**Synthesis and Syncretism**

**from Rene Guenon's "The Veil of Isis"**

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Among those of our contemporaries who claim to study traditional doctrines

without penetrating their essence, especially those who consider

them from a ‘historic’ and academic point of view, have an unfortunate

tendency to confuse ‘synthesis’ and ‘syncretism.’ This remark applies in

a very general way to the ‘profane’ study of the doctrines of the exoteric

order as well as those of the esoteric order; the distinction between them

is seldom made, and the soi-disant ‘science of religions’ deals with a multitude

of things which, in reality, have nothing ‘religious’ about them, as

is the case in the initiatic ‘mysteries’ of antiquity. This ‘science’ itself

clearly affirms its ‘profane’ character, positing in principle that he who

is outside of all religion, and who, consequently, cannot have any religion

(we would rather say tradition, without specifying any particular

modality), that an entirely external knowledge is the only one qualified

to deal with it ‘scientifically.’ The truth is that, under the pretext of disinterested

knowledge, a clearly anti-traditional intention is concealed: it

is a ‘criticism’ intended above all, in the minds of its promotes and less

consciously in those who follow them, to destroy all tradition, by wishing

to think of it as a set of psychological facts, social or otherwise, but in all

cases as being purely human. We will not dwell on this point further,

because, currently, we propose only to point out a confusion which can

obviously exist independent of this anti-traditional intention although

characteristic of the ‘profane’ mentality.

‘Syncretism,’ understood in its true meaning, is nothing more than a

simple juxtaposition of elements from various sources, gathered ‘from

the outside,’ so to speak, without any principle of a more profound order

unifying them. It is obvious that such an assemblage cannot truly constitute

a doctrine, any more than a heap of stones constitute a building;

even if some who superficially consider fall under this doctrine, this illusion

cannot withstand scrutiny. There is no need to go far to find authentic

examples of this syncretism: modern counterfeits of tradition, such as

Occultism and Theosophy, are nothing other than this at essence; notions

borrowed from various traditional forms, being generally misunderstood

and distorted, are mixed with conceptions belonging to philosophy

and profane science. There are also philosophical theories formed

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almost entirely from fragments of other theories, and here syncretism

usually takes the name of ‘eclectism’; this case is less serious in fact than

the preceding one, because it is only a matter of philosophy, i.e. of profane

thought which, at least, does not try to pretend to be something else.

Syncretism, in any case, is always an essentially profane process, by

its very ‘externality’; not only is it not synthesis, but, in a sense, it is quite

the opposite. Indeed, synthesis, by definition, begins with principles, i.e.

from what is most internal; one might say, it goes from the center to the

circumference, while syncretism stands at the circumference itself, in

pure multiplicity, in an ‘atomic’ sense by the indefinite detail of elements

taken one by one, considered in themselves and for themselves, separated

from their principle, i.e. separated from their true *raison d’être*.

Therefore, syncretism has an entirely analytical character, whether it

likes it or not; it is true that no one speaks so often or so willingly of

synthesis as certain ‘syncretists,’ but this proves only one thing: they feel

that if they recognized the true nature of their composite theories, they

would confess that they are not the depositories of any tradition, and the

work they have done is no different from the work that the premier ‘researcher’

came to by somehow assembling the various notions that he

would have drawn from books.

If they have an obvious interest in passing their syncretism off as synthesis,

the error of those we spoke of at the beginning usually occurs in

the inverse: when they find themselves in the presence of a real synthesis,

they seldom label it as syncretism. The explanation of such an attitude

is very simple: adhering to the point of view which is the most narrowly

profane and the most external as can be conceived, they have no

consciousness of what is of another order, as they do not wish or cannot

admit that certain things escape them, they naturally seek to reduce everything

to processes that are within the reach of their own understanding.

Imagining that all doctrine is only the work of one or more human

individuals, without any intervention of superior elements (for it must

not be forgotten that this is the fundamental postulate of all their ‘science’),

they attribute to these individuals what they themselves would be

capable of doing in such a case; it goes without saying that they do not

care at all about whether the doctrine they study in their own way is or

is not the expression of the truth, because such a question, not being

‘historical,’ does not even arise for them. It is even doubtful that the idea

has ever occurred to them that there can be a truth of a different order

than simple ‘truth of fact,’ which alone can be an object of erudition; as

for the interest that such a study may present for them in these conditions,

we must admit that we cannot render it so, because it is a mentality

that is foreign to us.

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Be that as it may, what is particularly important to notice is that the

false conception that wants to see syncretism in traditional doctrines has

the direct and inevitable consequence of what may be called the theory

of ‘borrowing’: when one finds the existence of similar elements in two

different doctrinal forms, one hastens to suppose that one of them must

have borrowed from the other. Of course, this is not a question of the

common origin of traditions, nor of their authentic filiation with the regular

transmission and the successive adaptations that it entails; all this,

escaping the means of investigation available to the profane historian,

does not exist for him. They wish to speak only of loans in the grossest

sense of the word, of a kind of copy or plagiarism of a tradition by another

with whom it has been in contact as a result of all contingent circumstances,

of an accidental incorporation of detached elements, not answering

to any profound reason, and that is indeed what the definition

of syncretism implies. Moreover, one does not wonder if it is not normal

that the same truth receives more or less similar expressions or at least

those that are comparable between them, independently of all borrowing,

and they cannot ask this, since, as we said earlier, they are resolved

to ignore the existence of this truth. Furthermore, this last explanation

would be insufficient without the notion of primordial traditional unity,

but at least it would represent a certain aspect of reality; let us add that

it must in no way be confused with another theory, no less profane than

that of ‘loans,’ although of a different kind, which invokes what is commonly

called the ‘unity of the human mind,’ by hearing in this an exclusively

psychological meaning, where, in fact, such a unity does not exist,

and implying that any doctrine is merely a product of the ‘human mind,’

so that this ‘psychologism’ does not consider the question of doctrinal

truths any more than the ‘historicism’ of proponents of syncretic explanations

does.

We will also point out that the same idea of syncretism and ‘borrowing,’

applied more specifically to the traditional scriptures, gives rise to

the search for hypothetical ‘sources’ and the assumption of ‘interpolations,’

which is, as we know, one of the greatest resources of ‘criticism’

in its destructive work, whose sole real goal is the negation of any ‘suprahuman’

inspiration. This is closely related to the anti-traditional intention

that we indicated at the beginning; let us just note this in passing,

since this point of view is not what we intend to develop at the moment.

But, at the least, we must recall the incompatibility of any ‘humanist’

explanation with the traditional spirit, an incompatibility which is obvious,

since not considering the ‘non-human’ element is to properly ignore

what the very essence of tradition is, without which there is nothing that

deserves to bear this name.

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On the other hand, it suffices, in order to refute the syncretistic conception,

to recall that all traditional doctrine necessarily has as its center

and starting point the knowledge of metaphysical principles, and that all

that it entails, in a more or less secondary capacity, is only the application

of these principles to different domains; this amounts to saying that it is

essentially synthetic, and, from what we have explained above, synthesis

excludes all syncretism by its very nature.

We can go further: if it is impossible for there to be syncretism in the

traditional doctrines themselves, it is equally impossible for any of those

who have truly understood these doctrines to resort to syncretism, those

who have necessarily understood the vanity of such a process, as well as

the vanity of all those processes which are peculiar to profane thought.

All that is really inspired by traditional knowledge always proceeds

‘from within’ and not ‘from without’; anyone who is aware of the essential

unity of all traditions may, in order to expound and interpret the

doctrine, appeal to means of expression coming from various traditional

forms depending on the case, if he considers that there is some advantage

in this, but there will never be anything that can be assimilated from near

or far to any syncretism or the ‘comparative method’ of scholars. On the

one hand, the central and principal unity illuminates and dominates everything;

on the other hand, this unity being absent or, to put it better,

hidden from the eyes of the profane ‘seeker,’ he can only fumble in the

‘outer darkness,’ vainly thrashing about in the midst of a chaos that could

only be brought into order by the initiatic *Fiat Lux* which, due to his lack

of ‘qualification,’ will never be proffered for him.