

## Possessio and Syncretism in Biblical Perspective

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The scope of our deliberations in this symposium seems to be conveniently pinned to one specific missiological issue: Which anthropological adjustments should be made when presenting the gospel to the peoples of different cultures without running into the risk of distorting Christianity? But the question of the fights and limits of missionary adoption is also a theological issue, which brings us in touch with the drama of salvation history. We would not do justice to our topic if we were to take the word “possessio” only as a new technical term of missionary strategy. First of all, we have to reflect back to the basic act of him who takes into possession that which by eternal right is already his sole property.

In the messianic Psalm 2 (v.8), God speaks to his Anointed One: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.” What is mission? God the Father puts his creation in the power of the Holy Spirit under the dominion of his Son, who on account of his universal act of redemption, has been installed as its sovereign ruler (Isa. 53:12; Dan. 7:14; Mt. 28:18; 1 Cor. 15:22-25). But this rightful taking into possession is not a harmonious process: it is the continuation of that war which began with the original rebellion in the invisible world and which will be concluded only when even death, the last enemy, is destroyed (1 Cor. 15:25). It is against this cosmic background that we have to consider our issue of the “possessio-syncretism axis.”

We can, therefore, distinguish between *three Stages of possessio*:

In the *first stage* God invades this occupied world of nations and establishes bridgeheads of his sovereignty. He does so by a chain of specific elections. Partly they belong to the history of biblical revelation, partly to the history of Christian missions. Here the whole emphasis lies on demonstrating the uniqueness of God’s Godhead, and in guarding it against the insidious counterattacks of the present demonic usurper of the world.

In the *second stage* these bridgeheads of elected communities become the basis of operation for a progressive reconquest of the whole ethnic and cultural territory which they represent. Here the principle of doctrinal exclusiveness of the missionary message is complemented by a strategy of a sifting inclusiveness: The distorted elements of the first creation are reclaimed for the Kingdom of Christ.

The *third stage*, finally, lies beyond this present age. Here the Devil, the prince of this world, will completely be removed and the kingdoms of the world will totally have become the kingdom of the Lord and his Christ (Rev. 11:5).

In missiology we are only concerned with the first two stages of *possessio*. We may distinguish them as *exclusive* and *comprehensive possessio*. If they are seen against syncretism as the other end of the axis, a tri-partition of our discussion becomes logical. We have to speak firstly about the principles of biblical identity. Secondly about the danger of its syncretistic falsification, and finally we have to outline a missionary strategy of translation which is aware of both.

### EXCLUSIVE POSSESSIO: ESTABLISHING BRIDGEHEADS OF GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY

Within the entire world of human religion, the faith of the Bible appears as a unique phenomenon by the emphasis it puts on its exclusiveness. The Judeo-Christian religion is, as far as its convictions are concerned, the most intolerant of all religions — a feature which, to some degree, was inherited from it also by Islam. This exclusiveness consists in the fact that the cosmic redemption proceeds by a series of elections, which are bound together by a chain of continuity. God has chosen specific times, places and persons to reveal himself,

a specific way to save the world, a specific people to be the bearer of his plan of salvation, specific means to bring redemption to the world, and above all, a specific human genealogy in which the central mystery of our faith, the birth of the divine Redeemer, God's own incarnation, should take place.

This must not be, as it so many times has been, understood as the expression of a primitive tribal religion. Rather it introduces us to the unique concept of a sovereign God who cannot be disposed of by the religious manipulation of man, but who himself establishes contact with mankind and determines its destiny *by* binding it to the mysterious ways of his contingent self-disclosure.

The central concept of Old Testament religion, therefore, is the *covenant* between Yahweh and his elected people. The story of the Old Testament is the account of one single drama: Yahweh struggles to insure the validity of his covenant with Israel by demanding her undiverted loyalty and by demonstrating his own faithfulness to his promises connected with this covenant.

A very peculiar feature in the image of God, therefore, is what G. von Rad (1963:216-225) calls the "holy jealousy" of God Yahweh. He is tremendously concerned about the respect for his majestic position and the exclusiveness of Israel's loyalty to him. But jealousy is only the anthropomorphic expression of God's holiness, which finally is to be adored by all mankind.

This finds another expression in the special weight carried by the First Commandment. It is not only the fountain of all other commandments, but at the same time the substance of the central creed of Israel, the "Shma Israel," and the main key to understand her historical tragedy.

The negative consequence of the particular character of Israel as elected people is the derogatory and sometimes even hostile attitude to the other, not elected, nations, the "goyim", and her strict separation from them.

Still Israel does not understand herself as a secluded ghetto, removed from regards herself as the center of the world. Her history appears finally as the clue to the outcome of world history. The idea is especially emphasized in the messianic announcements of the prophets and in the tradition of the significance of Mount Zion as the navel of the earth.

This constitutes the Old Testament's particular centripetal concept of the Gentiles' salvation (Blauw 1962:34). It is no mission in the literal sense. For the barrier of the historic confinement of God's favors will not be crossed by Israel going out to evangelize the nations. Rather the nations will come themselves to Zion, feeling irresistibly attracted by the manifestation of God's glory in the rule of his Messiah as an offer of renewal to the whole earth (Isa. 2; 9:2-7; 11:1-10).

By such terms the Old Testament uncompromisingly maintains its basic affirmation: the redemptive transformation of the world will remain the prerogative of the sovereign God reclaiming his creation. Autonomous human movements within the sphere of religion, politics or technology will play no constructive part in this process. The kingdom of God will be built on the ruins of the empires (Dan. 7).

Coming to the New Testament, we should first of all notice its close connection with the basic assumptions and the general outlook of the Old Testament. It is simply wrong to state the relationship between the two Testaments in terms of particularism versus universalism. The New Testament emphatically remains in the continuity of the particular history of revelation and election centered on the people of Israel. It remains Israelocentric, even where history passes through an epoch of rejection of the physical Israel (Rom. 9-11).

The real progression of the New Testament does not lie in the introduction of new foundations, ideas and values. It consists firstly in the kerygmatic affirmation that the Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled, and secondly in the interpretation of the peculiar, unexpected way in which they have been or still will be fulfilled.

What is constitutive for the New Testament is that Jesus of Nazareth is the expected Messiah promised by the Old Testament prophets, not a new religious ideal, but a new reality. This is what H. Kraemer (1938:62ff) referred to by his term "biblical realism." But Jesus was a Messiah rather different from the expectations of the contemporary Jews. And the way in which he brought redemption to his people, as victim on a cross, was neither anticipated nor understood by them. The reason was that the different aspects of the revelation, contained in the various prophetic writings, had never been grasped fully by the Jewish readers.

Jesus Christ is not only the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures; he gives also their authentic interpretation. He does so partly during his earthly days, partly through a special revelation by the Holy Spirit — another newly entered biblical reality — after his ascension. Therefore, the apostolic *kerygma* and *didache* about Christ and his work receive an importance for the salvation of men which is secondary only to his person, although inseparable from him. Paul regards the integrity of his gospel as indispensable to salvation (Gal. 1:6-9). This presupposes, of course, that the early church was convinced both of the authenticity and the essential oneness of her belief. The historic-critical approach to the Bible has led to the theory of a pluralism of didactic types within the New Testament itself. Each should be representative of a different understanding of Christology, soteriology, pneumatology and eschatology, and, therefore, of a different ecclesiastic tradition (Käsemann 1964:262-267). Such an idea was inconceivable to the apostles.

Doctrinal disunity would have been equal to the disunity of the church herself, a monstrous thought! For the church is nothing less than the new Israel, the people of the New Covenant. As Christ's body, she stands in an even closer relationship to God than the Israel of the Old Covenant. For through Christ, the Christians have already received the Spirit of life, and only here could he be received. "In Christ" is an ecclesiological term (Richardson 1961:249-252). *Hoi exoi*, the people still outside, are those who are "separate from Christ, strangers to the community of Israel, outside God's covenant and the promise that goes with them, Their world is a world without hope and without God" (Eph. 2:11-12). Therefore, the church has to fulfill that priestly ministry to the nations to which Israel once had been called (Ex. 19:4-6; I Peter 2:9-10).

This brings us to the New Testament concept of Mission. There is both a difference and a continuity to the Old Testament understanding. The act of redemption has removed the historic barriers between Israel and the Gentiles. Therefore, apostolic messengers are sent to the ends of the earth to proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom to the nations. Yet this new *centrifugal* dimension does not substitute for but complements the classical *centripetal* (Blauw 1962:66; Kvist 1957:124-134) concept: The gospel preached to the Gentiles is an invitation to become aspirants of the Kingdom of God by joining the Church of Christ. The people of God, it is true, is no longer tied to a specific geographical realm, the country of Israel. But it is still an elected community of people who have responded to a special calling, the *ekklesia*. They have passed from the realm of Satan to the realm of Jesus Christ and expect his second coming. The church is not equal with the Christianized nation, because the church is not the Kingdom yet. It rather constitutes the bridgehead of the coming Kingdom over the whole nation. Therefore, the church is not established by developing or revolutionizing the former ethnic structures, although these might be used pedagogically as "Bridges of God" (McGavran 1955). The constituting principle is a crossing of the border: through personal belief, repentance and baptism, individuals are incorporated into a totally new community — the chosen race, God's own people (I Peter 2:9). They live as strangers in the *diaspora*, having their true citizenship no longer on earth but in the Kingdom of Heaven to come (Phil. 3:20).

All this means that social entities, cultural values and former religious systems can only be a later concern to Christian missions. In biblical perspective "possessio" has a *personal* connotation. Mission, as the continuation of Christ's redemptive work, wants to take into possession living men. Scripture, in its teaching about the divine concern for the Gentile world, never refers directly to cultural values, religious ideas or technological achievements, except twice in an eschatological context (Isa. 60:10; Rev. 21:24). God addresses his vocation to each person, calls him by his name and brings him into an intimate fellowship with himself.

Therefore, we are left in a certain aporia, when we expect direct biblical answers to the question of possessio in terms of cultural adaptation. The Bible is almost silent about our theme.' Primarily it is concerned with the personal allegiance of people. based on a change of mind, a metaphysical liberation and a spiritual regeneration.

This change of allegiance is nothing less than a divine miracle. It can neither be accomplished by the methodical skill of the missionary nor by the free decision of the convert. The whole initiative lies with the sending God. The means by which he accomplishes the new birth and the plantation of the new church is the preaching of the eternal gospel. It carries with it the power for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:16), and, therefore, also to the Indian Brahmin or the Russian Marxist.

This biblical truth must be affirmed today, especially in view of a rapidly spreading missiological heresy. It is cherished in ecumenical circles and presently goes together with the new concept of *dialog*. Here it is stated that the content of the gospel and the nature of salvation are neither known by the Christian messengers

beforehand, nor determined by a fixed type of doctrine. Rather they are to be discovered in the *situation* in which the dialog takes place (Hollenweger 1973:10-11). Here Christ speaks through the non-Christian to the Christian partner, no less (rather more!) than vice versa (Bangkok Assembly 1973:78-79).

The theological rationale for such a concept is sought in four propositions. The *first* is that the character of the Christian gospel itself is situational and pluralistic. The *second* is that God himself — this means the forces at work in the historical process — works towards universal salvation irrespective of whether the Christian church understands it or not.<sup>2</sup> This goes together, *thirdly*, with the idea of history as a principle of continued revelation in situations. And there is *fourthly* the idea of the cosmic Christ, working anonymously among the “living faiths” of other peoples as well as in Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Such views lack any solid exegetical support in Scripture. They open the doors of Christianity widely towards the entrance of syncretism.

Christian mission, although it needs courage to maintain this today, is basically a one-way traffic. It originates in the sovereign self-disclosure of the biblical God. It is carried out by ambassadors elected in Christ’s stead. It goes into a world which lives in a state of ignorance and demonic captivity. It carries a message which no heart of man conceived (I Cor. 2:9). It establishes elected communities as bridgeheads of God’s coming Kingdom.

I am, of course, aware of the fact that in the past this one-way road very often has been misused to export western cultural imperialism. The goal of the work of the American Board among the red Indians, e.g., was “to make them English in language, civilized in their habits and Christian in their religion” (Anderson 1875:61)! But painful as this historical insight is, the remedy is not to encourage all types of fashionable theologies which substitute Marxist or Afro-pagan ideas for western paternalism. Church renewal for mission can only be accomplished by a new concern for and an uncompromising loyalty to the authentic gospel.

## FACING THE SYNCRETISTIC COUNTERATTACK

### *(1) Syncretism: as Religious Phenomenon*

The word “syncretism” does not occur in the Bible. But the reality of syncretism was an ever-present phenomenon throughout the history of Israel and Christianity. The semantic origin of the term is given most convincingly by Plutarch (Kraemer 1959:385). He related that the rivaling Greek tribes of the island of Crete were usually involved in minor warfare against each other. But as soon as they were attacked by a common enemy from outside, they agreed to form a military alliance. Since then the word syncretism carries a note of an opportunistic fraternization without a deeper conviction.

Among missiologists, none has dealt more with the theological problem of syncretism than the late Hendrick Kraemer (1938; 1959:396f1; 1960; 1962). He ingeniously distinguishes between spontaneous primitive syncretism as a popular religious tendency, and conscious, philosophical construction of syncretism (1959:384-394). The latter may be attempted either by religious thinkers or by political rulers. Both forms are to be found in biblical times as well. We shall see, however, that in order to understand the real nature of “Christian” syncretism or Christopaganism, we have to dig at a deeper level still. Let us start by giving a working definition:

We understand syncretism as the unconscious tendency or the conscious attempt to undermine the uniqueness of a specific religion by equating its elements with those of other belief systems.

In this understanding, syncretism is not just the simultaneous practice of two unrelated religions, which might be motivated either by external pressure or inner anxiety. Neither should it be confused with the *adoption* of formal elements of other religions into Christianity for missionary reasons. Syncretism equates heterogeneous religious elements and thereby changes their original meaning without admitting such change.

### *(2) The Battle Against Syncretism in the Old Testament*

The whole history of Israel as described in the Old Testament is a gigantic fight for the validity of the First Commandment. The attacks against the Yahweh faith came from two directions, from inside and from outside.

The first threatening of Israel's belief started as soon as the people had settled in the country of Canaan. The Israelites had received their revelation during their nomadic existence in the desert. Now they were met by the Phoenician-Canaanite fertility cult, which was so persuasively fitted to the needs of an agricultural society. In the Old Testament we find a three-fold answer to this challenge: segregation, eradication and adaptation.

In the early writings we find continuous warnings not to have contact the Canaanites, or even the injunction kill or to enslave them (e.g. Deut. 20:16-18). This expression of intolerance must be understood as a harsh but necessary preventive measure. For the imminent danger was that the divine mission of Israel, as God's elected instrument for universal shalom, was swallowed up by the temptations of the heathen religion. The second measure was the destruction of the sacred places of the Canaanite cult and harsh prohibitions against indulging in any such practice. The third reply was the attempt to overcome the Baal religion by way of "possessio". Certain Canaanite assumptions, practices and places (especially Zion!) were incorporated into the religion of Yahweh and subdued to his authority.

None of these methods was entirely successful. The danger to the faith of Israel persisted in two ways: on the one hand the cult of Baal and Ashera on the hill tops and in the groves continued secretly. Together with this went the secondary religion, the practice of magic and spiritism, which lends itself so readily to combination with any of the higher religions. On the other hand there was the even greater danger that the process of adaptation go out of control. Instead of reinterpreting the elements of Baalism in the light of the Yahweh revelation, Israel's religion became Canaanized. Yahweh assumes the feature of Baal! Analogous to the plerophorous manifestation of nature forces the images of Baal and Ashera oscillated in an immense number of different local appearances. The same process now occurred to the concept of Yahweh. As O. Proksch, German Old Testament scholar, comments: "Yahweh himself, the God of Israel, seemed no longer to be the one only Yahweh (according to the 'shma Ishrael'), but he became multiplied into the Baalim of the country" (von Rad 1969:11:25; Proksch 19~0:215).

The threat of religious disintegration became even more acute after the 8th and 7th centuries B.C. Now the country was drawn into the imperialistic struggle of the ancient oriental powers of Assur and Babylon. Israel faced foreign religiosity not only in the archaic forms of the indigenous nature cult, but in the more refined ways of worship of the official state cults. The foreign conquerors tried to demonstrate their authority over Israel by introducing altars of their god (e.g. II Kings 16:13). The new religiosity fascinated the minds of the Jews. Voluntarily they sacrificed on their roofs to the host of heaven (Jer. 19:15). The women of Jerusalem participated in the cultic weeping over the mythical death of the spring god Tammuz. Thus Yahweh was downgraded to become one deity among others in the oriental pantheon.

In those dark hours in the history of Israel the entire people seemed to have committed apostasy or become given to syncretism. How then did the miracle happen that as the outcome of the struggle the Yahweh religion finally emerged in a thoroughly purified form? How could the Jews become the first really monotheistic people in the whole history of religion? Several forces joined in the battle for the maintenance, survival, and restoration of the genuine faith: There were those exemplary kings like David, Hezekiah, and Josiah, who took their vocation as messianic representatives of their covenant people very seriously. They established or reformed the

Yahweh cult as the only tolerated state religion. The deuteronomistic reform centralized the sacrificial cult exclusively in the temple of Jerusalem. After the exile Nehemiah and Ezra consolidated the Jewish community socially and religiously. In their zeal for purification they went to the extent of separating ethnically mixed marriages. Of greater spiritual importance was Ezra's canonization of the Pentateuch as the sole standard of reference in religious and social life.

But all this would have had little effect without a as the elected people with its specific corresponding promises corresponding inner revival. The religious conscience of Israel and obligations had to be stirred up. This function was exercised by a series of outstanding men whose ministry was as unique in the phenomenology of religion as the faith of Israel as such: the *prophets*.

What was the proper function of the prophets, in all the difference of their personalities, historic horizons, and theological emphases? It was to remind their people of its specific calling and to enable it to understand and accept its historic destiny within the framework of this unique vocation. Three main features are common to their mission and message:

*Firstly* they were deeply moved by the obligatory character of Israel's ancient holy traditions. They contrasted the pure beginning of the people's history, its election, and its experience of God's miraculous acts of salvation with the present accommodation to the religion and morals of the heathen. Passionately they call for a decision: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If Yahweh is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him!" (1 Kings 18:21). Never has syncretism been denounced more sharply than in these words of Eli5ah, the prototype of prophetism in Israel.

The *second* characteristic of the prophetic message is that it applies the will of God as clearly known from the Torah to the actual situation. This corrects our modernist misunderstanding that prophetism means to discover the unknown will of God in the situation! Israel's task is not to seek pragmatic answers like forming alliances with neighboring heathen nations to solve the present crisis. Isaiah and Jeremiah adamantly insist that faithfulness must prevail over the temptation to political opportunism: "If you will not believe, surely you will not be established" (Isa. 7:9). This is literally the opposite to syncretism!

The *third* main feature of the prophetic message is the eschatological vision. The prophets interpreted the political catastrophe as the divine punishment for Israel's syncretistic apostasy. This meant that history by no means had gone out of Yahweh's control. He both has the power and the intention to change its course again in favor of his people. In the final days God will remember his promises to Israel and renew his covenant with her. Zion will become the highest mountain on earth, and God will be really present in his holy city to establish messianic shalom over his people and from there over all nations.

Thus in the prophetic message past, present, and future were bound together by the continuity of the specific history of election, revelation, and salvation of Yahweh with his chosen people. Thereby the unmistakable identity of Israel's faith was safeguarded against any syncretistic disintegration.

### (3) *Syncretism Unmasked in the New Testament*

When the message of Jesus Christ as the Savior of all mankind was proclaimed for the first time in the Hellenistic-Roman world, the danger of being swallowed up by other religions was even greater than in Old Testament times. With the reign of Alexander the Great, a tremendous syncretistic process had been introduced into the Near Orient and the Mediterranean world. Visser't Hooft refers to it as the second historical wave of syncretism (1965:16-24). He calls it "the most powerful and comprehensive blending and combination of different religions which ever has taken place in history."

Many religions of most different origins and characters participated in this religious process (Lietzmann 1932:158-183): the ancient religions of Egypt, Persia and Syria; the two pantheons of the Greeks and Romans; the emperor worship which had been established by Alexander the Great as an ecumenical ideology of salvation; the universal popular religion of animism; the Dionysian and oriental mysteries; the Greek-Roman philosophies of Stoicism and Neo-Platonism; the aesthetic poetry of Horace and Virgil; Judaism with its different sects; and finally the newly emerging gnosis.

It was a thoroughly religious age. But it was a religiosity which was detrimental to the maintenance of any clear doctrinal profile. How would Christianity as a profoundly missionary faith be able to preserve its unique tenets on which its universal claims were based? Liberals like Gunkel and Harnack maintain that Christianity became the victorious religion of the Roman Empire by being transformed into a syncretistic religion (von Harnack 1906:1:262). But this thesis is neither logical nor can it be proved by a proper comparative religious analysis. Real syncretism never grants the victory to any particular religion.

The early encounter between the gospel and the contemporary religiosity are indicated in several New Testament writings. Visser't Hooft discusses a number of these early occurrences (1965:57-64). The temptation to syncretize the Christian faith came from different sources: Judaism changed the liberty of the gospel into a legalistic system. Dionysian enthusiasm perverted this liberty into an orgiastic libertinism. The cosmic speculation in Asia Minor introduced the elementary spirits of the universe (*stoicheia ton kosmou*) as intermediary forces between God and man. Magicians like Simon desired the charismatic aspect of the Holy Spirit as dynamic means to reinforce their mediumistic abilities. In the Book of Revelation the first encounter with compulsive emperor worship is hinted at. Not all of those interfaith encounters described in the New Testament were syncretistic temptations in the proper sense. Some cases were open intrusions of clearly competitive religions, acting either by enticement or by force.

Still, the New Testament indicates instances of a real syncretization of the Christian faith. The clearest evidence is found in the first Epistle of John. It is written at a relatively late stage of the New Testament period. Here the process of syncretistic assimilation has already become so refined that it could penetrate deeply into the heart of the Christian doctrine. We know from the post-apostolic period that this was accomplished most successfully by gnosticism. Indeed, the heretics against which the epistle polemicized bear the features of gnostic charismatics. They claim for their teaching a divine authority by speaking in the *ekstasis* of the Spirit. Therefore, their fellow Christians hesitated to question their truthfulness. But John recognizes that their Christology and soteriology are as incompatible with the genuine Christian faith as their behavior violates Christian ethics. Four observations about the way in which this apostle of

Christ deals with the emergence of syncretism appear most relevant to our theme:

(a) John, like Jesus, identifies the falseness of these prophets by their unethical behavior: their lack of genuine Christian love. It originates from their pseudo-spiritual arrogance and leads to strife and hatred in the brotherhood and even to open indulgence in sin (2:4-6).

(b) John encouragingly points out to his readers that they possess an inner equipment by which they themselves can cope with the seducers. It is the *anointing of the Holy Spirit* (2:27). It constitutes the inner fellowship between the believer and God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. Therefore, their faith is no mere intellectual agreement to a doctrinal proposition. It is a loving communion leading to a degree of certainty which, if it is cultivated properly and illuminated by insight, can never be shaken by any sophisticated argumentation. The spiritual intuition and Christian common sense (*sensus Christianorum*) of the ordinary congregation are the most powerful ally in the struggle of the church's watchmen against its constant syncretistic temptation.

(c) Still, true spirituality is no mere feeling. Its authenticity is to be verified by objective doctrinal criteria. The most important of them are plain enough to be used by all believers, and usually they suffice. In the case debated in John's epistle — as in almost any case of syncretism — the person of Christ is the chief target of the heretical attack. He is not plainly discarded. Obviously the heretics had their own Christology. Probably it was the Gnostic myth of a transcendental savior figure who appears to the souls of men and reveals to them the way back to their heavenly origin. Typically enough John, like all other New Testament authors, pays no attention to the speculative ideas of the heretics. He does not engage in dialog with them. He does not expect a more comprehensive understanding of Christ by listening to his speaking through the testimony of his partners about their living faith. Nothing is important to him but the devastating consequence of their teachings to the genuine Christian belief. The syncretistic Christology of the gnostics implies the denial that Christ is the Son of God who has come into the world in the human person of the historical Jesus. Here the central Christian belief, the mystery of incarnation as unfolded and defended in all writings of John, is at stake. In fact this early gnostic controversy introduces a Christological battle which soon will engage the whole ancient church, until it is settled dogmatically in Nicea and Chalcedon. These two ecumenical councils laid foundations which have proved to be and always will be indispensable for combating syncretism: the doctrines of the divine Trinity and of the two natures of Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup>

(d) Still something more remains to be discovered about the real issue at stake in pseudo-Christian syncretism. This is its metaphysical dimension: "Test the spirits to see whether they are of God!" (I John 4:1). This does not happen on the intellectual level alone. John does not act like a scholar of comparative religion. He does not consider the Gnostic aberrations as an interesting intermingling of foreign religious or philosophical ideas which in the historical situation is quite normal. Instead he treats it as a conscious attack planned and directed by a demonic enemy. The conflict displayed in the congregations of his readers is already the foreshadowing of a future apocalyptic drama: the emergence of Antichrist. According to general Christian convictions ("as you have heard" I John 2:18), this person will come at the close of the present age shortly before the *parousia* of Christ (cf. II Thess.:3-12). In the power of Satan he will usurp the place of God, making himself the object of worship. When John speaks of a plurality of antichrists he does not refute the expectation of the one single Antichrist. On the contrary, the present antichrists are imbued with the spirit of the coming Antichrist (4:3). The gnostic heretics are antichrists because essentially they are already now doing the same thing on a smaller scale as the final.

Antichrist will do in a universal dimension: they deprive Christ of his central place in the life and faith of his church. Syncretism in the light of John's first epistle is the constant sublime anticipation of the final battle between Christ and Antichrist. For the church this is a matter of life and death. At stake is nothing less but our

belonging to Christ, the reality of our experienced redemption and the reliability of the promise of eternal life when “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he *is*” (I John 3:2).

## COMPREHENSIVE POSSESSIO: TAKING CAPTIVE TO OBEY CHRIST (II Cor. 10:5)

Syncretism is Satan’s constant attempt by way of theological camouflage to intrude into the exclusive relationship between the biblical God and his elected people. But this does not place the biblical faith in a permanently defensive position. On the contrary, there is no more aggressive<sup>1</sup> conquering force in the world than the gospel that proclaims Jesus as Christ and Lord.

### (1) *The Theological Implications of Possessio*

The term “possessio” could be used as a valid synonym for the missionary task as such. For it is the apostolic commission “to bring about obedience to the faith for the sake of his name among all the nations,” i.e., all those “who are called to belong to Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:5-6). If we understand “possessio” in this context, we discover a dramatic notion in it.

The Latin word can signify both the fact of ownership and the act of acquisition. This distinction is meaningful to our topic. Mission is the process by which the original owner, God, regains that which by eternal right is already his property. Thus the converts are God’s possession in a double sense.

The doctrine of creation, on the one hand, introduces a rather comprehensive note to the concept of possessio. Man does not only consist of his immortal soul, but also of his body. He subsists in a cultural and social involvement which was willed~ by the Creator. And in this total natural existence even fallen man remains in a basic relatedness to God. God bestows his fatherly mercies on him. He reveals his eternal power and deity through the things that he has made (Row. 1:19-20). Man expresses his relatedness to God by way of religion (Acts 17:22-28). All this cannot be left out of account in the act of missionary possessio.

On the other hand, the same world which on account of its creation is the property of God lies also under the dominion of God’s adversary, the devil. There is, in fact, a whole demonic structure which has imposed itself on the world, the *stoicheia tou kosmou*. They affect every aspect of man’s life. They control his transpersonal relations in society, culture and religion.

Therefore, man lives in a state of estrangement from God and of captivity which distorts his way of perceiving, thinking and acting (I Cor. 12:2). The Christian missionary has to consider that the task of taking into God’s possession is antagonized by the state of demonic possession which characterizes fallen man and his world (Eph. 6:10-18).

The ancient church was conscious of this dramatic nature of mission. The admission into the fellowship of Christ by baptism was, therefore, preceded by an act of exorcism. The converts had to renounce Satan and all his ways and works, and thereafter submit themselves to the living God (Acts 26:18; 1 Thess. 1:9). Having become “ransomed by the precious blood of Christ” (I Peter 1:18-19), they now had become truly God’s possession in a second sense.

Now it should be noted that an analogous procedure was followed when the conceptual world of the Gentiles was Christianized. Mission implies translation. When the biblical message is transmitted into the realm of a different culture, this culture necessarily will have to provide the material elements in which it will be embodied.

Some theologians regard this transculturating process *in* the history of the biblical faith as the consequent syncretization of the Jewish-Christian religion. Hermann Gunkel has stated that the Christianity of Paul and John is a syncretistic religion (1903:88). His proposition has been renewed by W. Pannenberg (1967). He whole-heartedly accepts such a syncretizing process by reevaluating its traditional theological verdict. He considers it as the way in which the history of religion finally leads to the unification of mankind in one religious culture. Pannenberg justifies his position by claiming that religious accumulation was way in which the Yahweh religion assimilated the Canaanite cults, and Christianity assimilated the Hellenistic mystery religions. Thus they emerged victoriously as the integrated religions of their times.



But such a view presents the history of biblical religion as a snowball system which is contrary to what really happened. The hearers of the biblical faith were extremely conscientious about its uniqueness and incompatibility with the basic assumptions of other religions. There was no possibility of plainly equating biblical concepts with non-biblical ones, because the latter lacked the authenticity of God's historic self-disclosure. And there was still less a possibility to enlarge the biblical message by non-biblical elements which were not unfoldings of what God really had said and given to Israel in his historic election and deeds of salvation. In fact the Epistle to the Hebrews regards the history of revelation as concluded with Christ (1-féb. 1:1-2). The ancient church dogmatized this conclusion of revelation by fixing the New Testament canon and by developing the creed as the standard of its correct interpretation. In fact, the canon and the creed become the church's two main weapons against accumulating and transmutating syncretism.

## (2) *The Three Steps of Biblical Adaptation*

In the history of the biblical faith there was, indeed, a certain amount of assimilation of elements from the cultural and religious environment. But this was practised in a very peculiar way. It was a *possessio* which led to art affirmation rather than to a loss of spiritual identity. This was achieved by three decisive steps: *selection, rejection, reinterpretation*.

(a) *Selection*. The first observation which strikes us in the study of biblical "*possessio*" is the extremely cautious, self-conscious and discriminating way in which it proceeded. As to its form, the biblical faith expresses itself in the categories, symbols, ideas and devotional practices of human religion in general. It can, therefore, be studied within the framework of comparative religion. Whenever the trans-cultural borders were crossed, the phenomena of indigenous religion provided the material to be adapted for the missionary translation. But not all concepts and terms within the religious world were found equally compatible with the biblical revelation. Some lent themselves readily; others appeared ambivalent; still others were totally disagreeable to the basic thrust of the creed of Israel and the church. It can be shown that both in the Old Testament and New Testament a careful selection was practised, in which only such elements were adapted as could be integrated into the continuity of the prophetic and messianic tradition.

For example, in the Old Testament the faith in Yahweh led to the adoption of titles like "King" and predications given to El, Baal and other oriental high gods which under girded the belief in the supreme power of Yahweh. This was done in the conviction that only Yahweh was entitled to such majestic dignity, and that the honor taken by the other gods was in fact an usurpation. Yahweh reclaims the right and adoration which is due to him alone. At the same time other concepts, which went together with the worship of those gods, were experienced as extremely repulsive to the holy nature of the God of Israel. Here their matrimony with goddesses could be mentioned. We also can refer to the practice of human sacrifice or sacred prostitution. We know that occasionally some of these things were adopted by the Israelites. But this led always to a furious reaction of the prophets as the watchmen of the genuine and pure adoration of Yahweh and to the final elimination of the offending features.

The same selective procedure was followed in the New Testament. When the apostolic church crossed the border from the Hebrew to the Hellenistic world (Riesenfeld 1969), the proclamation of Jesus Christ attracted a whole number of religious and philosophical concepts like the popular divine titles Kurios, Soter and Son of God, or the stoic idea of the Logos as the rational principle of the cosmic structure. Still, in none of these cases was a completely new or even heterogeneous element added to the Christian faith. For all of these titles were already found in the Septuagint as divine attributes of Yahweh or of the Messiah. The concept of Logos was developed in the Chokma literature and could be found in the Proverbs and Wisdom of Solomon. Thus the selective *possessio* of oriental and Hellenistic concepts did not lead into syncretism. Instead it achieved a progressive invigoration, unfolding and clarification of the potentialities which were already inherent in the genuine tenets of the biblical creed.

That such selection was possible at all shows that, on account of general revelation, non-Christian religion may contain some foreshadowings of that divine reality which is brought authentically in God's historic self-revelation to Israel. But the realm in which general revelation can be traced is an ambiguous field. Therefore, the first step of *possessio*, selection, is always followed by an antithetical one:

(b) *Rejection*. No part of creation remained unaffected by the original rebellion. Here is a basic distinction between the Thomistic worldview and the Reformed one. The former describes the effect of the fall in terms

of deprivation, the latter in terms of distortion. Therefore, Roman Catholic missions often are less inhibited than evangelicals in their accommodation to non-Christian practices like ancestral worship.

The biblical procedure is clearly determined by its dualistic view of salvation history as a warfare between the kingdoms of God and Satan. Therefore, *possessio* is always accompanied by a conscious rejection, a rejection in a double way.

Firstly, the discriminatory principle of selection implies a preliminary ruling out of all elements in heathen culture which are incompatible with biblical faith.

Secondly, rejection is also practised within the procedure of adaptation. It is the purification of the adapted material from those elements which have defiled and distorted the original beauty of creation and man's sincere response to general revelation. Whenever Christian missions by way of translation and indigenization take into usage native concepts and practices, they have to guard these adopted elements against their interpretation in the light of their former conception.

This is done already in the first kerygmatic approach to heathen listeners (cf. Acts 17:29-30), and it is followed by catechetical instruction. The apostolic exhortation to the converts, therefore, always points out their former state of ignorance and perversion. Sometimes it refers to the analogy of their religious concepts and experiences now and in the past. In this case the complete contrast between the former influence and fruits of the Holy Spirit is pointed out (I Cor. 12:2; Eph. 2:11-12). The spiritual communion experienced at the Lord's Table has, indeed, an analogy in the heathen sacrificial meals. But far from justifying their continuation, this analogy serves as the strongest argument for their rejection: "What pagans sacrifice, they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons" (I Cor. 10:20-21; II Cor. 6:16).

The neglect of this principle is the greatest menace in the present encounter between ecumenical Christianity and non-Christian religion: its quest is a wider human community on the basis of merging the various spiritual experiences in the name of Christ. But the metaphysical dualism in the spiritual world is not seen any more.

There is an embracing without rejection. The act of *possessio* becomes mutual.<sup>6</sup> But since the Holy Spirit refuses to coexist with the spirit of Satan, such interfaith experiences will lead to the occult possession of the initiating Christian partner.

(c) *Reinterpretation*. The step of exorcistic rejection cannot be the final one. Otherwise it leaves a vacuum which eventually will be filled by the old usurper again (Luke 11:24-26). *Possessio* becomes complete only through the third step, reinterpretation and rededication. It means a complete change of propriety, function and direction of the pre-Christian concepts, practices and goals. The titles of divine dignity, the existential experience of trans-personal realities in fear and hope, as well as the ritual symbolism of the other religions were regarded as shells. Having been evacuated and purified, they were filled with the new reality of God's grace in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Visser't Hooft gives a good example in pointing out the reinterpreting change of the term "metamorphosis" (1965:75). In the Hellenistic mysteries it meant a physical penetration of the initiate by the nature of the God through a magical ritual. Paul adopts this concept — which is one of a few religious words with no semantic correspondence in the Old Testament — and fills it with an unmistakably new Christian significance. It now means that the convert through his repentance, regeneration and faith in Christ changes his mind into conformity with the mind of his Lord (Rom. 12:2). This means that the place which through a mystico-magical union formerly was occupied by the mystery deity is now occupied by Christ. But he is a partner of a totally different nature, and so is the nature of the spiritual communion.

The same change by way of reinterpretation could later be practised by the ancient and medieval church also in connection with visible cultic means. Harnack sees in this the "complete development of Christianity into a syncretistic religion" (von Harnack 1906:1:262). Many evangelicals will be inclined to agree with him on this point. Still, I am not sure that Harnack was wholly right. For such *possessio* of sacred rites, rituals, symbols and instruments was done by way of changing their possessing authority and spiritual function. And it was done deliberately to exhibit the victory of Christ over the demonic idols. We may think of the apostolic fight which in the power of Christ led to the disarmament and servitude of the principalities and powers (Eph. 6:10-17). In Old Testament times the tempting power of booty taken from heathen enemies was so great that it had to be totally destroyed (I Sam. 15:3). The New Testament demonstrates the superiority of the power of Christ by turning the rebellious arguments of gnostic philosophy into weapons against the validity of the heathen cult (II Cor. 10:5).

Such possessio by way of reinterpretation and rededication is, of course, full of risk. The answer to the question whether it is legitimate and will be successful depends on three conditions:

The first is the painstaking execution of the first two steps of selection and rejection.

The second is the spiritual power of the missionary church to refill the adopted elements with a genuine Christian meaning which really will convince and capture the minds of the young native Christians.

The third condition for a successful reinterpretation is the spiritual condition of the converts themselves. Here the well-known argument between the weak and the strong (1 Cor. 8-9 and Romans 14-15) becomes most relevant to our theme. If the young Christians are still *weak*, i.e., tempted and scared by the associations of their former heathen existence, extreme restraint will be imperative for the missionary. If they are *strong*, i.e., if they have outgrown their former motivations, holder experiments may be ventured, although only with their consent, or better by their initiative.

This third consideration leads to the conclusion that the proper time of large-scale adoption is not the first generation of converts. Nor is it such a later generation which is spiritually starved and engulfed by a violent antichristian environment and is in danger of relapsing into heathenism. For such “adaptation” will simply condone the real desire to secure compromising with the nationalistic renaissance of heathenism. Here, indeed, the insight gained in the struggle of the Reformation becomes valid: *in statu confessionis nihil est adiaphoron*. Indigenization must never become a euphemistic term for a badly concealed apostasy.

The acceptable time for vigorous possessio will be when an indigenous church has grown in biblical insight and spiritual maturity and aggressively challenges its environment for Christ, the Pantocrator. Then progressive adaptation will be a symbolic anticipation of that eschatological state, when creation will have been set free from its present satanic corruption and the kings of the earth will bring their national treasures as a holy tribute into the City of God (Isa. 60:11; Rev. 21:24).

### Notes

1. Missiologists frequently quote as their standard key passage in this connection I Cor. 9:19,22. Here Paul refers to his apostolic condescension to become a slave to all men. He does not, however, refer to cultural and ethnical distinctions, but to differences in religious position and spiritual insight. He does not say “I have made myself a Jew to the Jews, a Greek to the Greeks,” as this verse is misquoted frequently. Instead he refers to the different obligation to the Mosaic Law of those who formerly were within the Old Covenant and those who were outside of it.
2. Drafts for Sections Uppsala 68:29: “Certainly renewal does not depend on our understanding or misunderstanding of what God is doing in His Son.”
3. Ibid.:10: “... some Christians look upon the processes of secular history as furnishing new divine revelations which the churches must accept.”
4. Khodre (1972:141; IRM 55, 1966:201): “. . . we believe that Christ has more of His truth to reveal to us, as we seek to understand His work among men in their different Asian cultures, their different religions and in their involvement in the contemporary Asian revolution.”
5. Walter Hollenweger (1973:21f.) in his recent book on evangelism pleads that exactly these two doctrines are dispensable when translating the gospel into an Indian context!
6. Cf. the following quotation from the Bangkok statement on dialog in Bangkok Assembly ‘1973:79: “A desire to share and a readiness to let others share with us should inspire our witness to Christ rather than a desire to win a theological argument.”

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