelation in our own categories that cannot, in any ultimately “true” sense, transcend our own history. The gospel translates across human cultures, but this transmission is never simple.

Christians’ confusion and general lack of clarity regarding syncretism, it turns out, is closely connected to this challenge of facing and confronting historicism. Both syncretism and historicism prove closely related to the challenge of distinguishing divine revelation amid the contingencies of human culture. As Chapters 1 and 5 will show, a thorough study of syncretism indicates that categories now considered essential for Christianity started as syncretisms—concepts like Logos and *homoousios*. If some syncretisms have become orthodoxy over the course of Christian history, then a strong understanding of syncretism requires a strong understanding of the role of history in God’s revelation. While theologians usually treat questions surrounding Christianity’s cross-cultural transmission and questions of historicism quite separately, this dissertation shows how interconnected they prove to be. Understanding the

Spirit moving across culture has shared concerns with understanding the Spirit moving across time. Thus, finding clarity regarding historicism assists the project of finding clarity regarding syncretism. Syncretism thus is no ancillary aspect of Christian theology; syncretism is not a notion that theologians already understand and can move on. It is entwined with the ongoing attempt to offer a theological response to historicism, to account for the ways in which humans in history receive divine knowledge. It therefore lies at the heart of how the divine and the human engage each other, at the heart of Christology and the incarnation. Syncretism moves from the margins of Christian theology to its center.

If the problem identified in this dissertation is that Christian theology still does not have an adequate sense of the ubiquity of syncretism—much less a theology for that ubiquity—then the theological response I offer for the constancy of syncretism is a pneumatology with a strong place for the fact of cultural mixture in Christianity. This theological response first requires imagining a tradition without latent static notions of doctrine, but rather seeing tradition as dynamic, as a moving continuity. The Holy Spirit builds knowledge of Christ often by way of contested Christian transmission. In short, the Spirit uses the syncretisms that all Christians bring to Christianity to increase comprehension of the Logos across time and culture. Just as the writer of Hebrews acknowledges that saints of the past, before Christ, required later Christian saints for their faith to become perfect—“God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:40)—so Christian faith depends upon recognizing the faithful and often surprising syncretisms of others if we are to see a full vision of the Logos.

The dissertation thus begins with an assessment of Christian understandings of syncretism, displaying the confusions that continue to haunt this term. In addition to showing the term’s history and genealogy—including its pejorative turn after the Reformation—Chapter 1

shows how Adolf von Harnack's and Hendrick Kraemer's assessments of syncretism remain representative of theological treatment of syncretism up to today. Harnack responded to syncretism by offering an essentialist and ahistorical understanding of the gospel, while Kraemer overlooked the fact that yesterday's syncretisms have become today's orthodoxy. Chapter 2 suggests that Christian theology stands to gain substantial insights by assessing so-called etic studies of syncretism from history of religions research and from sociocultural anthropology. Such assessments highlight the ubiquity of syncretism in all religion, including Christianity in the West. They also delineate between various forms of syncretism and between other terms for cultural mixture like hybridity and bricolage. Finally, they display the power dynamics at play in deploying the term. Chapter 3 then assesses contemporary Christian approaches to cultural mixture. It starts by assessing the virtues and limitations of the terms inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization, then assimilates the substantial contribution of Kathryn Tanner's pivotal work *Theories of Culture*. With Tanner, I begin to construct a theological response to syncretism, showing how God's grace works amid Christians' pervasive borrowing. Chapter 4 then assesses the usefulness of the term tradition as a means of comprehending Christianity's continuities amid its pervasive syncretism. First taking up and challenging Tanner's own portrayal of tradition, I construct an understanding of tradition that draws from MacIntyre yet opens up his account by engaging African historians.

Chapter 5 draws these strands together to begin offering a pneumatology that responds to syncretism. Through the work of Rowan Williams, I display an understanding of tradition that is simultaneously continuous and adaptive. For Williams, the Logos constantly incorporates the unfamiliar and the strange into itself, in such a way that addresses both syncretism and historicism alike. Chapter 6 then provides textured examples of the dissertation's central claim

that the Spirit builds knowledge of the Logos through contested religious mixture. It assesses controversial syncretisms from Christianity in Africa, the area of my own research. This final chapter shows how contested practices like ancestor reverencing and bovine sacrifice rituals among Dinka Christians of South Sudan can build up our understanding of Jesus. It also displays how syncretisms which I myself might see as incapable of full incorporation into Christianity—like the Friday apostolics of Zimbabwe rejecting the Bible as part of God’s revelation—can still become means of the Spirit communicating. Not only in Chapter 6 but throughout this dissertation, I will also address the question that often lies close at hand in conversations about syncretism—the question of determining if and when some syncretisms prove beyond the bounds of Christian identity.

Two final points are important to note. First, while this dissertation draws extensively from conversations in global Christianity, it is not a work in missiology or “world Christianity” per se. I intend it as a work for the Western theological academy. I write as a Westerner who spent a formative period of my early adulthood living and working in East Africa—now with a research focus in African Christianity—who continually notices the extent to which Western Christians struggle to view churches in places like Africa on African’s own terms. By placing this work within the intellectual conversations of the Western academy, I hope to show that Western theology already possesses the resources for more appreciative interpretation: we simply have to recognize the implications of our own work. Tanner and Williams become important voices in this regard. If my arguments are overheard by Christians in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, I would certainly welcome such. If the arguments lead to a richer sense of their own contributions to Christianity, to less fear in integrating their own contexts into

Christianity, to an appreciation for ways in which their Christianity enhances our global vision of Jesus, that is all the better.

Second, I do not attempt an outright defense of the term syncretism itself. Many writers who address syncretism take it upon themselves to suggest whether the term continues to carry usefulness in their own area of study. Missiologists question whether it is sufficiently distinct from inculturation to warrant another word or worry—rightly—that the term remains too pejorative. Historians of religion question whether the term indicates anything at all, since all religions mix with local cultures in various and contested ways.¹⁰ I avoid such suggestions, largely because it seems too early to say whether the term will remain useful. If Christians can learn from anthropologists and historians of religion, recognizing that some syncretism is indeed ubiquitous in the transmission of religion, then the term might remain a useful designation of interesting, surprising, troubling, and promising cultural mixtures with Christianity. If historians of religion and anthropologists determine that syncretism is sufficiently distinct from other terms of mixture like hybridity and creolization, insofar as it does indeed carry a connotation of mixture specific to religion versus other aspects of culture—and assuming that they continue to find “religion” a meaningful and useful concept—continued use of syncretism may be appropriate. But these conclusions are only conjectural. If the term remains only pejorative in theology or unreflectively describes the kind of mixture that proves ubiquitous in religion, without an account of the textured decision-making and agency that go into selecting certain syncretisms over others, then perhaps we do well to put the term aside, at least for a season. My

¹⁰ Peter Schineller, “Inculturation and syncretism: What is the real issue?,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16.2 (1992): 50-53 and *Historical Reflections / Reflexions Historiques*, 27, no. 3 (2001). This issue of *Historical Reflections* is devoted to syncretism in religious studies and substantially debates the usefulness of the term. See also Robert Baird’s arguments in Chapter 2.

own sense is that there are distinct advantages to keeping it around, but only time will tell if that proves a theologically, morally, and pragmatically viable choice.

Chapter 1: Syncretism in Christian Thought

“It is better that we syncretize. Concord is a mighty rampart.”

-Erasmus of Rotterdam

“Christianity demands an undivided loyalty—there is to be no coexistence and no syncretism.”

-Alan Tippet

Any comprehensive assessment of syncretism must admit from the beginning its variability in meaning over the centuries. In the 2nd and 16th centuries respectively, Plutarch and Erasmus aimed to reconcile opposing factions in their appeals that various sides “syncretize.” 19th and early 20th century historians of religion employed the term neutrally to describe the mixing of various religions with one another. Christian theologians from the 17th century and the 20th century maligned supposedly inadequate forms of Christianity with the word. In the same time and place, even, the word carried different meanings: 20th European missiologists saw syncretism as pejorative while history of religions scholars imagined it as descriptive. Even the term’s derivation proves contested: is its origin the Greek συνκρητισμός, to unite as the ancient Cretans, or συγκεράννυμι, to mix together, perhaps implying the mixing incompatible things? (The former is the correct derivation.) Even though the word largely applies to *religious* mixing today, writers from Plutarch to authors of 19th century French and British political tracts used the term for building political constituencies amid fractious divisions in the realm of governance.

The one consistent aspect of syncretism—whether in irenics, invective, or something in between—has been a surprising or unexpected combination or mixture of seemingly unlike elements of human culture, whether religious, political, philosophical, or otherwise. In short, the

notion signifies ways in which existing human categories and divisions prove either untenable or no longer useful. From the 2nd to the mid-19th centuries, it applied to politics as often as religion; indeed, in Europe's 16th-17th centuries, its use in "politics" versus "religion" could hardly be disaggregated, as we will see. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, religion became the primary domain of syncretism and remains so today. It may be just as well that the word retain a religious connotation, if for no other reason than to provide a modicum—albeit only a modicum—of greater specificity.

The first two chapters thus probe the various and changing definitions, connotations, and employments of syncretism. The first chapter recounts its use before the 20th century and in 20th century Christian theology; the second recounts its use in the history of religions and anthropology, or the so-called "etic" study of religion. The aim of these first two chapters is not to provide a literature review, which would fill far more pages than a single dissertation. Rather, they aim to offer an historical account of the term's usage with a particular focus upon the coherence—or often lack thereof—of its employment. The chapters also show that syncretism tends to be a bellwether for wider issues in theology and the study of religion. In theology, concerns about syncretism indicate uncertainty regarding historicism and the mechanics of divine revelation in history. In the study of religion, changing uses of the term indicate evolving methodologies and wider disagreements regarding the aim and purpose of historical and anthropological studies of religion.

Given the overall theological orientation of this dissertation, together the two chapters show that Christian usage of the term requires reassessment, in light of (comparatively) more

careful employments in the history of religions and social sciences.¹ Such Christian reassessment is not simply a matter of definitional clarity for a term that theologians think they already know, important as that task may be. More urgently, careless use of the notion syncretism in Christian theology stultifies genuine engagements with new theological innovations and insights, most of which are emerging outside the modern West. If Western Christians are not careful, pejorative uses of syncretism can become another way of failing to listen to Christians in the global South on their own terms, a way of refracting theology in the global South through the categories of Western orthodoxy without expectation that the Spirit might be showing the church something it did not know before. Too often, the moniker syncretism closes off the possibility of appreciative listening and anticipation that there is still more to learn of the gospel.

This first chapter, then, follows syncretism from its earliest usage to contemporary theology. It explores the use of syncretism during the Reformation Era and the years that followed, especially as syncretism took a pejorative turn in the 17th century. After a brief assessment of syncretism's use in missiology, I then turn to two figures in the 20th century who exemplify treatment of syncretism in Christian theology—Adolph von Harnack and Hendrick Kraemer. Both thinkers sidestep questions of historical investigation that accompany syncretism, Harnack through an ahistorical essence of Christianity and Kreamer through an overly tidy account of Christian orthodoxy that overlooks internal contestations inherent to Christianity's doctrinal development. I conclude by showing how their theological instincts continue to represent contemporary treatment of syncretism in Christian thought.

¹¹ I will subsequently suggest that Christian theology has something to offer “etic” studies of syncretism, but leave that to Chapter Two.

I. From Irenics to Polemics

As indicated, the word syncretism dates back at least to the 2nd century CE, when historian and political philosopher Plutarch spoke of a Cretan propensity to forge political alliances against common foes despite their own internal divisions. While Plutarch provided the first known usage, he wrote as if Cretans themselves already used the term. In his essay “On Brotherly Love” in the *Moralia*, he wrote,

Then this further matter must be born in mind and guarded against when differences arise among brothers: we must be careful especially at such times to associate familiarly with our brothers’ friends, but avoid and shun all intimacy with their enemies, imitating in this point, at least, the practice of Cretans, who, though they often quarreled with and warred against each other, made up their differences and united when outside enemies attacked; and this it was which they called “syncretism”.²

The Greek word συνκρητισμός thus meant to come together as Cretans, syn-cret-ism. Plutarch applied the term appreciatively, considering the Cretans praiseworthy for their prudence in overcoming internal divisions for the sake of self-defense and preservation of political community. Thus syncretism began as a term for cooperation amid external dangers, a connotation retained in subsequent Byzantine texts.³

I.1. The Reformation to the Syncretism Controversy

Erasmus of Rotterdam brought the term into the Western church through his efforts to join Reformers into common union. Erasmus exhibited the Renaissance’s increased appreciation for history, as well as its tendency to see history and Christianity as contingently arranged. Increased recognition of pluralism then became a key ingredient for noticing syncretism at all, whether

² W. C. Helmbold, trans., *Plutarch’s Moralia, Volume 6*, Loeb edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 313.

³ Kurt Rudolph, “Syncretism: From Theological Invective to a Concept in the Study of Religion” in *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, ed. Anita Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen (New York: Routledge, 2005) 69.

between Christianity and classical learning or between Catholics and Protestants. Possessing a disposition averse to the invective so common during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, Erasmus cited Plutarch's praise of the Cretans, thereby encouraging reformers to "syncretize" with him. In a letter to Lutheran reformer Philip Melancthon, in 1519 he wrote, "You see how the hateful conspire against good learning. It is better that we syncretize. Concord is a mighty rampart."⁴ While syncretism became closely associated with humanists and their irenics, of which Erasmus was representative, others in the Reformation saw syncretism similarly. Zwingli urged syncretism with allies when Swiss Reformed churches faced persecutions for their doctrine of the Eucharist, while Martin Bucer negotiated between ecclesial factions by encouraging syncretism.⁵

At this point syncretism serves as an ecumenical invitation—or at least prudent cooperation. Erasmus, Zwingli, and Bucer did not seek to dismiss differences among various reformers, rather they sought alliances that would advance their theological and political aims. They utilized syncretism as a strategy to pursue broader goals like reformation without schism (for Erasmus) or ending persecution (for Zwingli). Christians did not view the term with universal sympathy, however. Reformed theologian Zacharias Ursinus, a chief author of the Heidelberg Catechism, criticized the syncretism of the humanists who, in his view, rebelled against God through their irenics, using the *bonae litterae* at the expense of the scriptures. Nevertheless, in subsequent years, a "syncretist" implied an irenic theologian or a humanist who tried to reconcile fracturing churches. While resembling Plutarch's use, the Reformation added a

⁴ James Moffatt, s.v. "Syncretism," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 155. Latin is author's translation.

⁵ See Moffatt, "Syncretism" and Paul Tschackert, s.v. "Syncretism, Syncretistic Controversies," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (New York: Fun and Wagnalls Company, 1908).

vital connotation to syncretism: it took on a specifically theological and religious quality, in addition to Plutarch's specifically political intent.⁶ While Christian theology and Europe's political intrigue were deeply intertwined in this era, we do not see the term employed solely for political unity by governing authorities as in Plutarch. Indeed, the humanists' self-conscious blending of Christian thought and classical learning foreshadowed the kinds of religious mixture now taken for granted as part and parcel of syncretism. Meanwhile, Ursinus foreshadowed the pejorative use of syncretism by resisting the humanists' mixture of *bonae litterae* with Christianity. The word seems well on its way toward its contemporary formulation.

Amid the invective of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, however, syncretism did not long retain its irenic association; its pejorative turn came in a 17th century debate known as the Syncretism Controversy.⁷ The controversy pitted German theologians seeking unity among Lutherans, Reformed, and Catholic churches against Lutheran scholastics favoring doctrinal specificity and strict uniformity. Georg Calixtus, a German Lutheran theologian with humanist sympathies, opposed growing factionalism in various quarters of the Reformation as theologians articulated dogma with increasing specificity, thereby closing ranks against one another. Calixtus traveled extensively through Reformed and Catholic lands; his encounters along the way made him wary of both theological and political consequences of Christian internecine conflict, notably the violence of the Thirty Years War. Calixtus proposed formulations of Christianity largely based upon the teachings of its first five centuries, with room

⁶ See Moffatt "Syncretism" and Tschackert, "Syncretism, Syncretistic Controversies."

⁷ Some have also called a prior debate within the Roman Catholic Church in the 15th-16th century a "syncretistic controversy," in which the syncretists were those like Cardinal Bessarion who attempted to harmonize theological factions between Aristotelians and Platonists. So far as my own research indicates, this controversy was called "syncretistic" in retrospect rather than by the players themselves.

for free investigation and disagreement on matters considered *adiaphora*.⁸ Along with his fellow theologians in Helmstädt, he proposed an expression of faith based in scriptures and the Apostles Creed, interpreted through the Vincentian Canon, that is, “what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” For Calixtus, nothing short of the Reformation was at stake. Historian Paul Tschackert writes: “He looked with concern upon the crystallization of theology and the ecclesiastical authorization of fixed dogma as a menace to free investigation, the peace of the Church, and the hope of Protestantism.”⁹ Other Lutheran scholastics like Abraham Calovius, however, made a life’s work of resisting such irenics, promoting a Lutheranism that strictly preserved—and expanded—the Augsburg Confession and the Lutheran Book of Concord.

With the opposing factions represented by Calixtus and Calovius, the Syncretism Controversy emerged out of the 1645 Colloquy of Thorn, an attempt to reconcile Prussian Protestants and Catholics, for which Calixtus prepared his minimalist conception of Christian doctrine. The Colloquy failed to forge unity due to intractable positions on all sides, instead drawing resistance from Lutheran delegates Johann Hülsemann and Calovius, who accused Calixtus of abandoning the Augsburg Confession and threatening the very foundations of the Lutheranism. This confrontation instigated a series of public rebuttals and refutations between Calixtus and Calovius, in which Calovius accused his opponent of ninety-eight heresies, called his writings “the excrements of Satan,” and asked that the syncretistic party be expelled from the Lutheran Church. The latter effort failed, but meanwhile the opposing parties crafted thousands of pages against one another, with support from local princes.¹⁰ It was Calovius, in fact, who

⁸ Calixtus also sought unity with Catholics by way of the Jesuits, but they refused such an alliance because Calixtus’ doctrinal proposal did not include the primacy of the pope.

⁹ Paul Tschackert, “Syncretism,” 219.

¹⁰ Even while the Syncretism Controversy was ongoing, ecclesial historians were already documenting it and offering their own assessments. Kurt Rudolph, in “Syncretism: From Theological Invective to a Concept in the

invented the false etymology συγκεράννυμι, intentionally shifting the word's connotation away from its positive association with overcoming divisions, suggesting instead that it derived from confused mixture.¹¹

In time, Calovius and his party in Wittenberg came to promote forms of doctrine stricter than the Lutheran Book of Concord, expressed in a new formula called “the Consensus.” This statement presented Calovius’ belief that Lutheranism was the one true church—Catholics and Calvinists excluded—with absolute standardized dogma including, in Tschackert’s words, “such eccentric doctrines as the knowledge of Old Testament believers of the whole doctrine of the Trinity, the real faith of baptized infants, and the ubiquity of the human nature of Christ to all believers.”¹² By the time debate regarding the Consensus reached its height, Calixtus had died and his son Friedrich Ulrich Calixtus carried on his father’s legacy, arguing that the elder Calixtus was far closer to orthodox Lutheranism than his accusers alleged. Attempts to promote the Consensus as a new Lutheran doctrinal formula faltered, partly through Friedrich’s efforts. So great was the enmity between Friedrich Calixtus, Calovius, and their respective parties that political authorities intervened to forbid polemical writing and preaching. The two held their negotiations in princely courts through legal representatives. While many prominent Lutherans sought to smooth the rough edges of Calovius and Hülsemann’s rhetoric, Philip Spener among them (although neither did Spener side with Calixtus), the denunciations continued unabated.

Study of Religion,” writes: “In 1648, the Alsatian Lutheran Johannes Konrad Dannhauer accordingly wrote a comprehensive monograph on the history of syncretism as the mixing of things which do not belong together, which began with Eve and the Serpent, Israel in Egypt, and so on, and continue with Melanchthon, Grotius, and Calixt (*Mysterium syncretismi detecti, proscripti et symphonismo compensati*, Strasbourg 1648). Dannhauer distinguishes three forms of syncretism, according to a physical or chemical method: the blend of two forms to a new one (*digestio absorptiva*); the reduction of the joint attributes (*digestio temperativa*); and the combination to a tangle (*colluvies; digestio conservativa*). A remarkable precursor of modern typology!” (69-70). We will encounter such typologies in Chapter 2.

¹¹ John C. L. Gieseler, *A Textbook of Church History, Vol V: 1517-1854, from the Reformation to the Present Time*, trans and ed Henry B Smith (New York: Harper and Bros, 1880).

¹² Paul Tschackert, “Syncretism,” 221.

The controversy largely ended in a stalemate with the death of Calovius in 1686, but not before the word “syncretist” had become a pejorative epithet for one who too readily abandon elements of Christian doctrine, in this case in order to seek unity with other churches.

The controversy itself, insofar as it represented certain preoccupations of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, left a legacy that endured within Christianity largely until the ecumenical movement of the 20th century—a legacy that deeply informs contemporary conversations about syncretism. Calixtus and Calovius argued about the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith constituting ultimate authority of the Christian belief. Is the *regula fidei* a succinct core of Christian faith, as for Calixtus? Or does doctrine require meticulous elucidation through confessional statements that resolve numerous ongoing debates within the community of the faithful, as for Calovius? The tendencies of Calixtus and Calovius as reconciler and strict dogmatist, respectively, found various expressions in subsequent centuries as Christians continued to struggle between doctrinal uniformity and ecclesial unity. Centuries later, Anglicans in the Oxford Movement who sought unity with the Roman Catholic Church, for example, would also argue for the Vincentian Canon as a means of common doctrine.¹³ Meanwhile in 17th century Germany, polemics pressed opposing camps into stronger and more exclusive positions as they distinguished themselves from one another.¹⁴

¹³ I explore the Vincentian Canon further in Chapter 5, as John Henry Newman offered important cautions about the Canon as a means of unity.

¹⁴ While Christianity had long promoted expressions of doctrinal unity, displayed in its creeds and the agreements of its early ecumenical councils, in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation uniformity became more detailed and more strictly articulated. In retrospect, many theologians viewed the Syncretistic Controversy as a taint upon the history of the church—a time when internal Christian squabbles over minutiae of doctrine threatened a larger mission. Tschackert, in a statement representative of many European Christians before the First World War, wrote in 1908, “The despotic determination [of Calovius] to force a *Consensus repetitus*, as the only and final dogma and theology before which all investigation and progress must fall prostrate, raised up its own factional limits, and the most deplorable result, surviving to the present, is the alienation from the church of educated men, thereby the demoralization of a great unity spirit, for the need of the German Evangelical Church is suffering.” (Tschackert, “Syncretism,” 223)

What Calixtus and Calovius shared in common, however, proves even more pertinent to our concerns. Both Calixtus and Calovius sought an ahistorical, unchanging articulation of Christianity, albeit with opposing degrees of specificity. Calixtus sought a static formulation of faith from the 5th century that would serve as a measuring line for Christians across time—the Vincentian Canon. Calovius sought a detailed exposition of the faith that would clarify doctrine and resolve questions to such an extent that future conflicts over doctrine would be avoided. That is, once such detail has been articulated, it requires no additional supplements. Tschackert writes, “According to Calovius pure doctrine is the only necessity; it is ready-made and complete, the ecclesiastical norm, admitting of neither addition nor reduction.” Notably for Calovius, logical consistency became paramount, at the expense of historical considerations. If salvation comes through reconciliation with the triune God by way of Jesus Christ, his eccentric doctrines like the knowledge of Old Testament figures of the doctrine of the Trinity is logically consistent, if absurd from an historical standpoint.¹⁵ Regardless, for Calixtus and Calovius fear of conflict and fear of syncretism led to formulations of doctrine that removed the gospel from engagement with the variabilities of history. They both forged unity through common belief, with practices and tasks of Christianity largely overlooked.¹⁶ Despite their vehement disagreements, the legacies of their shared approach continue to inhibit careful analysis of syncretism.

1.2. Definitions Abound: Syncretism in 18th-19th Centuries

The debates of Calixtus and Calovius proved formative but not definitive. Their conflicts gave a polemical dimension to syncretism and Calovius added a caustic connotation. Calovius’ false

¹⁵ Calovius thereby shows that accounting for history should become part of any account of how humans reason—a recurring theme across this dissertation.

¹⁶ The contemporary heritage of such inclinations we will explore in Chapter 3, by way of Kathryn Tanner’s critiques in her book *Theories of Culture*.

etymology of syncretism proved quite successful, as philosophical dictionaries in subsequent centuries retained his sense of confused mixing. Between the Syncretism Controversy and the 20th century, however, syncretism carried no single, definitive connotation. In fact, it continued to carry both positive and negative meanings well into the early 20th century; it could signify praise or disdain depending upon its context. Politicians and philosophers drawing from Plutarch and Erasmus spoke enthusiastically of syncretism, church historians or philosophers who drew from Calovius claimed the term only implied incoherence. During this period, the word also came into circulation in the history of religions school, carrying a largely neutral connotation. Notably, Christian missionaries—the circles in which syncretism would eventually carry its most pejorative sense—rarely used the term during this time. When they did, they used it in a largely descriptive sense until the early 20th century.

Among those who employed the term negatively, philosophers saw syncretism as attempts to unite too many varying strands into untenable union. In 1766, *A Concise History of Philosophy and Philosophers* portrayed syncretism as uniting opposing factions at the expense of coherence. Plato, they claimed, attempted to unite other philosophers such as Socrates, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, and Parmenides, “mangling them in such a manner as to adapt them more easily to his scheme”; Plato’s syncretism was simply an unsuccessful “endeavor to reconcile all.”¹⁷ Similarly, a philosophical essay from *Knight’s Quarterly Magazine* in 1824 regarded ancient philosophy following Plato and Aristotle as too loose in its syntheses:

It was certainly a singular era in the history of the human mind, when, not only all the religions of polytheism were amalgamated into one incoherent mass, and almost all the jarring sects of philosophy were forced into union, but this multifarious superstition and

¹⁷ Jean-Henry-Samuel Formey, *A Concise History of Philosophy and Philosophers* (London, Newberry, 1766), 104.

this syncretistic philosophy, instead of being opposed to one another, were blended into one religious system.¹⁸

Due to the union of too many oppositions, syncretism implied untidiness, a lack of rigor. By the late 1800s, philosophers began to contrast syncretism with eclecticism, the former being “the jumbling together of different systems or parts of a system without due respect to their being consistent with one another” and the latter being the joining together of parts “brought together [with] a kind of congruity and consistency,” according to philosopher Charles Krauth. By this account syncretism seeks no reconciliation of opposing doctrines, “it merely places them in juxtaposition.”¹⁹

Yet this negative appraisal was by no means a consensus among philosophers and theologians. Philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, a significant figure in the German *Sturm und Drang* movement and friend of the poet Goethe, spoke of syncretism with great appreciation. In his book *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, published in German in 1786 and in English translation in 1800, he saw syncretism as an effort “fought to unite the principles of all parties.”²⁰ In examining this same period of Hellenistic philosophy, he found syncretism vital to its generative capacity. Hellenistic philosophy thrived because it harnessed the interactions of many different cultures interacting within the expansive Greek and Roman empires. He wrote,

From this conflux of nations, and the gradual amalgamation of the sentiments of all in the Greek and Roman Empire, arose the *modern Platonic philosophy*, as it was called, and particularly that singular *syncretism*, which sought to unite the principles of all parties,

¹⁸ Hamilton Murray, “The Later Ages of Heathen Philosophy,” in *Knight's Quarterly Magazine*, Volume 2 (London: Charles Knight, 1824), 158.

¹⁹ Charles Krauth, *A Vocabulary of the Philosophical Sciences* (New York: Sheldon and Company: 1878), 503-504. Much Christian literature during this time focused largely upon Calovius and Calixtus (for example, John Lawrence Mosheim, *An Ecclesial History, Ancient and Modern*, trans Archibald Maclaine (London: J. Haddon, 1810) and Wilhelm Münscher, *Elements of Dogmatic History*, trans James Murdock (New Haven: A. H. Maltby, 1830).). Some, however, used syncretism to speak of mixture similarly to these philosophers, such as “any syncretism with Arians” (Daniel Wilcox quoting Dr. Cheynel in *The Noble Stand, the Third Part* (London: Cruttenden, 1720), 222.).

²⁰ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, transl T. Churchill (New York: Bergmann Publishers, 1966 [from first English translation published 1800]), 397.

and in a short time assimilated the ideas of Indians, Persians, Jews, Ethiopians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and Barbarians. This spirit prevailed wonderfully in the Roman Empire, as every where philosophers sprung up, who added the notions of their own native places to the general mass: but Alexandria was the spot where it most eminently flourished. Into this ocean the drop of Christianity was cast, and attracted to itself whatever it supposed itself capable of assimilating.²¹

By this account, syncretism led to insight as Hellenistic authors drew from a wider range of sources than they could have before; syncretism led to exchange, dialogue to wisdom. Indeed, Herder contended that Christianity's own beauty and richness emerged from this intellectual syncretism as Christianity grew in Alexandria, Egypt and thereby acquired elements of such philosophy: "If Jerusalem were its cradle, Alexandria was its school," he wrote.²²

Later in the mid-19th century political circles, the term also retained Plutarch's positive sense, particularly through an influential essay by French historian and statesman François Guizot. Guizot, who would eventually serve as the French Prime Minister in the mid-19th century, encouraged cultural syncretism between political and ecclesial parties in a popular essay entitled "*Du catholicisme du protestantisme et de la philosophie en France.*" Amid the growth of European nationalism, he urged French national unity over factionalism, arguing that rival political parties as well as rival Catholics and Protestants contributed to the distinctive union that was French culture. Rather than one faction defining French identity, what proved distinctly French was the sum its varying factions. Frances Foster Barham, English translator of the tract, advocated a similar strategy within British culture and politics of the early-mid 19th century, calling the essay "Syncretism and Coalition" in its 1839 publication.²³ Similarly, London-based

²¹ Herder, *Outlines*, 397-398, italics his. Syncretism appears also in the original German as *synkretismus*. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Hartknoch, 1786), 319.

²² Herder, *Outlines*, 397.

²³ Frances Foster Barham, trans, "Syncretism and Coalition," originally published in 1839, appears in *The Spirit of Literature: A Collection of Remarkable Tracts and Pamphlets, Vol I* (London: Sherwood and Bowyer, 1844). The English translation opens with this curious epigraph:

intellectual magazine *The Monthly* spoke of syncretism in glowing terms in the magazine's first issue, using it frequently in subsequent issues. In a public letter addressed to Queen Victoria, the editors promoted coalition-building, citing Guizot, and hailed the syncretists of ecclesial history as models for her own political strategy. Syncretism and catholicity appear synonyms, as they suggested that the Queen model politics upon ecclesial irenics. Contrary to promoting confusion and incoherence, syncretism binds differences together in a kind of mystical nationalism. Their rhetoric drew explicitly from religious language of praise and honor to promote national harmony. In florid language, they wrote:

Bright and youthful Queen whose mind is now opening in its first clearness and amplitude, nor yet overclouded and contracted by the impious quarrels of parties, O seek the sublimer sovereignty of religion, and the larger empire of universal syncretism, patronage, and coalition. Thus become the delight of mankind, and the glory of thy people. In this thy true greatness lies, thy true honor and happiness. In that lofty and matchless empire where thou alone dost reign, be like the moon when she traverses the eternal azure, and looks down from her glorious serenity on the earth beneath.

Such be thy sublime monarchy, O dawning star of Britain! Impersonate that great Spirit of Unity who is above all, and in whom all consist. Outsoar all parties, and embrace them all. Be the Catholic of the Catholics, and the Protestant of the Protestants, and the Conservative of the Conservatives, and the Whig of the Whigs. Let all look up to thee as their common glory and consolation; let none rise above thee in catholicity, or extend beyond thee in philanthropy; but follow that supreme law whose seat is the bosom of God, and whose voice the harmony of the universe.²⁴

The Monthly went on in subsequent magazines to clarify syncretism from eclecticism, in response to readers' concerns that syncretism leads to undue confusion. Yet *The Monthly* made a different distinction than the philosophical dictionaries above, saying that syncretism combines differences into a productive result.

For the sake of the ladies, it is premised that the word Syncretism is derived from the Greek sun (together) and keraw (to join). Plutarch in his Essay on Brotherly Love, uses suncretismos, as precisely synonymous with *conjunction*. In modern times, Syncretism has been employed by learned writers to signify the *science of coalition*, and in this sense it is adopted in the following pamphlet.

This false etymology overlooks Plutarch's direct reference to Cretans.

²⁴ "A Loyal Address to the Queen's Most Gracious Majesty," *The Monthly Magazine*, ed John Heraud, Vol I Jan-Jun (London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, 1839), 147-155.

Later in the 19th century, *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, another intellectual magazine of the day, employed the term with less exuberance by conceiving neutral connotations. They displayed the term's fluidity and incongruent definitions. In 1841 they published an essay expressing concern about the prevalence of syncretism in politics. Such mixture led to too little cohesion in the body politic, too loose a confederation. The state was united only in appearance. They wrote, lamenting, "We esteem the body more than the soul of the state."²⁵ About a decade later, *Fraser's* ran a book review of H. A. Holden's edition of *The Octavius of Minucius Felix* in 1853 which referenced religious syncretism. The Octavius was a 2nd century Christian apologetic in the form of a dialogue between a pagan and a Christian. The anonymous reviewer wrote that Minucius and his pagan interlocutor both employed syncretism, for each appropriated diverse intellectual resources in their respective arguments. On the syncretism of paganism the reviewer wrote:

The philosophy which at the time Minucius was writing arrayed itself against Christianity, was both in its form and purpose syncretic—that is, it aimed at a species of notional optimism, and attempted to harmonize all previous systems, and to extract from each, however discordant or however irreconcilable their joint or several stock of truth.²⁶

Indeed, the reviewer continued, the Roman emperors themselves strove for such syncretism in both religious and cultural senses as a strategy for consolidating disparate peoples of various cultures into a single coherent political whole. Yet neither was Christianity immune to such

²⁵ Frans Xavier Baader, "Religious Authority the Principle of Social Organization," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 23 Feb 1841. Translation of "Grundziige der Societatsphilosophie" 1837.

²⁶ Review of *The Octavius of Minucius Felix*, ed. H. A. Holden, *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, January – June 1853, 293-294. See also Carston Colpe's detailed reference to this Fraser's citation in his "The Phenomenon of Syncretism and the Impact of Islam" in Kehl-Bodrogi, Krisztina, Barbara Kellner Heinkele, and Anke Otter Beaujean, eds. *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East: Collected Papers of the International Symposium* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 35-48. Here, and in the *Dictionary of Religion*, Colpe describes syncretism's appearance in *Fraser's* as its first use in religious studies. Given our assessment above, this is a substantial overstatement. Colpe may have based this judgment off of the Oxford English Dictionary, in which this reference to syncretism in *Fraser's* appears more neutral compared to earlier entries. "Syncretism," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, Volume XVII, *Su-Thrivingly* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 475.

syncretism, the author suggested: “the Christians were most inclined to fraternize with the Platonic academy, and a syncretic reconciliation had in fact commenced in some quarters, and especially at Alexandria, between them.”

Thus, during the 19th century, syncretism implied any number of incongruent things. For political elites it conjured a means of promoting nationalism; for theologians and philosophers it brought to mind the joining together of various ideas or schools of thought, even if incongruently. In the last example from *Fraser’s*, syncretism evoked a neutral sense for religious mixture—which would carry over to the history of religions school later in the 19th century, covered in the next chapter.²⁷ Before moving to representative figures in the 20th century whose treatment of syncretism proved pivotal for later decades and for the contemporary moment, however, let us examine how and when the term emerged as pejorative in Christian missionary circles. This shift deserves particular attention, since its connotation proved so influential in contemporary literature.

1.3. Turn to the Pejorative in Christian Mission Literature

During the 19th- and early 20th-centuries, uses of syncretism in mission literature could be either descriptive, negative, or positive: no single connotation proved decisive. In the monthly journal of a missionary organization called the Evangelical Alliance, for example, an 1861 article calls the joining together of Christianity and Islam in missionary contexts a syncretism, but its tone is simply descriptive. Even if the author eventually criticized such religious mixture, the label

²⁷ These by no means exhaust the uses of the term, of course. There was an organization in London called the Syncretic Association in the 1840s, hosting lectures such as “The Nature and the State of English Drama.” One of the few instances of syncretism employed in the physical sciences was by chemist George Farrer Rodwell, who viewed syncretism as a hasty generalization in his “On the Theory of Phlogiston” in *Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science* Vol 35.4, Jan-Jun 1868 (London: Taylor and Francis), 28.

syncretism only explained the phenomenon.²⁸ As late as 1913, James Shepard Dennis' *The Modern Call of Missions* takes a Calixtian approach to syncretism, sympathetically calling it a means of finding common doctrine among Christians.²⁹ Of the negative literature, missionaries especially referenced East Asian religious traditions. Largely due to the sentiment that Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are harmonious in their teachings, missionaries worried Christianity might lose its distinctiveness were it considered harmonious with them as well.³⁰

Gustav Warneck, the founder of the field of missiology, offered a similarly negative portrayal of “Asian syncretism” as a threat to Christianity. Speaking of Japanese Christianity in his 1884 *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from Reformation to the Present Time*, Warneck encouraged shifts “in the forms of worship and constitution” according to the “national peculiarities of Japan.” But theological shifts he strongly discouraged. Warneck represented a quite typical sentiment among Western Christians, that seemingly “external” aspects of Christianity like its worship and ecclesial polity might shift in various cultures, but that the Western forms of doctrines should be wholly transported. In a notably revealing statement, he feared “a Christianity different from Western, i.e. from historical Christianity.” Western Christianity here serves as the sole normative standpoint for “historical” Christianity. Such

²⁸ Rev. R. W. Monsell, “The Religious State of the Nations of Eastern Europe and Western Asia,” in *Evangelical Christendom: Its State and its Prospects, Vol 2* (London: William John Johnson, 1861). He writes: “The rise of reforming sects, aiming at a syncretism of Mohammedanism, and of a modified form of Christianity, is a remarkable symptom of the process which is going on in men's minds. The most important specimen of this kind is the sect founded by Omar Effendi, at Broosa and in the neighbourhood. It is a sort of mysticism, presenting much that is analogous to the primitive doctrines of the Society of Friends. Its founder is at present in exile” (658). A work of comparative theology in Christianity and Hinduism from 1885 speaks similarly. Referring to India, the author employs syncretism descriptively not pejoratively. Count Goblet d'Alviella, *The Contemporary Evolution of Religious Thought in England, America, and India*, trans J. Moden (London: Williams and Norgate, 1885), 273ff.

²⁹ Dennis admires the effort of such irenics but was skeptical of its prospects. He instead promoted common and coordinated mission endeavors among various mission societies rather than competition between them. James Shepard Dennis, *The Modern Call of Missions* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1913).

³⁰ See for example Charles C. Starbuck, “Theological and Religious Intelligence: A General View of Missions” in *The Andover Review* 7 (Jan-Jun 1887), 214. Another writer describes such syncretism as “a bleak black cloud on the horizon of Japanese Protestantism.” G. A. Gollock, review of *The Most Vital Mission Problem of the Day*, Frederick Schwager, *International Review of Missions* 5 (Jan 1916), 683-685.

deviations, he feared, emerged in part from exposure to Western historical-critical scholarship: “This tendency is undoubtedly connected also with the modern critical theology introduced into Japan not from Germany alone which has produced in the heads of many young Japanese more confusion than enlightenment and has favoured their inclination to rationalism.”³¹ Such scholarship highlighted ways Christianity itself had mixed with its surrounding cultures across its history, potentially relativizing the gospel message.

By the World Missionary Conference of 1910 in Edinburgh, conference contributors still largely saw syncretism as a descriptive term, yet made increasingly negative conclusions. The term also shifted from Asian religious contexts to any geographic context—or at least any context outside the West. Contributor H. A. A. Kennedy described Hindu religious blendings as “curious religious syncretism.” Drawing from Adolph von Harnack, he compared syncretism in the early church to syncretism in their own time, arguing that syncretism helped Christianity spread to new regions but came “at too great a cost” as paganism infused Christianity.³² Another contributor, speaking on indigenous religions especially in Africa said, “In all his labours ... the missionary must never attempt to combine Animism and Christianity. A syncretism is impossible.”³³ Indeed, the conference itself exhibited the sorts of fissures that would become

³¹ Gustav Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from Reformation to the Present Time*, trans. George Robson (New York: Fleming Revell, 1903), 314-315. Similarly negative appraisals of syncretism also arose in biblical scholarship regarding the mixture of YHWH worship and Canaanite religion, for example George Barlow, *A Homiletical Commentary on the Books of Kings* (London: Richard D. Dickenson, 1885), 164.

³² H. A. A. Kennedy, “The Missions of the Early Church in their Bearing on Modern Missions” in *World Missionary Conference 1910: To Consider Missionary Problems in Relation to the Non-Christian World, Volume 9* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910), 174 and 181, respectively. On the early church’s use of Greek philosophy, in “General Conclusions” of Volume IV commissioners wrote: “it was ... through the endeavours of the Church of the early and later ages to conciliate the non-Christian world of that time, by accepting and using and transforming its thought, its superstitions, and its usages, that there entered into the Church alien and dangerous elements which poisoned its life at the very springs, and cost it untold sorrows and agonies ere they were expelled from its faith. It may be that the warning of history is still needed in our modern world and in the India of to-day.” (Vol 4, 247-248) For a recent retrospective on the 1910 conference, see Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

³³ Volume 4, 24.

crucial to syncretism's subsequent connotations. Missionaries and scholars presented widely varying views of Christianity's relationship with other religions, even while they differed as to whether historical critical scholarship offered new openings of interpretation in Christianity or threatened long-held orthodoxies. Overall, rising concern over syncretism reflected an increasingly anxious and defensive stance in missionary circles—and Western Christianity more widely—regarding rising secularism and pluralism in Western societies.³⁴

By the 1920s the term became more consistently negative. Protestant missionary efforts grew in public recognition, while Europeans' and North Americans' knowledge of religions beyond Christianity grew. In response, theologians and missiologists worried that Jesus might become a revered figure in other religions without the entirety of the gospel message being absorbed. Charles Harris, in his book *Creed or No Creed*, expressed such a worry. "There is only one effective barrier against syncretism," he wrote of "heathen" religion, "and that is the fearless assertion of positive dogma."³⁵ By this point, Harris required no additional qualification for syncretism; he did not need to explain further whether a "syncretism" be positive or negative. The 1928 missionary conference in Jerusalem spoke similarly: delegates did not necessarily eschew borrowing from other religious sources—some contributors encouraged it outright—but delegates did consistently discourage syncretism. Renowned Quaker Rufus Jones, for example, detected a great opening for Christianity in its encounter with other religions, an opening like that of Christianity's early encounters with Greek philosophy. He told the Jerusalem gathering, "What ought to have happened long ago, and what must happen now as soon as possible, is that

³⁴ Conference attendees also differed widely over the role of the social gospel as a means of responding to these challenges; many saw great potential in the social gospel while others claimed it distracted from Christianity's core spiritual message.

³⁵ Charles Harris, *Creeds Or No Creeds?: A Critical Examination of the Basis of Modernism* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co, 1922), 315.

the leaders of the Church and the leaders of the Christian forces generally should joyously welcome all freshly discovered truth as from God, and should re-interpret Christianity in the light of all the truth that can be demonstrated as truth,” he wrote.³⁶ Even if Christianity can grow in its wisdom from outside traditions, however, *syncretism* proved out of bounds for Jones. In a similar statement, W. E. Hocking of Harvard University encouraged missionaries to view Christianity as “hospitable” to other forms of thought and to their experiences of other religions. Yet he perceived syncretism as a line which could not be crossed. He compared syncretism in religion with eclecticism in philosophy: “mere syncretism has no charter of life in it,” he wrote, because it thoughtlessly combines its sources without careful concern for coherence.³⁷ (We see, again, syncretism and eclecticism being used in divergent and inconsistent ways.) Quite revealingly, Europeans were the ones primarily worried about syncretism, and worried for churches outside Europe. “Another topic that claimed special attention was the danger of syncretism,” the conference proceedings said, “which many, especially in the continent of Europe, feel confronts the younger churches.”³⁸ Even though the 1928 conference included substantially more voices from outside Europe and North American than the 1910 gathering, Europeans expressed little worry about religious mixture closer to home.³⁹ Indeed, a decade after

³⁶ Rufus Jones, in *The Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council, March 24-April 8, 1928, Volume I* (New York: International Missionary Council, 1928), 245. He continues, “That is what Clement of Alexandria insisted upon when Christianity was still young. ‘Truth by whomever spoken,’ he declared, ‘is from God.’ For him the great Greek philosophers were forerunners of Christ, as were the Hebrew prophets. ... The most important single spiritual task before the religious world to-day is the discovery of a similar use of the present-day intellectual conquests of thought for the enrichment and expansion of our Christian faith.” (246).

³⁷ In speaking of Christian mission, he wrote, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven hidden in measures of meal. ... Let them hide religion in the measure of the world’s meal, knowing that the result will be an enlarged and truer conception of their own religion.” (302)

³⁸ Vol 3, pp. 121-122.

³⁹ One contributor to the Jerusalem conference defied this trend, even if his voice proved the most vociferous against syncretism. Syncretism was an “ominously rising tide ... in the modern world,” not limited to non-Western regions. He also worried about proposals like those of Rufus Jones and Hocking, which gave too much ground to other religions. Failing to stipulate “the essential difference and absolute uniqueness of Christianity,” he worried that certain conference papers were “drifting on the dangerous waters of syncretism.” This voice was Hendrick Kraemer,

the Jerusalem Conference, the term syncretism was almost entirely pejorative in Christian mission. To call something syncretism required no additional clarification.⁴⁰

This turn to the pejorative, like most transitions in language, occurred slowly and for multiple reasons. While not all such reasons are entirely clear, two factors repeatedly appear across this literature. First, as the contributors to the 1910 and 1928 missionary conferences indicated, European and North American Christians experienced unprecedented exposure to the wide variety of religious expression across the world. Pluralism again proved the context-shaping cultural paradigm that allowed missionaries, and Christians in general, to notice syncretism at all.⁴¹ Such exposure pressed certain affirmations of Christianity in ways not felt before—or at least in recent centuries—regarding the exclusivity, rigidity, or porosity of Christianity’s self-identity. Most contributors to these missionary conferences imagined a golden mean between accommodation of other religions and resolute Christian distinctiveness, but they differed fiercely on determining that mean. Wherever they located it, however, “syncretism” came to indicate undue cultural accommodation. Few offered guidance, however, as to which cultural mixtures would be acceptable and which norms and standards might be employed to determine such. Tragically, European and North American Christians consistently saw other churches in danger of syncretism with little worry—or even awareness—of the complicated webs of their own Christianity’s mixture with culture.⁴²

renowned Dutch missiologist whose writings—covered in the next section—decisively shaped modern formulations of syncretism. Hendrick Kraemer was himself unable to attend the Jerusalem conference due to illness, but another delegate read remarks he had prepared for prior regional gatherings held in preparation for the Jerusalem meeting under the topic “What is the value of the religious values of the non-Christian religions?” (345-348).

⁴⁰ In 1934, for example, John Verst wrote in the *Christian Century*, “Christianity has never been able to abide syncretism. It has all along felt that it had something peculiarly its own; that something being Christ.” Vol 51, 24.

⁴¹ As philosopher Stanley Cavell writes, “The idea is that the problem of the other is discovered through telling its history.” *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 468.

⁴² Exceptions of course exist, including Ernst Troeltsch and Hendrick Kraemer, addressed later in this chapter.

Gustav Warneck's remarks regarding modern methods of biblical criticism reveal a second aspect of syncretism's pejorative turn. Warneck not only expressed concerns about churches syncretizing and thereby comprising "historic" and "Western" Christianity. The culprit of such syncretic compromise was "modern critical theology." Warneck worried that new methods of biblical criticism exposed biblical texts to historical scrutiny in ways that relativized their status as unique means of revelation. Warneck was hardly alone in these concerns. As such methods detected historical inconsistencies within biblical texts, holy scripture—and thereby God's perceived action in history—seemed tainted by the contingencies of human history. Archaeologists found no historical evidence for Israelites leaving Egypt in the numbers given in the Pentateuch; they found little evidence of conquests described in Joshua; they discovered extensive borrowing in Israel's ancient religion from local Canaanite religion even in the strictest expressions of ritual practices. New Testament scholars and theologians began contrasting the Jesus of ancient Palestine with the divine figure revered in Christian creeds, seeing the latter as a construct of Greek philosophy as much as historical fact. Lines between God's activity in the world and human calculation in history blurred. In liberal and conservative circles alike, many Christians sought something stable amid these fresh historical challenges. All of this took place within the increasingly modern northern European concern for "authenticity", as in the scholarly pursuit of the historical Jesus. For a church already facing rising secularism and pluralism, historical criticism of its scriptures only added to its defensive stance. Many responded with a static expression of the gospel that seemed to withstand the winds of historicism. Syncretism became either something accidental to the core of the gospel, or a betrayal of the gospel. Adolf von Harnack and Hendrick Kraemer represent each of these positions, both of which have become prominent in contemporary theology. The responses were, in fact, not dissimilar from

Calixtus and Calovius, insofar as they sought increased purity in Christian doctrine—whether general or specific—amid perceived threats to Christian identity.

II. Syncretism and Historicism: the Responses of Harnack and Kraemer

By now it is clear that, in the first half of the 20th century, the term syncretism could have taken up any number of connotations. Yet by mid-century, its meaning focused upon religious mixture considered outside normative Christianity. Two figures from this period aptly represent the varying responses to syncretism by theologians, Adolf von Harnack and Hendrick Kraemer. These two writers offer the most sophisticated Christian treatment of syncretism during the 20th century. For Harnack, writing on syncretism in the early 20th century, it was neither positive nor negative; syncretism simply accompanied Christianity's mission expansion. For Kraemer, however, writing alongside and in the spirit of Karl Barth's early work, Christianity's distinctiveness as revelation from God was at stake, thus he eschews any hint of syncretism.

II.1. Adolf von Harnack

By Adolf von Harnack's account, syncretism can be either an asset or a hurdle for Christianity, depending on the context. As new findings from historical critical studies became increasingly influential in Christian theology, Harnack provided an account of Christianity responsive to this new research. He writes with great awareness of scholarly literature exhibiting the shifting developments in Christian belief and practice in its early centuries—what would become called the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. With assiduous historical research, Harnack argued that syncretism became part of Christianity shortly after Jesus' life in Palestine. Indeed, Christianity required syncretism in its early missionary expansion across the

Roman Empire in order to flourish. Some such syncretisms proved pivotal to Christianity's growth and development. Yet syncretism could become a hurdle as well, because Christianity inevitably needs to whittle away various additions that accumulate over the years. Such pruning was the task of the Protestant Reformation, a task Harnack saw himself continuing. As a way of discerning the gospel kernel from its accumulated husks, Harnack offered an essence to Christianity that escapes the changes and chances of history. The essence then proves a measuring line for true Christianity.

Harnack's most extensive writing on syncretism came in his 1902 book *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*. In this volume, he took research from his *History of Dogma* for a book "devoted to the mission and spread of the Christian religion during the first three centuries of our era."⁴³ He described Christianity evolving into a syncretistic religion, from its non-syncretic origin in Jesus. "Christianity was not originally syncretistic itself," he wrote, for Jesus' original teachings emerged within Judaism, not in relationship with other religions. Yet Jesus' early disciples, "who were responsible for the primitive shaping of Christianity," mingled his teaching with Greek and so-called "Oriental" religious elements.⁴⁴ At this time in the History of Religions School, a "syncretistic religion" referred to religions which had blended elements from various sources into a single whole, like Manichaeism. (Chapter 2 offers more detail regarding this scholarship.) Even if Jesus did not syncretize in his own teaching, at least according to Harnack, his disciples did, given the syncretic Hellenistic world in which they lived. "The soil of Hellenism," included the blending of Platonism, Neoplatonism,

⁴³ Adolf von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, Vol 1, trans by James Moffatt (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1908), viii.

⁴⁴ von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, 35.

and Near Eastern religious thought. Within this context, Christianity took many such elements into its own affirmations.

Early Christianity's ability to syncretize with this Hellenistic thought-world proved to be one of its greatest strengths, according to Harnack. Christianity flourished because of its syncretic capaciousness. As it borrowed ideas from Hellenism, it used them "to promote its own development."⁴⁵ Throughout the expansion of its first three centuries, Christianity's growth and evolution depended upon incorporating certain syncretisms. Yet it rarely incorporated syncretisms at face value. Christianity borrowed from various environments while transforming their religious sensibilities. Christianity, he wrote, takes "materials that it collected and endowed [them] with life and power as it developed into a syncretistic religion during its first three centuries."⁴⁶ He portrayed this early expansion in triumphant terms:

How rich, then, and how manifold are the ramifications of the Christian religion as it steps at the very outset on to pagan soil! ... It revealed to the world a special kind of syncretism, namely, the syncretism of a universal religion. ... Every force, every relationship in its environment, was mastered by it and made to serve its own ends. ... Yet, unconsciously, it learned and borrowed from many quarters; indeed it would be impossible to imagine it existing amid all the wealth and vigour of these religions, had it not drawn pith and flavour even from them. These religions fertilized the ground for it, and the new grain and seed which fell upon that soil sent down its roots and grew to be a mighty tree. Here is a religion which embraces everything. And yet it can always be expressed with absolute simplicity: one name, the name of Jesus Christ, still sums up everything.⁴⁷

Many so-called syncretistic religions had little if any universal aspirations, Harnack contended. Leaders of these religions combined cultic elements from various places into a single whole, especially as various geographic areas gained closer political and economic ties. Yet they did not aim to articulate a universal religion. Christianity was different, according to Harnack. It took

⁴⁵ Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, 35.

⁴⁶ Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, 86.

⁴⁷ Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, 312-313.

beliefs and practices from across the Mediterranean world and incorporated them into a singular religion while retaining an “absolute simplicity” in the name of Jesus Christ. Thus, unlike more geographically based syncretistic religions, Christianity also became an exclusive religion. It did not hastily combine with local religions without employing standards, Harnack seemed to say. Rather, Christianity sublimated various constitutive elements into a greater whole; Christianity “continued to be exclusive,” he wrote, “and yet drew to itself any outside factor of any value.”⁴⁸

By the 3rd century, due in part to its syncretism, Christianity came into “full bloom” by Harnack’s portrayal. Christianity achieved its “completed form.” Yet the very syncretism that led to its bloom came with costs. On the one hand, syncretized Christianity became part of what Harnack considered substantial human advances—Christianity was “a civilizing power.”⁴⁹ Not only did it advance the message of Jesus, Christianity “supplied the form in which syncretistic monotheism won the day.”⁵⁰ On the other hand, all sorts of extraneous elements became absorbed into Christianity that distracted from its central message. By the middle of the 3rd century, “Saints and intercessors, who were thus semi-gods, poured into the church,” he wrote. “Local cults and holy places were instituted. . . . The old gods returned; only, their masks were new. Annual festivals were noisily celebrated. Amulets and charms, relics and bones of the saints, were cherished eagerly.”⁵¹ In classic Protestant form, Harnack condemned such seemingly superfluous pieties.

⁴⁸ Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity, Vol 2*, trans James Moffatt (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1908), 336-337. As Chapter 2 shows, other so-called syncretistic religions like Manichaeism also employed standards as they incorporated from other religions. Whether Christianity’s standards were stricter than those of Manichaeism, for example, varied widely according to circumstance.

⁴⁹ Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, 318. Some pages later, he writes, “By this sign it conquered; for on all thing human, on what was eternal and on what was transient alike, Christianity had set the cross, and thereby subdued all to the world to come.” (337)

⁵⁰ Harnack, *Mission and Expansion, Vol 2*, 336.

⁵¹ Harnack, *Mission and Expansion, Vol 1*, 315-316.

Given such accumulations, Harnack clarified his method for incorporating syncretisms. Christianity cannot simply take in any new elements so long as they become sublimated. This approach leads to extraneous and distracting elements. Harnack spoke with both appreciation and reserve about such incorporations: “had she [the church] been summoned to the bar and asked what right she had to admit these novelties, she could have replied, ‘I am not to blame. I have only developed the germ which was planted in my being from the very first!’”⁵² It is one thing for Christianity to incorporate new ideas in its early centuries, when it is still a young religion, Harnack seems to be saying. Once Christianity has sufficiently matured, it cannot endlessly incorporate across the centuries. He wrote,

The reasons for the triumph of Christianity in that age are no guarantee for the permanence of that triumph throughout the history of mankind. Such a triumph rather depends upon the simple elements of the religion, on the preaching of the living God as the Father of men, and on the representation of Jesus Christ. For that very reason it depends also on the capacity of Christianity to strip off repeatedly such a collective syncretism and unite itself to fresh coefficients. The Reformation made a beginning in this direction.⁵³

The Reformation movement recognized that, at its own point in history, Christianity required not accrual but simplifying. Mindful of history of religions scholarship on historical processes in religion, Harnack acknowledged Christianity will continually syncretize. Yet it must also continually shed certain elements to add “fresh coefficients.” The Reformation “made a beginning” in simplifying Christianity, a beginning that Harnack sought to carry forward by distilling Christianity to a singular essence. Such an essence thereby allows Christianity to judge which syncretisms prove distracting and which permissible. He outlined this essence in the lectures that became the book *What is Christianity?*, published in 1900.

⁵² Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, Vol 1, 317-318.

⁵³ Harnack, *Mission and Expansion*, Vol 1, 318.

In these lectures, Harnack offered an essence to Christianity that transcends the particularities of history, even if it was first expressed in history by Jesus of Nazareth. Harnack's essence has often been critiqued as too biased toward a strict return to Jesus' original teachings, but this assessment does not quite do justice to Harnack—especially if *What is Christianity?* is read alongside other works like *Mission and Expansion*.⁵⁴ While the History of Religions School—Harnack included—deciphered between the original teachings of Jesus and later accumulations, Harnack's essence was not originalism. Instead, the essence of Christianity is something permanent that draws from its origin but is not necessarily coterminous with it. He wrote, “either the Gospel is in all respects identical with its earliest form ... or else it contains something which, under differing historical forms, is of permanent validity. The latter is the true view.”⁵⁵ Christianity's essence not only draws from original teachings of Jesus, but also from later aspects like Hellenism. In response to the growing historicism of his day, Harnack acknowledged Christianity's varieties across time and culture. He responded, as an historian and theologian, by determining the historically particular from the essential. He aimed to decipher between “the kernel and the husk.”⁵⁶ Determining such an essence not only encapsulates Christianity, but also provides a means to judge certain syncretisms as permissible or impermissible.

What is this essence of Christianity, then, that transcends history? Put succinctly, Harnack believed it to be eternal life in the soul of human beings. God as an eternal being has entered into temporal human beings such that—despite being bound in time—we possess

⁵⁴ See Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, trans Christopher Home (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), 8.

⁵⁵ Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, trans Bailey Saunders (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 13-14.

⁵⁶ Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 55.

eternity within us.⁵⁷ Jesus Christ both lived and proclaimed this message. Jesus, Harnack wrote, “was its personal realization and its strength, and this he is felt to be still.”⁵⁸ This essence carries two primary consequences, the infinite value of the human soul and the calling to a “higher righteousness” based in love and expressed in mercy. Much of Christianity’s genius abides in its ability to contain so much variance in belief and practice around a single center, Jesus Christ. But it can do so only by freeing religion from “self-seeking and ritual elements,” thereby reducing it “to *one* root and to *one* motive—love.”⁵⁹ As in *Mission and Expansion*, Harnack praises the Reformation for bringing Christianity back to itself, back to “its original purity.”⁶⁰

With a characteristic Protestant worry about purity of belief and the danger of ritualism, Harnack believed that such an essence could provide an ahistorical standard to guide discernment as to when syncretisms should be incorporated and when they should be eliminated. By Harnack’s account, Christians need not unduly worry about historicism, they need not fear the fact that scholars like Albert Schweitzer were increasingly pointing out the distance between the near eschatology of Jesus’ teachings and the church’s later assumption that Jesus would not return for many generations.⁶¹ They need not worry that Jesus’ teaching in Palestine later became infused with Hellenism. Historical circumstance has influenced the church throughout its history—from its Jewish origins through the early church’s use of Hellenism to the present day. Amid these historical changes, an ahistorical kernel remains; an essence can guide and adjudicate.

⁵⁷ Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 8, 62.

⁵⁸ Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 145.

⁵⁹ Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 72.

⁶⁰ Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 283.

⁶¹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Fortress Press, 2001 [1906]).

Harnack's arguments have been heavily criticized, for legitimate reasons I will explore shortly. First, however, one should recognize what is compelling about Harnack and his treatment of syncretism. His study of syncretism and his definitive essence of Christianity, taken together, provide a coherent—if limited—means for addressing which beliefs and practices may be considered within or beyond the bounds of normative Christianity. As an historian, Harnack recognizes that manifestly different expressions of Christianity have existed over time. These various expressions have often been inconsistent with one another, sometimes to a staggering degree. Medieval Byzantine Christians accustomed Orthodox Eucharistic liturgies would surely be at some strain to recognize much contemporary worship in the United States, and vice versa. One way to coherently respond to such variance, occurring under the single name of Christianity, is to provide an ahistorical essence. The essence gives sufficient content to acknowledge the centrality of Jesus in all Christianities, but does not require strict doctrinal conformity. If history constantly changes, if cultures inevitably differ from one another, then a standard or measure outside and beyond history and culture could seem the most cogent response.⁶² While Harnack does not expressly put in this way, his approach might suggest a “do no harm” principle for syncretisms. So long as syncretisms do not depreciate or distract from the essence of Christianity, they would be permissible. Yet if Christianity benefited from intellectual sources beyond its geographic origins in Palestine, especially in its early years, at times it also must trim down extraneous content that builds up over time. Again, having an ahistorical essence by which to judge which elements prove extraneous and which permissible ably guides the process. For Harnack, Christianity can hold an ahistorical and unchanging essence because human beings

⁶² J. D. Y. Peel describes European missionaries and Yoruba Christians narrating their approach to Christianity and culture in just this manner in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. “Syncretism and Religious Change,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 10, no. 2 (January 1968), 129-30.

themselves—despite their many variances—remain the same basic creatures across time. The “inmost constitution” of humans never changes, he writes.⁶³ All this may seem reasonable enough, but for one flawed premise. That is, that this “inmost constitution” could ever escape one’s history and culture.

German contemporary Ernst Troeltsch quickly challenged Harnack by pressing the logic of his “essence”. In his essay “What Does ‘Essence of Christianity’ Mean?”, Troeltsch wrote of Harnack’s project: “the ‘essence’ would have to be found in an ‘idea’ which is distinct from individual manifestations and also from the original form and which only finds expression in all of these together.”⁶⁴ Through this succinct summary, Troeltsch implied clear hurdles to Harnack’s project. Expressing and summarizing a religion—free of its origins, its historical manifestations, and its contemporary expressions—proves too abstract a task for any historically embedded human being. To a great degree, this response to historical criticism misses its central philosophical insight, that all activity relating to time-bound human beings bears the marks of history itself. There is no getting outside our historical embeddedness.⁶⁵ Indeed, Troeltsch argued, the term essence already assumes much that is inherently modern and, by implication, unfamiliar to Christians of past centuries. The notion “essence” assumes

that large coherent complexes of historical events are the development of an idea, a value, or a line of thought or purpose, which gradually develops in detail and consequences, which assimilates and subordinates alien materials and which continually struggles against aberrations from its leading purpose and against contradictory principles threatening from without.

⁶³ *What is Christianity?*, 8 and 149.

⁶⁴ Ernst Troeltsch, “What does ‘Essence of Christianity’ Mean?” in *Writings on Theology and Religion*, translated and edited by Robert Morgan and Michael Pye (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1977), 125. See also Sarah Coakley, *Christ without Absolutes: A Study of the Christology of Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford, Clarendon: 1989).

⁶⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, in his introduction to the edition of *What is Christianity?*, cited above, contends that Harnack “failed to realize the importance of the so-called religious-historical school” and never truly sympathized with them, as did his contemporary Ernst Troeltsch. Harnack “never portrayed the essence itself as a historical phenomenon,” he writes (x, xiii).

Again, Troeltsch described Harnack's project in such a way that questioned its very aim. Harnack granted the historical development of Christianity, its ability to incorporate and "subordinate" seemingly alien elements, and the challenge of responding to deviations and digressions. But the unstated assumption in Harnack, a distinctly modern one, is that "an idea, value, or a line of thought" is the singular initiating and propelling force behind historical events. Historical phenomena and material expressions take secondary importance, for the *idea* proves primary. The propelling force is not an event (such as the Resurrection) or a subsequent community (the church as the body of Christ).⁶⁶ Privileging an immaterial idea has the consequence of depreciating the physically incarnated Christ and subsequent implications of the incarnation across history.

Given Harnack's limitations, Troeltsch argued that theologians should use the notion of essence more carefully. While Troeltsch vacillated on the usefulness of the term "essence", he at least argued that—if used at all—it should indicate something in motion.⁶⁷ Essence "must be a developing principle," he wrote, for the Holy Spirit continues to speak to and inform Christianity in human history.⁶⁸ Troeltsch recognized that in the realm of material history, tugs between the objective and subjective are unavoidable. Any articulation of Christianity's essence will prove tentative in any ultimate sense. "To define the essence is to shape it afresh," he claims.⁶⁹ Indeed, elements of Christianity that now appear essential might, from a purely historical point of view,

⁶⁶ In this regard, Troeltsch quotes Loisy, cited above. "Harnack's conception is ... a radical formulation of individualistic protestantism freeing itself from the collective unity of the church. In a purely historical view the Gospel would be rather the root of the church, while the church is the living and inexhaustible expression of the Gospel; the essence is the actual history which necessarily arose at every point out of the context of circumstances and which was a necessary condition of the assertion of the Gospel under just those circumstances." (127).

⁶⁷ Lori Pearson argues that Troeltsch moved from employing "essence" as a term for Christian identity to abandoning it in favor of cultural synthesis (*Kultursynthese*) late in his career. Lori Pearson, *Beyond Essence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Theological Studies, 2008).

⁶⁸ "What does 'Essence of Christianity' Mean?", 151.

⁶⁹ "What does 'Essence of Christianity' Mean?", 162.

seem “fortuitous” additions, contingently added across history during antiquity, the Reformation, or the modern era.⁷⁰ The trouble is not only that Harnack attempts to reason outside of history. More importantly for Troeltsch, employing an abstracted ahistorical standard can overlook new movements and new insights of the Holy Spirit. “When we are certain that the spirit of Christ, through history, is speaking a new *word* to us,” he writes, “we do not need to be ashamed to admit that it is a *new word*.”⁷¹ In short, addressing syncretism through an essence like Harnack’s only overlooks the ongoing work of the Spirit.⁷²

If Harnack’s essentializing tactic proves quintessentially modern—as Troeltsch contended—it also proves quintessentially Western. Harnack exhibited a classic pattern of Western reasoning that itself inherently occludes perspectives outside itself. Harnack writes as one who has assessed the whole landscape of Christianity as reflected in his *History of Dogma*. Like so many Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers, his reasoning appears to have moved beyond the provincial toward universal expression. He can thereby speak for others, rising beyond the cultural and historical limitations of his own context. Once offered, this universal expression applies to any version of Christianity across time and culture. As with Warneck, the quintessential version of Christianity, the standard by which to measure others, is its Western expression. The conclusiveness of such reasoning need not allow anything new, at least not in such a way that might alter the existing Western standard. Once Christianity matured in the 3rd century, its essence could be extracted and applied universally.

⁷⁰ “What does ‘Essence of Christianity’ Mean?”, 142.

⁷¹ “What does ‘Essence of Christianity’ Mean?”, 168. Italics his.

⁷² As for whether the notion of “essence” is a useful tool for articulating the identity of Christianity, see Stephen Sykes careful treatment in *The Identity of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). Making a finalized determination on that matter is beyond the scope of this dissertation. At the very least, however, employing “essence” in Harnack’s fashion avoids key questions of historicity. In Chapter 4 I argue that “tradition” enables a more historically framed means of articulating Christian identity than many versions of a Christian essence, but that does not inherently preclude the possibility of “essence” as a potentially useful designation.

II.2. Hendrick Kraemer

Like Harnack, Hendrick Kraemer possessed a keen eye for the interconnections between syncretism, mission, and Christian transmission. Writing from the 1930s to the 1960s, he was an extraordinarily influential voice in the missionary movement of the early 20th century, particularly the Jerusalem missionary conference of 1928 and the Tambaram conference of 1938. Compared with Harnack, Kraemer writes in a new theological moment, during and after the rise of so-called neo-orthodoxy. His approach to syncretism reflects neo-orthodox concerns for the clairvoyance and utterly distinct character of God's revelation in Christ. In Kraemer, syncretism is less a distraction from an essence than it is the illicit mixing of Christianity and culture such that divine revelation loses its distinctive quality. Kraemer's work became the most representative work in 20th century theology on the subject of syncretism. His definitions of the term remain the most common ones and his inconsistencies continue to pervade present usage. Finally, like Harnack, his treatment of syncretism dodges questions of historicism. While Harnack avoids historicism by abstracting from history, Kraemer avoids it by suggesting that revelation is a category of knowledge that transcends history. This response remained a common one both in neo-orthodox and in postliberal approaches. I examine Kraemer's work on syncretism as outlined in his two major works, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, written for the 1938 Tambaram missionary conference and in response to W. E. Hocking, and his 1958 book *Religion and the Christian Faith*. Overall, Kraemer is a tragic figure in this dissertation. On the one hand, no other thinker I examine possessed an eye quite as keen in identifying colonial legacies. At the same time, his overall theological method provided too few tools for appreciating new theological insights that first appear "foreign" to Christianity. In this

regard, Kraemer exhibited obfuscations common to the missionary movement of his day: his title contrasting “the Christian message” with a “non-Christian world”, for example, is precisely the same language of separation between Christianity and “the world” used in the subtitle of the World Missionary Conference’s 1910 report.⁷³

In *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, Kraemer defined syncretism as *illegitimate mixture*, that is, the mingling of Christianity with various aspects of culture to such an extent that Christianity’s overall message becomes lost.⁷⁴ Kraemer did not worry about cultural mixture in itself—he readily acknowledged that Christianity constantly mingles with its cultural environs. Indeed, the fact that all cultures have religions of some kind suggested to him that “a point of contact [between Christianity and culture is] a given fact.” He writes, “The Christian faith has to function and move through this common psychological apparatus” existing in all humanity. Yet Christianity approaches cultural mixture differently than other religions, particularly those he called “naturalistic” religions, that is, most non-Abrahamic religions. Naturalistic religions, he said, tend to syncretize and are relativistic in their encounter with other religions. They easily incorporate “non-native” elements into their religious understanding as the religion travels across culture and across time. Kraemer argued that their core affirmations adapt and convert into new expressions without monikers like heresy and schism, because these religions do not carry the “absolute standard of reference” of Christianity. For most non-prophetic religions, he says, “A more adequate term [than syncretism], devoid of any value-judgment, would be amalgamation.” When religions lack confession or creed, amalgamation need not be avoided, rather it is part of the “necessary and normal traits in the religions that live on the primitive apprehension of existence. In view of the fundamental nature and structure of

⁷³ Cited above.

⁷⁴ Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 203.

these religions it is nothing capricious or unprincipled.”⁷⁵ Christianity arose within this Hellenistic religious environment that gave rise to mystery cults and so-called “syncretistic religions”, he claimed. Like Harnack, Kraemer also argued that Christianity emerged distinct from these other religions. For Kraemer, Christianity was the sole religion of that time that saw itself as exclusivist:

It is not to be marveled at that the prophetic religion of Biblical realism does not show this syncretistic, pragmatist, relativist and subjectivist trend of the naturalist religions. It contrasts entirely with the endless assimilative and adaptive elasticity of naturalistic monism. It is disturbing by its “exclusivist” attitude, that is not lessened in the least by the fact that the Bible radiates with the luster of love and freedom of the Spirit, and with the personality of Christ who sovereignly breaks through all limitations and proclaims the truth that “sets free.” This enigmatic “exclusivism” brought it about that amidst the tolerant and conforming mystery-cults Christianity stood alone “intolerant” and nonconformist.⁷⁶

As a concept, syncretism arose naturally within Christian discourse, even if it borrowed the term from Plutarch and retooled it, because Christianity contains stricter unconditional affirmations than other faiths, he argued. The “peculiar conception of syncretism could only grow in a Christian atmosphere ... because an absolute standard of reference is implicitly assumed.”⁷⁷

Kraemer developed these ideas further in his 1956 book *Religion and the Christian Faith*, which vacillated between acknowledging syncretism’s frequency while also retaining a pejorative sense for the term. On the one hand, he identified the ubiquity of cultural and religious mixture in all religions, drawing from the History of Religions School: “syncretism, cultural and religious, is for many reasons a persistent and universal phenomenon in human history. It cannot

⁷⁵ Kraemer, *The Christian Message*, 203.

⁷⁶ Kraemer, *The Christian Message*, 210-211.

⁷⁷ Kraemer, *The Christian Message*, 203. In his later book *Religion and The Christian Faith*, Kraemer expanded this point to acknowledge syncretism would prove a concern for Islam as well, given its rigorous understandings of revelation.

but happen, unless peoples live in entire isolation.”⁷⁸ At the same time, Kraemer wished to retain something of syncretism’s traditional disparaging character—at least in relation to Christianity—presumably to retain a term for illegitimate mixture. To do so, he suggested a distinction between phenomenological syncretism and theological syncretism. He wrote:

Syncretism is a phenomenological and a theological problem. We mean by “phenomenological”: what is syncretism, when we look at it as it functions concretely in religions and cultures? By “theological” we mean: what is there to say about syncretism in light of the question of ultimate truth in Christ?⁷⁹

Thus when Kraemer spoke of syncretism’s ubiquity, it pertained to phenomenological syncretism, that is, the inevitability of cultural mixture, presumably not theological syncretism. Christianity retains its status as a religion, along with Islam, whose “fundamental nature is unsyncretistic.”⁸⁰ Christianity may adapt to various cultures, but Christianity retains an uncompromising ultimacy.⁸¹ Perhaps emerging from his deeper exploration of historical writings on syncretism, he offered a new revised definition.⁸² He defined theological syncretism as “a systematic attempt to combine, blend and reconcile inharmonious, even often conflicting,

⁷⁸ Hendrick Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956), 389.

⁷⁹ Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, 392.

⁸⁰ Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, 397.

⁸¹ In this regard, Kraemer’s treatment of syncretism fits within his overall theology of religions. Kraemer situates theology of religions within ecclesiology rather than a wider rubric like fundamental theology. For Christians, Kraemer argued, God in Christ is the orienting point and center of all reality. As an apostolic fellowship based around this center, Christians then encounter other religions. These religions may contain aspirations of divinity—flashes of divine light, perhaps—but they do not see God in Christ and thus do not fully see divinity. There exist connecting points between other religions and Christianity, but not in sense that certain ideas and practices of these religions can be simply transferred to Christianity. (Notably, Kraemer does not like to say Christianity “fulfills” other religions, as that would be disrespectful to the coherence of those religions.) Kraemer is often criticized for this methodological starting point, which does not seek to examine other religions on their own terms, only through the Christian perspective of all reality being centered upon God revealed in Christ. He responds that his approach of always mentally remaining within his own Christian world is in fact more methodologically honest than scholars who believe that they leave aside their own presuppositions when examining another religion, but are unable to do so. For a comprehensive overview of Kraemer’s theology of religions, see Tim S. Perry, *Radical Difference: A Defense of Hendrik Kraemer’s Theology of Religions* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001).

⁸² Challenging the historicist Hermann Gunkel, he argues that Christianity began as syncretic but quickly turned anti-syncretic. He writes, “The main error of Gunkel is that he does not see how improbable it is that a religion, conceived and born in syncretism turned immediately after its appearance on the scene of history into a stubbornly un- and anti-syncretistic religion, despising syncretism as a form of atheism.” (*Religion and the Christian Faith*, 77) However historically incongruent this statement may be, it reflects his deeper engagement with historical research.

religious elements in a new so-called synthesis. This attempt is intentional, made on the basis of reflection.” The term now involves *systematic* and *intentional* efforts to blend “inharmonious” religious elements. While keeping his basic affirmation that Christianity is not a syncretistic religion, he acknowledged the extent to which it borrowed from other religious beliefs and practices, especially in its early centuries. “Prophetic” religions like Christianity and Islam, with purportedly more rigorous understandings of revelation, retain an aversion to syncretism. Thus syncretism becomes a “missionary problem” insofar as the church has to discern legitimate versus illegitimate cultural mixture.⁸³

Kraemer’s subsequent distinctions between syncretism and other forms of cultural mixture are some of the most revealing—and inadequate—aspects of his thought on the subject. As noted, he distinguished syncretism from *amalgamation*, which applies to uncontested religious mixture of so-called naturalistic religions that lack Christianity’s sense of prophetic interruption. He subsequently offered distinctions between syncretism and adaptation and between syncretism and absorption. He saw adaptation as pertaining to Christianity but less controversial than syncretism. It is “*expression* of the Christian faith in a style which is ... not that of a pot-plant, but of a seed sown in a specific soil.” Adaptation is contested, however, for he recognized that “there are knotty questions here” leading to conflicts.⁸⁴ Kraemer did not,

⁸³ Kraemer writes, “In other words, syncretism only becomes a problem, and in certain situations a matter of life and death, when *prophetic* religion, especially prophetic-apostolic religion such as Christianity, based on the assumption of God’s initiative in the act of divine self-disclosure, and naturalistic-cosmic (or naturalistic-monistic) religion meet each other; whether on the plane of the latent, non-rationalized primitive syncretism or of popular religiosity, or on the plane of identity-mysticism.” (*Religion and the Christian Faith*, 403)

⁸⁴ Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, 410, italics his. Kraemer is, again, at his best and worst in this regard: best in that he challenged Western churches who criticized others’ adaptation while ignoring their own. “Why do Westerners find it natural and justified that English, German and Dutch Christianity, for instance, should have their peculiar characteristics, style, and flavour, and are even reluctant in our own environment to enter fearlessly into the knotty questions implied by this fact, whereas, when it comes to the ‘younger churches’, we often impede them in their search for self-expression by immediately raising the knotty questions? Is that not weighing with two measures?” (410-411) Kraemer is at his worst in that there is no clear distinction between adaptation and syncretism.

however, offer criteria by which to determine whether something qualifies as adaptation versus theological syncretism. While this tentativeness was for worthy reasons—he wished to retain local freedom for churches to carry out their own discernment without Western norms interfering—it leaves no recognizable distinction between syncretism and adaptation. His third term, *absorption*, indicates how all major religions assimilate influences beyond their origin as they spread from place to place. Absorption is “adoption of originally extraneous elements,” he writes. He strictly contrasts absorption with syncretism, however, because absorption applies to Abrahamic traditions such as Christianity which has made “use of these elements as means for its own dynamism.”⁸⁵

Kraemer’s distinctions between syncretism and amalgamation, adaptation, and absorption remain far more declarative than descriptive. He does not indicate why certain examples qualify as adoption or absorption and not syncretism, save that the former examples fit within his neo-orthodox understanding of Christianity (and a related understanding of Abrahamic traditions). His distinction between amalgamation and syncretism, for example, depends upon a strong contrast between naturalist and prophetic religion. Yet many examples of naturalist religion also claim prophetic aspects. Bantu and Nilotic African religions, for example, would seem to neatly fit into his “naturalist” category, save for their long tradition of prophets. Such figures demonstrate continuity with past religious affirmations and practices while also possessing an interruptive quality similar to Kraemer’s claims regarding Christianity and Islam, yet seem outside his category of prophetic religion.⁸⁶ Old Testament prophets, meanwhile, syncretized

⁸⁵ Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, 398-399. He continues, “this whole process of attraction and repulsion, of absorption and adoption, inherent in the historical texture of human life, must therefore not be brought under the heading ‘syncretism’, but belongs to the Toynbeeian category of challenge and response.” (399)

⁸⁶ Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (James Clarke & Co., 1961) and Douglas Johnson, *Nuer Prophets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

with elements of Canaanite religion and Muhammad blended experiences of revelation with existing cultic practices in the Arabian Peninsula. These latter examples would seem far closer to syncretism than absorption, except for the fact of their designation as Abrahamic religions.⁸⁷

Differences between amalgamation, adaptation, absorption, and syncretism all draw upon his questionable distinction between phenomenological syncretism and theological syncretism. The criterion by which to judge phenomenological syncretism from theological syncretism is the biblical narrative itself, he claims, what he calls “biblical realism.” He writes, “Real initiation into the Bible is the only sure way of getting Christians immune to the subtly syncretistic temptation, and at the same time helping them, even without any learned expositions, to develop spiritual discernment and understanding.”⁸⁸ Kraemer’s biblical realism invites human beings to encounter within the Bible a world in which God acts and saves human beings—and the creation itself—a world of God’s purposive action that should in turn become the Christian’s world. This biblical world becomes the Christians’ reality.⁸⁹ This immersion into the biblical world, conditioned as it may be by the norms of neo-orthodoxy, becomes the bulwark against

⁸⁷ Figures like Aquinas, similarly, would seem to fit neatly within Kraemer’s definition of syncretism. Again, however, Kraemer considers the medieval Christian exchange with Aristotelianism too immense a project to call “syncretism”. “The enormous questions implied in these ‘morganatic’ marriages contain powerful tensions, which emerge from time to time in theological and religious development, but do not constitute what is called syncretism. They keep alive a permanent struggle between ‘systasis’ and ‘diastasis’.” (Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, 399.) If the primary criteria distinguishing Aquinas’ “absorption” from syncretism is simply its scale, one wonders how large “naturalist” religions qualify as syncretic while medieval Christian use of Aristotle avoids it.

⁸⁸ Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, 411.

⁸⁹ Contrary to common criticisms, Kraemer was not a biblicist. He employed historical criticism of scriptures and believed they could enlarge Christians’ understandings of the Bible. If anything, he was something like a proto-postliberal, who believed that the biblical narrative itself carries a coherence for the believer that becomes the ultimate reality of the world. When looking for contemporary figures resembling Kraemer, Tim Perry rightly points to George Lindbeck and Hans Frei. Noting such similarities between biblical realism and postliberalism, Perry quotes Lindbeck: “It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.” Also, for Lindbeck, scripture becomes ‘not simply a source of precepts and truths, but the interpretive framework for all reality’” (106). I will take up critiques of the postliberal school in Chapter 3 through a discussion of Kathryn Tanner’s *Theories of Culture*.

syncretism.⁹⁰ Yet this distinction avoids difficult questions of the history and development of Christian doctrine.

There exist clear instances of elements which once appeared “outside” Christian self-understanding that later entered into Christianity and subsequently became necessary aspects. *Homoousios*, which came to Christianity by way of Gnostics, once appeared beyond the bounds of the biblical world. Indeed, in mid-3rd century council in Antioch, the church expressly rejected *homoousios* in its excommunication of Paul of Samosata. In time, however, *homoousios* enhanced the ongoing project of understanding the mysteries of God in Christ. Christians certainly domesticated such concepts—they did not take *homoousios* or Logos strictly on the Gnostic and Stoic terms on which they first arrived in Christianity. But that does alter the fact that the biblical world became “enlarged” from its prior realm, so to speak, through the domestication of such “foreign” vocabulary. As I explore in Chapter 5, the 4th century debates around Arius were not debates over who was more faithful to the biblical text itself. If anything, Arius held a slight advantage in exegesis that closely followed the scriptures. In short, Arius and *homoousios* show that syncretism in one generation becomes orthodoxy in another. If orthodoxy itself comes to be in history—and continues to develop through history—then the fact that some syncretisms have become accepted orthodoxies should give considerable pause in claiming a genuine distinction between phenomenological syncretism and theological syncretism.

Kraemer and his biblical realism prove far more representative of 20th century theologians than may first appear.⁹¹ In many ways, he exhibits similar obviation regarding

⁹⁰ For an example of connections between Kraemer’s rhetoric and early Barth, see “The Strange New World within the Bible” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Peter Smith, 1957): 28-50.

⁹¹ In the Preface to his *Politics of Jesus*, John Howard Yoder makes a direct connection from his own work to Kraemer and biblical realism. He sees the book as “an exercise in fundamental philosophical hermeneutics, trying to apply in the area of the life of the Christian community the insights with regard to the distinct biblical worldview

historicism to early Barth and postliberals like Lindbeck. On the one hand, they claim to accept historical critical studies of scripture. Like Kraemer, they note that such studies enhance understanding of the bible while playing down its challenges. Barth, for example, would say that simply because Moses did not write the Pentateuch does not imply that the Pentateuch does not genuinely reflect God acting for and on behalf of the people of Israel. This statement is true as far as it goes, but it does not answer epistemological challenges posed by historicism and historical critical study. In biblical and doctrinal criticism, God's revelation seems so intertwined with the ambivalences of human history that God's action becomes more difficult to distinguish from human action. Kraemer's response, resembling at least the rhetoric of early Barth, was a renewed emphasis upon God's revelation as wholly other, as something beyond human thought, experience, and knowledge. As Kraemer put it, God's revelation is *sui generis*, of its own kind, incomparable. Knowledge acquired by revelation is distinct from knowledge acquired through ordinary human history. Christians can then carry on the practice of theology and biblical studies, content that historicism cannot apprehend the otherness of this divine message. Revelation comes as a revolutionary unveiling of the divine to the beleaguered and contingent task of ordinary human religion.⁹²

But questions of historicism remain unanswered. If human beings absorb God's revelation in our historical particularity, revelation comes to bear the marks of such particularity. After all, humans are the ones passing on and thereby bearing the message of revelation. How,

which have previously been promoted under the name of 'biblical realism.' " Naming Hendrik Kraemer's work, among others, he continues, "What the present volume offers is a late ripening, in the field of ethics, of the same biblical realist revolution, in which precisely ecclesiology and eschatology come to have a new import for the substance of ethics." Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994 [1972]) x.

⁹² For Barth on the concept of religion, see *On Religion: the Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, trans. Garrett Green (New York: T & T Clark, 2006). Barth does provide a more presentist account of revelation than Kraemer; see Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

for example, might God's revelation in the Ancient Near East, as portrayed in the Old Testament, push through the limitations of tribal conceptions of gods during that time to show forth the true God?⁹³ Historical critical studies show that ancient Israel clearly borrowed from its surroundings or, put theologically, that God's revelation interpenetrated with existing religious practices such as animal sacrifice. To press the matter, the Old Testament record indicates that ancient Israel absorbed God's revelation but not without some disquieting marks from its cultural milieu, such as divine violence, xenophobia, and tribalism. Yet Israel also absorbed a message of a loving God who makes faithful covenant with God's creatures. Discerning such divine revelation and its relation to its human receivers would seem a primary theological question emerging from historicist challenges. Emphasizing God's revelation at the expense of addressing the human receiver, however, only serves to leave these sorts of questions unaddressed while historically conscious Christians continue to ask them.⁹⁴ Put in this light, syncretism is no peripheral issue of Christian theology. It corresponds with ongoing attempts to offer theological responses to historicism and to account for the ways humans in history receive divine knowledge.

III. Conclusion: Continuing Confusions

In the years since Harnack and Kraemer, questions around syncretism have continued along similar lines. Theologians achieved little intellectual clarity. Religious studies literature displayed some progress, which will be focus of the next chapter. Terms like "inculturation" and

⁹³ In Rowan Williams' Gifford Lecture "No Last Words: Language as Unfinished Business," during a question and answer session, Williams provides the apt example that God communicating to a "tribal Bronze Age culture" risks a Bronze Age tribal God. "How is it that the reality of God's communication to that Bronze Age tribal culture somehow squeezes itself through the narrow funnel of Bronze Age tribal goddery to become part of a larger narrative which we now call Hebrew Christian scripture?", he asks. <http://www.giffordlectures.org/lectures/making-representations-religious-faith-and-habits-language>.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Van A. Harvey, *The Historian & The Believer* (New York: MacMillan, 1966) and Dale C. Allison, Jr, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

“indigenization” have attempted to provide an alternative framing, which I will assess in Chapter 3. Some theologians addressed competing senses of the term seeking clarity amid present confusion and advocating “neutral” use. Madathilparampil Thomas, for example, wrote in 1985, “Either the word should not be used in discussions of the theology of interfaith dialogue or it should be given a neutral phenomenological connotation as in the discipline of the History of Religions.”⁹⁵ Others viewed syncretism in a largely positive sense, like Wolfhart Pannenberg (1971), Leonardo Boff (1981), and Carl Starkloff (2002).⁹⁶ The majority of contemporary Christian theologians, however, still retain syncretism’s pejorative connotation. The first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, William Visser ’t Hooft, advocated a view similar to Kraemer’s in his 1963 book *No Other Name: the Choice between Syncretism and Christian Universalism*. Missiologist Alan Tippitt later wrote against syncretism using imagery like Harnack’s: “the interpenetration of the pure Gospel with purified tradition should lead the participants, not into syncretism, but a new kind of indigenous entity ... a process of church maturation.”⁹⁷ Lesslie Newbigin understood syncretism similarly to Kraemer, seeming to distinguish between something like theological syncretism and phenomenological syncretism.⁹⁸

Given these varying uses, ongoing imprecision remains. The volume *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, published in 1989, shows amorphous understandings

⁹⁵ Madathilparampil M. Thomas. “The Absoluteness of Jesus Christ and Christ-Centred Syncretism,” *The Ecumenical Review* 37.4 (1985), 397. See also Robert Schreiter, “Defining Syncretism: An Interim Report,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 17.2 (1993): 50-53.

⁹⁶ Pannenberg, trans George H. Kehm, *Basic Outlines in Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1971); Boff, transl John W. Dierscksmeier, *Church: Charism and Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1985 [Portuguese 1981]); Starkloff, *A Theology of the In-Between* (Marquette University Press, 2002). These figures are notable in that all include history within the data of God’s revelation.

⁹⁷ Alan Tippitt, *Introduction to Missiology* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1987), 389.

⁹⁸ Like Kraemer, Newbigin acknowledges the knotty questions of syncretism: “In the attempt to be ‘relevant’ one may fall into syncretism, and in the effort to avoid syncretism one may become irrelevant.” *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 7.

and displays the continuing prominence of Harnack's and Kraemer's lines of thought.⁹⁹ The theologians in this volume still largely operate with a conceptual distinction between theological syncretism and phenomenological syncretism, even if they do not articulate the distinction forthrightly like Kraemer. Many writers also carry a latent understanding of Christianity possessing a Harnackian essence by which to judge syncretisms. Some argue that certain forms of cultural and religious mixture *appear* to blend religions together in a contested fashion, but they do not in fact constitute syncretism so long as these blends prove faithful to Christianity. Such inconsistencies lead to quite contradictory statements. Tilmann Vetter, for example, asks whether John Cobb's engagement with Buddhism constitutes syncretism. Because Cobb engages other faiths by "passing over" and "coming back" to Christianity, Vetter argues, Cobb is not "blending" religions as much as incorporating insights from other religions into Christianity.¹⁰⁰ Cobb's orienting principle, Vetter argues, is "the Biblical heritage, not...later accretions" to Christianity. At the same time, however, in the sense that Cobb attempts to strengthen Christianity's affirmations through "assimilating the achievements of Buddhism (and similarly those of other religions and of science)," Vetter says Cobb "is no reformer, but a syncretist."¹⁰¹ Vetter would seem to be arguing that Cobb is not a "theological syncretist" since he avoids "accretions" which distract from a Biblical core (note the Harnack-like move), but Cobb would qualify as a phenomenological syncretist in his employment of Buddhism within Christianity.

⁹⁹ Jerald Gort, Hendrik Vroom, Rein Fernhout, and Anton Wessels, eds, *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989).

¹⁰⁰ Tilmann Vetter, "John B. Cobb, Jr., and the Encounter with Buddhism" in Gort et al eds, 122-133; 126. While Christians often see faith as holding onto God, as attaching the self to God's divine life, Cobb suggests a conception of human non-attachment could in fact enhance Christian understandings of faith in God. Cobb draws from the Pure Land tradition of Shinran, suggesting its "combination of faith and cessation of clinging" could potentially be incorporated into Christianity. Vetter writes, "Cobb is no syncretist in the narrow sense of the word, even though he can expect criticism by adherents of traditional forms of belief and their corresponding theologies for his openness." (129)

¹⁰¹ Vetter, "John B. Cobb, Jr.," 129.

Walter Strolz's treatment of Raimundo Panikkar, a Catholic theologian well known for his engagement with Hinduism, raises similar questions, wondering whether Panikkar shows "traces of syncretism."¹⁰² Panikkar may practice syncretism in his employment of Hinduism for Strolz, but there is "no basis for an a priori negative appraisal of such traces," because any religion "adopts and assimilates intercultural influences."¹⁰³ Thus Panikkar indeed may be a syncretist in the sense that he sees other religions as means to "enrich one's own tradition" through the inevitable intersections of human cultures.¹⁰⁴ Vetter's and Strolz's narrations show that if all Christians employ phenomenological syncretism to some degree, then determining theological syncretism becomes all the harder.¹⁰⁵

These essays express ongoing bafflement in Christianity regarding how to employ the term syncretism, much less conceive of the cultural religious mixture it indicates. They show the resilience of Harnack's essentialized Christianity; they display the lack distinction between Kraemer's phenomenological syncretism and theological syncretism. Throughout, we see the need for a deeper accounting of historical studies if we are to propose a theological account of syncretism. The need for clarification carries substantial theological import: if today's syncretism may become tomorrow's orthodoxy, perhaps the greatest problem in carelessly employing

¹⁰² Walter Strolz, "Panikkar's Encounter with Hinduism" in Gort et al, eds, 146-152, 150. In Panikkar utilizes "a holistic Indian inheritance," wherein humans exist in a certain unity with God's cosmos, which deepens Christian affirmations about humans as God's contingent creatures for Panikkar (148).

¹⁰³ Strolz, "Panikkar's Encounter," 150. Italics his.

¹⁰⁴ Strolz, "Panikkar's Encounter," 151.

¹⁰⁵ Other writers see syncretism as an evolutionary stage on the way to "full" Christianity. According to missiologist Harold Turner, some syncretisms employ indigenous religion as Christianity seeps into a local episteme while others combine Christianity with indigenous religion without ever becoming "truly" Christianity. The challenge, by this account, is that the intellectual system of Christianity contrasts with indigenous religions such that true conversion requires a great reorientation in understanding. "Although individuals and perhaps small groups are capable of the quantum leap that represents conversion from a primal religion to the Christian faith, the majority exhibit the smaller mutations or syncretisms that serve either as stages to full conversion or as terminal forms that present new obstacles to the Gospel," he writes. Like Harnack, Turner assumes an essential form of Christianity—the "full conversion" of which he speaks—contrasted with presumably lesser conversions. (Harold Turner, "New Religious Movements in Tribal Cultures" in Gort et al, 105-113 at 113.)

syncretism is the problem of foreclosing possibility. Calling something theological syncretism can close off potential means of deepening Christian self-understanding by tampering a movement of the Holy Spirit. Such possibilities make a reappraisal of syncretism in modern theology all the more urgent. To that end, I turn to so-called etic literature on syncretism, which consistently approaches the term with greater acuity.

Chapter 2: Syncretism in the History of Religions and Anthropology

“As anthropologists we would probably label many instances of inculturation ‘syncretism’ in so far as they involve the combination of diverse traditions in the area of religion.”

-Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw

While Christian theology struggled with no little confusion regarding its use of the term “syncretism”, other scholars of religion had long been using the word in a more neutral sense. Starting in the History of Religions School in Germany during the late 19th century and early 20th century, and spreading to European and American anthropology by mid-20th century, it became a term broadly designating the blending of religions. This chapter tracks the changing understandings of syncretism among so-called etic scholars of religion, with a view toward harnessing their insights for Christian theology. In this context, etic studies refer to scholarship that aims to evaluate religion while refraining from assessing normative claims of religious adherents. It does not argue for one theological position over another, rather it aims to judge between perceived facts, facets, and phenomena of religion from a neutral standpoint, so far as possible. In short, etic scholarship examines religious thought and practice not as a practitioner of religion might, but as one looking in from the outside. This need not imply the scholars themselves be areligious, simply that they employ methods of those studying from the outside. This approach has at times been slow to recognize its own methodological commitments, which I will point out later in this chapter. Yet theologians can find substantial insights in this literature

regarding syncretism and salutary resources to aid Christian theology's confusions regarding the word.

I present the scholarship in four phases which unfold from the mid-19th century to contemporary scholarship. Each represents a phase in scholarly conversation in which certain themes take priority based on trending literature of the day. In each phase, some consensus begins to form among scholars regarding the meanings and purposes of the word syncretism, yet in each instance new concerns arise that press scholarship forward into the next phase. Understandings of syncretism move in dialectical progression, for just as scholarly consensus begins to emerge, other researchers find limitations within such consensus and thereby push research in new directions.¹ The first phase, which I call "recognizing ubiquity," ran from the mid-19th to the mid-20th centuries and primarily featured scholars from Germany and surrounding countries, from Hermann Usener in the late 19th century to Dutch thinker Gerardus van der Leeuw in the early- to mid-20th century. Thinkers in this phase showed a growing realization of the universality of syncretism. "Syncretism" shifts from a word limited to certain religions to a ubiquitous aspect of all religions. During this first phase, scholars did not necessarily follow strict methodological distinctions between "emic" and "etic," as many like van der Leeuw reflected both historically and theologically. The second phase, "elucidating syncretism," took the ubiquity of syncretism for granted and thereby sought to elaborate upon its nature in order to justify and clarify the concept's increasingly expansive scope. To do so, scholars in the 1960s-1980s like German Carsten Colpe and Englishman Michael Pye offered

¹ Thomas Tweed describes this process: "In some ways, the history of the study of religion—and all fields and subfields—has been a process of ceaseless change as one perspective replaces another, as scholars claim that the prevailing category—the orienting metaphor, key noun, or favored phrase—obscures something we should notice. That realization prompts a search for another interpretative term that promises to illumine what has been obscured." In "After the Quotidian Turn: Interpretive Categories and Scholarly Trajectories in the Study of Religion since the 1960s," *The Journal of Religion* 95, no. 3 (2015), 361-362.

more nuanced definitions of syncretism, made typologies and categories, and highlighted various aspects of syncretism. As the history of religions became more self-conscious in its methods—and more consistently “etic” in perspective—scholars identified a need to rigorously categorize syncretism. By the 1990s, a third phase emerged, raising concerns about power and contestation in syncretic processes. This phase, which I call “celebrating mixture,” accentuated ways that subaltern peoples used syncretism as means of negotiating their own cultures amid the intrusions of European colonialism. While history of religions scholars continued to write on the subject, anthropologists produced most literature of this third phase. The fourth and current phase, “incorporating cognition,” returns to the challenge of elucidating syncretism. Scholars like Luther Martin and Jeppe Sinding Jensen thereby focus upon the *mechanics* of syncretism, employing insights from cognitive theory. Across the four phases we observe scholarly development alongside critical voices that continually question the usefulness of the term.

I. The Universality of Syncretism: Recognizing Ubiquity

The first phase of scholarship began in the mid- to late-19th century with the rise of the historical study of religion and lasted through the mid-20th century. As shown in Chapter 1, scholars used syncretism in a variety of ways during this period. Within this milieu, religious historians initially used syncretism in a pejorative manner, though not nearly as pejorative as later Christian mission literature. By the early 20th century, religious historians transitioned to using syncretism as a more neutral descriptor. By the middle of the 20th century, their focus shifted from identifying religions that appeared especially prone to religious mixture—labeled “syncretistic religions”—to recognizing syncretism as an element intrinsic to all religious endeavors. By the

conclusion of this phase, scholars generally acknowledged that all religions mix with their surrounding cultures in contested ways.

Literature in the late 19th and early 20th century often portrayed syncretism in an evolutionary sense, as a transitory stage between the polytheism of paganism and the monotheism of supposedly more “developed” religions like Judaism and Christianity. By such accounts, syncretism retained its pejorative status as a deviation from “pure” forms of religion; its evolutionary conclusion came in monotheism, generally assumed to be Christianity. William Allen, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, aptly represented this tendency in his 1890 textbook of ancient history:

Syncretism is that development of pagan religion which recognizes the universality and identity of the religious sentiment, but has not yet advanced to the conception of a genuine unity of the divine nature or monotheism. It is polytheistic, but a form of polytheism which embraces all countries and nations, seeing in their different systems of gods only varying names for the same beings. It was an act of Syncretism when the Romans identified their Minerva with the Greek Athena, and their Mercury with the German Woden. This sentiment controlled the popular religion of the early Empire, and in the time of the Severi it became formulated into a religious system, tolerant and humane, and moral in its tone, even if somewhat vague and lacking consistency in the form it took. Along with this reconstruction of the popular religion the old Greek philosophies were eagerly studied, revised in the light of recent thought, and thus invested with a new life. The Neo-platonism, or revised Platonic philosophy, thus constructed, was until the extinction of paganism the most dangerous rival of Christianity.²

Indeed, by many accounts, syncretism evinced movement within a Hegelian dialectic of religion. On the one hand, syncretism was an expression of conflict as religions grew in scope and came into conflict with one another; on the other hand, as Professor Allen noted, syncretism could also represent a coming new synthesis. For Allen, the latter served as a peaceful expression of religion that pleased numerous constituencies. Prominent German historian of religion Hermann

² William F. Allen, *Ancient History for Colleges and High Schools, Part II: A Short History of the Roman People* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1890), 283.

Usener showed a similarly Hegelian tendency: even though syncretism was a mishmash of Christianity with other religions which distorted the Christianity articulated by the Church Fathers, it was also, in Carston Colpe's assessment of Usener, a "necessary transitional stage in the history of religions."³

For others during this period, syncretism reflected religious stagnation. As various religions came together, each lost something of its original vitality. Syncretism thus reflected decline rather than a dynamic Hegelian dialectic. Contemporary scholar of syncretism Kurt Rudolph describes this portrayal: "Syncretism or 'syncretistic' became the mark of a late stage of a secondary development, combining elements of either ideological or cultural practices, which originally had nothing to with one another and thus lost their intrinsic 'purity' or 'integrity' in the 'blend.'" This understanding of syncretism drew from and further encouraged its pejorative connotation in Christian theology, for "Syncretism became a typical 'Late Period Problem' lacking the vigor of youth." Ultimately syncretism was a feature of those religions that did not stand the test of time, Rudolph notes. He writes, "Syncretism became an attribute of religious formations developing between and alongside the great religions."⁴ Major religions retained privileged status as more sophisticated and more civilized expressions religious impulses.

A vital designation leading toward the realization of syncretism's ubiquity was that of a "syncretistic religion," distinguished from seemingly more "pure" religions. Scholars employed "syncretistic religion" largely for traditions that self-consciously blended or borrowed from recognized religions, citing Manichaeism, mystery religions, and Gnosticism as exemplars.

³ Carston Colpe, s.v. "Syncretism [First Edition]," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Lindsay Jones, ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005), 8926. Colpe's article originally appeared in the 1987 volume of this encyclopedia.

⁴ Kurt Rudolph, "Syncretism: From Theological Invective to a Concept in the Study of Religion" in Leopold and Jensen, 68-85, 70. Originally published in 1979 as "Synkretismus vom Theologischen Scheltwort zum religionswissenschaftlichen Begriff" in *Humanitas Religiosa: Festschrift für Haralds Biezais zu seinem 70 Geburtstag* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1979).

Manichaeism, for example, intentionally borrowed elements Babylonian, Iranian, Hellenistic, and Christian religions, forming them into a single whole. “Mani ... effected a further syncretism by creating a system in which previously existing linkages were interrelated in an entirely new and original way,” writes Carston Colpe. As Manichaeism found expression within Christian or Zoroastrian or Buddhist lands, it accreted additional syncretisms. Scholars saw Hellenistic mystery religions as similarly syncretic: they might reverence a particular god but form a cult separate from that god’s initial geographic home. “The Mithra mysteries of Asia Minor did not presuppose any ancient Iranian mystery but only the god Mithra as such, albeit a Mithra equated with [Roman and Greek gods] Sol and Helios.” Gnosticism, meanwhile, though it involved less systematizing than Manichaeism, nevertheless took existing syncretisms of Greek, Eastern, and Semitic religions, blending them into their mythic narratives of a great redeemer. Syncretistic religions, by this account, were “the high points of syncretic processes inasmuch as they are not the first realizations of syncretism but already presuppose less organized syncretic fields. Such religions are as it were ‘metasyncretisms’ or ‘second-level’ syncretisms.”⁵

The designation of syncretistic religions as high syntheses of other religious systems led in turn to the question of whether Christianity deserved such classification. Christianity, after all, was the *de facto* religion for most of these researchers, whether or not they considered themselves adherents. As noted, some scholars argued that Christianity was not a “syncretistic religion” or argued that syncretic Christianity served as an evolutionary stage toward a presumed “fuller” expression of Christianity. Others argued that Christianity’s emergence as a religion with a single founder led to a purity that explained Christianity’s non-syncretic character as well as its historical continuity compared with other ancient religions. Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932), a

⁵ Colpe “Syncretism [First Edition],” 8932. While Colpe himself wrote in 1987, he is describing research carried out in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

founder of form criticism and a prominent figure in the growing History of Religions School (*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*), however, discovered syncretic aspects in early Christianity, such as “borrowing of the sacraments from mystery religions.”⁶ Gunkel did not focus upon the originality of religions like Christianity or Judaism but rather searched for precedents explaining the sources of their seemingly novel elements.⁷ For Gunkel, many elements that appeared original in Judaism and Christianity were only original insofar as they syncretically applied existing religious tools to new environments or new circumstances. By this view, if Christianity blended Judaism, Stoicism, Platonic philosophy, and numerous other systems in varying contexts, scholars had difficulty saying that Christianity was not syncretic. Thus, as noted with Adolf von Harnack (1873-1912), some Protestant scholars embraced the label of syncretism as an aspect of Christianity’s growth and creativity—so long as syncretisms did not distract from its perceived purity.

In the early 20th century, with the history of religions developing as a field, the study of syncretism began to reflect certain ideological and methodological fissures. Christian historians making normative claims about Christianity’s status as the one true religion diverged from those wishing to avoid such claims. Through the early 20th century, many members of the History of Religions School served as theological faculty in Protestant seminaries and universities. Strong distinctions between “emic” and “etic” did not yet exist, as many if not most members of the School considered themselves Protestant theologians as well as historians. In addition to Harnack, Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) also wrote in this intellectual environment.

⁶ Christoph Auffarth, s.v. “IV. Greco-Roman Antiquity” in “Syncretism,” *Religion Past and Present*, Edited by Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 417.

⁷ Anita Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen write: “To Gunkel, the cardinal principle of historical study was to accept historical antecedents and he became one of the prime scholars to use the term syncretism in order to stress the historicity of religions.” Leopold and Jensen, “Introduction to Part III: Syncretism: The Dynamics of Religion” in *Syncretism: A Reader*, 88.

Nevertheless, with Christianity now considered a syncretistic religion, by the early-mid twentieth century, scholars generally acknowledged syncretism as an aspect of all religions across times and cultures. The most developed account of syncretism during this period belongs to Dutch scholar Gerardus van der Leeuw, in his 1933 book *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*.⁸ Van der Leeuw decisively moved beyond seeing syncretism as a deformation of earlier religions or as a stage in evolutionary development, both of which regard syncretism as an aberration of normative religion, Christian or otherwise. Rather, van der Leeuw normalized the non-pejorative use of syncretism, calling syncretism “one form of the dynamic of religions.” By focusing on the “dynamic” of religion, he began moving away from the study of religions as formal systems—the common approach of that period—toward attention to religions’ refashioning over time. Religions retain a static form vital to their continuity—a form he considered their essence—yet religions also remain dynamic. “A historic religion, then, is an organized system. Nonetheless its characteristics are not fixed and rigid; rather they are in perpetual flux: not manufactured but growing, and in a state of incessant expansion.”⁹ His spatial terms like “growing” and “expansion” suggested a determined center, such that as religions change they retain continuity and coherence. In constructing a general theory of religion that worked for all religions, not just Christianity, he identified syncretism as a universal feature.

Van der Leeuw defined syncretism as “transposition,” that is, “the variation of the significance of any phenomenon, occurring in the dynamic of religions, while its form remains quite unaltered.” Certain symbols and material objects in religion can change and syncretize, he claimed, changing in meaning and significance, even while a religion’s essence remains.

⁸ Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans John Evan Turner (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1967). The title was *Phänomenologie der Religion* in the original German.

⁹ Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 609.

Protestant churches, for example, retained the practice of Holy Communion when they broke from the Roman Catholic Church. However, they retooled the theology of Holy Communion, opposing transubstantiation and shifting the ritual's material expression by simplifying ceremonies, as in the removal of candles from altars. Yet the essence of Christianity remained amid these Protestant syncretisms. Likewise, in the book of Genesis the myth of Bethel transformed from "a fetishist experience" to a theophany to an "edifying consolation." At times, "the actual character of a phenomenon is utterly lost in transposition," he wrote, yet even still the religion can retain its essence—as did Judaism amid changes concerning Bethel.¹⁰

All religions, according to van der Leeuw, have such "transpositions," to such an extent that historically dominant religions are themselves amalgamations of other religions. "Every historic religion, therefore, is not one, but several; not of course as being the sum of different forms, but in the sense that diverse forms had approximated to its own form and had amalgamated.... This is true of even the great, and so-called world, religions."¹¹ Sometimes such combinations, in small and large religions alike, represent a development in human experience and consciousness as humans' social communities become enlarged and more interconnected, he claimed. In the move from "polydemonism" to polytheism, for example, he saw a development of humans from viewing the world in terms of uncontrollable chaotic forces to seeing the world as an ordered environment: "the chaotic plurality becomes an ordered whole," and thus pantheons form with gods who enable human beings to control their surroundings.¹² Other religions come to more unitary expressions of divinity, which he also considered a moral and religious gain. For example, Greek religious reflection eventually moved away from a pantheon

¹⁰ Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 610-611.

¹¹ Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 610.

¹² Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 169.

toward “a primal unity and primal Power in one,” which came to supplant the gods of polytheism.¹³ Van der Leeuw did not consider such developments constituting “evolution”, however, perhaps because the term carries a sense of inevitability. Yet he did see such development as positive religious expansion and growth. Syncretism was not simply a summation of the past, nor did it necessitate dialectical movement, but it did often indicate growth and accretion, potentially making moral gains along the way.¹⁴

Given van der Leeuw wrote near the end of this first phase, he dialectically pushed beyond scholars’ tendencies to see religions as static systems, even though he still maintained that religions hold a stable essence. Thus van der Leeuw’s writings carried a number of tensions, which later scholars would continue to press. Van der Leeuw acknowledged that some syncretisms or transpositions lose “the actual character of a phenomenon” while others do not. Yet when characteristics perceived as central to a religion change, does the essence change? Does it become a new religion? Who decides? Van der Leeuw pointed out, for example, that religious adherents often do not recognize that they are transposing previous practices and beliefs, rather they see only continuity; Protestants, for example, saw themselves as reclaiming or recovering the sacrament of the Eucharist, not altering it. Yet from phenomenological and historical perspectives, the idea and practice of the Eucharist drastically shifted during the Reformation. To what extent can a practice or belief be transposed without eventually abandoning its essence? In time, historians followed van der Leeuw in accenting the dynamic nature of religions but avoided his account of religious continuity as too essentialized. By the late 20th century, the idea that a religion would have a static form continuous over time seemed too

¹³ Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 33.

¹⁴ While van der Leeuw at times avoids direct associations with Hegelian dialectics, the Hegelian influence is strong indeed. See Ninian Smart’s “Forward” in the republication of *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* by Princeton University Press in 1986.

Platonic for an academy increasingly concerned with avoiding the rigidities of structuralism and essentialism.¹⁵

Furthermore, van der Leeuw's work reflected the methodological conflicts among many historians of his day, who moved between historical and theological reflection, even while the religious studies guild increasingly tried to distinguish itself as an historical science free of normative judgment. As a Dutch Reformed minister, he not only made Christian theological arguments along with his historical arguments, he blended the two. The closing line of his chapter on syncretism exhibited this fusion of perspectives: "Religion, however, lives only by being active; and in Christianity this ceaseless agitation is the life movement of the Holy Spirit, on Whom no limits whatever are imposed."¹⁶ After extensive historical reflection, he concluded theologically. Van der Leeuw was by no means ignorant of the challenges of mixing methods, he simply thought that combining historical and theological approaches proved *more* epistemologically honest than a solely historical approach (Hendrick Kraemer from Chapter 1 made similar arguments). In studying phenomena like religion which posit transcendent qualities, van der Leeuw felt that many historians hide their own religiosity or lack thereof and thus hides biases. Nevertheless, later scholars would consider him too theologically oriented for a scientific study of religion. As Anita Leopold and Jeppe Jensen have recently argued, "There is a precedence of religious phenomena over cultural phenomena that makes [van der Leeuw's] theory a matter for theology rather than the study of religion."¹⁷

¹⁵ Michael Pye aptly portrays the challenge: "The overall question is whether these starting points in van der Leeuw's account of religion are sufficient for the development of a full-scale theory of religion under its dynamic aspect, which might better be named a theory of religious tradition. This designation presupposes that 'tradition' means, first and foremost, 'handing on' and thus implies process and movement. In effect, van der Leeuw's ideas on this subject may be regarded valuable hints but not yet as a fully coordinated analytical typology of religious tradition." 1991, 108-109 also in Leopold and Jensen, 90. Pye aptly sums up concerns I take up in Chapter 4.

¹⁶ *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 612.

¹⁷ "Introduction to Part III," 91.

1.2. Syncretism Travels to Anthropology

While historians of religions continued to investigate the universality of syncretism, anthropologists subsequently picked up the word in the 1930s and 1940s. Anthropologists shared with historians of religion the non-pejorative use of the term—indeed, anthropologists came to use syncretism in a largely positive, at times celebratory, sense. They differed in methodological approach, however, with anthropologists highlighting cultural continuity over historical change. Both disciplines, however, shared a concern for finding the historical precedents of various syncretisms.

Melville Herskovits was the most prominent anthropologist of the era to employ the designation syncretism in his research on continuities or “retentions” of African cultures among slaves in the New World after the trans-Atlantic journey. In the early- to mid-20th century, Herskovits’ project of identifying such continuities aimed to give Africans living in the Americas a broader sense of their own cultural history, thereby providing more social status in an era in which the perceived pedigree of one’s ethnicity and its history carried social prestige. Drawing from the theory of Franz Boas, who eschewed the then-prominent view that cultures existed on an evolutionary scale, Herskovits envisioned cultures as discrete units, each largely self-contained until coming into contact with others. Herskovits applied this Boasian understanding to his own research by discovering ways in which African slaves had retained cultural practices long after their journey to the Americas. The Baptist Shouter movement, for example, used Christian hymns sung by European Americans, even starting songs with the “lugubrious measured quality” of much European music, then transformed the tune by speeding up the tempo and adjusting the hymn tune. “The tune is converted into a song typically African in its

accompaniment of clapping hands and foot-patting, and in its singing style,” he wrote. Similarly, such shouters marked their ritual space with white chalk at the doors and center pole, “reminiscent of so-called ‘vever’ designs found in Haitian *vodun* rituals,” all characteristics that Herskovits had seen in West Africa.¹⁸ Likewise, Africans in the Americas took *orisha* deities and transposed them with Catholic saints in Brazil and across much of the Caribbean. The continuity of African religions proved a means of accommodating the Catholicism of the slave-masters on the one hand while also resisting their power on the other. The institutional church “uneasily tolerated” such syncretisms for certain Catholic festivals, even while some cults moved underground and provided the impetus for slave revolts.¹⁹ Thus syncretism was a means of cultural survival: it not only entailed borrowing from one cultural context and applying it in a new culture, but became a means of perpetuating certain religious beliefs and practices long after peoples had left the culture of their origin. Already within this early use of syncretism within anthropology, one detects a celebratory tone in the marking religious practices that continued seemingly against all odds.

French anthropologist Roger Bastide represented a later approach to syncretism that drew from Herskovits while challenging the paradigm of static cultures. Bastide proposed the influential category “mosaic syncretism”—in which elements of different religions coexist without forming a new whole—discussed in the next section. Like Herskovits, Bastide (1960) saw syncretism as a continuation of African religious practices carried forward in the New World. Syncretism was not simply a form of accommodating Catholicism into slave culture, he contended, but syncretism also served as a “mask” to distract whites from indigenous African

¹⁸ Melville Herskovits *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990 [1941]), 222.

¹⁹ See Andrew Apter, “Herskovits’s Heritage: Rethinking Syncretism in the African Diaspora” in Leopold and Jensen, 168.

practices. By blending their practices with Catholicism, Africans in the Americas hoped that slave-masters would be less likely to challenge them. Thus when African slaves established connections between *orishas* and Catholic saints, they continued to reverence the *orisha* under the cloak of Catholicism. This system of equivalences worked across the New World in a wide variety of slave communities, Bastide argued, because of “structural, cultural, and sociological parallels” between Catholic views of saints and African views of *orishas*. In structure, Catholic saints serve as mediators between human beings and God, just as *orishas* act as “mediators between man and [the high God] Olorun”; similarly, saints carry a similar function to *orishas* in that “each ... presides over a certain human activity or is responsible for healing a certain disease”; both saints and *orishas* “are the patrons of trades and occupations, protecting the hunter, the smith, the healer, and so on.”²⁰ Bastide sought to offer keener attention to transformations over time, however, than Herskovits. Syncretism thus became a process by which African religions eventually merged into the Catholicism of the New World, albeit a Catholicism which itself transformed in the syncretic process. If at first the reverencing of saints hides African piety toward *orishas*, in time the *orishas* became replaced by Catholic saints such that African religion became “corrupted” and “denatured.”²¹ Bastide wrote, “Consequently syncretism, which was originally merely a mask, a means of distracting the white man’s attention and evading his watchful eye, is transformed into the system of equivalences, of correspondences between saints and *orixás*.” In time, “the saints are accepted and gradually replace the *orixás*.”²²

²⁰ Roger Bastide, “Problems of Religious Syncretism” in Stewart and Shaw, 115. Essay originally published in 1960.

²¹ Bastide, “Problems of Religious Syncretism,” 137.

²² Bastide, “Problems of Religious Syncretism,” 136-137. Bastide rightly wondered the extent to which Africans themselves saw the changes in their religious practices as contested mixture, 124.

While Bastide offered a fuller account of syncretism as a process than Herskovits, they share a number of similarities common to anthropology in their day and for years to come. First, both Herskovits and Bastide saw syncretism as a process with both a beginning and an end; that is, it starts with two distinctly separate cultures—West African and European Catholicism in this case—and ends in a new whole that carries qualities of each “original” culture. While both attend to cultural change, the paradigm of change assumes that cultures tend toward equilibrium with syncretism serving as a transitional stage away from an earlier stable culture toward a later stable culture. Both would likely acknowledge syncretism as a highly common phenomenon across human cultures, but as a process of striving toward new syntheses, not as an always ongoing occurrence as history of religions scholars concluded.

Second, both Herskovits and Bastide highlighted syncretism in the context of colonial encounter, thereby offering more contemporary contexts than much of the history of religions scholarship given their focus on the ancient world. For Herskovits and Bastide, as for many later anthropologists, syncretism provided a means of resisting colonial oppression—or at least accommodating to the colonial situation on terms not exclusive to European colonizers. Syncretic African sects instigated slave rebellions in Herskovits, while in Bastide syncretism served “counter-acculturation” movements that resisted full accommodation to European colonial culture. Finally, Herskovits and Bastide shared a moral urgency in their work: in one of their most lasting contributions, they showed the continuity of African civilizations against the

tide of European and American racism. The myth that Africa had no past—or at least not a past worth remembering—slowly receded, even if its legacies are still among us.²³

II. Delineating a Universal Phenomenon: Elucidating Syncretism

By the 1960s, it became commonplace within so-called etic scholarship to regard syncretism as a universal phenomenon. Once scholars determined syncretism a universal within the realm of religion, they sought to clarify the category. By the logic of this phase, a ubiquitous category like syncretism requires additional explanation, for simply identifying something as syncretism does little to advance research. On its own, it is not an adequately specific designation. In this phase of “elucidating syncretism,” scholars followed three strategies: first, they offered more refined *definitions* of syncretism; second, they provided *typologies* of syncretism; and third, they supplied various *aspects* of syncretism. The second phase also saw more cross-pollination among the disciplines of anthropology and the history of religions, especially within academic conferences on syncretism which also flourished during this stage.²⁴ Now well beyond the beginnings of the discipline in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, history of religions scholars

²³ For an example of a continuing legacy of such views of African history, see Milan Kundera’s portrayal of African kingdoms on the opening page of his acclaimed 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

Putting it negatively, the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing. We need take no more note of it than of a war between two African kingdoms in the fourteenth century, a war that altered nothing in the destiny of the world, even if a hundred thousand blacks perished in excruciating torment. Will the war between two African kingdoms in the fourteenth century itself be altered if it recurs again and again, in eternal return? (New York: Harper and Row, 1984: 3)

The fourteenth century, of course, is that moment before the arrival of European colonizers after which African history could “begin”, it would seem.

²⁴ Books from such conferences include Sven Hartman, ed, *Syncretism. Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Cultural Contact, Meeting of Religions, Syncretism held at Åbo on the 8th-10th of September 1966* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1969); A. Dietrich, ed, *Synkretismus im syrisch-persischen Kulturgebiet. Bericht über ein Symposium in Reinhausen bei Göttingen in der Zeit vom 4. Bis. 8. Oktober 1972* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975); F. Dunand and P. Lévêque, eds, *Les Synchrétismes des Religions de l'Antiquité* (Leiden: Brill, 1975).

became more self-conscious about their discipline, its aims and purposes, and its boundaries. This second phase thus exhibited history of religions scholars' larger concern with clarifying the discipline's objectives and methods. In this regard, we see tighter methodological boundaries, with scholars decidedly operating within an "etic" mode compared with phase one. This second phase ran from the 1960s up to the 1980s and 1990s, when new concerns in social theory emerge.

II.1. Definitions and Typologies

Precise definitions proved the first way of clarifying the phenomenon of syncretism. Such definitions usually identified a certain element (or elements) as essential to syncretism. Just as Gerardus van der Leeuw saw "transposition" as the essential quality of syncretism, so subsequent scholars proposed others. In 1970, scholar of East Asian religions J. H. Kamstra, drawing from a Marxist framework as well as the works of van der Leeuw, determined "alienation" as the primary motivation for syncretism. As religion systems encounter new stimuli, religious adherents often become alienated with existing beliefs and practices, thereby leading to new and syncretic expressions of religion.²⁵ Kamstra then defined syncretism as "the coexistence of elements foreign to each other within a specific religion, whether or not these elements originate in other religions or for example in social structures."²⁶

In 1971, English scholar Michael Pye published an influential essay drawing on Kamstra's work entitled "Syncretism and Ambiguity," in which he argued syncretism must entail elements from differing religions or cultures that exist uneasily together. Thus he defined

²⁵ Rudolph, "Syncretism: From Theological Invective to a Concept in the Study of Religion," 73.

²⁶ Kamstra translated by Michael Pye in his "Syncretism and Ambiguity" in Leopold and Jensen, 59. 1970, 10. Kamstra's work is *Syncretisme op de Grens tussen Theologie en Godsdienstfenomenologie* (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

syncretism as “the temporary ambiguous coexistence of elements from diverse religious and other contexts within a coherent religious pattern.”²⁷ Syncretism is not only ambiguous but temporary, that is, it either becomes integrated into the religion or becomes rejected. Pye also reflected a growing tendency against essentializing religion, naming a religious tradition “a coherent religious pattern” rather than simply a “religion” with (presumably) fixed boundaries. German scholar Kurt Rudolph, with Micheal Pye, suggested syncretism as temporary, with a beginning and an end, but saw the “crossing” or “interlocking”—i.e. *Verschränkung*—between “religious and cultural elements of different origins into a situation of contact” as syncretism’s most essential component. Such interlocking may lead to full assimilation, through a kind of cultural osmosis, or to outright conflict about a tradition’s boundaries, as in the conflict between Calixtus and Calovius.²⁸ Meanwhile, André Droogers suggested that some kind of contestation would seem essential to syncretism, whether or not religious elites like clergy recognize it as conflict or not. Thus Droogers defined syncretism as “religious interpenetration, either taken for granted or subject to debate.”²⁹

In time, scholars recognized that no singular definition of a notion as diverse, complex, and contested as syncretism would be possible, nor even desirable. Instead, they suggested that syncretism required more rigorous defining or elucidating according to the specific context under consideration. By 1987, Carston Colpe wrote, “Precise application makes it clear that no definition of syncretism is possible without a specific context and that the term cannot serve as an adequate description of homogeneous sets of phenomena.”³⁰ He went on to say that use of the

²⁷ Pye, “Syncretism and Ambiguity,” 67.

²⁸ Rudolph, “Syncretism: From Theological Invective to a Concept in the Study of Religion,” 82, see also Droogers “Syncretism: the Problem of Definition,” 12.

²⁹ Droogers “Syncretism: the Problem of Definition,” 20-21.

³⁰ Colpe, “Syncretism [First Edition],” 8926.

term syncretism requires additional explanation, such as what religious practices are being blended, from whom, and from where. Given the fact that each situation of syncretism is slightly different, the term may require precise context-specific definitions that remain within the scope the notion's wider connotation.³¹

Beyond various definitions, typologies became another common way to manage the sprawling senses of syncretism, thereby organizing its content into more manageable designations. In Carsten Colpe's entry on syncretism in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* in 1989, he argued that typologies are necessary because "it is not possible to apply the concept of syncretism in a universal, univocal way" due to its wide-ranging applications.³² Such typologies generally fell into one of two categories. First, some typologies offered a two-fold distinction that served as an initial macrolevel assessment, a kind of "metatypology" that offered initial clarity about the kind of syncretism under consideration. "Objective" versus "subjective" syncretism was an early example that largely followed etic versus emic conceptions of the term.³³ Second, other typologies offered varying sorts or forms of syncretisms, such as syncretism as assimilation, as evolution, as synthesis, and so on. Those producing such typologies rarely intended reified, unchanging designations, but tools for the sake of clarity.

³¹ More recently, religious historian Ulrich Berner has indicated that a singular definition is not in fact necessary, so long as scholars from various disciplines offer definitions sufficient for their contextual use of the term, mindful of the need for careful elucidation given the notion's varied historical use. "In this debate," he writes, "no agreement has been reached on how to define the nature of syncretism – but such agreement is neither possible nor necessary, since all that ultimately matters is the consistency and utility of the more precise terminologies used in different disciplines with divergent approaches." Ulrich Berner, s.v. "II. Religious Studies" in "Syncretism," *Religion Past and Present*, edited by Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 416.

³² Colpe, "Syncretism [First Edition]", 8927.

³³ Droogers in *Dialogue and Syncretism*, 13-16; Droogers and Greenfield, "Recovering and Reconstructing Syncretism," *Reinventing Religions: Syncretism and Transformation in Africa and the Americas*, ed Sidney Greenfield and André Droogers (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 31. If the label "objective" implied the etic viewpoint offered a more comprehensive and measured approach than the "subjective", it reflected the history of religions' school—as well as many anthropologists'—belief that a firm methodological basis for the scientific study of religion could resemble the kind of remote analysis comparable to natural sciences.

While offering a comprehensive overview of such typologies lies beyond the scope of this historiography, a few examples from each category of typologies aptly portrays such trends in this second phase.

For example, scholars made a pervasive distinction between “unconscious” and “conscious” syncretism, that is, between accidental or deliberate blending. Unconscious syncretism, according to Rudolph and Colpe, might be “naïve” or “spontaneous” or even “vegetative” (the latter description is not entirely clear); that is, it arises within a religious tradition without its adherents necessarily realizing or intending it. Conscious syncretism, on the other hand, entails a deliberate attempt to draw together insights or practices from varying religions into a new form, even “a new overarching uniform religion.” Rudolph wrote, “The best example being Manicheism ... but also the Ryôbu-Shintô of Japan” which combined Japanese Shintô religion with Shingon Buddhism.³⁴ Another simple but pervasive metatypology distinguished syncretism as a process from syncretism as a state or a result. On the one hand, syncretism may be an historical process ongoing across a particular period of time. The Apostle Paul and other early Christians incorporated elements of Stoic thought in ethical dictums of Romans 12, for example, in formulating early Christian ethics; this proved an early example of a long process of employing aspects of Stoicism into Christianity, a process with a presumed endpoint.³⁵ At other points in time the religion itself may feature seemingly permanent elements of syncretism, Manichaeism again serving as a primary example. The distinction, while helpful, need not be too rigid, for oftentimes the process of syncretism leads to a state of syncretism. Indeed, in the example above, early Christians’ use of elements of Stoicism in Christianity would

³⁴ Rudolph, “Syncretism: From Theological Invective to a Concept in the Study of Religion,” 80.

³⁵ Runar M. Thorsteinsson, “Paul and Roman Stoicism: Romans 12 and Contemporary Stoic Ethics,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 29, no. 2 (December 2006): 139-161. Chapter 5 will offer additional assessments of incorporation of Stoicism’s Logos theology.

constitute syncretism as a process, yet as these elements became permanent fixtures within Christianity in subsequent centuries it constituted syncretism as state or result.

Scholars also distinguished between syncretism among religious systems as a whole and smaller syncretisms that take place within religions. Carsten Colpe differentiated between syncretism of “complex wholes” and “particular components.”³⁶ Syncretism among complex wholes entailed religious systems encountering one another, with the results being a new institutional religion or new form of dogma or transformations within each religion even as it remained distinct from the other. Such syncretism among “complex wholes”, especially when new religions form, drew from the history of religions concept of “syncretistic religions,” with multiple religious thought worlds encountering and forming new syntheses. On the other hand, syncretism of “particular components” entailed various elements of religions being transplanted into a second religion, such as individual gods traveling to another religion and thereby finding a new identity. Such syncretism involving relations between particular components could be led by elites or arise organically among religious practitioners, as in modern syncretisms like Christian yoga, which takes a practice from Hinduism and self-consciously establishes it as a form of meditation for Christianity.

While some employed meta-typologies entailing two or three forms of syncretism, others provided more detailed typologies with numerous syncretisms. Kurt Rudolph, in a summary essay of syncretism scholarship published in 1978, identified numerous such forms. *Symbiosis* describes separately identified religions coexisting or living together. In Rudolph’s words they “retain distinctions” even as adherents view the religions as “a relative unity.” The primary example of such symbiosis is the commonly spoken sentiment of Confucianism, Taoism, and

³⁶ Colpe, “Syncretism [First Edition]”, 8927.

Buddhism that “the three religions are one.” *Amalgamation* entails a fusion of religions, while *acculturation* consists of the integration of religious systems, generally by means of conscious syncretism. Meanwhile *identification* connects certain components of one religion with similar ones in another, often as “spiritual imperialism” carried out by religious elites of a more powerful religion in their attempts to convert subjugated peoples.³⁷ Other terms for identification included “guided syncretism” or “syncretism from above” contrasted with “syncretism from below.”³⁸

In time the typologies only increased.³⁹ Kurt Rudolph identified sixteen various forms across the literature: “symbiosis, acculturation, identification, theocracy, amalgamation, fusion, assimilation, amelioration, transformation, metamorphosis, substitution, eclecticism, dissolution, isolation, synthesis, relativization.” While Rudolph’s essay provided greater detail on these varying forms, for our purposes he showed the extent of scholarly effort explaining and outlining syncretism during this period in the 1960s-1980s. Indeed, Rudolph sensed the challenge of such

³⁷ Rudolph, “Theological Invective,” 81-82, 76.

³⁸ Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, “Introduction” in Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, ed. *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 8.

³⁹ Religious historian Ulrich Berner offered such systemizations, using both meta-typologies and micro-typologies. Initially, he distinguished between syncretism “on a system level” from syncretism “on the element level.” In the former, a boundary is eliminated between competing religious systems, as when various local religions join into a single pantheon; this may in turn become a “Meta-syncretism” in which “a new system emerges” as in the case of Mani’s combination of various religious systems into a single system. Syncretisms “on the element level” largely worked as Colpe’s syncretism of “particular components.” Berner further clarified his distinctions, suggesting syncretic disputes within a religious system entail “rationalization,” i.e. justifying whether or not to retain a syncretism, while syncretism between religious systems entails “systematization,” bringing formerly differentiated religions into a whole. Rationalization itself then involves three further distinctions: “perfectionizing rationalization,” which aims to transcend the present religious system; “stabilizing rationalization,” which confirms present beliefs against competing teaching (e.g. Christian debates regarding heresy); and “reacting rationalization,” which entails two or more systems “which do not overlap,” as when a religion meets a new economic system. With systematization, meanwhile, he distinguished three further types: “progressive systematization,” which raises doubts about another religious system in favor of one’s own; “stabilizing systematization,” which argues for increased “confidence in one’s own system” as in Christian apologetics; and “vertical systematization,” in which “the conflict is between systems with different functions” such as religion and science. Berner’s extensive categorizing displayed a high point of Stage Two elucidations of syncretism, showing how scholars often situated their analysis of various forms of syncretism within the meta-typologies above. Ulrich Berner, “The Concept of ‘Syncretism’: An Instrument of Historical Insight/Discovery?,” in Leopold and Jensen, 300-310.

breadth and suggested the need for more precise schema: “This universal usage [of syncretism] requires an analytical scheme and typological breakdown into its various manifestations,” he wrote, “but the requisite uniform terminology has not yet been established.”⁴⁰

Outside the history of religions, anthropologists provided their own typologies, particularly Roger Bastide, a figure who bridged phase one and phase two scholarship. In his 1971 *African Civilisations in the New World*, he distinguished between morphological (or mosaic) syncretism and institutional syncretism. In the former, elements of various religions coexist next to one another without necessarily forming a new whole. African and Catholic symbols may mix upon a single altar, for example, in Caribbean or Brazilian religion: “we may cite the Voodoo-type *pé* or the altars of the *macumbas*, with their stones, rum-bottles, crosses, statues of saints’ pots containing the souls of the dead, wax candles, specially blessed rosaries, and so on.”⁴¹ Bastide argued that these existed uneasily together. The African elements retained the religious sensibilities, powers, and symbolisms of their origin across the Atlantic and thereby preserved African religion in the Americas. Meanwhile, Catholic symbols sat alongside them and retained their own Christian meaning. (The extent to which the African and Catholic elements remained symbolically distinguished to the practitioners themselves became a source of significant debate in subsequent anthropology). Institutional syncretism, on the other hand, welcomed African religious elements into the established systems of Catholicism, as in the integration of African celebrations into the Christian liturgical calendar such as All Souls’ Eve as an occasion for ancestor worship.⁴² Bastide similarly distinguished so-called “magic syncretism”

⁴⁰ Rudolph, “Theological Invective,” 79.

⁴¹ Roger Bastide, *African Civilisations in the New World* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), 155.

⁴² Stefania Capone notes that Bastide’s mosaic syncretism is a syncretism without mixing, if we are to take Bastide at his word that the African and Catholic systems indeed remained distinct. Bastide wanted to argue that West African symbols upon such altars retained their African symbolism and effect as part of a larger argument made

from “religious syncretism.” The former operates under “the law of accumulation,” which adds religious symbol upon religious symbol thereby enriching the repertoire of religious symbolism even if the accumulation is not systematized into dogmatic schema.⁴³ The latter offers more systematic integration of religious symbols, whether through new theologies, new religious institutions, or otherwise. Finally, Bastide distinguished between inward and outward syncretism, which is largely a distinction between the extent to which syncretistic practices seeped into the psychology of practitioners as opposed to social and material manifestations of syncretism that may not necessarily reflect the inward beliefs of practitioners.

A final means of describing the complicated notion of syncretism was to delineate various *aspects* of syncretism. Rather than breaking syncretism down into various types, a number of scholars identified features of syncretism consistent across a wide range of instances that could thereby serve as methodological starting points for analysis. Helmer Ringgren, for example, in his introduction to a 1966 essay collection on syncretism, argued that scholars should give attention to the *conditions* that lead to syncretism.⁴⁴ Up to this point, scholars had focused primarily upon the historical aspects of syncretism, determining sources and precedents for later religious developments, paying less attention to the kinds of social environments that prove particularly fertile for syncretic developments. One such aspect was points of contact between religions: how do religions encounter one another—through trade, through missionaries,

across his career, that is, that the substrata of African societies in the Americas better preserved a pure African culture than African elites like postcolonial African politicians or leaders in the *negritude* movement, who themselves syncretized with Western culture and thereby “spoiled” a seemingly pure Africa of the past. Capone rightly points out that this pure Africa carries a mythic quality for Bastide and his disciples, regardless of its historical accuracy. Capone goes on to suggest an additional distinction in Bastide’s syncretism, “Afro-African syncretism” versus “Afro-Western” syncretism; the former draws from elements that precede slavery and gestures toward the belief “in a basic unity of African culture” while the latter integrates with Western culture in ways Bastide found unpalatable and impure. See Capone, “Transatlantic dialogue: Roger Bastide and the African American religions.” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 37, no. 3 (2007): 336-370.

⁴³ Bastide, *African Civilisation*, 155.

⁴⁴ Helmer Ringgren, “The Problems of Syncretism” in Sven Hartman, *Syncretism*.

or otherwise? Similarities between religions serves as another: religious practitioners in the United States who identify themselves as “Buddhist-Episcopalians,” for example, often highlight similarities between practices of meditative or contemplative prayer in Buddhism and Christianity. The psychological traits and the strategies of leaders supply additional such aspects. What personality traits do founders share, such as Jesus, Mani, and Muhammad? These leaders were not only spiritual guides, but also highly creative individuals, able to draw out from various religions what they considered valuable and then inventively shaping a new tradition. Similarly, do these leaders use certain common strategies when choosing certain religious expressions while neglecting others? The political aspect became another area of increasing concern during this period, as scholars began realizing the extent to which divisions between religious and political affairs were often as much a product of scholars’ projecting the Western paradigm of an institutionally separated church and state onto non-Western cultures. Prophets among the Nuer people of South Sudan and Ethiopia, for example, were not simply those who offered prophetic utterances received from a divine source; they skillfully drew people together through diplomatically layering and (subsequently) blending rituals for newly formed political communities that incorporated the pre-existing beliefs and practices of participants, for whom religion and politics were not separate ventures.⁴⁵ Likewise, as noted, the consolidation of various gods in the Greek pantheon was as much a means of political consolidation among various Greek city-states as it was solely a religious fusion—assuming the term “religion” is not overly anachronistic in this case. Realization of this political aspect of syncretism would lead directly into the third stage of syncretism scholarship.

⁴⁵ See E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) and Douglas Johnson, *Nuer Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Looking back upon this second phase from the 1960s-1980s and its concern for delineating syncretism, scholars began to identify its limitations. On the one hand, its many definitions and typologies provided some clarity. Yet they often raised more questions than they answered. When syncretism is unconscious and unnoticed, does it count as syncretism? How does one determine when syncretism stops being a process and becomes a state? Finally, if syncretism itself seemed a sprawling area of research, the typologies of syncretism sprawled as well: like Rudolph, one wonders the extent to which a sixteen-point typology of syncretism increases or inhibits conceptual clarity. In a retrospective comment upon his own precise modeling of syncretism, Ulrich Berner wrote in 2004,

Looking back, twenty-five years after drafting the “Heuristic Model of Syncretism,” the impression is ambivalent: on the one hand, the model looks very complex, comprising a lot of definitions, on the other hand it appears now as rather limited, covering only a part of the field that Religious Studies are concerned with. If the model remains a useful instrument within a limited context of research, however, this very fact might have interesting implications concerning the relationship between different approaches to the problem of syncretism.⁴⁶

Berner recognizes that the model itself emerged out of a particular scholarly period with its own preoccupations; its value becomes clear when recognized within this context of research, not when abstracted as a model for all time.

II.2. Critical Voices

Given the competing definitions, differing typologies, and various aspects of syncretism, some scholars questioned syncretism’s usefulness as a term at all. Religious historian Robert Baird offered an early critique of scholarly use of syncretism in his 1967 essay, “Syncretism and the

⁴⁶ From Berner’s personal communication with editors Leopold and Jensen, “Introduction to Part V: Category Problems and Theoretical Suspense,” 260.

History of Religions.”⁴⁷ Drawing largely from Hendrick Kraemer’s treatment of syncretism, he argued that theologians may find the term useful as a marker for conflicts in religious ideas or practices that remain unresolved and inconsistent, but not historians. If syncretism is a universal phenomenon, the term proves too imprecise. It fails to offer sufficient explanatory content; it does not help students of religion distinguish between religions; it obscures rather than elucidates facets of religious belief, he argued. Thus it offers little descriptive or theoretical force. This especially applies to the term “syncretistic religion”:

If it is true that such borrowing and blending and influencing on the plane of history is part of the whole historical process and is both inevitable and universal, then no real purpose is served by applying the term syncretism to such a phenomenon. Historically speaking, to say that “Christianity” or the “mystery religions” or “Hinduism” is syncretistic is not to say anything that distinguishes it from anything else and is merely equivalent to admitting that each has a history and can be studied historically.⁴⁸

Since historians seek paths of connection and interpenetration leading to differing religious developments across time, the notion offered little headway for Baird. For historians, “to label a religious complex syncretistic is to say it is inconsistent—in which case more specific arguments are required.”⁴⁹ In addition, Baird claimed, syncretism assumes a “beginning” or a “first cause”; it seeks “roots” and “sources.” Such a quest simply takes historians down rabbit holes because such quests only lead to discovering more and more syncretisms.⁵⁰ Baird’s essay, appearing early in this second phase of scholarship on syncretism, initiated a debate that continued for decades to come within syncretism literature. Nearly every subsequent essay that provided an overview on syncretism cited Baird, largely because he identified two recurring tensions. First, he noted the worry that any phenomenon that is universal may not be an adequate explanatory category or a

⁴⁷ Robert Baird, “Syncretism and the History of Religions” in Leopold and Jensen. Originally published in 1967.

⁴⁸ Baird, “Syncretism and the History of Religions,” 51.

⁴⁹ Baird, “Syncretism and the History of Religions,” 57.

⁵⁰ Baird, “Syncretism and the History of Religions,” 50. For a response to Baird, see Ulrich Berner, “The Notion of Syncretism,” *Historical Reflections* Vol 27, No. 3, 499-509.

sufficiently tailored descriptor. Second, he identified the fear that syncretism depends upon latent essentialism, upon the existence of a beginning or a first cause to religion. Each of these concerns became fodder for dialectical conversation, pushing scholars toward subsequent phases of research.

III. The Resilience and Power of Syncretism: Celebrating Mixture

Given complaints like Baird's, one might expect scholars to have stopped using "syncretism". Quite the contrary occurred, in fact. Partly due to the end of the Cold War and the increasing attention to multiculturalism that its end ushered forth, the 1990s saw flourishing literature on concepts of cultural mixture such as hybridity, creolization, and bricolage. This trend proved a boon to syncretism. Precise methodological questions gave way to new energies in the social sciences regarding cultural mixture. In the 1990s, anthropologists especially began to employ syncretism with renewed vigor as a term for cultural mixture specific to religion. Indeed, even though discussion of syncretism ebbed in some quarters of history of religions scholarship after the 1970s and 1980s—so claimed Fritz Graff in 2005—its frequency in wider publications took a sharp uptick from the mid-1980s through the 1990s.⁵¹ Amid this renewed attention to syncretism, scholars still noted and incorporated the methodological headway from the history of religions, such that new writings on syncretism employed the term more self-consciously with keen attention to its pejorative past. The most characteristic feature of the third phase was its attention to political contestation and the networks of power at play in syncretism, with Michel Foucault serving as the philosophical muse of this stage. Scholars employed discourse analysis in their

⁵¹ Fritz Graff, s.v. "Syncretism [Further Considerations]," *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition, Vol 13*, Lindsay Jones, ed, 8937. The rise in usage of syncretism is from Google Books Ngram, https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=syncretism&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Csyncretism%3B%2Cc0, accessed September 12, 2016.

assessments of syncretism to determine who employed the term, what they referred to, to what end, and wielding what authority. In addition to highlighting the power at play in deploying syncretism, scholars sought to capture the agency of subaltern peoples amid the experience of colonial domination. Thus syncretism became grouped with other words like hybridity, creolization, and bricolage. I will first address literature on the interplays between syncretism and political power, then indicate distinctions that emerged between prominent words for cultural mixture.

III.1. Syncretism and Political Power

Anthropologists Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw offered the most representative writing of this phase in their introductory essay to the collection *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*. They contended that the word syncretism can and should be revived with special attention to elements of power at play in the syncretic process; syncretism should connote the “politics of religious synthesis.” They sought to avoid treating syncretism as a category or as an “ism”, instead focusing upon the “processes of religious synthesis” and the “discourses of syncretism.”⁵² That is to say, they turned their attention to usage of the term itself: how the term indicated conceptions of authority and how religious practices labeled “syncretism” may in fact have been means of subaltern peoples negotiating their own identities in terms both familiar and unfamiliar to Western scholars. They suggested that syncretism’s contested history is part of its virtue: because the designation had carried a pejorative connotation, reformed usage allows critique of past pejorative use, thereby enabling new interpretations of—and appreciations for—beliefs and

⁵² Stewart and Shaw, “Introduction” in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*, 7. The word ends in “-ism”, so one must presume that they mean avoiding analyzing syncretism only as a static category, favoring instead processes of religious mixture.

practices labeled syncretism. They wrote, “it is precisely its capacity to contain paradox, contradiction and polyphony which makes syncretism such a powerful symbolic process.”⁵³

Stewart and Shaw showed scholars’ increasing recognition of agency among practitioners beyond religious elites. If scholars in the past had focused largely upon clergy either welcoming or challenging certain syncretisms, in this third phase scholars noticed how ordinary, non-elite religious practitioners employed syncretism as a means of expressing their own power and agency. Similarly, they marked a shift from emphasizing syncretisms within religious traditions writ-large to small-scale syncretisms among specific religious communities. In the context of Christianity, for example, attention shifted from missionary to convert. Just as the missionary represented holistic and at times essentialist understandings of traditions like Christianity, so the convert became one who renegotiates the meaning of a tradition based upon a local episteme and the perceived needs of her particular culture. In the words of Hans Keppenber, focus shifted “from product to producer.”⁵⁴ Thus the typology between syncretism “from above” (or guided syncretism) and syncretism “from below” re-emerged, this time with renewed attention to the networks of domination at play in syncretisms “from above” while celebrating the agency exhibited in syncretisms “from below.”

Two additional points deserve attention in Stewart and Shaw’s analysis. First, Stewart and Shaw coined the useful term “anti-syncretism” as a notion for efforts to oppose cultural mixture through delineation of fixed boundaries in religious traditions. Anti-syncretism is “the antagonism to religious synthesis shown by agents concerned with the defense of religious boundaries. Anti-syncretism is frequently bound up with the construction of ‘authenticity’, which

⁵³ Stewart and Shaw, “Introduction,” 21.

⁵⁴ Hans Keppenber, “In Praise of *Syncretism: The Beginnings of Christianity Conceived in the Light of a Diagnosis of Modern Culture*, in Leopold and Jensen, 33.

is in turn often linked to notions of ‘purity’.”⁵⁵ It becomes a strategy for consolidating religious power, knowledge, and practice by appealing to a pure and uncontested version of religion, ethnicity, or other identity markers. Especially among movements marked “fundamentalist” or “nativist”, anti-syncretism can serve as a tool to consolidate amid threats to perceived purity: “selected forms may be identified as foreign and extirpated, or alternatively recast and retained through claims that they have really always been ‘ours’, thereby deleting former religious syntheses from authorized cultural memory.”⁵⁶ Second, the authors identified syncretism not only as a means of empowering indigenous agency against Western hegemony, but also as a potential strategy for imperial practices. “The penetration of Western forms of capitalism and cultural hegemony has been—paradoxically—both subverted and promoted through syncretism,” they wrote.⁵⁷ In one troubling example from essayist Wolfgang Kempf, ritual circumcision among the Yawing of New Guinea became not only Christianized but Westernized, for the circumcision became a way of ridding oneself of “black blood” and entering “an inner state of whiteness.”⁵⁸ Syncretism can both build up indigenous agency and impose degrading forms of Westernization, depending upon who employs it and for what purposes.

Another work that represented the spirit of this third phase, largely by offering an instructive contrast with thinking in phase one, was historian Andrew Apter’s re-reading of Herskovits’ employment of syncretism. Written in the early 1990s, Apter agreed with Herskovits that syncretism was a means of African slaves withstanding colonial masters, but challenged Bastide’s account of the means by which slaves employed syncretism. Apter argued that the *orishas* were not merely cultural survivals transferred through Catholic saints to distract the

⁵⁵ Stewart and Shaw, “Introduction,” 7.

⁵⁶ Stewart and Shaw, “Introduction,” 8.

⁵⁷ Stewart and Shaw, “Introduction,” 21.

⁵⁸ Stewart and Shaw, “Introduction,” 19.

masters; they were means of reformulating the Catholic religion itself. Rather than seeing how slaves slowly integrated into the culture of the New World through syncretism, Apter was more interested in identifying how “we can recast historical genesis as a grand counter-hegemonic strategy.”⁵⁹ More important than the symbolic and ritual syncretism of *orishas* with Catholic saints were the hermeneutical possibilities of West African methods of religious interpretation that allowed new meanings to emerge within the ritual syncretisms identified by Herskovits and Bastide. The West African practice of “deep knowledge” (*imo jinlè*), in its ability to “safeguard a space for opposing hegemony” became a strategy to resist colonial domination through Catholic saints themselves. He wrote:

Sanctioned by ritual and safeguarded by secrecy, deep knowledge claims are invoked to revise dynastic genealogies, the rankings of civil chiefs, and even the relative positions of deities within official pantheons. Deep knowledge by definition opposes public discourse, and the authoritative taxonomies that it upholds—whatever they may be. If this is what has made West African religions powerful in relation to local, colonial, and postcolonial hegemonies, it has also informed syncretic revisions of dominant hierarchies in the New World, incorporating them within more popular pantheons and cosmological fields of command.⁶⁰

Apter shifted syncretism’s emphasis from ritual to hermeneutics, thereby displaying how Africans in the New World reconceived and redeployed their own power, using the religious resources at hand—in this case Catholic saints. Apter thereby displayed this third phase’s concern with colonial hegemony, indigenous agency, and the discourses of power through hermeneutical analysis.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Andrew Apter, “Herskovits’s Heritage,” 178.

⁶⁰ Andrew Apter, “Herskovits’s Heritage,” 180.

⁶¹ Similarly, Gustavo Benavides highlighted power, indigenous agency, and the fluidity of religious meaning in his 1995 essay “Syncretism and Legitimacy in Latin American Religion.” Syncretism occurs as religious adherents choose from a “repertoire” of potential elements; in their various choosings and as communities make common choices, syncretism form. Formation of official versions of religion can serve as “transcendental” means to legitimate “certain power relations” (Leopold and Jensen on Benevides, 152).

III.2: Managing Mixture: Syncretism, Creolization, Hybridity, and Bricolage

Syncretism was only one of many terms for cultural mixture circulating during this period. How did syncretism distinguish itself from other terms like hybridity, creolization, and bricolage, if at all? Charles Stewart wrote on creolization, for example, “In contemporary theory it is not clear if the concept denotes anything different from the apparently synonymous terms ‘syncretism’ and ‘hybridity’.”⁶² While the answer to this question was never entirely settled—especially among anthropologists who did not work exclusively within religion, as opposed to religious historians who did—distinctions emerged in the practical usage of the terms, even while they conceptually overlapped.

In their own genealogies and usages, both hybridity and creolization connoted cultural mixtures that emerged specifically within *colonial encounter*. Hybridity, especially as articulated by Homi Bhabha and other postcolonial theorists, related to the experience of colonialism undergone by subaltern populations who found their cultural identities intruded upon by colonial and postcolonial administrations. Earlier works in postcolonial theory, such as Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, portrayed indigenous subaltern political culture and Western colonial political culture as binary entities, with elites of the subaltern caught between this binary—neither at home in indigenous culture given their Western education nor at home in the West given their status as “Other” from the normative status of white Westerners.⁶³ In contrast, hybridity became a term that aptly portrays new identities and cultural practices formed between and beyond this binary. Hybrid acts, practices, and political spaces are those that are neither primarily indigenous nor colonial; they are newly formed spaces betwixt and between the

⁶² Charles Stewart, “Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory,” in *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory*, edited by Stewart (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007), 3.

⁶³ Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. (New York: Grove Press, 2008). Fanon himself gestured beyond this binary even if he never quite eluded it.

indigenous-colonial binary because they draw from both sources.⁶⁴ In postcolonial Kenya, for example, one might consider political parties as “hybridized” entities. On the hand they reflect the Western convention of organizing a subgroup of the national citizenry in service of certain legislative aims, on the other hand they reflect African indigenous politics’ ability to organize collectively in service to political aims organized more around geography and loosely held kinship ties. Political parties in Kenya are neither fully Western nor entirely indigenous in their political origins: they organize nationally yet often with localized political aims, hence the ill-informed Western tendency to call them “tribal” based parties.

Creolization, meanwhile, has eluded simple definitions and changed substantially over time, even though its genealogy and present usage largely reflect the history of colonial encounter and the spread of global capitalism from Europe to the Caribbean and elsewhere. The term “Creole” emerged in the 16th century as a term for “offspring of Old World progenitors born and raised in the New World,” with largely negative connotations.⁶⁵ In time it came to be applied to mixed languages, especially in the Caribbean, whether in new forms or in nonstandard versions of Western languages. More recently in the work of thinkers like Édouard Glissant, creolization has come to indicate the ubiquity of cultures incorporating and assimilating influences from other cultures.⁶⁶ “Europe is being ‘archipelagoized’ in its turn and is splitting into regions,” Glissant said. “It seems to me that these new dimensions of existence escape national realities which are trying to resist the forces of archipelagoization.... We must accustom our minds to these new world structures, in which the relationship between the center and the

⁶⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004). See also Papastergiadis, “Tracing Hybridity in Theory” in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics and Anti-Racism*, P. Werbner and T. Modood, eds. (London: Zed Books, 1997), 257-281.

⁶⁵ Stewart “Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory,” 1.

⁶⁶ In the move toward ubiquity of Creolization, similar conceptual issues emerge as with syncretism, such as whether creolization a process or a state, or whether the pejorative history of the word should disqualify it from scholarly usage (see Stewart 2006).

periphery will be completely different. Everything will be central and everything will be peripheral.”⁶⁷ While creolization was initially a term exclusive to the Caribbean, itself a distinct example of cultural interchange, Glissant turned it around in order to apply it to European metropolises as well. Yet Glissant’s usage still in fact depends upon the mobility of goods and persons enabled through the spread of global capitalism, as his examples of European cities like London indeed show. Creolization still depends upon the history of colonialism and its modern-day heir, globalization.

Thus while hybridity, creolization, and syncretism all denote cultural mixture, important distinctions emerged. First and foremost, syncretism remained distinct from these other terms in its specific relation to religion. *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism* displayed this orientation: even as the book crossed disciplinary boundaries between anthropology, religious studies, and critical theory, the subtitle *The Politics of Religious Synthesis* indicated consensus regarding the religious aspect of syncretism—even if scholars increasingly questioned religion as a domain distinct from other social realms like politics.⁶⁸ Any debate as to whether the term syncretism applied outside religion was scant but consistently in favor of keeping its religious connotation.⁶⁹

Second, in contrast to both hybridity and creolization, syncretism requires neither modernity nor colonialism.⁷⁰ In the History of Religions School, the first usages of syncretism

⁶⁷ Édouard Glissant, qtd in Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions*, 6-7. The authors take the quote from a French website; the link is no longer active (http://www.france.diplomatique.fr/label_france/ENGLISH/DOSSIER/2000/15creolisation.html).

⁶⁸ Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, *Syncretism/Anti-syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (New York: Routledge Press, 1994).

⁶⁹ See analysis in Rudolph, “Theological Invektive”; Stewart and Shaw “Introduction” in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*; Luther Martin, “Syncretism, Historicism, and Cognition: A Response to Michael Pye,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8, no. 2 (1996), 215-224; Berner “The Concept of ‘Syncretism.’ ”

⁷⁰ When usage of hybridity and creolization spread beyond application to colonial and postcolonial politics and economics, scholars become worried. Despite creolization’s varying connotations, for example, Stephan Palmié reminded anthropologists of the specificity of Creolization’s inherited content: as the “initial focus and early fulcrum of the capitalist world system, the Caribbean was literally remade by market forces,” an association appropriately applied for most of the term’s lifetime (436).

applied to distinctly non-modern phenomena—the religions of the Ancient Near East and Hellenistic Antiquity. Syncretism thus entails a longer historical scope, even if its categorical range proves more limited to the subject of religion than hybridity and creolization. This is not to say that syncretism does not involve a political dynamic, it is simply to say that syncretism need not entail a specifically political or colonial power struggle. A religion like Manichaeism did not necessarily form out of political and colonial contestation. In this case, while Manichaeism was an aftereffect of political contestation started by Alexander and the cultural exchange which followed his conquests, it was not an immediate result of his conquests. Even when one conceives colonialism more broadly than the expansion of modern European empires to also include expansion by ancient empires like Alexander's, syncretism still occurs outside such contexts of imperial expansion.

Third, in contrast to hybridity specifically, syncretism is not necessarily a newly identifiable entity resulting from two previously distinct systems. Rather, as shown in phase two, syncretisms can exist solely within one religious system that borrows from other systems without creating a new entity. Medieval Christians borrowed the pagan imagery of evergreen plants in their Christmas celebrations, even while the celebration remained distinctly focused upon the Christ mass. (The timing and festivities of Christmas itself, of course, itself borrowed from the earlier Roman holiday Saturnalia.)

Finally, how does syncretism relate to bricolage? For Claude Levi-Strauss, who brought the term bricolage to prominence, it entails using widely varying resources to fashion a new cultural synthesis according to the needs of the situation. The closest translation in English may be bric-a-brac, but a bric-a-brac combined to form a single whole. While Levi-Strauss employed the term in his book *The Savage Mind* to contrast “primitive” cultures with the modern

engineer—the former employing bricolage while the latter identifying clear means and ends in his projects—later scholars would argue that moderns employ bricolage as much as anyone else. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s rhetoric in the civil rights movement serves as an example, for he employed traditions of American democracy, the Black Church, Liberal Protestantism, and Ghandi’s nonviolence to craft synthetic speeches that spoke to a remarkably wide constituency of Americans (I take up this example again in Chapter 6). Used in this wide sense, bricolage became the broadest term in scope compared to hybridity, creolization, and syncretism. Some therefore considered syncretism a category within bricolage, thus King’s speeches fit into the wider category of bricolage, but in their religious element they could be considered syncretism as well. Yet others sought to retain a firmer distinction. Anthropologist Richard Werbner, for example, wrote, “bricolage is the formation of fresh cultural forms from the ready-to-hand debris of old ones. By contrast, the contentious and distinctively ritual and/or religious hybridization is syncretism.”⁷¹ In this sense, syncretism need not be made from “debris” or bric-a-brac of various elements. It does not entail truly “fresh cultural forms,” but rather employs different intellectual and material tools to articulate an older tradition in a new context.

Given the many concerns voiced during this third phase, it is useful to gather up key themes as well as recurring concerns. Old methods and paradigms for understanding cultures were breaking down and scholars were seeking new methods. They saw the extent to which older methods in the discipline of anthropology fabricated essentialisms that proved more limiting than illuminating, as in the case of essentialized African “tribes.” For Western colonial administrators who, all things considered, knew very little about a place like East Africa, essentialist tribal labels like Kikuyu, Luo, or Akamba provided a means of categorizing peoples according to

⁷¹ Richard Werbner, “Afterword” in Stewart and Shaw *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*, 215.

certain essential traits—and in ways resembling the ethnic discourses common in Europe at that time. Yet such essentialisms vastly overlooked the extent of interpenetration, movement, and fluidity that had always taken place as peoples intermarried, traded, and migrated. Likewise, the anthropological method of structuralism made individual cultures into monoliths, as if singular cultures each built themselves up with distinct systems of meaning, ritual, politics, and so forth, without penetration from the outside.⁷² In opposition to what seemed like straightjackets of interpretation—if their rhetoric is any guide to their feelings regarding their predecessors' methods—terms like hybridity, creolization, bricolage, and syncretism felt quite freeing. Scholars now had conceptual tools to make sense of cultures that seemed perpetually in flux, since cultures never allow a definitive articulation before another culture has already emerged. Some scholars were indeed vociferous in their denunciation, displayed in Goran Aijmer's introduction to the book *Syncretism and the Commerce of Symbols*: "We have no *a priori* right to define either society, or culture, as well integrated 'wholes'. Rather ... we may assume that groups are formed by agglomerations of people around particular activities," he writes.⁷³ Cultures constantly form and re-form as people "generate faked traditions out of a constantly ongoing bricolage."⁷⁴ If so much was up for grabs, one may ask, then, what guided analysis? If researchers could not impose conceptual categories like ethnicity that were indigenous to their own European context, what could they use? Highlighting interweaving political contestations and analyzing networks of power proved the most common methodology. Indeed, the approach of discourse analysis showed the extent to which old essentialisms were themselves means of

⁷² For a fuller appraisal of this approach in the African context, see Terence Ranger, "The Local and the Global in Southern African Religious History," *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 65-98.

⁷³ Göran Aijmer, "By Way of Introduction," in *Syncretism and the Commerce of Symbols*, ed. by Göran Aijmer (Göteborg: The Institute for Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology), 3.

⁷⁴ Aijmer, "By Way of Introduction," 12.

exploiting power. After all, the ability to categorize people and their cultures, especially within colonial contexts, proved a tremendous power indeed. Syncretism thus became a tool in the arsenal of scholars eager to break down what seemed an old consensus of cultural analysis.

Some scholars sought to learn from such past mistakes, even if such lessons were more often suggested than implemented. Writers increasingly realized the implications of their research upon the populations they studied, that is, the effect of discourse analysis upon those who employ that discourse in their everyday lives. While such research carried potential to reveal the instability and contingency of communities' traditions, it also carried harmful potential to deconstruct powerful sources of genuine meaning for peoples who already felt uprooted by Western forms of modernization. Just as the anthropology of a prior generation potentially harmed research subjects by categorizing them into "essentialized 'tribal' identities"—often in service of the aims of European colonialism—likewise postmodern anthropology practiced its own imperialism. Stewart and Shaw wrote, "anthropological hegemony now entails taking apart practices and identities which are phenomenological realities for those who use them ('your tradition is invented'). In our enthusiasm for deconstructing syncretic traditions we may have invented another kind of intellectual imperialism."⁷⁵

III.3. Semiotics: Transitioning to the Fourth Phase

Assessments of power in syncretism did not preclude other themes of analysis, in particular that of semiotics. Anthropologists and historians explored how people use and negotiate cultural symbols, especially symbols that appear at variance with one another and become labeled syncretism. The book title *Syncretism and the Commerce of Symbols*, an essay collection

⁷⁵ Stewart and Shaw, "Introduction," 23.

published in 1995, displayed the sharing of religious symbols and their reinterpretations through such movement. Writing in terms familiar to anthropologists, André Droogers argued that humans think in metaphors and that humans understand the world by way of symbols. From the words of our languages to the images that together construct a cultural reality, all are signs indicating meaning. Thus, “culture can be defined as the capacity to generate meaning.”⁷⁶ Syncretism then becomes an aspect of cultural symbols, since symbols are not static. As symbols change over time, both in their physical aspect and in their meaning, humans syncretize symbols with one another or syncretize by projecting a new meaning onto familiar symbols. Indeed, even when a symbolic image stays the same, the meaning can profoundly change and thereby lead to new cultural expression—Protestant reinterpretations of the Eucharist again being an example. Among anthropologists studying syncretism in the 1990s, semiotics drew especially from existing conversations about power. In his essay “Syncretism, Power, and Play,” Droogers connected human capacity for symbolism as a meaning-making enterprise to the wielding of power, for generating meaning directly relates to the capacity to employ power within communities and society at large. “Meaning-making with regard to reality is often reserved for those in power,” he wrote. Within religion, such power relates to who controls its symbols and its rituals: “Much of the division of labor within a religion has to do with the access to the ritual control of ... supernatural resources.”⁷⁷ Symbols offer both freedom and constraint in this regard. Freedom insofar as people can choose between various symbols—a particular symbol is one option among many—and can even choose (or at least negotiate) a symbol’s meaning. At the same time, because certain symbols already exist, they block off other alternatives. Even while

⁷⁶ André Droogers, “Syncretism, Power, and Play,” in Leopold and Jensen, 218.

⁷⁷ André Droogers, “Syncretism, Power, and Play”, 220.

European Protestant Christians in the 16th century renegotiated the meaning and interpretation of the Eucharist, the use of bread and wine precluded other symbolic options.

The theme of semiotics served as a transition from the third phase of literature to the fourth. While cultural theories of semiotics had existed for some time, they became part of the syncretism conversation largely during this phase. This in turn led to examining the role of human cognition in making and perpetuating certain symbols over others in the production of culture—insights that resulted in phase four’s attention to religious cognition.

Before moving to the fourth phase, however, one observes a larger methodological shift occurring in scholarship on syncretism. In the first two phases, scholars assessed syncretism largely within the bounds of religious studies without substantial interdisciplinary cross-pollination. Religious historians wrote largely for religious historians while Herskovits and Bastide wrote for anthropologists. In the third and fourth phases, scholars portrayed syncretism on a wider canvas, at least a wider theoretical canvas. Largely due to the anthropological method of employing theories of culture to ethnographic study, researchers incorporated syncretism into these theories rather than assessing it strictly within the bounds of religious studies. In the fourth phase, historians of religions—rather than anthropologists—return to the forefront, but the breadth of interdisciplinary methodology remains.

IV. The Mechanics of Syncretism: Incorporating Cognition

If the third phase in the 1990s emphasized networks of power and, to a lesser extent, semiotics, the fourth refocuses upon more specific methodological concerns. In the third phase scholars attended to themes of power and symbolism because they so thoroughly reoriented the discussion; in the fourth phase, which began around 2000, they keep these insights close at hand

but apply them to the mechanics of syncretism. They ask questions like how syncretisms are produced, what patterns are involved in making syncretisms, and how scholars might predict syncretic formations. Thus this fourth phase, the present one, aims to provide an orderly account of an often-unruly term, just like the second phase. Yet it does so quite differently than the second phase did: rather than assessing the internal dynamics of syncretism through precise definitions and typologies, current scholars focus upon the cognitive operations of the mind when receiving new religious data. For many scholars in this phase of “incorporating cognition,” cognitive theories provide new tools to explain why human beings choose certain religious formations over others, how they determine symbolic meanings of objects, and why certain forms of mixture prove more appealing than others. Cognitive studies of religion are appealing not only for the new insights they offer, but also because “harder” sciences like neuroscience at times have increased the perceived credibility of “soft sciences” like religious studies.

Scholars of syncretism have found two interrelated elements of cognition particularly relevant: the *synthetic* nature of understanding and the brain’s pattern of *selectivity*. Scholars first drew from Pascal Boyer’s seminal book *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*, published in 1994, which offered a cognitive basis for approaching and explaining religion.⁷⁸ Luther Martin, the earliest voice connecting syncretism to human cognition, described how the brain processes information based upon preexisting concepts and structures.⁷⁹ Humans do not simply copy or download new information, we process data based upon concepts already existing within the mind. In receiving data, the brain constructs its own presentation of the material received; new data “attaches” to existing concepts and constructs in the brain. Thus as religion and culture pass

⁷⁸ Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

⁷⁹ Luther Martin, “To use ‘syncretism’ or not to use ‘syncretism’: that is the question,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 396.

from one generation to another, and from one individual to another, the mental representations of religion are constantly reconstructed and thus refigured due to the synthetic nature of cognition.

Such reconstruction of religion also occurs due to selectivity in human cognition. Martin argues that syncretism is not simply a random or accidental combination of religious data; people often select certain elements of a religion over others due to cognitive processes, many of which occur unconsciously. “Although generalizations about similarities among religions may be constructed upon conscious and even intentional representations of similarities, they are most often the products of intuitive and unconscious recognitions.”⁸⁰ Humans choose to perpetuate certain aspects of religion and culture while neglecting others, usually at an unconscious level. In describing such cognitive synthesis and selectivity, cognitive scientists Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier write:

In blending, structure from input mental spaces is projected to a separate “blended” mental space. The projection is selective. Through completion and elaboration, the blend develops structure not provided by the inputs. Inferences, arguments, and ideas developed in the blend can have effect in cognition, leading us to modify the initial inputs and to change our view of the corresponding situations.⁸¹

Data received into the brain goes into a “separate ‘blended’ mental space,” a space that itself relies upon existing constructs. The mind then projects some elements but not others, selecting certain aspects while leaving others aside. The process of reproducing data thereby modifies the original data as received.

The synthetic and selective quality of human comprehension suggests that human cognition assures religious transmission is both original and constrained. Not unlike what we saw above in theories of semiotics, religious transmission is original in the sense that human minds constantly reconstruct data and thus shape new understandings and expressions of data. It is also

⁸⁰ Luther Martin, “Syncretism, historicism, and cognition,” 221.

⁸¹ Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, “Conceptual Integration Networks,” *Cognitive Science* 22, No. 2 (1998): 133.

constrained in the sense that it can only process the data given to it, and does so by connecting with the mental categories already at play in minds receiving the data. Martin writes, “Rather than ‘a jumble where socialized subjects eventually find what they need in order to become competent members of the group,’ cultural formations such as syncretism may be understood as a selective reinforcement of a cultural content.”⁸² In this regard, cognition works very much like language; Boyer writes that we have “similar inferential mechanisms [to language] which restrict the range of generalizations” we can produce.⁸³

Martin, along with a host of other scholars like Leopold and Jensen, thus argued that such brain functioning accounts for the ubiquity of syncretism as identified in the first phase of syncretism research in the 19th and early 20th centuries. If no two human minds and no two human cultures receive data in the same way, then syncretism becomes inevitable. If blending is “the way we think,” in Leopold and Jensen’s words, then any religious transmission requires new expressions and constructions of existing religious knowledge and practice.⁸⁴ Drawing on Martin, they suggest that the “architecture” of cognition may explain why and how syncretisms operate, that is, cognition is “both cause and mechanism of syncretism.”⁸⁵

In a work exemplifying such approaches, published in 2000, Timothy Light applies such cognitive theory in religious transmission to South American and East Asian religion as well as to his own religious growth. Light proffers the category “orthosyncretism” in describing much religious development, including his own as a practicing Christian. Light portrays his religious comprehension across three stages in his lifetime—as a four year old, as an adolescent, and as a late middle-aged man. As a child, for example, Light associated “holy action” with activity in

⁸² Martin, “Syncretism, Historicism, and Cognition,” 220. The quote is from Boyer, 1994: 40.

⁸³ Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*, 116.

⁸⁴ Leopold and Jensen, “General Introduction,” 9.

⁸⁵ Leopold and Jensen, “Conclusion,” 377.

church like genuflection or making the sign of the cross. By adolescence such holy action expanded to include prayer and ethical acts. Regarding doctrine, as a child Light considered a wide array of people “holy” including God and Jesus but also including Mary, Joseph, and his priest, without a clear sense of hierarchy between them. From adolescence into adulthood his understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity developed, first sharply distinguishing Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to developing a clearer monotheism in later life.⁸⁶ The symbols in church remained the same, even as Light’s understanding changed. Few Christians would call the four-year-old Light or the adolescent Light a heretic, despite the fact that views of God during those stages were not complaint with Christian orthodoxy as understood through creedal documents. Rather, most would attribute his earlier views to religious growth and the limitation of cognition especially in his early years. Yet Light’s experience suggests an additional point. His own seemingly “unorthodox” understandings of Christianity clearly led to his mature Christianity. Orthodoxy required something resembling heresy.

Light contends that symbolic continuity amid varying interpretations occurs across cultures as well, largely due to human cognition. The Virgin of Guadalupe, for example, is not simply the transference of a pagan deity onto the Virgin Mary. “The Indians were not perpetuating memories of pre-Columbian goddesses but were projecting elements of their Christian worship into the pre-Christian past,” he notes, quoting Louise Burkhart.⁸⁷ The symbol may have remained the same—or at least similar—but its meaning and interpretation vastly

⁸⁶ Timothy Light, “Orthosyncretism: An Account of Melding in Religion,” in Leopold and Jensen, 327. Originally published in 2000.

⁸⁷ Louise M. Burkhart, “The Cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico,” in *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality from the Cult of the Feathered Serpent to the Theology of Liberation*, ed Gary H. Gossen with Miguel Leon-Portilla. New York: Crossroad, 1994), 208. Burkhart notes the sophistication of Mexican Christians’ interpretation of Guadalupe, which often eluded the Spanish priests of the 16th century: “Priests, incapable of viewing Indian religion except in terms of idolatry versus Christianity, were oblivious to many of the subtle adjustments and compromises the Indians were making both in their memories of ‘idolatry’ and their practices of Christianity” (208).

changed. For Light, the two principles of syncretism are the inevitability of religious change and the principle of “cognitive integrity.” While change is a constant facet of religion, “the alteration will be interpreted as continuity, despite the appearance to the outside of radical change.”

Humans strive to function as singular, non-contradictory beings (and societies) despite inconsistencies in thought and behavior. “All of us know from observation that every society and every individual to a greater or lesser degree simultaneously holds on to mutually contradictory propositions, beliefs, and habits of action. And yet we operate as, and consider ourselves as, unitary wholes, and talk about ourselves as single entities and about our societies as cohesions definable by shared characteristics.”⁸⁸ The framework for making coherence out of change and inconsistency is cognitive, through a three-stage process. First, we acquire individual aspects of knowledge in religion, what he calls “discrete-points”, such as individual rituals or precepts for behavior. Second, we integrate these various points, as in connecting the ritual of baptism with Holy Communion or linking behavioral precepts into a single religious ethical system. Third, we connect these integrated points in a webbing, for example by linking ritual acts with ethical precepts. We do this by synthesizing new information with existing concepts and by cognitive selectivity which might choose one symbol above another. An adolescent integrates the meaning of religious rituals into existing childhood understandings of activities that take place in holy spaces. For Light, syncretism is simply part of learning religion: “today’s orthodoxy is the result of yesterday’s mixing, and it has never been otherwise.”⁸⁹

Light’s essay shows the extent to which this phase’s literature has dialectically joined its own concerns with themes from previous stages. Light moves seamlessly between discussing cognition (phase four) and semiotics (phase three). Panayotis Pachis, meanwhile, glides between

⁸⁸ Light, “Orthosyncretism,” 341.

⁸⁹ Light, “Orthosyncretism,” 345.

politics (phase three) and cognition (phase four) when describing Greeks employing their antiquity as a means of asserting political status in the modern era.⁹⁰ Unlike the second phase, these scholars generally have *not* sought a precise definition of syncretism; Light himself offers a vague definition of syncretism in his essay and simply says, “I do this because the central issue is not the taxonomy of mixing, but the prevalence of the phenomenon itself.”⁹¹ Nor do scholars generally defend their use of the term, perhaps because of the term’s increasing non-pejorative use in the second and third phases. They simply employ it with little (if any) defensiveness.⁹² Indeed, Ulrich Berner argues during this phase that a single definition of syncretism would be neither useful nor necessary: “it would not make sense looking for the ‘essence’ of syncretism or discussing which concept of syncretism is the ‘right’ one. Every conceptual model that is consistently constructed could be useful, because every concept of syncretism that is clearly defined possibly opens up a new perspective on the complex cultural phenomena.”⁹³ Berner’s sentiment aptly articulates the spirit of literature during this phase.

IV.2. Continuing Ambivalence

Nevertheless, there still remains some debate regarding whether or not to use the term syncretism especially among religious historians (anthropologists, by comparison, voice less concern). Indeed, a special edition of the journal *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* is dedicated to syncretism and directly addresses this question of continued usage (Fall 2001, Volume 27 No

⁹⁰ Panayotis Pachis’ “Religious Tendencies in Greece at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century: An Approach to Contemporary Greek Reality,” in Leopold and Jensen, 348-361.

⁹¹ Leopold and Jensen, “Conclusion,” 326.

⁹² For examples see Joel Robbins, “Crypto-Religion and the Study of Cultural Mixtures: Anthropology, Value, and the Nature of Syncretism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, No. 2 (June 2011), 408-424; Mika Vähäkangas, “Ghambageu Encounter Jesus in Sonjo Mythology: Syncretism as African Rational Action,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, No. 1 (March 2008): 111-137.

⁹³ Qtd in Leopold and Jensen, correspondence with the editors, “Introduction to Part V: Category Problems and Theoretical Suspense,” 262.

3). In his essay “Retrofitting/Retiring ‘Syncretism’,” historian A.J. Droge argues against its use, claiming that a nuanced use of the term, exemplified in thinkers like Martin and J. Z. Smith, has failed to take hold in the academy.⁹⁴ Most continue to use it without the precise analytical considerations provided above, he argues. For Droge, scholarship on the *use* of the term syncretism would prove far more helpful than studying the phenomenon itself. (In this sense Droge shares concerns with phase three material.) In the same volume, Bruce Lincoln suggests the term be dispensed with entirely, favoring instead the term “mongrelization” for its “disquieting and abrasive” connotation that more accurately reflects, in his view, the “incendiary issues of race and sex” that so often accompany religious and colonial exchanges.⁹⁵ Fritz Graff, in his “Additional Considerations” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* that supplements Colbe’s entry, likewise speaks with ambivalence about the term’s usefulness.

Such concerns notwithstanding, some synthesis has begun to take shape among historians of religion who retain the notion, especially regarding scholarly expectations when using the term. A 2004 essay by Martin and Leopold, entitled “New Approaches to the Study of Syncretism,” offers a representative guide for employing the term.⁹⁶ After providing a careful and succinct overview of the use of syncretism among both historians and anthropologists, they conclude by offering guidelines for its use. Syncretism may be used descriptively, they argue,

⁹⁴ For Jonathan Z. Smith’s treatment of syncretism, see “Wisdom and Apocalyptic” in *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 67-87.

⁹⁵ Bruce Lincoln, “Retiring Syncretism,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 27, no. 3 (2001), 457.

⁹⁶ Luther Martin and Anita Maria Leopold, “New Approaches to the Study of Syncretism,” *New Approaches to the Study of Religion: Volume 2: Textual, Comparative, Sociological, and Cognitive Approaches*, Peter Antes, Armin Geertz, Randi Warne, eds (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 93-108. Also representative is the conclusion of Leopold and Jensen’s volume on syncretism suggesting three analytic “levels of analysis” involved in assessing “the nature of syncretism.” They first proposed a “social” level, which examines employment of power in identifying and controlling religious content and religious boundaries, taken from phase three. They then suggested a “semiotic” level, also from the third phase, which addresses “the hermeneutical and transformative impact that syncretistic formations have on religion.” Finally, they proposed a “cognitive” level of syncretism, which explains the “nature of conceptual blending and religious categorizing.”

but not as an explanatory category in itself. If all religions are syncretic, then employing syncretism as an explanation for phenomena proves empty; in particular the category “syncretistic religion” communicates very little. When used descriptively, scholars should be as explicit as possible about their data and what leads them to employ the term. Is the data from polemical charges, from colonial encounter, from defending religious boundaries, or otherwise?⁹⁷ The assessment of such data must distinguish what constitutes syncretism from what is *not* considered syncretism. They finally offer three requirements for the rigorous employment of the category. First, it must “stipulate relationships among ... data” that prove syncretic in a particular time and place, establishing both empirically and theoretically why the data constitutes syncretism. Second, it must “differentiate and describe as an object of study the incursions, additions/deletions, transformations and/or substitutions/combinations” that take place in the data being explored in the two (or more) traditions interacting. Third and finally, it must “propose an explanation” that might be compared and contrasted “against comparative (historical and anthropological) data.”⁹⁸ If studies cannot meet these criteria, they suggest, then perhaps the term should indeed be discarded.

This caution proves indicative of much current literature in the history of religions, even while discussions about syncretism retain a more positive tone in anthropology. Despite scholars’ increased general comfort with the notion of syncretism by the fourth and present phase of literature, it continues to have its advocates and its critics. Across the four phases, scholars have achieved remarkable gains, yet found seemingly endless new questions. Discovering its ubiquity in the first phase led to efforts to delineate the phenomenon in the second, yet also led to questions as to whether the term describes anything at all. In more current scholarship,

⁹⁷ Martin and Leopold, “New Approaches,” 101-102.

⁹⁸ Martin and Leopold, “New Approaches,” 103.

excavating semiotics in the third phase led to new ground in cognitive theory in the fourth, but theories about religious cognition have now brought up old questions about who defines religion—questions along the lines of phase three. If “religious ideas” are natural to the brain as Boyer and Luther assert, what constitutes “religion” and who defines it?⁹⁹ Indeed, controversy over the use of syncretism has often been the instigator for finding new insights, stretching from van der Leeuw’s notion of “transposition” in the first stage to Martin’s and Leopold’s attention to cognition. Whatever the term’s future, those rituals, beliefs, and practices indicated by syncretism—which consistently thwart easy categorization—will continue to animate scholars.

V. Mutual Learning between Theology and Religious Studies: A Pluralist Approach

V.1. Implications for Christian Theology

The aim of this analysis is not simply to provide a historiographic review of syncretism as treated in history of religions and anthropology, useful as such a historiography may be. Within the concerns of this dissertation, my aim is to display the rigor of this scholarship’s treatment of syncretism compared with Christian theology’s as explored in Chapter 1. This aim does not suggest that history of religions and anthropology do not possess their own methodological shortcomings, which I will address shortly. It is to say, however, that Christian theology gains

⁹⁹ The eagerness of some religious studies scholars to embrace neuroscience as “resolving” questions like syncretism easily overlooks fundamental epistemological concerns. Since humans are the ones both carrying out research in neuroscience and the ones being experimented upon, we cannot avoid the fact that neuroscience research depends upon human ways of knowing in all their limitations. Epistemology precedes neuroscience, for human minds are still the objects doing the research by determining its scope, its aims, and its categories. Russell McCutcheon voices a similar concern; he worries about presuming a humanly defined category like “religion” as naturally occurring in the brain: “What therefore troubles me about the attempt to find religious experiences in the mind/brain or religion in the genes is the manner in which ... a cultural and historically local nomenclature (i.e., this is religion, that is not religion) is being dehistoricized and thus normalized by being medicalized and thus naturalized.” “Will Your Cognitive Anchor Hold in the Storms of Culture,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (December 2010), 1185. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, “Hegel on Faces and Skulls” in *Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Alasdair MacIntyre, 219-236 (Notre Dame University Press:1976).

great insight from examining this literature as theologians seek clarity regarding their confusions surrounding syncretism. Chapter 1 already identified the extent to which theology's befuddlement about syncretism is linked to inadequate response to historicism. Literature from the history of religions and anthropology offers three more correctives that prove salutary to Christianity theology: first, the universality of syncretism; second, the politics of syncretism; and third, the epistemological insight of blending as an inherent aspect of thinking.

While theologians from Harnack in the early 20th century to Theo Sundermeier in the contemporary guild acknowledge the ubiquity of syncretism in Christianity, as in any other religion, this insight has not made its way into the mainstream theological academy where syncretism largely remains a pejorative designation. The first two phases of literature on syncretism, taken together, make the ubiquity of syncretism abundantly clear. The first phase makes the point in a general sense, but the second presses it further by elaborating upon the variety and the scope of syncretism. For theologians, it is less important to determine whether there are indeed sixteen different varieties of syncretism—as identified in Rudolph's essay—than it is to offer a theological account of such variety in the transmission of Christianity. Put theologically, what might such variety tell us about God in Christ, who becomes enfleshed into the culture of first century Palestine and continues to be revealed in countless cultures since? I will begin to offer a theological response to this question in the next chapter with Kathryn Tanner, as well as in Chapter 5 with Rowan Williams' thought. At this point, such variety in syncretism indicates, at the very least, the futility of employing syncretism only as a pejorative term. As noted in Chapter 1, this pejorative designation depends upon distinctions like Hendrick Kraemer's between phenomenological syncretism and theological syncretism, a distinction of dubious usefulness given that Christians can rarely determine in advance which syncretisms will

become part of accepted Christian orthodoxy. To the extent that the theological academy struggles to acknowledge syncretism's ubiquity, it reflects an inadequate theological account of the cultural interpenetration involved in transmitting the gospel. Such careless treatment of syncretism suggests that many Christian theologians, even if unconsciously, still long for unfiltered revelation.

Second, in an ethical vein, the most important insight from "etic" scholarship to Christian theology entails the politics of syncretism highlighted in the third phase. "Definitions are acts of power," Gustavo Benevides reminds us.¹⁰⁰ Benevides is certainly correct that the term has flowed largely in only one direction, from those who possess political and religious power to those who do not. Practically, this has meant that the term has tended to flow from Western to non-Western churches, with little attention to syncretism within Western Christianity itself. Yet surely the Western Christian is as syncretized as any other. As Charles Taylor writes in his book *Sources of the Self*, Westerners have integrated various traditions into a single individual or cultural identity, drawing from sources as varied as Christianity, Enlightenment thought, and Romantic expressivism. To the extent that each of these three sources emerged partially in opposition to what preceded them only shows how contested such mixture of the Western self in fact is. "Views coexist with one another which have arisen later in reaction to them," Taylor writes. For example, "Born-again Christians in the United State cannot help being somewhat influenced by expressive individualism."¹⁰¹ Ordinary as an altar call may appear to a Christian in the American South, this conclusion of a religious gathering combines the Christian affirmation of salvation from sin with the 19th century Romantic ideal of the expressive individual, acting on

¹⁰⁰ Benevides, "Syncretism and Legitimacy in Latin American Religion," in *Syncretism: A Reader*, ed. Leopold and Jensen, 208.

¹⁰¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 497.

one's own behalf and expressing inward feelings reflecting a deeply-held personal identity. Yet such syncretism went largely unnoticed among Westerners as Christianity traveled to new environments. Many 19th and 20th century European missionaries to sub-Saharan Africa, for example, joined the findings of modern medicine with Christianity in contexts of African cultures that highly valued healing as an aspect of religious power. Part of the potency of Christianity was the extent to which its practitioners, in this case medical missionaries, effectively relieved illnesses. Yet modern medicine was certainly not part of Christianity for most of its history; to join modern medicalization and Christianity together is most clearly itself a syncretism.

Overlooking the West's own syncretism is not simply an innocent oversight. It reflects the extent to which Westerners have viewed their own expression of Christianity as normative while seeing non-Western Christianity as inferior or, at least, lacking the sophistication of the supposed Western standard. There is a large and growing literature in this regard, particularly on Christianity and race, which provides numerous instances of Christianity being understood as the cultural possession of the West.¹⁰² In short, the literature persuasively contends that Christianity became synonymous with the West from the Late Medieval era well into the era of European imperialism, thereby contributing to a racialized Christian imagination that, at its very worst, questioned the humanity of non-Western peoples or saw non-Western peoples in intermediary stages moving toward the culmination of religion and culture expressed in the West.¹⁰³ The

¹⁰² Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?: The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003) and *Encountering the West*; on race, Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) and J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁰³ As one example, see the theological dialogue regarding the status of American Indians in Francisco de Vitoria's argument for equal rights of Indians and Spaniards in "The Rights of the Indians," written during the 16th century Spanish conquests. De Vitoria addresses various arguments circulating regarding the status of Indians, ranging from

inability of Westerners to identify their own syncretisms is an enduring symptom of such cultural presumption, of seeing churches beyond the West as “spiritual colonies,” to use Hendrick Kraemer’s apt phrase.¹⁰⁴

In light of such cultural and religious presumption, secular anthropologists often proved more adept at sympathetically interpreting syncretic beliefs and practices than Christian thinkers. Anthropologists exhibited such moral sympathy largely because of their self-understood aim of making the seemingly exotic intelligible on its own terms and making the strange appear ordinary to Westerners. More so than many Christians, anthropologists often exhibited, in van der Leeuw’s phrasing, “the persistent and strenuous application of ... intense sympathy” required for apprehending other cultures’ religious practices.¹⁰⁵ Van der Leeuw continues, quoting G.K. Chesterton, “When the professor is told by the barbarian [sic] that once there was nothing except a great feathered serpent, unless the learned man feels a thrill and a half temptation to wish it were true, he is no judge of such things at all.”¹⁰⁶ Anthropologists quite often felt that thrill more so than, say, British Victorian missionaries. By exploring the inner logic of indigenous appropriation of Christianity rather than judging it by a Western standard of fixed orthodoxy, anthropologists found certain humanist tendencies within practices and beliefs that Western Christians deemed “pagan” or “unchristian.” As we will see in Chapter 6, for example, ritual acts like animal slaughter in places like South Sudan were not simply “pagan” sacrifices to appease angry gods, but were means of social conciliation and forgiveness addressed to a community and to God. From the perspective of Christian moral theology, the anthropologists in such cases

sub-human to un-baptized. In both cases, they were ripe for plunder according to the opponents of de Vitoria. Selections of de Vitoria in Arthur F. Holmes, *War and Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 118-136).

¹⁰⁴ Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, 410.

¹⁰⁵ Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 675.

¹⁰⁶ Van der Leeuw misquotes Chesterton slightly, “Religion in Essence and Manifestation,” 675. Chesterton wrote “told by the Polynesian” but van der Leeuw (or his translator) quotes him saying “barbarian.” Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1926), 108.

exhibited virtues of charity, mutuality, and concern for those marginalized by Western society—virtues prized by Christians themselves—more adequately than many Christians. This is not to suggest any inherent superiority of anthropologists, who have their own curious history with the European colonial project as documenters of indigenous culture for imperial authorities. It is simply to say that Western Christians have often failed to live up to their own norms when interpreting Christianity beyond the West.

Third, treatment of semiotics and cognition in the third and fourth phases of scholarship demonstrates the extent to which synthetic blending is natural to the human reception of knowledge and thus the extent to which syncretism is a natural aspect of conversion.¹⁰⁷ If new religious knowledge joins with knowledge and concepts already in the mind, then various peoples will inevitably receive the Christian message differently given their varying cultural epistemes. Westerners articulating the Christian message in terms that accord with modern science is just as syncretic as Africans comprehending the atonement through existing systems of ritual sacrifice.

The synthetic quality of human understanding also suggests that oftentimes syncretisms do not imply distortion of Christianity, but rather *comprehension*. If a community articulates Christianity through local cultural tools, that simply implies the process of cognition is working as they link Christianity to existing modes of understanding; oftentimes those very practices deemed syncretic by missionaries or (more often) church authorities external to that culture are far more sophisticated in terms of the local episteme than outsiders initially think. As noted in the example of Guadalupe, integrating Juan Diego's vision into the local church's practice of

¹⁰⁷ Encouraging the usefulness of these aspects of the cognitive study of religion is not an unqualified endorsement of the project, as noted above. The usefulness of cognitive studies for this project largely entails the synthetic nature of human understanding.

Christianity was less a means of keeping paganism going—a “cultural survival” in the parlance of anthropologists—and more a means of projecting Christianity onto the culture’s past experience and history. Mexican Christians reinterpreted their culture’s past in light of Christian affirmations, not despite them, because they saw elements of Christianity already in place before missionaries arrived. Juan Diego’s vision affirmed that the God proclaimed in Christ was already at work before the Christian gospel was first heard. Diego’s culture did not have a long history of Christianity at that time, thus such connections empowered the notion of Christ being the fulfillment of already familiar religious practices.

V.2. Implications for Religious Studies

This survey not only carries implications for Christian theology, however; the survey also raises concerns regarding long held assumptions in so-called etic scholarship of religion. At least three recurring concerns arise from the above survey. First, scholars worry whether discussion of syncretism inherently assumes timeless or essentialist understandings of religion. Second, they debate whether or not to continue using the word syncretism. In this regard, I suggest this debate obscures more urgent concerns regarding the category of religion itself. Third, the survey brings up wider methodological concerns related to questions of whether it would be desirable—or possible—to have “etic” scholarship that is truly free of “emic” concerns. Syncretism research would suggest that scholars of religion are already borrowing across lines of theology and religious studies, and that all scholars carry out reflection within an “emic” community of some kind. Religious studies thereby benefits from a more self-consciously pluralist approach. In each of these three areas, I offer reflections as one whose primary academic expertise lies in Christian theology and ethics—that is, as one outside the “etic” guild strictly conceived—but as one how

has found invaluable insights within these approaches to religion. Any critiques offered are in the spirit of enhancing the study of religion, not as one who sees “etic” and “emic” approaches as necessarily competitive. Rather, I see them as shared ventures in seeking understanding of human attempts to comprehend the divine.

The fear that discussions of syncretism necessarily entail an essentialist understanding of religion appeared in Baird and became a perennial worry in the literature. The fear stems from a now-common argument in the guild, articulated in Baird’s 1967 essay: if no religion has pure origins and if all religions prove to be mixtures of other preexisting religions, then any assumption of a pure essence would be based upon a historically questionable speculation, that is, that there is some fixed and unchanging idea that has been expressed in all articulations of a religion across the vicissitudes of time and culture. We saw such an understanding of religion in Harnack and in van der Leeuw’s articulation of the “form” of a religion. Charles Stewart, representing anthropologists, similarly expresses a concern that notions of stability in religious traditions lead to essentialist conclusions about pure origins: “Once the idea of stable traditions is introduced, how far away can the notion of pure traditions be?”¹⁰⁸ Luther Martin similarly notes the peril of assuming essences, claiming “stable or normative religious contexts ... do not, in fact, exist.” He then quotes J. Z. Smith’s quip, “there is no primordium—it is all history.”¹⁰⁹ Indeed, if anything is consistent in religion, it is its ability to change; Leopold and Jensen write, “The history of religion confirms that every religion is in ‘essence’ syncretistic—there are no pristine origins or essences.”¹¹⁰ For Stewart, Martin, Leopold, Jensen, and others, studies in syncretism serve as critiques of essentialism because they accentuate the constant transitioning

¹⁰⁸ Charles Stewart, “Relocating Syncretism in Social Science Discourse,” in Leopold and Jensen, 276.

¹⁰⁹ Luther Martin, “Syncretism, Historicism, and Cognition,” 218.

¹¹⁰ Leopold and Jensen, “General Introduction,” 5.

and flux of religions. Given syncretism's varied use in either perpetuating or challenging essentialism, are these scholars correct that the term assumes essentialist understandings of religion?

I will take up broader concerns about the constant flux of religion in Chapter 4's defense of "tradition", but a few preliminary points can be made at this juncture. First, the notion of syncretism needn't assume essentialism. A researcher can first designate one religion as distinct from another using reasonable criteria, criteria adequately discussed within the guild, then identify processes by which varying religions mix with one another in contested ways, then theorize based on specific ethnographic studies. The researcher may find the identified religion mixes with elements of a surrounding culture that are not traditionally associated with that religion, and find contested mixture therein. The religions and their surrounding cultures may perpetually change yet retain a distinguishable sense of self-identity amid such change. Thus religions may syncretize with one another without assuming an essentialist framework; we may observe syncretism between religious systems constantly undergoing change. Indeed, just because religions are not fixed does not mean they are not continuous. Calixtus' and Calovius' desires for a pure and timeless expression of Christianity reflected their (mutual) yearning to resolve the bitter debates of German Protestantism in the 17th century through a timeless doctrinal uniformity, but this approach has not been Christianity's, nor other religions, only means of expressing continuity. Indeed, given that religious studies scholars' research continues to identify social groupings like "Christianity" or "Islam" at all, they assume some continuity, even if they rarely provide an account of it. I argue in Chapter 4 that "tradition" goes a long way toward providing such an account.

Moving to a second recurring concern, scholars continue to debate whether syncretism should be employed as a descriptive term at all, but continually overlook the extent to which this debate very much depends upon changing understandings of the category of religion itself. From Baird in the 1960s to the conversations among Luther Martin, A.J. Droge, Bruce Lincoln, and Ulrich Berner in the 2001 special issue of the journal *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* to Fritz Graf's "Further Consideration" in the Encyclopedia of Religion's entry on syncretism in 2005, scholars have reached little consensus regarding whether to keep using the term.¹¹¹ Such debates about the usefulness of the word, however, overlook a wider concern that is far more fundamental, that is, whether the term "religion" itself is a viable category.¹¹² It

¹¹¹ If one is looking for an argument in favor of using syncretism, one might wonder with Shakespeare's Queen Gertrude whether syncretism's naysayers "doth protest too much." The many complaints have not lessened the need to study instances of religious intermingling, only highlighted it. Arguments that the term is not used well or consistently are hardly arguments against its use at all, because numerous other terms in the scholarly guild suffer from similar troubles yet are retained because they designate something other terms do not—words like "society", "culture", "political", and indeed "religion" itself. The primary argument for its continued use is the fact that no alternative term has emerged to express the kinds of phenomena portrayed through the term. Hybridity, creolization, and bricolage all lack the clear reference to the sphere of human life described as religious (as does "mongrelization" for that matter); meanwhile terms like synthesis, interpenetration, and systemization lack the sense of contestation involved in syncretism.

¹¹² I need not explain in detail debates regarding the category of religion, but two complaints are worth highlighting briefly. First, some have questioned religion largely because of the Western presumptions that accompany the term—presumptions that can obscure rather than illuminate lived experience in other cultures. Among many cultures, Western distinctions between "political", "religious", and "economic" describe aspects of life so intertwined as to be indistinguishable. For the Dinka of South Sudan, for example, especially before its civil wars severely fragmented indigenous forms of politics, political leaders like masters of the fishing spear gained their legitimacy not only through political savvy, but also through their ability to wield powers related to divinity. Likewise, economic relationships intertwined with familial relationships as marriages became economic alliances through the exchange of cattle. To call the master of the fishing spear a purely "religious" leader was to assume he bore leadership more comparable to a Christian priest than a European mayor. He was, of course, neither and both. As Max Weber reminds us, it is life within modern bureaucratic states and capitalist economics that leads to such compartmentalization. Thus, the argument goes, to employ the term "religion" is to portray a sphere of life that carries some independence—though not utter independence—from politics, economics, and so on. Not only that, it is to assume a fairly organized system of beliefs and practices that exists in self-conscious contrast to other such organized systems. These politically oriented arguments suggest Western scholars impose categories upon others and thereby imposing meaning upon them rather than drawing out their own sense of meaning.

Second, others complain that "religion" itself is simply a vague term, lacking decisive meaning or at least meaning too many different things to too many different people. The American Academy of the Religion, the world's largest scholarly guild committed to the study of subject, has refrained from providing a definition of religion, even though academic study generally emphasizes initial agreement upon its object of study. By this second complaint, if the meaning of religion is vague, then the meaning of syncretism is vague: surely any mixing of two vague and fuzzy entities called "religions" can only lead to even more vague analyses.

would seem that if there are entities of thought and practice rightly labeled “religions”, then the term syncretism designating the interpenetration of such entities, employed with care and analytical precision, surely describes something no other word does. If a sufficiently distinct entity called “Christianity” blends with another tradition of thought and practice such as, say, Buddhism or—in a more political vein—the Democratic or Republican Party in the United States in ways that prove contested to Christianity’s own practitioners, no other term quite captures this contestation. But if a “religion” is simply a provincial classification among Westerners for a discrete set of practices and beliefs that exists self-consciously in contrast to other such systems, a classification that does not apply beyond the European sub-continent and North America, then syncretism indeed only adds to the confusion of religion.¹¹³ If religion does indeed point to something not exclusive to the West—if it at least refers to beliefs and practices relating to a “highly exceptional and extremely impressive ‘Other’,” in the words of van der Leeuw, or to an unconditioned source and grounding of being or to other expressions of divinity—explored across human cultures and understood with rich variety, then syncretism may be a perfectly appropriate term for the interpenetration of such entities with one another and with their surrounding cultures in contested ways. I myself do not pretend to have a settled opinion in the ongoing debate regarding the usefulness of the term “religion.” I simply point out that stated confusions over syncretism can take for granted something called religion that is itself increasingly contested.

Third, these discussions bring up concerns regarding the interrelation between so-called emic and etic approaches to religion. Among many historians of religion, one finds a pervasive

¹¹³ This provincial critique of religion can sometimes assume that the term cannot undergo changes that reflect the experiences of peoples beyond the modern West, as if the term cannot incorporate insights from societies that view divinity in a less compartmentalized fashion than Western culture.

concern about theology as a constant distraction to the guild, as if an albatross in religious studies. Some view the inclusion of theology, for example, in the American Academy of Religion, as an undue mixture of methodologies in the field of religious studies that should prioritize historical and phenomenological approaches. Some blame the fact that modern research universities placed religious studies within already existing faculties of theology, as well as the requirement of teaching religious appreciation courses which seemed to saddle any seemingly objective scientific study of religion in a humanist approach that kept the scientific study of religion “subservient to theology.”¹¹⁴ Others claim that historians of religion are themselves to blame. In the mid-20th century, historians of religion like Gershom Scholem, Henry Corbin, and Mircea Eliade took it upon themselves to save religion from itself by promoting what Steven Wasserstrom calls a “secular esotericism.”¹¹⁵ Theirs was a new understanding of religion that responded to and aimed to counteract the fragmenting tendencies of modernity’s rationality and technology. For many historians of religion, this approach to religious studies slipped religious methodologies through the back door such that religious studies itself become a crypto-religion; unverifiable data still made its way into historical assessments. For these scholars, the most effective way to retrieve a viable history of religions is to build the discipline and its departments afresh.

¹¹⁴ Martin, Luther H., and Donald Wiebe. “Religious studies as a scientific discipline: The persistence of a delusion.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, No. 3 (September 2012): 587–597. For an apt response to their position, see Ann Taves, “A Response to Martin and Wiebe,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, No. 3 (September 2012): 601–604. Wiebe has a number of works documenting the institutional connections between religious studies and theology such as “The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion,” *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy*, 141–162 (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1984) and republished and expanded in 1991. See also Gregory Alles, ed., *Religious Studies: A Global View* (London: Routledge, 2007).

¹¹⁵ Wasserstrom quoted in Tyler Roberts, *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism After Secularism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 7. Roberts also rightly cites the *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell McCutcheon (Bloomsbury Academic, 2000) as another resource expressing such a concern.

Yet the study of syncretism shows the extent to which these scholars already depend upon theological approaches and the extent to which they possess their own standards of normativity. To call anything “syncretism” assumes categories of continuous religious expression, whether Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, or otherwise, which themselves mix with elements initially conceived as extraneous to such categories. Scholars generally defer to these categories of social groupings, largely determined by the religious adherents and not the scholars themselves. Study of syncretism, then, is surely a foothold into recognizing the extent to which religious studies and theology are more inherently interconnected—and productively interconnected—than many religion scholars acknowledge. Indeed, the ongoing question among etic scholars as to whether any study of syncretism doesn’t implicitly assume some emic norm—in this case the perceived identities and boundaries of religious communities themselves—shows the extent to which such interaction takes place even when it is not intended.

Studies in syncretism also show the extent to which religious studies is not a purely scientific or value-free enterprise but carries its own kinds of normativity. Historians and anthropologists in the third phase of literature did not simply recognize the power dynamics of syncretism as impartial observers. They were trying to name and thereby uplift the agency of marginalized peoples living on the underside of globalization. That enterprise is itself highly morally charged, whether such moral claims are named as such or not. Many scholars of religion also want to view reason “as a nonmoral instrument of inquiry that is equivalent to our contemporary understanding of scientific reasoning.” That is, they wish to employ reason in a fashion first elaborated in the European Enlightenment, which disentangled knowledge and virtue.¹¹⁶ Easy to overlook, however, is the extent to which this Enlightenment instinct to

¹¹⁶ Luther and Wiebe, 589.

disentangle reason from virtue had a moral drive all its own—seen, for example, in Enlightenment political theory’s emphasis upon human equality. Ultimately, then, all scholars are “emic” scholars within a particular guild possessing its own preoccupations. Historians of religion and anthropologists, despite attempts to bracket normative claims, hold a clear position within a mode of post-Enlightenment research that attempts to distance the object of study from the human knower and treats reason as a faculty relatively independent of other human faculties. Rather than trying to obscure the moral commitments of the religious studies academy, it seems more productive to acknowledge them, to recognize its interdependence with theology, and to consciously shape a more pluralist approach to studying religion.

As one observing religious studies scholars from the outside as a Christian thinker—and thus as one disposed to notice when people claim an identity as Christian—a particularly revealing aspect of the usefulness of this pluralist approach is the study of conversion. Historians of religion and anthropologists alike often deemphasize acts of conversion due to their scholarly procedure. Historians of religion look for historical antecedents within the communities they study; anthropologists—traditionally at least—look for cultural “survivals” after acts of religious conversion. Thus both disciplines are inclined to find elements of cultural practice that do not change after a person or community claims a new religious identity. Indeed, attention to such continuities can serve as a useful check for Christian theologians, who can at times overemphasize conversion at the expense of noticing such continuity. Nevertheless, religious studies scholars often portray conversion as simply layering atop a new religious draping upon existing religious beliefs and practices, which themselves remain largely unchanged as the primary religious episteme. Anthropologist Joel Robbins describes such an approach:

The majority of anthropologists were until recently ill-prepared to recognize any other kind of conversion than the kind that hides a more fundamental commitment to

traditional religion. They routinely relied on a hermeneutic of suspicion that counseled them to doubt the sincerity, or at least the accuracy, of the claims the people they studied sometimes made that they had in fact converted in more far reaching ways. Searching for traditional religion behind the Christian mask, they were licensed to discard the mask itself as soon as they had torn it off.¹¹⁷

The reliance upon methodologies that emphasize historical antecedents and cultural survivals in fact risks misinterpreting—or worst disrespecting—research subjects themselves, who may repeatedly identify themselves as Christians, Muslims, or otherwise, but be portrayed as those who convert in name only but not in belief or practice. Robbins, drawing from anthropologist Louis Dumont, argues that syncretism is not simply a means of perpetuating cultural survivals. Rather, humans establish hierarchies of less-valued and more-valued categories in cultural and religious life. When someone converts to another religion such as Christianity, the continued use of their traditional practices should not necessarily indicate that these traditional practices are more fundamental, Robbins argues, especially if the research subjects do not so indicate. Instead, converts retain existing cultural practices that do not conflict with now more-valued Christian affirmations, while adjusting those traditional values that are less-valued or that conflict with such affirmations.¹¹⁸ Historians and anthropologists at times do not apply their own insights about fluidity and flux to Christianity, writing as if people have not truly converted because they do not appear to abide by a seemingly fixed standard.

It is not only the methodological emphasis upon cultural continuity that obscures key elements of religious experience such as conversion, however; the very etic method of bracketing out data described—albeit vaguely—as “religious experience” from analysis cannot help but obfuscate acts like conversion. To put aside such data simply because it is “unverifiable” or

¹¹⁷ Robbins, “Crypto-Religion,” 412. See also his *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

¹¹⁸ Robbins, “Crypto-Religion,” 415.

because it cannot be reproduced in a seemingly scientific fashion is to overlook a definitive aspect of religion. Put differently, the procedure of “methodological atheism,” which presumes religious institutions as human constructs for the sake of academic analysis by limiting itself to what is “empirically available” can conceal as well as illuminate.¹¹⁹ Methodological atheism may be a natural move in the social scientific study of religion, insofar as it aims to study without the biases of normative religious judgments. When it comes to studying phenomena like religions, however, bracketing out elements of divinity or the sacred risks excluding a definitive and integral aspect of subject itself.¹²⁰

As an analogy, one can imagine a study of the history of the physical sciences that chose to bracket out its mathematical aspect. Such researchers would come to all sorts of conclusions about various matters, such as how scientists interact with one another, how they determine what makes their conclusions viable, how they derive meaning and motivation in their scientific efforts, what happens when various schools of science interact and mix (scientific syncretism, if you will), negotiations over the funding of science internal to the academy and in political communities at large, and so forth. The researchers would find invaluable insights that improve understandings of the processes of scientific discovery, as well as insights into the politics and economics of scientific research. Indeed, many such studies exist, Thomas Kuhn’s study of the paradigm shift being the most famous example. Yet one could quite reasonably come away from such studies with a sense that an understanding of science certainly entails addressing its mathematics. One should know not only how Copernicus and Galileo interacted with the Vatican, but the kinds of knowledge they discovered.

¹¹⁹ On methodological atheism see Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 100.

¹²⁰ For another articulation of such struggles, see Jon Bialecki’s “Does God Exist in Methodological Atheism” in *Anthropology of Consciousness* 25, no. 1 (2014), 32-52.

Rather than trying to maintain a strong distinction between the subject who studies the religion of others and the object of their study, this assessment of syncretism suggests it makes more sense to admit that “etic” and “emic” scholars are constantly borrowing from one another and thereby advocate a pluralist approach to the study of religion, one that includes history, anthropology, theology, ethics, and other disciplines. Within studies of syncretism, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the most impressive studies belongs to Gerardus van der Leeuw, who not only articulated the concerns of the first phase with rare clarity but also broke new ground, for he was a thinker who carried an uncanny ability to reason in both “etic” and “emic” modes. Even modern historians of religion who question his theological bias wax eloquent about his insights on syncretism. Leopold and Jensen write:

He did not wish to reduce religion to a pre-given thing, neither as “biology” in the Darwinian sense nor as “holy other” in the Christian sense. His theory of the dynamics of religions reflects his aim of a more multiplex view of religion in the history of human activity. This is what makes his representation of syncretism, even today, an inspirational reading despite some theoretical obscurity.¹²¹

As much as scholars of syncretism like Luther Martin and Ulrich Berner search for an ever-clearer and more scientifically-inspired methodology for studying syncretism, ultimately the measure of the methodology lies its results: if someone like van der Leeuw provides the insights he does without strict methodological atheism, it shows that expanding the circle of interpreters may in fact benefit the study of religion.

VI. Conclusion: Toward a Theological Reappraisal of Cultural Mixture

Regardless of where the religious studies guild lands regarding such matters of methodology, for Christian theology the matter of reappraising syncretism is more urgent. Theology’s careless

¹²¹ Leopold and Jensen, “Introduction to Part III: Syncretism: The Dynamics of Religion,” 91.

treatment of syncretism has often caused substantial harm by privileging Western expressions of Christianity as normative while overlooking the theological creativity of Christians in places like Africa, Latin America, and East Asia. If anything, syncretism's past pejorative connotation can become motivation for reevaluating the word and the beliefs and practices associated with it.

These first two chapters have shown the need to join Christian reflections on syncretism with wider conversations about the nature of religious change and continuity, as well as conversations about religious identity amid cultural flux. In short, the church presently lacks a properly theological account of syncretism, one that absorbs the fertile insights of historians and anthropologists while taking account of the term's troubled history. The remainder of this dissertation aims to provide such a theological account. In order to do so, I first turn to contemporary theological terms for cultural mixture, including inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization. I then look to Kathryn Tanner's work, which directly responds to scholarship of this chapter. In doing so, we begin to find an understanding of God's grace at work not in spite of syncretism, but amid syncretism.

Chapter 3: Contemporary Theological Approaches to Cultural Mixture

“Theology is always indigenous, resulting from the effort to articulate the meaning of the Gospel in a particular cultural milieu in response to the realities of that milieu.”

-Kwame Bediako

While the social sciences probed the many aspects of syncretism, from its universality in religion to the inherent power dynamics of its usage, Christian theologians continued their own conversation on cultural mixture from the material covered in Chapter 1. By the mid- to late-20th century, as churches in Asia, Latin America, and Africa continued to grow, Christian literature increasingly recognized and thereby appreciated the varieties of Christian expression across the globe. Missionaries and theologians used the word syncretism less frequently—even though it remained largely pejorative—even while its use increased in the social sciences. Theologians began using other words with more appreciative connotations, in particular inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization. These terms reflected a new stage in Christian theology’s reflection upon culture, attempting more sympathetic readings of Christianity beyond the West than those of Chapter 1.

This chapter sketches the trajectories of Christian thought regarding cultural mixture during the late 20th century to the present. The first part explores the most prominent terms for mixture—inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization. These terms, however, do not fully escape challenges identified in Chapter 1, particularly essentialist and ahistorical tendencies, for they inadvertently perpetuate a hierarchy between Christianity in the West and elsewhere, despite their attempts to do otherwise. Conversation about these terms and what they indicate

have taken place largely in circles of missiology and so-called World Christianity, less so in Western theology. Kathryn Tanner's *Theories of Culture* (1997), which I take up in the final portion of the chapter, is an exception. She is the most prominent Western theologian to engage issues related to inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization (albeit to address existing concerns in North American theology). In doing so, she also incorporates many concerns expressed by social scientists in Chapter 2. Tanner's portrayal of Christian identity as fluid and constantly borrowing from its surrounding cultures offers a textured theological response to perceived challenges of syncretism. Yet the chapter concludes by suggesting the need for still more theological resources. In particular, addressing syncretism requires a more historical framing, that is, a richer account of continuity amid fluidity than Tanner's.

I. Inculturation, Indigenization, and Contextualization

By the mid-20th century, Christian missionaries and theologians alike sensed a need for differing approaches to cultural mixture than those reflected in Chapter 1. Delegations at the world mission conferences of Edinburgh (1910), Jerusalem (1928), and Tambaram (1939) increasingly reflected church growth in places outside North America and Europe. While Edinburgh drew few delegates from outside the North Atlantic, by Tambaram representatives from so-called younger churches were the majority. Events in global politics likewise pressed Western missionaries toward accepting indigenous leadership, as European colonies disintegrated and independence movements in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia grew. Inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization became favored terms for identifying how various peoples adapt the Christian gospel to their culture. These terms remain the primary designations in contemporary theology.

The three terms, while distinguished, hold a great deal in common.¹ All three assume pluriform expressions of Christianity; they assume a Christian gospel that is inherently adaptable according to various cultures; like syncretism, they can indicate a process—the temporal undertaking of Christians adapting the gospel to their contexts—or they can refer to the outcome of this process. Christians also employed sociocultural anthropology more than they had in previous generations, as their reflections became more self-consciously interdisciplinary. In this regard, “inculturation” itself is an amalgam of words: theologians intentionally combined the term acculturation from the social sciences and incarnation from Christian theology.² The terms carry such overlapping meaning that many use them interchangeably and synonymously. Francis Clooney, for example, in a 1988 essay on Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili, writes, “I will refer generally to ‘inculturation’ and ‘contextualization’ interchangeably, and mean the effort by a person of one culture to represent something discovered in the ‘home’ culture in the appearances, images, words, customs of the other culture.”³ Similarly, the *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* provides quite similar definitions for inculturation and indigenization, cross-referencing them as if the words are largely synonymous.⁴ Overall, the

¹ For other studies on these three terms, see Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992); David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); Ruy O. Costa, ed., *One Faith, Many Cultures*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); François Guillemette, “L’apparition du concept d’ inculturation: une reception de Vatican II,” *Mission: Journal of Mission Studies*, vol 2, no. 1 (1995), 53-78; Achiel Peelman, *L’inculturation: L’Église et les cultures* (Paris and Ottawa: Desclée/Novalis, 1988).

² Bert Hoedemaker, s.v. “Inculturation: IV: Missiology,” *Religion Past and Present*, edited by Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 446-447, 446.

³ Francis X. Clooney, “Christ as the Divine Guru in the Theology of Roberto de Nobili” in Ruy O. Costa, ed, *One Faith, Many Cultures*, 25-40, 37.

⁴ Donald K. McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary Theological Terms, Second Edition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014). McKim’s definition of inculturation is “assimilation of something within a specific culture through observation, experience, and instruction. Theologically it is the process by which the gospel is adapted to a specific cultural setting” (162). Indigenization he considers “expression in local terms of what has come from somewhere else” (162). While contextualization does not receive its own entry, “contextualization of theology” does: it is “concern for theology to arise out of and adapt to the historical, social, and cultural settings in which people live” (67).

distinction between inculturation, indigenization, contextualization, and syncretism remained unclear. Given that the discipline of anthropology used syncretism as a way of celebrating the agency of the subaltern while missiologists used inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization for the same phenomena, some ambivalence proved inevitable.⁵ Significant debate remains as to which term proves the most appropriate, which offers the most content, and which carries the least colonial baggage. In my descriptions that follow, I do not advocate one term over the other; I explore them in order to subsequently show how all three words still suffer the effects of European colonialism.

Inculturation, a term primarily used in the Roman Catholic Church, describes the Christian gospel becoming implanted within a locality in ways appropriately meaningful to that culture. Inculturation became especially prominent after Vatican II (1962-1965), given the council's receptivity to indigenous beliefs and practices (admittedly, these were non-Western indigenous beliefs and practices, since many Western ones were already integrated into what was considered normative Catholicism).⁶ Aylward Shorter offers one of earlier systematic approaches to inculturation, broadly defining inculturation as "the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures."⁷ By Shorter's account, Christianity always takes a cultural form; as it enters a new environment, it engages in dialogue with its new culture. Jesuit

⁵ Anthropologists Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw offer a summary of the analytical problem between the terms in their introductory essay to *Syncretism/Anti-syncretism*: "As anthropologists we would probably label many instances of inculturation 'syncretism' in so far as they involve the combination of diverse traditions in the area of religion. Representatives of the Catholic Church would immediately dispute this usage, however, and reserve 'syncretism' for a narrower (and altogether negative) subset of such syntheses where they perceive that the Truth of the Christian message is distorted or lost. Yet given that Western distinctions between 'religion' and 'culture' may not translate elsewhere, Catholic clergy themselves often have great difficulty distinguishing between 'proper inculturation' from 'illegitimate syncretism' (11).

⁶ For an excellent ethnographic account of the changes in Catholic mission practice after Vatican II, see Dorothy Hodgson, *The Church of Women: Gendered Encounters between Maasai and Missionaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

⁷ Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 11.

theologian Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator offers a definition more forthright in its emphasis upon activity and agency. He defines inculturation as “the process of expressing the fundamental truths of Christianity in the local faith-dialect of the people of God.”⁸ While the basic tenets of Christianity remain the same, Orobator argues that inculturation entails “selective modification of Christian faith and worship.”⁹ Shorter and Orobator portray Christianity as a stable entity, modified within new cultural environments. As with syncretism, inculturation can be “from above” or “from below,” that is, initiated by church authorities or by local congregations. Either way, church leadership bears significant responsibility for guiding the process, which requires humility, creativity, and extensive dialogue, Orobator says.¹⁰

Theologically, inculturation literature relates the exchange between Christianity and culture to Christ’s own incarnation. As “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14), as Jesus adopted the Palestinian culture of the first century, so the gospel becomes expressed in the varieties of every human culture. Each culture becomes “a new creation” as the gospel enters in, Shorter says.¹¹ Just as in Jesus there is mutuality, exchange, and dialogue between word and flesh, so inculturation requires the same interchange between gospel and local culture, according to Orobator. The ultimate goal is the transformation of a culture itself.

According to Jesuit priest Pedro Arrupe, inculturation is

the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question ... but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a “new creation”.¹²

⁸ Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 86.

⁹ Orobator, *Theology Brewed*, 128.

¹⁰ Orobator, *Theology Brewed*, 132-136.

¹¹ Shorter *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 79-87.

¹² Arrupe, Pedro, S.J. “On Inculturation.” Letter to the Whole Society of Jesus, 14 May 1978. *Acta Romana Societatis Iesu* 17 (1977-1979): 256-281. Shorter cites the letter in *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 11.

Notice that the scope of inculturation has expanded dramatically: inculturation brings about a Catholic culture. No longer is inculturation simply making the Christian gospel intelligible in local culture, it now animates and unifies culture.

The term indigenization, meanwhile, has a longer history than inculturation, but with less specificity. More common among Protestants, initially indigenization indicated the process of churches moving toward indigenous leadership, rather than leadership by foreign missionaries.¹³ In the mid-19th century, missionaries Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson promoted what they called “indigenous churches” as the aim of missionary work, that is, churches that were “autonomous, financially independent, and responsible for their own growth.”¹⁴ In the 20th century, indigenization shifted in meaning; it began to express articulation of the gospel in terms appropriate to and resonant with particular cultures. Since the word pre-dated inculturation, Protestants continued using it while incorporating this expanded connotation. By the 1960s, however, many in mainline Protestant circles came to see indigenization as too limiting—too focused upon “spiritual” matters at the expense of social and political challenges. Klaus Koschorke writes, “in the 1950s and 1960s the indigenization model proved increasingly too narrow to provide an appropriate interpretation of the Christian message in a time of social upheaval. ... In ecumenical discussions, therefore, the concept of indigenization was replaced by contextualization, although important elements were kept.”¹⁵ For mainline Protestants in the

¹³ For many, this remains the primary connotation of the term. See Orobator 128.

¹⁴ Klaus Koschorke, s.v. “Indigenization” *Religion Past and Present*, edited by Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 459-460. Given the interdependence of European colonial efforts and missionary enterprises, such moves toward independence had to wait until wider political pressures for self-rule increased in late 19th and early 20th centuries.

¹⁵ Koschorke, “Indigenization,” 460.

mid- to late-20th century, contextualization became the favored term for Christianity integrating with culture.

In these circles, contextualization then meant employing and negotiating the Christian gospel in ways that address social and political injustices. The World Council of Churches (WCC), for example, worried that political upheavals of the day—from independence movements to Cold War posturing—carried urgent ethical import requiring attention from churches. A 1972 statement of the WCC’s Theological Education Fund proved emblematic: it encouraged Christians of the so-called Third World not only to “respond to the gospel in the concepts of a traditional culture,” but to attend to “the process of secularization, technology, and the struggle for human justice that characterize the historical movement of Third-World countries.”¹⁶ Contextualization, then, joined theological, ecclesiological, and ethical concerns in a single designation.

In evangelical Protestant quarters, meanwhile, contextualization became the preferred term to indicate positive exchange between the gospel and culture, along the lines of what Catholics and mainline Protestants call inculturation and indigenization. By evangelical definitions, contextualization is not simply the interaction between the gospel and culture, but between the biblical text itself and culture. By one definition, “Contextualization is a dynamic process of the church’s reflection, in obedience to Christ and his mission in the world, on the interaction of the text as the word of God and the context as a specific human situation.”¹⁷ The rhetorical play between “text” and “context” indicates that the Bible itself takes on agency as interlocutor with culture, with human interpreters carrying secondary agency.

¹⁶ World Council of Churches Theological Education Committee, qtd in Koschorke, 460.

¹⁷ B. J. Nicholls, “Contextualization” in Sinclair B. Ferguson and David Wright, eds, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 164-167. The dictionary offers definitions for neither indigenization nor inculturation.

Given the significant overlap between these terms, scholars now debate the superiority of one over others. In an essay distinguishing between the three terms, Ruy Costa suggests that inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization build upon one another, with contextualization being the most comprehensive in definition. He argues that inculturation, the most basic of the three terms, focuses upon “symbolic exchange” between the preaching of the gospel and culture. Indigenization includes this sense but goes “a step further” to include power struggles between “foreign missionaries and national leaders.” Contextualization, meanwhile, adds issues of social inequality and injustice beyond the church itself. It is, he writes, the “process of conscientization about power struggles in the world, in which the church participates either actively or passively.”¹⁸ Each definition is distinct, he seems to argue, but contextualization exhibits the widest range and scope. Bert Hoedemaker, meanwhile, advocates inculturation because he claims that it overcomes colonial associations of other terms. Inculturation “deliberately intends to move beyond the earlier missiological terminology” like indigenization or accommodation, “which presuppose the superiority of the Western cultural form of Christianity and imply only limited, mission-supervised concessions to non-Western cultures.”¹⁹ Hoedemaker, in advocating inculturation, in fact reveals a flaw embedded within all three terms.

1.2. Colonial Legacies of Inculturation, Indigenization, and Contextualization

Such internal disputes regarding the superiority of one word over another can obscure the fact that none of these terms entirely move beyond colonial legacies, at least in their most common usage. Positively, the terms are indeed a response to the repression of colonialism and churches’

¹⁸ Ruy O. Costa, “Introduction” in Costa, ed, *One Faith, Many Cultures*, xiii-xiv.

¹⁹ Hoedemaker, “Inculturation,” 446.

inabilities to view indigenous cultures on their own terms. Yet insofar as they are a response to what has gone before, they share some of the same assumptions as those colonial views. All three terms retain a distance between Christianity and churches outside the West by portraying Christianity as something entering Africa, Asia, or Latin America from the outside. Along the way, they easily fall into ahistoricizing and essentializing tendencies like those of Harnack.

These terms often assume a binary between Christianity and “local culture” in various parts of the world. (In this regard, it is a binary often shared with the word syncretism.) One translation of inculturation into Swahili, *utamadunish*, portrays this gap all too well. Laurenti Magesa writes, *utamadunish* “denotes the process or act of making something alien (foreign) part and parcel of a particular culture.”²⁰ Insofar as inculturation itself derives from acculturation, it can assume two formerly differentiated entities coming into contact with one another and subsequently taking on or sharing cultural aspects. Speaking on the limits of acculturation, J. D. Y. Peel writes,

The reactions of people to radical social change marked by the availability of totally new cultural systems are not best approached by theories of acculturation which aim to trace each item of behaviour to its cultural source, to add them up, and to pronounce the reaction more or less “acculturated” or “traditional”, along a single continuum. The various ways in which the new syntheses relate to traditional culture vary not so much in degree or quantity of indebtedness as in kind or quality. ... The mechanical assignation of cultural traits is no aid to understanding, for it is a purely external way of classifying behaviour.²¹

Especially for religious practitioners themselves, Peel contends, there are not necessarily clean distinctions between “Christian” culture and “indigenous” culture; in the transmission of “totally new cultural systems”—in this case Christianity—the old and the new become so mixed that

²⁰ Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 37.

²¹ Peel, “Syncretism and Religious Change,” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 10, No. 2 (Jan. 1968), 140.

drawing clean lines between them overlooks the creative resourcefulness of practitioners. From a theological perspective, drawing such lines can unduly predetermine where the Holy Spirit is active and where the Spirit is not. Indeed, implicit within the binary assumed in acculturation and inculturation is a normative account of Christianity as one of those two entities. This normative Christianity, however much it purports to remain free of culture, is generally Christianity as practiced in Europe and North America during the colonial and modern eras. The rhetoric also thereby serves to portray what is African or Asian or Latin American as “other” from Christianity itself, a subjection not experienced by Christians in, say, Britain or the American South. Within the Western theological academy, for example, academics in Germany or France find no difficulty defending their writing as proper theology; it is simply assumed “Christian theology” upon its output. Yet Christian academics in many other countries find their reflections labeled “African theology” or “Asian theology” or “World Christianity,” as if they must successfully overcome a perceived gap between their local culture and theology which still requires an additional qualifier.

Indeed, this perceived gap is precisely why theologians like John Mbiti, Jean-Marc Éla, and Kwame Bediako resisted terms like indigenization—Bediako, for example, often preferred “indigeneity”.²² The words can assume that Christianity is not already African—or Christianity—once Africans have begun practicing it and reflecting upon it. They can suggest the necessity of double conversion, a conversion to both Christianity and Western culture. Mbiti writes:

To speak of “indigenising Christianity” is to give the impression that Christianity is a ready-made commodity, which has to be transplanted to a local area. Of course, this has

²² Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Costa Mesa, CA: Regnum Books International, 1992) and Timothy Hartman, “Revelation, Religion, and Culture in Kwame Bediako and Karl Barth” (PhD Diss, University of Virginia, 2014). Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

been the assumption followed by many missionaries and local theologians. I do not accept it anymore.²³

Mbiti and Bediako sought to overcome this perceived, but untenable, gap between “Christianity” and “local culture”; hence Bediako’s fondness for saying that missionaries did not bring Christ to Africa, rather, Christ brought the missionaries. They and other theologians working in Africa during the 20th century often wrote works considered “cultural retrieval” which documented religions and philosophies of various African communities before the colonial encounter; yet these were not simply efforts showing that Africans have cultural histories, as Western readers often assumed. The theologians wanted to display how God was at work in those histories long before missionaries arrived. Christianity gave a new name and a new understanding to these existing religious and moral affirmations. Edward Antonio similarly identifies this binary: “On an epistemological level inculturation can be thought of as an attempt to resolve the problem of culture and religious ‘incommensurability’ entailed by the colonial insistence on the radical difference between ‘civilized’ western cultures and the ‘irrational’ African counterparts.”²⁴ In turn, Antonio reconceives inculturation as a means of overcoming this binary; his use of inculturation thus shows that mindfulness of the term’s genealogical heritage can lead to fresh and empowering uses.

Among the static and binary portrayals of inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization, logic like Harnack’s kernel and husk often lies close at hand. The essence of Christianity moves from place to place, taking on whatever husks might pertain to the culture in which Christianity finds itself. The literature provides little sense that culture itself is a humanly constructed entity (a point that I will take up again with Tanner). Neither does it portray

²³ John Mbiti, “Response to John Kinney,” *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 3.2 (April 1979), 66.

²⁴ Edward Antonio, “The Hermeneutics of Inculturation” in *Inculturation and Postcolonial Discourse*, 29-60, 40.

Christianity as a whole changing or growing as it takes shape in various cultures. Put differently, this siloed sense of culture leads to a limited view of catholicity: insights from one part of the church need not carry over to others or be shared by others.²⁵ Theologian Maaraidzo Mutambara furthermore shows that this static sense of culture can combine with an uncritical stance toward one's own culture, particularly in the area of gender relations. Lacking such "critical consciousness" means that inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization can exacerbate existing inequalities by folding Christianity into already existing hierarchical understandings of gender.²⁶

The most revealing argument that inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization replicate certain mistakes of missionary forebears, however, comes from local congregations. In much literature, common examples of inculturation include the addition of local singing, dancing, and drumming into liturgy, as well as reshaping liturgical space to reflect indigenous religious symbolism. Examples of substantial changes or additions to the church's wider teachings, however, prove far less common—even though many Christians would perceive those changes (whether rightly or wrongly) as the more lasting and prestigious ones. Congregations also report uneven implementation of inculturation. Magesa found that many church leaders consider inculturation insufficiently implemented, with too much control wielded by church authorities and too little control at the grassroots. Many leaders of local parishes, Magesa writes, "[feel] that church leaders in Africa, and not Vatican officials, should be the ones to lead the

²⁵ Shorter voices similar concerns regarding an essentialized and provincial understanding of inculturation on 60-61 and 81-82, even if he too sometimes describes inculturation as analogous to rather than a form of incarnation.

²⁶ Maaraidzo Mutambara, "African Women Theologies Critique Inculturation" in Antonio, *Inculturation and Postcolonial Discourse*, 173-192.

process of integration of the Christian faith into the local socio-religious realities.”²⁷ While the Roman Catholic structure of the Vatican highlights the struggle, Protestant churches have suffered from the same dynamics of ranking authority based upon geographic origin.

Finally, the Christology of much inculturation literature remains at times quite tepid, insofar as it lacks a historical portrayal of Christ gathering up peoples into himself. The literature frequently compares inculturation in the present day to Jesus taking on the cultural particularities of first century Palestine: just as Jesus put on aspects of Palestinian culture, so the church puts on aspects of cultures across the world. Shorter writes on this approach, “His cultural solidarity with the Palestinians of his day was a necessary condition for communication with them. The same is true of the church in every place and age. Inculturation is necessary for the continuation of Christ’s mission.”²⁸ At times it seems that Jesus is transplanted across various cultures, moving from Palestine directly to a particular local culture. But this risks isolating the incarnation to various places and times, with little interconnection between them, that is, with little sense that the universal church becomes enriched from every culture’s new insights about Jesus. Christ moves across culture because the Spirit has been moving across history, building the church’s interconnections with itself and with the world, a point I expand upon in Chapters 5 and 6. Furthermore, inculturation Christologies also risk Jesus’ Jewishness appearing a contingent aspect of his identity, not integral to God’s mission in Christ, as if an eternal kernel of Jesus can be separated from the husk of first century Palestine. In Shorter’s quote above, it sounds as if Jesus became a Palestinian Jew primarily for the sake of communicating with Palestinian Jews,

²⁷ Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 11. Magesa interviews Christians across East Africa, inviting them to share their own interpretations of inculturation.

²⁸ Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 80. Orobator also compares the exchange between gospel and a culture to the exchange between the divine and human natures of Jesus himself—the *communicatio idiomatum*, 129.

thereby overlooking Jesus' mission to continue and expand God's covenantal relationship with the Jewish people.

In sum, these terms have not entirely overcome the challenges identified in Chapter 1, even if they have made substantial advances. In much of the literature, though again not all, the terms often imply an ahistoric sense of the gospel and an unnecessarily static and isolated connotation of culture. While my critiques focus upon the subtle genealogical dynamics at play in the employment of inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization, I do not suggest the words be disregarded outright. Antonio, among others, has shown that such reflection can be folding into their continued use. Like syncretism, they are not terms with an innocent history. Yet also like syncretism, measured analysis of their history increases the capacity to appreciate the hurdles to be overcome.

II. Syncretism and the Incarnation: Leonardo Boff and Liberation Theology

Even after inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization came to prominence, some theologians have continued to use the word syncretism for Christianity's mixture with culture. Leonardo Boff is the most vocal theologian to do so, for reasons that also challenge the working assumptions of those terms. His book *Church: Charism and Power* (1981 Portuguese, 1985 English translation) contains a chapter entitled "In Favor of Syncretism: the Catholicity of Catholicism." Before moving Kathryn Tanner's contributions, it is worth highlighting Boff's arguments, in part because he and other liberation theologians provide a richer account of the incarnation than most inculturation literature. Indeed, *Church: Charism and Power*—in its challenge to established means of Christian transmission in the Catholic Church—was the impetus for the Vatican's condemnation of liberation theology, expressed in Cardinal Ratzinger's

“Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation.’”²⁹ Boff highlights numerous concerns shared by this dissertation, notably historicism and ahistorical essentialism. He also argues that syncretism can remain a useful designation while employing a moral force that inculturation lacks. In short, Boff uses the church’s own pejorative vocabulary to challenge its history as partner in the European colonial enterprise. By doing so, he offers a vivid portrayal of the doctrine of the incarnation and its connection to syncretism, a portrayal that becomes further enriched through the work of fellow liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuría. Together, they elaborate upon the Christology voiced in Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes*: “by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man.”³⁰

For the church to be truly catholic, in the universal sense, Boff argues that it also must be syncretic. Syncretism assures that the gospel incarnates in various times and cultures while also preventing Western Christianity from becoming unnecessarily dominant. “Catholicity as the synonym of universality is only possible and attainable through the process of syncretism from which catholicity itself results.”³¹ Drawing from scholarship such as Harnack’s assessment of Christianity as syncretic, Boff repeatedly states that syncretism is a “normal and natural process” as the gospel travels across time and place. Like the arguments in Chapter 2, Boff contends that all religions with large numbers of adherents in various times and geographies are syncretic.³² He writes, “to find expression, the experience [of transmission] uses tools that it finds in culture and

²⁹ Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), vii.

³⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22. Available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

³¹ Leonardo Boff, *Church*, 89.

³² Boff, *Church*, 89. See also pages 91-93.

society. ... Syncretism is not only inevitable but is positively the historical and concrete way in which God comes to people and saves them.”³³ Culture becomes an aspect of God’s salvation.

Christianity and the church are living, active, and historical by Boff’s account; they are not limited to one expression or to static doctrine. He writes, “the universal salvific will of God is historicized and incarnated in the rites, doctrines, and traditions of a religion, in the ethical codes of a society, in the various forms of social interaction.” Boff places critical categories like *historicism* side by side with doctrinal ones like *incarnation*, for Christ does not abstract himself from the vicissitudes of history. Rather, God’s plan of redemption becomes carried out through material history itself. “Religion is, then, essentially syncretic because it is made up of the incarnation and historicization of universal salvation together with the experience of saving grace,” he writes.³⁴ Any conception of “pure” Christianity seeks retreat from history, not engagement with it. “Pure Christianity does not exist, never has existed, never can exist,” he writes, “The divine is always made present through human mediations which are always dialectical.” Syncretism is not only part of Christianity, it is inherent to God revealing God’s self to human creatures.³⁵ It is up to the church, then, to discern between the many inevitable syncretisms that become part of its life, to discern between what he calls “true and false syncretism.” Drawing extensively from early church councils, Boff offers numerous criteria for discerning true versus false syncretisms, such as “excluding magic, superstition, and polytheism.” Taking from Jesus’ woes in Luke’s gospel, he also includes criteria such as ignoring justice and neglecting the poor as indicators for false syncretism. In short, he says, “One

³³ Boff, *Church*, 97 and 99.

³⁴ Boff, *Church*, 93.

³⁵ There remains in Boff some essentialism: “Christian syncretism is understood to be the syncretism that arises from the essential core of Christian faith that is embodied in the symbolic framework of another culture.” (101)

can say that everything that aids liberty, love, faith, and theological hope represents true syncretism and incarnates the liberating message of God in history.”³⁶

Some have said that Boff uses syncretism like inculturation, as if the two are synonyms. Theo Sundermeier says that Boff “comes very near to the idea of inculturation” while Carl Starkloff says Boff is “understanding the term to mean what most theologians today mean by inculturation.”³⁷ Yet this is to overlook one of his most fundamental affirmations. Using syncretism appreciatively turns the tables on those in the church who have used it pejoratively as a means of excluding marginalized voices. Early in the chapter, Boff contrasts authorities at the top of church hierarchies, who traditionally determine syncretism, with those on the bottom.

If the observer sits in the privilege places within Catholicism—understanding it as a signed, sealed, and delivered masterpiece—then he or she will consider syncretism to be a threat to be avoided at all costs. If, however, he or she is situated on a lower level, amid conflicts and challenges, in the midst of the people who live their faith together with other religious expressions, on a level that understands Catholicism as a living reality and therefore open to other elements and the attempt to synthesize them, then syncretism is seen as a normal and natural process.³⁸

By continuing to employ the word syncretism, and by using it in more evenhanded and celebratory ways, Boff turns the traditional discourse on its head. By keeping the term in play and *not* shifting to words like inculturation, he reminds the hierarchy of ways in which its own use of syncretism has neglected those on the underside of the church. Thus the history of syncretism’s pejorative use is not forgotten, but absorbed into a current positive meaning. Boff thereby employs a strategy Michel Foucault calls a “reverse discourse”: he takes an existing

³⁶ Boff, *Church*, 104. Notably, Boff addresses syncretic expressions of Yoruba religion in the New World, an example used by so-called etic scholars in Chapter 2. Boff argues that Yoruba religion in Brazil “converted Christianity” to Yoruba religion rather than converting Yoruba adherents to Christianity. It “cannot yet be called Christianity,” he claimed, but these religious adherents may still be considered “anonymously Christian” (102). The argument is admittedly convoluted in labeling as anonymous Christians those who self-describe as Christians.

³⁷ Theo Sundermeier, s.v. “Syncretism,” *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch, Jan Milič Lochman, John Mbiti, Jaroslav Pelikan, Lukas Vischer (Boston: Brill, 2008), 267; Carl Starkloff, *A Theology of the In-Between*, 153.

³⁸ Boff, *Church*, 89.

means of pejorative description and turns its connotation around from within the discourse itself.³⁹ By displaying the naturalness of syncretism, and its ubiquity in religious expression, he seeks to empower those called syncretists while also recognizing the historical injustices associated with its careless use in the past.

Boff's theology of the incarnation plays a significant role in this universal ecclesiology.⁴⁰ The resurrected Christ reveals its presence in the pneumatological church—and beyond the church. “Through the resurrection the body of Jesus Christ was not simply brought back to life. It was completely fulfilled and liberated from every temporal and spatial limitation,” he writes. The liberated Christ now brings unity to the cosmos: “Through the resurrection the limitations of the carnal Jesus fell away, bringing forth a global relationship to all of reality.”⁴¹ True syncretisms become ways that the cosmic Christ makes unity. Nevertheless, Boff's Christology retains a wider distinction between the incarnated Jesus of ancient Palestine and the body of Christ throughout human history. His response to Pius XII's statement that “whoever sees the Church sees Christ, that the Church is Christ himself” proves indicative. “Obviously, such statements should not be taken literally,” he writes. “The Church is not hypostatically united to the Logos as was the humanity of Jesus. The Church is at one and the same time saint and sinner, always in need of conversion and reform.”⁴² Later in Chapter 5 I will argue for a hypostatic union, conceived temporally and eschatologically, that does indeed see greater intercourse between the saints in time and the Logos. In this regard, Boff risks a “primary” and “secondary” Christ, the

³⁹ Foucault's example of such a strategy is the normalizing of same-sex relations designated as “homosexuality” in Western discourse, in which the same term used to contain or control same-sex behavior was later used to establish its “naturalness,” as Foucault describes it (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House Press, 1990), 43). See also Kane, “Tragedies of Communion: Seeking Reconciliation amid Colonial Legacies” in *Anglican Theological Review* 97, No. 3 (Summer 2015): 391-412.

⁴⁰ See also Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for our Time* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980).

⁴¹ Boff, *Church*, 145.

⁴² Boff, *Church*, 144.

primary Christ as the Jesus of Palestine and the secondary Christ as the body of Christ in history. His critique of the Catholic Church seeing itself as the primary, even the sole, material expression of Christ in history risks precluding a richer Christology that includes subsequent materiality in the body of Christ through time.

Liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuría offers a richer Christology in this regard. For Ellacuría, the church itself becomes a sacrament of God's presence and of God's liberation. He writes, "the church presents itself, first, as that people of God who pursue in history what Jesus clearly marked as the presence of God in humanity."⁴³ The people of God are those who carry on the work of Jesus in history; they are those who, like Jesus, stand up for the poor and seek to liberate human beings from all that entraps them. The oppressed carry an especially important role, as they themselves carry forward in history Jesus' work upon the cross. They become the historical means by which God works salvation: "this crucified people is the continuation in history of the life and death of Jesus."⁴⁴ While Ellacuría primarily addresses the doctrine of salvation, the implications for the doctrine of the incarnation are clear. The incarnation takes material form in history through the church and especially through crucified people who suffer oppression just as Jesus suffered at the hands of oppressors on the cross. Attending to Jesus' salvific work in history entails recognizing how crucified people are becoming agents of God's salvation, how they themselves become joined to Christ. He writes,

Historic soteriology is a matter of seeking where and how the saving action of Jesus was carried out in order to pursue it in history. Of course, in one sense, the life and death of Jesus is over and done, since what took place in them is not simply a mere fact whose value is the same as that of any other death that might take place in the same circumstances, but was, indeed, the definitive presence of God among human beings. But

⁴³ Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Church of the Poor, Historical Sacrament of Liberation," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 543.

⁴⁴ Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Crucified People," in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 590.

his life and this death continue on earth, and not just in heaven; the uniqueness of Jesus is not in his standing apart from humankind, but in the definitive character of his person and in the saving all-presence that is his. All the insistence on his role as head to a body, and on the sending of the Spirit, through whom his work is to be continued, point toward this historic current of his earthly life. The continuity is not purely mystical and sacramental. In other words, worship, including the celebration of the eucharist, is not the whole of the presence and continuity of Jesus; there must be a continuation in history that carries out what he carried out in his life and as he carried it out. We should acknowledge it in his personal biography, but this trans-historic dimension will only be real if it is indeed trans-historic, that is, if it goes through history. Hence, we must ask who continues to carry out in history what his life and death was about.⁴⁵

Ellacuría's portrait of Christ across history is more material than Boff's; Jesus takes physical form through the crucifixion of peoples in history, even while the Spirit still mystically joins humanity to Christ. Like Boff, Ellacuría retains a distinction between the Jesus of Palestine and the body of Christ across time, yet Ellacuría does not unduly separate Jesus in Palestine from the body of Christ in history. The Jesus who walked in ancient Palestine retains priority in our comprehension of Jesus, for Jesus is the head of the body, yet the body itself continues to take physical shape across history.

To reason from both Boff and Ellacuría, inculturating the gospel *is* incarnation; it is the body of Christ taking form within material history. Jesus of Palestine is not the only aspect of the second person of the Trinity. Across human history, the Spirit joins more and more peoples to Christ, such that the Spirit carries on the work of incarnation. The full picture of Jesus is not complete until the eschaton, when all peoples will be gathered into Christ. The church, meanwhile, is to act in such a way that trusts the Spirit is building up the body of Christ in surprising, unexpected, and syncretic ways. The *communicatio idiomatum* continues in history as more and more people become incorporated into—and thereby become—the body of Christ. In this regard, another word in Swahili for inculturation, *umwilisho*, more aptly captures this

⁴⁵ Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Crucified People," 589-590.

Christology and pneumatology than *utamadunish*. *Umwilisho* literally means “body-making”, turning the word for body, *mwili*, into a verb. It suggests that those practices labeled inculturation become embodied parts of the church’s life and thereby aspects of Christ’s own body. Not surprisingly, it is also the Swahili translation of incarnation.⁴⁶

III. Theologizing Syncretism: Tanner’s Constructive Proposal

Another theologically robust response to syncretism, one that absorbs the insights of anthropology and the history of religions from Chapter 2, is Kathryn Tanner’s *Theories of Culture*, the final approach examined in this Chapter. No contemporary theologian in the United States has offered as careful and perceptive a response to the ubiquity of Christians intermingling their beliefs and practices with their surrounding cultures. Tanner resists depicting Christianity as an edifice of static doctrines and beliefs, as often portrayed in inculturation literature and in postliberal theology—George Lindbeck in particular. Rather, Christians always mix, intermingle, and borrow their practices and beliefs from elsewhere. God’s grace can move freely in any culture because God’s freedom extends beyond the bounds of any one cultural system. For Tanner, Christians find unity and commonality despite their varying practices and conceptions through a shared *style* and a shared *task*. Hers is a theology that fully embraces syncretism and begins to overcome the limitations often implicit in inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization.

⁴⁶ Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 37-38.

III.1. The Troubles of Modernism in Christian Theology

Kathryn Tanner's entry point is not syncretism, inculturation, or concerns about global theology. She engages an ongoing conversation in Western theology on human culture, going back to early 20th century writings of Ernst Troeltsch, mid-century writings of H. Richard Niebuhr, and—more urgently for Tanner—the postliberal school based at Yale Divinity School in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁷ Yet Tanner's concerns substantially overlap with those identified in Chapters 1 and 2. Figures like Harnack and Kraemer engaged many of the same interlocutors as did Troeltsch, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Lindbeck, such as the History of Religions school, Karl Barth, and modernist cultural theory. Thus the critiques and insights in Tanner's *Theories of Culture* apply just as much to much inculturationists and much global Christianity literature as they do to her own concerns with the postliberal school. Tanner shows that theologians' dependence upon modernist approaches has not only provided poor phenomenological descriptions of Christianity and its relation to culture, it has limited theological insights as well. In terms of Chapter 2's historiography, theological conversations about culture have remained largely in the first two phases, to the detriment of theology.

In modernists accounts of culture, which dominated social theory during the mid-20th century, culture is integrative, meaning-making, ordering, and synchronic, Tanner reminds us. Cultures exist as holistic enterprises that offer responses to and interpretations of the gamut of human experience by providing them with order and meaning. Insofar as cultures are holistic, they function independently of one another: however much they exchange ideas and practices, one culture borrowing from another does not depend upon that other culture for its existence.

⁴⁷ For a thorough background on postliberalism, see Paul DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell: 2008). For a perspective more internal to postliberal theology, see William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

Cultures provide order for their occupants through implicit and explicit norms, guidelines, and prescriptions. This tendency to foreground the ordering function of culture generates synchronic descriptions of culture, as if the ordering function of culture leads to mass assimilation by populations as a whole. However much individuals' own behaviors may vary in slight details, they remain bound within a singular culture. This is not to say that cultures are inevitable or that they are not human constructions. Cultures are made by human beings, but they are comparable to a human edifice; something built by humans that largely retains its structure, form, and function over time. Figures like Herskovits and Bastide from Chapter 2 exemplified this view.⁴⁸

This approach to culture carries two important moral implications, Tanner contends. First, social theorists like Herskovits sought “a nonevaluative alternative to ethnocentrism.” Giving various cultures their own status removed prior assumptions that a single culture forms the “best of what is said and thought” in human experience. Social scientists overturned the notion that “culture” is inherently evaluative by carrying out their own “reverse discourse,” as Boff did with syncretism; they assigned “culture” to be a neutral descriptor of varying means of social organization. Because culture no longer connoted assessments and appraisals of others, this project of social theory fit within the Enlightenment project of freeing humans from tradition. By making people aware of other means of ordering human life, one's own culture becomes contingent, not necessary. One can thereby feel freed from culture's restraints. Second, however, it achieved this moral gain at a cost; it avoided ethnocentrism by portraying cultures beyond the West as frozen in time, a move which inadvertently painted other cultures as not “evolving” like Western cultures continued to do. As with Harnack, elements of the

⁴⁸ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), see also chapter 2. For examples of receptions of Tanner's book, see Reinhard Hütter, *Modern Theology* 15:4 October 1999, 499-501 and Medi Ann Volpe's *Rethinking Christian Identity* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

Enlightenment project again came at the expense of rigorous historical descriptions of other cultural systems, as Europeans described the dynamic cultural enterprises of regions outside their own as rigid and fixed.

Postmodern cultural theory, on the other hand, recognizes these limitations and has reoriented itself accordingly. Culture becomes understood as indefinite, hybridized, contested, and constructed. “What we might call a postmodern stress on interactive process and negotiation, indeterminacy, fragmentation, conflict, and porosity replaces these aspects of the modern, post-1920s understanding of culture, or more properly ... forms a new basis for their reinterpretation,” she writes.⁴⁹ Postmodernists first formulate cultural theory against their modernist predecessors, challenging their portrayals of cultures as stable entities, as self-contained internally consistent wholes, and as means of remote social ordering. They also challenge modernist inattention to historical processes. “Deconstruction and poststructuralist theory suggest that determinacy, closure, and consistency are not more to be expected in the tacit cultural forms of everyday life than they are in formalized and explicit ones,” Tanner writes.⁵⁰ While such cultural theory at first focuses on challenging modernist theory, those challenges become the basis upon which to build new theory. In constructing human culture, widely held agreements are generally minimal; identity is “a hybrid, relational affair, something that lives between as much as within cultures.”⁵¹ Cultures may keep their own distinctions as they cross boundaries, but boundary-crossing and contestation become far more taken for granted than ever before. Conflict and politics take center stage as humans continually struggle over meaning. Like the writers in phase

⁴⁹ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 38.

⁵⁰ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 39.

⁵¹ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 57-58.

three of the last chapter's historiography, Tanner senses a certain freedom of description—and theological possibility—that modernist theory lacked.

III.2. Theology after Modernism

Tanner contends that such advances in cultural theory would seem to have gone unnoticed in Christian theology. We have already seen the shortcomings of this modernist approach in inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization literature. Static, siloed descriptions of culture inadvertently give the impression that Christianity is a “foreign” entity arriving in cultures beyond the West, rather than an indigenous enterprise of converts themselves. Tanner deepens these points and provides new insights through her engagement with postmodern social theory.⁵² Such an exploratory project draws out at least two strands of insight for theology. First, Christian identity is always already borrowing from its surrounding culture, wherever Christians find themselves. Second, to see Christian identity otherwise—along the lines of modernist social theory—limits the extent, creativity, freedom, and range of God's grace.

III.2.1. Graceful Borrowing

The primary target of Tanner's critique is postliberal theologian George Lindbeck, even if her critique extends wider than Lindbeck himself. For purposes of this discussion regarding postliberals and cultural theory, postliberal theologians claim to offer theology for the church,

⁵² It is not that Tanner immediately assumes that the latest social theory define terms of engagement for conversations in Christianity and culture. That is not only problematic at the level of theological methodology, it would imbue postmodern theory with the very sort of ahistorical status that it shuns. Tanner ascribes “no sacrosanct status” to postmodern views of culture, calling her project “exploratory.” Rather, she asks, “How might some fundamental theological topics appear differently, what new directions for their investigation might arise, were one to experiment in theology with a postmodern view of culture.” (*Theories of Culture*, 57-58)

insofar as they theologize based on existing Christian practices and commitments.⁵³ Rather than theology serving as the center out of which Christian affirmations and practices emerge—a common misperception that postliberals challenge—the theologian reads the Christian community and describes its implicit logic. Postliberals then divide theological reflections into “first-order” and “second-order” reflections, first-order being the affirmations and practices of the Christian community and second-order being the work of theologians. This second-order reflection is more systematic and cohesive, offering “a description of the internal logic of Christian practice.”⁵⁴ The postliberal method assumes, therefore, that there is a particular logic undergirding the whole of the Christian cultural and religious system; the theologian offers suggestions or criticisms of existing practices insofar as they deviate from the logic identified as implicit in the system. “Presumably only one logic is implicit in the practices, to which the second-order theologian is merely to conform,” Tanner writes when expressing her reserve regarding this approach.⁵⁵

Yet what proved true of modernist social theory also proves true of theology. Lindbeck’s theologian resembles the modern anthropologist who reads practices and beliefs and then imposes a singular structure upon them. The nature and task of theology is not to build up a static structuring of doctrine, Tanner contends, even if such structuring remains based upon the practices of the Christian community. Such wholesale depictions of Christianity (and culture) reflect the interpreter rather than the community itself. Calixtus’ and Calovius’ expressions of Christianity, for example, reflected the preoccupations of the Reformation period; Harnack’s reflected the essentialist tendencies of modern European theology and philosophy; Kraemer’s

⁵³ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville, Westminster: 2009 [1984]). See also Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

⁵⁴ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 73.

⁵⁵ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 74.

reflected worries about Christian purity as it spread to new lands in the early and mid-20th century; Lindbeck's reflected a felt need in the 1980s to articulate Christian identity in an increasingly pluralist society. All of these approaches portray the Christian community in too abstract a sense. For Tanner, there is no such thing as a singular "Christian community," but rather a great host of communities across time, united in common style and common task.

Christians in various times and places exhibit great fluidity in their beliefs and practices, Tanner argues, borrowing extensively from their environment in making universal Christian claims. Christian identity and Christian communities are hybrid and syncretized, joining together threads of varying sources into a whole. Their common beliefs and practices are contested; they look different in differing places and times. Theology works as much by binding together various practices and arguments as by pure logical consistency that applies across all time. In fact, Tanner argues, logical consistency is not necessarily the primary purpose of Christian claims. Christian arguments, she writes, are often "bad arguments if assessed in strictly logico-deductive terms." She continues, "they do not strictly prove anything, but transpose the ground of argument as they proceed."⁵⁶ Rather than being a reified, purely rational enterprise, theology emerges out of culture itself. Anywhere theologizing occurs, Christians employ whatever tools are available at hand to make the case that God is revealed in Christ. The fact that theology always employs local materials, however, does not make it a provincial exercise. Christianities simultaneously emerge out of particular communities' communal practices, while still making universal claims. This dialectic between the local and the universal is embodied within churches' rituals of the Eucharist, for example. In the ritual act, a local community becomes the body of Christ as it receives Holy Communion, while also affirming that it joins a universal Christian fellowship.

⁵⁶ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 117.

Tanner agrees with postliberals that theology emerges out of Christian communities, that theology follows practice. Yet this does not imply that theology is second-order reflection which builds an edifice of doctrine. Rather, Tanner sees the Christian community and its theological affirmations as in motion, as hybrid entities whose theology cannot be formulated in any once-for-all manner.

Because Christians draw upon whatever local resources lie at hand—both physical and intellectual—syncretism becomes part of the nature of theology. Such syncretism is not a flaw in the process of humans receiving divine knowledge; it is simply inevitable that humans reason using whatever intellectual resources already exist around them. Christians, Tanner writes,

use in odd ways whatever language-games they already happen to speak. *Physis* and *hypostasis*, for example, are common Greek words; it is only their use that is unusual in the early Christian creeds. A Christian way of life is, then, essentially parasitic; it has to establish relations with other ways of life, it has to take from them, in order to be one itself. ... Christian practices are always the practices of others made odd.⁵⁷

Tanner's account resembles that of social scientists in Chapter 2 who highlight the role of conceptual blending as humans receive new cultural resources, as well as Leonardo Boff's. The question is not whether seemingly foreign materials are becoming part and parcel of Christianity, the question is whether local cultural materials are forming "true syncretisms" or false ones. Coherent Christian identity is not a matter of using materials considered "indigenous" to Christianity, for no such materials exist. Even something as "quintessentially Christian" as the Eucharist emerged out of Jewish ritual meals and practices of mystery religions. "It is not so much what cultural materials you use as what you do with them that establishes identity," Tanner writes.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 113.

⁵⁸ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 113.

Forming Christianity out of borrowed materials also provides a more careful account of Christian conversion. Any conversion will inherently entail syncretism as the convert makes sense of Christianity by means of existing physical and mental constructs. When converting to Christianity, one does not turn away from one's former life in the sense that the past is entirely left behind—that is an impossible prospect. Such descriptions of conversion depend upon a poor account of human memory; one does not reconstruct a life using purely Christian tools. Rather, the Christian convert remains within her social location and intellectual history, but now compiles the spiritual, intellectual, and practical tools at hand quite differently. Indeed, the Christian convert uses many of the same cultural materials she used before, yet with a differing purpose. In Augustine's conversion detailed in the *Confessions*, he clearly retained the tools of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy that had so shaped him up to that point. Yet he redeployed them for his ministry as bishop and theologian. Tanner writes, "While a second birth means in part the renunciation of prior practices, one's prior life is not simply cast aside but given back to one in a radically different form."⁵⁹ In this regard, Tanner aptly reflects imagery in the gospels of Jesus' followers receiving sight. Even if the world contains the same physical and cognitive materials it did before, it becomes seen and organized anew.

Tanner's account of Christian borrowing also challenges common conceptions of "Christian society" as a goal for the church, a theme in much inculturation literature. Recall, for example, Arrupe arguing that inculturation should lead to a Christian culture. Postliberals rarely seek so broad a goal, but they do often conceive of Christianity as a social form unto itself. If the wider society is not Christian, Christians can at least form their own "alternative society."⁶⁰ Yet

⁵⁹ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 113.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981).

Christianity cannot be a society in any full sense. In addition to borrowing political trappings from its surrounding culture, as when Christian bishops took sartorial cues from Roman senators with their purple robes, Christianity inherently lacks the sufficient entities for making its own society. In the most obvious sense, Christians rarely set up their own courts, much less any other legal or judicial functions vital to any society. Rather, Christians form a “voluntary association within a wider society.”⁶¹ They do not possess a fixed model for relating to the wider society in which they find themselves.⁶² In certain circumstances Christians might collaborate quite closely with state and governing authorities when they share mutual aims, as when bishops and pastors might work hand in hand with local authorities during times of famine. On the other hand, in a situation like South African apartheid, the church has no choice *but* to establish itself over and against governing authorities.⁶³ At times Christianity will draw from the pressures of wider culture for genuine moral gains, as in the case of women’s increasing role in church governance, which drew from the women’s suffrage movement. Other times Christianity will resist wider cultural movements, as in forms of racial hierarchy in 1930s Germany and the American South of the 1960s.

Such fluidity in Christianity quickly brings up questions regarding boundaries. Tanner is quite mindful of such concerns—after all, any form of human association with a positive identity will entail boundaries. “One can still agree with postliberal theology that the identity of a

⁶¹ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 15.

⁶² She suggests that typologies like those in H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* and Ernst Troeltsch’s *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* cannot possibly apply consistently, especially when one form of the typology becomes superior to others. By Tanner’s argument, it makes little sense to worry whether the church is unduly serving as the “Christ of Culture” or “Christ Above Culture,” by H. Richard’s accounting, or whether the church is sufficiently self-differentiated from the wider culture, because varying cultural situations are too distinct from one another to accommodate such universal typologies. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).

⁶³ See the Kairos Document: http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/The_Kairos_Documents.sflb.ashx.

Christian way of life is formed by a cultural boundary,” Tanner writes.⁶⁴ Yet the boundaries form according to contexts; they depend upon the environment and thus cannot be predicted in advance. Neither should boundaries form out of anxiety related to retaining Christian distinctiveness. To continue the example of responding to famine, in such situations Christians generally care less about their distinctiveness from others responding to the situation than they do about offering neighbor-love for those suffering. Undue concern for Christian distinctiveness can lead to fear, itself an untrustworthy source in building up Christian identity. Tanner writes,

The boundary is ... one of use that allows Christian identity to be essentially impure and mixed, the identity of a hybrid that always shares cultural forms with its wider host culture and other religions (notably Judaism). In contrast, then, to even the more moderate postliberal position, Christianity is a hybrid formation through and through; nothing need be exempted out of fear that the distinctiveness of Christianity must otherwise be lost. Moreover—and more significantly—contrary to moderate postliberalism, the distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed *by* the boundary but *at* it; Christian distinctiveness is something that emerges in the very cultural processes occurring at the boundary, processes that construct a distinctive identity for Christian social practices through the distinctive use of cultural materials shared with others.⁶⁵

Boundaries of Christian identity form in light of the potential responses available for Christians in any given circumstance. “Boundaries are determined, in sum, by how a Christian way of life is situated within a whole field of alternatives.”⁶⁶ Permanent boundaries would depend upon all Christians employing precisely the same cultural materials. Not only should identity depend upon more positive content, but “where the boundaries are drawn is never fixed,” Tanner writes, because the criteria for such boundaries are not static over time.⁶⁷ To again take up the example of *orisha* deities becoming Christian saints, Christian communities may take differing positions depending upon how various Christian communities employ the *orishas*. One should remain

⁶⁴ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 114.

⁶⁵ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 114-115.

⁶⁶ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 111.

⁶⁷ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 109.

open to the possibility that their incorporation could either enhance or distract from Christian identity.

In sum, theological reflection that borrows from modernist approaches to culture, whether borrowed consciously or not, bring culture into theological discourse too late. They construct an ideal form, or ideal forms, of Christianity and then determine how such forms might engage with wider culture. Since syncretism is ubiquitous, however, Christians borrow seemingly non-native cultural resources from the start. Christianity is always already indigenous as soon as converts begin expressing it. Or, to put it as Bediako might, it is indigenous before missionaries arrive, even if not yet bearing the name of Christianity. “The boundary has already been crossed in and through the very processes by which Christians come to believe anything at all,” Tanner writes.⁶⁸ Rather than worrying about authenticity, we might instead exhibit curiosity about how the Spirit may be at work amid newness.

III.2.2. Divine Freedom amid Fluidity

The primary theological mistake of these approaches entails curbing the free grace of God and discounting God’s freedom. For Tanner, postliberal fear of theological mixture contaminating Christianity proves “contrary to the idea that God’s grace finds us where we are.”⁶⁹ For most postliberals, Christians might borrow from elsewhere but Christian identity remains self-contained. Indeed, we find similar logic in Harnack, Kraemer, and many inculturationists. “Christian identity once again seems threatened by efforts of translation into non-Christian terms,” according to these accounts. Tanner continues, “Despite the recognition of outside influences on Christianity, it remains the case for postliberals that ‘religions, like languages, can

⁶⁸ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 116.

⁶⁹ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 113.

be understood only in their own terms, not by translating them into alien speech,”” Tanner says, quoting George Lindbeck.⁷⁰ Yet Christian evangelization and missionary work surely depend upon seeing another’s culture as receptive to God’s grace. To employ Lindbeck’s analogy of language, something in that seemingly foreign language had to already gesture toward Christian affirmations if Christians were to make connections with it. “There had to be something about the society of others that suggested its openness to grace,” Tanner writes.⁷¹

The wide extent of God’s grace means that it can take quite surprising forms. The Spirit not only uses elements of culture that easily translate into Christianity. The African concept of *ubuntu*, for example—the idea that individual human identity is inherently interconnected with and dependent upon other persons—easily resonates with Christian images of the interdependent body of Christ (Rom 12:4-8, I Cor 12:4-31). Not all such means of grace are so simple. Even pieces of culture that first seem contrary to the gospel might be reoriented to Christian affirmations. Churches in South Sudan have incorporated the practice of ritual bull sacrifice in their Christian peacemaking practices, a contested practice that first appears quite strange to outsiders (I explore this example in Chapter 6). One need not presume a seemingly shocking and unfamiliar incorporation within Christianity should inherently be excluded. Just as the Germanic church did not rule out the “outrageous novelty” of erecting live trees in one’s home to celebrate the birth of Christ, we mustn’t rule out future such novelties to come.

The challenge arises as to whether Tanner provides Christian identity with too little content, given her account of God’s free grace and her depiction of fluidity and hybridity. If Christian identity is constantly in flux, if it constantly intermingles with the contents of surrounding culture, if there is not a “transcendent standard of correctness,” what content *does*

⁷⁰ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 105.

⁷¹ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 118.

Christianity contain?⁷² While she does provide guidance for what holds Christian identity together and for recognizing commonalities in Christian identity, which I will address shortly, Tanner contends that the desire for such firm content is itself counter to God's freedom. She writes:

What holds all these different practices together as a unity is nothing internal to the practices themselves; the center that holds them all together should remain, as Barth says, empty. What God wants of us is not some part or aspect of Christian social practices themselves; it is not anything that those Christian practices contain or encompass of themselves in a way that might be passed down to others in history. ... Were any of this to be the case, something about Christian history itself would replace God's own directives to human beings; something human would be illegitimately elevated to the status of God and take God's place as the focus for human obedience. The freedom of God to work in new ways would be thereby inhibited by the illegitimate authority lodged there.

Since Tanner's concern is that some human construction takes the place of God, the center of Christianity is "empty". No Christian belief or practice takes the place of God in God's self—no liturgy, no confessional document, or no Prayer Book. Likewise, no kernel or essence can replace God's active Word. Ascribing finality to any of these provides reassurance, but at the expense of hearing a new word from the Spirit.⁷³ Humans in various cultures might construct some center of the faith particular to their circumstance, but that center can only ever be an icon pointing to God. To do otherwise would be to worship the creation rather than Creator.

III.3. A Common Style and Task

However open to novelty and however constructed Christian theology may be, it remains a shared enterprise, one (hopefully) distinctly recognizable to other Christians. What are those shared marks of identity for Tanner, what does its unity consist of? While Harnack, Kraemer,

⁷² Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 79.

⁷³ In this regard, Tanner shows a certain apophatic instinct shared with my other primary theological interlocutor, Rowan Williams.

many inculturationists and postliberals—and Calixtus and Calovius for that matter—all argue that Christianity’s unity comes through shared beliefs, Tanner disagrees. She argues that Christians have shared *concerns* but not shared *conceptions*.⁷⁴ These concerns include ritual acts like baptism and Eucharist, shared assertions like creeds, but not identical beliefs. Creeds say enough to carry common concern for Christians, but they carry too little content to resolve disputes with any finality. They say just enough for Christians to have healthy disagreements about them (and unhealthy ones, for that matter). Rather, “one might have more success capturing the nature of Christian style if one stopped looking for similarities across cases and tried instead to form some generalization about the point of these Christian efforts to trope borrowed material.”⁷⁵ Thus, when asked “what is Christianity?” or “what unity do Christians hold?”, Tanner responds with a shared *style* and a shared *task*.⁷⁶

III.3.1. Style

The notion of style, a favored term of postmodern cultural theory, indicates one way of living amid varying possibilities. Tanner writes, “Style commonly refers to the specific way a practice is performed when there are other possible options.” Styles have their own internal dynamics, as in styles of art and music; expressions of a style can exhibit remarkable diversity yet remain recognizably a single style. Christianity, for example, can accommodate both pacifists and just war theorists, despite critical differences over matters as grave as the use of force. Tanner writes, “A distinctive way or manner of doing things might, then, unify Christian practices despite their

⁷⁴ She also challenges those theologians who argue for internal Christian coherence through shared rules or through the concept of tradition. I take up the latter matter in the next chapter.

⁷⁵ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 145.

⁷⁶ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 96. Tanner also prefers terms like style and task because they avoid an unhealthy binary between action and belief and also avoid abstraction.

diversity, make them all Christian rather than not.”⁷⁷ Style manages to capture the elusiveness of Christian identity itself, for it compiles elements whose coherence gestures beyond verbal articulation. Tanner writes, “One appeals to similarity in style just in case one has difficulty formulating what the similarity is; style is apparent *in* the way things are arranged and cannot be adequately stated in general terms.”⁷⁸ Even with an empty center, Christians still exhibit shared commonalities through shared manners and approaches.

Likewise, styles borrow from various external sources while retaining an internal coherence. Christianities in various parts of the world can borrow from their cultural contexts, thus exhibiting vastly different practices, rituals, and expressions of Christian belief, while remaining distinctively Christian. In short, Christians improvise their faith, building as they go according to the contextual circumstances that surround them. The genre of jazz in its global diversity offers a fruitful analogy. Whether played in New York, South Africa, Brazil, or Scandinavia, jazz retains its distinguishable style, even while musicians in these different regions incorporate music from their respective homelands in vastly different ways—sources which are themselves not jazz but become jazz through the ensemble’s playing. A New York musician might incorporate American rock, a Durban musician Zulu melodies. Like Christianity, jazz style itself is difficult to pin down—it cannot be summed up by listing out qualities like a swing rhythm or certain instrumentations or harmonic techniques, for other styles can share these features without being jazz. Whether in jazz or Christianity, one should examine the contested use of external material within its context. Thus in assessing new proposals, “everything depends on the relative plausibility of their respective construals of how past and present material hang

⁷⁷ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 144.

⁷⁸ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 147.

together.”⁷⁹ A Christian should consider womanist readings of the atonement, for example, not simply by situating them alongside prior theologians like Anselm and Luther, but amid the social location of women in abusive situations; they should be judged within *that* context, not an abstracted one that removes womenists from their respective social locations. Christian ethicist Sam Wells’ offers a similarly rich analogy in the context of Christian ethics. Instead of seeing Christian ethics as responding primarily to moments of acute crisis in human life, he suggests that it should orient itself around the formation of Christians in virtue, such that they not only instinctively respond to crises with faith, hope, and love, but that they exhibit these virtues across the whole of life.⁸⁰ Like the theatrical improviser, Christians have been so shaped by a narrative of faith that they can improvise in any new context. Tanner would extend this idea of improvisation beyond ethics to Christian theology itself.⁸¹

Nevertheless, for some readers Tanner’s “style” lacks definitive content or sufficiently specific reference points. While I will take up some of these concerns in the next chapter, at this juncture we should acknowledge that Tanner wants the reader to acutely feel this lack. Christian identity feels elusive because God is free and God’s grace moves where it will. Tanner intentionally avoids giving the reader something firm to hold onto, for it presses the reader to examine where the Spirit may be at work unexpectedly.

⁷⁹ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 162-163.

⁸⁰ Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004). For this analogy extended to jazz, see my “Negotiating tension toward a hipper groove: Jazz improvisation as a metaphor within Christian ethics,” *Theology* 115, No. 1 (January/February 2012), 36-43.

⁸¹ The analogies of improvisational theatre and jazz, which so emphasize formation and repeated practice, suggest that Tanner may not offer an adequate account of the formation of the self in such hybrid environments. I address this concern in the next chapter.

III.3.2. Task

Tanner's other key concept in Christian identity is task, another notion that unites the varied actions and beliefs of Christianity. Since the transcendent God eludes definition, the task to which that God calls us is not strictly definable. Rather, the task is the *pursuit* and continued *discovery* of Christian identity itself—always underway and in negotiation. Christians continue to search for God, and thus the task and identity of Christianity are never settled: “In the end, then, how the identity of Christianity should be summed up is an unanswerable question in that Christianity has its identity as a task; it has its identity in the form of a task of looking for one.”⁸² Our common affirmations are so vague—Jesus is the image of God, Jesus calls us to neighbor love, the church is the community tasked with proclaiming Jesus, and so on—that they provide only “a project requiring a solution.” The work of organizing ourselves around this “similar set of claims and ritual actions” and asking “a similar set of questions” unites Christians. Our commonalities lie in the commitment to figuring out such solutions together—of “mutual accounting and responding” in Christian fellowship—not in agreeing with one another on those solutions. After all, because such solutions remain human articulations of a transcendent God, they are never themselves complete.⁸³

Arguments, therefore, tell Christians a great deal about ourselves; in fact, arguments define Christians as much as agreements. If Christianity is a task continually searching for its identity amid the many differences of time and culture—which itself guarantees some disagreement—then Christian discipleship and Christian community is “*a genuine community of argument*.”⁸⁴ Accounts of Christianity like Harnack's or inculturation theories' prove too irenic

⁸² Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 155.

⁸³ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 153.

⁸⁴ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 123 (her italics).

in portraying a friendly meeting of Christianity and culture. Since agreed upon propositions do not unite Christians, then Christians will inevitably disagree with one another since we do not possess a finalized form of doctrine. Christians will have “competing judgments ... based on plausible interpretations of materials in which all parties put some stock.”⁸⁵ Arguments, then, shape common reference points that bear sufficiently significant implications to warrant substantial emotional and intellectual energy by competing parties. “What all parties are fighting over form normative reference points for the argument, even if their interpretation is part of what is subject to debate,” Tanner writes.⁸⁶ If you want to know the central aspects of Christianity, look at Christians’ disputes. Early Christian arguments over Christology in creedal debates themselves indicated the extent to which Jesus reoriented responses to and understandings of God among early disciples. Contemporary debates in Protestant churches over opening the ritual of the Eucharist to unbaptized persons indicates the increase in Eucharistic piety among Protestants. Debates over same-sex marriage show how integral churches’ ethics of sexuality have been for Christians’ social identities since its earliest centuries. She acknowledges not only the inevitability of conflict but also its dangers. Thus Christians should avoid responding to conflict by offering fiats; rather, they should carry out mutual judgment through sustained fellowship, acknowledging that we lack timeless standards to determine with finality when a belief or practice is out of bounds. In such situations, Tanner contends, local Christians carry priority over those judging from the outside. Since one assesses the appropriateness of a new Christian practice by “looking at the weave,” she reminds us, local Christians know that weave best.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 154.

⁸⁶ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 154.

⁸⁷ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 174.

Rather than seeking uniformity in thought and action, Tanner suggests mutual recognition as the primary binding and identifying aspect of Christian unity. “Perhaps mutual recognition is the more reasonable expectation,” Tanner writes, “where simple agreement in affirmation and action cannot be had.”⁸⁸ When seeking such recognition, Tanner recognizes that agreement generally goes backward rather than forward—to founding events and foundational statements of the Christian church. She likewise recognizes such agreements will be vague, like “there is a God (of some sort or other), Jesus is of crucial significance (in some unspecified sense) for knowledge of God and for the proper orientation of human life in light of God’s existence.”⁸⁹ And Christians will more likely agree upon negative judgments than positive ones. Nevertheless, given the bitter disagreements of Christian history—at their worst in conflicts like those between Calovius and Calixtus in Chapter 1—mutual recognition of a shared style and task is no small feat.

IV. Assessing Tanner

Tanner’s intervention into conversations on theology and culture not only addresses the particular place and time in which it emerged—the postliberal school of the 1980s and 1990s. It also serves as an intervention into discourses of inculturation, indigenization, contextualization. It provides vital tools for Westerners to interpret Christianity outside the West with far greater sympathy. In short, seeing the constructedness of all theology relativizes Western theology. It removes any sense that Christianity has to become indigenous to a place, as if God’s grace in Christ is an entity foreign to that place. While Tanner advances the conversation on theology and syncretism, however, I also argue that a theological account of syncretism still requires fuller

⁸⁸ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 172-173.

⁸⁹ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 173.

acknowledgment of the ways in which Christianities of the past have inherently informed Christianities in the present and future.

IV.1. Beyond Inculturation, Indigenization, and Contextualization

Tanner provides a remarkably compelling account of Christianity in light of syncretism, surely the most sophisticated contemporary Western treatment of Christianity in light of pervasive syncretism. In short, Tanner joins the insights of social scientists as assessed in Chapter 2 with constructive theological insight. The ubiquity of syncretism in Christianity needn't be troublesome to Christians, but rather an occasion for God's grace to move freely—a prompting for theological creativity. Tanner's account pushes away from static notions of Christianity that fail to acknowledge syncretism or at least exhibit undue fear of protecting Christianity's authenticity amid syncretism. She thereby provides a crucial reframing: rather than trying to protect Christianity as one's own possession, Christianity always depends upon the free grace of God, such that Christians cannot possess Christianity at all. Christians receive God's grace and, in response, construct accounts of theology for particular times and places based upon common materials like scriptures, creeds, and rituals of baptism and Eucharist. The local materials that go into theology are not aspects to be overcome: God's grace "finds us where we are," such that local materials become means for God's revelation. Syncretism becomes inherent to the theological enterprise.

The fact that theology is always already syncretized with local culture does not inhibit theological creativity, as if using other sources lessens what is genuinely theological about Christian reflection. If anything, the fact that cultures are always changing and in flux means that the theologian always has new materials with which to work, materials which themselves carry

potential for fresh insight. Employing outside materials “does not relieve a theologian from his or her own constructive responsibilities. This is in part because of novelties of circumstance; something new is always being added to the equation.”⁹⁰ Theology is thus always an unfinished enterprise, able to receive new insights and express new possibilities of God at work in Christ. Christians “cannot rule out rather outrageous novelty to come, novelty that breaks previous human assumptions about the way it all hangs together.”⁹¹ Acknowledging the promise of such novelty carries two salutary aspects. First, it can enhance our ability to recognize one another, especially important in modern times when Christians across the globe have unprecedented access to one another. Second, this posture reflects an openness to the Holy Spirit, blowing where it will. It does not make sense to follow a single prescriptive strategy for assessing such novelty, because we do not know ahead of time which syncretism will become orthodoxy. Tanner writes, “an ad hoc use of various strategies....guided by the case-by-case judgment of particulars, makes better sense theologically.” Her approach, she continues, “shows a proper willingness to be guided by the Spirit of God, a Spirit that blows freely and not according to prior human presumption, not according to demands for some simple predictable consistency that human beings might take for granted.”⁹²

The theology emerging from such an account of Christianity values diversity and creativity in theological endeavors. “Diversity is a salutary reminder,” she writes, “that Christians cannot control the movements of the God they hope to serve.”⁹³ Disagreement, rather than an inherent indicator of certain Christians deviating from established norms, instead indicates theological creativity, for reading Christianity in different places leads to qualitatively

⁹⁰ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 88.

⁹¹ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 136.

⁹² Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 119.

⁹³ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 175.

different judgments. “Different understandings of how to lead a Christian life—even when they occur at the same time and place—are not necessarily a bad thing,” she writes, “They may be just the product of sincere, equally uncorrupted, and fully capable Christian efforts to lead a Christian life.”⁹⁴ Tanner celebrates theological creativity, both in theologians and in ordinary Christian lives. Creativity is not reserved only for respected theological minds like Thomas Aquinas or John Calvin, for all Christians improvise.

IV.2. Overstating Agency

When Tanner published *Theories of Culture* in 1997, the postliberal position she challenged as so dependent upon modernist cultural theory was at the height of its notoriety in Christian theology. She rightly sensed the opportunity that accompanied this new recognition of human agency. Twenty years on, however, one can affirm the basic fact that humans constantly reconstruct culture while acknowledging that we nevertheless construct culture within profound constraints. In short, like so many cultural theorists of the day, Tanner tended to overstate human agency. In all her emphasis upon construction, she understates the conditionedness and the historicity of any corporate human enterprise, Christianity included. God’s Word may be free, but humans remain quite limited such that our theological construction only goes so far. Our construction always takes place in a community whose influence upon us is quite profound and by way of already existing conversations and practices of Christianity. Her overstating agency minimizes two aspects of the church’s life—its material aspects and its history.

Overlooking the shared material aspects of Christianity first risks minimizing Christianity’s material aspects—and therefore its sacramental aspects. Tanner writes, “if the

⁹⁴ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 158.

unity and wholeness of the original material transmitted are up for grabs themselves in the process of transmission, one would be hard pressed to say that the markedly different results are really guided to any substantial extent by the same materials.”⁹⁵ The varying results, i.e. differing Christianities, may be guided by widely differing methods, but they are surely guided by some of the same *materials*—scriptural texts, bread and wine treated as sacred objects, and so forth. It is the Holy Spirit’s agency working through these materials, of course, to make them means of grace. Yet bread, wine, oil, and water remain physical, material vessels where God has promised to act through such instruments of grace. Common statements about what takes place in such sacraments remain no less vague, of course; Tanner is quite correct in that regard. Yet employing common materials very much shapes and constrains Christian thought and action. In the Reformation, for example, the ritual of the Eucharist underwent profound changes in its practice and conception alike. Yet the common materials of bread and wine provided substantial constraints upon the ritual practices and the theologies emerging among Protestant Christians. In this regard, the “markedly different results” among Protestants *were*, in fact, “guided ... by the same materials.”

Furthermore, when speaking of the conditionedness of corporate human undertakings more broadly, Tanner makes brief mention of such but does not integrate it into her wider account of human agency. She acknowledges that all human beings begin within a cultural context, which leads to clear constraints in how we think and reason—theologically and otherwise. “One has to start somewhere and where one starts influences where one can go,” she writes, “As culturally conditioned beings, there is no help for that, because there is no human

⁹⁵ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 134.

alternative.”⁹⁶ Tanner quickly recognizes this point and then moves on to speak against an understanding of cultural conditioning that “enforces uniformity of practice and expels innovators.” She is concerned that acknowledging cultural continuity has been used as a justification for conformity—a concern I share and one I take up in the next chapter. Meanwhile, however, surely one can account for the constraints of human embeddedness within one’s particular culture without resorting to cultural determinism and forcefully patrolling boundaries. In short, she does not provide an adequate account of contingency in human culture amid the ongoing bricolage of Christian theology.

Philosopher Charles Taylor offers a fuller portrayal of human agency amid embeddedness in his description of human reason and morality always inherently working out of an already given framework.⁹⁷ Taylor avoids the rigidity of modernist accounts of culture while also providing a more textured portrayal of contingency. By the time humans grow into becoming moral agents in their early years, embedded cultural frameworks of reasoning and moral intuitions pervade and condition our thinking throughout our lives. This is not to say that humans cannot think beyond these initial intuitions, reframe them, or ultimately disagree with aspects of them, but we never ultimately avoid them, “because the moral ontology behind any person’s views can remain largely implicit,” Taylor writes.⁹⁸ He terms these “inescapable frameworks”—though this designation is uncharacteristically imprecise for Taylor. They are more unavoidable than inescapable, for “inescapable” sounds like a trap that again conjures up static notions of culture. If we negotiate the framework, as Taylor indeed contends, then we have changed or “escaped” that framework in some sense. Regardless, by Taylor’s account humans

⁹⁶ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 168.

⁹⁷ On balancing ongoing cultural construction and human embeddedness, see also the discussion of semiotics in Chapter 2.

⁹⁸ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 9.

work through their frameworks, disregarding aspects of them while mixing them with new cultural influences. Culture is not a straightjacket for Taylor, for we still invent identity and make meaning within our contexts. “We find the sense of life through articulating it,” Taylor writes, “Discovering here depends on, is interwoven with, inventing.”⁹⁹ On the one hand, our identity—individually and socially—emerges from a situated position. On the other, we only discover that identity in the very act of making identity. In short, Taylor shows that affirming cultural construction needn’t lead to overstating the role of human agency.

Such overstatement leads to a theological problematic in Tanner, that of portraying God’s Word as free without sufficiently recognizing the limitations and finitude of the human receiver. Throughout *Theories of Culture*, Tanner carries a Barthian concern for God’s freedom, God’s ability to communicate as God will. God’s Word is a free word. God’s Word is certainly free, nevertheless humans remain limited, only able to hear, see, taste, touch, learn, and receive through our own finitude. Thus the theological venture always entails not only construction and freedom, but also the constraints of being human—of living in human community, of thinking within a given cultural episteme, of working with given materials. The question then becomes how do we theologize historical contingency. What is the theological promise that accompanies our cultural constraints and our finitude? These questions become prompts for reflection in Chapter 5.

Not only is the human receiver of God’s revelation a contingent creature, but she received the message of the gospel from another person, who received it from another before her.¹⁰⁰ Knowledge of the gospel thus inherently carries a historical quality, which brings us back to the recurring concern of history and historicism. Tanner responds to historicism with a

⁹⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 18. Hans-Georg Gadamer offers a similar portrayal, discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁰⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*.

Foucaultian account of human agency, claiming that human beings always have and always will construct their culture and religion. With God's grace moving freely where it will, this account of human agency carries great theological promise. At the same time, the reception of God's revelation appears fleeting in Tanner, as if various times and cultures simply construct their own Christianities with little interconnection between them. It is as if contingent human creatures receive revelation for their own time and place, with few implications for the universal church across time. The center is a bit *too* empty. The Word becomes flesh in Jesus, but what form does the incarnation take across history—beyond ancient Palestine? In what ways are Christians connected to a universal body of Christ, a body that continues to incorporate more and more aspects of humans and their cultures into itself?¹⁰¹ The style and task of Christianity remain under negotiation, but part of that negotiation entails recognizing that the gospel is passed down in history. Tanner's depiction of style and task begin to address challenges of syncretism, but do not sufficiently address problems of human contingency and Christianity's historical continuity, however limited and negotiated that continuity may be.

In sum, Christians do not simply syncretize because they creatively construct and reconstruct the faith. Christians syncretize and reinvent Christianity because of human finitude and contingency. We syncretize because we cannot avoid our culture and we have no tools at our disposal *but* the tools of our culture. To make sense of the faith handed down to us, we use material and intellectual tools of our culture, because the faith handed down expressed itself in a culture not entirely our own. It existed in a culture of the past, not the culture of our present.

¹⁰¹ Tanner offers a fuller Christology in her book *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). In this book, the interaction between Christ as the second person of the Trinity and the body of Christ across time is still fairly one-way. For example, she writes "Christ substitutes himself for us," "what he has achieved becomes ours through him" (102), "We are to take up the very position of the second person of the trinity," Christ is our "entryway, our point of access" to the divine life" (142), "Human relations, which remain fully human, image the trinity only as they are joined up with its own life" (236). In short, it remains unclear what role the saints across time play in shaping the body of Christ.

Thus, per Tanner, we invent and syncretize as we receive Christianity, but we still invent within multiple givens. The Spirit joins both continuity and invention to proclaim the gospel and to join us to Christ.

V. Conclusion: Moving Toward a Theology of Syncretism

Amid Tanner's formidable achievements, questions then remain. She offers a rich account of the constructedness of Christianity in the present and future, but Christianity's debt to the past remains unclear. She continually refers to common reference points like scripture, creeds, baptism, and Eucharist, but provides little account of how these common elements of the faith remain amid pervasive mixture and social construction. Tanner often takes Christian commonalities for granted without offering an account of how Christians retain these commonalities over wide spans of geography and history. A full theological account of syncretism would not only take account of the constructed nature of present theology; it would also note how syncretisms have shaped past theology and provide an account of the continuity retained amid pervasive syncretism. In the next chapter, I turn to these concerns. I argue that a dynamic concept of tradition fills such gaps within Tanner's account, that tradition need not imply a stultifying fixation with the past. Rather than referring to "substance-like stuff" as Tanner contends, tradition can acknowledge the contestations and the continual social and individual constructions entailed in Christianities continuities.

Chapter 4: The Perils and Promise of Tradition

“One problem with recent work on the category of tradition is that it tends to be dominated by Christian traditionalists who have trouble imagining traditions unlike their own as viable forms of life.” -Jeffrey Stout

In the year 1520, Ethiopian Emperor Lebna Dengel welcomed Portuguese diplomat and emissary Dom Rodrigo de Lima into his court. As one of the world's most ancient Christian kingdoms, Ethiopian Christianity had existed since at least the 4th century. Indeed, many narrate the origin of Ethiopian Christianity to the Ethiopian eunuch's encounter with Philip the Evangelist recounted in Acts 8. While the Ethiopian church kept some connections with the wider church, largely through the bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, who ordained their clergy, by the 16th century they had become quite isolated. A few Ethiopian Christians took pilgrimages to Jerusalem, where Ethiopian monks ran a monastery; occasionally Ethiopian Christians traveled to centers like Rome and Constantinople. But these were exceptions. Even Christian visitors to the Ethiopian church tended to remain in the kingdom, not returning to their homeland to thereby establish more lasting connections. Historian Adrian Hastings writes that by the 16th century, the church in Ethiopia existed in “almost total isolation ... since the seventh century.”¹ The Portuguese, meanwhile, had been establishing outposts on the eastern coasts of the African continent, arriving in Ethiopia in 1520.

Given the increasing isolation of the Ethiopian church in preceding centuries, mutual recognition as fellow Christians was by no means a foregone conclusion. For centuries,

¹ Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 44.

Portuguese and Ethiopian Christians built up their own liturgical practices, their own hymnody, their own textual traditions. Portuguese Christians, given their frequent contact with Catholic Christianity's power center in Rome, exchanged and borrowed habits and practices with Christians in western Europe. Ethiopian Christians, meanwhile, constructed and reconstructed their Christianity around more local concerns. Their liturgical practices mixed Old Testament imagery with African rituals in ways quite unfamiliar to Europeans; they had doctrinal debates about the Sabbath bearing little resemblance to debates elsewhere in Christianity. Ethiopian Christianity was itself an example of the construction and fluctuations of religions and culture identified over the last two chapters. Indeed, given the social theory outlined in those chapters, which so emphasized the constructedness of all cultural endeavors—Christianity included—one might find it surprising if Lebna Dengel and Rodrigo de Lima *had* agreed upon each others' status as Christians. If culture is constantly being reshaped, if people "generate faked traditions out of a constantly ongoing bricolage," as anthropologist Goran Aijmer writes, then Ethiopian and Portuguese Christians in 1520 might have seemed strangers indeed to each other.²

Yet they recognized one another as Christians. "The Ambassador replied ... that they gave great thanks to God for having fulfilled their desires in bringing Christians together with Christians," de Lima's fellow explorer Francisco Alvares wrote.³ Amid their own respective syncretisms, they affirmed the other's faith. In fact, the list of commonalities went on and on. Alvares provided a picture of Ethiopian monastic life that quite resembled European monasticism. He noted:

² Göran Aijmer, "By Way of Introduction," in *Syncretism and the Commerce of Symbols*, ed. by Göran Aijmer (Göteborg: The Institute for Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology), 3.

³ Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, 130. They were not simply pleased to recognize one another as Christians—they were pleased to have political allies. Lebna Dengel had been seeking outside help battling Muslim armies with fresh support from the Ottoman Empire. Such political considerations did not make such mutual recognition a foregone conclusion, as Europeans were often quite quick to challenge the status of Christians in Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

The celebration of mass, the chalices, the manner of making altar bread and altar wine, the recital of the psalms at Matins, the frequent procession, the thuribles, crosses, bells, cloths, and pictures carried in procession, the books in the sacristy, the feast days and long fasts.⁴

Differences of course existed, differences which Jesuit missionaries would later emphasize and in turn exaggerate, even exploit. But the similarities remained remarkable given Ethiopia's isolation.

This story of mutual recognition should give some pause. Religions may constantly syncretize; Christians may reconstruct their religion out of nearby materials which are themselves contingent to Christianity, as Tanner argues. But continuity remains. One can too hastily embrace the exuberance for hybridity, syncretism, and bricolage. A theological account of syncretism therefore should not only account for constant bricolage. It should also account for the remarkable continuity across wide spans of space and time, exemplified in the Ethiopian and Portuguese encounter. Such continuity entails both common teaching and common materials, as in the sustained use of the shared scriptural texts—even in widely different translations—and the ongoing inclusion of bread, wine, oil, and water in Christianity's rituals. Yet social scientists' and Tanner's emphasis upon cultural and theological construction makes it difficult to see how, where, and for what reasons certain continuities remain in play, even taken for granted. While the center is empty for Tanner, certain elements keep showing up in her account of Christianity—scriptures, creeds, prayers, rituals like baptism and Eucharist. Tanner is surely right to argue that Christians keep constructing and reconstructing the meaning of these documents and rituals, that theologians keep making meaning out of them. Yet given her emphasis upon fluidity, it is not clear why certain texts and rituals continually come into play

⁴ Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, 131.

over and above others, for they simply appear as assumed constants amid fluidity and flux.⁵ If postliberals bring in culture too late, as Tanner rightly argues, Tanner brings in elements like scriptures and sacraments too late. Throughout *Theories of Culture*, Christians have been constructing their religion for much of the book, when constancies like scriptures and sacraments suddenly appear.

One concept that might relieve this gap is that of “tradition”. Tradition acknowledges the embeddedness of human ventures—religion included—while providing a strong account of continuity. It also avoids an overly individualized account of Christian identity, one that neglects an account of Christian interconnectedness. Yet Tanner strongly criticizes tradition as a descriptor for Christian identity. She considers it a notion too encumbered by the past and too static to capture the dynamic aspects of the Christian task. In this chapter I assess her critique of tradition, querying whether the concept might be resuscitated for a theological account of syncretism. In doing so, I engage Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of the concept, given his extraordinary influence upon contemporary theological understandings of tradition. To form an account of tradition that truly incorporates phenomena of syncretism, however, I move away from MacIntyre, finding help from Africanist notions of tradition. In particular, the political tradition of indigenous African pluralism provides a model of a continuous, dynamic tradition that puts the capacity of incorporate strangeness and otherness at its very heart.

⁵ This critique of Tanner is similar to one offered by Reinhard Hütter in a review of *Theories of Culture*, that is, that a thoroughgoing cultural approach struggles to account for theological concepts. He writes, “Tanner’s use of ‘Word of God’ has implicit normative connotations whereby it clearly transcends the logic of cultural construction, yet the concept is nowhere theologically accounted for.” *Modern Theology* 15:4 October 1999, 499-501.

I. The Perils of Tradition

Tradition has become a favored term for theologians over recent decades. Amid postfoundationalist epistemologies and postmodern cultural theories that so embrace fluidity, tradition has become a concept that provides many theologians a sense that Christianity retains stability.⁶ Tanner herself resists the concept of tradition, however, in part because many theologians have projected onto it a static and unchanging sense, as if it provides an unchanging assurance amid what seem endless fluctuations. While Tanner rightly avoids a static notion of tradition, static continuity is by no means the only sense of the term. Even postmodern thinkers like Terence Ranger, who launched a critique of tradition in the early 1980s that Tanner employs in *Theories of Culture*, still acknowledged the usefulness of the term. In theological circles, her critique of tradition also overlooks the primary purveyor of the term in contemporary theology—Alasdair MacIntyre—who approaches it more carefully, even if MacIntyre himself vacillates between static and dynamic senses of tradition.⁷ Tanner and MacIntyre display the risks of overlooking tradition on the one hand and of overstating its cohesiveness on the other. After discussing them in turn, I suggest that tradition remains the most viable term for conceiving Christianity across time amid its ubiquitous syncretisms, so long as tradition be understood as dynamic continuity.

⁶ See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas' essay "Flight from Foundationalism" in *Wilderness Wanderings* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1997).

⁷ For another work that puts Tanner's account of tradition in conversation with MacIntyre, see Medi Ann Volpe's *Rethinking Christian Identity* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). While I share common concerns with Volpe, I hold that Tanner offers more correctives to MacIntyre than she contends.

1.1. Tanner's Critique of Tradition

Tanner's primary critique of tradition is its purportedly static quality, as if its elements remain the same as they are transmitted from place to place. "Tradition amounts to substance-like stuff that naturally persists across time and displacements of space," Tanner contends.⁸ This approach repeats the mistakes of modernist social theory, Tanner claims, by imagining a stable core moving across time. Tanner admits that some accounts of tradition acknowledge change, but when they do, she claims that tradition remains within this same paradigm. In these more careful accounts, perceived changes and growth simply make explicit "what was implicit before." She cites 17th century French theologian Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet's study of early Christian creeds, in which he argued that changes in the church's doctrine over time simply reflected drawing out the logic implicit in the earliest Christians' experience of Jesus.⁹ In such a scenario, the Christian tradition might be elaborated upon, but substantially changed. If the tradition expands in content, it expands spatially by explicating what was formerly implicit, it does not become expressed anew in history. Tradition survives fickle time and changing culture.

Tanner then outlines two ways in which scholars posit a static understanding of tradition, one exemplified by Troeltsch and one by Hans-Georg Gadamer. Her readings of these two figures, however, projects onto them far more rigid conceptions of tradition than they in fact offer. The first approach, which she associates with Troeltsch, emphasizes transmission; it supposes that what is transmitted remains the same even while the results look different in varying places. "The material gives itself to be understood differently in a way that is appropriate for a particular time and place. It need not itself change; it can remain itself while being viewed from multiple perspectives, while addressing new questions or satisfying new needs from its

⁸ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 129.

⁹ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 130.

bountiful resources.” By this first approach, Christianity possesses something like an essence—or at least some unchanging aspect handed down over time, that can be viewed quite differently. This critique of tradition might be associated with some versions of inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization literature, in which a stable, unchanging core of Christianity becomes expressed differently in various times and cultures. Christianity “is ever renewed in the same form” even as Christians apply and interpret it differently. As we saw in Chapter 1, however, Troeltsch is rather more suspect of such a static expression of tradition than Tanner lets on. If anything, while Harnack does not employ the term “tradition” for his essence, this first approach to “tradition” seems far closer to Harnack than Troeltsch.¹⁰

The second approach, which she claims reflects Gadamer, suggests that transmission *inherently* entails what has gone before it. This account of tradition not only contends that passing something along in history implies that there is a “thing” there to be passed; it also affirms that the thing passed sends with it material accumulated in its history. “One is always already influenced by that material’s prior effects in history, by the interpretations and appropriations of that material in the circumstances preceding one’s own. All the results are therefore incorporated within the same overarching history of the same tradition’s material effects,” Tanner says of this latter approach.¹¹ Yet Gadamer would not quite put it this way, given his debt to Hegel. “Effects” of the tradition would pass on through sublimation, which would not entail “all the results [being] therefore incorporated” in quite the sense that Tanner seems to mean it. Nevertheless, Tanner contends that this approach to tradition involves substance-like stuff being passed down with additional material now affixed to it. Tradition

¹⁰ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 130. Certainly elements of *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* resemble Tanner’s account, yet his essay “What Does ‘Essence’ of Christianity Mean?” is more careful. See Chapter 1.

¹¹ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 131. See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method, 2nd Edition*, trans J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 2004).

grows, but it grows as a center that accumulates, not something renegotiated over time. In both accounts of tradition, however fair or unfair her portrayals, it seems that tradition itself is the primary actor. A “tradition” has a life all its own, thereby neglecting the human agency at play in the process of handing on. “All these accounts of tradition make continuity in either traditional materials or the process of transmission a presumption by isolating something from the vicissitudes of history to guarantee it,” she writes.¹² Christian identity is something found or discovered, rather than constructed.

She then draws from the renowned essay collection edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*; yet here too, she reads more onto Hobsbawm and Ranger than they themselves imply. She writes, “Post-modern cultural theory makes the important claim that traditions are invented, meaning by that not merely that traditional materials are often new rather than old and borrowed rather than indigenous, but that they are always products of human decision in a significant sense.”¹³ With Hobsbawm and Ranger, she highlights the fact that many invented traditions are means employed by those in power to perpetuate their prestige by constructing tapestries to display authority. The architecture of Westminster Palace, for example, which was built in the mid-19th century, drew from centuries-old gothic architecture to provide the edifice with visual elements harkening back to centuries of British political authority. Insofar as such strategies consolidate existing power structures, tradition also often continues by way of exclusion, domination, and omission. This critique of tradition is indeed quite fair: if tradition often evokes continuity, it can perpetuate existing structures that rest upon injustices. Indigenous Welsh or Irish architecture, for example, do not appear in Westminster.

¹² Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 131.

¹³ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 133.

Yet this does not imply a wholesale rejection of “tradition” as a conceptual resource for Hobsbawm and Ranger. They referred to specific instances of late-industrial capitalism in which governing authorities manufactured decorated traditions through invented ceremonies as means of consolidating control and displaying authority. They wanted to know what was it about this particular political, economic, and historical circumstance that led to a proliferation of invented traditions. Political traditions and ceremonies that appear quintessentially British, for example, such as “the pageantry which surrounds British monarchy in its public ceremonial manifestations,” arose rather suddenly in the late 19th century.¹⁴ Likewise, British colonial administrators set up “traditions” displaying their own authority by emulating the ceremonies of the British landed gentry while also describing “traditional” societies in Africa as timeless.¹⁵ (The latter European description of Africans was itself another invention.) Hobsbawm and Ranger did not argue, however, that wider traditions like the religions of Christianity and Islam are invented in this same sense. Saying Victorian governments in late 19th century invented nationalistic parades is quite different from saying that the tradition of Britain’s political liberalism is invented. The latter is also true, of course, but Hobsbawm and Ranger do not comment upon whether “tradition” should or could be a viable term for such large-scale social, political, and economic entities like political liberalism, Christianity, or Islam.

Terence Ranger himself takes up these concerns a decade after their influential book, in an essay entitled “The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa.”¹⁶ As I will

¹⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions” in *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

¹⁵ Terence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa” in *The Invention of Tradition*, 211-262.

¹⁶ Terence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa,” in *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth-century Africa*, ed. Ranger and Olufemi Vaughan (London: The Macmillan Press, 1993), 62-111.

return to Ranger later in this chapter, his essay deserves attention. Speaking of the book's wide influence, Ranger writes,

It is clear that this success has been achieved partly at the expense of the book's particular argument. The folklorist and many of the anthropological applicants were drawing upon it to argue that all traditions, at all time and places, are "invented". In a sense, of course, this is true and where that sense has been ignored, or denied, then its statement is liberating. But the book's argument was different. It was about a specific historical period in which, it asserted, traditions were peculiarly frequently invented rather than customs continuing to evolve. Its argument focused on the rise of romantic nationalism, the rituals of mass industrial politics, the interactions of imperialism and "scientific" classification, the production of "neo-tradition" cadres to serve the imperial states, and the counter-inventions of anti-imperial and socialist movements.¹⁷

In retrospect Ranger worries that the term "invention" carries a host of its own problems. It sounds too individualistic, recognizing individual agency at the expense of the corporate processes of invention. In the context of Africa, "invention" also sounds too one-way, as if the colonizers were the only ones inventing, even though Africans were creatively negotiating their own contexts amid European intrusions. Invention also sounds too free of history, "too once-for-all an event" with "little allowance for process, for the constant reworking of identities."¹⁸ Ranger furthermore worries that "invention" too easily conjures material inventions, which simply require a patent for the process to conclude. These limitations, Ranger contends, overlook the genuine continuities people draw upon when constructing and reconstructing their culture and politics. He draws from fellow African historian Steven Feierman, who writes, "long-term continuity and active creation are in fact compatible."¹⁹

Finally, Tanner's critique of tradition overlooks its most influential advocate. When contemporary theologians like Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank refer to the importance of

¹⁷ Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition Revisited," 63.

¹⁸ Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition Revisited," 80.

¹⁹ See Steven M. Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 3. See Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition Revisited," 77.

tradition, they do not cite Troeltsch and Gadamer, they refer to philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.

This exclusion is a surprising lacuna. While MacIntyre himself clearly draws upon Gadamer, he offers his own distinctive account which cannot be subsumed under Tanner's critique.²⁰

MacIntyre's account of tradition, as well as contemporary theological accounts, give a great deal of attention to the aspect of struggle; indeed, Tanner's own statement of the Christian community as a "community of argument" closely resembles MacIntyre's understanding of tradition. Such conflict is indeed *definitive* of tradition for MacIntyre, such that tradition is not assumed "as a naturally preexisting reality" as in Tanner's portrayal.²¹ Given MacIntyre's tremendous influence upon contemporary theology, his account of tradition deserves attention in its own right. Because there is no shortage of writing on MacIntyre in contemporary theology and philosophy, I limit my treatment to presenting his account of tradition, especially in light of Tanner's critiques, and only noting prominent critiques like Jeffrey Stout's.²²

1.2. MacIntyre on Tradition

Alasdair MacIntyre provides an account of tradition far more dynamic than those discussed by Tanner. For MacIntyre, traditions amend themselves across time, collecting additional materials such that the traditions' intellectual content does change and grow, all while retaining a basic core. Unlike Bosseut, by MacIntyre's account new information need not necessarily be implicit

²⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, "On not having the Last Word: Thoughts on our Debts to Gadamer" in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 157-172.

²¹ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 132.

²² See John Horton and Susan Mendus, ed, *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Peter McMyllor, *Alasdair MacIntyre: Critic of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Thomas D. D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: the Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006); Christopher Stephen Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre: Relativism, Thomism, and Philosophy* (Lanham : Lexington Books, 2009); Bruce W. Ballard, *Understanding MacIntyre* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2000); Jack Russell Weinstein, *On MacIntyre* (Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2003); Lawrence S. Cunningham, ed, *Intractable Disputes about the Natural Law: Alasdair MacIntyre and Critics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2009).

in what was said before, it can be a fresh development. Furthermore, MacIntyre provides a more rigorous epistemological exploration of tradition by linking it to thought itself: humans inherently reason within tradition and reasoning takes place within the given constructs of holistic inherited intellectual and cultural frames. Yet for MacIntyre, the fact that we reason within inherited intellectual traditions leads contemporary Westerners into profound difficulties—and here is where his differences with Tanner become quite sharp. Because we draw from so many diverse sources, moderns reason ourselves into incoherence for MacIntyre. Following the Enlightenment’s challenge to tradition—“Ours is an age of criticism, to which everything must be subjected,” Immanuel Kant famously said—too many Westerners neglect the traditioned nature of thought. I argue, however, that given our assessment of the ubiquity of syncretism, MacIntyre overlooks not only the inevitability of reasoning out of various traditions, he overlooks the benefits of doing so. MacIntyre’s account gets us partway toward a robust account of tradition, but stops short of an account that absorbs the ubiquity of syncretism.

What, then, is a tradition for MacIntyre? MacIntyre first provides a brief definition in his 1981 work *After Virtue*: a tradition is a “historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods of that tradition.”²³ Note that tradition entails history as well as a social grouping that self-identifies through that tradition. Disputation over its perceived goods then serves as an identifying feature of this continuous social grouping. Already, we are at some distance from Tanner’s portrayal. If anything, Tanner and MacIntyre are of one mind regarding the centrality of argument to a social grouping’s identity. MacIntyre expands this definition in his 1988 book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*:

²³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007 [1981]), 222.

A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.²⁴

While retaining the importance of tradition as a social grouping across history, by this more comprehensive definition MacIntyre distinguishes between various sorts of conflicts that will lead to traditions' definitions and redefinitions. First, he identifies conflicts arising from critics external to the tradition and, second, from disagreements within the social grouping itself. MacIntyre furthermore argues that a tradition's sustainability depends upon the conclusions reached through such conflict. As in Tanner, conflict becomes a driver for a community's identity, with its responses shaping its self-understanding. Unlike Tanner, MacIntyre accentuates the historical aspect of these arguments.

Given the centrality of conflict and the time-bound nature of traditions, MacIntyre outlines three stages through which traditions must pass to survive and thrive amid the uncertainties of historical processes. The first stage of any tradition begins in a particular time and place, responding to the particular concerns of the tradition's formative community: "Every such form of enquiry begins in and from some condition of pure historical contingency, from the beliefs, institutions, and practices of some particular community which constitute a given." Certain beliefs, texts, and authoritative persons "are deferred to unquestioningly, or at least without systematic questioning."²⁵ In time, the community of tradition finds aspects of these authorities—be they texts or persons—inadequate or in tension with themselves. Such tensions may emerge within the community or through the meeting of "two previously separate

²⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1988), 12.

²⁵ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 354.

communities,” each with their own customs and institutions, which sets off argument. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, the cross-cultural process of transmission is one of the most common occasions for such argument. In the second stage, the community addresses these arguments but has not yet found their resolution. Debates remain inconclusive. If the tradition is to continue across time, the second stage exhibits inventiveness and resourcefulness. Addressing intellectual challenges requires a “rare gift of empathy” among a tradition’s adherents, especially its intellectuals, MacIntyre says. It requires the ability to question whether traditions that are not one’s own can supply ideas and materials that may enhance one’s tradition. That is, another tradition might “explain the failings and defects of their own tradition more adequately than they, using the resources of that tradition, have been able to do.”²⁶ MacIntyre calls this learning a second first language. By the third stage, the tradition finds resolution to this debate, to its “epistemological crisis.” By addressing the challenges of the second stage, the tradition renews itself. It is now chastened but also more intellectually rigorous.²⁷ The community’s response to challenge, MacIntyre writes, “has resulted in a set of reformulations, reevaluations, and new formulations and evaluations, designed to remedy inadequacies and overcome limitations.”²⁸ Whether traditions can respond adequately to such epistemological crises determines their continuity.

²⁶ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 167.

²⁷ MacIntyre’s narration of building a tradition is strikingly similar to Hegel’s portrayal of the dialectical progression of human thought in his *Logic*. For thought in Hegel and tradition in MacIntyre, each are formed in community with others, formed and constantly corrected across time, and often refined through a process of negation. MacIntyre claims his account differs from the sense of inevitability in Hegel’s growth toward world spirit or Absolute Knowledge, which is true, but the mere portrayal of thought itself is quite similar. As Jeffrey Stout notes, Hegel abides under the surface of MacIntyre but rarely receives extensive attention. Stout notes Richard Bernstein’s critique of MacIntyre: “there is very little in MacIntyre’s critique of the Enlightenment project that was not stated or anticipated in Hegel” (*Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, 137).

²⁸ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 355. Even after such reformulations, however, in the case of religious traditions, that which is divine or sacred still proves “exempt from repudiation” even if “its utterances may certainly be subject to reinterpretation.” In many ways, the challenge of historicism to Christian theology in recent centuries has been a coming to terms with the fact that, through historical studies, that which Christians consider divine or sacred no longer enjoyed such exemption, setting off profound challenges to the tradition.

This portrayal of tradition offers a potentially compelling account to syncretisms' seeming "incursions" into a tradition. In a positive case, a tradition's practitioners identify a fruitful resource seemingly outside their tradition, which suggests that the tradition as formerly constituted could not adequately respond to some intellectual or moral challenge. Crisis ensues, whereby the tradition's adherents debate the virtues and limitations of this intervention. Some practitioners begin to incorporate the syncretic belief or practice while others argue it is beyond the bounds of their shared tradition. Empathetic and careful intellectuals in the tradition then provide new formulations of the tradition's claims that address or incorporate the concerns of the syncretism. Whether the syncretism is fully integrated or not depends on all sorts of concerns internal to the logic and practice of the tradition in question. (Indeed, this process aptly characterizes what happened in early Christianity's Christology debates, explored in the next chapter through Rowan Williams' work.) On the other hand, in a negative case, some intellectuals may promote a syncretism in the second stage, but a tradition's adherents would not incorporate the syncretism. Even this process, however, stands to further clarify the tradition's identity.

MacIntyre provides a far more robust account of tradition than something resembling a material object being handed down across time, along the lines of Tanner's descriptions. As the tradition changes, its adherents do not simply elaborate on its fundamental insights. Neither does a static tradition simply take different expressions in various cultures. Certain elements of the tradition, "hitherto unrecognized incoherences," lead to "dissolution of historically founded certitudes."²⁹ A tradition might reject some elements once seen as vital as it encounters new

²⁹ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 362.

intellectual challenges across time. Not only that, but the tradition survives by its incorporation of insights from outside traditions—it survives by its responses to syncretisms.

Beyond some agreement over the role of argument in a social grouping's identity, MacIntyre and Tanner largely part ways, and here is where MacIntyre shows himself vulnerable to rigid understandings of tradition that do not withstand the fact of syncretism's ubiquity. MacIntyre's sense of tradition requires far more uniformity than Tanner's style and task. For MacIntyre, a core remains amid the transmission: "some core of shared belief, constitutive of allegiance to the tradition, has to survive every rupture," he writes.³⁰ Tanner questions the degree to which this core, even if continuing across various times, becomes substantially meaningful, however. Even if one does not necessarily hold that a center is "empty", Tanner does show that the "core" of a tradition like Christianity becomes so variously reinterpreted that it fails to offer substantial shared meaning or sufficiently specific meaning. Again, simply saying something like "Jesus is the image of God" says so little that it does not constitute sufficient content to warrant being considered a meaningful "core" of the tradition. Indeed, Tanner rejects a Christian identity based upon shared intellectual agreements for these very reasons. For MacIntyre, however, intellectual agreement is vital. A tradition, he writes,

has to be embodied in a set of texts which function as the authoritative point of departure for tradition-constituted enquiry and which remain as essential points of reference for enquiry and activity, for argument, debate, and conflict within that tradition. Those texts to which this canonical status is assigned are treated both as having a fixed meaning embodied in them and also as always open to rereading, so that every tradition becomes to some degree a tradition of critical reinterpretation in which one and the same body of texts, with of course some addition and subtraction, is put to the question, and to successively different sets of questions, as a tradition unfolds.³¹

³⁰ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 356.

³¹ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 383.

Not only do traditions require a set of standard texts that remain “essential points of reference,” but the adherents of a tradition view these texts as carrying a “fixed meaning” as well as potential new insights. Thus, inasmuch as MacIntyre requires newness and argumentation in his account of tradition, some fixed core remains throughout the vicissitudes of history.³²

Such rational consistency matters for MacIntyre because, without it, humans reason incoherently, since we can only reason through traditioned frameworks.³³ Reason and tradition are naturally intertwined, and so it would seem that the more stable the tradition, the more stable the reasoning.³⁴ Indeed, the Enlightenment’s hope that universal reason could provide a stable, coherent, and shared reference point across humanity proves fruitless for MacIntyre. Beyond vague platitudes, no universal reason exists that can adjudicate between varying lines of argument; there is “no preconceptual or even pretheoretical data that ... can apply a neutral court of appeal,” he writes.³⁵ He then continues,

There is no other way to engage in the formulation, elaboration, rational justification, and criticism of accounts of practical rationality and justice except from within some one particular tradition in conversation, cooperation, and conflict with those who inhabit the same tradition. There is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or another.³⁶

³² A question, of course, is whether we can even access such fixed meaning in texts, because our knowledge is always already mediated, a point that Williams will take up along with Kierkegaard in our next chapter. MacIntyre acknowledges the challenge, but contends that gesturing toward such meaning is enough assurance (“Thoughts on Our Debt to Gadamer”).

³³ MacIntyre sees reason and history (and therefore tradition) as profoundly interconnected, because we can only understand what someone means if we know the context in which she speaks. R. G. Collingwood, a philosopher from whom MacIntyre draws upon extensively, writes, “you cannot find out what a man means by simply studying his spoken or written statements.... In order to find out his meaning you must also know what the question was (a question in his own mind, and presumed by him to be in yours) to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer.” Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978 [1939]), 31.

³⁴ When humans disagree with one another, often it is not simply the subject matter that divides them. They are, in fact, displaying protocols of reasoning that are incompatible with one another. MacIntyre shows this phenomenon playing out in arguments over justice. When Aristotle or John Stuart Mill talk about what is just, Aristotle imagines reasoning with regard for a human telos while Mill reasons in light of calculations of social utility in a liberal political economy. Thus they disagree on how to reason before they disagree on what constitutes justice.

³⁵ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 333.

³⁶ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 350.

Humans reason from situated locations, without a view from nowhere. Tradition thereby both acknowledges our situatedness and provides a means of reasoning within it. Given such attention to tradition, MacIntyre's great foe is the liberal reason of the Enlightenment. Viewing reason as common to all persons and therefore the source of human equality, Enlightenment philosophy "hoped reason would displace authority and tradition."³⁷ Yet because reason and tradition are intertwined, the Enlightenment led only to rival versions of reasoning through various traditions, with no further resolution. Enlightenment thought became a tradition in itself, but an incoherent one for MacIntyre, since it was a tradition that claimed to abandon tradition.³⁸

MacIntyre's sense of rational stability, even amid what he calls epistemological crisis, comes into conflict with the fact of syncretism's ubiquity. Even when a tradition passes through its epistemological crisis by way of encounter with a foreign tradition, any insights taken from that other tradition need be fully incorporated into the native tradition in order to retain coherence, he contends. Such encounter may be a natural aspect of a tradition's growth, but the tradition is only enhanced insofar as "foreign material" becomes fully integrated into the expression of a single tradition and its telos. Indigenous peacemaking rituals in Northern Uganda that repatriate child soldiers from the Lord's Resistance Army into their communities would only be incorporated into Christianity if they become fully "converted" into a Christian framework. Promising as MacIntyre's three stage model of epistemological crisis may be, it remains quite unclear how the second stage of a tradition's growth would play out in real life examples given the strict criteria for consistency. In most instances, working through an epistemological crisis

³⁷ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 6.

³⁸ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 6-7, 326ff. Jeffrey Stout notes that MacIntyre treats "the Enlightenment" with far too broad a brush by removing the textured debates within modern liberal theory and its own reflection on the extent to which many liberal theorists acknowledge liberalism as a tradition. Stout calls this "castigation by lumping" (*Democracy and Tradition*, 128).

entails genuine boundary crossing, not simply experimentation with other forms of life carried out at some remove from one's "home" tradition which then become incorporated only through stringent attention to the rigorous intellectual coherence of one's original tradition. Integrating outside resources is more akin to speaking two languages at once rather than learning a "second first language" and then incorporating it into one's native tongue. In short, MacIntyre's account of incorporation is too tidy and not sufficiently embedded in historical process. Recall Tanner's account of conversion: converts incorporate the "language" of Christianity into their existing cultural framework, into their existing language, rather than learning the grammar and vocabulary of Christianity and then later integrating it into their own environment.

Yet MacIntyre contends that, without such full transmutation of foreign elements into a tradition, humans haplessly exist within multiple traditions. One may live largely within one, borrowing from other, but never recognize one's incoherence. Few realize their predicament in leading this supposedly unexamined life. Most, he contends,

tend to live betwixt and between, accepting usually unquestioningly the assumptions of the dominant liberal individualist forms of public life, but drawing in different areas of their lives upon a variety of tradition-generated resources of thought and action, transmitted from a variety of familial, religious, educational, and other social and cultural sources. This type of self which has too many half-convictions and too few settled coherent convictions, too many partly formulated alternatives and too few opportunities to evaluate them systematically, brings to its encounters with the claims of rival traditions a fundamental incoherence which is too disturbing to be admitted to self-conscious awareness except on the rarest of occasions.³⁹

If humans reason within traditions, and if most people exist "betwixt and between" multiple traditions, most would, by MacIntyre's account, have trouble reasoning coherently at all. This incoherence, for MacIntyre, turns out to be the source of moral confusion that plagues the modern era. People implicitly choose rival traditions of moral enquiry and thereby end up with

³⁹ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 397.

competing accounts of categories like justice.⁴⁰ Syncretism becomes a feature of mongrels, not of the intellectually serious.

In sum, MacIntyre offers a robust account of tradition that improves upon certain lacunae in Tanner, but not without committing himself to an unduly strict account that mimics some of the errors Tanner identifies in modernist accounts of culture. Positively, MacIntyre's tradition provides a genuinely communitarian, not individualistic, account of a religion like Christianity, one that acknowledges the extent to which humans inherently reason within highly particularistic contexts. He also provides a strong account of a tradition existing and adapting to fluctuations across history with genuine continuities. On these points he exceeds Tanner. Overall, however, his account of tradition demands too high a standard of strict coherence. First, his account fails to acknowledge how genuinely tenuous processes of incorporating new data can be and, second, it provides too clean an account of human reason. His own account of tradition fails to acknowledge the significant extent to which traditions constantly syncretize and do so without some clairvoyant moment in which a new idea makes a clean move from its native environment into another tradition's environment. As Tanner notes, during the process of transmission it usually remains unclear for some time whether, for example, an African high God is fully "baptized" into an understanding of YHWH or a Christian understanding of the Trinity or whether the African high God retains elements that appear outside the orbit of purportedly standard Christian accounts. As we will see in Chapter 6, this ambiguous process, when approached with careful attentiveness, can in fact enrich Christian understandings of God insofar as it can bring forth new understandings of the triune God not recognized before.

⁴⁰ Because so many people are reasoning from such different frameworks, MacIntyre claims that ethics turns into emotivism, that is, ethical judgments contain little more than expressions of feeling.

1.3. In Defense of Mongrels

One cannot blame MacIntyre for seeking coherence, the problem is the type of coherence he seeks. His coherence concerns itself with logical consistency such that the historical process of reasoning gets overlooked. Contra MacIntyre, the ideal of coherence is never a finished matter, but an incomplete one that nevertheless ever strives for greater clarity, even if it lies beyond our immediate grasp. Because coherence remains incomplete, borrowing between traditions becomes less problematic. If anything, such borrowing can aid the task of seeking coherence, since it brings potential new insights (as MacIntyre in fact suggests above, if inconsistently given his other claims).

Put differently, one suspects that MacIntyre, despite the influence of Hegel, is not quite *enough* of a Hegelian. To return to the example of justice, in the context of the United States, Jeffrey Stout reminds us that Americans' profound disagreements about the philosophical and religious sources undergirding their respective accounts of justice has not inhibited substantial moral conversations—and substantial consensus—on issues like women's suffrage, prohibitions on child labor, civil rights, and a host of other subjects.⁴¹ With a more historical account of justice, someone like Stout would simply suggest that Americans are still arguing about what constitutes goodness and justice, and this is to be expected. To the extent that there exists anything called true justice, its content is not a Platonic form but is still in process. Through situations within material history like slavery, labor abuses, and marginalization of women, Americans formulate and reformulate our conception of justice. If justice is a concept in motion, we should fully expect to have rival accounts of its content. Yet MacIntyre and theologians who draw extensively from him, like John Milbank and Stanley Hauerwas, often mistake this

⁴¹ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 123.

contested process of reasoning for incoherence.⁴² For them, Jeffrey Stout claims, “pluralism is another name for confusion.”⁴³ As we saw in Charles Taylor, however, pluralism need not lead to poor reasoning or moral incoherence. We can reason within conditioned frameworks *and* be participants in constructing the cultures in which we live *and* seek a coherent selfhood amid our various influences.⁴⁴ We all, like the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*, believe “as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” Yet we continue to reason seeking coherence amid seemingly “impossible things.” Indeed, Stout argues that MacIntyre’s thought does not align with his own personal experiences of rationality: MacIntyre’s reasoning appears profoundly hybrid, for he creatively cobbles together aspects of thought from sources as varied as Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel, and Wittgenstein.⁴⁵ His followers display the same sort of tendency: for Stanley Hauerwas, learning to speak Christian can be enhanced by learning some Aristotelianism. Ironically, for all of MacIntyre’s critique of modernity, he still seeks an account of the self that is quite modern. That is, a coherent, well-integrated, and contained self with a distinct sense of boundaries.

This tension within MacIntyre arises in part because he portrays tradition in two senses not easily reconcilable. On the one hand, tradition appears a stringent means of forming self-identity; it defines and shapes human reason. On the other hand, MacIntyre also portrays

⁴² In this regard, Hauerwas is closer to MacIntyre than his other great influence, John Howard Yoder. In *The Priestly Kingdom*, Yoder writes, “Reality always was pluralistic and relativistic, that is, historical” (59).

⁴³ Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 1.

⁴⁴ In addition to *Sources of the Self*, given this section’s discussions of Hegel, see Taylor’s *Hegel and Modern Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979) and *Hegel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

⁴⁵ In turning this critique upon MacIntyre himself, Stout writes, “he has performed a valuable service to his culture precisely by being the sort of person his current theory of rationality frowns upon. What kind is that? It is the kind who, from time to time, finds it necessary to abandon a morality so well integrated that it suffocates thought, who has the courage to take a stand for which there is not yet a convenient label or easily defined lineage, and who has the practical wisdom to fashion a critical language for himself out of materials borrowed from many sources. All of this can be done without engaging in *the* liberal project, aspiring to be a citizen of nowhere, or ceasing to be one of us.” (Democracy and Tradition, 138)

tradition as something living, not yet completed, as an argument about goods constituting that tradition. By this latter account a tradition's identity remains incomplete. There is an inherent tension when MacIntyre says (above) that authoritative texts in a tradition need both a "fixed meaning" while also being "always open to rereading."⁴⁶ MacIntyre's treatment of Aquinas exemplifies this tension. At times, he lifts up Aquinas as the normative example of someone who reasons within tradition, integrating outside thought from Aristotle, Plato, Stoics, and Jewish and Islamic scholars only insofar as their ideas become decidedly Christian thought, rather than "foreign" influence. At the same time, MacIntyre began to appreciate Aquinas only after recognizing that Aquinas' goal was not to produce a total system, but rather that the system was "self-consciously unfinished in form."⁴⁷ Yet MacIntyre's rigid approach to tradition can easily lead to those very myopic forms of Thomism that he finds distasteful. The Thomists that MacIntyre most respects are *not* those who reason within tight boundaries, but rather those who integrate Thomism with other sources, as in his eloquent appreciation of Herbert McCabe, who read Aquinas with philosophical interlocutors like Wittgenstein in highly original ways.⁴⁸

Such equivocating on tradition leads to a number of missteps among contemporary theologians who make extensive use of MacIntyre—three in particular. First, it leads to an undue sense of Christian separation from world. A sectarian temptation like Hauerwas' emerges, for the sake of perpetuating life within a single tradition; or an undue sense of rivalry emerges between

⁴⁶ On this equivocation regarding tradition, Susan Moller Okin writes, "At times he describes it as a defining context, stressing the authoritative nature of its 'texts'; at times he talks of a tradition as 'living,' as a 'not-yet-completed narrative,' as an argument about the goods that constitute the tradition." (Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 60.)

⁴⁷ Stout on MacIntyre, *Democracy and Tradition*, 126.

⁴⁸ See MacIntyre's Forward to McCabe's *God Still Matters* (New York: Continuum, 2002), vii-ix. Also see McCabe's essay on Wittgenstein and Aquinas in that same collection.

the Christian tradition and other modes of thought, as in Milbank.⁴⁹ Second, MacIntyre's standard of intellectual cohesion is rarely the ultimately arbitrating factor in deciding between competing positions. As Tanner reminds us, theological judgments tend to take a more aesthetic quality—"ones like those used to determine, say, the best interpretation of a poem."⁵⁰ MacIntyre's desire for rigid coherence only adds to sense that Western theology is, in words theologian Jean-Marc Éla, "suffocating in rationalism."⁵¹ Third, theologians who draw from MacIntyre, particularly the Radical Orthodoxy school, exhibit an unjustified link between the fact that humans inherently reason within tradition and the necessity of traditionalism. To say "human beings inherently think within traditions" does not necessarily lead to the conclusion "rational Christians should follow traditionalism." We can reason—and do reason—within traditions that are still in process.

While the concept of tradition holds more promise than Tanner suggests, MacIntyre's account proves too constrained. Human processes of rational thought are not as finalized as he contends, nor are traditions' boundaries as self-contained he asserts. Formations of traditions across time also display more ambiguity between systems of thought than he suggests. The concept of tradition holds promise for addressing the intellectual challenges of syncretism, and its accompanying challenge of historicism, but it requires more flexibility and historical awareness than MacIntyre offers.

⁴⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) and John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory, 2nd Edition* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

⁵⁰ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 91. The next chapter provides such an example of aesthetic judgment in the debates between Arius and Athanasius.

⁵¹ Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 42.

II. An Amalgamating Tradition

Up to this point, two aspects of cultural theory remain in tension with one another—construction and continuity. Tanner and many social scientists of religion portray Christianity as constantly in flux and under continual negotiation. While addressing the pervasiveness of syncretism, these scholars have overstated agency and provided an insufficient explanation of continuity. The concept of tradition provides a more historical framing, thereby addressing continuity and holding space to address historicism. Yet MacIntyre’s account proves too constrained: for MacIntyre, intellectual coherence eclipses historical coherence. This section, on the other hand, argues that the concept of tradition can be resuscitated to describe Christianity amid syncretism. Rather than a definitive exposition of tradition, however, I offer models of traditions from which Christianity might draw upon. Any “true” account of tradition is still in formation, so these models press our conception of tradition forward, filling in and improving upon MacIntyre’s important work and thereby inviting further revisions to the concept as deployed in Christianity. The first examples of American democracy and philosophical pragmatism draw from Jeffrey Stout’s well-known work on the subject. The second model—less well-known in the Western theological academy but even more promising—gleans wisdom from the inclusive indigenous political traditions that shaped many communities across the long history of sub-Saharan Africa. It is the tradition of indigenous African pluralism. Not only is this pluralism a model of tradition worthy of attention from a conceptual standpoint, it is a model of hospitality and incorporation which enhances ecclesiology.

II.1. *Stout on Tradition*

Jeffrey Stout, both a great admirer and astute challenger of Alasdair MacIntyre, provides an account of tradition with a far looser definition than MacIntyre and therefore greater flexibility. Quite simply, Stout sees tradition as “a discursive practice considered in the dimension of history.”⁵² Referring to MacIntyre’s conflicted senses of tradition described above—with one overly fixed and the other living—Stout favors the second, “not-yet-completed narrative.” He writes, “I am proposing that [MacIntyre’s] second sense be explicated in terms of the concept of a discursive social practice viewed diachronically.”⁵³ For Stout, the primary elements of tradition include its social component and its sense of ongoing development across time. We inherently draw from what has gone before, but tradition is also always in progress; the goods of any tradition are contested, its commitments never entirely clairvoyant and beyond disputation.

Stout’s primary example of such a tradition is American democracy. It is a community of argument across time, in the MacIntyrean fashion; its arguments consist of discussion of what its goods consist of—such as whether its conception of justice includes slavery or women’s suffrage. Proponents of American democracy hold up their own exemplars—saints of sorts—from Abraham Lincoln to Walt Whitman to Harriet Tubman. They aim to inculcate certain virtues into its citizens like the concern for equality. Yet the tradition of American democracy remains an unfinished project. For example, the tradition has grown substantially in its understanding of equality, from the vast inequalities of its founding through Abraham Lincoln’s still ambivalent view of African Americans’ equality through today’s continued pressures

⁵² Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 135.

⁵³ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 136. Note Stout’s account of tradition is a discursive practice, which can include, but is not limited to, text-based discourses. Unlike MacIntyre, this understanding of tradition includes oral cultural traditions, examples of which I will discuss later in this chapter.

represented by movements like Black Lives Matter. The tradition's understanding of equality remains incomplete.

For our purposes, Stout offers two conceptual interventions that improve the concept of tradition—his philosophical pragmatism and what he calls “moral bricolage.” Pragmatism provides a framework for arguing about the goods of a tradition, in this case democracy. As with MacIntyre, argumentation clarifies the identity and understanding of the tradition. Yet Stout's pragmatism does not share MacIntyre's concern for rigid coherence, such that identities can remain open-ended. Furthermore, Stout's pragmatism offers a method of disputation within tradition that recognizes the sources of its beliefs and practices without undue reverence for the past. Stout writes, “pragmatism is democratic traditionalism. Less paradoxically, one could say that pragmatism is the philosophical space in which democratic rebellion against hierarchy combines with traditionalist love of virtues to form a new intellectual tradition that is indebted to both.”⁵⁴ In this regard, Stout himself turns to jazz as a valuable analogy. Jazz represents an ongoing dialogue within a traditioned form of music that constantly improvises based on its current context. Its musicians, like advocates of democratic tradition, “are not constrained by antecedent agreement among the participants concerning what the outcome will be. And they are no less valuable because they diffuse authority throughout the group.”⁵⁵

Second, Stout's “moral bricolage” offers an account of human reasoning far more reflective of syncretism's ubiquity. Like Tanner, Stout describes moral reasoning as a venture in borrowing and retooling. Exemplary figures in American democracy like Martin Luther King, Jr. draw from multiple sources in advocating equality and justice. The tradition of American democracy incorporates thinking that may appear beyond its bounds: while King employed

⁵⁴ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 13.

⁵⁵ Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 348.

distinctively American resources such as the theology of the Black Church, liberal Protestantism, and Jeffersonian democracy, he also employed seemingly external sources such as Ghandi's teachings on nonviolence. In fact, Stout argues, "All great works of creative ethical thought (and some not so great) ... involve moral *bricolage*." New religious and moral insights come not through limiting oneself to the conceived sources of one's tradition, but through borrowing conceptual resources from elsewhere. Stout continues, "they proceed by taking apart, putting together, reordering, weighting, weeding out, and filling in."⁵⁶

Stout is situated somewhere between Tanner and MacIntyre in this regard. Like MacIntyre, he sees moral insight as dependent upon tradition, but also, like Tanner, dependent upon creative enterprises that incorporate newness outside the constraints of MacIntyre's model. Such *bricolage* is not one option among many forms of reasoning, however. Figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thomas Aquinas are exceptional in their influence but not in their manner of reasoning. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, everyone reasons in piecemeal fashion, it is simply "our common lot."⁵⁷ Somewhat puzzlingly, however, Stout reserves the term *bricolage* for individual thinkers like King, not for larger societies. "Bricolage is something individuals do," he contends, while the broader common moral language of a society remains "largely outside of intentional control."⁵⁸ Stout's point is fair insofar as individuals can only influence society's moral discourse but they cannot direct it. But Stout obscures how our "common moral language" is also mixed. This common moral language consists of syncretisms and bricolages that have become such enduring reference points over time that they now appear a whole, having benefitted from systematic thinking such as Aquinas.

⁵⁶ Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 75. For reception of this idea in Christian theology, see *Theology Today* 46.1 (1989).

⁵⁷ Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 336.

⁵⁸ Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 338-339.

In conclusion, Stout provides important correctives that retrieve tradition from the limitations of MacIntyre and Christian traditionalists. Stout's tradition is not only more dynamic than MacIntyre's, it also aptly captures the dialectical process of human thought itself. As a pragmatist, he follows Dewey's and other pragmatists' debt to Hegel, thereby evincing a more historically based form of reasoning than MacIntyre. While Stout's portrayal of tradition lacks the expansiveness or detail of MacIntyre, that is, in part, the point. A less detailed yet more open-ended accounting of tradition places Stout within the dialectic of thought itself, without trying to extricate himself to offer a side-on view, as MacIntyre often attempts. Indeed, Stout's tradition is far more inclusive of Tanner's insights, since it avoids static notions of traditionalism while also providing a richer sense of cultural continuity. Since tradition is indeed a concept still in process, one that benefits from viewing it from quite different angles, let us turn to another account of tradition, this one from African historians who have painstakingly considered the perils and virtues of the term. From these thinkers, Christianity not only gains a rich sense of conceiving tradition in dynamic perspective. It also gains the insights of a tradition that sees amalgamation and the incorporation of otherness as its primary strength.

II.2. "Tradition is a moving continuity": African Historians

African historians are no strangers to the concept of tradition, as we found in Terence Ranger's retrospective essay on *The Invention of Tradition*. Many of them, however, vehemently resisted the notion for some time, insofar as they wanted to correct anthropologists' static descriptions of culture. Years before cultural construction and hybridity became academic trends, African historians avoided the term "tradition" because it connoted enclosed and unchanging African societies. Too often, "traditional" African culture meant a culture stuck in place and time, and

African historians knew such cultures never existed. Jan Vansina, a pillar of African history, writes:

Traditions are historical phenomena which occur everywhere. Historians have tended to shy away from them. ... The popular use of the term in the sense of “lack of change” irritates historians whose avocation is to discover change. ... In addition “tradition” is often invoked to designate the historical consciousness of a particular group and more often than not the term is just a flag of convenience to legitimate a position held on other grounds.

Vansina elegantly sums up concerns regarding tradition. He worries that the term connotes something too fixed to address the complexities of historical change; he worries that those who employ it perpetuate their preferred structures of political authority. He continues, “It hurts to be told by foreign scholars that, in earlier days, the ingenuity of your forebears was so constrained by ‘cultural tradition’ that people were condemned to repeat themselves endlessly, to be stuck in the same rut for time immemorial.”⁵⁹ Indeed, it is because African historians are so attuned to the pitfalls of the term that their treatment of it proves so careful and lucid.

Vansina launches a sustained effort to reinvigorate “tradition” amid these critiques, largely because no other word quite captures the long-term, historical continuities he finds across his research. In his book *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (1990), Vansina sets out to narrate a staggering span of history, covering millennia of equatorial Africa. He must make sense of consistent patterns discovered over a wide range of time, arguing that “tradition” proves the most productive concept by which to do so. “Traditions are not just in the minds of observers,” he writes. “They are ‘out there’ ... Phenomena with their own characteristics.”⁶⁰ While he does not elaborate upon what he means by “out there,” he is at least suggesting that tradition is more than the mental constructs of its

⁵⁹ Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest: Toward a History of Political Tradition* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), xi.

⁶⁰ Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest*, 258.

adherents, it involves political power arrangements, economic structures, and material objects repeatedly used over time. Any of these may change, but the tradition can remain vital—indeed, they must change to remain vital. Terence Ranger calls this “invention *by* tradition rather than the invention *of* tradition.”⁶¹

In equatorial Africa, Vansina discovers common political and moral conceptions constituting a strong and long-lasting political tradition. He does so by mining languages across the region, thereby identifying interconnections and common root words between the languages, and by pointing out shared political characteristics of 19th century equatorial Africans. Equatorial political arrangements, for example, consisted of three “interlocking social groups” that formed the basis of society—the district, the village, and the House. The House was a larger household consisting of ten to forty people who often—but by no means necessarily—shared kinship ties. These establishments were deeply flexible in how they interacted with one another, such that alliances and associations between houses, villages, and districts constantly changed. A House could choose the village of its association, likewise a village could choose their district; alliances shifted according to circumstances. Groups “could be absorbed by another” and at times villages or districts “could even vanish.”⁶² Houses themselves competed for membership such that persons could alter their own associations if they found better circumstances elsewhere. While houses organized around a prominent elder male who served as the symbolic “father” of the House—often called a “big man”—at the village and district levels authority remained diffuse. As his title indicates, the rainforest communities were not separated from one another but kept many interconnections. Never were they frozen in place and time.

⁶¹ Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition Revisited,” 76.

⁶² Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 74.

These communities in turn shared systems of meaning-making—what outsiders would later call religion.⁶³ The equatorial tradition was, in Terence Ranger’s words, “a great ancestral repository of values and solutions which allows for a wide range of elaborations and innovations within its terms.”⁶⁴ Witchcraft, for example, proved central to this shared moral system, with its emphasis upon fairness, equality, and communitarianism (contrary to Western stereotypes of witchcraft). Those who were the object of witchcraft were generally perceived as selfish or unwilling to share their goods and resources with others. Big men, for example, often wore charms because their wealth made them a focus of others’ jealousy. According to this moral system, “One should never give cause for envy. One should never stand out, one should always share. In sum witchcraft was an ideology of equality and cooperation.”⁶⁵ The tradition proved able to withstand numerous assaults, especially the slave trade: “the tradition was not defeated. It adapted. It invented new structures.” Its continuities remained because its central aspects remained pliable. For millennia, the equatorial political tradition continued to adapt because, for Vansina, “tradition is a moving continuity.”⁶⁶

Vansina then provides useful theoretical reflections that set off a productive conversation in African history regarding tradition, a conversation which also carries lessons for Christian theology’s sense of tradition. The primary continuities of a tradition are its cognitive elements, Vansina contends, which remain in place even as material components or “physical representations” of traditions change. The material components of a political district might shift due to external invaders or to the incursions of the slave trade, even as the cognitive layout of

⁶³ These were never dogmatized, in part due to lack of writing. In this regard, Vansina refutes MacIntyre’s suggestion that traditions, by definition, possess texts.

⁶⁴ Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition Revisited,” 19.

⁶⁵ Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 96. It was somewhat paradoxical, Vansina notes, that values of witchcraft like equality proved so important to a society dependent on competition between big men. Yet enduring traditions thrive in part because of their elusive paradoxes.

⁶⁶ Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 258.

district-village-House remained in force. Yet such material changes are hardly “accidental”, for they themselves can shift the cognitive aspect of a tradition over time.

Traditions are self-regulating processes. They consist of a changing, inherited, collective body of cognitive and physical representations shared by their members. The cognitive representations are the core. They inform the understanding of the physical world and develop innovations to give meaning to changing circumstances in the physical realm, and do so in terms of the guiding principles of the tradition. Such innovations in turn alter the substance of the cognitive world itself.⁶⁷

Thus traditions have durable cognitive elements that endure across time, such as the semantic data of equatorial Africa languages or scriptures for Confucian or Buddhist or Abrahamic

traditions, but these remain negotiated. For Vansina, traditions “*must* change to stay alive.”⁶⁸

Because of such change, “the specific definition of a tradition is partly in the mind of the beholder.” One can speak of the “Judaean-Christian-Muslim tradition” as he does, but also of the

Christian tradition and, within that, Catholic and Wesleyan traditions. Importantly, Vansina notes, traditions require a power of self-determination. “Traditions need autonomy,” he writes,

because when people are forced to act in a particular way, the dynamism and liveliness that

traditions require disappear. Thus the European colonial system in Africa, which severely impeded African autonomy, extinguished the equatorial African political tradition, he argues.

Vansina’s exposition of the interplay between the cognitive continuities and physical changes of a tradition is admittedly clumsy at times—for example, he contradicts himself when saying that traditions’ cognitive aspects consist of “static basic principles” that become altered. Yet his sense of interplay and development through the dialectical exchange between the cognitive and the physical is quite insightful. Amid changes in physical circumstances, a traditioned community draws upon the cognitive resources of its past to explain its present. Yet that exploration itself

⁶⁷ Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 259-260.

⁶⁸ Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 258.

comes to altar the cognitive world of the tradition. It is a process not unlike MacIntyre's three-stage portrayal of the development of traditions, but with slightly more attention to the material and with a richer portrayal of oral traditions, not simply text-based traditions.

Christians encounter this interplay quite often. The Episcopal Church, for example, has seen a substantial increase in sacramental theology in recent decades, no doubt due to the material changes required by its 1979 Book of Common Prayer, which instructed churches to make Holy Eucharist a weekly act of worship rather than monthly or bimonthly. The Episcopal Church drew upon its existing sacramental theology—the cognitive realm as Vansina would call it—yet the changed material circumstance also pressed Episcopal clergy and theologians to look elsewhere for new theological insights pertaining to increased sacramental devotion. Not surprisingly, therefore, Episcopal theological interest in Eastern Orthodox theology saw a marked increase after the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, given Orthodoxy's already existing sacramental theology. The frequency of a material (and spiritual) Eucharistic meal changed Episcopalians' cognitive conceptions of the ritual.

Subsequent African historians take up Vansina's account of tradition, validating the usefulness of the term while challenging aspects of his theorizing. At times Vansina tends toward overstatement, as when he says that certain "fundamental choices" made early in the formation of tradition were "never questioned again."⁶⁹ But more so, historian Terence Ranger questions his claim that a political tradition as vibrant as equatorial Africa's would die out in forty years time due to colonial incursions. If anything, such a stultified sense of tradition does not live up to Vansina's own theorizing. Such an abrupt end overemphasizes the agency of the colonizers without adequately recognizing how Africans reconceived their own imagined communities and

⁶⁹ Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 71. See also 258.

negotiated their own autonomy amid colonialism, Ranger contends. (Vansina corrects this oversight in his subsequent book *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880-1960*.⁷⁰) In the case of Tanzania, intellectuals negotiated colonialism by selecting certain forms of discourse in their own tradition while leaving others aside—as they always had. They continued to employ traditioned metaphors like fertility and rain during the colonial era, they simply mingled them “with ideas of democracy and populism in an un-self-conscious, creative, and topical amalgam.”⁷¹ Intellectuals in Tanzania, for example, had long lived in pluralist environments with competing notions of the good life, and had long practiced bricolage in joining various sources into a coherent moral framework. They continued such bricolage during and after European colonialism, according to historian Steven Feierman. Ranger writes, “I greatly prefer Feierman’s formulations [of tradition], which suggest, rather than a single great tradition coming to an end under colonialism, a pluralism both before, during and after colonialism, and which suggests that while colonialists were inventing ‘tribes’ and narrowing cultural choices, peasant intellectuals could make their own enlarging uses of ‘tradition’.”⁷² If traditions are, as Vansina contends, in the eyes of the beholder, then their continuities can show up in unexpected places while still remaining a continuity.

To transplant this approach to Christianity, such a posture of receptivity to differing forms of the Christian tradition might improve ecumenical conversations between, say, Western Christians and Nestorian Christians in the Middle East and Asia. Instead of approaching the relationship from the starting point of distance—“they are Nestorian and therefore unorthodox”—Western Christians might patiently listen first, thereby discovering insights within

⁷⁰ Jan Vansina, *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880-1960* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

⁷¹ Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition Revisited,” 21. See Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*.

⁷² Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition Revisited,” 23.

these churches which Western Christianity lacks. This posture of receptivity would not mean leaving aside concerns about differing Christologies, but could open new paths for discovering mutual insights that exist alongside such differences.

In addition to portraying tradition as a “moving continuity,” historians also describe African political traditions as synthetic and adjustable—and stronger for being so. One of the most highly developed and perceptive studies of African political traditions in this regard is Paul Landau’s *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400-1948* (2010).⁷³ Landau portrays a political tradition whose very strength is its adaptability and, even more so, its capacity to incorporate outsiders. Thus, in our study of syncretism, he provides an example of a highly syncretic tradition that sees its syncretism not as a weakness but as a key aspect of its resilience.

Landau narrates the political traditions of the South African highveld by positing them in contradistinction to common Western assumptions of political organization in southern Africa.⁷⁴ For centuries, South Africans did not organize their politics through distinct tribes. As in the equatorial tradition, peoples moved easily between various groupings. The Western notion of a nation-state with strict boundaries and firm ethnic identities, meanwhile, proved rigid—a rigidity that would become foisted upon these highveld political systems. Landau writes,

the people of South Africa were historically well equipped to embrace and absorb strangers. Hybridity lay at the core of the subcontinental political traditions. Nineteenth-century European newcomers were different and attempted to repudiate mixing, politically and otherwise, albeit with only partial success.

When Europeans came to the highveld in the 19th century, they found political groupings—or what is often pejoratively still called “pre-political” groupings—and assumed them more fixed than they in fact were. Europeans reified the distinctions that they observed upon arrival,

⁷³ Paul S. Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁷⁴ The highveld is the large inland plateau in the eastern portion of South Africa.

claiming that they had found permanent tribes. Oftentimes such tribal groupings proved extremely arbitrary. The “Barolong” of the highveld are one example: “If that tribal name capture any quiddity,” Landau writes, “it was this: Bantu-speaking southern highveld familiar with Christianity.”⁷⁵

In fact, African political associations on the highveld were highly flexible institutions. Chiefs easily incorporated separate polities into their own such that anyone who lived within the geography of the chief’s realm could be considered part of the polity. “The word for the landed polity, residentially (*morafe*),” he writes, “meant everyone in the big meeting (*pitso*), everyone living together, not all blood-relations.”⁷⁶ This proved far more inclusive than Western notions of citizenship: in short, if one came to the polis’ meetings, one could be part of the polity. This political structure meant that when certain peoples fled from famine or warfare, they could easily be incorporated into another polity. The political tradition proved especially adept at handling refugees, as polities of the highveld often did in the 19th century when grassland chiefs east of the highveld—most famously Shaka Zulu—became increasingly militarized, thereby leading many peoples to flee to the highveld. This political heritage shared with Equatorial Africa the House as the “critical component” of its politics. This inclusive system, Landau contends, “opened the possibility of settlement to immigrants willing to subordinate themselves to a ruling chief or an alliance of farmers and to alter their communal identities. ... In none of these guises was the House a closed-door kin-group or ethnically homogenous tribe.”⁷⁷ Among the Xhosa, for example, “all persons or groups who accepted the rule of the Tshaw [reigning House] thereby

⁷⁵ Landau, *Popular Politics*, 128.

⁷⁶ Landau, *Popular Politics*, 11.

⁷⁷ Landau, *Popular Politics*, 49.

became Xhosa.”⁷⁸ Christianity on the highveld fit into this political pattern as well, incorporating peoples from various places and bloodlines into a single constituency: “all constructed themselves from households coming from diverse places, over and against the rules of ethnic and blood inheritance. Mission stations did likewise, albeit (at first) in miniature.”⁷⁹

Thus a strong and enduring political tradition thrived upon the highveld, taking various forms as political circumstances transformed dramatically during colonialism. “South African modes of self rule comprised a venerable political tradition, one that deprecated skin color and language as barriers and elevated brotherhoods, rankings, and amalgamations. The tradition preceded tribes and survived through them and beyond them.”⁸⁰ Because Landau recognizes the strength of this ordering outside of what became tribal structures—that is, outside of conventional Western understandings of politics—he exhibits far more optimism about perpetuation of the tradition than Vansina. “Ordinary denizens of South Africa continued to find ways to tap their own store of knowledge and praxis,” he writes. “They were the inheritors of a flexible and adaptable political tradition, one that was very hard to smash.”⁸¹ As European colonialism expanded, the highveld political tradition did not necessarily show up in the invented systems of tribal politics (though they did there, too). Rather, this inclusive political tradition appeared in independent churches, popular reform movements, and, in time, the nationalist rhetoric of the African National Congress (ANC). Political movements took up the traditioned language of ancestry to bolster their support when resisting the spread of the European state in South Africa, for example. As land increasingly came under white control and African residents of the highveld moved to work on white farms or moved to growing cities, they became

⁷⁸ Landau, *Popular Politics*, 85.

⁷⁹ Landau, *Popular Politics*, 83.

⁸⁰ Landau, *Popular Politics*, xi.

⁸¹ Landau, *Popular Politics*, xii.

increasingly separated from their strong communities at home. They sought familiar forms of community in churches, shaping independent churches' ecclesial organizations along the lines of their highveld political traditions. Speaking especially of churches run by African Methodist Episcopal missions, Landau writes, "For the midlevel worker in galley kitchens and factories, shops, and yards, whose workplace life was removed from any extended residential, kin-connected community, the Church offered a home like no other."⁸² From the very beginning of mission work in South Africa, Christianity was always and immediately more political than European missionaries realized, because its converts constantly drew from this political tradition. "From the perspective of the highveld people," Landau writes, "the faith began as a novel way of using the language of mobilization, brotherhood, and settlement."⁸³ The political tradition was hard to smash indeed.

Landau's work builds and improves upon Vansina's notions of tradition, while also providing a fine example of how a tradition's strength can be its ability to incorporate what first appears outside of itself. "The highveld's political tradition in South Africa, related to ancient ideas informing people in southern, eastern, and central more generally, had *amalgamation* as its central strength, not tribal particularity," Landau writes.⁸⁴ Amalgamation, welcoming and incorporating strangers, and receptivity to the unfamiliar: these became the hallmarks of its tradition.

⁸² Landau, *Popular Politics*, 171.

⁸³ Landau, *Popular Politics*, 74. Landau's treatment of this subject is exquisite, particularly in his careful attention to details of early translation of Christian theological concepts and scriptures. See in particular 74-107. Even if missionaries like Moffatt were not consciously aware of how politicized their work was, their Christian translations exhibited the political nature of their work insofar as they took from political, chiefly language time and again.

⁸⁴ Landau, *Popular Politics*, 246. One should also recognize the role of splitting apart as well as amalgamating: he continues, "Admixture and amalgamation coexisted with splittage to produce a network of interrelated or similar (*"bechuana"*) people practicing a mixed-farming economy with regional pastoral circuits."

III. Conclusion: Hospitable Ecclesiology

These examples from Africa not only provide an account of tradition in motion; they not only portray tradition as fully historical in its self-understanding. Even more significantly, they offer a vision of tradition as incorporative, able to receive what first appears beyond itself. It is, in short, a vibrant, syncretized tradition. Contrary to strict notions of tradition in MacIntyre and among Christian traditionalists, amalgamation can be a core strength of tradition, rather than its demise. Moving from MacIntyre to Landau entails a wide-ranging journey, but a fruitful one. The primary elements of the highveld political tradition are clear: a tradition that amalgamates as new people enter; a tradition easily able to accommodate strangers and refugees; a tradition that deemphasizes one's origins in light of new shared tasks; a continuous social identity that constantly takes in and absorbs newness. While these are Landau's descriptions of the political tradition of the South African highveld, and many other communities across African history, a theologian might see them in another light—as aspirations for the church. This incorporative understanding of tradition could indeed serve to reinvigorate Christian ecclesiology in the West.⁸⁵ Western ecclesiology has often borrowed its understanding of corporate identity from exclusive expressions of political community forged in Europe especially during and after the Reformation. Indeed, the church assisted in shaping this understanding because of its own ecclesial divisions—Catholic-Protestant, Lutheran-Reformed, the list goes on—vividly on display in the Syncretism Controversy explored in Chapter 1.⁸⁶ The instinct of political inclusion

⁸⁵ For a work in this regard, see Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness amid Moral Diversity* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2006).

⁸⁶ For competing perspectives on religion and the Thirty Years' War, see Jeffrey Stout's *After Babel and Democracy and Tradition* contrasted with William Cavanaugh's *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York, Oxford University Press: 2009).

within indigenous African pluralism thereby provides a vital injection for Western Christian understandings of the church's ability to incorporate newness into the body of Christ.⁸⁷

To return to the encounter between Lebna Dengel and Rodrigo de Lima, each found the other a representative of a syncretized tradition, even while they shared recognizable qualities that many modern cultural theorists might find surprising. Tradition provides a framework for understanding such mutual recognition: amid the vast differences of space and time, amid the continued constructedness of Ethiopian and Portuguese Christianities, they still shared a “discursive practice considered in the dimension of history,” exemplified in the ritual of the Eucharist and in their scriptural texts. Christianity constantly reinvents itself, as Tanner argues so compellingly, yet the concept of tradition captures the historical processes of passing on the faith in ways no other concept quite does. Moving beyond the limitations of traditionalism, from African historians we recognize tradition as a moving continuity; we receive a glimpse of a tradition admirable in its ability to amalgamate and incorporate strangers. Assimilating such wisdom into Christianity thereby requires some theological filling out. To do so, I turn to Rowan Williams and his account of the Logos. Indeed, Terence Ranger's statement “invention *by* tradition rather than invention *of* tradition” aptly describes Williams' own sense of the power of “tradition”. For Williams, the kind of amalgamation displayed in inclusive African political

⁸⁷ On African pluralism, see Lamin Sanneh, *The Crown and the Turban: Muslims and West African Pluralism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997). For examples of the inclusive African political traditions making their way into Christian political theology, see Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999); Audrey Chapman & Bernard Spong, eds, *Religion and Reconciliation in South Africa: Voices of Religious Leaders* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2003); James Cochrane, John de Gruchy & Stephen Martin, *Facing the Truth: South African Faith Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999); John de Gruchy and Steve de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa, 25th Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); John de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002); Lyn Graybill, “Pursuit of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa” *Africa Today*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (1998): 103-134; Berney Pityana & Charles Villa-Vicencio, eds, *Being the Church in South Africa Today* (Johannesburg: South African Council of Churches, 1995).

traditions—the welcoming of the strange, the new, and the unfamiliar—is precisely what the Logos undertakes across history as Jesus draws more and more people to himself (John 12:32).

Chapter 5:

The Syncretizing Spirit: Rowan Williams' Refusal of Doctrinal Closure

Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal
consciousness ... can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?

—Johannes Climacus, ed. Søren Kierkegaard

Speaking through his pseudonym Johannes Climacus, Søren Kierkegaard poses questions befitting the philosophical challenges surrounding the notion of syncretism. If the temporal world is in motion and eternal timeless, how and to what extent can the temporal express the eternal? How can human beings, as creatures existing in time and history, have access at all to God's eternal knowledge? Eternal knowledge must penetrate temporal human knowledge if God is to reveal God's self at all, and it does so by speaking to human beings embedded in time. The question is not whether the divine and the human are incompatible as if they occupy competing space, such that Jesus being divine and human offers a puzzle to be solved like that of how a square and triangle could occupy the same physical space.¹ The question regards the finitude of the human receiving divine, eternal knowledge. However free God's grace may be, humans remain limited and time bound. Such divine communication thereby entails the great risk of being misunderstood—eternity speaks to finitude and thus risks being perceived as possessing elements of such finitude. Put differently, how does divine knowledge syncretize with human

¹ Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (New York: Continuum, 1987), 57-59.

minds and cultures in the act of receiving revelation? It is no wonder that Climicus' statement concludes, "The question is asked by one who in his ignorance does not even know what provided the occasion for his questioning in this way."

The theology of Rowan Williams moves toward a response to such theological difficulties. Williams' attention to the development of Christian doctrine across history and cultures, particularly his attention to Christ's ability to incorporate the seemingly strange into his body, offers a theological paradigm for comprehending how the contested transmission of Christianity often builds and deepens understandings of the Logos. It is not only that theology develops over time and across culture, however. Drawing especially from the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, Williams shows that the historical nature of human thought itself precludes the possibility of static doctrine, because such doctrine would assume a human agent thinking outside the constraints of time and history. In contrast to modern Christian theologies, of both liberal and conservative stripes, which often inadvertently eschew human embeddedness in history and culture (recounted in Chapter 1), Williams offers an account of the Holy Spirit ever deepening and widening our comprehension of the Logos as Christianity becomes transmitted to more and more persons, times, and cultures. Yet such increasing knowledge of Christ leads not to modern triumphalism, as if our time knows more of the Logos than others simply because we exist in a later moment; new affirmations in Christianity are tested and judged by the initial promise of Christianity's foundations in Jesus and the scriptures. Thus Williams portrays a restless push and pull between innovation and tradition, each judging the other.

After providing pertinent background on Williams' response to historicism in the British academy of his day, this chapter begins in what might seem an unexpected place for examining questions of syncretism in contemporary theology—Christological debates in Christianity's early

centuries that led to the Nicene crisis. Yet because this period was one of both pivotal theological reflection *and* a period of great syncretism in the church, it proves a deeply instructive case study. For many, historical study of the Nicene crisis lessens the power of doctrine, because it draws out what seem to be historical contingencies of doctrinal formation, such as the extent to which Christians borrowed terms like *homoousios* from Gnostics deemed heretical or the extent of imperial interest in producing a cohesive and unifying statement of belief for Christians (so Constantine hoped). For Williams, on the other hand, historical study of doctrine shows the Spirit at work through, and often in spite of, human contingencies; in short, historical study of the Nicene crisis shows that Christian doctrine is always in motion. This portrayal of early creedal debates forms the second part of this chapter. Given such motion, given that Christianity is always responding to new challenges and syncretisms in time, then Williams' theological account of history provides an entrée to a more adequate theological account of syncretism. This account of history forms the third part of the chapter. Drawing these reflections together, the chapter concludes by displaying Williams' account of the Holy Spirit ever building our knowledge of the Logos by incorporating—often by syncretism—more peoples and cultures into the body of Christ, a body never fully comprehended by humans until the eschaton.

I. Williams in Context: Anglican Responses to Historicism

When Williams was a student and young scholar, prominent responses to historicism by British Christian intellectuals generally entailed questioning traditional doctrinal claims of the church as stated in its creeds. While the question of relating history to doctrine was a familiar one by the end of the 20th century, a new cohort of British scholars addressed the question with new vigor

and with the additional consideration of religious pluralism.² Their approach, typified in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), was to rework Christian doctrine in light of modern critical studies. The authors, which included John Hick, Don Cupitt, and Maurice Wiles, among others, held that being intellectually serious in the modern world, in light of the findings of historical studies and the increasing awareness of other global religions, entailed rejecting traditional doctrines like the incarnation. Williams certainly appreciated the intellectual challenge these scholars posed, but found that fully engaging historicist literature and methods could in fact bring Christians back to the theological reasoning of the early church with fresh eyes and new appreciation. If one does not assume a great wedge between the intellectual world of early Christians and our own, early church debates become far more intellectually defensible and more useful than modern scholars had acknowledged.

The opening paragraphs of *The Myth of God Incarnate* outline this influential strand of argument in the British academy. From the start, the writers acknowledge the fluidity and flux of Christianity, of the sorts addressed in this dissertation: “It is clear to the writers of this book—as to a great many other Christians today—that Christianity has throughout its history been a continuously growing and changing movement.” Modern Christians in the West, they claim, face “two major new adjustments” from the 19th century that continue to press Christianity’s growth and change. The first is greater acknowledgement of human beings as part of nature and of the evolutionary process. The second is acceptance of biblical criticism. During the 19th and 20th centuries, they say, Western Christianity “accepted that the books of the Bible were written by a variety of human beings in a variety of circumstances, and cannot be accorded a verbal divine authority.” They go on to claim that this insight extends beyond the Bible to Christian origins as

² For historical context of British Christianity at this time, see Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

well. This historical understanding of Christian origins leads to a third development, which is a thoroughgoing change in the understanding of Jesus. Referring to Jesus as God incarnate and considering him the second person of the Trinity, they write, “is a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us.”³ While such language was helpful to Greek Christians during Christianity’s early centuries, it is less helpful to moderns the argument goes.⁴ In the context of Anglican theology, taking aim at the doctrine of the incarnation could hardly be more significant. Over the previous century and a half, Anglican theologians increasingly viewed the incarnation as *the* central affirmation of Anglican theology and Anglican social ethics, from F. D. Maurice to the authors of the seminal 1889 essay collection *Lux Mundi* to Archbishop William Temple’s writings in the mid-20th century. The writers of *The Myth of God Incarnate* thus called for no small reorientation in Anglican theology and ethics. Across Williams works, then, Hick, Wiles, and Cupitt all become interlocutors, serving as foils to Williams’ own views as he forges his approach to history and doctrine.

There was, of course, another Anglican response to historicism in the background, the figure of John Henry Newman. Newman’s 19th century work *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* offered a careful response to historical studies of early Christianity, one that readily acknowledged the inconsistencies of Christian theologians in the early centuries of the church, while also affirming the Christian creeds. Written while Newman was still an Anglican,

³ John Hick, ed, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1977), ix. See also John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age, 2nd Edition* (Louisville, Westminster Press, 2005).

⁴ Curriculum at schools like Cambridge and Oxford reflected a divide between historically oriented biblical studies and doctrinal study. Williams’ biographer Rupert Shortt writes, “In the 1960s the Cambridge theological syllabus knew ... scarcely anything of how Christian thought evolved during the millennium between the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and the eve of the Reformation. Instead, students faced a heavy dose of biblical studies, much of it directed towards disentangling the Jesus of History from the Christ of faith.” For many students, Shortt continues, “this experience can be harrowing,” because such study of history made doctrine seem contingent, especially when theology courses rarely addressed historicism. Rupert Shortt, *Rowan Williams: An Introduction* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2003), 20.

the writing process itself proved pivotal to his conversion to the Roman Catholic Church as he thought through the implications of his argument. In his research of early Christianity, Newman found great variability in early Christian doctrine, a fact requiring explanation since many prominent figures in the early church made statements contrary to later creedal affirmations. “If we limit our view of the teaching of the Fathers by what they expressly state,” he wrote, “St. Ignatius may be considered as a Patripassian, St. Justin arianizes, and St. Hippolytus is a Photinian.”⁵ Newman also found it quite unsettling that a doctrine like real presence, which became so important to the church’s life and teaching, received little attention in many quarters of the early church. Thus, the church could not claim that the Vincentian Canon could serve as a means of unity, since, in the early church, “what was believed everywhere” would be quite thin indeed. Neither could the church claim that there was no variation in its teaching, especially not in these early centuries.⁶ For Newman, such historical variation became a puzzle to be solved.

Newman responded with his theory of doctrinal development, by which he argued that the gospel is of such depth and import that humans can only comprehend it over a long expanse of time. “From the nature of the human mind, time is necessary for the full comprehension and perfection of great ideas,” he wrote (“idea” in this context means something closer to ideology in modern parlance). In Jesus, the gospel could be expressed “to the world once for all,” but it could not be fully understood or comprehended once and for all due to human contingency.⁷ Thus the wide variability of the gospel would seem perfectly natural for Christianity’s early years, since

⁵ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 17.

⁶ At the time, many in the Oxford movement held that the Vincentian Canon could serve as a means of unity, while many Catholics argued that the church’s teaching did not vary over time. For a study of Newman in light of these matters, see Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957).

⁷ Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 29-30. It is Chadwick who suggests that Newman’s use of “idea” is like unto contemporary “ideology”. *From Bossuet to Newman*, 149.

the church was still working out the implications of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection; indeed, for Newman, the church continues to work out the implications. He argued further that growth in human understanding is part and parcel of any great tradition, especially one claiming a message of divine origin. History is *required* of the doctrinal enterprise, for the implications of truth take time to seep into human beings. As Owen Chadwick writes of Newman, "An idea of importance or complexity can only be comprehended in all its aspects through a long period of time and diverse circumstances, which elicit its consequences and its relations. This is what has happened in the development of Christian doctrine."⁸ The idea of doctrinal development was not new to Christian theology, but Newman's take on it was, for Newman allowed more space for growth within the doctrinal enterprise, not simply elucidation. Medieval scholastics, for example, often defended changes in church dogma over time by saying that the church was drawing out the logical consequences of an unchanging original message. In the 17th century Catholic bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet posited a revised version of this thesis, saying that development was clearer explanation of unchanging doctrine. For Newman, however, the process is more comparable to growth and maturation: just as human beings grow in understanding from childhood into adulthood, so the church matures in its own understanding.⁹ The ecclesial implications were clear for Newman: the Roman Catholic Church accepted additions in doctrine discovered throughout history, as in its acceptance of the Assumption of Mary, while Protestants were quite suspect of such (the Assumption again being a primary example). Newman wrote, "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant."¹⁰ Such sentences echoed across

⁸ Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*, 149.

⁹ Newman's logic resembles that of Light's "orthosyncretism" in Chapter 2.

¹⁰ Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 8.

Anglicanism for decades to come; for many, accepting Newman's intellectual response to history meant converting to the Catholic Church.

These responses, well known to Williams, present two quite different approaches to history. Starkly put, taking history seriously means either abandoning traditional doctrinal statements of the church or becoming Catholic. (The latter option Williams did indeed consider as a young man, just as he considered the possibility of converting to Eastern Orthodoxy). Yet each of these options seem too clean, even too hasty, as if they offer prefabricated solutions to problems like historicism and syncretism that require still more intellectual investment. Williams sees more potential in early and medieval Christian thinking than did the writers of *The Myth of God Incarnate*. Significant as the differences between thought-worlds of the ancient Mediterranean and the modern West may be, Williams does not give modernity the epistemological superiority that Wiles, Hick, and Cupitt do; he is thus more trusting of early church sources. He is not unsympathetic to Wiles, Hick and Cupitt, seen in his appreciation of Cupitt's persistent worry that moderns see God as an "exceptional spiritual individual" or as a self like other selves.¹¹ Compared with the *The Myth of God Incarnate* writers, though, Williams is more philosophically careful, critiquing Wiles and Cupitt as much on philosophical grounds as theological ones. Poor philosophy, for Williams, leads to poor doctrine.

Newman's approach to history, on the other hand, would still seem too clear cut for Williams. If Wiles, Cupitt, and Hick are too taken by historicism, Newman was not taken enough. Newman portrayed the process of doctrinal development as if its conclusion are foregone, only to be discovered across time; his theory of development does not sufficiently address how conflicted the processes of doctrinal formation in fact are. Not only that, Newman

¹¹ Williams, "'Religious Realism': On not quite agreeing with Don Cupitt" in *Wrestling with Angels*, 228.

clearly saw differences in Christian doctrine across history as a problem to be solved; Christian pluralism may be the norm, but a norm softened through careful explanation. Yet for Williams, such plurality just is; seeing plurality as a fact and not as a problem thus removes defensiveness when responding to intellectual challenges of historicism. Indeed, Williams portrays plurality within Christianity as a positive driving force toward the formulation of doctrine; and once the doctrine has been articulated in creeds, such creeds still accommodate wide varieties of understanding—they are not finalized statements. Indeed, if the church has the ability to recognize it, such plurality can display the diversity of the Spirit and the Spirit's generative quality. Within this chapter, my description in Section II of Williams' response to Arius shows his differences from Newman's approach, while Section III shows his differences from contributors to *The Myth of God Incarnate*.

Thus Williams, like Tanner, approaches theology's interaction with history and culture by accentuating the diversities of the church, by not shying away from its many conflicts. In terms of our study of syncretism, he provides an account of Christianity making use of and incorporating philosophies beyond its original expression and retooling them for Christianity's own distinctive purposes. Yet compared with Tanner, Williams offers a differing theological lens through which to conceive of such incorporation. If Tanner frames these incorporations through God's free activity in the world, which inherently finds differing expressions based on differing cultural materials, Williams portrays the Logos growing and accreting across history, taking more and more peoples—and their cultural contingencies—into itself until the full expression of the Logos in the heavenly Jerusalem.

II. Creedal Syncretism

As we saw in Chapter Two, historians of religion consider Hellenistic religions of Antiquity exemplars of syncretism, Christianity included. Gnostics, mystery religions, and Manichaeism fused together strands of varying religions, which previously existed fairly independently from one another, thereby forming new religious syntheses. Meanwhile, existing traditions like Judaism syncretized elements of Hellenism while still remaining distinctly within their own tradition's self-understanding.¹² Christianity existed within this same environment of Hellenism and underwent its own engagement with Hellenistic philosophy.¹³ Rowan Williams' analysis of 4th century creedal debates within a highly syncretized environment shows that Christianity's own creeds, the most widely recognized articulation of Christian doctrine, are themselves highly syncretized statements. The debates between Arius and Athanasius were not debates over who was syncretizing less or who articulated purer doctrine, but rather which syncretism proved most faithful to the deposit of worship and belief passed down. If the debates around Arius were "formative of what we now utter as orthodox," and if these arguments were themselves syncretic, then Williams' account of these debates is a promising place indeed to continue shaping a theological account of syncretism.¹⁴

When Williams published his treatise on Arius in 1987, he intentionally broke from a long tradition of Christian writing that viewed Arius as the quintessential Christian heretic. Traditionally, Arius was a model of how and where theological reflection goes awry; Christian

¹² Were one to employ the many distinctions of syncretism in Chapter Two, these two approaches represent syncretism as a system, that is as a new religion in itself, and elemental syncretism or syncretism within an already existing religious structure.

¹³ For an apt discussion of whether such traditions constitute "religion", see Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). For discussion of Christians' self-understanding vis-a-vis Jewish communities of the Mediterranean in the first-fourth centuries, see Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race? Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 24.

scholars largely viewed Arius as an illustrative foil to the positions of the orthodox camp in Christianity's early centuries and to their own theologies. Indeed, Williams cites, among others, Newman's *Arians of the Fourth Century* as an example of such an approach.¹⁵ By employing methods from both Christian theology and the history of religions, however, Williams aimed to portray Arius on his own terms. For Williams, Arius was a theological conservative seeking to protect the transcendence of God and God's ultimate unknowability. The orthodox camp was, to Arius, redefining standard accounts of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Hellenistic philosophy. Arius worried that Athanasius redefined God by arguing that God the Father's life is inherently interconnected with the life of the Son Jesus. Arius sought instead to preserve existing accounts of God's life as a monadic being, a being without necessity, a God who does not require to be in relationship with a Son (and Spirit) to be God. Arius' goal, Williams writes, was "to develop a biblically-based *and* rationally consistent catechesis."¹⁶ Yet if Williams differs from Newman in treating Arius on his own terms, he is at one with Newman in employing a study of Arius for his own theological ends.

II.1. Articulating the Logos through Syncretism

With detailed treatment not only of Arius but of his theological and philosophical influences, Williams shows the extent to which Arius and Athanasius alike drew from Hellenistic philosophical conversations of their day; he portrays both Arius and Athanasius as syncretists.¹⁷ They were not syncretists in the sense that they crafted a new religion, like Mani who so

¹⁵ Williams, *Arius*, 3. See John Henry Newman, *Arians of the Fourth Century* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1890).

¹⁶ Williams, *Arius*, 111.

¹⁷ Williams explicitly refers to syncretism of the early church in his essay "Does it make sense to speak of pre-Nicene orthodoxy?" in *The Making of Orthodoxy*, ed. Rowan Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 16.

ingeniously wove together aspects of assorted religious traditions in making what became Manichaeism. Rather, both saw themselves reasoning within a Christian tradition working through fundamental questions, employing whatever religious and philosophical resources most cogently advanced the coherence of Christian beliefs and practices as handed down. Yet syncretists they were, insofar as Alexandrian theology was syncretic. Because the Alexandrian school was so indebted to Philo, Clement, and Origen—themselves deeply syncretic thinkers—Greek thought was already embedded in Arius’ and Athanasius’ theology. Importantly, Alexandrian Christian theologians saw the incorporation of Greek thought such as Hellenistic Logos theology not as a corruption of “original” Christianity, but rather as an *enhancement* of the deposit of faith because it helped clarify key doctrinal affirmations.

The clearest example of such syncretism in Williams’ *Arius* is the development of Logos theology, a concept vital to 4th century Alexandria. Early Christian communities referred to Jesus as a divine being and worshipped him as such, but Judaism’s monotheistic affirmations precluded the existence of a second divine being. This conundrum led to centuries of debate regarding the identity of Jesus and his relation to God the Father, in which early Christians extensively employed Hellenistic philosophy to address its own fundamental questions.¹⁸ Logos, a Greek word connoting the faculties of speech and reason (as well as a host of other meanings), expresses the means by which divine knowledge becomes mediated into the universe. For the Stoics, the Logos is the rational ordering of the cosmos, a natural law of sorts. The Stoics’ Logos is both immanent and transcendent, “a life-giving force hidden within things, a power working

¹⁸ While the affirmation of Jesus as “fully divine” and “fully human” became an *a priori* assumption to Christians of later centuries, modern theologians with an abundance of historical knowledge can overlook the difficulty of getting to statements like “fully divine” and “fully human.” As Williams writes, scripture and tradition “need to be made more *difficult* before we can accurately grasp their simplicities.” Williams, *Arius*, 236.

from above on the sensible world.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, Platonists held similar debates when seeking to comprehend how God communicates divine knowledge to human beings without such knowledge being corrupted by its participation in the material, and thus non-eternal, cosmos. For Christians, the question became how an immaterial and changeless God communicates to material and changeable beings without degrading God’s self in some way due to the “intermingling” that may accompany such communication.²⁰ Jesus as the Logos of God, portrayed in the prelude to John’s gospel, subsequently became an essential intellectual paradigm of the Alexandrian school. Indeed, Christians adopting and retooling the intellectual heritage of Hellenistic concepts of Logos was one of the most important attempts of early Christians to express the universal implications of Jesus and the gospel.²¹

Williams begins his narration of these philosophical debates with Plato’s *Timaeus*. His primary dialogue on cosmology, the *Timaeus* proved foundational for Hellenistic accounts of the divine Being’s relation to a time-bound cosmos. In Plato’s cosmology, he makes a distinction between what always existed, what we would call eternal, and what is in process, including the material cosmos. The beauty and order of the material cosmos suggests for Plato that it is modeled upon something “higher and better,” Williams writes.²² This model of the universe is

¹⁹ Jean Pépin, trans. Denis O’Brien, s.v. “Logos,” *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition*, Lindsay Jones, ed, (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005), 5500-5506.

²⁰ Seeing the God of the Old and New Testaments as immaterial and unchangeable is, of course, less taken for granted in modern theology than in the Patristic period. In such discussions, especially in light of our conversations on syncretism, it is important to acknowledge that Patristic thinkers were not necessarily unreflectively importing attributes like divine immateriality and immutability from Greek thought into Christianity. These attributes were ways of interpreting the scriptural witness. As Williams writes, describing God as immaterial and immutable—as free from time, matter, and chance—was “self-evidently the only way to make sense of the scriptural data” (*Arius*, 111).

²¹ German theologian Notger Slenczka overstates the matter slightly, neglecting Paul’s universalizing language as well as his Stoic sources, when he writes, “The adoption of the pre- and non-Christian concept of *logos* is the first and decisive attempt of Christianity to express the universality of truth which the first disciples recognized in the person of Jesus.” Slenczka, s.v. “Logos,” *Religion Past and Present*, Hans Dieter Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel, eds, (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 588-590, 588.

²² Williams, *Arius*, 181.

itself good and therefore always existed; the model—or *autozoōn*—thereby provides an intermediary through which the divine Craftsman creates. It is both of the divine Craftsman while also accessible to human reason. In the act of creating, Plato's divine Craftsman "contemplates a world of rational structures outside his own being, and forms the empirical world accordingly," Williams says.²³ Indeed, "the craftsman who made it must have had before his eyes the eternal world that is known by *logos*."²⁴ Such terminology regarding the "image" of the divine, and how that image relates to divine unity, proved fertile reflection for Christian arguments regarding Jesus' relation to the Father.

Williams follows this line of thought to Alexandria, Egypt and to the 2nd century Jewish thinker Philo, who imported these lines of reasoning into Judaism and thereby provided a vital link from Stoicism, Platonism, and Neoplatonism to Christianity. Questions about a divine Craftsman's relation to the created cosmos proved close indeed to Jewish affirmations of monotheism. "Philo is the first thinker," Williams writes, "we know for certain to have identified the realm of forms with thoughts in the mind of God."²⁵ Philo identified the model or *autozoōn* from which *Timaeus*' divine Craftsman works with Jewish understandings of God's speech or

²³ Williams, *Arius*, 199.

²⁴ Williams, *Arius*, 182. See *Timaeus* 28C-29A. The challenge facing the divine Craftsman in forming a material and changeable cosmos is, in the words of philosopher Donald Zeyl, that of "crafting an image of [the *autozoōn*] that is subject to the constraints of becoming; unlike the model, it must be visible and tangible." Zeyl, Donald, "Plato's *Timaeus*," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/plato-timaeus/>. For many subsequent Neoplatonists, the manifestation of the divine Being necessarily entails the concept of two—a "dyad"—i.e. the One and the One's manifestation. On such manifestation Williams writes, "But this form is not the unadulterated presence of the One as such, it is rather that 'refracted' image of the primal unity that is capable of being the unitive principle in a world of manifold realities." (*Arius*, 192). Indeed, Platonists and Neoplatonists rigorously debated details of the *autozoōn*, for example whether the creator God contemplates a separate "realm of ideas" when creating or whether God contemplates "his own being" when creating (199-201). Persistent worries, originating in Aristotle, that Plato's *Timaeus* portrayed the world as too simply the "product" of [the demiurge's] unity and the "formless plurality" of material matter led to the idea that the world's plurality "derives from unity" (192, italics Williams). Debates also emerged as to whether there is some kind of hierarchy between the Craftsman's Intellect (*nous*) that forms the world and the thoughts (*noēta*) of this Intellect that provide the structure of the cosmos. Christians in turn had parallel debates regarding what sort of hierarchy, if any, exists between God the Father and Jesus as the Logos of God.

²⁵ Williams, *Arius*, 203.

Logos to human beings. Before God makes the world God contemplates the forms as the structuring mechanism of the world, a kind of intellectual cosmos which created matter reflects. This structuring is the Logos itself, the means by which rational spirits—human beings—come to know God. Yet the Logos is not only those rational structures of the world that point to order and unity; it also entails God revealing God’s self in the inspiration of scripture and Torah, as well as the ability of humans to receive, study, and contemplate the Torah. While the Logos is the source of all matter, the Logos is still not separable from God. Williams writes, “When [Logos] is being considered over against the multiple forms of God’s providential involvement in the world (the *dunameis*), it is clearly *not* separable from the one God. It is God himself turned towards what is not God.”²⁶ Given Old Testament writings on God’s covenantal dealings with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the nation of Israel as a whole, Philo’s God remains more purposive than Plato’s craftsman. That is, Philo posited closer continuity between God’s nature and God’s activities.²⁷ In mapping the ground for later Christian reflection, Philo’s account of the Logos also bestowed a number of enduring challenges later taken up by Arius and Athanasius. In particular, Williams writes, “The paradox of something that ‘is and is not God’ is only disturbing if that something is indeed accorded an identity of its own—which is precisely the early Christian problem” (124).

Clement of Alexandria and his student Origen provided a bridge between the intellectual insights of Philo and Christianity, Williams notes. For Clement, as for Philo, the Logos is the image of God, that which communicates divinity to human beings, but now transposed onto the individual Jesus. In Clement the Logos descends into the material world, a descent that allows

²⁶ Williams, *Arius*, 119.

²⁷ A common distinction posed between Jewish accounts of creation and Plato’s account is the former’s creation *ex nihilo* and Plato’s divine Craftsman creating from existing matter; yet *ex nihilo* was by no means settled or decisively addressed in Philo’s time. See Jon D. Levenson’s *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: the Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

humanity's salvation. Yet Clement retained a vital distinction in Philo between knowing and seeing God the Father versus seeing the Logos. The problem then arose for Clement that the expressions of the Logos within the material world are "manifestations accidental to the 'real' life of the Logos, which is in God, identical with God."²⁸ This temptation to separate God into parts based upon God's utter transcendence and what is knowable to human beings became a point Arius pressed. Origen, however, spoke with greater clarity regarding the Logos being existent from all eternity. For Origen, the Son is eternally and timelessly generated by the Father: God the Father is the *archē* or origin of the Logos, the Logos the *archē* of all else. The Son does not have an *archē* in the sense of a point of time, but does have an *archē*, a 'rationale of existence', in God the Father. Origen's critical contribution was to connect the existence of the Logos to the Father's own life as God, Williams notes. Being "Father" is a constitutive quality of God being God, that is, "God as father must have a son in order to be what he is."²⁹ While this aspect of Origen's thought became vital to Athanasius and later to the Cappadocians, the logic implied by this point was more complex than Origen realized or indicated. He continued to portray God as a being wholly transcendent and unknowable, while the Logos was associated with the "world of divine ideas."³⁰ The Father retains a certain freedom from the Son, because Origen does not wish the Father to depend upon the Son.

²⁸ Williams, *Arius*, 130. In retaining God's transcendence from the material realm, partially revealed by the Logos but not entirely revealed, we end up with a God who is "partly knowable (as Logos) and partly unknowable," thereby risking partitioning the divine life and thereby threatening divine simplicity, the doctrine that God in God's unity does not contain parts. The problem is not simply that God is inherently beyond human comprehension, for that is taken for granted; the problem is that substantial qualities of God remain hidden and therefore God is "separable" as if by "known and unknown" pieces. It is as if God has held some part of God's self in reserve when communicating to humans. Interestingly, this logic in fact resembles the distinction between the "immanent Trinity" and the "economic Trinity." For an insightful challenge of the usefulness of that distinction, see Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1, the Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

²⁹ Williams, *Arius*, 138.

³⁰ Williams, *Arius*, 139.

By narrating the theological development among the Platonists, Philo, Clement, and Origen, Williams portrays the debates between Arius and Athanasius as thoroughly *Alexandrian* debates, already well syncretized with Stoic and Platonic conceptions of Logos. For Williams, when Arius argued that Jesus is the Logos and is created by God the Father, he tried to clarify challenges within Alexandrian Christology. Following Philo, for example, Arius wanted to say that the Logos is of God but is not God. Jesus, as the Logos of God with his own identity, is created by God because, for Arius, if Jesus is not created, then the Logos becomes another aspect of God's own being, which limits God's transcendence and offers its own threat to God's simplicity. Arius pressed certain points of Clement and Origen, worrying their logic implied that the monotheistic God of the scriptures entailed a second "part" to God's being. To preserve God's transcendence and simplicity, Arius contended that the Son Jesus is therefore the "firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15), born of God before the world was created, reflecting the image of God. Athanasius, on the other hand, expanded on Origen's insight that being Father is in fact constitutive of God's life. God was always Father to the Son, the Logos, who reveals God's life to human beings and to the cosmos itself. To ask when God had a Son—before time or before creation or before the Incarnation—is not a helpful question. (In this regard, Athanasius partially broke from Platonic accounts of creation, which often offered accounts of the divine Being's life before creation.) Athanasius expanded on Origen while removing Origen's sense of separation between Father and Son. Yet for Arius, Athanasius had in fact redefined God's very being, because the Logos became implicit to the life of the transcendent God. Arius' concern had an apophatic appeal: God is ultimately unknowable, but Athanasius introduced an undue sense of necessity in God's life.

It is worth pausing to acknowledge the remarkable advances in Christian comprehension of Jesus' relation to God the Father through the careful syncretism of Philo, Clement, Origen, Arius, and Athanasius. The prologue to the Gospel of John provided an initial launching point for Christian reflection on Christ as the Logos, on Jesus' relation to God the Father, but little more.³¹ Logos became important not because of its frequency of use in the New Testament—it is not a significant concept in gospels other than John—but because of the extent to which it provides conceptual resources for addressing the puzzle of Jesus' relation to God the Father, a puzzle that became fully felt only in the 4th century. Employing tools of Stoic and Platonic philosophy, Philo began to articulate how the eternal and timeless God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob communicates to a time-bound cosmos. Clement transposed Philo's insights into Christianity, adding distinctively Christian elements such as the Logos' own descent to humanity. Through Origen, the Son the Logos becomes a constitutive element of God's own life. We are still some way from what became known as Christian orthodoxy, no doubt—the Logos and the Father still appear too separate from one another and the Logos unduly subordinate to the Father—but substantial gains had been made, gains that found richer articulation in Athanasius and the Cappadocians. By the time of the Cappadocians and subsequent Christian theology, the concept of Logos had been utterly retooled from its Stoic and Platonic origins. The Stoics' Logos, for example, carries an immanentism that Christian theology abandons; neither is the Christian Logos subordinate to the Divine Being as in forms of Platonism. Yet Jesus as the Logos retains the Stoic and Platonic associations of an intermediary between God and the cosmos that reveals God's purposes and intentions. In articulating such development, Williams

³¹ This launching point, however, is indeed allusive in quality. See for example John Howard Yoder's exegesis of John 1 in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), 50-51.

wants the reader to be ever conscious of this history of doctrine, this sense in which the Christian church in its first few centuries grew into orthodoxy.

In sum, doctrinal growth came *through* the use of seemingly non-Christian intellectual tools and categories.³² Conceiving of the Logos as a bridge between God’s eternal nature and the limited time-bound capacity of human beings only developed through abiding engagements with Greek philosophy, not through Christians solely reflecting upon their own Jewish and Christian sources. Thus for Williams, the events and debates portrayed in *Arius* are about more than a heresy, they are “a debate about the kinds of continuity possible and necessary in the Church’s language.”³³ Both Arius and Athanasius insisted that their language was catholic and scriptural—and they were right to do so. The challenge was *not* who was a superior exegete—if anything Arius was the more cautious exegete and Athanasius more daring—nor who innovated more than the other, nor who utilized more “authentically” Christian resources; both were fine exegetes, both provided theological innovation, and both extensively utilized Hellenistic thought. The question, for Williams, was which innovation best captured the faith as handed down, which innovation most ably expressed the gospel shared by the apostles and recounted in Christian scriptures. Expositing tradition becomes, contrary to conventional assumptions, an innovative task.

³² Logos, of course, was not the only concept in early church debates which drew heavily from prominent philosophies of the Hellenistic world. The idea that the divine life could have a “procession” from itself drew heavily from Neoplatonic writings describing life constituted by the divine but still distinct from it. *Homoousios* was discussed in Chapter 1. Williams accentuates the extent to which the orthodox camp employed language and tools from their opponents, reworking them or applying them differently in order to clarify their own theology. “Modern scholarship has become increasingly aware of how the very vocabulary of orthodox theology is shaped by borrowing and reworking the terms and images of dissident groups,” he writes (*Arius*, 24).

³³ Williams, *Arius*, 234.

II.2. Implications from Nicene Debates: the Necessity of Theological Innovation

Such purposive syncretism in the early church brings up vital questions of theological method for Williams. The Nicene crisis thus provides opportunity to assess syncretism in light of wider theological questions, because the challenges emerging from these debates are not only classical questions of Christology, but of Christianity's incorporation of "outside" influences during the growth of doctrine over time. Williams' assessment of Arius brings up at least three questions pertinent to a theological account of syncretism. The first question to emerge is how Christian theology conceives of its own innovations. Such innovations are inescapable, Williams claims: he calls *homoousios* "a *necessary* moment in the deeper understanding and securing of tradition."³⁴ Second, how should the church understand heresy, and heterodoxy for that matter, if orthodoxy itself draws from heresies like Arius' that press the church to clarify doctrine? Third, how might we conceive of Christian doctrine given it emerges in a history filled with accident and chance? That is, amid the caustic rhetoric and imperial forces at play in creedal development, how do we discern God's revelation through the Spirit? Williams begins to address such questions in the final portion of *Arius*, the "Postscript (Theological)". Throughout, Williams portrays Christian doctrine as in process, but not in the same ways as Newman. Again, for Williams plurality is not a problem to be solved but an occasion for the Spirit to work—however difficult, conflicted, and ambivalent human reception of the Holy Spirit may be.

First, Nicene debates show that innovation in theology is inevitable as Christians deepen their understanding of Jesus and as they discover new intellectual challenges. As church communities came to pose certain questions about Jesus' relation to God the Father—some questions emerging from the various accounts of Jesus in Christian scriptures, some from

³⁴ Williams, *Arius*, 235. Italics mine.

Christianity's interaction with philosophies of the day—they had to be addressed for Christianity to be an intellectually serious enterprise. Once posed, questions like how an immaterial God communicates with material beings within the cosmos would not simply go away. 4th century Christians could not, Williams argues, retrieve the “lost innocence of pre-Nicene trinitarian language.”³⁵ Rejecting innovation was not an option; the church could not, for example, reject the term *homoousios* simply because it did not appear in scripture or because it entered Christian vocabulary by way of Gnostics. Indeed, there never existed an innocent “original” to which Christianity could return; such originals only appeared so retrospectively. The theological puzzles of the 4th century required a move from a “‘theology of repetition’ to something more exploratory and constructive,” Williams claims; simply reiterating what had been said before would not do.³⁶ At this point in Christianity's history, a theology of repetition would have been dangerous—a betrayal of the Christian tradition even—because it would have failed to provide an adequate account of itself.

Responding to theological innovation is not only a matter of Christians providing an adequate account of their faith as handed down, however. More poignantly, theological innovation occurs because there is still more of Jesus to see. Williams employs the debate between Arius and Athanasius not only to ask questions about how Christians do theology, but also to argue against certain styles of doing theology. If doctrine is not simply a matter of repetition, if doctrine continually draws from seemingly non-Christian and dissident sources, then doctrine is never finished this side of the eschaton. “Doctrine,” after all, was first a verb, *docere*. The implications are significant for theology; its task requires continual attentiveness. “To understand such processes [as the Nicene debates] is to experience orthodoxy as something

³⁵ Williams, *Arius*, 234.

³⁶ Williams, *Arius*, 235.

still future,” Williams writes. It is not only the church of the 4th century that would have betrayed itself had it followed a theology of repetition—the church in any generation betrays its task of proclamation were it to do the same. The conclusions of Nicaea and Chalcedon provide only a beginning, not an end, to Christian talk about God. Nicaea and Chalcedon are but signposts of sorts amid the ongoing development of doctrine. Not only does repetition potentially close off new insights, but a theology of repetition prevents the gospel from being adequately strange and surprising to us. This “making difficult” of the gospel is, Williams says, “perhaps one of the most fundamental tasks for theology.”³⁷ A theology of repetition is one that we’ve heard before, one that fails to challenge. Each generation has to make the gospel strange in its own way: this task entails a more thorough engagement with the past; it also entails articulating such wisdom by way of syncretic theological innovation. Growth in doctrine does not stop with Athanasius, Chalcedon, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Barth, or whomever. Tempting as it may be to become captivated by particularly elegant theologies, being so captivated inhibits attentiveness to the Spirit’s subsequent communication.

A second question emerging from Williams’ account of Arius is that of appraising heresy, especially when heresies like Arius’ pressed vital theological questions and, by their “mistakes”, helped clarify doctrine. Heresy thus becomes not wrong-headed deviation, but rather a necessary step in the formulation of a still future orthodoxy. It is surely unfortunate, then, that Clement and Origen retain an ambiguous status in many quarters of the Christian church due to their “incomplete” doctrine or their “heterodox” leanings, even up to today. Clement, for example, was for centuries regarded a saint in the Catholic Church but removed from the list of saints in the 16th century due to error in doctrine, a decision which Pope Benedict XVI

³⁷ Williams, *Arius*, 236.

reaffirmed in recent years. Such judgments not only fail to view the figures within their historical intellectual contexts, they overlook the debt Athanasius and later theologians owed them. One is hard-pressed to find thinkers during Clement's and Origen's respective time periods that offered seemingly more "orthodox" accounts of Christianity.³⁸ To depreciate Clement and Origen is to ignore the trial and error aspect of all intellectually complicated ventures, theology included. In its own way, it is to mimic the facile, ahistorical errors of Calovius in Chapter 1, who expected all saints—including those in the Old Testament—to possess a fully formed doctrine of the Trinity. Heterodoxy implies orthodoxy, which did not quite exist at the time of Clement and Origen.³⁹

A final question regarding syncretism emerges in Williams' theological postscript, that of how to make theological sense of the fact that orthodoxy emerges within a history that seems so subject to accident and chance. To many, all of the historical contingencies of Nicene debates, the use of seemingly non-Christian philosophy, to say nothing of the ugliness of the rhetoric within the victorious orthodox camp, would lessen the power of creedal insights. Matters of God's revelation seem tainted by the ambivalent processes of history and imperial politics. What Christians hold to be revelation from God, expressed in their creeds, seems so tainted by human hands, so mired in historical complexities, that it loses its purity. If the creeds themselves are so mired, is the Christian faith itself up for grabs? Williams' exploration of Arius provides a different vantage point for such historical questions. The back and forth across history, the church's slow but improving articulation of Christology, the church's use of pagan philosophy

³⁸ Tertullian, for example, would seem as or more heterodox on the Trinity than Origen.

³⁹ Williams, "Pre-Nicene orthodoxy?". Friedrich Schleiermacher also offers perceptive reflections on the relationship between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. He retains vital space for heterodoxy as "inclination to keep the body of doctrine mobile and to make room for still other modes of apprehension." *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, Third Edition, trans. Terrence N. Tice (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 76.

all become revelatory.⁴⁰ Seeming ambivalences of history in fact become part of this process: “Doctrine is implicated in power if it is implicated in history,” Williams writes.⁴¹ Thus appreciating revelation entails appreciating the vicissitudes of history and recognizing the Holy Spirit’s work within it. This response recurs as an ongoing theme in Williams’ later theology and is the next subject of our inquiry.

III. History throughout Doctrine, Not Doctrine throughout History

The negative corollary to Williams’ appreciation for history is a persistent worry that modern theologians, for all their historical scholarship, still too often work from a static perception of doctrine, thereby precluding a sophisticated analysis of syncretism. In speaking of 4th century doctrinal debates, Williams consistently comes back to the point that understanding such debates does not simply entail comprehending the logical arguments at stake, it entails appreciating the history of the arguments—both in a theological sense but also political, economic, and social senses. He writes,

‘Loyalty’ to how the Church has defined its norms must contain a clear awareness of the slow and often ambivalent nature of the processes of definition if we are to avoid supposing that the history of doctrine is not really *history* at all and that contemporary ‘right belief’ has no connection with or conditioning by a specific past and present.⁴²

In Chapter 3 we found such tendencies to avoid these ambivalent processes in postliberalism, but they also exist elsewhere in theology—in Radical Orthodoxy, strict Calvinism, and many Roman Catholic encyclicals. Nevertheless, it is all too easy to point to these more traditionalist quarters of the church when criticizing static doctrine. Yet Williams does not turn his aim to

⁴⁰ Rowan Williams, “Trinity and Revelation” in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 131-137.

⁴¹ Williams, “Maurice Wiles and Doctrinal Criticism,” in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, edited by Mike Higton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 282.

⁴² Williams, *Arius*, 25. Italics his.

traditionalists when criticizing a lack of historical consciousness in scholarship. Instead, he turns to historians of religion and liberal theologians, like contributors to *The Myth of God Incarnate*. The implications are significant: if scholars who criticize doctrinal claims as a response to historical studies are still operating with a latent sense of static doctrine, then ahistorical theology and scholarship is likely all the more prevalent among non-historians and the theological guild as a whole.

III.1. Ahistorical Historians

Williams' assessment of two thinkers, Walter Bauer and Maurice Wiles, displays this continuing ahistorical tendency and its dangers for theology, while also showing his concerns regarding a wider array of scholars, such as Hick, Cupitt, and John Dominic Crossan. Indeed, Williams' responses to them display his integration of material history into the theological task as well as his apt responses to historicism.

Walter Bauer provides an example of a prominent Christian historian who attempts to take account of history, but remains an essentialist articulating a concept of Christian doctrine beyond the vicissitudes of time and history. Bauer wrote both during and after the time of Adolf von Harnack, serving as a counterpoint to Harnack's influential arguments that Christianity holds an essential kernel of belief from its early years and across its history. Countering Harnack, Bauer argued that early Christianity held a vast variety of beliefs, so wide that what we now call "orthodox" was only one of many different expressions of Christianity. Orthodoxy triumphed largely because it possessed the most political power and the most impressive resources, not necessarily because it offered the most persuasive or most universal arguments, according to

Bauer. Orthodoxy, by this account, is something of a political accident imposed by the Roman center of the church—orthodoxy is contingency and chance.⁴³

Nevertheless, Bauer did find consistency to the breadth of Christian belief, which he articulated as a common commitment to Jesus and the Body of Christ. Bauer was more circumspect than Harnack that Christian belief can be distilled into statements that adequately capture its essence—words and sentences cannot capture the spiritual belief and experience that is Christianity. Rather, Williams writes, “Bauer assumes that the Christian faith is a principle beyond history and speech: once this ‘transcendental’ reality is ‘categorically’ expressed and apprehended, it is *misapprehended*.”⁴⁴ Even if the essence of Christianity cannot be expressed, Bauer still assumes an “inner” truth to Christianity that is free from history and free of accretion; its central common commitment to the Body of Christ remains a “still point” of doctrine.⁴⁵ This account is not a strong improvement upon Harnack when it comes to history. Materiality and history, according to Williams, still threaten the core of Bauer’s Christianity. Christianity’s truth is “perennially at odds with and at risk from the deceitfulness of material history,” Williams writes. Even while Bauer acknowledges the many transmutations of Christianity across time and culture, “it remains in essence free of them.”⁴⁶ Bauer’s historical assessment of Christianity still seeks to avoid history itself; history remains a corrupting influence.

Rather than arguing as if historical criticism like Bauer’s is some kind of challenge for theology which must be toppled, Williams argues from within such methodologies, first questioning whether they stand as good arguments solely from historical criteria. Bauer’s account of early Christianity as sprawling diversity is not good history, Williams argues; early

⁴³ Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971)

⁴⁴ Williams, “Does it make sense to speak of pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?”, 5.

⁴⁵ Williams, “Pre-Nicene orthodoxy?”, 5.

⁴⁶ Williams, “Pre-Nicene orthodoxy?”, 5.

Christianity possessed normativity, simply a normativity that entailed plurality.⁴⁷ To show Christianity's growing sense of definition and the interconnection between churches, Williams points to the seemingly constant exchanges of correspondence between bishops—"an almost obsessional mutual interest and interchange."⁴⁸ Christians were not simply scattered across the Roman Empire without knowledge of one another, untroubled by wide varieties of Christian belief and practice. The letters exchanged showed not only an early church with a growing sense of universality, but disagreements that led to formation of a Christian canon and, ultimately, to church councils arguing over orthodoxy. If Jesus' message is for the whole world and not a single geographic realm, then a certain degree of uniformity would be desired; some normativity would be inherent to its foundational message. This picture, Williams contends, is one in which "learning and exchange must ... continue, and progress needs to be checked against original inspiration The whole ethos takes rather more seriously the temporal nature of human knowing."⁴⁹ Contra Bauer, doctrine for early Christians did not reflect a struggle to accurately reflect a timeless, immaterial message—even if that message ultimately could not be articulated in words as Bauer claimed—rather early Christians kept testing and seeking to improve their Christological claims by sharing them with others and by reflecting on the "original inspiration." Christian doctrine does not take shape *despite* material history, rather within material history.

Williams' other primary example of a historian not taking adequate account of historical consciousness is more contemporary. Maurice Wiles was Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford in the 1970s-80s, known for a program called "doctrinal criticism."⁵⁰ Doctrinal criticism is, in the words of G. F. Woods, "the critical study of the truth and adequacy of doctrinal statements,"

⁴⁷ Williams, "Pre-Nicene orthodoxy?", 18.

⁴⁸ Williams, "Pre-Nicene orthodoxy?", 11.

⁴⁹ Williams, "Pre-Nicene orthodoxy?", 15.

⁵⁰ Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1986).

employing methods similar to those of biblical criticism.⁵¹ Wiles himself claims that Christian doctrinal affirmations from the 4th and 5th centuries depend upon a cultural episteme not commensurable with modern consciousness due to differing cosmologies, to say nothing of differing understandings of the self, economics, and the political realm. Williams offers numerous criticisms of this undertaking, primary among them a concern of undue epistemological confidence, that is, a concern that such modern criticism claims to know more than one truly can about the texts under consideration.

While Williams would not accuse Wiles of operating with the ahistorical essentialism of Walter Bauer, he nevertheless suggests that Wiles, despite his concern for viewing doctrinal texts in their historical context, is still searching for doctrinal purity free from the corrupting influences of, for instance, the imperial politics of 4th and 5th century Rome and Constantinople. He writes as if “we understand the early Christians’ experience so much better than they did that we can discount the greater part of what they concretely said not only as metaphor but as misplaced or dispensable metaphor.”⁵² Put this way, the method still resembles a project like Harnack’s: by identifying corrupting—and thus extraneous—influences such as imperial politics, a purer Christian message emerges, free of superfluous factors. Wiles’ method “can produce a search for pure sources, religion uncorrupted by the world,” Williams writes. Yet this desire to be free from “corrupting” historical influences misses the point of historical criticism in the first place. “The lesson of criticism is precisely that of the radically historical nature of all religious utterance: there is nothing untouched by culture and the contestation of power,” Williams

⁵¹ G. F. Wood, “Doctrinal Criticism,” in F. G. Healey, ed, *Prospect for Theology* (Welwyn: James Nesbit, 1966), 75.

⁵² Williams, “Maurice Wiles and Doctrinal Criticism,” 292.

writes.⁵³ While Wiles' project would first appear to expand the project of historical criticism to subjects like Christian creeds, he inadvertently restricts it.

Wiles' search for pure sources thus leaves him susceptible to historical anachronism. Williams argues that Wiles' theological affirmations, which would seem to come from his technique of whittling away historically accidental aspects of Christian doctrine, in fact still depends upon the affirmations of these creedal debates of which he is so suspicious. Wiles says, for example, that Jesus decisively changes how human beings conceive and speak of God and how God interacts with the world: this change is the primary "difference" Jesus makes. For early Christians, however, Jesus first changed how they *responded* to God; only after such responses were they able to change how they *thought* about God.⁵⁴ To say what Wiles says assumes that the earliest Christians could have easily figured out the manifold ways in which Jesus changes human thinking, when it took the early church many generations to process, ruminate over, and discern how Jesus changes human conceptions of God. Wiles writes as if the earliest Christians asked certain questions about Jesus' relation to God the Father, when in fact these questions came later in the church's life—reflected in Nicene debates. In Williams' words, there is no "prior apprehension of the life and death of Jesus as divine action," as if the disciples knew the whole story from the beginning. The primitive church, including the writers of the New Testament, had not and could not have articulated Wiles' theological affirmation, nor Origen's nor Athanasius' nor the Cappadocians. Nor should we expect them to. The trouble with Wiles' approach, Williams writes, is "importing into the understanding of the first believers a kind of 'pre-doctrinal' (not only pre-dogmatic) and innocent kernel of belief (Jesus shows us the truth

⁵³ Williams, "Maurice Wiles and Doctrinal Criticism," 283.

⁵⁴ Williams writes that the New Testament writers were less concerned with questions about how we think about God in light of Jesus, rather they were concerned with "the difference Jesus makes ... with how and with whom God may be called upon...." Williams, "Maurice Wiles and Doctrinal Criticism," 290.

about God) which is in fact dependent upon, the deposit of, a highly developed chain of reflection.” The ultimate irony of this approach of extracting an “innocent kernel” of Christian doctrine is that the kernel itself raises exactly the sorts of questions that led to the early church’s doctrinal debates. “What can now be salvaged from the chastened doctrinal heritage must be something like what impelled the Christian enterprise in the first place; and the chastening of the doctrinal heritage is itself spurred by a recognition of the distance between foundational experience and its supposedly mythological articulation.”⁵⁵ Such critiques apply not only to Wiles, but to many in the search for the “historical Jesus” as well, who often read back onto Jesus a singular, static message.

In his critique, Williams has employed epistemology and historicism in a more thoroughgoing manner than Wiles himself. Wiles follows historical thinking only up to a point, then abstracts an ahistorical notion of Jesus; Harnack’s essentialism proves difficult to exorcise. Williams contends, on the other hand, that modern critical scholarship does not hold epistemic priority over other interpreters. Theologians and historians can—and should—examine historical and political contexts, can and should assess scripture and doctrine in light of the political contestations at play in processes like creedal formation. But modern scholars can only achieve so much: they still depend upon the sources themselves. They cannot in any ultimate sense get “behind” the text. Wiles does not adequately account for the fact that our knowledge of Jesus is always necessarily mediated by the original persons who experienced Jesus and wrote about him dying and rising from the dead. He reasons as if moderns have a unique ability to abstract ourselves from culture and context, as if the modern self can somehow be removed from the process of thinking in history, with little or no debt to thinkers who came before us and gave us

⁵⁵ Williams, “Maurice Wiles and Doctrinal Criticism,” 290.

the texts and ideas we ourselves ponder. Williams continues, “It is a little bit as if the devout imagination could make us coeval with Jesus and the first believers, so that we can lay hold of the buried pearl of Jesus’ ‘impact’ and yet remain free of those cultural pressures that lead inexorably towards the errors of doctrine.”⁵⁶ What for Wiles seem like “distortions” of doctrine are for Williams simply matters of limited human beings searching for doctrinal truth amid their unavoidable cultural contexts.

Williams’ response to historical criticism is, in short, more history. It is more history in an epistemological sense, a recognition that all thinkers—the present writer included—think within constraints of time-bound personhood. In this regard, Williams draws from Kierkegaard:

The experience of the believer contemporary with Christ furnishes the *occasion* or *condition* of subsequent faith, not its *normative content*. What prompts and forms belief is not the ‘raw’ event of the life of Jesus, but that event as witnessed to—as already mediated. If we have to make ourselves contemporary in imagination with the first believers, reconstructing an ‘impact’, our faith will constantly come to rest either in speculative projections or in inoffensive generalities. We have no way of saying what *we* would see as contemporaries of Jesus and the apostles: the ‘impact’ of Jesus is itself embedded in a world of image and expectation not our own, and we could not ever be in a position to evaluate this more satisfactorily than Jesus’ contemporaries—having the experience (as Eliot might have said) but *not* missing the meaning. It is not simply that the importance of Jesus is misconstrued: what the experience of Jesus as significant actually amounts to is, as a historical question, answerable only in the terms of his contemporaries. He was important for first-century reasons, not important for timeless reasons distorted by confused first-century minds. I suspect that Wiles here is not enough of a historical relativist!”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Williams, “Maurice Wiles and Doctrinal Criticism,” 290-291.

⁵⁷ Williams, “Maurice Wiles and Doctrinal Criticism,” 291, italics mine. Williams makes similar points in “Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?”: The record and image of Jesus in the early church “is conceived as a parabolic story, yet it is remembered in diverse and less than wholly coherent narrative forms, whose historical foundation is uncertain. To be introduced into relation with such a figure is to encounter what is not exhaustible in word or system—or so Christians have concluded: it is to step into *faith* (rather than a definitive enlightenment). In so far as certain features of the development of canon and orthodoxy paradoxically worked *against* the absorption of Jesus into a thematized religious subjectivity and a system of ideas, they preserved the possibility of preaching Jesus as a questioning and converting presence in ever more diverse cultures and periods, and the possibility of intelligible debate and self-criticism within Christianity.” (17)

Moderns cannot get around the disciples and what they experienced; we cannot transpose our intellectual categories onto their experience to achieve a “truer” knowledge of Jesus than the disciples themselves. Historical critical writings may remove or bracket divine revelation as a data point for historical research, but their methods still do not achieve an ahistorical reference point. While Wiles concludes that sufficient evidence does not exist for certain doctrinal affirmations, like the incarnation, for Williams this misses the point of doctrine itself. Jesus’ incarnation concerns not just his fleshly body in Palestine (important though that is) but also about the evidence of Jesus’ body in the ongoing community of the church. Thus Williams’ account of the resurrected Christ not only entails an empty tomb, but draws from primitive Christian communities who claim Jesus still present in their own community life. Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann aptly captures the sentiment of the intimate connection between the historical figure of Jesus and his followers: “The historical reality of Christ was of course the undisputed ground of the early Christians’ faith: yet they did not so much remember Him as know He was with them.”⁵⁸ The reason that the early church was not as worried about a distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is not simply that they lived closer to the time of Jesus or that they lacked a modern critical consciousness; it is because they sensed Jesus present among them. Thus Williams’ response to historical critical studies is not *only* more history, but also a Christology with a strong place for Jesus’ presence across history in the life of the church.

Bauer and Wiles display tendencies still common in modern Christian scholarship, tendencies which inhibit a rigorous understanding of syncretism because they remove doctrine from genuine encounter with material history, whether in Jesus’ own day or in Christianity’s

⁵⁸ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Press, 2000), 20.

subsequent transmission across time and culture. Writers like Bauer and Wiles fail to recognize our own embeddedness in time as thinkers, always carrying history in our thought. While modern theology purports to take account of human embeddedness in history—theologian Bruce McCormack, for example, contends that “historical consciousness” is one of the essential features of modern theology—nevertheless it often relies upon latent essentialist and ahistorical doctrine.⁵⁹ In this regard, Williams begins to show his great debt to the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel.

III.2. Revelation amid Material History

Comparing Williams’ earlier versus later writings, his concern for history shifts from a largely theological vein to a concern both theological and epistemological. In his early writing and through *Arius*, he writes as a theologian who cares profoundly about history, displaying the extent to which doctrine grows as Christians continually reflect upon Jesus and the Christian life. In this regard, Williams also shows his indebtedness to Vladimir Lossky. Once Williams absorbs the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, however, the role of history becomes far more expansive. It moves to being an aspect of doctrine to being infused within thought itself and therefore inherent to human reception of divine communication.

Lossky provides the launching point for Williams’ engagement with doctrine and history, for Williams depicts Lossky as one who saw revelation in progress well after the life of Jesus through subsequent theological reflection. In Lossky, for example, perceived “deviations” in doctrine like those in Clement and Origen are part of the process of forming orthodoxy.

Therefore, we do not know if a thinker is “right” or “wrong” until later Christians have had an

⁵⁹ Bruce McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies In the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 11.

opportunity to reflect upon their insights. Indeed, part of the trouble with Clement and Origen, Lossky contends, was that they failed to adequately “baptize” Greek thought, a task the Cappadocians more ably performed. (This assessment begs the question whether Clement or Origen—in their human finitude—*could* have adequately baptized Greek thought like the Cappadocians, especially given the remarkable doctrinal insights they had already achieved.) Lossky’s tradition is “living and developing,” very much like the tradition depicted in the theological postscript of *Arius*, even if Williams depicts a more contentious and less fundamentally cohesive orthodoxy than Lossky. To Williams, Lossky is an historian “identifying what it is that gives a group of very diverse thinkers at various periods [such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor] such homogeneity as they have, and in assessing how successfully various of them balance fidelity with ‘creative reinterpretation’, and assimilate material from outside the tradition.”⁶⁰ Yet Hegel will enlarge history even further for Williams.

In his earlier writings, Williams expressed hesitation regarding Hegel, concerned that his philosophical system sought undue tidiness and premature finality. “I had begun by taking very much for granted the view of Hegel that treats him as a thinker obsessed with final reconciliations and total intellectual schemes,” Williams writes.⁶¹ Yet through student Andrew Shanks and friend Gillian Rose, he reassessed Hegel to appreciate how his philosophy articulates the ever unfinished quality of human thought and language. “These two persuaded me to rethink Hegel and to grasp that what he was concerned with was not a system that could be projected on

⁶⁰ Williams, “Lossky, the *via negativa* and the foundations of theology,” 17. See also Williams’ dissertation, “The Theology of Vladimir Nikolaievich Lossky: An Exposition and Critique” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oxford, 1975). The *via negativa* itself is an abiding theological challenge to conceptions of fixed doctrine: a fixed positive doctrine inherently lacks negation, and thus neglects the process of attaining spiritual knowledge that apophaticism assumes. Christian utterance is not “another closed system, incapable of responding to ‘prophetic’ interruption” (“The Unity of Christian Truth” in *On Christian Theology* 16-28, 19). Negative theology is not simply a style of theology for Williams, but rather an aspect of any thorough doctrinal enterprise, a phase in the ongoing process of making theology.

⁶¹ Williams, “Author’s Introduction,” *Wrestling with Angels*, xiii-xix, xiv.

to some detached reality ‘out there’, but a habit of thinking that always sought to understand itself as a process of self-questioning and self-dissolution in the process of discovering *real* language—and thus real thinking.”⁶² For Hegel, negation is not a “passing moment” but rather the “energy” of thought itself as the individual finds herself amid a community and amid “the journey to truth.”⁶³ Language, and thought itself, always takes place first in history and, second, in relation with others.

Because thought occurs in time, it presumes history. However much thinking might *feel* timeless when it contemplates static objects of thought, it cannot be so: humans might contemplate a static object, but, as we do, we remain in time. After all, “Contemplation reveals the object, not the subject,” Hegel interpreter Alexandre Kojève notes.⁶⁴ If one thinks of a chair resting in front of a table, the chair may be imagined as still but the thinker remains timebound. Hegel posits an “irresistibility of the motion of thought,” Williams writes. “Because there is no moment of pure, unmediated identity in the actual world, there are no discrete and simple objects for thought to rest in. No perceived reality is stable and self-contained for thinking.”⁶⁵ Thought itself depends upon such irresistible motion. We may be tempted to believe that a fixed reality provides some kind of mental surety, assuring stability and concreteness; yet this not only misunderstands epistemology, but also our apprehension of the sacred. “Liberation here is liberation from a sterile and reductive adhesion to a fixed perception of fixed states of affairs. The holy, the graceful, is not interruption, the timeless overthrowing of process and purpose, but is inseparable from the labour of making—which is necessarily, for Hegel, the labour of finding:

⁶² Williams, *ibid.* xiv.

⁶³ Williams, *ibid.* See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1991).

⁶⁴ Alexandre Kojève. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Cornell University Press, 1980), 3.

⁶⁵ Williams, “Logic and Spirit in Hegel” in *Wrestling with Angels*, 37.

hence its innate and massive *difficulty*, its distance from voluntarist play.”⁶⁶ Thus, it is not just that doctrine plays out within history, as in Lossky, it is that God’s revelation comes through human understanding embedded within history. “Time and understanding belong together,” Williams writes.⁶⁷

Thought takes place in history, but also in relation with others: we think as social creatures.⁶⁸ Indeed, the relationality of thought is why language proves so vital to its exercise. Williams writes, “The implication of locating the self firmly in this temporal context is of course to locate it also in the processes of linguistic *exchange* that are initiated by a venture of understanding. To be a time-conditioned self is also to be a *social* self, a self formed in interaction.”⁶⁹ We communicate with others, and by doing so we ourselves come to understand what we mean through our own communication. The question “am I making sense?” in common conversation shows this sort of interdependence. Such effort not only assures effective communication, the listener’s response subsequently shapes the speaker’s own thoughts. For Hegel, the human interconnection required for thought is so important that thought and language themselves presume a certain degree of reconciliation with other persons: to communicate adequately with another is to relate with them rather than seeing them as an inherent rival to oneself. Such reconciliation implies that thinking itself entails love (and therefore, for Hegel, God).

⁶⁶ Williams, “Hegel and the gods of postmodernity,” 30. Italics his.

⁶⁷ Williams, “Hegel and the gods of postmodernity,” 30.

⁶⁸ Given this dissertation’s concern with incorporating non-Western perspectives into Christian theology, note the extent to which Hegel feels he must justify an anthropology of being-in-other as the individual self comes into consciousness through others, which displays the extent of individuality in Western conceptions of the self. African communitarian thought such as ubuntu anthropology assumes human interconnection from the start; it sees no need to “begin” with the individual and subsequently move to another. See Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997).

⁶⁹ Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 81. Italics his.

Thinking about objects and persons then entails the consideration of their relations with other objects and persons. For someone to recognize a chair, one must recognize that it is neither a stool nor an ottoman nor a couch; yet like all of these things it is an object to sit upon. In Hegel's *Logic*, thinking entails what Williams calls "complementary opposition." Any thing is what it is because it is not something else, its definition depends upon excluding other possibilities from its reality. "Each 'thing' is defined by not being another, lives in and only in the absence of another, and so 'passes over' from being a discrete object to being a moment in a complex movement."⁷⁰ As much as objects' definitions depend upon fundamental dissimilarity from other objects, they also depend upon the existence of those other objects, because we would have no proper conception of objects if their contrasts did not also exist. To think about objects and persons is thus to think within an interrelated cosmos. "Hegel's contention," Williams writes, is "that to think about thinking is to think about, or rather to think *within*, an infinite relatedness, a comprehensive intelligibility."⁷¹ Here also, thinking itself entails God, who is the infinite relatedness that enables thinking.

This historical and relational character of thought shapes Christian understanding of God's communication and of Christian doctrine itself. First, doctrine is not "command of data," something "done with and settled," but rather "a challenge left open."⁷² In this regard Williams expands upon his conception of doctrinal development in *Arius*. As in *Arius*, Williams holds that Christian doctrine is not simply a set of propositions and directives. Yet doctrine is also an enterprise carried out by humans who always think within time, even when thinking about eternal subject matters. Thus creeds might provide a structure for the church's subsequent

⁷⁰ Williams, "Logic and Spirit," 37.

⁷¹ Williams, "Logic and Spirit," 38.

⁷² Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 25, 83-84.

language, but are not propositions in a static “yes or no,” “right or wrong” sense. The conclusions of Nicaea and Chalcedon offer only a beginning, not an end, to Christian talk about God. Rather than finalizing conversation, creeds say something like, “if Jesus is Lord, then here is how to start thinking about God, Jesus, and Spirit.” Williams writes, “the priority is less the communication of principles and injunctions than the bringing of the hearer into ‘dramatic’ relation with the subject of the story.”⁷³ The mistake of the Gnostics was not simply their cosmology, nor their Christology, but their presumption that the gospel brings one into a static, achieved enlightenment—as if our salvation as time-bound creatures could in any sense be complete in this life. Gnostics fail to provide a “temporal account of faith.”⁷⁴ Narratives play such a large role in the canonical gospels due to the importance of history itself, for narratives reflect history in ways propositions cannot.

Furthermore, because revelation comes to human beings who think in history, revelation carries the marks of history; God’s revelation itself comes to human beings by way of historical processes. This is not a flaw of revelation—as if God could or should have communicated timelessly beyond the particularity of a single culture—it is an inevitability of God communicating to human subjects. Elements of material history in the gospel are not husks to be removed from a core, rather such particularities become aspects of revelation itself. The culturally particular egalitarian political system in Israel can be seen as an aspect of YHWH’s uniqueness: YHWH chose a people of the Ancient Near East who did *not* have an authoritarian king but rather a people who practiced a politics of relative social equality for their day. Jesus’

⁷³ Williams, “Pre-Nicene orthodoxy?”, 15-16.

⁷⁴ Williams, “Pre-Nicene orthodoxy?”, 16. The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, for instance, noticeably lacks a portrayal of Jesus’ life in history, as in the canonical gospels; it is largely a series of Jesus’ teachings. “Thus in the ‘dramatic’ perspective, with its inbuilt tension between role and plot, the creation of meaning and the imposition of meaning, Christian theology offers a deliverance from the menace of pure (structuralist) functionalism, without simply taking refuge in a static essentialist dogma or a privatised existentialism” (Williams, “The Finality of Christ,” 96).

death at the hands of the *Roman* imperium is not a husk to be ignored once one has seen the significance of Jesus' death as a sacrifice for human sin. His death is itself a challenge to imperial state violence like Rome's.

At the same time, neither is the one culture and context in which Jesus lived lifted up beyond history, as if ancient Palestine and Jesus' life therein become abstracted. In a critique of Karl Barth, Williams expresses a concern that for Barth "revelation occurs *in* but not as *part of* history."⁷⁵ That is, especially in the early Dogmatics, revelation occurs to human beings but avoids bearing the marks of history itself—there is "absolute isolation of the revelatory event from any historical condition."⁷⁶ While this overstates Barth slightly,⁷⁷ in Barth's rhetoric at least the revelation of Jesus is a revolution that interrupts human understanding, without adequate acknowledgement of the extent to which such knowledge has to be mediated by and through humans living within conditioned cultural frameworks.⁷⁸ In overlooking such, Barth does not seem bothered by historicism but neither does he use it as extensively as Williams does. Barth offers "epistemological security" but still an abstracted security.⁷⁹ For Williams, on the other hand, the seemingly contingent becomes an aspect of divine revelation: revelation "does not insist that meaning is delivered to us from a normative elsewhere."⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," in *On Christian Theology*, 131-147, 133.

⁷⁶ Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," 133. Williams continues on Karl Barth, "Revelation interrupts the uncertainties of history with a summons to absolute knowledge, God's knowledge of and interpretation of himself."

⁷⁷ The later Barth is more careful. In *The Humanity of God* for example, Barth writes, "In Jesus Christ there is no isolation of man from God or of God from man. Rather, in Him we encounter the history, the dialogue, in which God and man meet together and are together, the reality of the covenant *mutually* contracted, preserved, and fulfilled by them" (*The Humanity of God*, trans John Newton Thomas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 46). Nevertheless, in *The Humanity of God*, Barth remains more comfortable with "parables" from culture rather than Jesus taking on aspects human culture as in Williams' thought (55).

⁷⁸ Graham Ward takes up this critique of Barth more thoroughly in his book *Christ and Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), see especially 1-26.

⁷⁹ On Barth and epistemology, Kantian epistemology in particular, see Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

⁸⁰ Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," 134.

In sum, the response to what would seem a challenge of pervasive syncretism, the challenge of a gospel that never seems quite “pure”, is a richer account of history and God revealing God’s self through history. Any account of the gospel that claims to know what Jesus “really” said or did or was trying to do, whether Harnack’s, Bauer’s, Wiles’, Crossan’s, or anyone else, fails to recognize the historicity of the thinkers themselves. In contemplating the object, Jesus, they fail to account for their own time-bound subjectivity. Because Jesus existed and continues to exist in the church through history, doctrine is always in progress. Jesus doesn’t sit still; the very fact that Jesus is re-presentable indicates that there is more to see of the Logos. Revelation both is and is not complete. It is complete in the sense that we have seen Jesus in human history in ancient Palestine; it is not complete in the sense that our limited human sight has not seen all there is to see of Jesus. In this regard, there is an important positive corollary to the point that we cannot get behind history and that revelation bears the marks of time. If Christianity is not simply about retrieving a sacrosanct Jesus and who existed at a moment in time and applying that Jesus to today, if Christian doctrine develops and grows, then all Christians have a part to play in the continual discovery of Jesus. As Jesus becomes present in every Christian, that Christian shows something new of the Logos. To recognize the part that *we* play in seeing more of Jesus requires fuller attention to the Holy Spirit.

IV. The Syncretizing Spirit

Williams’ theology of the Holy Spirit is profoundly interconnected with his Christology. To contemplate the Logos is to already be within the work of the Spirit. In Williams’ pneumatology the Logos accretes—at least by temporal human perceptions—as Christianity spreads to various times and places; there are aspects of Jesus that we will only see as Christians encounter the

unfamiliar. Such unfamiliarity is not a threat to the gospel, for the deposit of faith is sufficiently capacious to incorporate the unfamiliar. Williams writes, “the fundamental categories of belief are robust enough to survive the drastic experience of immersion in other ways of constructing and construing the world.”⁸¹ Indeed, Williams contends, Christian belief does not simply survive the immersion, it grows and it rediscovers itself through the immersion. When Jesus says in John 16:15 that the Spirit “will take what is mine and give it to you,” it not only implies a gifting of Jesus’ power to the disciples, it also implies that Christian disciples will themselves possess aspects of Jesus that will enrich fellow Christians.⁸² In short, the Holy Spirit joins with human thought, human life, and human culture.

In building a pneumatology, Williams is clear that the Holy Spirit is far more than simply a means of God’s communication, as so often portrayed in Western theology. Western theology often sees the Spirit simply as God’s “teacher”, as the channel through which God speaks to us. If God’s communication is the primary role for Spirit, then it is no surprise that Western theology often overlooks it. After all, God also communicates—offers God’s word or Logos—through Christ. “Pneumatology looks uncomfortably like an exercise designed simply to explain how we know what Christ does,” Williams writes, “the Spirit is the seal of the epistemological security.”⁸³ It would seem at times that there is little left for the Spirit to do in Western theology, once the Spirit communicates Christ who is himself the primary communication of the Father.⁸⁴ But if Christology and pneumatology are not overly distinct areas of dogma, then as the Spirit incorporates humans into Christ’s body, the Spirit is also building up the Logos. In baptism, for

⁸¹ Williams, “Prologue,” xiv.

⁸² Williams references this scripture in “Trinity and Revelation,” 143.

⁸³ Williams, “Word and Spirit” in *On Christian Theology*, 107-127, 118.

⁸⁴ For important exceptions to this trend, see Robert Jensen, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1: The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Eugene Rogers *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources Outside the Modern West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

example, the Spirit not only makes us God's children in joining our lives to Christ, our own selves become incorporated into Christ's body. Each of the baptized bears newly discovered aspects of the Logos, such that Christ's body is ever growing and incorporating.

IV.1. An Accreting Logos

Williams initially draws this interconnection between the Son and Spirit from Vladimir Lossky, then expands the insight through his own theological vision. For Lossky, the Spirit undergoes its own kenosis, as Christ did, by its coming to dwell within humans: the Spirit "effaces" itself in giving grace, working through us to become bearers of God's grace.⁸⁵ The Spirit's presence within implies that "the will of God is no longer external to ourselves." Christ "will manifest Himself in deified persons," Lossky writes, "for the multitude of the saints will be His image."⁸⁶ Lossky describes a kind of feedback loop between Christ and the saints: the saints receive their identity from Christ as the Spirit dwells within them, yet the fullness of the body of Christ is not simply the human Jesus who walked in Palestine in the first century. The fullness of Christ is the accumulated image of the saints across time, with Jesus as the head of the body.

Williams takes Lossky's instinct and portrays it from a more human, time-bound vantage point. Lossky writes as if with a full picture of Jesus; even if not all the saints who will constitute Jesus' image have yet lived, the image still carries a certain completeness. In contrast, Williams writes from where we sit now—as he says, his methodology begins "in the middle of things."⁸⁷

From where we sit, we do not yet see this complete Christ, and so the most appropriate way to

⁸⁵ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (St. Vladimir's Press, 1991), 172. The image of the Spirit's kenosis is on 168.

⁸⁶ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 173.

⁸⁷ When describing his theological methodology in the Prologue of *On Christian Theology*, Williams writes, "I assume that the theologian *is* always beginning in the middle of things. There is a practice of common life and language already there, a practice that defines a specific shared way of interpreting human life as lived in relation to God" (xii).

describe this Christ, as human beings still within time and expecting to see more of Christ through other holy lives, is to describe the Spirit working to build the Logos, block by block or saint by saint. “To the extent that the relation of the Spirit to Logos is still being realized in our history, we cannot ever, while history lasts, say precisely all that is to be said about Logos.”⁸⁸

Williams paints a vivid portrait of this process:

So the relation between Jesus and Christian believers is the basis on which there comes to be built up a particular vision of God’s nature and action. There is a single authoritative form of human flourishing, liberty before God and full response to God, the Logos made flesh in Jesus; we speak of Jesus’ existence as a divine act from first to last because it is recognized as having a potential for bringing together the whole of the world we know in a new unity and intelligibility. This potential is realized in a way that is always historically incomplete—so that the unity and intelligibility can never be seized as a single object to a single mind. It can only be hoped and worked for, as lives are touched and changed, moving into the likeness of Jesus’ freedom before God, and that movement of manifold change, the endless variety of imitations of Christ, is where we recognize the divine action as *Spirit*—the same divine action as establishes the form of the incarnate Logos, but working now to realize that form in a diversity as wide as the human race itself. Thus, in theological terms, human history is the story of the discovery or realization of Jesus Christ in the faces of all women and men. The fullness of Christ is always *to be* discovered, never there already in a conceptual pattern that explains and predicts everything; it is the fullness of *Christ* that is to be discovered, a unity that holds together around this one story.⁸⁹

While Williams’ vision sounds less complete than Lossky’s, in other ways he expands the imagery. First, Williams portrays a deeper sense of discovery—we do not yet know the fullness of the Logos. Second, the image of Christ is not simply an accumulation of the saints, but “the discovery or realization of Jesus Christ in the faces of *all* women and men.” Finally, Williams carries a more elaborate sense of Christ incorporating the unexpected and strange into Christ’s body, as well as a more diverse image of Christ. The “endless variety of imitations of Christ” turns out to be “where we recognize the divine action as Spirit.”

⁸⁸ Williams, “Trinity and Pluralism” in *On Christian Theology*, 167-180, 178.

⁸⁹ Williams, “Trinity and Pluralism,” 173. Italics his.

Williams grounds this pneumatology in a rich engagement with the New Testament, for a confidence that the church will discover more of Jesus emerges quite early in Christian thought. The earliest Christian theologians, New Testament writers John and Paul, present Jesus not simply as a human being who existed in a particular place and time—although he was certainly that. Jesus also unveils a new prototype of being human (Romans 5, I John 1:1-4). Jesus is both a prophet in first century Palestine and also the model of future humanity, the “shape of the potential future of all human beings.”⁹⁰ For John and Paul, Christians discover this new humanity through one another. “Thus each believer is, *through* the agency of other believers, growing into a ‘Christ-shaped future’, in the sense that his or her possibilities are defined with reference to Jesus,” Williams writes.⁹¹ In a model that resembles Hegel’s portrayal of human thought with others and in history, Christian growth comes through the wider community of believers *and* is inherently incomplete because there are ever more people who will show more of Jesus.

Thus John and Paul set the stage for Christianity to grow in vibrancy and life as it encounters new environments and new cultures, for Christ becomes encountered anew in each Christian convert and each new context. Christian mission itself assumes the possibility of such newness. Again, it is not simply that an original revelation of Jesus is re-presented to a new audience, it is that in the re-presentation more is discovered. The re-presentation itself becomes a means of revelation. “The uncovering in new contexts of the face of Christ becomes one of the tasks of theology,” Williams contends.⁹² The revelation that occurs in processes of Christian transmission is “the illuminating or transforming operation of the Spirit.”⁹³ Relating to themes of Chapter 3, this approach to mission offers a notably different one than inculturation,

⁹⁰ Williams, “Trinity and Pluralism,” 171.

⁹¹ Williams, “Trinity and Pluralism,” 172. Italics his.

⁹² Author’s interview with Rowan Williams, July 20, 2016, Cambridge, UK.

⁹³ Williams, “Trinity and Revelation,” 143.

indigenization, and contextualization: rather than a static Christian gospel that accumulates material in various cultures, with new material being largely incidental to the overall message, in Williams' approach the communication of the gospel uncovers fresh revelations of the Logos that become part of the universal message of Christianity. "The assumption," Williams writes, "is that this or that intellectual idiom not only offers a way into fruitful conversation with the current environment but also that the unfamiliar idiom may uncover aspects of the deposit of belief hitherto unexamined."⁹⁴ Williams offers the specific examples of Christianity "colonizing" Stoic and Platonic thought, but the point extends to all sorts of other "unfamiliar" idioms, whether aspects of African communitarianism or Celtic spirituality. The primary challenge for Westerners is whether our theological imaginations are sufficiently capacious to appreciate this same sort of "colonizing" freedom displayed by Christian theology in the global South.

Thus as the gospel spreads, the Spirit enriches it with an ever more diverse and universal picture of Christ. Christ is Jewish, first and primarily, but he also incorporates aspects of all human cultures into his own self, into the *body* of Christ. Jesus is the "divine stranger who creates a common world" by being the summation of all humanity in its diversity.⁹⁵ There is a single universal humanity, which is Christ, "a single authoritative form of human flourishing, liberty before God and full response to God, the Logos made flesh in Jesus." Yet this single form is only achieved by incorporating "endless variety" into Christ's body by means of the Holy Spirit's indwelling. As universal human, Jesus does not simply become the receptacle for human culture whatever its manifestation, however, as if Jesus is simply the final blending of any religion and culture that has existed. Williams writes, "We may still want to confess that in Christ 'all things cohere', but it is possible to understand this as saying not that 'in Christ all

⁹⁴ Williams, "Prologue," xiv.

⁹⁵ Williams, *Why Study the Past* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 114.

meanings are contained' but that 'on Christ's judgement all histories converge.' " Jesus is not a container of all meaning, for God allows freedom for human cultures to possess their own meanings, but Jesus is the "test, judgement and catalyst" of such meanings.⁹⁶ Christ both incorporates and judges the diversity of human culture, incorporating what is holy and rejecting that which mars the image of God. Nevertheless, Jesus is the means by which individual cultures find meaning beyond a simple "tribal" identity: "nations will stream to your light," Third Isaiah says (Isaiah 60:3). As they are incorporated into the body of Christ, the "Christianness" of their meanings become not simply meanings for one individual culture, but universal meanings in and through their participation in Christ's body.⁹⁷ Guadalupe, for example, becomes not simply a figure for Mexico: she reveals something about Mary that Christians had not seen before, something of value for the universal church.

The Spirit's incorporation of the unexpected and strange means that Williams' pneumatology joins the universal and the particular without subsuming the latter into the former. Such universal humanity, because it is always incorporating particularities into itself, does not trample upon others; the universal Logos rejects blunt homogenization.⁹⁸ Thus human solidarity does not come about through common employment of reason that invariably leads humans to reach common conclusions, in a Kantian fashion. Rather universal humanity is ever still to be discovered as the Holy Spirit incorporates more persons and cultures into an accreting Logos. By Williams' pneumatology, the local and the particular become both humbled and accentuated. Humbled because one's own particular culture and context is not the summit of all of human

⁹⁶ Williams, "The Finality of Christ" in *On Christian Theology*, 93-106, 94.

⁹⁷ "Christianness" is a term Williams borrows from Raimundo Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber, and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments of Christic Self-consciousness," in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, ed, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1987): 89-116.

⁹⁸ Williams expresses particular worry about "forces in our world that make for the reduction of persons and personal communities to units in large-scale, determined processes, resistance to the power of the universal market or the omnipotent state." ("Trinity and Pluralism," 174)

achievement. Yet the particular becomes accentuated because all peoples and times and places may become means and agents of God's revelation. The Spirit is "that which realizes in the endless diversity of human lives the set of renewed human possibilities opened up by the work of Christ."⁹⁹

In portraying Christ as the universal human, Christians must tread lightly given the long interconnection between elements of Christian mission and the European colonial project, a concern Williams readily acknowledges. Christian interest in history has been an "ambiguous affair," especially when easily conflated with Western understandings of progress conceived in terms closely aligned with Western capitalism and state politics.¹⁰⁰ "A Christian theology of history has all too often in recent centuries allied itself with a Western doctrine of linear progress, which has functioned as an enemy of native cultures and world-views in the non-Western world," he writes.¹⁰¹ Confession is thus pivotal to Christian mission today: "Believing in the church catholic must mean believing in the church penitent."¹⁰² To the extent that the church has participated in the degradation of non-Western cultures in the name of a static gospel that unduly resembles European Christianity of the 19th and early 20th centuries, contemporary proclamation entails confession. Seeing the fullness of Christ invites Western Christians to discover indigenous Christianity in the global South, allowing it to judge our incomplete Western gospel.

The body of Christ is not complete until its incorporation of all peoples, cultures, and histories into the redeemed body of Christ, a body formed by the Holy Spirit. "The Son is

⁹⁹ Williams, "The Unity of Christian Truth," 26.

¹⁰⁰ For a textured example of such pairings, see Jean and John Comaroff *Of Revelation and Revolution Volume One: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹⁰¹ Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism," 171.

¹⁰² Williams, "Mission and Spirituality," in *Ray of Darkness*, (New York: Cowley, 1995), 221-244, 230.

manifest in a single, paradigmatic figure, the Spirit is manifest in the ‘translatability’ of that into the contingent diversity of history,” Williams writes. “Freedom in the Spirit is uncircumscribed; and yet it always has the shape of Jesus the Son—another way of expressing Paul’s paradoxes of law and liberty.”¹⁰³ Just as the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary to bring forth Jesus in her womb, so the Spirit works among the many features and forms of humanity to bring about the fullness of the Logos, a fullness revealed completely in the eschaton but still future to us. This takes place at both cultural and interpersonal levels; not only do various peoples of the earth show us more of the Logos, but each individual bears marks of Christ upon them that no other person bears. It is only with each other that we grow into the fullness of Christ.

IV.2. Discerning Revelation and Testing the Spirits

If the Holy Spirit works by way of syncretism, yet not all syncretisms become incorporated into Christianity, how do we recognize the Spirit? If the Spirit mediates revelation through ordinary human methods of communication, how does one identify it as something beyond the ordinary? Returning to themes of historicism, how is Christianity not just whatever history throws at us, a seemingly random blend of syncretisms? Surely there must be some identifying features of revelation if Christians are to recognize it as divine communication; surely certain innovations will prove beyond the bounds of Christian belief and practice.

For Williams, revelation is that which is “generative”; generative in the sense that it sparks new ways of seeing God, of conceiving God’s work in the world, while also unsettling comfortable religious assumptions. In many stories in the gospels, revelation is not necessarily a sudden flash of light; more often, revelations of Jesus lead to puzzlement and questioning, which

¹⁰³ Williams, “Word and Spirit,” 125-126.

in turn generate new ways of seeing. When people see Jesus' works their first instinct is often to question or even challenge him: "who can forgive sins but God alone?", the scribes and Pharisees wonder in Luke 5:21. Williams writes, "Revelation is a concept which emerges from a questioning attention to our present life in the light of a particular past, a past seen as 'generative.'"¹⁰⁴ Just as the past has been generative—reflected in scriptures and creeds—so may the present be. Rather than closing off debate, however, revelation typically initiates it, as with the scribes and Pharisees above. Williams writes, "So my thesis is that any such puzzlement over 'what the Church is meant to be' is the revelatory operation of God as 'Spirit' insofar as it keeps the Church engaged in the exploration of what its foundational events signify."¹⁰⁵ Conflict and crisis become means of revelation in part because they bring to the fore things that may never become known or explored without such crises. Williams writes, "What is sobering is the thought that we might not discover exactly what orthodoxy involves, short of a major crisis or threat."¹⁰⁶ If the egalitarian politics of ancient Israel discussed above prove an aspect of God's revelation, then centuries-long debates about kingship in Israel, as shown in Deuteronomistic literature and across the biblical prophets should be no surprise. Is God solely king of Israel, such that Israel's politics are necessarily egalitarian, without raising up a specific king who could compete with God, or can a human being serve as a lesser king? Crises open up certain questions Israel and the church were simply not asking before. Thus revelation draws from a history of God having communicated to us—the history of God choosing an egalitarian people, for instance—and an attention to where God may or may not be at work in the present time. Amid such debates, preemptive allocations of monikers like "heretic" and "orthodox" again prove

¹⁰⁴ Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," 134.

¹⁰⁵ Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," 144.

¹⁰⁶ Williams, *Why Study the Past?*, 58.

dangerous, as if the church already knows its complete doctrine and could simply make a straightforward judgment that certain ideas and practices inevitably fit into one category or the other. Given human beings' roles in discerning such debates, Williams admits some hesitation regarding the imagery of revelation as "lifting the veil," a portrayal in which humans are largely passive. For Williams, a better approach would be to ask "if we live like this, has revelation occurred?"¹⁰⁷

Such acknowledgement of the textured debates at play when discerning God's revelation prevents reading certain syncretisms as unreflective moments in which Israel and the church crudely mix the religion of YHWH or the revelation of Christ with foreign substances. In the Old Testament, the incorporation of the Canaanite god El into the Jewish understanding of YHWH serves as one example. Ugaritic texts of the Ancient Near East describe El as the high god in the pantheon of the Canaanites, the god who created the world and was "first in the council of gods"; El was also known "as the friendly and merciful god," in the words of Old Testament scholar Anton Wessels.¹⁰⁸ In due course, as the Israelites expanded their presence in Canaan, traits associated with El were merged or transferred to YHWH, but not without aspects of El's mercifulness being incorporated into understandings of YHWH. Meanwhile, other aspects were disregarded, such as El being husband of goddess Asherah and father of lesser gods. The processes of incorporation were highly contested, as the biblical prophets so clearly indicate. Certain aspects of El enriched an understanding of YHWH while others did not. Nevertheless, the merging and incorporation of El into YHWH became a vital moment in Israel's growing affirmation of the universality of YHWH: if the foreign El can be incorporated into YHWH, then

¹⁰⁷ "Trinity and Revelation," 135.

¹⁰⁸ Anton Wessels, "Biblical Presuppositions and Syncretism" in Jerald Gort, Hendrik Vroom, Rein Fernhout, and Anton Wessels, eds, *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 55.

surely other conceptions of a high God are also capable of being transferred and incorporated as well. Indeed, the incorporation of aspects of El indicated YHWH was not simply a tribal god, but a universal God able to draw others into God's self. The syncretism of El led to an enriched understanding of YHWH as merciful and an enhanced understanding of YHWH as God of all people.

For Williams, constant reorientation to Israel's and the church's foundational events proves the primary means of "testing the spirits" to determine whether an innovation fits within the tradition (I John 4:1). In a single sentence Williams can say "learning and exchange must continue," but also say "progress needs to be checked against original inspiration, individually and collectively."¹⁰⁹ Great periods of Christian growth are reorientations to Christian foundations, such as the Reformation or 20th century neo-orthodoxy: "the movements of greatest theological vitality are all movements of 'recovery', of ressourcement, rather than simply innovation or simple repetition."¹¹⁰ Foundational events of Christianity are not just places to launch later reflection but also checks and orienting points for reflection and practices in progress. Thus in discerning newly discovered aspects of Jesus, Christians are not expecting something that does not accord with Jesus himself. Christians are not expecting something that supersedes Jesus, even if we do expect to see more of Jesus. Williams' pneumatology thus possesses qualities both daring and conservative. Daring insofar as what the Spirit might show the church remains open and "uncircumscribed." Yet it is conservative insofar as the aim of these debates is to keep "the Church engaged in the exploration of what its foundational events signify," that is, the debates are ways of talking about the Jesus portrayed in the scriptures. "We

¹⁰⁹ Williams, "Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?", 15.

¹¹⁰ Williams, *Why Study the Past?*, 97-98.

must be taught to find God in the present tension between tradition and unforeseen possibilities,” he writes.¹¹¹

Even as the church articulates its self-definition, it does so only in a tentative sense. The church orienting itself by its foundational events in Jesus is not a matter of following a primitive Christianity checklist, rather it is a matter of hearing and responding to the spirit of foundational Christian thought and practice. *Homoousios* would likely not fit such a checklist, for example, because it says more about Jesus than primitive Christianity did, for reasons explored above. Yet it does capture the spirit of primitive Christianity insofar as it portrays Jesus as a human so infused with divine light that he changes how humans respond to God. The church refuses to offer a sharp and complete definition of itself because the finality of Christ in the eschaton means the non-finality of the church today. Williams writes:

Inevitably, the Church becomes involved in patrolling its boundaries; not every spirit is of Christ, not every way of speaking and acting is capable of being transparent to Christ. Discipline is exercised, so that what is said and done in the Church displays its accountability. But when all justice has been done to this need, an area of reserve remains: we do not yet know what will be drawn out of us by the pressure of Christ’s reality, what the full shape of a future orthodoxy might be.¹¹²

As long as there is tomorrow, the church is incomplete and our knowledge of Jesus is incomplete. This reorientation to foundational events is not “an obsessive concern with knowing exactly who is outside, who can be trusted to reflect orthodoxy as I have learned it.” After all, the primary goal of patrolling boundaries is not the church’s self-identity, but its witness. More important is that such identity allows the church to speak freely to the world. Williams continues,

¹¹¹ Williams, “Trinity and Pluralism,” 179. Williams also views the lives of the saints as both checkpoints for potential innovations and sources of innovation. The saints articulate Christianity in ways that go above and beyond what the church might achieve through pure reason; they are forms of life that respond to Jesus with a different—at times fuller—coherence than reason can portray.

¹¹² Williams, *Why Study the Past?*, 58.

Definition matters, ultimately, so that resistance is possible to the idolatrous claims of total power that may be made from time to time in the world. ... Definition matters so that the Christian is free to say with conviction that the truth of the world and of humanity is not at the disposal of this or that system of political management.¹¹³

Self-identity is for the sake of proclamation. An aspect of the church's vocation is to remain partially free from the world, to the degree possible, so that it may participate in Christ's judgment of the world.

Until the eschaton, innovation is tested and judged by the ongoing discernment of the church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This tentative approach may certainly seem too open, too fluid, and insufficiently rigorous for many. As we found in Chapters 1 and 3, however, attempts to offer criteria more definitive and more binding end up saying too much or too little. The church's history shows that it often judges incorrectly, prematurely, and without sufficiently listening to context. Given this history of the church judging prematurely, especially the Western church, a vital virtue when discerning syncretism is patience—the capacity to listen attentively to the unfamiliar without dismissing it prematurely. “Christian mission,” Williams writes, “is not a recipe for talkative and confident activism; it requires something like a contemplative attention to the unfamiliar—a negative capability—a reluctance at least to force the language and behavior of others into Christian categories prematurely, remembering that our understanding of those categories themselves is still growing and changing.”¹¹⁴ Just as the contemplative waits upon God in silence without jumping in too quickly to assume where God is moving, so Christian mission listens to the unfamiliar, querying God's presence therein, waiting to discover new knowledge of Christ. Such attention to the unfamiliar is accompanied by *expectation* as the gospel spreads. Too often, when encountering the unfamiliar, Christians lead with anxiety

¹¹³ Williams, *Why Study the Past?*, 58.

¹¹⁴ Williams, “The Judgement of the World,” 39.

regarding Christianity's authenticity. Such concern has its place, but such anxiety often crowds out this sense of expectation. After all, "orthodoxy is common life before it's common doctrine."¹¹⁵

An ecclesiology of interdependence undergirds the patience required amid uncomfortable syncretisms. No one part of the church can define itself without the other, neither can it solely define another.¹¹⁶ "It is not without each other that we move towards the Kingdom; so that Christian history ought to be the story of continuing and demanding engagement with strangers, abandoning the right to decide who they are," Williams writes. "We shall none of us know who we are without each other—which may mean we shan't know who we are until Judgement Day."¹¹⁷ We discover our own Christian identity through Jesus by means of living in the community of the church as guided by the Spirit. Reflecting on patience amid interdependence, Williams says, "If I can't immediately see how Christ is sayable, thinkable, or imaginable in this context ... hang around. We don't quite know what's going to happen, what's going to be activated or triggered, or where the resonances are going to come."¹¹⁸ Christians do not yet know what Jesus is going to say next.

V. Conclusion

The Spirit works through syncretisms to bind us to the Logos, itself ever moving and growing by human sight. While static doctrine expressed through ahistorical essentialisms and through structuralisms has been a primary antagonist of this chapter—and the dissertation as a whole—

¹¹⁵ Rowan Williams, *Ray of Darkness*, 264.

¹¹⁶ God's covenant with Israel proves another salutary aspect in this regard for Williams, because it reminds the church that there is theological meaning which the church does not contain yet still requires; that is, the church requires God's covenant with Israel in order to be the church. "The Finality of Christ" 100 and 102.

¹¹⁷ Williams, "'Nobody Knows Who I am Till the Judgement Morning'" in *On Christian Theology*, 286.

¹¹⁸ Williams, author's interview, July 20, 2016.

the source of this problem runs deeper than such modern movements. Its source is human beings' desire for closure, the desire to complete and finalize our account of God. Nevertheless, Williams writes, "there remains an obstinately mobile and questioning force within [Christianity's] fundamental language."¹¹⁹ After all, who we will be in Christ has not yet been revealed (I John 3:2); what we "*will* finally be is not something theory will tell us, but something only discoverable in the expanding circles of encounter with what is not the Church."¹²⁰ Syncretism is oftentimes perceived as exactly that—"what is not the Church." Yet the fullness of the Logos comes to us not simply by way of the church reflecting upon itself: what we have not yet discovered of the Logos is "only discoverable" through encounter with the unfamiliar. Ultimately there is no simple checklist that offers a final determination in advance on some matter of controversy or the potential promise of some syncretism; such controversy is only worked out in history. Sympathetically approaching syncretisms thus becomes a necessity of Christian discipleship, a necessity of discovering ever more of the Logos.

¹¹⁹ Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism," 179.

¹²⁰ Williams, "Trinity and Pluralism," 180.

Chapter 6: Ancestors, Sacrifice, and the Bible

“Do not quench the Spirit.”

-The Apostle Paul, I Thessalonians 5:19

“To trust in the religious experience of indigenous peoples is to surrender oneself to the Spirit who is wiser than all ecclesial prudence and who knows the true paths far better than the theological search for the purity of Christian identity.”

-Leonardo Boff

On a hot, dusty day in the town square of Rumbek, South Sudan in 2004, Dinka religious leaders gathered with priests from the Catholic and Episcopal (Anglican) churches.¹ Townspeople and visitors alike congregated, along with women from the Episcopal Church’s Mothers Union. Everyone assembled around a pristine *Mabior*, a white bull, who awaited ritual slaughter. A Catholic bishop opened the ceremony with prayer: “God has decided to give us peace. ... God wants us to make Sudan a home for peace.” A Southern Sudanese Anglican priest read from the book of Psalms:

Bring us back, O God our Savior,
and stop being displeased with us!
Will you be angry with us forever?
Will your anger never cease?
Make us strong again,
and we, your people, will praise you.
Show us your constant love, O Lord,
and give us your saving help. (Psalm 85)

¹ This portrayal of bovine sacrifice, as well as ritual interpretations later in the chapter, are from Kane, “Ritual Formation of Peaceful Publics: Sacrifice and Syncretism in South Sudan (1991-2005),” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 44, no. 3-4, 386-410. Used with permission.

Another young South Sudanese Anglican priest sporting sunglasses played a bass drum to accompany singing women. Children from a Catholic primary school choir sang of hope: “I am the hope of my people, I am the healer.” The ritual included a variety of languages: the bishop spoke in English, priests in Dinka, English, and Arabic, while other Dinka and Nuer participants in their respective languages. Christian prayers opened the sacrifice ritual, while indigenous Dinka religious invocations accompanied and followed the ritual event.

The ritual moved toward the act of sacrifice as indigenous Dinka practices of intercession intermingled with Christian prayers and blessings. Dinka religious leaders nimbly moved around the *Mabior*. These ritual leaders—called spear-masters or masters of the fishing spear—pushed their long weapons toward the bull to taunt him, then pulled back. They repeated their taunting over and over as the bull became increasingly agitated, seemingly aware of his pending fate. The spear-masters spoke to the bull, telling him of his mission. His sacrifice would bind peace between the Dinka and the Nuer; he would carry a message to God and the spirits of those who had died that the long conflict between these neighboring peoples had ended. As the ritual drama developed, women ululated while holding Christian crosses in their hands. Meanwhile Nuer and Dinka elders and chiefs vividly threatened anyone who perpetuated the violent conflict between Dinka and Nuer: such perpetrators would follow the deadly path of the bull. Crowded concentric circles formed around the *Mabior*: spear-masters constituted an immediate circle, dancers and drummers surrounded them, and casual onlookers formed the final band. As the bull tired, seemingly entranced, young men wrestled him to the ground, some taking hold of his horns, others his feet. They held him in place as a spear-master cut his throat. Blood sprayed on young men and spear-masters, flowing out from the bull onto parched ground as participants celebrated.

To most Western Christians, this bovine sacrifice would not constitute a Christian ritual. As we will see, however, South Sudanese Christians offer textured theological accounts of this event—accounts that stand to enrich the apprehension of Christ’s atonement. Not only that, this ritual became a vital aspect of the church’s political witness in South Sudan, playing an important role in promoting peacemaking during the perpetual internecine conflict among rival rebel groups in the 1990s and 2000s. In this regard, the ritual and the People-to-People Peacemaking Process that surrounded it offer yet unexplored insights for Christian political ethics. Yet oftentimes, when describing this ritual outside South Sudan, the first question one encounters is whether it “counts” as a Christian event or a Christian ritual, with little or no sense of expectation that Christians could be experiencing an event that teaches them something, whether about sacrifice generally or Christ’s own sacrifice. Many Western Christians approach this ritual with a posture of defensiveness—is it “really Christian”—rather than one of anticipation that the Spirit could be at work.

Across this dissertation, my primary theological claim is that the Holy Spirit builds knowledge of the Logos across history, often by way of contested religious mixture with culture—or what is commonly called syncretism. Having initiated a theological case for such a claim, drawing especially from Rowan Williams, this final chapter displays the potential of this pneumatology by interpreting three contested practices across African Christianity, the area of my own research. The first practice, that of reverencing ancestors, I argue should become a Christian practice across the universal church. That is, reverencing ancestors can and should be fully incorporated into Christology and ecclesiology, for these ancestors are part of the communion of saints constituting the body of Christ across history. The second practice, the bull sacrifice narrated above, I argue can and should be incorporated among Dinka Christians, but I

do not argue for its inclusion into Christianity beyond its present contexts. Transporting the ritual elsewhere risks losing its rich contextual environment and thereby obscuring its very insights.

This approach also suggests that Christians should approach similar such rituals, whether among the Nuer or otherwise, with utmost openness as to their possible inclusion in the church. Indeed, even if bovine sacrifice does not become a ritual for the wider church, churches elsewhere can benefit from hearing theological arguments of South Sudanese, which can enhance Western Christian understanding and appreciation of Christ's own sacrifice. The final example is one that most Christians, myself included, would consider beyond the possibilities of incorporation into Christianity. The Friday apostolics of Zimbabwe are, by their own description, "Christians who do not read the Bible." They have rejected a normative place for scripture in their own lives, claiming direct access to the Holy Spirit unmediated by scriptural text. Even here, however, my objective is not to offer adjudication upon a group already disparaged by many Christians. Rather, I ask, how might a Christian look upon and interpret this community's controversial claims with the utmost respect, even while disagreeing with their conclusions. Why have they rejected the scriptures and what can we thereby learn? Might their protest of the scriptures tell the church something about itself, its history, and its theology? If we can hear the Friday apostolics on their own terms rather than simply labeling them "beyond the bounds" of Christianity, we might thereby hear a word from the Spirit.

These three examples offer various possibilities for approaching syncretisms in Christianity. Some syncretisms become part of the tradition, as I advocate regarding ancestor reverencing and as has been the case with Hellenistic Logos theology. Other practices might remain Christian practices in a particular time and place, without spreading to the universal church, as with the bull sacrifice ritual. In such cases, unique contexts invite varying Christian

responses. A context like South Sudan carries its own challenges quite different from those of a secularized Western culture. Yet the wider church can absorb the theological insights emerging from each context, since ongoing expressions of Christ's incarnation are not isolated from one another. Finally, some practices and beliefs would not be incorporated into Christianity, like the Friday apostolics' rejection of the Bible. Even so, Christians do well to listen to these practitioners with utmost respect, improving Christian witness based upon their encounters. These are three responses to syncretisms based on specific cases, surely more will emerge based upon other contexts and upon additional careful research.

I. Reverencing Ancestors: A Christian Account

Ancestor reverencing is one of the most pervasive and important spiritual practices across the African subcontinent. For many years, however, Western Christians thought it part of "animist" religion with few links with Christianity. Reverencing ancestors, however, is part of a holistic worldview and cosmology that links past and present to one another and connects an individual to a wider cosmological community. Indeed, many Christian theologians argue that African approaches to ancestors carry deep resonances with the doctrine of the communion of saints. Drawing from two preeminent thinkers, Catholic theologian Jean-Marc Éla and Presbyterian theologian Kwame Bediako, I argue not simply for the inclusion of ancestor reverencing as a Christian practice; I argue that it *improves* our understanding of the communion of saints. After providing brief context, I portray how these two theologians have both utilized and transmuted the practice into Christianity and how the practice enhances the church's doctrine.²

² Bediako and Éla, as well as John Mbiti, are sometimes critiqued for painting with too broad a brush when they speak of "African" practices like ancestor reverencing, overlooking the textured variety of the practice across the continent. These critiques are fair, yet the widespread commonality of such a practice is of great importance and can

In many African cosmologies, ancestors act as a binding agent within and between communities both living and dead. Connection with those who have gone before provides a comprehensive identity, one rooted within and linked to a particular place and community of people. Ancestors also play an intermediary role, oftentimes receiving worship and adoration. Speaking of the Akan of Ghana, John Pobee gives a succinct and comprehensive overview of their understanding of ancestors:

Perhaps the most potent aspect of Akan religion is the cult of the ancestors. They, like the Supreme Being, are always held in deep reverence or even worshipped. The ancestors are that part of the clan who have completed their course here on earth and are gone ahead to the other world to be elder brothers of the living at the house of God. Not all the dead are ancestors. To qualify to be an ancestor one must have lived to a ripe old age and in an exemplary manner and done much to enhance the standing and prestige of the family, clan, or tribe. By virtue of being the part of the clan gone ahead to the house of God, they are believed to be powerful in the sense that they maintain the course of life here and now and influence it for good or ill. They give children to the living; they give good harvest, they provide the sanctions for the moral life of the nation and accordingly punish, exonerate or reward the living as the case may be.³

Among the Akan, ancestors work between the “other world”—those “living at the house of God”—and the present world, mediating between that realm and the present time. They assist with harvests, assure continuity in giving children, and mediate justice. In so doing, they provide critical aspects of their community’s moral framework. The ancestors are not simply all those who ever lived, but are exemplary people who, in their own lives, were revered for living exemplary moral lives.

Among many northern Cameroonians, ancestors carry similar roles, Éla notes. Some ancestors play a role similar to biblical prophets in the Old Testaments: they resist impulses in

itself be overlooked in depictions that accentuate variety. In these arguments, I am simply highlighting their contexts in Ghana and northern Cameroon as examples of similar but distinct practices of ancestor reverencing across much of the continent.

³ John Pobee, *Towards an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 46. Also quoted in Kwame Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture” in William Dyrness, ed, *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 98.

their communities which depreciate respect for human life. “We have seen old sages shun new religions which run counter to their ideal of life,” Éla writes, “and which disintegrate families and break vital bonds.”⁴ Contrary to Western stereotypes, Éla argues, reverencing ancestors does not imply superstition. “Missionaries have tended to confuse the ancestors with ‘spirits’,” spirits in the superstitious sense of the term, which “is incompatible with the Christian faith,” he says. Rather, ancestor reverencing provides moral ordering through their distribution of justice and imparts communal identity through common links a community’s past. Éla continues, “for an African to be clothed with the dignity of an ancestor implies that one has constantly excelled in the practice of virtue.”⁵ When communities respect and revere these ancestors, often through ritual acts, they also recognize their place within a larger whole. John Mbiti writes, “When these [ritual] acts are directed towards the living-dead, they are a symbol of fellowship, a recognition that the departed are still members of their human families, and tokens of respect and remembrance for the living-dead.”⁶ For Bediako, meanwhile, the ancestors are those “who were faithful to the Supreme God before the arrival of the Gospel as well as early converts.”⁷ One might compare the ancestors to “God-fearers” of the book of Acts, gentiles outside the covenant community of Israel holding religious views consonant with the people of Israel.

Éla maintains that a high view of ancestors informs northern Cameroonian communities’ views on death in ways quite consonant with Christianity. Death is not an end or an annihilation. As an example, Éla describes the *pra*, a jar kept in households representing the ancestors: it “functions as a symbol, binding together things that seem distant. It is a means of overcoming the

⁴ Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 31.

⁵ Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 29.

⁶ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy, 2nd Edition* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2002), 59.

⁷ Bediako, “‘Their past is also our present.’ Why all Christians have need of ancestors: Making a case for Africa,” *AICMAR Bulletin* 6 (2007), 14. In this quote Bediako draws from Kenyan Anglican archbishop David Gitari. The Anglican Church of Kenya has incorporated ancestor reverencing into its approved liturgy.

distance and the oblivion created by death, and it creates a bond of unity between the living and the dead.” Again, he points out, the practice differs from superstition: “The Mada of northern Cameroon do not preserve the *pra* out of fear of their fathers, but out of the need to stay in communion with them and to bring them into the life of the family.” Thus, long after people have died, they remain part of an ongoing community—they are not simply remembered but continue to constitute the community. “*The dead are not dead!*” Éla affirms, in what he considers a “central affirmation of African thought.”⁸ Thus, when northern Cameroonians heard the message that, in Jesus, Christians do not die but live, it carried familiar resonance: “death no longer has dominion” (Romans 6:9) and “in Christ all shall be made alive” (I Corinthians 15:22). This sense of communion with ancestors, Éla writes, could have a salutary effect on Westerners. As Western culture increasingly separates death from everyday life, going to great lengths to avoid death, Éla contends that it is quickly becoming Westerners’ “most important taboo.”⁹

For both Bekiako and Éla, inclusion of ancestor reverencing recognizes God’s action across all of history. Some places and times do not become privileged over others, simply because they practiced Christianity before another—medieval Europe should not be privileged over 14th century Africa. Especially because the institutionalized religion of Christianity remains newer in much of the African subcontinent than in Europe and the Middle East, Africans affirm that the God revealed in Jesus has indeed been active for centuries in their own lands. Seeing God as active within Africans’ past becomes vital to understanding God. If God “has had no connection with our past,” Bediako writes, “then what are the grounds for our confidence that the living God has anything to do with our present?” If God only came to be revealed in Africa when missionaries arrived, with no connection to religious beliefs and practices before Christianity,

⁸ Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 14-15. Italics his.

⁹ Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith*, 26.

then their Christianity has no memory. “Without memory we do not know who we are,” he continues. Bediako argues, like Tanner, that God’s grace meets Christians within their contexts, but Bediako would accentuate that the context includes not only its present but its past. “Our African cultural heritage is in fact the very place where Christ desires to find us in order to transform us into his image,” Bediako continues.¹⁰ God meets Christians amid their ancestors, not in spite of them.

In Bediako’s arguments, Christianity welcomes ancestor reverencing by transmuting the understanding of ancestors into a Christian frame. As in the Logos theology narrated in Chapter 5, when understandings of the Logos transformed from something like Stoic immanentism to Chalcedonian Christology, the role of ancestors becomes transfigured. Bediako begins by moving the ancestors from the realm of power-bearing entities to the realm of myth—myth being positively understood as stories from the past that shape present identity. They no longer carry powers like assuring the birth of children and participating in dispensing justice. Rather, blending theological and sociological instincts, he reads them as a projection of the community itself. He writes, “are not ancestors in effect a projection into the transcendent realm of the social values and spiritual expectations of a community? ... [A]ncestors have no existence independent of the community that produces them.” In sum, a social body projects onto the ancestors its values, its social cohesion, its “spiritual expectations,” then the community itself begins to live in accordance with this projection. Bediako continues, “Strictly speaking, the cult of ancestors, from the intellectual point of view, belongs to the category of myth, ancestors being the product of the myth-making imagination of the community.”¹¹ Having lost certain spiritual powers, the

¹⁰ Bediako, ““Their past is also our present,”” 5.

¹¹ “Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective” in *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 2000), 30.

ancestors come into Christianity as those who have decisively shaped the moral fiber of African communities, who have passed along teachings similar to Jesus himself. Without ancestors who taught faith, hope, and love before communities heard the teachings of Christianity, Bediako suggests that Africans would have been less receptive to Jesus.

The ancestors play a comparable role to figures in the Old Testament, Bediako claims, but without displacing them. Rather, their relationships with YHWH become models for appreciating and reinterpreting ways God has worked among one's own ancestors, even amid imperfections. "By presenting us with the history of God's dealings in the lives of his people whose faith was not perfect," he suggests, the Hebrew Bible "offers a paradigm by which to understand the similar journeying in our past." Just as Old Testament figures plowed the ground for the message and person of Jesus, so also ancestors in Africa made ready the gospel within African cultures:

With their constant message that the lives and careers of the "ancestors": Adam, Eve, Noah, Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and the rest of them, have an abiding relevance for every succeeding generation, so we too must have had our fathers and mothers, ancestors who, like the biblical ancestors, made choices at critical points in their lives, choices that shaped the destinies of our traditions, until, in the fullness of time, they became merged, in Christ, with the history of all the people of God.¹²

Those ancestors who have revered the high God and shaped the morality of communities that received the message of the gospel have indeed been incorporated into God's covenant community. The ancestors are God's people.

¹² "Their past is also our present," 13-14. While Bediako holds a primacy of place for God's covenant with Israel, he makes more direct associations between an African past and the people of Israel than commonly done in contemporary Western theology. In this regard, the location of the reflection is vital: he writes as a Ghanaian whose culture has had less intersection with Judaism than Westerners. Meanwhile, Western theologians write within a history of supersessionism with all of its tragic consequences. Bediako thus should not be misunderstood in his comparison of African ancestors.

The role of the ancestors changes so dramatically for Bediako because of Jesus' own redemptive work amid the ancestors. Returning to Pobee's depiction of the realm of the ancestors, Jesus enters into that realm in which they exist and makes it his own, thereby removing any menacing powers of the ancestors while himself summing up and embodying positive ancestral powers. He writes,

From the standpoint of Akan traditional beliefs, Jesus has gone to the realm of the ancestor spirits and the "gods". We already know that power and the resources for living are believed to come from there, but the terrors and misfortunes which could threaten and destroy life come from there also. But if Jesus has gone to the realm of the "spirits and the gods", so to speak, he has gone there as Lord over them in much the same way that he is Lord over us. He is therefore Lord over the living and the dead, over the "living-dead", as the ancestors are also described. He is supreme over all "gods" and authorities in the realm of the spirits. So he sums up in himself all their powers and cancels any terrorizing influence they might be assumed to have upon us.¹³

Bediako's imagery echoes the Apostle Paul's description of Jesus entering into those intermediary realms between God and the physical cosmos and carrying out the work of salvation and redemption therein. In redeeming this realm of the ancestors, Jesus transfigured that realm and made it his own. The ancestors no longer hold a mediatory role in Bediako's account; since these mediatory functions "originated from among us," they also required salvation. Bediako writes, "Our Saviour is our Elder Brother who has shared in our *African* experience in every respect, except in our sin and alienation from God."¹⁴ Jesus becomes the supreme ancestor, the chief ancestor, the great ancestor who sums up all other ancestors, yet without subsuming all ancestors' unique and distinctive identities. As the image of the Logos comes to resemble the saints themselves, so ancestors also retain their identities as they become welcomed into the body of Christ. Since the ancestors are then summed up in Jesus, that also means that Jesus is African.

¹³ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 103.

¹⁴ Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," 102.

Jean-Marc Éla takes a slightly different approach; he relates his reflections more directly to the doctrine of the communion of saints by speaking of a “communion of ancestors.” Éla draws from the existing doctrine while also arguing that African traditions reframe and refine the doctrine. Indeed, he sees ancestor reverencing as the next step in the existing logic of the doctrine of the communion of saints. By his portrayal, the doctrine’s logic already embraces ancestors—it simply requires more outright articulation. Just as the church recognizes the great saints who now constitute the mystical body of Christ, so also it should recognize the mystical fellowship shared with ancestors. As in so much of Éla’s writing, his work on ancestors emerges directly from his attentive listening to Christians in his own context of northern Cameroon.

When refining the doctrine of the communion of saints, the church can learn from its past mistakes, Éla remarks. To simply transfer existing Catholic practices of piety onto ancestor reverencing, as the Church often did when pairing ancestors with already acknowledged Christian saints in much of the New World, dismisses the practice and its insights. Such “syncretism from above” or “guided syncretism” makes the institutional church the sole arbitrator. It replaces the ancestors with the church’s own figures, failing to recognize the ancestors’ inherent value for everyday Christians. He writes,

let a new language for the gospel come forth from the lives of our people with their deeply rooted belief in the ancestors. Isn’t this question of language at the heart of our common faith? Our Christian faith does not intend to express itself through new forms of cultural violence.¹⁵

Éla suggests that the church recognize its mistakes in medieval Europe, where the proliferation of masses said for the dead did not appease the human instinct to revere those who have gone before us. Instead, he claims, the church should listen to its people in northern Cameroon, to their own explanations of why ancestors prove so important. To think that the church could disregard

¹⁵ Éla, *My Faith*, 31. His comments about transferring the communion of ancestors to veneration of saints is on 28.

ancestor reverencing by simply transferring it the veneration of already acknowledged saints—many of them European in origin—disparages African Christians.

Instead, enlarging an understanding of the communion of saints to include ancestors enriches the church. Drawing from Vatican II and Catholic liturgies for All Saints Day, Éla simply follows their existing logic. Vatican II acknowledges that “those who have not yet received the fullness of revelation and faith are to no lesser degree a part of the church, but in a way that is not historically visible.” Meanwhile, All Saints Day liturgies pray for those who “searched for God uprightly.” These affirmations proclaim that God’s work extends beyond acknowledged Christian channels, that God’s grace extends beyond the sacraments themselves. Thus in the vision of Revelation, when there gathers a “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes” (Rev. 7:9), Éla sees the ancestors in the eschatological vision, just as he feels their presence as part of his own Christian faith. Speaking of Jesus’ descent among the dead, he then ponders, “Can we exclude the old sages of Africa from those in the world below, to whom the resurrected Jesus announced the good news of salvation (I Peter 3:19-20)?” Expanding the notion of the communion of saints thereby expands the church’s comprehension of the Logos’ pervasiveness across human history:

African Christians must not be limited to invoking the “saints,” most of whom are unknown to them. Rather, based on our experience of communion with the ancestors, we must rethink the mystery of the church as a total communion with those ancestors who are not gods, but mediators of that life and those blessings that come from God alone. A true understanding of All Saints’ Day requires inclusion of saints who have not been canonized or recognized by the ecclesial institution. ... To experience in an African way the mystery of communion in Christ in whom is all that is visible and invisible (Eph. 1:10) is to incorporate our living relationship with the ancestors as a dimension of our total faith. The communion of saints thus includes communion with the ancestors.¹⁶

¹⁶ Éla, *My Faith*, 30.

By invoking Ephesians, Éla brings to the communion of saints a clearer sense of the cosmic Christ, the Christ who gathers up all things in him (Eph 1:10). This Christ “in whom all things hold together” (Col 1:17) surely entails those ancestors who not only excelled in virtue but also shaped the hospitable communitarian cultures of Africa that received the Christian message.¹⁷

Such an enriched understanding of the communion of saints need not be limited to Africa, it should be shared by the universal church. Bediako and Éla alike imagine the whole church embracing ancestors, not only African Christians. Bediako writes, “all Christians in every place and time, not only need to have a past, but indeed, do have a past, a pre-Christian past that connects with the present. All Christian have need of ancestors, pre-Christian ancestors!”. Christians fail to recognize ancestors to their detriment, for they thereby ignore much of God’s work in history and overlook the importance of recognizing one’s past as part of one’s identity. Bediako writes, “The critical residual question is: Do all Christians recognize that it is so, that it is so in the purposes of God, and therefore do they recognize who their ancestors are?” By recognizing those whose faithfulness decisively shaped our own moral community, our identity, our sense of past and its continuity into present, we come to recognize more of God’s work in the world. Éla, meanwhile, remarks that the early church disregarded the cult of ancestors in various parts of the Mediterranean world in Christianity’s early centuries “for purely historical or accidental reasons.” Those who followed the cult of ancestors in the Mediterranean world of Christian origins, he claims, persecuted the church such that Christians could not simply return to the cult with an open, appreciative stance. Rather than ancestors, Christians came to revere their martyrs instead, and Christians could not both revere their own martyrs and the cult that killed

¹⁷ Given Éla’s depiction of the “living relationship” with ancestors, he would likely disagree with aspects of Bediako’s projection argument—relationships with ancestors seem to have a livelier interchange than mere projection for Éla. They also continue to play a mediatory role in Éla that they do not for Bediako. As a Catholic theologian, Éla is perhaps more comfortable with figures other than Jesus having a strong mediating capacity.

them. Such reasons need not impede the church today, he claims. Éla writes, “This context of persecution blocked the church from ever reevaluating the cult of the ancestors as it then existed. Christians became a new family in which the cult of the martyrs was substituted for the cult of the dead.”¹⁸ Yet the time has come for the church to revisit its approach, Éla claims, for God has been working among ancestors whether Christians acknowledge them or not.

This account of the ancestors matches well with the portrayal of the Logos across history in Chapter 5. Both before and after the time of Jesus in Palestine, the eternal Logos has been working in human lives, building up the image of Christ in all places and times. Pre-Christian ancestors who anticipated the person and work of Christ themselves become gathered up into Christ. Christians expect to discover more of Jesus not only in Christianity’s future, but also in pasts not always labeled as Christian. Yet these pasts also experienced the work of the Spirit, the grace of the God who is in Christ. The Logos reveals itself in the communion of ancestors, who are themselves members of the communion of saints.

Such ancestors become saints not only for their particular locale, but across the universal church. Faithful Stoics, who reflected upon the nature of the Logos centuries before Jesus’ ministry in Palestine, become Christian ancestors. They belong not only to the Greek Church but to Christians of any time. The same holds in other lands. Should not this American writer, whose heritage is largely from Celtic lands, celebrate the sacramental imagination of pre-Christian Celtic spirituality that so shaped Celtic Christianity? These ancestors belong not only to modern descendants of Celts, they belong to the whole church. So also African ancestors become ancestors for all Christians. In the communion of Christ, as I learn from Éla and Bediako, I myself come to have fellowship with *their* ancestors through the ancestral wisdom transmitted

¹⁸ Éla, *My Faith*, 30.

through these two theologians. As the Logos continues to incorporate newness and strangeness into itself, those who did not confess Christ but followed the way of Christ do indeed constitute the body of Christ; they are ancestors of the whole church.

II. Renewing Sacrifice

I now turn to the bovine ritual that opened this chapter, offering three interpretations of the sacrifice and then reflecting theologically on the implications of this event for Dinka Christians and for the wider church. The first interpretation is largely indigenous, describing the action and symbolism from the perspective of Dinka moral and religious cosmology. The second two interpretations are Christian ones offered by participants in the ritual event. They justify Christian participation in the ritual as well as Christians' sponsorship of the event through the New Sudan Council of Churches. Unlike my argument about ancestor reverencing, I do not suggest that this sacrifice become a ritual event in the wider church. The indigenous ritual interpretation makes clear that the embedded meaning of the ritual event could not be transplanted easily beyond its Nilotic contexts. Nevertheless, Christians elsewhere—the Western church especially, given its secular, desacralized context—gain great insights from this bovine sacrifice. The ritual shows, for example, the inherent communitarian commitments that come alongside participating in sacrificial events, including Christ's own sacrifice. To a sterilized Western culture, it also vividly displays elements of sacrifice that we often avoid or find unsightly. Finally, from the perspective of Christian political ethics, the ritual models a noteworthy strategy for peacemaking amid pluralism. In short, Christian understandings of sacrifice and of political action stand to be enhanced.

First, some wider context helps place the ritual act. While Dinka led, a ritual like this one carried sufficient similarities to Nuer sacrifices for Nuer to recognize and acknowledge many actions of the ritual. Both communities highly value their cattle; in this regard, classic mid-20th century ethnographies like those of E. E. Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer and Godfrey Lienhardt and Francis Deng on the Dinka hold up quite well. Cattle are “the most precious thing [Nuer] possess,” according to Evans-Pritchard, while Dinka hold a certain “moral closeness and interdependence” between cattle and human beings, according to Lienhardt.¹⁹ Both communities use oxen for many other sacrifices—Nuer use an ox for a wedding sacrifice, for example—but require bull sacrifice to resolve blood feuds. Ritual details of their sacrifices do differ, however: in Dinka rituals the bull is attached to a stake in the ground and is killed by slitting its throat, while in Nuer ceremonies the bull roams free and is killed by a single well-placed strike to the heart. At a People-to-People Peacemaking conference in Waat, for example, a Nuer spiritual leader, *kuaar muon* or earth-master, carried out the ritual sacrifice, slaying the bull with a single jab. Yet both communities see their rituals as quite flexible: Lienhardt speaks of “local variation, change, and freedom” in Dinka ritual action and Evans-Pritchard writes, “Nuer are more interested in purpose than in details of procedure.”²⁰ Thus Nuer and Dinka see sufficient commonality in their rituals to view the other communities’ ritual actions as efficacious. How, then, might they interpret such ritual acts?

The first and most common interpretation of participants is an indigenous one, by which the sacrifice binds peace among erstwhile opponents by allowing a divinely sanctioned space of mutual accountability. From this space, opponents can express wrongs committed against one

¹⁹ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 248 and Godfrey Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 21.

²⁰ Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*: 265 and Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 212.

another and seek reconciliation and restitution. By this interpretation, the bull carries multiple functions: it embodies the raging conflict, it carries messages to God and the spirits of those who died, it serves as an offering to those who have died, and its death threatens those who break the peace.²¹ The feast following the sacrifice then provides opportunity for opposing parties to eat together, as a beginning of their expression to overcome past strife. One civic leader in Rumbek describes it this way:

Traditionally a bull can be slaughtered. This is a sacrifice that will cement blood relationship, that will address itself to God, [saying] that we have abandoned the war, we have abandoned our quarrel, we are now brothers again. ... This bull ... is an offering to the dead: the blood that pours out from the bull is an oath that if you fight again this blood will not leave you.²²

Malok's account is concise and representative of many Dinka accounts. First, he notes that it "cements" blood relationship between former foes, making them "brothers again." Here bovine blood carries a healing quality, one that counteracts the polluting quality of human blood.²³ While human bloodshed had contaminated relationships between Nuer and Dinka, bovine blood heals such contamination. The blood also serves as "an oath" to God and fellow human beings. Those who participate in the ritual promise to end atrocities committed against one another; if they do not, they risk their own death. Julia Duany, participant in other People-to-People Peacemaking events, describes this oath: "A curse is placed on any who partake of the *Mabior*'s sacrifice and later break the oath for peace. ... It is a very serious curse: it is a curse of death."²⁴ Malok also describes the sacrifice as an "offering" to the dead, that is, a way of appeasing the

²¹ Michael Ouko, 2004. "From Warriors to Peacemakers: People-to-People Peacemaking in Southern Sudan," *Forced Migration Review* 21, 28-29 (2004).

²² Elijah Malok in the film *The Blood of the Bull*, produced by Philip Carr, (Cloudburst Media, 2004). The author appears in the film.

²³ Ouko, see also Cherry Leonardi, "Paying 'Buckets of Blood' for the Land: Moral Debates over Economy, War and State in Southern Sudan," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 29.2 (2011), 215-240.

²⁴ Julia Duany, qtd. in Vern Neufeld Redekop, 'Reconciling Nuers with Dinkas: A Girardian Approach to Conflict Resolution,' *Religion* 37, no. 1 (2007), 78.

spirits of those who have died in previous conflicts. Such bovine sacrifices entail a certain equivalence between bull and human: just as many humans died in ethnic warfare between Dinka and Nuer, so this bull serves as a collective sacrifice for the many who died before him. The feast continues to bind the people to one another. The NSCC goes so far as to say “the meat of the bull acts as a sacrament, which feeds the spirit of these people as they eat. It blesses the people gathered and sanctifies their mission for reconciliation.”²⁵ On a symbolic level, the ritual is a model of past strife as embodied in the bull’s struggle, and a model for overcoming conflict through taking oaths of peace to God and through seeking atonement and restitution with those who died.²⁶

The ritual interpretations offered above from participants in NSCC-sponsored peace rituals also closely align with classic ethnographic literature. Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt both speak of bull and human equivalency in rituals such as this one. Evans-Pritchard speaks of the bull sacrifice as expiation for human wrongs, while Lienhardt writes, “The death of the [bovine] victim is explicitly the source of life to the people.”²⁷ They similarly speak of ritual participants becoming bound to one another in peace, despite their past conflict. Such sacrifice enables “normal social relations to be resumed” among Nuer, while among the Dinka “those attending the ceremony are most palpably members of a single undifferentiated body, looking towards a single common end.”²⁸ Evans-Pritchard would disagree with the NSCC’s assessment of the significance of the feast, however. While the sacrifice itself is a place of divine communication between God and human beings, the feast would not be considered a sacred meal. “Those who

²⁵ The New Sudan Council of Churches, *Inside Sudan: the Story of People to People Peacemaking* (Nairobi: New Sudan Council of Churches, 2002), 61.

²⁶ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in Michael Banton, ed, *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1966), 1-42.

²⁷ Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, 296.

²⁸ Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 293 and Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, 233.

eat the flesh are not thought to gain spiritual strength by doing so,” he writes. “It might be held that the juices of the cucumber [another sacrificial object] and occasionally the chyme of a beast, have a sacramental use in the sacrificial situation, but the same could not be maintained of the flesh of animal victims.”²⁹ Indeed, the NSCC’s assessment shows how ritual interpretations vary and change over time: for some Christian ritual actors, the feast resembled—though did not replicate—the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist. Either way, the feast of the ritual enhances its efficacy as participants engage one another interpersonally through the shared feasting. Human hatred has been carried into the earth with the blood of the bull; the ritual has enabled a space before God that invites people to safely recount wrongs committed against one another, to seek recompense and rapprochement.

Meanwhile, Christian churches’ relationships with this peace ritual have been complicated and remain unsettled. Some pastors feel that Christians should not participate in bull sacrifices, while others offer nuanced reinterpretations. Some Nuer and Dinka Christians reject the ritual outright, arguing that it arises from pre-Christian sources and thereby detracts from Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross as the final sacrifice for human sin. Pastors who oppose such sacrifices often cite the book of Hebrews, which contrasts sacrifices offered “day after day” in ancient Jewish temple rituals with Christ offering “a single sacrifice for sins” (Hebrews 10: 11-12). However, many Christians support the bull sacrifice, reinterpreting the event in light of Christian affirmations. Christians participated in the rituals I witnessed and Christian leaders carried positions of significant authority. Not only did Christians offer prayers, scripture readings, and songs as in the event described above, they organized the very peace conferences at which such rituals took place. Indeed, many chiefs, elders, and women present at People-to-

²⁹ Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 274

People conferences identified themselves as Christians and participated without any hesitation in the ritual and the feast that followed. Many pastors also participated in both the ritual and the feast, thus cementing their inclusion in the “undifferentiated body” of the ritual. I label the two most prominent Christian reinterpretations discussed below as “ritual sublimation” and “sacrificial prototype”.

According to ritual sublimation, the church accepts the ritual because it determines the sacrifice is an appropriate expression of peace not substantially at odds with its own vision of peace based in Christian theology. This does not imply, however, that the church accepts the ritual on the indigenous terms described above. Instead, the church sublimates the ritual, giving it a “higher” purpose than its original intention by the ritual actors. Msgr. Caesar Mazzolari, former Roman Catholic Bishop of Rumbek (originally from Italy), offers a precise explanation:

The church has adopted many signs and symbols—singing and dancing—which become spontaneous for our people, to express that we are uplifting, even sublimating, the concept of their reconciliation, making God the center, the giver of mercy, the giver of forgiveness, the one who really is the author of reconciliation. ... [The ritual] is an indicator of our intention to forgive one another.³⁰

Notice the careful language of the bishop to avoid direct association with certain elements of the ritual: while the church is “adopting” certain signs and symbols, it is not arguing for their ritual efficacy in the same way as the ritual participants above. The church uplifts and sublimates a concept of reconciliation that is not entirely its own—“the concept of their reconciliation,” the bishop says—and offers it up to God with the church serving as intermediary between God and the indigenous practice. As intermediary, the church takes ownership of the ritual before God and offers it to God, yet within the church’s own understanding of reconciliation. We see this transition from indigenous to Christian terminology in Mazzolari’s move to Christian language

³⁰ The Blood of the Bull, 2004.

of mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In sublimating the ritual, Christian spirituality moves to the center of the event. By this interpretation, the church does not simply sanctify something formerly considered “pagan”; rather, it views the sacrifice as already an offering to the one God, an action seeking atonement for past sins—albeit carried out in ways unfamiliar to the Christian tradition. In that the ceremony aims toward peace, the spear-masters and other ritual actors are carrying out an act centered in the Christian God because this God is the author of all reconciliation and peace, even if spear-masters do not necessarily conceive of the ritual this way. Thus Christians can participate in the bull sacrifice without necessarily being troubled by elements such as prayers to deceased spirits. The bishop could open the ceremony with prayer because the Christian God accepts the ritual insofar as it promotes peace and reconciliation between human beings.

According to the third interpretation, sacrificial prototype, the church appreciates the sacrifice of the bull because it serves as a prototype for comprehending Jesus’ own sacrificial death. In the indigenous interpretation of the ritual above, the bull serves as a sacrifice made for wrongs of the past—such as killings based on ethnicity and abduction of women and children—while also opening up new possibilities of living peacefully together. Language of sacrifice for past wrongs that allows peaceful relations with one’s neighbors would sound familiar to Christian ears. For Christians, Christ takes on the sins of human beings on the cross and allows humans to live at peace because sin no longer inhibits humanity’s relationships with God and with one another. The bull ritual sets the stage for the message of Christianity. As one Christian pastor active with the NSCC told me, “Christ is a sacrifice, the bull is a sacrifice. Let’s not add confusion where we do not need to.” He was not implying strict equivalence between the bull and Christ but rather substantial similarity. Both sacrifices cover human wrongs, though the bull

sacrifice covers specific wrongs limited to one period of time and one human locality, while Christ's sacrifice covers human sin across time and place. This Christian leader would likely agree with Godfrey Lienhardt's assessment of Dinka acceptance of Christian atonement: "The doctrine of redemption in Christian theology should present less difficulty [for Dinka] than some other doctrines, since the notions of a kind of redemption and vicarious suffering are embedded in their own thought."³¹ Like the ritual sublimation interpretation, this view does not accept that pre-Christian ritual practices are inherently evil; rather it views God as present in those practices, with God coming to dwell in a new way with the advent of Christianity in this cultural context. Thus an Anglican priest read from Psalm 85, invoking God to look beyond human sin and bring humans back to God's self—"bring us back, O God our savior." By choosing this Psalm, the Anglican priest vocalized the similarity between the bull sacrifice and Christ's actions since both sacrifices seek atonement and ask God to cease displeasure with humans' wrongful actions.

In saying the bull sets the stage for the Christ, many South Sudanese Christians are saying something like a classic *logos spermatikos* argument, but also saying something in addition. Practices like this bull sacrifice were certainly preparing the way for comprehending Jesus' own sacrifice on the cross; they were seeds of truth sown among Dinka and Nuer. When they say the bull is a prototype for understanding Christ, however, they are not implying that the bull paves the way for Christ such that bull sacrifice might become forgotten with Christ now in the picture. Elements of bull sacrifice help interpret the sacrifice of Christ and remain part of their understanding of Christ. More than simply paving the way for Christ's sacrifice, the *Mabior* illuminates Christ's sacrifice; it shows elements of Christ's death that Christians might not otherwise see. The bull sacrifice becomes part of comprehending Christ's sacrifice in ways

³¹ Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, 238.

European missionaries could not have expressed. Thus, the ritual carries lessons for Christians elsewhere, even if the ritual remains tied to its Dinka context. I offer three such lessons. The first two are largely suggestive, pointing out areas where the bovine sacrifice fills in gaps characteristic of Western thinking on Christ's atonement. A full treatment would surely require more than this cursory overview. I offer more detail on the third point, one relating to political ethics.

First, contrary to many Western portrayals of the atonement as largely individualistic, the ritual frames the sacrificial act as inherently communitarian. The sacrifice binds peace between two communities as each makes an oath before God to end violence and strife. The sacrifice entails giving and receiving forgiveness, but also commitments and obligations to community members, such as restitution of stolen property. Contrast this communitarian focus with the Western atonement theory of penal substitution, for example. The imagery of penal substitution, with its strong forensic qualities, often resembles a courtroom drama in which the accused stands before God as someone deserving punishment and Jesus receives that punishment in place of the accused.³² Leaving aside the limits or virtues of this understanding of the atonement vis-à-vis other approaches, the individualistic imagery of the courtroom stands out. Jesus' atonement appears a transaction between an individual and God—an image especially pervasive in British and American hymnody.³³ Scripture certainly contains precedent for forensic imagery in the

³² Courtroom imagery was common in figures like Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and others of the time, who drew from “the Reformed tradition’s legal and transactional motifs” (Steven M. Studebaker, Robert W. Caldwell III, *The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards: Text, Context, and Application* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 174). Wesley often prefers other kinds of atonement imagery over forensic imagery, but he does use it. See Darren Cushman Wood, “John Wesley’s Use of the Atonement,” *The Asbury Journal* 62.2 (2007): 4.

³³ For example, *Rock of ages, cleft for me* (Augustus Toplady, 1776), *And can it be that I should gain* (Charles Wesley, 1738), *My God, if I may call thee mine* (Charles Wesley). An individualist focus is not exclusive to Western traditionalists, liberal theologians like Troeltsch were also quite individualistic in their conceptions of redemption. See Sarah Coakley, *Christ Without Absolutes: A Study of the Christology of Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 87-92.

atonement, but also includes as much or more precedent for a communitarian focus; Leviticus and Hebrews particularly display sacrificial practices quite communitarian in their orientation. Finally, the bovine ritual indicates the communal cost of participating in such a ritual. To give up a *Mabior* means giving up a substantial portion of one's wealth for the sake of peace with one's neighbor.³⁴

Second, the bovine ritual enhances understandings of Jesus' atonement through the role of blood. In the often sanitized theology of the Western church, Christ's blood can become overlooked, associated with medieval piety often considered morose and thereby worth forgetting. Yet the ritual images, with blood holding active and healing qualities, quite resemble Old and New Testament ones. Blood is multivalent in books like Leviticus and Hebrews: it is a symbol of death, a symbol of life, and a means of atonement through life overcoming death. Sacrificial blood, in particular, is "life released for the benefit of others."³⁵ The Dinka ritual has remarkable resonance with these scriptural images. Here too, sacrificial blood carries a healing quality, one that counteracts the polluting quality of bloodshed spilled through human violence. If the shedding of human blood contaminates human relationships, bovine blood—and Jesus' blood—mends such relations. The power of blood carries human wrongdoing into the earth itself, while bestowing new life to those who participate in the sacrifice ritual. As with the covenantal imagery of the Eucharist—in which Christians receive the blood of Christ in the form of ritually blessed wine—ritual participants make promises to keep peace as part and parcel of

³⁴ Contemporary theology has begun to move away from individualistic understandings of the atonement; of primary importance in this regard is the work of René Girard. See *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986 [1982]) and *Things Hidden since the Foundations of the Earth* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987 [1978]). David Heim's *Saved from Sacrifice* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans: 2006) provides an example of subsequent Girardian reflection on the atonement. For another social reading of sacrifice, see Sarah Coakley, "Sacrifice Regained: Evolution, Cooperation and God," The Gifford Lectures, University of Aberdeen (April 2012).

³⁵ Hermann V. A. Kuma, *The Centrality of Blood in the Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), 351.

their participation in the “undifferentiated body” formed through the ritual event. That is, the shedding of blood in ritual acts inherently carries social commitments and obligations. If anything, such deep resonances between Old Testament, New Testament, and Dinka understandings of blood implore Western Christians to consider the possibility that, instead of the medieval church being peculiar in its fascination with blood, perhaps we are the strange ones. Western Christians are the ones whose everyday lives have become so removed from certain visceral human experiences that the image of blood has moved from a healing image to a distasteful one.

Finally, the ritual displays how this community forges meaningful ritual acts in the context of religious pluralism. In this regard, they exhibit the instincts of indigenous African pluralism discussed in Chapter 4. Syncretism becomes an aspect of peacemaking in a pluralistic context. The syncretic character of the ritual allowed each of these interpretations to serve as plausible accounts of the same event. It allowed participation by people of the varying—and overlapping—traditions of indigenous religion and Christianity, thereby forming a ritualized collective amid differing accounts of the ritual. While many Christians rejected intercessions to the spirit world, they valued the ritual’s emphasis on peace through sacrifice and thus felt comfortable participating. Many Christian pastors participated in the ritual because they reinterpreted the event through Christ’s sacrifice and thus saw no dissonance in their association with it. These pastors acknowledged that their participation could be controversial or contested, but theological interpretations like ritual sublimation and sacrificial prototype justified their participation in the ritual while also allowing them to participate in commensal acts like the feasting that followed. Meanwhile some non-Christian Dinka and Nuer would not agree with Christian interpretations of the ritual. For them, the ritual promotes peace without having to

gesture toward anything beyond itself, as in Christian interpretations. The flexibility of the ritual thus became a political virtue: it could bind people together in a common space and allow for communal acts like feasting, despite differing interpretations.

The Southern Sudanese thus offer two levels of insight to Christians elsewhere working in peacemaking amid contexts of pluralism: first, the importance of ritual action in forming political alliances and, second, the potential of syncretism in shaping such alliances. When Western Christians look at political engagement amid pluralism, the mechanistic nature of our contemporary politics can make events like rituals seem of secondary importance. The first priority when forming political alliances, it may seem, is to find people with shared aims and to begin political action from there. Within Western culture, Charles Taylor speaks of the increasingly mechanistic view of the universe—thereby diminishing the role of the sacred and the transcendent—while Luke Bretherton points out the extent to which this mechanistic view of the world pervades Western politics and economics. Bretherton writes, “‘Weberian’ notions of politics as a rational legal order articulate the dominant political imaginary, whether it takes liberal, neoliberal, or social democratic form.”³⁶ In shaping a new political alliance for peacemaking, the church in South Sudan did more than simply find South Sudanese who tired of the violence of rebel movements, however. It appealed to something beyond mere shared political aims, seeking a means of *binding* their new social cohesion. Ritual proved the most effective way to do so.³⁷ Indeed, when tracking Taylor’s examples of cultural shifts toward modernity and our secular age, one distinctly notes that a decrease in social ritual accompanies

³⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) and, drawing from Taylor, Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 107-108.

³⁷ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). See also Kane, “Ritual Formation of Peaceful Publics.”

the increasingly mechanistic view of the universe.³⁸ The South Sudanese ritual of bovine sacrifice indicates that pluralistic alliances are stronger and more stable when they bind themselves together with ritual. Rituals enable social cohesion through mutual commitments and covenants toward one another; they embody and model the sort of social cohesion required for sustained political action; they carry an aspirational quality that articulates the values motivating political action—however vague those values may be.

When shaping these plural alliances for justice and peace, the bovine sacrifice also indicates that rituals for plural politics benefit from having each constituent tradition meaningfully recognized in the ritual event. For Christians, this involves both syncretism and a willingness to allow other traditions their own meaningful expression within a shared ritual space. There are appropriate times for Christians to worry about the distinctiveness of their claims enacted in ritual; there are also times when undue preoccupation with such concerns for authenticity inhibits genuine engagement with confronting injustice and working for peace. More concretely, this bovine ritual is not the Eucharist. Even if understood as a Christian ritual because it expresses sacrificial themes common to Christianity, a strong distinction remains between rituals like this one and rituals that Christians call sacraments.³⁹ At times, rituals like this one work precisely because participants do *not* fundamentally agree on the meaning. Dinka spear-masters gave substantial space at the start of the ritual for Christian songs and prayers that were not their own; Christians who did not subscribe to every aspect of the spear-masters' actions nevertheless participated in that portion of the ritual. The bovine sacrifice was remarkable in being a single event with so many varying interpretations, at times incommensurable with one another. In such cases, syncretism again becomes a political virtue. Dinka spear-masters and

³⁸ *A Secular Age*, 438-440, 613-614.

³⁹ The NSCC wrote that the ritual acts “as a sacrament” but did not call the ritual itself a sacrament.

Christian bishops forged a political alliance to confront the brutal violence of warring rebel factions in South Sudan and the brutal atrocities that followed in the 1990s, in part through their ritual syncretism.

Indeed, such ritual syncretism in the context of Western politics is not as uncommon as Westerners might initially think; we are simply unaccustomed to calling it “syncretism”. Political actions by community organizers in the United States and Britain, for example, have a similarly syncretic quality. At Industrial Areas Foundation rallies, organizers consistently assure that clergy from various faith traditions offer prayers, that the rallies give voice to moral values shared by religious and secular persons alike, that participants sing songs from various traditions. A rabbi and an imam might come away from such a rally with differing interpretations of what “happened,” of the meaning of the ritual, each interpreting through the lens of their own commitments. Yet through the political action they nevertheless become part of a single public political constituency. If anything, the bovine ritual might suggest that such IAF rituals still remain too sterile, that their performance styled events might inhibit the kind of social bonding formed through highly participatory rituals like bovine sacrifice.

Western churches also have a rich example of this sort of syncretism in the American civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself employed strategies quite similar to the Southern Sudanese when building coalitions for civil rights. Ethicist Hak Joon Lee, for example, marvels at King’s “almost magical” ability to draw “tens of thousands of people, religious and secular, into working for global peace and justice.”⁴⁰ Surely King’s success in this regard was due in part to his ability to synthesize and syncretize various religious, ethical, and political traditions into his speeches—themselves ritual events closely resembling Baptist sermons. He

⁴⁰ Hak Joon Lee, *The Great World House: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Global Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press: 2011), 20.

thereby made speeches which resonated with an extraordinarily broad constituency. He drew from the tradition of the Black Church with its emphasis upon liberation and the Biblical prophets; he drew from liberal Protestants like Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, he drew from the political tradition of nonviolence by appealing to Gandhi, and he drew from the tradition of American democracy by quoting founders like Thomas Jefferson. His “I Have a Dream” speech is a classic example.⁴¹ King directly quotes the Biblical prophets, dreaming that “one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low.” He recalled the spirituals of the Black Church, closing his speech saying, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!” He drew from practices and beliefs of nonviolence: “Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.” Finally, he made extensive appeals to the tradition of American democracy: he claimed that segregation and discrimination spoiled the founding ideals of the nation—Jeffersonian Enlightenment ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. King drew these various traditions together into a single rhetorical whole. Like the bull sacrifice ritual, listeners could interpret such speeches in various ways—as representing Christianity, representing American values, representing liberal democracy, or representing nonviolence.

While King’s “I Have a Dream Speech” and Southern Sudanese peace rituals were very different political acts, they shared the strategy of employing various cultural traditions in a single frame to mobilize people within a diverse polity for peaceful political action. Many have criticized both King and Southern Sudanese church leaders for such mixture: some argued that King’s use of Gandhi or his rhetoric of American democracy distract from a “pure” Christian message. Meanwhile some pastors in South Sudan accused People-to-People Peacemaking of

⁴¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream” in *A Testament of Hope: the Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed James M. Washington (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 208-216.

employing “pagan” rituals. Yet such mixture allowed substantial space for Christians and those of other religions to participate in political action while also expressing their religious motivation for such action, doing so while remaining respectful of and hospitable to other cultural and religious traditions.

III. Christianity without the Bible?

My third and final example considers the Friday Masowe apostolics of Zimbabwe, portrayed in Matthew Engelke’s ethnography *The Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (2007). The Friday apostolics often call themselves “Christians who don’t read the Bible,” seeing the scriptures as too remote and distant from their everyday lives. They do not view the Bible as a central and normative record of God’s dealings with human beings in history, nor do they see it as a means of the Holy Spirit’s continuing communication today. Quite the contrary, they find no need for scripture in their lives, because their faith is “live and direct,” with immediate access to the Holy Spirit’s guidance.⁴² While I do not share their rejection of the Bible, I do not write with the intention of rebutting or adjudicating the Friday Masowe apostolics. As noted, by providing a respectful reading this church, I show how even those syncretisms which prove beyond the bounds of Christianity can still enrich the church. In this case, two insights emerge. First, their experience beckons lament for the involvement of Christian scriptures in the oppressions of European colonialism. Second, the Friday apostolics and Engelke’s portrayal of them provides a textured account of the theological ambiguities inherent in mediating the presence of a God who, in Christian theology, is always both present

⁴² Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 3.

with and absent from human beings. After offering brief background on the church, I take up these two themes.

The Friday apostolics emerged out the life and work of the early to mid-20th century prophet Johane Masowe. Born Shoniwa Masedwa, in 1932 he had a transformative experience that led him to become Johane Masowe, or John of the Wilderness—a John the Baptist for Africa. Having fallen severely ill with headaches, and unable to move or speak, he studied scripture, prayed, and fasted. After forty days of living on wild honey in the wilderness, he heard the voice of God telling him that he had been “sent from Heaven to carry out religious work among the natives.”⁴³ The Friday apostolics are one of a number of contemporary groupings inspired by Johane’s message of a faith with direct access to God and the Holy Spirit. They are distinct, however, in their rejection of the Bible. (Johane Masowe’s view of the Bible is not entirely clear; he certainly read and studied it, but also encouraged followers on occasion to burn their Bibles in an act of protest.) The Friday apostolics claim that if God speaks today, then the Bible obstructs God’s present communication through prophets, angels, singing, healing, and so forth. Offering a common argument from many stricter quarters of Protestantism, they argue that the Christian faith is spiritual, relating to the immaterial. They go a step further than those Protestants, however, seeing the Bible as blocking communication from the Holy Spirit because it is itself a material object. As one pastor put it, “What is the Bible to me? Having it is just trouble. Look, why would you read it? It gets old. Look again. After keeping it for some time it falls apart, the pages come out.”⁴⁴ If the Holy Spirit speaks directly to humans, then the Bible is only a distraction.

⁴³ Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 79.

⁴⁴ Qtd in Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 2.

One reason the Friday apostolics give for rejecting the Bible is its connection to European exploitation through colonialism. One elder describes the Bible as “a political tool of subjugation,” employed by whites as a subtle means to subjugate African peoples. When telling followers to burn their Bibles, Johane himself said that the Bible was given to Africans by “men with black hearts.” After all, whites themselves did not strictly follow the Bible. Engelke writes,

As one church elder put it, “We learned that we could not trust the whites or their book.” He told me that missionaries often said one thing, the Bible another. Polygamy, for example, was roundly condemned by the missionaries, but it was not condemned in the Bible. In addition to this, the elder suggested that “history is written by the victors, and there is this problem with the Bible. It is a record of what the Europeans want others to know.” This remark is representative of the views I heard expressed and contributes to the thesis about white might.⁴⁵

This elder’s comments offer several layers of political protest. First, Europeans applied the Bible inconsistently in Africa, lifting up certain aspects while rejecting others; notably, to this elder, they rejected the Bible’s lack of judgment on polygamy—an area which held resonance for many Africans. Europeans’ selective use of the Bible furthermore suggested that they employed it for their own political ends, the elder implies. He also expresses reserve about recorded history in general, the Bible included. Recorded history comes from those who have conquered others, not those who have suffered under the victor’s yolk. Since European victors brought the Bible to Africa, surely it carries this same bias. It tells what whites want others to know; it is not a book that empowers, the elder says.

The political vein of this critique might appear surprising, or at least an overreaction, to many Western Christians. After all, have not internationally recognized ecclesial leaders like Desmond Tutu quoted the Bible outright when challenging injustices of racism and apartheid? Yet the Friday apostolics are far from alone in questioning the Bible as a resource for African

⁴⁵ Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 5.

Christians, and their concerns are quite representative.⁴⁶ During the colonial era, missionary concern for biblical literacy became entwined with other colonial ambitions in a mutually reinforcing web. Europeans working in Africa commonly saw literacy as a civilizing agent and an unqualified good, even if they supported it for quite different reasons. Terence Ranger writes, “literacy and literature [were] a key dimension of the ‘richness’ that Christianity would bring to an impoverished people.”⁴⁷ European missionaries wanted Christians to be able to read the Bible as an aspect of Christian discipleship, while colonial administrators needed educated Africans to staff colonial administrations. For missionaries, education and literacy gave new or potential converts access to the transformative power of sacred scriptures; to colonial administrators, church schools provided education in reading, writing, and arithmetic that educated a new citizenry able to participate in the colonial economy. This education also gave Africans increased familiarity with European manners, etiquette, and dispositions vital for employment in the colonies. While Europeans saw Africans reading scriptures and Africans serving in the colonies as distinguished ventures, if carrying some mutual benefits for varying parties, Africans saw what most whites did not: such European motives combined at their own expense. Indeed, by the

⁴⁶ The Friday apostolics’ rejection of the Bible resembles other intellectuals and theologians who either reject the Bible outright or say that Africans must receive it carefully. For Takatso Mofokeng, writing from the South African perspective, the Bible has not simply been misused by oppressors, as many theologians like Tutu would contend. The Bible contains oppression. Stories of slavery and of exploiting women, for example, indicate that the Bible has many traditions “which lend themselves to only oppressive interpretations and oppressive uses because of their inherent oppressive nature.” Many South Africans concerned with facing historical injustices, he contends, “have zealously campaigned for its expulsion from oppressed Black community.” (See Gerald West’s assessment in “Negotiating with the ‘White Man’s Book’: Early Foundations for Liberation Hermeneutics in Southern Africa” in *African Theology Today*, ed, Emmanuel Katongole (Scranton: The University of Scranton Press, 2002), 29). Others take a more calculated approach. Itumeleng Mosala, for example, argues that Africans should self-consciously draw from dual sources in their quest for liberation—their African heritage and culture should be in dialectical relation with the Bible, for only then can the Bible be a liberating document. That is, the Bible does not liberate on its own, its contents carry too much of a mixed record (West, 26). Like the elder of the Friday apostolics, he argues that the Bible is a book of the victors, both in its writing and its propagation. But for Mosala, the Bible can liberate when it is employed in conversation with African heritage.

⁴⁷ Terence Ranger, “Taking on the Missionary’s Task”: African Spirituality and the Mission Churches of Manicaland in the 1930s, in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (1999), 198.

early 20th century, many European colonies outsourced schooling almost entirely to Christian missions, who were pleased to have the opportunity to train Africans to read the Bible.⁴⁸ The missionary rush for biblical literacy thus became deeply interwoven with wider European colonial ambitions.

There is an old anecdote in South Africa, perhaps a bit well-worn, but nonetheless vivid in portraying the interplay of religion, politics, and economics involved in blacks losing about 90% of the region's land to whites by the early 1900s (the situation was similar in Zimbabwe near the Friday apostolics). "When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we (Blacks) had the land. The white man said to us 'let us pray.' After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible." In response to this anecdote, Desmond Tutu has replied "And we got the better deal!"⁴⁹ Tutu says this having spent a lifetime fighting for justice in South Africa. (And plenty of South African theologians still think he shouldn't say it.) That is not a judgment for Westerner Christians to make, however; our posture should be one of repentance that Christian sacred literature could ever become an agent of exploitation to the degree that it did. Christian sacred scriptures, texts that Christians claim carry divine empowerment, became absorbed into the disempowering project of European colonialism. Certainly Africans like Tutu read the Bible, "the white man's book" as it was often called, and saw within it themes of liberation. Yet the fact that it was ever called "the white man's book" should elicit lament, repentance, and a search for restitution. It will not do to simply dismiss the Friday apostolics as beyond normative Christianity and move on, since the colonial legacies of this sentiment still remain in the church.

⁴⁸ For an early and influential study, see Roland Oliver, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (London: Longmans, Green, 1965).

⁴⁹ In West, "Early Foundations," 27.

This political aspect is not the only vein of critique, however, or even the primary one. For most Friday apostolics, the Bible seems too remote and irrelevant to their contemporary concerns and everyday challenges. The Bible is “stale”, they claim, written for people two thousand years ago. One Friday apostolic says, “it is not always relevant to the needs of Africans today. We are facing new problems—AIDS, witchcraft, and other African problems—and must be addressed in new ways.”⁵⁰ Friday apostolics often note, in turn, that Jesus himself did not have a Bible, nor did the early apostles. In language very much resembling Paul’s contrast between letter and Spirit, they seek to emulate the early Christians as a community which freed itself from undue dependence upon the written, stale word. Engelke writes, “They see themselves as taking up the enthusiasm of the earliest converts and reclaiming the direct dialogue with God.”⁵¹ They see their faith as a recovery of the practices of early Christians who had direct access to the Spirit.

The concern is not simply with the Bible itself, it extends to a wider critique of the written word as a means of God communicating to human beings. “Apostolics draw attention to the Bible for what to them it clearly is: an object,” Engelke writes. “The Bible is an artifact, a thing. As such, it does not inspire them.”⁵² Theirs is a protest against any material aspect of faith, since faith is trust in that which is unseen. While this emerges out of a long Protestant tradition of uplifting the spiritual over the material, it goes one step further to include the Bible as something material. For many strict Protestants, the Bible provides an unmediated experience of the divine, but for the Friday apostolics that misses the point of having an immaterial faith at all.

⁵⁰ Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 6-7.

⁵¹ Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 17.

⁵² Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 7.

Engelke writes, “the Friday apostolics want a faith in which things do not matter.”⁵³ Part of this protest is the fact that the Bible, as a material object, is not just outdated but static. As an object, it does not change with the times, and it makes religious authority routine and predictable. Texts, as static entities, stifle and deaden the spiritual life in all its liveliness, they claim. The materiality of the Bible inhibits access to the Spirit, distracting people from what the Spirit might say in the contemporary context.

The Friday apostolics’ depiction of the Bible as “stale” accentuates recurring intellectual tensions within Christianity itself—in particular tensions related to how divinity can be mediated to human beings. Engelke skillfully narrates these tensions through what he calls “the problem of presence.” If a central paradox within Christian thought is “God’s simultaneous presence and absence” from human beings, the question arises how that presence becomes mediated given God’s concomitant absence. Humans construct various ways of expressing their comprehension of God’s presence—through words, through material objects, through their behaviors (semiotics thus proves another vital entry point in Engelke’s discussion). Yet none of these things sum up God or channel God completely; they are not God in God’s self. Even when God seems powerfully present to a Christian through an experience of deep transcendence, some absence still remains—leaving room for doubt or evolving understandings of such experiences. The Friday apostolics accentuate this “problem of presence” because their rejection of the Bible as a means of God’s presence is so rare among Christians, but the problem is one all Christians face.

Through Engelke’s breadth of research, one sees that no Christian church has “resolved” the problem of presence.⁵⁴ Engelke places the Friday apostolics within a Christian framework that includes voices as varied as Saint Augustine, American fundamentalists, Friedrich

⁵³ Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 9.

⁵⁴ Engelke’s treatment is far more extensive, and he draws conclusions separate from my own.

Schleiermacher, and others. Each attempt to resolve the paradoxes of mediating God's presence, often addressing perceived faults of a previous generation, only creates new problems—for God still remains absent. Protestant Reformers in the 16th century, for example, worried about the presence of God being unduly mediated through ecclesial structures and physical, sacramental objects, so they turned to the experience of reading scriptures as a primary means of mediating the divine. Strict Protestants in the 18th and 19th centuries went further still. They sensed lingering institutional control over the scriptures and their interpretation, whether by Protestant scholastics or ecclesial structures, and so they put the individual Christian in direct contact with the Bible, claiming unmediated access to the divine through encounter with scripture. Engelke writes, "What Protestantism brought about was an increased emphasis on scripture, and with it, language, as a kind of immaterial presence." For these Protestants, "live and direct" faith could be accessed and mediated through encounters with scripture. What the Friday apostolics saw is what most European Protestants overlooked: these Protestants emphasized immaterial presence yet they still depended upon a material object—the Bible. As another example, Engelke describes an English church panel defaced by Reformers because of its images, with the images replaced by Bible verses. "But if some English iconoclast had indeed purged the panel of its idolatrous nature, it was still, to the casual observer, an object."⁵⁵ No matter how Christians try to resolve the problem of presence, it remains.⁵⁶

The Friday apostolics thus show how difficult this problem of presence in fact is. As Christians desiring a truly immaterial faith, the Friday apostolics have taken the logic to a reasonable—if surprising—conclusion. They not only reject the Bible, but also church buildings:

⁵⁵ Engelke, *The Problem of Presence*, 224.

⁵⁶ Given the emphasis in Chapter 1 on the dangers of static conceptions of the gospel, Engelke helpfully describes a common missionary instinct in the 19th century that the Bible is a stable text providing constancy amid history's many variations.

they meet in fields and under trees. The tension exists within Christianity as a whole, however, not just the Friday apostolics. The problem of presence is not simply a matter for strict Protestants, as if Anglicans, Catholics, or Orthodox have discovered a golden mean between word and sacrament that resolves the semiotic challenges of an immaterial God communicating to a material cosmos. Theologically, there is no comprehensive solution to the challenge of mediating the divine into our material world, of finding a singular expression of Christianity that resolves the paradox of God's presence and God's absence. Christians can only be on their guard against excesses that try to resolve this problem of presence. If there exists a theological response to the problem of presence, perhaps it is a more central place for apophaticism. Apophaticism does not resolve the matter, of course, since it is less a "solution" to problems than a means of doing theology that acknowledges irresolution. Yet apophaticism is a way of recognizing theological limitation and thereby acknowledging that the subject of our reflection, for all the loquaciousness of theologians, remains beyond possibility of expression in any word, action, or object. The Friday apostolics remind Christians that nothing, ultimately, fully expresses the divine.

IV. Conclusion

These three examples indicate how the Spirit often builds knowledge of the Logos through the contestations involved in transmitting Christianity from place to place. The Holy Spirit takes human beings, who bear their own distinctive marks of culture, and draws them into God's covenantal work such that Jesus himself comes to express this variety and diversity. As Éla or Southern Sudanese become drawn into the body of Christ, they are not taken in and made to strictly conform with an already existing and unchanging standard as the Spirit joins them to the

Logos. Rather, aspects that might first appear strange to other Christians, aspects carried from their own culture, become transfigured and thereby build up additional knowledge of the Logos. New insights emerge *through* them; they bring with them new aspects of the Logos never before encountered by past saints.

Through Christian transfiguration of ancestor reverencing, we gain perspective, insight, and appreciation for ways in which the Logos has been at work in history before first century Palestine and outside the people of Israel. Christians come to recognize that the Christian gospel could spread to new places only because of faithful ancestors in those places who passed along teachings and practices consonant with the gospel. Just as Christians expect to learn more of Jesus in the future, so Christians learn more of Jesus from the past. Ancestor reverencing also reminds Western Christians, amid our individualistic tendencies, of the mutual interdependence of the spiritual life and of the debts owed to those in our pasts.

For Western Christians interpreting the bull sacrifice ritual, we find that the Spirit often works by way of reminder. In centuries past, Christians in the West have had stronger communal understandings of sacrifice than we do in the modern moment, as well as a less transactional and less sterilized understanding of Christ's atonement. In this regard, the bull sacrifice indicates the extent to which all quarters of the church require one another for a fuller picture of Jesus. Just as Southern Sudanese Christians ask Westerners for assistance with theological education, so can Western Christians gain from Southern Sudanese a richer portrayal of the obligations, covenants, and commitments to social restoration that accompany participation in ritual sacrifice. Western Christians also discover a syncretic model for engaging with non-Christians in plural political contexts.

Regarding the Friday apostolics, their rejection of the Bible is in part a judgment upon Western Christianity's deep and abiding interconnections with wider European colonial ambitions. Their rejection of the Bible bids confession and repentance. They also highlight the extent to which resolving certain paradoxes like the problem of presence only ends up accentuating those paradoxes. Sometimes, embracing paradoxes makes for far fewer problems than resolving them.

These three examples clearly indicate that enacting the pneumatology of the last chapter is far from easy. Christians should expect that discerning the spirits (I John 4) will continue to be contested in history. Both Tanner and Williams remind us, however, that such disagreements over the movements of the Holy Spirit can be productive. With trust in the Spirit and fortitude amid conflict, such syncretisms can lead to new insights. As the church has found throughout many periods of conflict, whether 4th century creedal debates or the Reformation or otherwise, such contestation can be an indicator that the Spirit is speaking a new word.

Conclusion

In Romans chapter 8, when depicting God's work in the Spirit with intensifying vigor, Paul writes, "The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (vv. 16). The positive claims of this dissertation largely emerged out of reading this verse while attempting to find clarity amid Christian theology's confusion surrounding the notion of syncretism. Paul is clear: the Holy Spirit does not simply communicate the message of Jesus to human beings and leave it at that. The Holy Spirit joins with our human spirit to declare that God has called us God's children. The Spirit pulls us into God's own life, such that humans become participants in the Spirit's communication. The Spirit engages in kenosis by humbly dwelling in human beings and making us instruments of God's work. Both the Holy Spirit and our own human spirits take part in proclaiming God's love. In doing so, our spirits become transfigured. Because Christ has become our "elder brother" or "first ancestor", as Christians in Africa often translate Romans 8:29, we share in the glory of God (Romans 8:17; 8:30).

I have been arguing that, in the process of Christian transmission, God's Spirit joins with human spirits to proclaim God's love. Our own human spirits exist in ordinary, time-bound, finite, and culturally embedded circumstances. Rather than seeing these circumstances as things to be overcome for the sake of conversion, they become aspects that we bring into conversion—employed by the Spirit for the proclamation of God's love. The transformation to which Jesus beckons does not come in spite of the circumstances in which we live; the Spirit employs aspects of those circumstances in and for conversion. As human beings bring cultural particularities into the body of Christ, the Spirit transforms them so that the Logos itself comes to possess them. The culturally particular becomes part of the mystical body of Christ—a body not purely physical,

not purely spiritual, a body not limited to the person Jesus who walked in ancient Palestine, but a body becoming expressed throughout history in disciples throughout the ages. In Lossky's words, "the multitude of the saints will be His image," as our spirits become transformed and thereby engulfed into the Logos through the Spirit.¹ With the second person of the Trinity understood in such an historical framing, a full understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum* inevitably confronts questions of syncretism. For oftentimes, contested religious mixture with culture is precisely how God's Spirit witnesses and joins with our spirit. The Spirit uses existing tools at disciples' disposal to proclaim God's love in Christ, however unfamiliar and strange these tools may appear to other Christians. Through the saints across time, such strangeness becomes communicated and transferred to the divine Logos.

Since "The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God," since God's Spirit joins our spirit, Christians need not fear syncretism. One verse prior, Paul writes, "you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear." Some syncretisms—"true syncretisms" as Boff calls them—become inevitable in the transmission of the gospel and stand to enhance our understanding of Christ. Syncretism understood in a solely pejorative sense only clouds Christian judgment and inhibits our receptivity to the Spirit. Given that the syncretisms of ancient Hellenism into early Christianity enhanced Christian understandings of Jesus, we have every reason to assume that present syncretisms from other parts of the world will do the same. The growth of Christianity in the global South is showing us more of Jesus—aspects not before recognized. Certainly not all syncretisms should become incorporated into Christianity; some syncretisms will prove beyond the bounds of Christian identity, some will distract from the revelation of God in Christ. Yet given that past contested religious mixtures like *homoousios*

¹ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 173.

have become accepted orthodoxies, we have every reason to approach such mixture with a sense of expectation, not simply with fear of dilution.

The path of this dissertation began by confronting Christian confusions regarding syncretism and concluded with the beginnings of a pneumatology that takes account of the fact of cultural mixture in Christian transmission. While religious studies scholars noted the ubiquity of syncretism (Chapter 2), Tanner provided a means of understanding the ubiquity of mixture in a theological vein. God's grace finds us where we are, such that Christians are always using "local" materials to construct their understandings of God (Chapter 3). This does not limit God, if anything it displays an expanded understanding of the power of God's Spirit to work in so many various places. With Williams, this idea expands slightly. Christians, always using local resources, become bound up into the life of the Logos itself, such that these local resources become more than passing expressions of Christianity—they become incorporated into the very life of the Logos (Chapter 5). Christianity, as a tradition of moving continuity (Chapter 4), grows in its understanding of Jesus. New incorporations into the Christian tradition often entail substantial debate, for new incorporations will inevitably appear unfamiliar and strange to many (Chapter 6). At the same time, Christians do well to remember that many of Christianity's most vital and dynamic periods of intellectual and spiritual growth came by way of encounters with religious otherness, through processes of receiving aspects of other traditions' wisdom.

Given this synthetic quality of the Spirit's work, I conclude with two final considerations, one Christological and one related to the concept of religion itself. The Christological consideration relates to my definition of syncretism as phenomena of contested religious mixture with culture. "Mixture" is a word often avoided in theology, particularly in Christological discussions about the divine and human natures of Christ. The Council of Chalcedon, after all,

held that Christ existed in two natures without confusion, without change, indivisibly, and inseparably. Mixing the two natures of Christ would seem out of bounds by this assessment. The first response to this concern is simply to note that saying Christianity mixes with culture is not the same thing as saying that Jesus' divinity mixes with his humanity. But to leave the assessment here would dodge a larger question. After all, I am indeed arguing that as the Logos accretes over time, as aspects of human culture that may first appear beyond the self-understanding of Christianity become incorporated into the body of Christ, elements of humanity do become divinized and come to constitute the eschatological body of Christ. Christians can indeed still make such claims without saying that there comes to be a mixing of divine and human essences, and without saying that humanity becomes completely subsumed into divinity.

In an essay on Gregory of Nyssa's use of terms like "mixture" and "mingling", Sarah Coakley offers a reconsideration of mixture in Christology. Gregory himself does not hesitate to use the word mixture when describing human salvation. When portraying the interchange of Christ's humanity's with divinity, he calls humanity "a drop of vinegar mingled in the boundless sea" of divinity.² In this regard, many accuse Gregory of claiming that Jesus' humanity becomes completely subsumed, even obliterated, in the divinity of Jesus such that only divinity remains. Yet this overlooks the nuance of his language. Gregory draws from longstanding conversations in Aristotelian and Stoic circles about the nature of mixture, borrowing this analogy from an Aristotelian one of wine mingling in a sea. Had Gregory retained the image of wine, he could be accused of Apollinarianism and of divinity subsuming the humanity, since the wine would become so diluted in the sea that it would no longer retain its quality. Yet Gregory adapts the Aristotelian imagery by employing vinegar instead of wine—an image he draws from the Stoics.

² Sarah Coakley, "'Mingling' in Gregory of Nyssa's Christology: A Reconsideration," in *Who is Jesus Christ for Us Today*, ed. Andreas Schuele and Günter Thomas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 72-84, 76.

Unlike wine, when mixing vinegar and water the vinegar retains its distinctive quality.³ That the sea is so much greater in quantity than the drop of vinegar only displays the greatness and incomparableness of divinity itself in comparison to the human. Gregory employs this analogy within a larger scriptural interpretation of mixture in I Corinthians 15:20, wherein the firstfruits of humanity are taken into the divine, even “absorbed.” Given the context of I Corinthians 15 and its treatment of salvation, the implications for humans are clear. Humans’ themselves also become “mingled” with Christ, partially in this life and fully in the eschaton. Coakley writes,

This particular mingling of divine and human in Christ that is being discussed is one in which we are also destined to participate: it is the firstfruits of “them that slept,” and hence the union (or mingling) of human and divine that occurs in Christ that enables *our* final union with Christ—a mysterious eschatological change to the body/soul “in the twinkling of an eye.” It cannot therefore be an *obliteration* of the human that is implied by this mingling (which would make nonsense of Paul’s entire argument in 1 Cor. 15). Rather, it is its unique transformation.⁴

In light of the theology of syncretism proffered in this dissertation, the firstfruits are those aspects of our cultures that have become part of ourselves which then come to constitute the Logos. Not all aspects of humanity or of culture become incorporated into Christ’s body, of course, but the firstfruits do. Thus there is no Christological incongruence in saying that the divine and the human become mingled or syncretized in our final union with Christ.⁵

As a second consideration, I turn to a theological observation on the category of religion itself, drawn from themes in Chapter 2 regarding the increasingly debated category. Whether the concept of “religion” continues to prove a useful designation I leave to continuing scholarly scrutiny, given the conversation is fairly early in its development. Yet this dissertation at least

³ Vinegar also carries a connotation of healing for the Stoics, adding another layer to Gregory’s salvific imagery. Coakley, “‘Mingling’ in Gregory,” 77.

⁴ Coakley, “‘Mingling’ in Gregory,” 77.

⁵ For another sensitive treatment of “mixture” in patristic thought, see Brian Bantum on Cyril of Alexandria in his *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 101-109.

makes clear that, for theological reasons, traditional understandings of “religion” can inhibit appreciation of the work of Spirit. Conceiving religion as a self-contained tradition of beliefs and practices understood in firm distinction from other such self-contained traditions sets up unnecessary intellectual hurdles. Scholars of religion in Chapter 2 make this point from a phenomenological perspective: religions have always borrowed from one another and from their local environments far more than theologians tend to admit. Yet from a theological perspective, given that the Holy Spirit has so often used other traditions to enhance Christian understandings of Jesus, it makes little sense to hold onto such rigid distinctions which suggest that one is crossing a well-defined border when drawing from another tradition. It makes more sense to see borders as porous: porosity reflects the fact that strong distinctions do indeed exist, but porosity also indicates that drawing from another tradition need not inherently mean that one is abandoning Christianity. If Stoicism or Neoplatonism had been conceived along the same rigid demarcations of our contemporary understandings of religion, would early Christians have felt so free to borrow from them? If a Christian wishes to incorporate the Prophet Muhammad’s dictum to pray five times a day, perhaps by saying the Lord’s Prayer at each call to prayer, should this Christian feel that they are violating a boundary? Especially given many scholars believe that Muhammad learned this practice from Ethiopian Christian monks, in this case Christians might receive back with gratitude a practice rightfully maintained by Muslims.

Borrowing from Islam is not the only instance in which Christianity can receive back some of its own wisdom from sources considered outside itself. Modern theologians sometimes malign the European Enlightenment for giving rise to political liberalism or for its role in

displacing Christianity from its central place in the European moral imaginary.⁶ Yet the Enlightenment was, if only in some respects, a movement which recognized Christendom's failure to live out its own stated political values—such as the value of radical social equality portrayed in much of the New Testament. If many Enlightenment political philosophers like Voltaire or Rousseau or Jefferson took equality as a political value more seriously than many Christians themselves (if more in their rhetoric than in their actual lives), Christians should feel free to utilize aspects of Enlightenment thought to improve Christianity. Or, more likely, Christians might simply recognize the extent to which they are already borrowing from these resources. This is not to say that traditions like the Enlightenment do not possess all sorts of ideas that conflict with Christianity, such as the unencumbered self or the glorification of reason at the expense of other human faculties. It is simply to say that Christians need not worry unduly about borrowing even from traditions that formed self-consciously in reaction to Christianity itself, so long as Christian disciples remain wise as serpents and gentle as doves (Matthew 10:16).

Seeing religions' borders as porous is not to slip into seeing all religions as one or to erase their distinctiveness. At a basic epistemological level, it acknowledges that Christians always have and always will syncretize with their environments. After all, having grown out of the fertile soil of Judaism, Christianity never was purely its own entity. Syncretism has always been part of its character—and part of its giftedness. But more than that, to recognize the porosity of religions is to trust the Holy Spirit. It is to trust the Spirit to guide us into all truth, come whence it may. It is to trust the Spirit to join our spirits with God's Spirit. It is to imagine

⁶ For examples, see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory, Second Edition* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006) and John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

the Logos anew—to recognize its capacity to incorporate the strange and the unfamiliar into itself. It is to allow the Spirit to show new paths of love for the Father. Christians need not fear syncretism. After all, “perfect love casts out fear” (I John 4:18).

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