SYNCRETISM AND AMBIGUITY

BY

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Dr. J. H. Kamstra has recently published a lecture about the significance of syncretism for the phenomenology of religion, and its connection with theology. His interest in this topic arose out of his experience of the mutual resistance set up between the syncretistic Japanese and Christianity, and out of his detailed study of the oldest case of syncretism in Japan, namely that brought about through the arrival of Buddhism in that country. He complains that since the work of H. Kraemer, little has been done in the analysis of syncretism, and that it has been neglected in the general study of religion. No reference to it is made at all, for example, in the 634 pages of Geo. Widengren's recent Religionsphänomenologie. Moreover most practitioners of the study of religion are strongly influenced by Christianity and tend to see syncretism as an illicit contamination, as a threat or a danger, as taboo, or as a sign of religious decadence.

Kamstra notes that the word synkretizein was first used by Plutarch to mean "to come to concord, just as the Cretans do when threatened by a common enemy" and that Erasmus used it in the sense of reconciliation. Theologians in the seventeenth century began to use it also pejoratively. Kamstra himself proposes to use the word to mean: "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". He elaborates the various ways in

5) Kamstra, Synkretisme, p. 10.
which these elements can be related, and then divides his attention between (1) "the theological approach to syncretism: the real roots of syncretism" and (2) "the phenomenological approach to syncretism: the dynamics of syncretism".

In the context of theological approaches to syncretism Kamstra pays special attention to the analysis of Hendrik Kraemer. Kamstra considers it important to move away from analyses which are theologically loaded and to move instead to a phenomenological base. His criticism of Kraemer, with this in view, is particularly illuminating because, sensing that Kraemer’s analysis was theologically conditioned, he turned his attention precisely to that religion which Kraemer had claimed was not in principle syncretistic, namely Kraemer’s own religion, and found the roots of syncretism there. Or rather, as he further explains, the roots of syncretism lie neither in the “naturalism”, whether primitive or monistic, of which Kraemer had spoken in distinction to the “prophetic” religions, but rather in the very structure of human existence. “To be human is to be a syncretist”, he writes 6). And by this he means: “Even a prophet—however filled he may be with the divine—simply needs the speech and the situation of his audience in order to be comprehensible at all 7).

In the text of his lecture Kamstra appeals to the authority of Paul to illustrate this point, while in a note thereto he suggests that Buddhism can provide a helpful nuance in its distinction between samvrti and paramārtha satya, i.e. between conventional and absolute truth. It seems that it would be possible to elaborate Kamstra’s thesis at this point on a stronger comparative base. Perhaps this should strictly speaking be done, if what he says is to be allowed to stand as a generalisation in the study of religion. On the other hand there is little point in tediously going over what will almost certainly not be seriously challenged. However I would emphasise briefly that there may be a slight problem here in that Kamstra’s position could be taken as representing an alternative theological standpoint to that of Kraemer with regard to the interpretation of the nature of prophetic religion in general and the Christian religion in particular. After all, one remembers that the very title of his fascinating book *Encounter or Syncretism* involved the use of a word fashionable in twentieth century Christian

6) Ibid. p. 23.
7) Ibid. pp. 23 f.