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André DROOGERS

Syncretism and Fundamentalism:
A Comparison

In several ways, syncretism and fundamentalism can be viewed as opposite reactions to the processes of modernization and globalization. Within religious contexts, syncretists and fundamentalists make different choices when confronted with alternatives and with challenges to the accepted practices of daily life. The power dimension is an important aspect for this comparison. But the study of these two modern religious phenomena also points to a similarity with a paradigmatic debate, the contrast between positivist and constructivist approaches. Though the comparison is not the most obvious, there are striking similarities between fundamentalists and positivists, on the one hand, and between constructivists and syncretists, on the other.

Key words: constructivism · fundamentalism · positivism · power · syncretism

Le syncrétisme et le fondamentalisme peuvent être envisagés de diverses façons comme des réactions antagonistes aux processus de modernisation et de globalisation. Dans un contexte religieux, les syncrétistes et les fondamentalistes font des choix différents lorsqu'ils sont confrontés à des alternatives ou à des défis par rapport à certaines pratiques quotidiennes acceptées jusque là. Pour tenter cette comparaison, la dimension de pouvoir doit être considérée comme un élément important. Mais en même temps, l'étude de ces deux phénomènes montre une similarité par rapport au débat paradigmatique qui sépare les approches positivistes et constructivistes. Malgré le fait que cette comparaison ne s'impose pas d'emblée, l'on trouve d'étonnantes similarités entre d'une part, fondamentalistes et positivistes et, d'autre part, entre syncrétistes et constructivistes.

Mots-clés: constructivisme · fondamentalisme · positivisme · pouvoir · syncrétisme

At first glance, syncretism and fundamentalism seem incommensurate. Though part of the vocabulary of the student of religion, they are rarely thought of together. "Fundamentalism", it might be argued, refers to an established and often institutionalized modality in more than one religion. "Syncretism" does not enjoy such a status. Scholars of religion may use the term referentially, but usually the people thus described are not aware of their being labeled as syncretistic. The religious leaders of these believers

may use the word to address a type of popular religious practice that they condemn. In this article, the focus is on syncretism and fundamentalism as modes of religious reflection. Thus, viewed each in their own context, they present more grounds for comparison. Indeed, such a comparison may sharpen our understanding of both. Syncretism and fundamentalism make a very different use of the same religious repertoires for religious construction and reproduction. In several respects these religious phenomena can be depicted as opposite processes.

A Short Characterization

Much ink has already been spilt on the question of how to define syncretism or fundamentalism.[1] Some scholars have predictably suggested giving up altogether attempting to define them; others have suggested distinguishing between various types of syncretism and fundamentalism (or fundamentalisms) (Lawrence, 1998; Marty and Appleby, 1991). As an anthropologist, I have advocated an eclectic praxis approach and a renewed interest in the political dimension of syncretism (Droogers, 1989; Greenfield and Droogers, 2001; see also Stewart and Shaw, 1994). To compare syncretism and fundamentalism, I will describe, as family resemblances, the defining characteristics that might be included for analysis.

Fundamentalism

Independent of the world religion of which it is a concrete expression, fundamentalism can be depicted as a critical reaction to modernization. I take modernization to be the process by which the results of science and technology have influenced societies in the world. Fundamentalism often takes an anti-modern stance, although using the technological means of communication that modernization has made available around the world. In its anti-modernism, moral aspects play the main role. Through globalization (i.e. the process by which the world is experienced as one place) both modernity and the fundamentalist anti-modern position have been able to spread. The mass media have played a role in this, especially after 9–11. One might even say that the media and politics have hijacked the definition of fundamentalism from academia and produced their own definition, with a strong emphasis on Islam, on terrorism and on the use of violence.

Another defining characteristic of fundamentalism is its activist, exclusivist and assertive stance. The anti-modernist position reflects a dualist way of thinking, dividing the world into two camps. Military metaphors are sometimes turned into real military activity. In fundamentalist circles, charismatic leaders may play a leading role, reinforcing the attractiveness of the message by their personality. Bodily identity markers, such as beards or distinctive garb, serve to make adherents' identity recognizable in the public sphere, reinforcing their visibility. Fundamentalism typically involves adherents taking sacred texts (when available) literally, as indisputable truth. Similarly,

fundamentalists often understand their religious identity (such as ethnicity or race) as imbued with essentialist qualities. Also, they often have a rather legalistic way of regarding ethics. Another frequent characteristic is male dominance, often as a by-product of the literal reading of sacred texts.

Syncretism

An equally brief and incomplete characterization of syncretism begins with the observation that it brings together elements from different religious sources. Some scholars consider non-religious elements to be part of the process of blending, as well. Other scholars note that the mixing of elements happens in varying degrees. Thus, they have distinguished different types of syncretism, with symbiosis at one end of the spectrum and complete fusion at the other. The two—or more—religious sources that provide elements for syncretization do not necessarily occupy an equal position. One source may be dominant, coloring the elements taken from the other religion. Much syncretism seems to occur in an unreflective manner, as a ''natural''— or better—cultural process. As a consequence, people who mix varied religious elements may not do so intentionally and would not necessarily defend or propagate their blended religious practices. Thus, syncretism often serves as a practical means of solving existential problems. If one religion disappoints as a problem-solver, the other religion and its representatives may offer compensation. Difficult situations may, therefore, stimulate people to appeal to forms of syncretization.

Another relevant aspect is that phenomenological or other similarities between religions may promote syncretism. Similarity between religions (e.g. parallel pantheons or types of religious experiences) may facilitate mingling. On the other hand, complementarities may also promote syncretization, as when one religion helps out where the other fails to do so. Furthermore, the actors in syncretic religious modes often are lay people (i.e. ordinary believers), including women; by engaging in syncretization, they withdraw themselves from the control of (usually male) religious specialists of the powers-that-be—fundamentalist or not. Thus, the power dimension of syncretism and anti-syncretism becomes evident, in terms of both gender and religious organization. Whether used by religious leaders or by scholars, syncretism is a product of the surprising event where seemingly separated elements, from different orders, are brought together. In that sense, scholars and religious leaders think in similar ways, presupposing more or less closed, autonomous systems that syncretists perforate and mix. Whereas the religious leaders condemn this heresy, scholars jump to the study of this unexpected matter out of order.

Comparison and Contrast

The terms ''fundamentalism'' and ''syncretism'' occupy various positions in emic and etic discourses. ''Fundamentalism'', as a term, has an emic origin

within US Protestant Christianity. Subsequently, scholars have adopted the term and applied it to other religions (although many of them do not accept the appellation). Whereas (Christian) fundamentalists proudly labeled themselves as such, syncretists rarely adopt that identity. The term ''syncretism'' has gained a Christian emic use, though, but exclusively as a part of the leaders' vocabulary when condemning the mingling of Christian with non-Christian elements that took place among common believers. Leaders viewed this mixing as impure and offensive, or even heretical. It threatened the monopoly of the clergy on the production of religion. In its more ancient emic meanings, the term, of course, did not have this negative connotation, as when Erasmus of Rotterdam recommended syncretism as a positive and productive way of handling theological differences in Christianity. The academic or etic use of the term starts from a rather essentialist presupposition. Scholars' attention seems to have been drawn to the phenomenon because the mixing was contrary to the division in religious systems that was considered the norm. That is why some forms of syncretism are so fascinating or even funny in their being out of place.

More important is the contrast between the two processes. Fundamentalists opt for one exclusive religious source, with one version and interpretation, whereas syncretists seem to see no problem in using more sources and in freely interpreting them. In using one source only, fundamentalists make use of a limited number of metaphors, or even only one key metaphor that becomes codified and sacrosanct. Syncretists, by contrast, explore the usefulness of many metaphors in a very practical way, especially when they consider them to be complementary to each other and effective in practical use. Accordingly, a difference is that fundamentalism is applauded by those leaders who identify with it and even promote or produce it, whereas religious leaders usually frown on syncretistic forms of expression, unless tolerance is a basic value in their religion. But this latter tolerance may change, as when leaders in Hinduism, long considered a very tolerant religion, adopt fundamentalist attitudes in competition with Islam, Christianity and secularism. Whereas syncretists generally adopt tolerant and inclusivistic attitudes, fundamentalists usually take exclusive and intolerant positions. Fundamentalists are likely to see the world as their setting; syncretists are likely to have a local perspective.

A final contrast is that fundamentalists typically seek institutionalization, whereas syncretists operate in a much more informal sphere and often are not even aware of the label ''syncretism''. Official and popular religion may therefore occupy contrasting positions, but they may just as well join in some form of fundamentalism. When syncretism attains the status of official religion, as in some Japanese religions, it may develop into a single-perspective religion and even become fundamentalist in its position. Usually, however, syncretism remains at the level of popular, rather than official, religion. Characteristically, too, fundamentalists accept male dominance, whereas active syncretists are often women. Indeed, their way of producing religion may serve as a form of unreflective resistance to male dominance. To exemplify syncretism, they need not even know the term or self-identify as syncretists.

A Three-dimensional Model

A three-dimensional model may be helpful in clarifying this comparison and in situating both fundamentalism and syncretism within a religious context. In this model, I bring together the power relations that prevail at three levels: the *internal*, the *external* and the *supernatural* (or *transcendental*) levels of a religious group, be it as small as a cell group in a local Pentecostal church, or as large as the world-wide Catholic Church. The external and internal levels refer primarily to social structural aspects; the supernatural dimension is more cultural in nature, or—more specifically—reflects the world-view.

Power can be defined as the ability to influence other people's behavior. At the internal level, power relations exist between believers, but even more so between religious leaders and their followers. At the external level, there is a power relationship between, on the one hand, believers and, on the other hand, non-believers or—perhaps more importantly—believers with other religious preferences. At the supernatural or transcendental level, though not usually coined in these terms, there is a power relationship between believers and their god, gods, spirits and any other forms the sacred may take. The repertoires for behavior, thinking and perception that usually are constructed and activated at each of the three levels are inter-connected and influence each other.

I suggest that the power relationships at each of the three levels (thus defined) are on a continuum and may change their positions between extremes over time. Accordingly, at the internal level, the leaders' position may be strong, influencing the common believers' thinking and behavior until the leader is ousted or dies and another constellation develops. There may also be, at the other end of the spectrum, a preference for rather hori-zontal relations, not only between members but also between leaders and members. For example, Episcopal churches differ from Presbyterian churches in this respect, although the temptation that power represents may make a Presbyterian church come to resemble an Episcopal one, illustrating the dynamics of the spectrum. On the continuum for the internal dimension, one might thus distinguish between the poles of a *vertical hierarchical* and a *horizontal egalitarian* mode of power relations.

On the external dimension, power relations may take the form of an effort to influence the outsiders in their behavior, for example, by converting them. At the other end of the continuum, this tendency may be fully absent. Indeed, the believers may readily adopt values and behaviors that are normal in the surrounding society, the direction of the power mechanisms being, in fact, inverted. Consequently, at this level, we may distinguish between an *exclusive* or even hostile pole and an *inclusive* and tolerant pole of the spectrum of power relations. Religious groups may, in the course of their history, move from one pole to the other through all the positions in between (see Yinger, 1970: 256ff.).

At the transcendental or supernatural level, power relations are similarly given expression, even though believers may not like to think of their reli-gious experience as involving power. But in terms of influence on the other's behavior, believers accept the influence of the sacred in their lives, just as they

seek to influence the sacred to their advantage. We can label the poles of the spectrum of power relations at this level *submissive* and *manipulative* respectively. Here, too, believers may in the course of time change their views of the sacred and move along the spectrum.

The Model Applied to Fundamentalism and Syncretism

We are now in a position to apply the three-dimensional model to the phenomena under comparison: fundamentalism and syncretism. The model can prove helpful especially in understanding under which conditions (i.e. power relations) fundamentalisms or syncretisms are most likely to occur.

When we thus consider fundamentalism, it usually comes with an emphasis in the internal dimension that stimulates vertical and hierarchical power relations between believers, with a clergy that guards the fundamentalist heritage. Because of the emphasis on the purity of its doctrine and praxis, a vertical structure that guarantees discipline is implied or even necessary. Looking at the external dimension, it is clear that fundamentalists, as a consequence of their exclusive view on the truth, adopt a relatively hostile attitude towards non-believers and the believers of other religious expressions. On the supernatural or transcendental level, the fundamentalist position seems to tend toward the submissive, more than the manipulative, end of the spectrum. The strictness of the position matches a view of the sacred as dominant, demanding full surrender in all areas of life. Observe that the modes of religious production adopted at the three levels reinforce each other.

On the internal dimension, syncretism works best when believers are able to avoid being controlled by the religious leaders, or when such control is simply absent due to relatively horizontal power relations. At the external level, syncretism, by its very nature, is open to external influences and thus adopts an open and tolerant attitude towards other believers and their religions. At the supernatural level, the practical attitude of syncretists points to a more manipulative than submissive attitude, although the power of the sacred is acknowledged, precisely for that reason it is a potential resource for the solution of problems. As soon as other religious sources are addressed, the number of sacred powers available for such use increases. Submission implies an exclusivity that precludes syncretistic efforts. Again, the constellation of positions and attitudes at the three levels may serve to reinforce the net result.

As is clear from comparison along these three continua, fundamentalism and syncretism appear to be stimulated in contrasting religious contexts. Fundamentalism thrives in conditions where the internal power relations are vertical and reinforce hierarchy. Moreover, it naturally adopts a hostile position with regard to others and non-believers, making them into an object for conversion or submission. Finally, it depends on a view of the sacred that prefers an attitude of submission to the sacred power. Syncretism, on the contrary, depends on enough space for believers to produce their own

form of religiosity, without control. It uses a relatively open perspective towards other religions, the sources for new elements. And it presupposes a form of the sacred that allows for its manipulation to address problems.

Positivism and Fundamentalism, Constructivism and Syncretism

Viewing fundamentalism and syncretism as two opposing modes of religious reflection, I suggest that there may be a parallel between these two modes of reflection and the positivist and constructivist paradigms, as modes of reflection in the social sciences. Following Guba (1990), a distinction can be made between paradigms—or, as he puts it, ''belief systems''—that rule scientific activity. Although Guba mentions four of them, for the purposes of this article, I shall discuss only the two extremes, the positivist and the constructivist paradigms (leaving the post-positivist approach and critical theory out of this discussion).

The positivist position, as summarized by Guba (1990: 20), presupposes a reality out there that is driven by natural laws. The scientist's task is to discover these laws and to produce generalizations that must be free from time and context. Some of these laws refer to cause–effect relations. Accordingly, the researcher should not intervene in the reality studied, and his or her values should not influence the outcome. The positivist methodology requires hypotheses that can be subjected to empirical tests, to be held under carefully controlled conditions. Thus, the body of scientific knowledge will grow. There is only one main story to tell about one reality.

At the other end of the spectrum, the constructivist position adopts an ontology that presupposes the existence of more realities, as multiple mental constructions. These realities are socially and experientially based, local in nature and specific. They depend for their form and content on the person who holds them. When in this type of research findings are reached, it happens in the interaction between the inquirer and the inquired. Accordingly, the method adopted is dialectic and hermeneutic: ''individual constructions are elicited and refined hermeneutically, and compared and contrasted dialectically, with the aim of generating one (or a few) constructions on which there is substantial consensus'' (Guba, 1990: 27). In this model of science, the ambition to reach ''the'' scientific truth is absent or at the least made relative. There are fragments of stories to tell about an unlimited number of realities.

There seems to be a certain kinship in the type of reflection, on the one hand, between positivism and fundamentalism, and, on the other, between syncretism and constructivism. Just as the positivists hold that the term ''reality'' refers to a singular entity, objectively ''there'', so too do fundamentalists hold that there is but one form of the sacred reality. Likewise, constructivists hold that there are multiple, socially constructed realities; similarly, syncretists have no qualms about working with multiple forms of religious reality, even those that official versions exclude or deny. Of course, syncretists may think that this religious plurality is still presupposing

one holistic cosmos, in which they have learned to move skillfully. But holistic view or not, syncretists tend to reject any exclusive approach to sacred reality. They thereby resist the power structure that accompanies such a singular view, whether it is fundamentalist or not.

The positivist belief system presupposes, as given, that a singular reality is ''out there''; likewise, in the fundamentalist belief system, the one sacred reality is presupposed. Accordingly, there is only one ''grand'' story to be told about this reality.[2] In the case of both fundamentalist believers and positivist scholars, the reality that they focus on is driven by laws and rules. The constructivist paradigm opts for realities, in the plural, and is even hesitant whether these realities, though many, are really ''out there''. Many stories can be told about these realities. Yet, there is a difference: syncretists have a stauncher belief in their realities than constructivists do in theirs. They believe in the realities that other religions suggest, at least as long as they work in solving problems. As constructivists presuppose, syncretists play with different realities when forming their religious identity. An improvising flexible and practical use is made of whatever regularity or causality presents itself.

Finally, just as fundamentalists and syncretists have different backgrounds as far as power processes and mechanisms are concerned, scholars can be said to play different power games in the way they practice science. Fundamentalists and positivists seek to impose a rather monopolistic, centripetal, law-based and strict view of the world. Both tend to be modernist in their approach. Syncretists and constructivists seem to resist this view. They adopt a mode of reflection that is tuned to the human ability to imagine an unlimited number of realities with a centrifugally expanding number of identities that are open to improvisation when the conditions demand such. They tend to be much more postmodernist.

Conclusion

In this article, it was shown how believers and scholars of diverse leanings opt for a different use of the repertoires that are available in their—religious or academic—world. It was suggested that, within a framework that focuses on the relation between meaning-making and power, fundamentalists and syncretists occupy opposing positions. This appears to hold in three respects: (1) in contacts between believers (internal dimension); (2) in dealing with outsiders (external dimension); and (3) when approaching the sacred (supernatural dimension). Also, it was suggested that there are unexpected similarities between fundamentalists and positivists, on the one hand, and between syncretists and constructivists, on the other. An exclusive and centripetal use of one single repertoire was contrasted with an inclusive and centrifugal use of a series of repertoires. Scholars and believers thus have more in common than the usual separation of religion and science appears to suggest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

[1.] For an overview of the literature on syncretism, see Droogers (1989), and Stewart and Shaw (1994). The most impressive source on fundamentalism is The Fundamentalism Project, organized by Marty and Appleby (1991); see also Kepel (1991).

[2.] Incidentally, in the positivist view, one is not allowed to intervene in that reality when researching it. Post-positivists even doubt whether that reality can be fully apprehended (Guba, 1990: 23), just as fundamentalists may opt for a *teologia negativa*.

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