

The Syncretistic Mind of Early Christianity

Syncretism is a cross-cultural phenomenon. As it has been traditionally understood, syncretism occurs when the cultural values of one group impose themselves upon the belief system of another group. Each group is thought to be self-contained and unadulterated prior to the melding. By such a definition, Christianity has often been understood as a “pristine” cultural system that became “polluted” over time by non-Christian beliefs. Cognitive scientists have challenged this understanding. Syncretism, they argue, is not the blending of two separate, self-contained cultural systems but a selective blending of an infinite number of conceptual structures. By such a reading, no culture exists in a pure, unadulterated form; rather, religious traditions are constantly transformed by new data, and each community must negotiate between multiple conceptual frameworks as it formulates its beliefs. This paper shall consider how cognitive models might enhance the study of ancient syncretism. By way of example, I shall focus on early Christian syncretisms involving Lady Wisdom. A semi-divine figure from the biblical book of Proverbs, Lady Wisdom was a popular image in early Christianity: to some, she was a type for the mother of Jesus; to others, she was the Holy Spirit or the Christ Logos. Such diversity of interpretation was possible, even within a single community, because early Christians simultaneously blended ideas from multiple Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian conceptual frameworks. This paper shall use the syncretisms of Lady Wisdom to reexamine the nature of ancient syncretism and explore the challenges of applying modern cognitive models to the study of ancient religion. Questions to be considered include: How does one recover the cognitive frameworks of ancient communities? How does the elite provenance of our sources bias our access to the cognitive frameworks of non-elite Christians? Can universal models even be applied to specific historical circumstances?