
UNIT 12 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND SYNCRETIC TRADITIONS*

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12.0 OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the concept of religious pluralism;
2. To understand how syncretic traditions and New Religions arise? What are the social and historical conditions associated with these processes; and
3. To study a few historical situations of Syncretism and religious pluralism from ethnographies.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

There are very few societies where everyone practices the same faith and have homogenous beliefs. Even in rural areas and smaller places, it is likely that one finds people with differing beliefs, practices as well as those who are sceptics or non-believers. The sociological fact that there are several faiths and belief systems may be accompanied by theological pluralism, where there is a religious sanction for the existence of multiple ways of believing, or a lack of it, where the religions preach that there is possibility of only one way. From a theological perspective, Eliade said that religions show the path to the truth. People with faith believe that religion locates the truth, the reality. There are two ways of looking at the truth, some may believe that there can be multiple ways of arriving at and viewing the truth and others may believe that only one way is possible. Depending upon which path one follows, society may be in a state of constant conflict or may be peaceful. Politically viewed, pluralism should be accompanied by tolerance and peace. There are two ways to do it politically, either to acknowledge the truth of all the faiths or to suppress all faiths in favour of a non-religious state. While India is an example of the former, the United State may be taken as an example of the other.

A sociological approach to religion views it as intrinsically linked to other aspects of society such as political economy, social stratification, gender and globalization among

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others. Religions change and evolve according to historical factors, economic and political transformations. Several sociological approaches have indicated how religion shapes and influences social life and is in turn informed by existing social conditions. In other words, to the sociologist, religion is a social phenomenon that is like any other social institution as well as tied up with other social institutions. Ethnographies enable us to understand religion from a subjective perspective, as to what it means to the people who believe and practice it.

Let us now discuss the concepts of religious pluralism and of religious syncretisation both from sociological and ethnographic perspectives.

12.2 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

In the city of Tokyo in Japan, in a small temple in the middle of city, with a long line of devotees lies 'God from India' as the local Japanese people usually term it for a shrine with various Hindu ritualistic objects. At shrines in temples in Japan, are found Hindu gods and goddesses, Hindu religious imagery, like the lotus and the swastika, jostling for space with various Buddhist and local deities and images. To people who have a truly pluralistic view of religion, like polytheistic Hinduism or Shinto, the sacred power can be distributed into various entities. The name and origin do not matter, as these can be also incorporated to suit different time and space locations and may travel from one place to another. As Eller (2007: 264) explains, the view of religion as organized or a doctrine, with definite boundaries and tenets is not prevalent among all people, least of among the ancient belief systems of the world. This is because for many people, religion is equivalent to science, a form of truth and explanation. There does not exist any separation of the natural and the supernatural, an axiom that led Spiro (1966) to formulate his concept of superhuman beings as against the more prevalent supernatural beings. The belief in sacred beings is an essential aspect of religion, but in some religions, these are confined to a few and essentialised beings. Some others, like Shinto are more inclusive and expansive, open to incorporate new superhuman beings. The sacred here is not constricted but has a universalized character, in that it may appear anywhere in any form. Although Christianity is a monotheistic religion, it expands itself by including and continuing to include sacred beings known as saints. As the geographical scope of the faith has expanded, the origin and nature of the saints too have expanded, incorporating the sacred from many locations.

Another way in which pluralism may exist from theistic perspective is to have a belief system that emphasizes that although the Truth is one, it can be understood cognitively from many platforms and approached taking different paths. Such a belief system encourages the peaceful co-existence of many faiths leading to a situation of social and political religious pluralism, where not only do different beliefs survive and exist but they also live side by side peacefully.

By and large, India, from ancient times has been such a religiously pluralistic region because of the Rig Vedic verse, *Ekam Sat, Vipra Vaudha Badati* (There is only one Truth, but sages describe it differently). The religious beliefs that sprang on the Indian soil, many centuries ago, were non-doctrinal, with no given or known source, coming from the collective wisdom and mouth of many, who were regarded as sages. The Rig Veda, that is the oldest known text from this part of the world, has no authorship. They also had no rivals as there was no competition from any other organized religion. The

teachings of the Vedas assume a universe into which they can pour the wisdom about an absolute truth, without having to negate any already existing treatise.

Sociologically speaking, indigenously evolved belief systems that grow on their own are inclusive and accepting of diversity. Sometimes, as in the case of Shinto, the diversity has a natural place within the existing belief system. Hinduism too, has grown incorporating various deities from different sources over time. However, assimilation does not imply pluralism, it means only a technology of incorporation. Pluralism can only come, when, due to historical reasons, a number of faiths exist side by side, either peacefully or in continuous conflict. In the latter case, a dominant, more powerful faith has the potential to erase others and establish itself as the only truth, as happened when Islam fought the indigenous beliefs and established itself over a large region. Christians too engaged in Crusades to spread and establish their religion. However, while these two major religions originating from the same part of the world, were able to eradicate the weaker and lesser local faiths, they remained rivals to each other for all times to come. Pluralism can therefore also be an outcome of a fairly equal power struggle.

In India, although Buddhism originated and developed as an alternate faith to conservative Brahmanical Hinduism and great monarchs like Ashoka converted and spread the new religion, there was a huge Hindu backlash and Buddhism lost ground in the region of its birth. At present it has been pushed to regions outside of India, towards the South and Far East and to Tibet. Hindus solved their problem of religious tolerance by accepting Buddha as one of the ten incarnations of Vishnu, placing him as the ninth incarnation of the deity. Thus, Buddhism was made to look like another version of Hinduism and the Buddhists as another kind of Hindus.

12.3 THE OCCURRENCE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

There are several reasons why a region begins to have more than one faith or belief system. As Eller (2007:20) has pointed out, W. Robertson Smith (1894) had shown the link between a people and their religion, to affirm that religion has an 'ethnic' or 'national' source. He also refers to Xenophanes, who had 2,500 years ago, discovered that gods always resemble the people to whom they belong as well as endorse their ways of life. Religions grow and become complex when the societies to which they are attached come in contact with others or change their ways of life. So, conquest, migration and now, globalization are some of the ways in which religions grow. These are also the ways in which a society can become plural. When two cultures come into contact, they can merge, influence, co-exist peacefully or in perpetual conflict. So we see, there are two possibilities, when two societies come into contact; either their belief systems merge and a different or complex entity emerges, or they co-exist; but have a good chance of influencing each other.

When the pastoral people entered India from the Central Asia and Middle East, they had masculine gods, mostly those deifying the natural elements like Varuna and Surya. But when they came in contact with the settled agriculturalists, mother goddesses and more eclectic gods like Shiva entered the pantheon. Contemporary Hinduism has absorbed many influences. Some aspects are highly parochial and magico-religious with many local deities and sacred beings and in another dimension, it is a metaphysical abstract philosophy of great sophistication, unifying and inclusive (Parthasarathy 2000). Similar collage like character are seen in other religions also, for example in Christianity,

festivals like Easter and the presence of St. Nicholas or Christmas Father, have nothing to do with core Christian beliefs but borrowed from local native pre-Christian cultures.

The power equation is important in the merging or co-existence of religions. When one religion is over-powering, it may absorb the weaker religion, by which it is meant that the people practicing that religion are weak as compared to the others. Christianity dispelled many tribal religions of smaller groups, who were overpowered by the colonial rulers in giving up their religion, but it could not replace Hinduism or Islam to a very large extent, in spite of colonization. Religions have co-existed in India, giving rise to a largely plural country, where even constitutionally the rights of all religions are protected.

A kind of religious pluralism arises when a religion bifurcates into different sects that may become so radically opposed as to behave like different religion, to the extent that marriage and social interactions are often restricted between them. The Catholics and the Protestants are a case in point. In Northern Ireland for example, these two factions have been at war for centuries and continue in that way. The Shia and the Sunni sects are similarly hostile to each other. The world's biggest Shia state, Iran, fought a long drawn out war with its Sunni neighbour, Iraq, only in the name of religion. Sects are at conflict only when they are equally powerful or have conflicting interests. Minor sects of Christians, of which, there are many, live quietly and peacefully with others. Hindus too have many sects, but except the long feud between Vaishnavites and Shaivites in the South of India, these other sects are rarely in conflict although they may be in contestation situationally. After Buddhism was subdued in India, it never came in conflict with Hindus, who continue to revere the Buddha.

Peacefully co-existing religions however remain a potential hotbed for the creation of conflict, as can be seen in India, where on and off, the vested political interests of certain groups, create conflicts between different religions, that in normal times exist in harmony. As pointed out by Geertz (1966), the sacred is capable of evoking very powerful emotional responses, so that for centuries, the world has seen religiously motivated conflicts to be the most persisting and powerful. Since religions also almost always act as ethnic and national identities, the religious conflicts often are conflicts of identity as in Bosnia. Religious groups that form minorities in their geo-political locations are liable to be persecuted, for example the Uyghurs in China and the Rohingyas in Myanmar.

New ways of worship and divergent belief systems often arise under situations of stress and oppression and are known as religions of resistance. They may arise under situations of colonization or when a people as a whole face oppression, racially, ethnically or otherwise. One such religious sect that has been studied extensively sociologically and anthropologically is Rastafari. It is a religion as well as a way of life that originated in Jamaica but spread to other parts of the world among the people of African descent, who had been transported away from their land of origin because of the slave trade. The people of African origin in Jamaica, who had originally been natives of Ethiopia faced extreme poverty and discrimination. In 1930, Rastafari was crowned the emperor of Ethiopia taking the name of Halie Salassie. To the downtrodden Ethiopians in Jamaica, this was a beacon of light, and they began to worship him as god, and hoped that they would be able to go back to their own country. As well explained by the novelist V.S. Naipaul (1962:216), the Rastafarian movement was a way in which the people of African origin in Jamaica, found a way to cope with and survive their oppression, through a counter-rejection. Since they felt rejected in Jamaica, they too rejected it as their own country claiming that they belonged to Ethiopia. They also rejected the way

of life there, preferring to smoke ganja, growing their hair into dreadlocks and neglecting the hygiene of their bodies, merging with nature and rejecting all manufactured foods like alcohol and meat. The Rastafarians are vegetarians and prefer to live peacefully. They have been studied by several sociologists (Chevannes 1994, Barrett 1977, Owen 1976) among others.

Although breaking away from conventional Christianity, the Rastafarians draw upon the Bible as their major sacred book. Owen (1976) points out that the Bible plays a key role in the life of the Rastafarians, according to their explanation that the Bible was written for and by black people and that God as depicted in it is black. In other words, they appropriated the Bible as their own, overriding some of the discriminations that they faced from white Christians. According to Campbell (1980) the Rastafarians show all the characters of a religion of resistance, rejecting and critiquing the way of life of the dominant people and claiming authenticity for themselves. They protested white supremacy, colonization and imperialism. These ideologies of the Rastafarians made this movement popular among Africans in similar situation, including African Americans. In this way one can see how a new religion may emerge because of historical circumstances.

The end of the twentieth century saw the emergence of new faiths, known as New Age religions. These emerged more among the western middle class, educated people, who were somewhat disillusioned with the conservatism, patriarchy and ecological consequences of mainstream Christianity. Some of them thought Christianity was not compatible with modern scientific knowledge. These New age religions are variously known as Church of Scientology, The Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna Movement and Neo Paganism. They are also highly syncretic traditions and we will discuss them in the next section.

Another movement that began many years ago as an alternate religion, that can be studied as religious pluralism, also became syncretic when it travelled to other places. This is Sufism, or Islamic mysticism that began early almost at the same time as the beginning of orthodox Islam. The word Sufi, derives from the Arabic word Suf, meaning wool and refers to the rough woollen garments worn by Prophet Muhammed. Sufism emphasized on unity with divinity through ecstatic love and devotion, rather than go through any formal rituals. They also emphasized following the path indicated by particular saints. By the twelfth century, the Sufi order had established itself and a number of sects had arisen associated with specific Saints or Walis, in the Middle East. Iraq, and Baghdad were especially rich in the Sufi traditions. They were referred to as ascetic protest as they rejected the royalty and also the paths of wealth and material possessions.

They positioned themselves against the monarchy in countries ruled by monarchs, like in Morocco. The Hamadsha (Crapanzano 1973) of Morocco were a Sufi brotherhood associated with two major saints of this region, Sidi-Ali, who lived in the eighteenth century and his servant, Sidi Ahmad; both of whom were venerated as holy. These Arab saints were also referred to as Maraboutin, from the Arabic word, Murabit, meaning a man of God. However, there is another version of the Hamdsha, very different from the Sufis who seek union with the Divine (Munson 1993). These are the ones found in shanty towns, among the poor and the migrant labourers, a majority of them being women. They get possessed by Jinns and their form of worship includes shamanistic kind of possession rituals. These Jinns are mostly associated with rivers and water sources and mostly possess women, who presumably also have a closer

contact with water. Exorcism is done by a Quaranic preacher but more importantly involves a symbiotic relationship between the victim and the spirit possessing her. In this way this form of Sufism also becomes a movement of the marginalized just like the Rastafari. It is also a feminized version of the largely masculine Sufi cult, engaging women with lower order spirits like Jinns that occur in the environment mostly associated with women and their daily work.

The defiance of the Sufi saints of those in power is a key character of the cult and as Munson (1993: 27) puts it focuses on the ‘they myth of the righteous man of God who dares to defy an unjust sultan’. This indicates that the poor and the powerless invent their own faith that enables them to survive and maintain their inner self-respect and identity.

From a sociological perspective this shows that marginalization, oppression and poverty are generative of new religions or faiths, which, while arising from mainstream traditions, have their variations in a way that they are cathartic and enable the survival of the down-trodden as pointed out by Naipaul, in respect of the Rastafari.

Religious pluralism is therefore indicative also of the deep cleavages within society, not only based on ethnicity but also of class, caste, race and other forms of discrimination. They mostly emphasize equality before the divine and reject the symbols of worldly power.

Check Your Progress 1

1. What are the ways in which you can understand and explain religious pluralism?
2. Under what historical and social conditions, new religions or sects arise? Describe with suitable examples.

12.4 SYNCRETIC TRADITIONS

Syncretic traditions are possible only when the religions move away from the essentialist doctrines and are willing to absorb beliefs from their environment. Political and historical situations play important role in bringing about syncretic traditions. In India, the 14th to 16th centuries are marked by a surge in anti-establishment and anti-essentialist movements that moved people away from all orthodox and conservative forms of religion. The Hindus, especially the lower castes, the women and other marginalized sections of society, were oppressed by the ruling Brahmins and the patriarchal Brahmanical traditions, that carried out atrocities over many weaker sections of society in the name of traditions and religious norms. The Muslim rulers of those times had also been engaged in oppressing and forcibly converting Hindus as well as destroying and looting temples. From the 14th century onwards in India, there emerged many saints and philosophers who broke through what they believed were the artificial barriers between religions. They were also critical of the social hierarchies and atrocities being practiced in the name of religion, by both Hindu Brahmins and Muslim clerics.

Sufism came to India through the holy person, Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, who came from Iran in the 12th century and became revered as Khawaja Garib Nawaz and lies buried in Ajmer at the shrine also revered as Ajmer Sharif and visited by thousands of people of all faiths, across the world. This alternate form of Islam had existed from the time of Prophet Muhammed, who had a benevolent attitude towards it, although it

differed somewhat from his teachings. Chisti came to India when Prithvi Raj Chauhan was on the throne of India. Although Chauhan was a Hindu king, Chisti had a strong influence on the ordinary people, by the simple teaching that God can be reached through pure devotion and love. The Sufi saints to follow like Baba Farid and Moinud-din Chisti, had great influence on Indian society, especially in the North, where even today there are many prominent Sufi shrines that are regularly visited by people of all communities. The great musician and poet, Amir Khusro, penned many verses professing the love for the divine who is portrayed as a beloved. Exactly parallel to Sufism was the Bhakti movement that also swept through both South and North India, professing very similar beliefs.

The Bhakti movement was particularly anti-establishment, attacking Brahmanical ritualism and caste and gender hierarchies. It sought to erode the boundaries between religions, for example Lalan Fakir, a major saint from Bengal who lived in the nineteenth century was a Muslim, with followers from all religions. The Bhakti movement and sects such as the Bauls of Bengal, gave a space to the social discards such as the low castes, widows and abandoned women, who found shelter and comfort in their institutions. There were also prominent women spiritual leaders like Akka Mahadevi, Bahina Bai and Mira Bai in the Bhakti movement that also sought to liberate women from the shackles of domesticity.

The attraction of the lower castes for the Bhakti and Sufi movements continues even today. Kapadia (1999) has written about the ritual practices of the untouchable Paliyans that emphasize bhakti (devotion) and are critical of the emotion less ritualistic practices of the Brahmins. The lower caste dhobis of Delhi, have important rituals associated with the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya (Channa 1985). They make sacrifices of goats on life cycle rituals like marriage and birth. Till quite recent times, their houses had the small alcoves for lighting the earthen lamps every evening in the tradition of the Sufis.

Sai baba is another saint, who was a Muslim fakir but is viewed as an incarnation of Shiva by Hindus and revered across the classes and castes. He is very popular among the lower castes as his followers too do not believe in caste or religious divisions and his worship is done mostly through singing and offering prayers through bhajans. Sai Baba is also seen as protector of dogs, contradicting the Brahmanical Hindus who consider dog to be an impure animal. The pull of Sai Baba also indicates a rejection of the ways of orthodox Hinduism with its emphasis on caste hierarchy and overt ritualism. It also rejects the religious bigotry of both Hindus and Muslims and indicates that there is only one divine presence irrespective of the name by which it is called. In many ways Sai Baba is also part of the larger Bhakti traditions.

During the colonial period, Christianity came to have a strong influence on Indian society. Unlike in many other colonies, the upper caste and class Hindus did not convert to Christians as they considered them impure (Mleccha). But on the other hand, several Hindu reformist sects were formed that imbibed in a syncretic manner, some of the major tenets of Christianity, while projecting them as part of ancient Hinduism. Or one may also say that they looked for the similarities between Christianity and Hinduism, in a way that they could transcend the criticism of Hindu orthodoxy that was seen as regressive and unfit for a civilized nation (Dirks 2001). The aspects of Hinduism that were seen particularly abhorrent were the caste system and the practice of untouchability, the treatment of women, and idolatry. Brahmo Samaj, as founded in Bengal, by reformists like Keshab Chandra Sen and Debendra Nath Tagore rejected

idol worship, Brahmanical ritualism as well as did not support caste hierarchy. They encouraged women's education and widow remarriage as well as allowing girls to get married at higher ages. Similarly, in Punjab and Northern India, Swami Dayanand Saraswati began the Arya Samaj, largely based on similar ideology. These reformist Hindu sects were also deeply connected with nationalism as they wished to emphasize the superiority of both the Hindu religion and the Hindu nation, as against western colonization. To a large extent they were both identity and self-respect movements, directed at the Western colonizers, while at the same time accepting the western values of equality, liberty and personal emancipation. With decolonization and modernization in general, these movements lost their significance as most of the things they advocated became a part of life in general. But they can be used as examples of syncretism where the values of a dominant culture, in this case western culture are adopted by a dominated culture to create a syncretic system of beliefs that is used to elevate the status of the dominated section of the people.

The very fact of living in close proximity leads to the slow and inadvertent absorption of elements of other religions that take place without any overt effort or dramatic eventuality. These processes occur as a part of daily life and the normal interactions of people. The core institutions of major religions therefore exhibit syncretic traditions. Many old and established temples of India have certain rituals and practices associated with them that involve the Muslims as well as the lower castes. The Shehnai players of Benaras had been playing the instrument as an evocation to the god Shiva, sitting outside on the steps of the temple. The most illustrious of this lineage, Ustad Bismillah Khan, had also carried out the same tradition. The Islamic traditions have also incorporated element from Hindu traditions. The Sufi shrines are known for their genre of specific musical traditions that have taken birth on the Indian soil.

Check Your Progress 2

3. What is understood by religious syncretism?
4. Can the Bhakti movement be understood as a syncretic religion? Explain.

12.5 MODERN AGE RELIGIONS

By the end of the twentieth century, modern day technology, transportation and communications brought the world closer and created what is today known as a global village. Such a shrinkage of the world, extensive travel and communication and close economic and cultural interactions resulted in the emergence of syncretic religious traditions, that have borrowed not only from each other but also from the ancient times. In the Western countries, emergent forms of religion include what is known as Neo-Paganism, back to the pre-Christian beliefs, borrowing mostly from ancient Celtic, Scandinavian and Germanic roots. These include worship of nature and female goddesses and fertility cults bringing people in closer communion with nature. Many people believe that the environmental and political ills of the present-day world are due to a moving away from nature and disregard of its power. They also believe that the doctrinal religions are too patriarchal and have over the centuries suppressed the power of women.

The modern witches or Wiccan, are another of the New Age religions that bring back pre-Christian paganism and the worship of goddesses and the feminine powers. Some

of these new religions also reflect on the changing perception of women about themselves and the realization that most world religions are patriarchal in nature. Another impetus by the end of the twentieth century was the increasing disillusionment with technology and the values introduced by Judeo-Christian religions about the centrality of humans in the order of things. Many felt that it is partly responsible for the ecological disasters faced by the world today. A reversion to paganism meant that worship of earth mother, Gaia, and an earth centric rather than an androcentric world-view.

A cult originating in India in the 12th century, namely the Vaishnava movement, started by Sri Chaitanya, from a small village in Bengal, called Nawadeep; has now spread to the entire world in the form of the Hare Krishna Movement. Although it has rustic and simple origins, it swept India during the Bhakti movement and in the twentieth century was taken by Prabhupada, to outside of India where it spread like wild fire to all corners of the world. At present, there is hardly any corner of the world where one does not find adherents of this movement and Hare Rama temples and institutions are likewise spread all over the world. It was also popularised by the Beatle band of New York during the Seventies, when reeling from effects of the Cold War and Vietnam, the people of America were looking for solace and there were strong anti-establishment movements. Involving nothing else but simple chanting and vegetarianism, it has a great appeal to people who wish to get out of the complex tensions of modern life, even if for a few hours. Today the Hare Rama movement utilises all the modern technologies and communication strategies and has a massive network, yet at the core its message is a very simple one that most people can follow easily.

So, we see that syncretic religions are usually products of historical processes and are well suited to deal with the problems and issues of the times in which they are located. The Sufi and Bhakti cults helped people on the margins survive the brutal domination of the priestly classes as well as despotic rulers of various orders. Syncretic religions usually evoke the most attractive elements from several sources and combine them into a compatible whole that people find easy to follow. They are also quite often resistance religions and emerge from among the marginalised and dominated sections, who find no succour in mainstream religions. Some like the Rastafarians are overtly anti-establishment and political in nature while others like the Hare Rama Hare Krishna movement, gently attacks the powerholders weaning people away from domination towards non-ritualistic simple and direct communion with the sacred.

It is also evident that syncretic religions are an outcome of religious pluralism. Syncretism is not possible without multiple forms from which to draw upon. We have examined the case of religions or sects such as Sufism that can in its place of origin be studied as the emergence of religious pluralism and in another historical situation, become a syncretic religion. In the Middle East, Sufism was a protest religion, providing an alternate and mystical path to conservative Islam. By providing for saints, shrines and ecstatic rituals, it catered to the needs of many people, especially the poor and marginalised, for cathartic release. They were treated as heretics by hard core orthodox Muslims, and many of them were also persecuted although many got reverence and recognition, even as direct descendants of the Prophet.

Check Your Progress 3

5. What do you understand by New Age Religions? Give some examples.

12.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have followed strictly the methodology and theoretical perspectives of sociology, and tried to understand both religious pluralism and religious syncretism in their social and historical context. However, when we analyse the sociological aspects of religion, at some point the theistic subjective character of the religion is also important from the social point of view as its effect or impact upon the social environment. For example, the way religious pluralism functions and syncretism is made possible or not possible, depends a lot upon the core doctrinal principles of a religion. An essentialist and intolerant religions doctrine will lead to its conflictual co-existence, if at all, with other religions and an open and non-doctrinal religion, like Shinto and ancient Hinduism will find peaceful co-existence highly feasible. Syncretic religions too reflect the social possibilities of their existence. Hierarchy and oppression usually provide ideal conditions for the emergence of protest religions, like Rastafari and Bhakti and Sufi cults. Most major religions, including the Judeo-Christian ones have risen as oppositional religions and contain elements of intolerance and essentialism. Very ancient and self-evolved religions are much more likely to be tolerant and accommodating. Outside of their theistic and sacred aspects, almost all religions have some interconnection with power and politics in some form or the other, relationships that affect their status as plural or syncretic or both.

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