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Book Reviews

Anita Maria Leopold and Jebbe Sinding Jensen (eds.) *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader. Critical Categories in the Study of Religion.* New York: Routeledge, 2005. xiii + 402 pp. Paper. ISBN 9780415973618. $29.95.

This useful volume, examining the problematic concept of religious syncretism, is divided into five sections, plus a critical introduction and conclusion by Leopold. The first section deals with the history of the use of the term, including a classic statement by the Dutch theologian Hendrik Kraemer, with reformulations and critiques by four historians of religion. The most critical is Robert Baird, who takes issue with the christo-centric nature of Kraemer's formulation (who saw syncretism as an innate feature of non-Christian religions) and suggests a rejection of the term due to its overly normative history, and seemingly inherent ambiguity. Michael Pye, on the other hand, deems "ambiguity" the most valuable aspect of syncretism, though in analytical terms he limits the concept to specific moments where contradictory religious meanings must be resolved. Kurt Rudolph emphasizes (problematically, as Leopold notes [26–27]) a distinction between "unconscious" and "conscious" syncretism, but also draws attention to the critical role of the observer or commentator on religious blending—foreshadowing in an important way the anthropological theories of syncretism developed by Droogers and Stewart. Hans Kippenberg's short statement provides a useful overview of the term as used in the German "History of Religion School" in the early 20th Century, connecting its ascendance to the consciousness of modernity as a product of Judeo-Christian history.

The next section treats syncretism as a "dynamic" character of religion. The brief statement by Gerardus van der Leeuw places syncretism in the phenomenology of religion, seeing the process active in a dialectic between history and revelation, in the constant refinement and expansion of the religious "system," where older practices and beliefs are "transposed" in new contexts. Hendrik Vroom's contribution extends logical principles to syncretism, and also relies heavily upon

the religion-as-system model, where inconsistencies in beliefs are necessarily eliminated. Leopold (92–94) provides a clear critique of this approach, though I disagree with her assessment of the hidden merit of Vroom's ideas. Indeed, the present section is perhaps the least valuable in the collection, with the exception of Roger Bastide's classic interpretation of syncretism in Afro-Brazilian religion, which may have been better placed in the following section, which treats specific cases of syncretism in cultural and historical settings, highlighting various power dynamics.

In this section, on "Religions in Contact", Andrew Apter provides a thoughtful critique of Herskovits' pioneering work on syncretism in New World African religion, recasting the process in (now familiar) terms of counter-hegemonic resistance, which he traces back to equally dynamic West African roots. Gustavo Benavides presents a nuanced sociolinguistic and culture-historical analysis religious change in the Andes, with critical attention to issues of power. Andre Droogers offers an engaging (if formalistic) anthropological model of syncretism (illustrated through an Afro-Brazilian case study), which stresses culture as developing in shifting relations of power and play (which is understood as constituted in moments of freedom where meaning-making through bricolage proceeds). Armin Geertz presents a comparable analysis of the politics of religion and culture among the Hopi, with attention paid to the underlying compatibility of "syncretic" mixtures which, however, are deployed strategically in accordance with different interests. Poet and novelist Carlos Guillermo Wilson's more polemical contribution collapses Afro-Caribbean syncretism into a catch-all of linguistic, religious, musical and gastronomical creolization, setting up a normative dichotomy between the positive work of syncretism-as-identity-construction and the negative, racist and colonial work of purification. As such, it present an example of the sort of discourse that Charles Stewart, in the following section, suggests be analysed as political "meta-syncretic" commentary.

The three essays in the next section return directly to issues of definition, category and overarching theories of syncretism, beginning with Stewart's overview of the social scientific use of the concept, with con-

clusions that generally accord with and extend Droogers' perspective. Luther Martin draws upon cognitive anthropology, and the work of Pascal Boyer, to develop a naturalistic theory of syncretism, which imposes some limits on what is, in the end, "mixable." The older essay by Ulrich Berner considers classic problems of syncretism, and proposes a heuristic typology with an emphasis on syncretism as a descriptive concept, in a manner which—as Leopold (261–62) notes, accords with some of the concerns raised by Stewart.

The final section offers "current approaches" to syncretism, which highlight cognitive, psychological and developmental perspectives in efforts to uncover "concrete" mechanisms directing the process. Timothy Light suggests that syncretism is the cognitive and developmental norm; Panayotis Pachis in an examination of contemporary Greek religion offers a cognitive explanation of the popularity of Hellenism, while noting the issues of power at stake; and Kristine Munk considers contemporary Zulu syncretism to be a psychological response to dilemmas of modernity, related to challenges to the embodied experience of witchcraft and healing.

Taken as a whole, this collection is indeed valuable, though Leopold's attempt at synthesis is perhaps overly ambitious. I am not convinced that "blending" in whatever domain we encounter it necessarily implies a unity that can be uniformly theorized. This is especially the case in the context of studies that highlight concrete issues of power (as Droogers, Stewart and others here do), which do not immediately relate to the more reductive explanatory models—especially the cognitive. Indeed, Stewart's protestations with regard to the futility of seeking an Archimedean point with regard to determining what is "mixed" and what is not are simply displaced, not overcome, when Leopold (258) recommends a turn to cognitive sciences to get past the structure/process dialectic, or—it would seem—the discourse of people about what they feel they are doing when they "blend" or "purify."

In other words, syncretism (so conceived) is always historical, social and situated. The pieces (including Leopold's commentary) which treat cognitive aspects of religious mixture are interesting, though uncritical assessment, in passing, of memetics (a very questionable field, in the

eyes of many hard-nosed "scientific" anthropologists), and the rather abrupt dismissal of Chomskyian linguistic theory (still convincing for a great many, including myself), speak to some critical lacunae. I do not deny the room for dialogue between these different perspectives, but would question whether "current approaches" to syncretism consist wholly in those that privilege the cognitive.

On a technical level, the volume needs clearer biographical data on the various contributors. This is often supplied by Leopold in her introductory comments, but not always. This is especially important given the diverse perspectives represented.

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Carol Meyers. *Exodus.* New Cambridge Bible Commentary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 311 pp. Paper. ISBN 9780521002912. US $21.99.

Carol Meyers' commentary on the book of Exodus adopts a "centrist" position in current maximalist-minimalist debates, interpreting the pentateuchal book as an example of exilic historiography that utilized cultural memory for didactic purposes. Meyers' approach flexibly wields historical, literary, ideological, and reader-reception theories to develop a "mnemohistorical" understanding of Exodus narrative and law. The result is a thorough-going commentary that summarizes well the state-of-the-Exodus-question and demonstrates for introductory students the variety of interpretive tools available to biblical scholars.

Meyers' first chapter provides the reader with a broad overview of the biblical studies discipline, a summary of the key issues of Exodus scholarship, and a guide to the layout of her commentary. The second chapter annotates a bibliography (commentaries, reference works, near eastern literature, and special thematic studies) that serves as a helpful resource. The remainder of the book presents a section-by-section reading of Exodus, dividing the narrative into three broad literary units: Israel in Egypt, Sinai and Covenant, Sanctuary and Covenant. Meyers' close reading is frequently interspersed with excurses that invite the