

Example of essay on historical foundations

[Parts of the World](#), [Europe](#)



Individual Project

Syncretism is also called ' hybridism' in books about religion, theatre and the effect of European colonialism. The interactions between two very different cultures often leads to fighting, conflicts and war but hopefully more result in exchanging goods (trading). Assimilation of foreign concepts into a local region is another description of syncretism. Syncretism is a process of combining two different religious faiths or belief systems so that they are more similar than they are different. Missionaries were often the first contact with countries that were later colonized by forceful means. Missionaries were active in Africa, India, China and the Americas during Western colonial periods. In most parts of the world non-Western religions " were often targeted as ' primitive'" (Poddar et al., 2008, p. 179) The arrogant attitude towards non-Westerners seems to fit the idea of taking a country and/or forcing people to be slaves because colonials probably assumed that if their religion is primitive than the people must be primitive, too.

An outcome of European colonialism was syncretism especially in the area of religion; and more so in some cultures than others.. The cultures found in the Americas were very different than the culture brought by European conquerors and colonists after the ' discovery' of the New World. Both indigenous populations in the Americas and Africans kidnapped and sold into slavery in the Americas assimilated European culture in a variety of ways. In South America slaves were converted to the Roman Catholic religion. They dealt with the conversion by taking some of the Roman Catholic rituals and liturgy and combining it with their own religions. This happened to the native, indigenous people in North and Central America, too. Often religion

from Europe was adopted but the people still worshipped in their own way using the Roman Catholic religion to cover their traditional ways of worshipping.

Brazil has a large population which experiences many interactions with people from diverse backgrounds. The Portuguese colonized Brazil and they instituted Catholicism there in the 1500s. (Portuguese Cultural, 2010, p. 119)

Missionaries were sent with instructions to convert the indigenous people because King João of Portugal and the Pope in the Vatican wanted to convert the population. An example of syncretism from Brazil is how the African

religion, Candomblé of the Yoruba and Bantu has continued in Brazil until this day. Western Africans were expected to convert to the Catholic faith

after they were forced into slavery. Ironically in the Candomblé religion a Supreme Being and lesser gods or angels known as orixás were worshipped.

The similar structure of the two religions made it easy for the Yoruba and Bantu to combine their religion and that of the Catholic Church. They were

able to keep all of their own religion while appearing to be strong Catholic converts. The religion is still celebrated in Bahía, Brazil today. The orixás

have two different names, one is Catholic and the other is Candomblé.

(Portuguese Cultural, 2010, p. 36) Now Brazil has the largest Catholic

population globally; about 75 percent of Brazilians identify themselves as

Catholic. (Portuguese Cultural, 2010, p. 119) Ironically the number going to church is decreasing; only about 20 percent are actively involved in the

Catholic Church by going to mass or other activities. (Portuguese Cultural, 2010, p. 119)

Africa was no stranger to different religions in places along the coast that

were trading with Arabic, European and Middle Eastern countries many centuries before the Europeans felt that the Americas were ripe for conquering and conversion to Christianity. On the Sofala coast in Africa many religions were combined. The population was already made up of mixed races including African, Arabic, plus other peoples). (Shaw & Stewart, 1994, p. 18) In the sixteenth century their religion was a mix of Islam and local traditional rituals.

The Lemba did not retain the 'Islamic' identity of their ancestors, but their distinctive, syncretic forms of circumcision, burial and ritual slaughter perpetuated a sense of 'difference' from surrounding populations. (Shaw & Stewart, 1994, p. 18)

It is interesting because Islam is also a religion that historically put importance on converting others to the religion. The point is that the African continent had examples of blending different belief systems into one community.

Jesuit priests who started arriving in China in the second half of the 14th century were willing to accept and respect the ancient Chinese tradition of ancestor worship. Other Catholic missionaries did not accept the traditional values of the Chinese and they did not have as much success. After the Opium Wars more Protestant missionaries from Europe and the United States traveled to China to gain converts. The American missionaries traveled with their families and lived in the Chinese communities so they were a lot different than the Catholic priests. Missionary schools were set by Christians from the West. The schools allowed poor children. They also allowed all children; the sex of the child did not matter. Educating the poor and girls in

schools was a big difference for the Chinese. Eventually the missionary school design was adopted in as China built their school system.

Unfortunately the perspective of the Chinese towards Western missionaries is that they were part of the military attempt to colonize China.

A French Dominican missionary went to India in 1320 and revived Christianity there. In much earlier times a Christian religions community had grown with the Saint Thomas church at its center. The Portuguese were the first from the Catholic Church to enter India in large numbers. Converting Indians to Catholicism was a big goal of the colonial plan the Portuguese had for India. Lutheran Protestants were the first Protestant missionaries to India when two German Lutherans arrived in about 1720. They worked hard to translate the Bible into many of the Indian dialects and languages. Part of the history of India includes stories of when Jesus visited there. The two big factors that made India a place that had no problem with Christianity were (a) the translation of the Bible into the local area dialects and languages, and (b) the shared historical memory of Indians about Jesus traveling through the country. Christianity was accepted by many Indians and is still popular in India today.

If syncretism had not taken place in the Americas more indigenous people would have died. The conquerors expected the indigenous people to accept a new way of worshipping. It was important to the conquerors because it was an important ingredient for subjugating the people and taking their land. If the people had not found ways to integrate their own beliefs with the religions of Europe (in particular Catholicism) they would have been badly punished. All the traces of the indigenous beliefs may have been destroyed.

If the Spanish Inquisition is any indication of the lack of tolerance by the Catholic Church of anyone they even suspected of not sharing the Catholic beliefs; many more people would have been killed. So many indigenous people died due to the diseases their bodies could not withstand plus the stress of being forced to change their lives that one way to survive was to use syncretism to include foreign culture into the belief system that they used in their lives every day.

If early Protestant Christianity had been accepted by the Chinese culture earlier in history there might have been more importance placed on democracy. That is because Christianity accepts that everyone has a right to an education, the poor and girls included. If that had happened the revolution led by Mao would not have been possible because there would be an acceptance that education and intellectual pursuits are good.

In India a larger, earlier push to convert the people to Christianity may not have made a lot of difference in modern times. The India people were already familiar with Christianity from the time of St. Thomas. So many varieties of religious beliefs exist in India, one more probably would not have made very much difference. India seems to tolerate differences in religion except when it comes to Islam. Pakistan and Bangladesh were formed for the Muslim people in India to move into after the British left India. Now the conflict between Pakistan and India over their border is taking place. It does not seem that having Christianity introduced into India earlier would have made much difference. After all St. Thomas had introduced Christianity into India earlier but it did not have deep roots.

Globalization in the modern world has many instances of syncretism because

people can easily travel to different countries. Now it is common for two people who grew up in different religions to be married. Syncretism as a blending of different cultures seems to be a peaceful alternative to conflicts.

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