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EARTH RELIGIONS AND BOOK RELIGIONS:
THE RELIGIOUS DOOR TO CIVILIZATIONAL ENCOUNTER

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"The Spanish conquerors of the Middle American and Andean worlds immediately overwhelmed their ill-equipped and unsuspecting victims...Even so, it could not be regarded as certain, at the time of writing, that the indigenous cultures would not in some form eventually re-emerge..."

—Toynbee, A Study of History.

Introduction

Civilizational analysis of the grand themes of human history inevitably involves study of religion, its theologies, and its influence on society. Yet, civilizationalists are often forced to rely on brittle or anachronistic concepts of religion which impede a thorough appreciation for the complexity of civilizational process. Fortunately, the field of religious studies has evolved sufficiently over the past 25 years to provide civilizationalist scholars with new analytical tools. Chief among these useful additions to civilizational study is the concept of "earth religion."

Popularization of this term derives from the work of Father Thomas M. Berry, an important Catholic theological voice in the field of comparative religions. Based partly on his study of Eastern religion in preparation for a never-to-be-realized career as a missionary to China, and partly on his upbringing in the rural setting of Western North Carolina, Berry observed that nature played a significant revelatory role in Asian religions.

In contrast to the Abrahamic traditions that place sacred books at the center of the religious belief, defining revelation in terms of writings, nature assumes this core function in other religions. As its name suggests, an earth religion considers natural phenomena such as the sky, the sun, stars, and water as conduits to the divine. A book religion, in contrast, considers scripture to be a superior and more reliable source of religious experience than direct contact with unspoiled nature.

In his classic essay, "The New Story," Berry (1988) describes earth religion by elaborating how it discovers the numinous in the elements of the earth. Ordinarily, this distinction would divide "civilizing reli-
gions” from “paganism,” classifying earth religions as types of animism, totemism, and other “isms” tossed into a pile as “primitive religions.” But Berry has never viewed Christianity as opposed to earth religion, or the Eastern religions as resistant to book religion. Indeed, most of his works on the subject challenge such a crass generalization that makes the earth religions the “good/unspoiled” ones, and religions of the book such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam the “bad/institutionalized” ones (see Berry 1988: contrast Fox, 1988).

Instead of moral categories, Berry uses socio-historical classifications congruent with civilizational analysis. Earth religions are primary in a chronological sense, antedating the invention of writing. Once expressed in writing, religious experiences mediated by nature acquire a literary or aesthetic dimension. (Societies without writing continue to rely on earth religion). As a technology capable of universalizing a particular experience, writing shifts the religious power to the text that explains the religious meaning of the experience of nature. Thus, scriptural books elevate the earth religion to a more effective tool of preserving religious inspiration and its application for social interactions with codes of law, artistic expression, and scientific development of new technologies. The Hebrew psalms and passages of the Vedic texts, for instance, use multiple references to nature as the context for religious experience. For Berry, earth religions and book religions are not dichotomous categories, but rather characteristic elements that can be merged and continue in creative tension within a synthesis.

For those familiar with civilizational analysis, the relationship between earth and book religions is similar to the nexus of culture and civilization. Culture is limited to a localized experience because it has not acquired the sophisticated vehicles for transmission. In contrast, civilization is an “elite” production within a society possessing writing, laws, city life, an organized military, and a state structure (Quigley, 1961/1979:76-84; Melko and Scott, 1987:5-10; 188-192 et passim). Book religion codifies earth religion experiences with the sophistication necessary to elevate religion on a par with other civilizational advances in writing and the arts. Just as culture lives on within civilization and attains a new dimension, the direct religious experience of the numinous in nature contained in an earth religion merges with a book religion and acquires new influence and permanence.

Writing has been the entry portal of religion into civilization because throughout world history, political and social explanations were often religious ones as well. Along with resources of social phenome-
na such as urbanization and scientific engineering that enable the creation of centers for worship in temple complexes, the technology of writing keeps religion on a pace with the progress of society. Just as writing advanced law, science, and the arts by extending learning to the public able to engage in dialog about their development (see Bakhtin, 1986), the written explanation of the religious connection between the human and the numinous provided moral norms for cult and social behavior much more sophisticated than possible with only oral traditions.

In another place, I have detailed how religion can be seen to parallel the development of humankind as it passed through various historical stages (Stevens-Arroyo, 1998). In order to contain the richness of human experience, earth religions need to incorporate the advanced technology of the book religions or else they fail to ring true to humankind's social expansiveness. Classifications such as "high" and "low" religion reflect this process. However, while it is clear that an earth religion's functions are enhanced by the acquisition of civilizational skills such as writing, engineering, science, and philosophy, it is also true that book religion can never completely replace the direct experience of the numinous in nature. Book religions derive much of their vitality and appeal only because the text produced corresponds faithfully to the direct interactions with nature and the freshness of immediate religious experience.

In Berry's view, the great world religions became possible only with the invention of writing, which transferred personal experiences of the numinous into a new social realm of universalized truths. Repeating a concept more fully explained in Toynbee (1946/1974) and other civilizational theorists (Quigley, 1961/1979; Melko, 1987), Berry tells us that the creation of sacred texts provided codification. This approximates for religion what Hord (1992) calls a "formal cognitive system." Because of this acquisition, certain religious systems transcended the boundaries of their own historical and geographical settings that had defined them as "earth religions" within their native sphere.

For Berry, a successful book religion must connect to elemental earth religion. It must absorb, rather than destroy, what previously existed. The ascendant book religions gains power when it interprets, rather than replaces, the religious experiences of earth religions. This was the process required in the formation of world religions. By appeal to the written text as a perfection of earth religions, several religious systems possessing writing were able to assume a new status as univer-
sal explanations for religious experience.

The sacred texts validated the pre-existing earth religious experiences, codifying their meaning for new situations and cultures. In other words, the formal cognitive system for religion in one civilization serves as a universal explanation for earth religious experiences for other societies. A successful world religion must balance universal claims with local experience, and historically only a handful of religious systems have proven capable of this development (Stevens-Arroyo, 1998). In this light, Christians consider Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam "world religions" and not as "primitive religions" (Zaehner, 1964; Küng, 1985/1986).

Civilizational theory since Toynbee is well acquainted with book religion, labeling its absorption of earth religion as "syncretism." Of course, there are other types of syncretism: earth religion-to-earth religion and book religion-to-book religion should be added to the earth religion-book religion syncretism. For example, the invasion of the Balkans by Indo-European peoples with a patriarchal earth religion enlarged the religious pantheons of the matriarchal earth religions of the original inhabitants (Giambutas, 1982). In parallel, the building of a temple to Ashtarte in the Roman world was the result of an encounter with the mystery religions of Asia, fully elaborated in terms of book religion. I would add in this latter case, however, that the motivation for adding this Asian religion to the Roman pantheon was to acquire the dynamic connection to earth religion contained within the Ashtarte religion.

Thus, Berry's concepts are useful for many kinds of syncretism, not merely the initial exchange between a civilization that has book religion and a lesser culture that has (only) earth religion. Syncretism assumes many shapes and degrees with diverse effects and patterns of implementation related to politics, culture, and social class (Rudolf, 1979). While sociology has contributed to an explanation of Toynbee's notion of why Christianity replaced Roman religion (Blaisi, 1988; Stark, 1996), Berry's contribution is to explain a process familiar to civilizational theory in religious terms. His dynamic view of a process that continually expands the boundaries of religious experience in order to keep pace with the revolutionary changes in the human experience is explained by the power of faith.

By recalling that the earth-book religion differences are not dichotomous, but often agglutinating, we can better understand the ongoing dynamic of syncretism. As documented throughout history, most
syncretistic exchanges take place in a context of power dominance, so that there is a "lesser" and a "major" religious component in such mixtures that generally corresponds with the socio-political equations (Díaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo, 1998; Benavides and Daly, 1993). As I hope to show, in the Americas, the syncretism acquires racial characteristics that further complicate the status level of the syncretized components (Elizondo, 1992; Pérez y Mena, 1998).

Berry and Toynbee on Christianity

I believe it is possible to reread the civilizational analysis of Sir Arnold Toynbee with the insights of Father Thomas Berry and other contemporary thinkers (see Stevens-Arroyo, 1998). Toynbee made the case that Christianity emerged from the religion of Israel and expanded because of syncretism. Restated in Berry's terms, it may be suggested that the Christian conviction that the Gentiles needed to be included in the early assembly of believers (Segal, 1990) opened Christianity to the earth religions of the Hellenist world and gave them a more coherent book religion (the Epistles and Gospels) to interpret those beliefs than Judaism (Hebrew Scriptures).

The formal cognitive system offered in the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew scriptures was adapted in Paul's Epistles and the Gospels to the Gentiles trapped within decadent Hellenist religions. The earth religion concepts of life and death, sexuality and fertility, operative in Hellenist religions were given a link to the historical event of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Rather than rejection of previous belief in earth religion, new Gentile believers were called to a transformation of those beliefs.  

This was a step towards a recognition of the numinous outside of the Hebrew experience that Judaism was unwilling to take (Toynbee, 1946/1974), but which made Christianity appealing to Gentiles in a Hellenist world. Simultaneously, Christianity portrayed the tenets of post-exilic Judaism as empty formalism that relied more on regulation than religious enthusiasm. Of course, Christianity's ultimate victory depended upon syncretizing its message with the constructs of Roman law and philosophy, all of which prepared the way for its establishment as the official religion of the empire under Constantine. Berry's concepts, I stress, do not replace the social, cultural, and political factors, but they add a theological dimension to any explanation.

In addition to explaining the historical exchange between Hellenism and Early Christianity, Berry's theory also explains syn-
cretism centuries later with the earth religions of the Germanic peoples who ended Roman rule. Berry (1988:197-202, *et passim*) details how the Jungian theory of archetypes helps explain the multivariate meaning of earth symbols, such as stars, moon, sky, water, rock, etc. Thus, for instance, the feminine symbol of the moon present in virtually all earth religions becomes the Christian symbol for Mary (see Giambutas, 1982; Hall, 1980). The so-called barbarians brought new earth religions with them and these were also syncretized missionaries who explained the Christian texts in ways that absorbed basic elements of the Germanic beliefs. Medieval Catholicism grew through syncretism between the Hellenist-Jewish synthesis with European forms of earth religion, resulting in a creation spirituality.

Christianity’s openness to earth religion should not be understood as a blind acceptance of all syncretism. There were boundaries to the belief and limits on what could and could not be absorbed from earth religions. The historical wrestling of Christianity with heresy might be considered a dialogical exchange in the sense that some elements of contemporary religious experience generally found their way into Christian theology. Thus, for instance, the asceticism of the Priscillian heresy was reflected in the austerity approved for the Monastic Orders, legitimated by church authority in Visigothic Spain (Salisbury, 1985:213-14 *et passim*). While rejecting ideas of a wicked and unredeemable flesh as preached by Priscillian, the church nonetheless strove to create its own more acceptable form of practicing mortification of natural desires.

Berry considers the civilizational achievements of the High Middle Ages as the product of a vision that integrated European earth religion within Christianity. That outlook has been labeled “creation spirituality.” Berry uses the word “mystique” (1988:129) for creation and redemption, although in another place (1988:126), he uses “redemption spirituality.” Berry says that a loss of theological vitality in reaction to the trauma of the Black Death in the 14th century and concomitant social factors (see Tuchman, 1978) led to an abandonment of the creation motif in describing the numinous. Instead of nurturing religious analogies to the earth as a window to the divine, Christianity (principally in the Reformation) substituted a negative view of nature that Barry calls, “redemption spirituality” (Berry, 1988:126).

Salvation was defined in terms of resisting human nature and in overcoming the merely “natural,” in order to rely solely on the “supernatural.” When redemption, i.e. opposing nature, is the primary relig-
gious goal, unspoiled nature becomes fundamentally evil. When redemption comes only from the supernatural as defined in the words of scripture, true religion is cast as negation of the spiritual power of earth symbolisms.

According to Berry, Christianity lost its original balance between book and earth religion when redemption spirituality replaced creation spirituality. The loss forced science outside of religious concern. Secularism and the Enlightenment became literate expressions of a new universalizing vision of the meaning and purpose of the earth, now told without a religious context (see Cassirer, 1951). By walling themselves within a redemption spirituality of negation and antagonisms between the sacred and creation, Christians often became anti-intellectual and anti-scientific, abandoning the creative impulses in the human experience to secular industry and invention (Delumeau, 1971/1977).

Berry does not romanticize science or rationalism. He decries the secular economic view of the earth that has treated the natural world as a machine. The disintegration of Christendom over a century and a half of wars and the consequences of the 18th century European Enlightenment may have freed science from its religious moorings (compare Eisenstadt, 1987), but it also set it adrift without the moral anchor of a spirituality (see Kavolis, 1988). Coal and iron could be extracted from the belly of mother earth without thought of the consequences: refuse could be dumped into rivers and the air without penalty; virgin forests could be violated; and climate altered with impunity.

Berry does not limit his criticism to Christianity, finding examples of the same trends in other world religions. He claims that earth religion had been the guardian of a respect for the earth as a living organism. Once earth religions were exiled from their symbiotic connection to book religions, however, they lost their abilities to influence civilization's governmental and economic forces. The earth religions of the world became "folk religions," considered anachronistic remnants of superstition and outmoded traditions.

Berry is optimistic about the future, albeit his sharp criticism of the religious past. A scriptural text introduced by a literate elite upon an earth religious peasantry may acquire normative power sufficient to constrain the elites from further innovation. It is noteworthy that world religions tend to provide scriptures that appeal to the masses and allow them to impose the parameters of revelation upon religious hierarchs (Fernández Armesto and Wilson, 1996; Delumeau, 1971/1977; Maduro, 1982).
Moving beyond the ordinary context for analysis of syncretism between civilizations, Berry considers a syncretistic process a continuing imperative for humanizing religion. In the contemporary religious world, says Berry, earth religions are acquiring the ability to convey their central message of direct experience of the numinous through modern technology. It is no longer necessary for a particular culture to develop its own civilizational tools or to be conquered by a civilization to acquire them. In the global economy, any local religion can instantly promote itself to a global public.

Thus the civilizing process of integrating earth and book religion is operative in new and far-reaching ways. Berry interprets the resurgence of Native American religious traditions within the ecological movements as paradigms for this recovery of a religious meaning to the planet (1988:180-193). Earth religious traditions can be "reinvented" in a modern context (see Hobsbawnm and Ranger, 1983). They refashion book religion by producing a theological awareness that the planet must be preserved through ecological concern. Secular science and a modern technological society seek to partner once again with religious imagination and moral conviction.

This description of Berry's concepts of earth and book religion cannot do complete justice to a powerfully insightful theory of history. As with other such theories, it provides an uncomplicated prism for interpretation that must be carefully applied to each historical circumstance. However, Berry's values would appear to coincide with many of Toynbee's aspirations for world civilization.

It is my intention here not so much to "prove" something about earth and book religion, but rather to extract from these concepts a useful perspective for analyzing syncretism within civilizational analysis. I propose here to explain how religion in general and theology in particular define the conditions for civilizational exchanges. After an exploration of the meanings of religion and theology, I turn in a second article to the specific historical example of baroque Roman Catholicism to illustrate how a theology open to religious syncretism can promote civilizational exchange.

**Theology and Civilizational Process Within Book Religion**

Theology is important to the consideration of syncretism. One of the functions of theology is to explain the religious faith within a context. These processes are not always self-contained. Contact with other religions is as frequent a cause of religious syncretism as it is of syn-
cretism in art, war, politics, and statecraft. Although there are other forms of religious syncretism (the imitation of rituals and the borrowing of symbols, for instance), civilizationists, such as Toynbee, correctly focused on the written expression of such syncretism as found in theology, the primary expression of book religion. Moreover, because theology often borrows on the same resources developed by a civilization, it is a most useful indicator of religious influence for analysts of civilizational process.

An example within Christianity of this explanatory process for religious experience can be found in the composition of the Epistles and Gospels. Current biblical scholarship has established that these written versions of the faith sprang from the needs of the early Christian community to have written records of the words and works of Jesus (Fernández Armesto and Wilson, 1996). But there are discrepancies and varied emphasis in each of these versions depending on the type of community for which they were written. Matthew, for instance, emphasizes that Jesus fulfills bible prophesies because his largely Jewish-Christian audience knew the Hebrew scriptures and expected to find echo of fulfillment in Jesus. Luke, on the other hand, writes principally for Gentiles and frequently needs to inject parenthetical explanations of Jewish customs and beliefs for his Hellenist readers. Thus, theologizing for different circumstances produced each of the four Gospels.

While the New Testament is theology, it has also acquired a function as sacred text. In the first Christian century, the church formulated a scriptural canon that divided the earliest theologizing about Jesus from all subsequent theology. We now have some theology that is “officially” a basic element of book religion (the New Testament) and a continual stream of theologizing in sermons, books and the like that is not canonical. Certainly, the theologizing in the Christian scriptures occupies a normative role in theological reflection (Rahner, 1963-1968a), but every sermon “produces the sacred” to borrow on a notion masterfully developed by Wuthnow (1994).

Since Augustine, who himself recapitulates an older philosophical tradition, theology is defined as “fides quaerens intellectum” (faith seeking understanding). Faith is a way of acquiring truth, not by reason, but by intellectual assent to a truth by trusting the word of the one offering the article of belief. Theology begins with the religious premise that the article of faith is to be believed, but then uses reason and logic to analyze and interpret the belief. Thus, Aquinas held that one
need not believe to be a good theologian. According to the "Angelic Doctor," even if one did not believe in the articles of faith, it would nonetheless be possible to develop rational arguments as to their meanings. Hence, although theology springs from faith, it is not faith itself.

Failure to recognize that theology is a step removed from faith has led astray many civilizational analysts, including Toynbee. Considering faith to be the same as its codification, Toynbee equates the synthesis of Early Christianity with Hellenism as the essence of Christian belief; subsequent modifications are seen as deviations from the faith. Needless to say, this is the classic Protestant position towards the Catholic reliance on oral tradition as a pillar of faith.

More important to the present discussion, the "freezing" of essential Christianity inside a Hellenist cube undermines the ongoing importance of theology as an expression of the civilizational process. In my opinion, neither theology nor syncretism is an unchanging issue. Thus, like civilization, theology provides a continuing record of how a religious faith expands and incorporates different experiences of the numinous. New philosophical paradigms that evolve within a civilization often appear first within religion. Moreover, the weltanschauung I often considered a requisite for constituting a civilization is found in religious formulations (see Melko and Scott, 1987:189-190). These functions would be impossible to understand without attributing a dynamic dimension to theology. In a sense, theology is a thermometer of syncretism: either it serves to incorporate new religious concepts within its own system or it separates the faith from other religious beliefs.

Conquest and Syncretism: To Split or to Lump?

The theological function of setting boundaries between religions has a parallel in civilizational analysis. One of the major issues in the classification of civilizational systems concerns the interpretation of boundaries for syncretism. The late Roger Wescott posed the question as a choice between splitting the synthesis away from its constituent parts or lumping them together (see Melko and Scott, 1990:6). The majority of civilizationists have entered the discussion about splitting and lumping in the ancient world: 16th century America has proven more difficult terrain. Thus, Quigley (1961/1979:160-66) and the contributors to a volume dedicated to the issue of boundaries (Melko, 1987: 22-31; 318) consider Latin America to have lost completely its distinctive civilizational systems after the European contact.

On the other hand, Toynbee was not as certain of this boundary
between the European and indigenous civilizations, suggesting that at some historical moment, the native American cultures might reemerge. This notion of a potential indigenous reemergence in Latin America is supported by various anthropologists and historians of syncretism in Latin America. They point to unique elements that distinguish the resultant synthesis from either its indigenous or European elements (Adorno, 1986; Bricker, 1981; Carrasco, 1995; Clendinnen, 1990; Harris, 2000; Hawkins, 1984; Wantanabe, 1992).

According to the perspective adopted in the best of these studies, the syncretistic process embraces a constant interaction of the components that involves issues of class, race, religion, and cultural proclivities. Rather than a one-time event concomitant with a proclaimed military victory or the publication of a canonical book, syncretism is an ongoing process, producing a constant interaction of earth and book religious components. In order to register the importance of this new perspective, many writers now use the term “hybridization” in place of “syncretism,” suggesting that the new term implies an organic and ongoing change.

I argue that if there is a hybridization of European (or Central) civilization in Latin America with New World religious experiences, the result is significantly different from the same process, let us say in the Philippines or in Africa. When the native civilizations of Aztecs, Mayas, Incas and others became “Latin America” after the Iberian conquests, the syncretized societies did not lose completely their distinctive character as civilizations. Rather, the Hispanicization of language and the formal cognitive system in culture and religion helped universalize the syncretized elements of the existing native religions.

Once syncretism is considered a meshing of differing religious experiences rather than being defined only as an exchange of concepts between religions, then variations, slight as they may appear, assume greater significance. The theological process filters out unassimilable beliefs from the encountered religion but encourages the adoption of more relevant elements for missionary purposes. The judgment that the indigenous civilizations disappeared with “enforced Christianity” (Melko and Scott, 1987:318) needs to be revisited with a careful analysis of how native beliefs survived the encounter and may, in fact, have subverted Iberian Catholicism (Benavides, 1995; Diaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo, 1998; Echeverría, 1998; Gruzinski, 1998; Roggiano, 1978).

Based partly on this empirical approach to the syncretistic process,
some scholars have transferred the process into the realm of faith. Thus, for instance, syncretism is considered “the religious imagination” (Buxó i Rey, 1989), popular religiosity (Díaz-Stevens, 1995; Maldonado, 1975; Vidal, 1994), national identity (Lafaye, 1974/1976; MacLachlan and Rodríguez, 1980), and spirituality (Alzadúa, 1987; Díaz-Stevens, 1998). In such works, the immediate experience of the numinous and the elaboration of the same into texts frames social interaction. As I hope will be clear, once religious syncretism is viewed as a theological process, the civilizational question shifts from identifying where syncretism has taken place to where it has not.

**Religious Syncretism and Civilizational Evolution**

Central to the premise that theology is important to the civilizational process is establishing how book and earth religions are viewed by orthodoxy. The “lumping and splitting” of civilization, I maintain, is not merely a mental construct of the civilizationalist, but a conscious product of theological efforts within book religion to incorporate or reject various expressions of religious experience. To show that syncretism takes place within theology, providing some illustration of orthodox syncretism is in order. Confining examples to the Abrahamic religions, we may begin with the religion of Israel. Gottwald (1979) offers an impressively developed notion of syncretism with Egyptian religion in the formation of the Mosaic period of Judaism. The simple faith of nomadic shepherds is infused with the elaborate book religion of Egypt during the period in which the Semites dwelt in Egypt. The syncretism is evident, not only in the elaboration of a written legal code (imitating as well the Babylonian experience under Hamurabi), but also introducing Egyptian purification rituals such as circumcision and lustrations.

Although these tribes came to consider their syncretism as superior to the Egyptian religion, they did not dismiss the religious experience connected with the other faith. Thus, the wizards in Pharaoh’s court really turn their staffs into snakes. The Hebrew texts recognize the power of the Egyptian religion by describing the snakes as real: they assert the value of their syncretized form of religion, however, when the Pharaoh’s snakes are eaten up by Moses’ staff, turned into a snake. In fact, with the notable exception of the so-called Wisdom writings of the late biblical period, the recorded Jewish traditions continue to respect the religious power in other beliefs.

The prophets are wary of the Canaanite and other religions because
of their power — not because they are false. The dreams of Pharaoh come true; the witch of Endor summons up the authentic spectre of Samuel, who complains to King Saul that he has misused spiritual powers. The belief that other religions have power to contact the spirits is feared, rather than dismissed. In this way, the Hebrew texts permit the Alexandrine Jew, Philo, to give an allegorical and metaphysical meaning to the remnants of earth religion in the Hebrew scriptures. The theological search for religious meaning in the evolving social context of Hellenism inclines Philo to portray Judaism as founded in syncretism.

The teachings of St. Paul, the paragon of Christian missionaries, state that there are natural, i.e. earth, religions which may anticipate some of the beliefs of the supernatural, i.e. book religion’s revelation of Christ. St. Paul on the Athenian Areopagus told the Greeks that they had been religiously correct to have erected a temple to the Unknown God. In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul described both the insights and the limitations of these Hellenist religious, but in the process, he accepted their value as religious experiences. He considered these non-Abrahamic experiences to be “grafted” into the faith of Israel (Segal, 1990).

Every human society may use unaided reason to conceive of the existence of God and ascribe various qualities to the deity, although Jews have the surety of the direct revelation by God through Moses and the prophets. The natural or earth religions contain elements also found in revealed religion, although they are often tainted by errors. However, until such time as the individuals hear the revealed word of God, the natural religion is sufficient for salvation.

Christian Theology and Syncretism As a Mode of Knowing

This view of non-Christian religions is clearly maintained within recognized sources of Christian theology (Rahner, 1963-1968a; Küng, et al., 1985/1986). Some have suggested how certain texts in other world religions anticipate Christian revelation (Pannikar, 1964) making sincere believers in other world religions into “Anonymous Christians” (Rahner, 1963-1968a:131ff; Röper, 1966). And although there is a tendency to equate earth religion with a (merely) natural mode of knowing the numinous, and scripture as the (only) supernatural one, there is so much “natural” or earth religion in the scriptures that such a distinction is largely unworkable (Rahner, 1963-1968; Schlette, 1966).

Thus, there is within Christianity a theological tradition that recognizes the validity of unevangelized earth religion as an authentic
mode of knowing about God, even if subordinate to scriptural knowing. Moreover, Catholic theologians have moved away from the notion that such believers are inchoate, imperfect, or anonymous Christians and towards the view developed by Berry.

The concepts of earth and book religion taken from Berry provide a way for civilizational theory to incorporate the current anthropological and historical studies of Latin American syncretism. Berry’s insistence that earth religion and book religion are each based on a different mode of encounter with the numinous couples his approach to systematic theology. The difference between earth religion and book religion relies on what theology calls the “mode of knowing” (Rahner, 1963-1968; Schlette, 1966; Stevens-Arroyo, 1968). The earth religion finds the numinous in natural phenomena, while knowledge through book religion relies principally on scriptures. The content of what is known may be the same — God — but the way of arriving at this knowledge is different.

Nature is, obviously, a “natural” mode of knowing: while belief in a revealed text is beyond the natural process and depends upon faith. Thus, to give an example, one may feel spiritually moved by observing a glorious sunset, a “natural” way of knowing God; reading in the scriptures that God created the heavens and the earth, however, is a “supernatural” way of knowing, since the connection between the numinous and the celestial bodies is asserted by faith.

The latter book expression of faith codifies the “natural”, i.e., earth religious experience. Yet in both instances, the subject knows the same truth. Adopting Berry’s approach prevents us from dichotomizing these two distinct ways of knowing the same truth. In fact, the emotional, “natural” mode of knowing reinforces and deepens the intellectually expressed written word. We might sidestep a content focus when analyzing syncretism to formulate an epistemological premise as the boundary of syncretism: Anytime religious experience is expressed within a system that incorporates these generically different “modes of knowing,” syncretism has taken place.

If this concept were to be expressed in the theological tradition of Aquinas, we might introduce some Latin terms. There is a syncretism of truths with different content (quoad substantia), but there is also syncretism by way of knowing (quoad modum) (Rahner, 1963-1968; Schlette, 1966). Orthodoxy has been largely preoccupied with syncretism that brings new content to the faith; often this is rejected as heresy because it contradicts one or other truth of the faith. Such con-
cerns are found throughout Christian history and reach even to the beliefs of an ordinary Italian miller, castigated for accepting new definitions of the Eucharist (Ginsburg, 1976/1992). Coming to knowledge of a truth of the faith through the natural means of an earth religion, however, can merit praise.

St. Boniface, for instance, chopped down the sacred oak tree and pointed to an evergreen as representative of the immortality of the true (Christian) God, thus subverting the old religion by syncretizing Christian faith in Germanic religious symbols. St. Patrick used the shamrock to explain the Trinity to the Celts. These, and the frequent uses of natural symbols to explain the faith, are examples of religious syncretism that rely on new ways of knowing old truths. They are more common events than the syncretism of religious content.

Of course, admitting a non-scriptural mode of knowing into religious orthodoxy brings attendant risks the established book religion’s theology. Often the earth religion’s symbol — which is better known than the theological or scriptural truth — becomes the primary religious meaning for the convert. For example, a missionary may introduce what he/she considers an orthodox belief, but the hearers, still shaped by a previous religious tradition, may attach multiple meanings to the Christian symbol or words. Hence, the process of syncretism may be depicted as a class, ethnic, or racial encounter, in which the subordinate group accepts the premise of religious encounter imposed by the hegemon but retains a meaning properly derived from its own religious system. And whereas some sources consider such syncretism the result of ignorance, far more today view the syncretistic result as a consequence of resistance (Benavides, 1994; see also Gutierrez, 1991).

Within theology, the rifts between Catholics and Protestants becomes manifest when arguing against the view that there are two ways of knowing God: the natural and the supernatural.

The Objection of Routinization.

While it is difficult to deny the frequency of exchange between earth religions and book religions, it may be objected that such exchanges have become so routinized that they can no longer to be separable as generically different religions. In other words, such processes create a tertium quid, the syncretistic elements cease to belong to the former religions and it is no longer useful to dissect and dissemble the syncretized religion. In this view, for instance, once the Hebrew religion assimilated the offering of bread and wine as a ritual from the sacred
beliefs of neighboring peoples, it became an intrinsic part of the Jewish faith that such foods could be symbols of sacred blessings.

The remembrance of Melchizadek, the King of Salem, passes into Christianity — not as syncretism with the Canaanite religion — but as a completely orthodox belief that is subsequently adapted to become a part of the sacrament of Holy Eucharist. Incorporation into the religion of Israel or into Christianity, it may be suggested, purifies the new belief of any of its connections to another religion, so that it becomes part of the sum of revealed truth (*revelatum*). From this perspective, once written down as part of book religion, a naturally knowable truth acquires all the attributes reserved to inspired scripture.

Such a theological view mechanically makes revelation *post-factum*. Instead of recognizing the natural process of syncretism between earth and book religions as part of a single process of contact with the numinous, it reserves that characteristic only to book religion. But this argument is specious: the same process is syncretism before it is accepted as orthodox theology, but not syncretism after it is accepted. Such a posture thus substitutes an act of faith for theological and empirically based analysis.

**Converting Religious Practice to Culture.**

Another objection argues that earth religion beliefs never become part of scripture, but only inform religious practices extraneous to the faith. We might speak here of an element of religious culture that remains culture and is never syncretized with belief. For instance, the fertility totems of the Celtic religion, the rabbit and the egg, figuring in springtime rituals, of are now syncretized with the Christian Easter. Yet the Easter Bunny is not an "official" part of Christianity contained in the scriptures. Hence, its presence in popular celebration of the feast does not represent contamination with a "pagan" religion.

The fallacy in this thinking is that the theologizing of the scriptures is accepted while a similar process post-canon is rejected. While the theologizing produces different results, both come from the traditions of the church (Rahner, 1963-1968a; Schlette, 1966). It was not the Bible that produced the tradition, but the tradition that produced the scriptures. Theology places boundaries on the content of these traditions, choosing only a few as biblical. Thus, it becomes important to consider traditional cultural practices within the context of an on-going religious syncretism.

Rather than becoming enmeshed in Catholic vs. Protestant
polemics, one might turn to Hans Freyer (1923/1998) and Edward Shils (1981). They envisioned tradition as a form of action that affirms the cohesiveness of social life through the synthetic power of understanding. As pointed out by John Simpson in his review of Freyer’s concept of culture, traditions are not always “rational” and depend upon complex layered meanings for their appeal. This concept has been developed by Anthony Giddens (1984) as “structuration” and allows popular imagination to supply for the defects of a strictly rational understanding of the world. Certainly, these empirical measures of secular phenomena that do not rely exclusively on rational constructs suggest a way to examine theology in its syncretistic functions.

In sum, syncretism and theology are related within the civilization-al process: Is the door to syncretism to be open or shut? And if open, how wide or how narrow? Berry’s premise states that the Christian theology of the 14th century shut the door to a previously active and creative integration of earth and book religion that flourished during the medieval period. His analysis offers specific social conditions and historical events to explain this shift. Logic suggests that should these social conditions change and new historical events intervene, the openness of Christian theology to earth religion would be reestablished, opening the door that had been shut.

Since theological thinking relies on faith, it can not be fully explained by a reductionist use of social science (see Milbank, 1990). Yet it is possible to pose certain empirical measures in analyzing religious syncretism. We must consider: first, the factors in a given historical period that foster or annul the spirituality that meshes earth and book religion; and, second, the theological language that opens or shuts the door to syncretism. I would like to revisit a previous work of mine (1998a) to trace these two elements as keys to syncretism in Catholicism, a world religion with nearly a billion members today in an article linked to this one under the title, “Baroque Catholicism As Openness to Earth Religions”. This paper will appear in the next CCR.

End Notes

1. I use “numinous” here, as does Berry, as a scientific term, since in different traditions the usual terms “God” or “divine” have acquired ethnocentric meanings that unduly color inter-faith analysis.
2. Note that the rejections urged upon Gentiles by Paul are focused upon lustful behavior, not on specific beliefs. Thus, conversion typically calls for "repentance=teshuvah" and a "new way of thinking=metanoia" as preconditions for receiving new life/birth in Christ. See Segal, 1990 for these important points.


4. For a description of this process in Gramscian terms, see Díaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo, 1998.

5. An examination of the themes and the presentations at the ISCSC conferences and various articles in the society's journal show that along with this negative view of a unique Latin American civilization, there have been articulate protest from ISCSC scholars such as Elpidio Laguna, Michael Palencia-Roth and Anne McBride Lamaye.

6. Judaism, a book religion, makes a similar acceptance of natural religions while maintaining that the revelation of the Law to Moses is obligatory only for kin members of the Hebrew people. It would take this study too far afield to prove that the same is true of Judaism and Islam, although persons knowledgeable in the study of religions will easily recognize the validity of this assertion.

7. The bibliography for this part will be published together with that of the second paper.