

Fighting syncretism: The early days

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Syncretism is the historical process by which different belief systems, typically religions, are fused into a new belief system. As is easy to imagine, it happens a lot, as cultures interact and overlap over long time-periods.

It is particularly likely in times of conquest and empire-building, as in the days of Alexander the Great, which introduced new routes of influence throughout southern Europe, the Middle East, and India—or when the Roman Empire exposed Europe to Christianity—or when European colonialism did the same for the rest of the world.

Being just one part of a long evolving history of storytelling is of course a problem for a religion whose mythological backstories must, for theological reasons, be *unique* and *true*. It can be particularly difficult to admit that your gods are really retconned versions of other people's gods. (Especially if it's important to you that they are *other people*.)

One—in my view awesome—way of dealing with this phenomenon is to say that all gods, known and unknown, are really versions of your god, and your god can take on infinite aspects. You come across a "new" deity that is revered by the local population? Cool, another manifestation of Brahma! What's he been up to over here?

Another kind of reaction is this:

Thou shalt have no other gods before me –Exodus 20:3, *KJB*

The First Commandment was of course a somewhat desperate attempt to prevent people not just from converting to other religions, but from adopting religious practices and beliefs that didn't belong in the One True Religion (i.e. Judaism/Christianity/Islam in any of their many variants) and would just ruin everything.

I say desperate, because it was a failure from day one. This is indicated by the many golden calves, broken covenants, and so on and so forth (not to mention the archaeological evidence as to what people really worshiped in the Holy Land 3,000 years ago).

What happens when you try to fight syncretism is apparently not that those outside influences disappear—they become devils. Like Beelzebub, whose name likely comes from "Ba'al," a title—like "Lord"—by which worshipers addressed their fertility god Hadad.

Or that guy who Faust made a deal with? Let's just say he's not likely to have his origin in the Middle East, but rather in those innumerable more or less supernatural, more or less deceitful creatures that northern European tales used to be full of. After Christianization, they were all the devil. (Anyway, I prefer the Robert Johnson version.)

Admittedly, those creatures were kind of evil to begin with. The principal point of the syncretism-fighters though, is that they don't exist—and it's heresy to believe otherwise! There. Now, about Mephistopheles. . .

Another more sympathetic way in which Christianity has failed to stave off outside influences is in the saints. Isn't it a bit odd that the Virgin Mary is so revered in certain regions, like southern Europe and South America? She seems more popular than the Main Man! Well, apparently, Virgin Mary worship in certain places was a continuation of the worship of a popular fertility goddess.

Some local "saints" in Ecuador are transparently non-Christian deities, and if we get into the syncretic religious practices of the Caribbean there's just no telling what is what anymore.

This shameless idolatry is bound to make a puritan very *angry*.

So what have we learned? Fighting the influences of other cultures, whether on your religion or otherwise, is not just as hopeless as fighting the tide, it is detrimental to your blood pressure. Do instead like Gandhi, who both translated the Bhagavad Gita to English and shed a few tears in front of the crucifix in St. Peter's Basilica.

As one preacher who wasn't too concerned with purity put it: Don't fight it! Feel it!

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