

Globalization, Syncretism, and Religion in Western Antiquity

Some Neurocognitive Considerations

by Luther H. Martin

1 Globalization and syncretism

Conditions in the modern world have often been compared to those in antiquity. Of the many comparisons cited, however, modern processes of globalization and those of ancient imperial expansions have generally been neglected. The notion of »globalization« has, of course, been used to signify numerous kinds of transformations in international structures, relationships, and influences. If, however, we think of globalization as a process that challenges identity by place, by community, and by tradition, then it is relevant to compare contemporary processes of globalization with those of *oikoumenai* past and, especially, with those of Western antiquity following the conquests of Alexander the Great and with the *pax romana* established by Augustus.¹

As has been well-discussed, J. G. Droysen first described in 1836 a discrete period of »Hellenistic« political history extending from Alexander to Augustus. He characterized this period as a »westöstliche Völkermischung« that resulted in a Hegelian »Verschmelzung der Religionen und Kulte«.² A century later, F. C. Grant pronounced that »the main characteristic feature of *all* [...] religion« during this period was »syncretism«.³ This view of Hellenistic religious syncretism became the basis for the use of this category in the history of religions generally and, subsequently, for its use in the contemporary social sciences. The category has, however, never achieved any consensual usage among historians of religion, much less among scholars from other areas of study.⁴ Most often, however, this category seems to have been employed as a somehow self-evident *explanation* for *descriptions* of complex historical constructions resulting, usually unintentionally, from cultural contact.⁵

1 Luther H. MARTIN/Panayotis PACHIS (ed.), *Hellenization, Empire and Globalisation. Lessons from Antiquity*, Thessaloniki 2004; Richard HINGLEY, *Globalizing Roman Culture. Unity, Diversity and Empire*, London 2005.

2 Johann Gustav DROYSSEN, *Geschichte des Hellenismus*, Hamburg 1836-1843; Gotha 1877-1878; new ed., Tübingen 1952-1953; cited from »Vorwort zur Zweiten Auflage«, München 1980, in vol. I, vol. III, 447; Claire PRÉAUX, *Le Monde Hellénistique*, Paris 1978, 7.

3 Frederick C. GRANT, *Hellenistic Religions. The Age of Syncretism*, Indianapolis, IN 1953, iii (emphasis added).

4 There is no entry for »syncretism« in either the multi-volume *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (Edwin R. A. SELIGMAN/Alvin S. JOHNSON [ed.], New York 1930-1935) or the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (David L. SILLS [ed.], New York 1968-1976), or in its revised second edition (William A. DARITY [ed.], Farmington Hills, MI 2007). There is a brief entry for the term in the one-volume *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, which equates syncretism with cultural change (David E. HUNTER/Phillip WHITTEN [ed.], New York 1976, 378) and a somewhat longer entry in a more recent five-volume encyclopedia of the same title, which describes »syncretism« as a reconciliation of »disparate – and sometimes

opposite – beliefs and practices«; »a blending of schools of thought« (Stephen D. GLAZIER, Syncretism, in: H. James BRIX [ed.], *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Thousand Oaks, CA 2006, vol. 5, 2150-2152, 2150).

5 Intentional syncretisms are another matter, usually explainable as propagandistic, ideological, theological and/or political initiatives. The classic example of intentional syncretism from Western antiquity is Manichaeism (Francis C. BURKITT, *The Religion of the Manichees*, Cambridge 1925, 71; see also Luther H. MARTIN/Anita Maria LEOPOLD, New Approaches to the Study of Syncretism, in: Peter ANTES/Armin W. GEERTZ/Randi R. WARNE (ed.), *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Berlin 2004, vol. 2, 93-107, 98.

Although Graeco-Roman cosmopolitanism provided a symbiotic model for globalization and syncretism, the concept of syncretism was scarcely mentioned by participants on the panel »Hellenisation, Empire, and Globalisation« organized for the 2003 meeting of the European Association for the Study of Religion that took as its general theme »The Globalization and Localization of Religion«⁶ – perhaps the consequence of a »syncretistic fatigue« born of an overuse of this imprecise notion. Only five of the nine contributors to the panel mentioned the term – three but in passing.⁷ While a fourth contributor, the historian of Graeco-Roman religions, Panayotis Pachis, gave an insightful analysis of particular historical influences on the Egyptian cult of Isis over the course of its development, he retained a Droysenean understanding of syncretism as resulting from influence of »the Greek way of thinking«⁸ – which was, of course, appropriate to this particular historical example. Only one contributor, Giulia Gasparro, also a historian of Graeco-Roman religions, paused in her response to the panel presentations to reflect upon the meaning of the term. »It is a well known fact clearly perceived within various polytheistic traditions of the ancient world«, she wrote, that it is »possible to establish a more or less rigorous system of [functional] ›correspondences‹ between the various religious frameworks, according to a play of ›identifications‹ [...] without however completely losing the sense that each specific personage belongs to a particular cultural context«. Nevertheless, Gasparro concluded that »syncretism« remains a »dubious category« for history of religions research.⁹

2 Syncretism, identification and selection

The »syncretistic« »play of identifications« and »correspondences« of which Gasparro spoke have frequently been exemplified for Graeco-Roman antiquity from Book 11 of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*. In an oft-cited passage, which has been evoked as the *locus classicus* of Hellenistic syncretism,¹⁰ Apuleius identifies the goddess Isis with ten other goddesses and then has Isis proclaim that »my name, my divinity is adored throughout

6 MARTIN / PACHIS, *Hellenisation* (as n. 1).

7 Gustavo BENAVIDES, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Markets and Empires, in: *ibid.*, 21-40, 27, 32; Gary LEASE, What Constitutes Globalization for Religion? Hallmarks from Antiquity. Late Antiquity Egypt, in: *ibid.*, 101-122, 107; Einar THOMASSEN, Respondant, in: *ibid.*, 246-255, 251.

8 Panayotis PACHIS, Manufacturing Religion in the Hellenistic Age. The Case of the Isis-Demeter Cult, in: *ibid.*, 163-207, 165.

9 Giulia Sfameni GASPARRO, The Globalisation and Localisation of Religion. From Hellenism to Late Antiquity. Assessing a Category in the History of Religions, in: *ibid.*, 41-83, 48-49; see also PACHIS, *ibid.*, 166; Luther H. MARTIN, Why Cecropian Minerva? Hellenistic Religious Syncretism as System, in: *Numen* 30 (1983) 131-145, 136-137.

10 Syncretism, in: Nicholas G. L. HAMMOND/Howard H. SCULLARD (ed.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Oxford 1970, 1029.

11 J. Gwyn GRIFFITHS, *Apuleius of Madauros*. The Isis-Book (*Metamorphoses* Book XI), Leiden 1975, 144.

12 Carsten COLPE lists fifteen examples of authorial syncretism during the Hellenistic era (though he doesn't include Apuleius in his list): »certain Pythagoreans, astrologers, Orphics, Physikoi, the various compilers of the Hermetic corpus and the sibylline and Chaldean oracles, the theosophists, alchemists, Lukianos of Samasata, Aelius Aristides, Numenius of Apamea, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Sal-lust« (Syncretism, in: Mircea ELIADE [ed.], *Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York 1987, vol. 14, 219-227, 219).

13 C. M. DANIELS, The Role of the Roman Army in the Spread and Practice of Mithraism, in: John HINNELL

(ed.), *Mithraic Studies*, Manchester 1975, 249-274, 271; Manfred CLAUS, *Cultores Mithrae: Die Anhänger-schaft des Mithras-Kultes*, Stuttgart 1992, 247-248.

14 CIMRM = Maarten J. VERMASEREN, *Corpus Inscripti-onum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithraicae*, The Hague 1956.

15 Manfred CLAUS, *The Roman Cult of Mithras. The God and His Mysteries*, Richard GORDON (trans.), London/New York 2001, 158.

16 MARTIN, Minerva (as n. 9), 139; Vera F. VANDERLIP, *The Four Greek Hymns of Isidorus and the Cult of Isis*, Toronto 1972, 28, n. 18.

17 PACHIS, Manufacturing (as n. 8), 173.

18 COLPE, Syncretism

(as n. 12), vol. 14, 219.

19 COLPE, Syncretism

(as n. 12), vol. 14, 219-220.

all the world, in divers manners, in variable customs, and by many names» (*Met.* 11.5) – an assertion that the classicist J. Gwyn Griffiths considered to be *the* »syncretistic formula of union«.¹¹

The question about employing this passage as the classical exemplar for syncretism is whether Apuleius' *theokrasia* instantiates a tenet of his neo-Platonic philosophy or whether it represents the historical situation of Hellenistic religiosity.¹² In considering this question, we might turn from Apuleius' philosophical fiction to a historical example from the single most widely spread as well as densely distributed religion of the Roman world, in which we might well expect to find syncretistic formations, namely, the Roman cult of Mithras.

In late third-century AD, Marcus Aurelius Decimus, governor of the Roman Province of Numidia (modern Algeria) from 283-284, and a Mithraist,¹³ dedicated an altar in the Roman colony of Diana Veteranorum (Aïn-Zana) with the inscription:

Iovi optimo maximo, Iunoni reginae, Minervae sanctae, Soli Mithrae, Herculi, Marti, Mercurio, genio loci, diis deabusque omnibus (CIMRM 140).¹⁴

Decimus didn't specifically identify these sundry deities with one another as did Apuleius with the Graeco-Roman goddesses of his novel. Rather, Decimus honored these deities as correlates *alongside* Mithras. An inscription from Rome to »those deities sharing a temple« (*tois synnaois theois*) with Mithras suggests that such associations were unexceptional in this cult (CIMRM 473). In fact, the historian Manfred Clauss has enumerated over twenty Graeco-Roman deities whose votives or statuettes have been found in Mithraea.¹⁵

The example from the Mithraic tradition gives historical support to Apuleius' fictive construction and confirms an observation about syncretic formations that I suggested over twenty-five years ago with reference to it, namely, that syncretic formations, in addition to involving identifications and correspondences, are examples of selection and rejection. So, while ten of the eleven goddesses included by Apuleius in his novel were identified with Isis, one, the Syrian Goddess Atargatis, was not, despite her being identified with Isis elsewhere in historical contexts.¹⁶ Whereas Apuleius' criteria of selection were those of authorial intent, the selective criteria of the Mithraic groups derive, apparently, from local practice.

Without an explanation for what Pachis has called the »tactics of selection«,¹⁷ historical understandings of syncretism seem, at best, to be descriptive redundancies rather than explanation in any scientific sense. While such descriptions may be able accurately to track the historical elements of formation, they do not offer any explanation for why, *given the historical situation*, certain syncretic possibilities were realized while others never were. In other words, syncretic constructions can be historically identified and described but historical descriptions do not *explain* historical constructions.

3 Syncretism, explanation and cognition

In 1987, Carsten Colpe defined »syncretism« as »relations between complex wholes«, which »can be any coherence of mental elements and of actions, representations, or objects related to these elements«, or »relations between particular components« of these wholes.¹⁸ However, attempts to *explain* such relationships at the historical level, Colpe conceded, can only result in classifications or typologies based on sophistic attempts to formulate generalizations about the multiplicity of historical specificities in ways that still differentiate between them.¹⁹ While much ink has been spilt developing such historical classifications and typologies in efforts to provide heuristic models for syncretic relations and formations,

the results of these generalizing efforts often approach – or even exceed – the complexity of the particular historical formations being described. On the other hand, less attention has been paid to what I take to be central to Colpe's definition of syncretism, namely, the »mental elements« to which diverse historical »actions, representations, or objects« are related and by which they may be explained.

Since Colpe first proposed his definition, a new disciplinary area of the cognitive science of religion has emerged that might offer some insight into those mental elements that are universal to human nature and, because of that universality, might structure as well as constrain the multiple possibilities of historical realization, including those often regarded as syncretistic.²⁰

The fundamental premise of this new discipline is that the mind is not a passive »blank-slate« upon which cultural influences and information might simply be inscribed, as most accounts of syncretism would seem to assume, but that the mental processing of such influences and information is both constructive as well as constrained.²¹ Such cognitive explanations may well contribute a clarifying scientific perspective to historical processes of syncretic selection and representation.

3.1 Syncretism, cognitive linguistics and blending theory

One of the first cognitive theories to be applied to the study of cultural formations is derived from linguistic theory. The promise and problems with this approach have been well summarized in a recent study by historian of religion Edward Slingerland, who illustrates it from Confucian syncretic constructions by Mencius in fourth-century BCE China – though Slingerland employs the linguistic category of »conceptual blending« rather than that of »syncretism«.²²

The presupposition of cognitive linguistics is that »linguistic conventions [...] represent the surface manifestations of deeper, active, and largely unconscious *conceptual* structures«.²³ This theoretical presupposition was first elaborated by George Lakoff and Mark

20 Colpe's article on Syncretism for the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (as n. 12) was published in English. Although I don't have access to the German original, I suppose that »mental elements« is the translation of »geistige« rather than »kognitive [Elemente]«. The cognitive sciences have, however, challenged the traditional distinction between the *Geistes-* and *Naturwissenschaften* by proposing scientific explanations for the former. Ten years prior to his inclusion of »mental elements« in his definition of syncretism, Colpe referred to problems with the »interpretation of human nature«, though he referred to this »human nature« in political and economic terms (Syncretism and Secularization. Complementary and Antithetical Trends in New Religious Movements, in: *History of Religions* 17 [1977] 158–176, 173).

21 John TOOBY/Leda COSMIDES. Conceptual Foundations of Evolutionary Psychology, in: David M. BUSS (ed.), *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, Hoboken, NJ 2005, 5–67.

22 Edward SLINGERLAND, *What Science Offers the Humanities. Integrating Body and Culture*, Cambridge 2008, 188–209.

23 SLINGERLAND, *Science* (see n. 22), 169.

24 SLINGERLAND, *Science* (see n. 22), 166–167; George LAKOFF/Mark JOHNSON, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago 1980; LAKOFF/JOHNSON, *Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York 1999.

25 SLINGERLAND, *Science* (see n. 22), 176; Gilles FAUCONNIER/Mark TURNER, *The Way We Think. Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*, New York 2002.

26 SLINGERLAND, *Science* (see n. 22), 177.

27 SLINGERLAND, *Science* (see n. 22), 209.

28 For example, Hugo LUNDHAUG, »There is a Rebirth and an Image of Rebirth«. A Cognitive Poetic Analysis of Conceptual and Intertextual Blending in the *Exegesis on the Soul* (NHC II, 6) and the *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II, 3). Diss. University of Bergen, 2007; SLINGERLAND, *Science* (as n. 22), 188–209.

29 Ibid., 22, 181 (emphasis added).

30 For example, ibid., 190–191, 198, 201, 205.

31 Ibid., 174.

32 Pascal BOYER, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas. A Cognitive Theory of Religion*, Berkeley 1994; *Religion Explained. The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, New York 2001; Dan SPERBER, *Explaining Culture. A Naturalistic Approach*, Oxford 1996.

33 SLINGERLAND, *Science* (as n. 22) 213–214 (emphasis added).

Johnson in their analyses of metaphor construction, in which body-based conceptual schemas, the *source* domain, serve as »conceptual templates for our understanding of abstract or less clearly structured« *target* domains.²⁴

Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner have extended »cognitive metaphor theory to argue that *all* of human cognition – even literal and logical thought – involves the creation of mental spaces and mappings between them.«²⁵ Thus, »many expressions that, at first glance, seem to involve simple source to target domain mappings in fact involve the blending of two or more spaces into a [...] third ›blended‹ space.«²⁶ In such complex analyses, blended constructions may themselves be shown to be inputs for further blends.²⁷ It would be possible, consequently, to analyze Apuleius' theocracy, for example, as a metaphorical construction, whereby discretely represented goddesses, who themselves are metaphorical blends of certain cosmic attributes – »mother of all things, [...] governess of all the elements, [...] chief of the powers divine, [...] principal of them that dwell in heaven« – become »blended« into a single mental space represented by Isis – who, in turn, metaphorically represents for Apuleius a Neo-platonic conceptual space of idealistic monism (Apul. *Met.* 11. 5) – or something of the sort. Analysis of this metaphorical »blend« would involve, consequently, a tracing of the historically differing source attributes of the blended deities – respectively, creatrix, originator of agriculture, guarantor of human reproduction and propagation, relief from illness, etc. (Apul. *Met.* 11. 2), into the target metaphor of Isis, which, in turn, associates her, as the metaphorical »Queen of Heaven«, with Apuleius' view of the cosmic foundations of and conditions for human existence.

Although the model of *conceptual* blending derives from and seems to be biased towards an analysis of *texts*,²⁸ Slingerland argues that, in addition to the »selective recruitment and combination of schemas into novel conceptual structures«, the theory can provide »a general model for how we might represent and *trace*« »novel motor programs, technological interfaces, and social institutions.«²⁹ I am unaware, however, of any study that has attempted to extend the model to domains other than the textual. Nevertheless, the key word in Slingerland's presentation of the theory is »*trace*« and while the blended spaces of any historical formation, like of those of conceptual expressions, may well be tractable, such trackings, while descriptive of source materials that may have been employed, approach, as with the case of historical classifications and typologies, the complexity of the formations being described without offering any explanatory insight into the criteria for selection and rejection.³⁰ As Slingerland puts it, the problem remains of »how the target of a given metaphor serves to constrain possible source domains, as well as to determine what parts of those source domains become conceptually active in the metaphor.«³¹ This is precisely the question that continues to confound historical explanations – or even descriptions – of syncretic formations, namely, the problem of what constraints are present in the construction of such formations and what criteria for selection are operative among the various syncretic possibilities afforded by conditions of historical complexity.

Slingerland concludes his discussion by referring to a more fundamental cognitive *explanation* for selective blending. »Cultural transmission«, he writes with reference to the work of Pascal Boyer and Dan Sperber,³² »is [indeed] a *selective process*, where a large and powerful suite of innate human cognitive biases assure that certain mental representations are more likely to be entertained and transmitted than others.«³³ This »large and powerful suite of innate human cognitive biases«, when fully mapped, can provide a greater explanatory basis for the mental elements underlying historical representations by human agents, past as well as present, than that offered by simply tracing intricate constructions.

3.2 Syncretism, epidemiological transmission and stabilization

The cognitive anthropologist Dan Sperber, notes that our »individual brains are each inhabited by a large number of ideas that determine our behavior.« Since mental representations spread contagiously from mind to mind, Sperber employs an »epidemiological« metaphor for their transmission and stabilization. Some, but not all representations are successfully transmitted, he argues. Those that do are inevitably transformed, as in the children's game of »Telephone« (»Stille Post«). »Only those representations which are [...] *minimally* transformed« will end up being publicly shared and »belonging to culture«. In a question directly related to that of syncretic formations, Sperber asks: »what causes such [public] representations to appear, to expand, to split, to merge with one another, to change over time, to die?«³⁴

Information that is most successfully transmitted, Sperber argues, is that which is intuitively attracted to evolved cognitive domains of individual minds whereas information that is domain impoverished will be transmitted poorly, if at all. As Sperber puts it, these cognitive »adaptations to an ancestral environment [...] tend to fix a lot of cultural content in and around [these specialized] cognitive domains«,³⁵ both within populations as well as across generations.³⁶ Such evolutionary and cognitive defaults are increasingly being recognized by literary critics as underlying recurrent themes in literature³⁷ and by historians as organizing the purduring concerns of historical agents.³⁸

The primary cognitive attractor or domain represented by the deities identified or associated by both Apuleius and Decimus is that of »agency«. »Agents« are readily distinguished from inanimate objects already by infants; they are self-motivating, intentional objects in the world that carry with them certain expectations of action and accomplishment. Deities are agents that are considered to accomplish the results attributed them by extraordinary means. Agents identified with one another, therefore, are those considered, whether by authorial intent or by local practice, to share a domain relevant quality or function. Consequently, the deities identified by Apuleius in his novel are an empathetic assemblage of

34 SPERBER, *Explaining* (as n. 32), 83.

35 SPERBER, *Explaining* (as n. 32), 113; see Dan SPERBER / Lawrence HIRSCHFELD, *The Cognitive Foundations of Cultural Stability and Diversity*, in: *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 8 (2004) 40-46.

36 Nicolas CLAUDIÈRE / Dan SPERBER, *The Role of Attraction in Cultural Evolution*, in: *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 7 (2007) 89-111.

37 For example, Jonathan GOTTSCHALL / David Sloan WILSON, *The Literary Animal. Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, Evanston, IL 2005; William FLESCHE, *Comeuppance. Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction*, Cambridge, MA 2008.

38 For example, R. Dale GUTHRIE, *The Nature of Paleolithic Art*, Chicago 2005; Gregory HANLON, *Human Nature in Rural Tuscany*, An Early Modern History, New York 2007.

39 Luther H. MARTIN, *Hellenistic Religions. An Introduction*, Oxford 1987.

40 MARTIN, *Minerva* (as n. 9), 139.

41 CLAUS, *Mithras* (as n. 15), 158.

42 Reinhold MERKELBACH understands Mithraism to be a »*Religion der Loyalität im römischen Kaiserreich*« (*Mithras, Königstein / Ts.* 1984, 153-88).

43 Luther H. MARTIN, *The Very Idea of Globalization. The Case of Hellenistic Empire*, in: MARTIN / PACHIS, *Hellenisation* (as n. 1); Jesper SØRENSEN, *Religion, Evolution, and an Immunology of Cultural Systems*, in: *Evolution and Cognition* 10 (2004) 61-73.

44 MARTIN, *Hellenistic Religions* (as n. 39), 115.

45 Luther H. MARTIN, *Performativity, Discourse and Cognition: »Demythologizing« the Roman Cult of Mithras*, in: Willi BRAUN (ed.), *Rhetoric and Reality in Early Christianity*, Waterloo 2005, 187-217.

46 For example, four members of Septimius Severus' Praetorian Guard were deployed, at the beginning of the third century AD, to Palaio polis, on the island of Andros, where they dedicated a mithraeum (*CIMRM* 2350). The faulty grammar of their dedicatory inscription betrays the »semi-literate« character of its inscribers (Nicholas REED, *The Mithraeum on Andros*, in: *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 18 [1975] 207-211, 207).

47 Luther H. MARTIN, *Reflections on the Mithraic Tauroctony as Cult Scene*, in: John R. HINNELL (ed.), *Studies in Mithraism*, Manchester / Rome 1994, 217-224.

48 Mary BEARD / John NORTH / Simon PRICE (ed.), *Religions of Rome*, Vol. 1. A History, Cambridge 1998, 36; Robert TURCAN, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, Antonia NEVILL (trans.), Oxford 2000, 103.

goddesses who represent possibilities for the realization of good fortune (*agathē tychē*) in systemic antipathy to the ill fortune that was considered to plague Graeco-Roman existence.³⁹ Atargatis is excluded from this assembly because of her association – but only in Apuleius's tale – with this cosmic antipathy.⁴⁰ The deities associated with Mithras by Decimus – and by others – were based on their common relationship to the sun (Apollo, Sol, and Helios), on their mutual roles as psychopomps (Mercury or Hermes),⁴¹ or on their associations with the military (Jupiter Dolechenus). But, whereas Apuleius' enumeration of selectively identified deities included only goddesses, Decimus' list included deities of both genders, necessitating the explication of yet another cognitive principle. Since deities are agents considered to accomplish the results attributed them by extraordinary means, they are also typically represented as powerful. Decimus' association of Mithras, and of the other deities he lists, with Jove, Juno and Minerva – the Roman Capitoline Triad – associates the power of these deities with that of the state, exploiting, thereby, a cognitive bias in support of imperial supremacy.⁴²

Sperber's metaphor of the epidemiological transmission of representations suggests that some minds might exhibit either an innate and/or an acquired immunity to (or stablization in the face of) »cultural infections«.⁴³ In the more or less expected variable association of certain Graeco-Roman deities with Mithras in the cultural heterogeneity of the Roman Empire, the remarkably faithful transmission of the central Mithraic tauroctony is a case in point. This rather complex image invariably portrays the Roman god: »Mithras pinning a fallen bull with his left knee. With his face averted to his right, he pulls the animal's head back by its mouth, chin, or horns with his left hand so that its throat is exposed; with his right hand, he slays the beast with his knife or sword. A sheaf of grain sprouts from the bull's tail. A raven appears over Mithras's right shoulder, often perched on his cloak. A serpent and often a cup are ranged beneath the bull, while a dog laps at the fatal wound of the bull and a scorpion is attached to the dying animal's genitals.«⁴⁴

Such a complex composition would seem to be vulnerable, if not outright amenable, to syncretic influence. And yet this image was transmitted throughout the Roman Empire, to its farthest boundaries, with little to no variation. The faithful transmission of the tauroctonous image is even more remarkable when we consider that there is no evidence from Mithraism for even the idea of any centralized conceptual control or administration that might support its standardization; that there is no evidence for the existence of any Mithraic texts or artistic templates that might have provided instructions or models for the tauroctony;⁴⁵ and that new Mithraic cells were often established by initiates, who were, nevertheless, often uneducated.⁴⁶ Although these conclusions could reflect a taphonomic bias in which generalized conclusions are based solely upon fortuitously surviving data, comparative studies of contemporaneous religious groups, including the early Christians, argue for Mithraic exceptionalism on these evidential points. The theoretical question raised by our historical example of Mithraism, then, is how this rather complex image became immunized to syncretic influences in the context of a cult that seemed otherwise receptive to a multitude of such influences? Interestingly, resistance to external influences, like their reception, seems to exploit innate cognitive attractors as well, reinforced, however, by robust mnemonic salience.

In its Roman context, the Mithraic tauroctony could only have been viewed by non-initiate members of the public as a representation of sacrifice,⁴⁷ a feature of much Roman official religion⁴⁸ that would have provided a particularly salient and inferentially rich image for Roman minds. A plausible cognitive attractor exploited by sacrificial rites is an evolved

sense of reciprocity – observable even among our cousin primates.⁴⁹ As expressed in the seemingly universal formula of relationship with deity – *do ut des* –⁵⁰ this ritual might be expected to activate default expectations about an economy of exchange,⁵¹ a principle that is manifest either as an actual exchange of resources among participants or as a potential exchange with invisible partners.⁵² Mnemonically enhanced by the predictable visceral reaction universally evoked by the spilling of blood and its associated emotional salience,⁵³ this principle celebrates, in the more traditional formulation by the classicist Walter Burkert, »The commensality of men in the presence of the sacred«.⁵⁴

The Mithraic tauroctony has also been identified as a star-map, in which each of its compositional elements corresponds to well-known constellations: the bull to taurus, the dog to canis minor, the serpent to hydra, the scorpion to scorpio, the cup, when present, to krater, and the wheat emerging from the tail of the bull, to the star spica. Although contemporary interpretations of this astrological representation differ,⁵⁵ the cosmic organization of the tauroctony would have been especially attractive to the visuospatial skills that are predominant among males,⁵⁶ who, of course, exclusively constituted the membership of the Mithraisms. This attraction to a spatial organization of relationships is associated with motor adaptations that had an evolutionary history in such ancestral male pursuits as hunting⁵⁷ – judging the position of moving targets, for example,⁵⁸ and accurately aiming projectiles at them.⁵⁹ Such activities were of significance for the large number of Mithraic initiates who were also members of the military, for which the cult had a special attraction,⁶⁰ and through which the cult was largely spread.⁶¹

Finally, in contrast to empathizing, which statistically is a characteristic of »female brains«, the methodical patterns of astrological configurations would have been attractive to the systemizing proclivity of male brains.⁶² This systemization bias would have provided mnemonic support for faithful transmission of the Mithraic tauroctony by its male membership.

49 Walter BURKERT, *Creation of the Sacred*. Tracks of Biology in Early Religions, Cambridge, MA 1996, 129-155; Sarah F. BROSNAN / Frans B. M. DE WAAL, Monkeys Reject Unequal Pay, in: *Nature* 425 (2003) 297-299; DE WAAL, Food Sharing and Reciprocal Obligations among Chimpanzees, in: *Journal of Human Evolution* 18 (1989) 433-459; DE WAAL, The Chimpanzee's Service Economy. Food for Grooming, in: *Evolution and Human Behavior* 18 (1997) 375-386.
50 BURKERT, *Creation* (as n. 49), 130, 136-138; Gerardus VAN DER LEEUW, Die Do-ut-des-Formel in der Opfertheorie, in: *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 20 (1920/21) 241-253; Emile DURKHEIM, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Joseph W. SWAIN (trans.), New York 1915, 388.

51 VAN DER LEEUW, Formel (as n. 50).

52 BOYER, *Explained* (as n. 32), 242; Scott ATRAN, *In Gods We Trust*. The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion, New York 2002, 115.

53 BURKERT, *Creation* (as n. 49), 30.

54 BURKERT, *Creation* (as n. 49), 150.

55 David ULANSEY, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*. Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World, New York 1989, 15-25; Roger BECK, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire*. Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun, Oxford 2006, 31-38, 194-222.

56 Doreen KIMURA, *Sex and Cognition*, Cambridge, MA 1999, 43-66; David F. SHERRY, What Sex Differences in Spatial Ability Tell Us about the Evolution of Cognition, in: Michael S. GAZZANIGA (ed.), *The New Cognitive Neurosciences*, Cambridge, MA 2000, 1209-1217.

57 KIMURA, *Sex* (as n. 56), 31-41; GUTHRIE, *Art* (as n. 38), 228-240, 257-265.

58 David J. LAW / James W. PEL-LEGRINO / Earl B. HUNT, Comparing the Tortoise and the Hare. Gender Differences and Experience in Dynamic Spatial Reasoning Tasks, in: *Psychological Science* 4 (1993) 35-40.

59 Simon BARON-COHEN, *The Essential Difference*. The Truth about the Male and Female Brain, New York 2003, 79-80; Isabelle ECUYER-DAB / Michèle ROBERT, Have Sex Differences in Spatial Ability Evolved from Male Competition for Mating and Female

3.3 The neural implementation of syncretistic selection

The cognitive effort required to resist syncretic influences to so faithfully transmit the Mithraic tauroctony attests to the central importance of this singular image for the social identity of the distributed Mithraic groups. Consequently, any discussion of selection among historically available ideas, representations or practices, or of immunization against such availability, must also include an explanation for how local ideas and preferences, while stabilized by cognitive attractors, are processed and differentiated by evolved neurocognitive functions.⁶³

One universal cognitive function, whereby historically antecedent and culturally contingent elements of syncretic formations are processed is imitation. *Homo sapiens* are innately imitators, and we are so within minutes of our birth. Within the first hour of life, for example, infants instinctively imitate rudimentary manual and facial gestures.⁶⁴ Like most animals, it's how we learn,⁶⁵ how we continue to learn as adults and how we transmit what we have learned.⁶⁶

The cognitive anthropologist Thomas Wynn has noted that »[a]ll understandings of the nature of mind have begun to take account of developments in neuroscience«,⁶⁷ and a possible neurological basis for the compulsion to imitate – and for learned social constraints upon this function – is the recent discovery of »mirror neurons« (*Spiegelneuronen*) in the brains of primates and now confirmed in those of humans as well. While the significance of this discovery is contested by some neuroscientists,⁶⁸ it has been hailed by others as the single most important discovery of the decade.⁶⁹

Briefly, mirror neurons are a specialized kind of motor neuron located primarily in areas of the premotor and inferior parietal cortexes. These neurons not only fire when an individual performs a particular action but also when an individual observes that act, or even when that individual speaks or hears about it⁷⁰ – and, they account for »automatic« arousal and behavioral responses to these inputs⁷¹ The firings of these neurons are linked to functions of the limbic system, the neural system that is associated with emotions.⁷² Consequently, these specialized neurons facilitate our feelings of empathy,⁷³ and may contribute to an explanation for human sociality generally.⁷⁴ Further, they support and, more

Concern for Survival?, in: *Cognition* 91 (2004) 221-257; Carol LAWTON/David W. HATCHER, Gender Differences in Integration of Images in Visuospatial Memory, in: *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 53 (2005) 717-725, 722; Hannah HOLMES, *The Well-Dressed Ape. A Natural History of Myself*, New York 2008, 39-40.

60 CLAUS, *Mithras* (as n. 15), 36.

61 CLAUS, *Mithras* (as n. 15), 21-22.

62 BARON-COHEN, Difference (as n. 59).

63 Daniel Lord SMAL has presented a fascinating and compelling argument that cultural practices influence human behavior by altering brain chemistry (*On Deep History and the Brain*, Berkeley 2008); D. C. A. HILLMAN has made a similar argument for the Graeco-Roman world (*The Chemical Muse. Drug Use and the Roots of Western Civilization*, New York 2008).

64 Andrew N. MELTZOFF/M. Keith MOORE, Imitation of Facial and Manual Gestures by Human Neonates, in: *Science* 198 (1977) 74-78.

65 Marco IACOBONI, *Mirroring People. The New Science of How We Connect with Others*, New York 2008, 38-42.

66 IACOBONI, *Mirroring* (as n. 65), 215-217, 260.

67 Thomas WYNN, Whither Evolutionary Cognitive Archaeology, in: Sophie A. DE BEAUNE/Frederick L. COOLIDGE/Thomas WYNN (ed.), *Cognitive Archaeology and Human Evolution*, Cambridge 2009, 145-149, 146.

68 See »Commentary« on Susan HURLEY, The Shared Circuits Model (SCM). How Control, Mirroring, and Simulation Can Enable Imitation, Deliberation, and Mindreading, in: *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 31 (2008) 1-58, 22-52.

69 Vilayanur S. RAMACHANDRAN, Mirror Neurons and Imitation Learning as the Driving Force behind »The Great Leap Forward« in Human Evolution, *The Edge*, www.edge.org/3rd_culture/ramachandran/ramachandran_p1.html, 1, 6 (accessed 3 June 2009).

70 IACOBONI, *Mirroring* (as n. 65), 12.

71 Alison MOTLUK, Mirror Neurons Control Erection Response to Porn, in: *New Scientist* 14 (June 2008) 15.

72 IACOBONI, *Mirroring* (as n. 65), 112, 115-116.

73 IACOBONI, *Mirroring* (as n. 65), 116-121.

74 IACOBONI, *Mirroring* (as n. 65), 30.

importantly, give analytical clarity to and explanation for, descriptions by cognitive linguists and conceptual blending theorists of those conceptual schemas that are derived from the body and its perceptual and motor experiences, and that serve as the *source* domain for blended constructions.⁷⁵

On the other hand, neither animals nor humans go through their lives constantly imitating all of the observed actions of other members of their species. To do so would simply be an inefficient way for any species to have evolved an ability to learn.⁷⁶ Rather, the neural implementation of imitation, like processes of syncretic formations, are constrained and, therefore, selective. This process of selectivity seems to be controlled at the neural level by a second type of cell in the mirror neuron system that inhibits or modulates the simpler mirror neurons. Because of its controlling function, this second type of neuron has been termed a »super mirror neuron«.⁷⁷ Super mirror neurons are differentiated from simple mirror neurons by their firing rate. While both simple and super mirror neurons fire when an individual performs some action, super mirror neurons fire at a decreased rate when an individual simply observes an action, or they cease to fire altogether.⁷⁸ The differential rate of firing by these super mirror neurons may be inhibiting the imitative compulsion occasioned by the uninterrupted firing of the simple mirror neurons.⁷⁹

Whereas the simple mirror neuron system is linked to the automatic functions of the limbic system, the super mirror neuron system is located in the mesial frontal cortex areas of the brain that are associated with such reflective mental functions as reasoning, planning, organization, emotional and impulse control, problem solving, as well as with learning and memory.⁸⁰ This area of the brain is the least developed in infancy but shows dramatic developmental and experiential change,⁸¹ which include an encoding of transmitted, stabilized, experienced and learned social preferences. In other words, the super mirror neurons function to constrain imitative behavior in accordance with social preferences transmitted in the context of localized practices⁸² – as was the case for the Mithraic cells – to immunize social groups against promiscuous contamination.

Whereas humans are hard-wired, as it were, to learn through imitation, resulting in, for example, such theocratic representations as those by Decimus, we are also hard-wired to

75 IACOBONI, *Mirroring* (as n. 65), 92.

76 IACOBONI, *Mirroring* (as n. 65), 200.

77 IACOBONI, *Mirroring* (as n. 65), 202.

78 IACOBONI, *Mirroring* (as n. 65), 202–203, 265.

79 IACOBONI, *Mirroring* (as n. 65), 203, 225–226.

80 IACOBONI, *Mirroring* (as n. 65), 195–199.

81 IACOBONI, *Mirroring* (as n. 65), 203.

82 IACOBONI, *Mirroring* (as n. 65), 271.

83 IACOBONI and his colleagues have argued that this differential coding for actions of self (increased firing rate) and that of others (decreased firing rate) »may represent a wonderfully simple neural distinction between self and others« (ibid., 203), which has elsewhere been described by existential phenomenologists (ibid., 259–272).

84 Matthew D. LIEBERMAN/Ruth GAUNT/Daniel T. GILBERT/Yaacov TROPE, Reflexion and Reflection. A Social Cognitive Neuroscience Approach to Attributional Inference, in: *Advances in Experimental and Social Psychology* 34 (2002) 199–249. The psychologists Amos TVERSKY and Daniel KAHNEMAN have identified a cognitive bias whereby humans in uncertain or complex situations reflexively (or intuitively) make judgments about similarities by reflexively (intuitively) judging how likely it is that A belongs to category B by asking themselves how similar A is to their prior image or stereotype of B. (Judgment under Uncertainty. Heuristics and Biases, in: *Science* 185 [1974] 1124–1131, 1124).

85 Robert BAIRD, *Category Formation and the History of Religions*, The Hague 1971, 146.

86 Luther H. MARTIN, The Amor and Psyche Relief in the Mithraeum of Capua Vetere: An Exceptional Case of Graeco-Roman Syncretism or an Ordinary Instance of Human Cognition?, in: Patricia A. JOHNSTON/Giovanni CASADIO (ed.), *The Mystic Cults of Magna Grecia*, Austin TX 2009, 277–289.

87 Hendrik KRAEMER, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, London/New York 1938.

88 Carolina MAESTRO/Carmine COLLINA, The Quest for a Common Semantics: Observations on Definitional Criteria of Cognitive Processes in Prehistory, in: DE BEAUNE et al., *Archaeology* (as n. 67), 85–94, 88.

select which aspects of others we finally imitate on the basis of locally determined preferences and behaviors,⁸³ and, consequently which to reject, as with the more selective theocrasia of Apuleius or with the faithful transmission of the Mithraic tauroctony. In other words, our brains function naturally to make sense of our environments and to articulate and to transmit that sense conceptually by efficiently organizing that sense in ways that blend information into categories deemed relevant, or to reject that which does not, both socially as well as cognitively, whether that selectivity is reflexive or reflective.⁸⁴ At this level of neurological implementation, it would seem that the species *H. sapiens* simply is *H. imitatus*, that is to say, *H. syncretismus*. From this neurological perspective, therefore, any generalized history of religions or social scientific category of »syncretism« that ignores human cognitive capacities for and constraints upon cultural constructions would seem simply to be a redundant truism. As Robert Baird famously argued already in 1971 with respect to analyses of syncretism at the historical level, »no real purpose is served by applying« this term to describe a process that is »both inevitable and universal.«⁸⁵

4 Conclusion

Processes of globalization, that is, modifications to local, community and traditional identities resulting from cultural contact and interaction with large(r)-scale societies, past and present, may provide an occasion for syncretism but they do not explain syncretism – nor do they explain descriptions of identity maintenance by local resistance to such influence in the face of that contact. Descriptions, from our historical example of identifications of the Roman god Mithras with other »congenial« Graeco-Roman deities or of their perceived correspondences, explain nothing about the nature of that congeniality among the particular deities in particular times and places or about unexpected and idiosyncratic juxtapositions, for example, the Amor-Psyche relief prominently displayed in the Mithraeum of Capua Vetere (CIMRM 186).⁸⁶ And while the presence of Mithras was contaminated by that of contemporaneous Graeco-Roman deities, the particularly faithful transmission of the Mithraic tauroctonous image throughout the multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic expanse of empire presents a confound for historical generalizations about processes of cultural interaction. Rather the notion of »syncretism« seems to have been employed, primarily by historians of religion, to characterize ordinary cognitive dynamics that, nevertheless, still retains a normative sense from its earlier theological usage,⁸⁷ implying, by semantic suggestion, some »non-syncretic« ahistorical alternative, i. e., revelation.

Ironically, the generalized history of religions category »syncretism« seems to have functioned to *explain away* the particulars of religio-historical change. Nevertheless, research at the neurocognitive level has begun to offer explanations for those »mental elements« that Colpe understood as central to such historical processes and relations. These mental elements include conscious as well as non-conscious capacities for, as well as constraints upon, processes of selecting and rejecting cultural and historical possibilities by historical agents, how the practices and mental representations of these agents were generated and transmitted, and how they became transformed and re-represented in their transmission from mind to mind and from group to group. We can summarize these contributions as follows:

- 1 Any specific sequence of events required to structure the type of knowledge or representation under consideration must be considered as structured by cognitive processes.⁸⁸ Whereas historical descriptions of so-called »syncretisms« are monothetic, cognitive

explanations are polythetic, involving at least two processes: blending (identification, correspondence) and selection (or rejection). Blending and selection are, of course, ordinary cognitive processes whereby *H. sapiens* categorize and thereby make sense of their environments. The psychologist Sarnoff Mednick considers that »the forming of associative elements into new combinations which either meet specified requirements or are in some way useful« to define the »nature of creative thinking«.⁸⁹ »Categorization«, then, is a fundamental cognitive process of creative and selective grouping by which some »distinct entities are treated as equivalent« but others are not. The problem to be explained is, as with syncretistic formations, »why we have the categories we have and not others«.⁹⁰ In other words, it must be explained why some »syncretistic« formations that are historically and culturally possible occur, others do not; some of those that do occur spread epidemiologically, others do not; some of those that spread are accepted, others are resisted.

2 Any historical change and stabilization involves both endogenous factors of blending and selection, such as evolved cognitive attractors and the neurologically implemented proclivity for imitation, as well as learned exogenous factors of selection, which inhibit or constrain endogenous default biases. These factors must be identified and explained.

3 It might prove heuristically beneficial to employ another, more neutral category for those historical constructions that have been described as »syncretistic«, as Ulrich Berner has suggested (this review). Such a category must, however, take into account that such historical constructions are not simply cultural stases to be described but are the products of human minds. Such products may themselves become inputs to be rejected, to be incorporated into held representations, or to be immunized against. These processes must also be identified and explained.

Cognitive scientists are seeking ever more precisely to map processes of endogenous selection and the neurocognitive mechanisms whereby exogenous factors become processed. Their contributions to our understanding of »syncretisms«, as to the study of religion generally, promise to restore to that study Max Müller's prescient, if subsequently neglected, proposal to establish a *naturwissenschaftliche* foundation for historical as well as for contemporary studies of religion.⁹¹

89 Sarnoff MEDNICK, The Associative Basis of the Creative Process, in: *Psychological Review* 69 (1962) 220-232, 221.

90 Douglas L. MEDIN/Cynthia AGUILAR, Categorization, in: Robert A. WILSON/Frank C. KEIL (ed.), *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, Cambridge, MA 1999, 104-106, 104; with respect to syncretism, see MARTIN, Minerva (as n. 9), 139.

91 Friedrich Max MÜLLER, Essays on the Science of Religion, in: MÜLLER, *Chips from a German Workshop*, vol. 1. New York 1881; MÜLLER *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, London 1893; see also Donald WIEBE, Religion and the Scientific Impulse in the Nineteenth Century. Friedrich Max Müller and the Birth of the Science of Religion, in: WIEBE (ed.), *The Politics of Religious Studies*, New York 1999, 9-30; WIEBE, The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion, in: *ibid.*, 141-162.

Zusammenfassung

Moderne Prozesse der Globalisierung wurden im westlichen Altertum durch die Imperien von Griechenland und Rom vorweggenommen. Der Begriff »Synkretismus« wurde zuerst definiert, um die kulturellen, und vor allem, die religiösen Wechselwirkungen zu charakterisieren, die durch diese Reiche veranlaßt wurden. Obwohl diese Wechselwirkungen weitgehend von Historikern beschrieben worden sind, liefern historische Beschreibungen keine Erklärung für die selektiven Prozesse der sich daraus ergebenden Formationen. Warum ist es so, dass einige »synkretistische« Formationen, die historisch und kulturell möglich sind, auftreten, aber andere nicht? Beiträge aus den Kognitionswissenschaften hinsichtlich der selektiven Übertragung, Konsolidierung und Ablehnung der übermittelten Informationen können sowohl zur erklärenden Aufgabe des Historikers beitragen als auch ein Modell für eine wirklich religionswissenschaftliche Studie der Religion anbieten.

Summary

Modern processes of globalization were anticipated in Western antiquity by the empires of Greece and Roman. The notion of »syncretism« was first defined to characterize the cultural, and especially the religious, interactions occasioned by these empires. Although these interactions have been extensively described by historians, historical descriptions do not explain the selective processes of the resulting formations. Why is it that some »syncretistic« formations that are historically and culturally possible occur but others do not? Contributions from the cognitive sciences concerning the selective transmission, consolidation, and rejection of transmitted information may contribute to the historian's explanatory task as well as providing a model for a truly ›religionswissenschaftlich‹ study of religion.

Sumario

Los procesos modernos de globalización han sido prefigurados en la antigüedad occidental clásica por los imperios de Grecia y Roma. El concepto de »sincretismo« fue definido para caracterizar las interacciones culturales y, sobre todo, religiosas, provocadas por esos imperios. Aunque dichas interacciones han sido ampliamente descritas por historiadores, tales descripciones no ofrecen ninguna explicación de los procesos selectivos de las formaciones consecuentes. ¿Por qué aparecen unas formaciones »sincretistas«, que histórica- y culturalmente son posibles, pero otras no? Aportes de las ciencias cognitivas sobre la selectiva translación, consolidación y reprobación de las informaciones transmitidas pueden contribuir a la tarea explicativa del historiador y ofrecer también un modelo para un auténtico estudio sobre la religión en las ciencias de la religión.