

Practice and Culture:

A different approach to Hinduism and Buddhism

One of the three cities of the Kathmandu Valley, Lalitpur in Nepal is traditionally the most Buddhist. The royal palace, located in the center of the city, features a famous gold window, depicting Srsti-kartr-lokeshvara. The window was a gift of a Buddhist goldsmith to the king of Lalitpur in the 17th century. The window is framed by images which clearly suggest that the figure is not Lokeshvara but Vishnu. Vishnu is the Supreme God of Vaishnavism, one of the three main sects of Hinduism. These combined figures represent the beliefs of the members of both religions in the city. A Buddhist politician also a goldsmith, made a donation acceptable both to the majority Buddhist population and his Hindu monarch. As an intermingling of two great religious traditions, one of which emerged out of the other, it was a strategic piece of syncretism shown in a particular situation.

By contrast, in 1879, several Western academics and members of the Theosophy Society moved to India to work actively in political and philanthropic movements. From their positions as white, Western politicians, they promoted the "purity" of a religion, one with no signs of syncretism, as opposed to the "damaging mixtures of colonial influence", which syncretized religions represented. India's problems, Theosophists claimed, were rooted in the adoption of Western ideals and customs. Annie Besant, president of the Theosophical Society and a leading figure in the Indian nationalist movement stated: "instead of only taking whatever was valuable and incorporating it into her own system, India is about to "denationalise herself". There was however, according to the author, still hope: "The Theosophy Society was sent to India to make Hindus realise that they had a treasure, and that it was from them that the rest had learnt"

In these two different approaches we notice how religion is culturally viewed. On one side, we have the people who practise this religions, who feel and know that their syncretism somehow will benefit them and that it is the right path to follow. On the other hand, we have the westernized scholars view in which the transition from Hinduism to a syncretized version of it is perceived as a disappointing situation for India and their traditions. Does it mean that Hindu population is no longer Hindu because of the syncretism of

Buddhism in their beliefs? Until what extent culture and society can be influenced with religion?

Religion is deeply connected with society, it keeps emerging as founder and encourager of core values and beliefs. Through religion we learn important concepts, like the difference between what's morally good or bad. It shapes communities and integrates nations.

In order for a community to "be devoted to" a religion, several factors are implicated. In some parts of Asia, a close relation between religious variations and economic life can exist. As the economy finds a way to hierarchize societies, the social divisions follow a pattern in which their economic position also dictates their ecclesiastical divergence. As a family is wealthier as result of its interaction with other cultures, their beliefs might be different from the ones a more traditional and conservative family may hold. For example, episcopalians in the USA have a disproportionately higher average income than other self-identified christians.

Religious feelings are also influenced by the ethno-linguistic relations of a community. Depending on the dialect a community may speak, a deviating branch of religion may be cultivated according to how their traditions shape common beliefs. A community located outside a big city is more likely to preserve an "old- fashioned" dialect which has the capacity of taking another stand in the community's spiritual life. It's more likely for two communities that have a common native tongue to share religious experiences or thoughts than it is for two different cultures. A tongue also has the power of tradition on its side. In seeking cultural preservation, dialects and religion are not too far apart.

In cultural preservation, religion has a big influence. I grew up in a Catholic family. My mother's grandmother taught her how to pray, and my grandmother taught my mother and my mother taught me. Among my earliest memories I recall going to church on Sundays and catechism on Saturdays. I never questioned my family's religion. I memorized all the prayers and some passages from the Bible but for me as a kid it didn't have much relevance, it was just something that my mom wanted me to do on the weekends. She never asked me if I wanted to be Catholic. I was never asked for an opinion, but what sane parent would turn to a 7 year old on

what she believes? Being a girl in growing age I wouldn't know what was good for my upbringing.

As my education level grew higher, logic and theology classes increased in school. I started to doubt. I went to church, listened to the sermons and I found similarities between moral values and ethical theories. I was demanding answers about the structure of the catholic religion. By combining history lessons, ethics, logic and the use of my rationality as a person; even my feelings (or faith) I began to doubt the veracity of the religion. Its hierarchical structure didn't make a lot of sense to me and little by little I was losing interest in the religion. I felt such faith and security that I had when I used to go to church when I was younger, vanished.

During my free time I tried to look for other "reliable sources of faith". I read books about other religions in the world and their beliefs. I wanted to retrieve that security, but this time what I decided to follow or pursue would make sense to me. I wanted something tangible. During my research I ended up talking to a friend of mine about it and he introduced me to La Casa del Tibet in Mexico. It's a temple which follows the classic Tibetan Buddhist culture where he attended guided meditations. He connected with the nature of the world and at the same time he disconnected from it to find inner peace. Or at least that's what he told me. I decided to try it myself and I went with him to one of his meditations. I would love to say it changed my life, but it only opened more space in my head for questions and my curiosity grew.

One of the many questions that emerged in my head was if I could follow the Buddhist religion and how would this process look like. The uncertainty of not knowing if my mother would accept or not my attempt to "convert" to Tibetan Buddhism, was killing me. I thought about telling her Catholicism wasn't satisfying my religious expectations. It stopped answering my questions and one way or another it just contradicted itself for me. Que no contestaba mis preguntas y de alguna u otra manera se me hacia absurda. Once I brought the conversation out, we had a heated discussion and my mom more than getting mad, she was upset. She felt betrayed and she was disappointed. I was not looking for that result.

For most Mexicans, you are raised in an environment where the religion you follow is the

one your parents taught you since you are little. If in the process of growing up you have a bond with it and you feel it's the right path, you just follow it. As a culture I think most mexicans don't have the culture or custom of questioning. We are raised to follow and don't ask. So when I questioned Catholicism, my mom's argument on why it was important to keep my faith in it was that she was my mother and that Catholicism was her religion and her mom's religion. She said it was a tradition and that if I didn't follow it I was denying my origins. How can I refuse to my mom something that is such a big and important part of her life?

There is an endless list of components which affect directly a community's' clerical situation. Elements might also compel for religious variation to occur. The religious variation referred to is called syncretism. Syncretism will be defined later in this paper, but broadly speaking syncretism is the intermingling and connecting of diverse religious beliefs and practices.

Syncretism must occur due to various reasons. At the beginning of my research, I believed that within the evolution of cultures and civilizations, people could find themselves in an unsatisfactory religious plight. As their religion didn't satisfy their expectations, they looked for the syncretism of beliefs which would eventually meet the theological principles in which they shall find happiness. The more I read about my topic, I kept encountering the idealist faith isn't a big factor on the decision, which sometimes is not even conscious, of adopting a new religion or in the syncretism of another in India.

The more I read the more I encountered with how deeply religion is connected with culture and society. Hinduism and Buddhism as cultures blend more easily with the idea of "living their religion" rather than defining it and picking the one which they find more pleasing. Why can't peoples "faith" be the one to blame on syncretizing two religions? Traditions and the strong roots some cultures have, usually are more relevant than their theological spirit. It's not enough to attend the Buddhist temple and meditate to be a Buddhist. It's not enough to read the Bhagavad Gita to call yourself a Hindu. There are also not clear definitions on what to do and what to exactly believe for these religions. Humans just identify with them. Often religions are part of the

population/ community because its adherents were born in them and with no intention. On other occasions, they convert for other cultural, social and economic reasons. If it's more comfortable and easy in order to establish a better political relationship with the neighbor territory, this is the way habitants of a place would "follow" this new syncretism. If they do not wholly reject a former faith with the new, then they can be described as syncretic. Culture is not separate from religion, they are completely linked. The syncretism of Hinduism and Buddhism is more of a cultural accident than an intentional decision based on spiritual conversion.

Syncretism: an attempt to define.

"Religions must change in order to retain meaning in the face of changing social and political circumstances"

I intend to show both the concept of syncretism and how to apply the term in a non-biased way. There is no universally agreed upon concept of syncretism. If doubt exists whether something is syncretized or not, there is not one objective answer. There will never be agreement about which practices, religions, symbols, myths, etc. are fully syncretic. The basic definition of syncretism accepted by most scholars and those who use it in academic writings is: "the unsystematic combination within a single tradition of elements which their originators intended to be kept apart"

Syncretism means belief in multiple religious assumptions, dogmas, doctrinal systems and/or the unification of different religious denominations, schools of thought and practices. *The Random House Dictionary* defines syncretism as: "the attempted reconciliation or union of different opposing principles, practices or parties." Hendrik Kraemer in his essay "Syncretism" states that: "The term syncretism has always more or less had the connotation of expressing the mingling of different religious elements." When thinking of the essence of the study of syncretism we shouldn't be concerned with whether a religion is or is not syncretic, but rather with studying the reasons for it and the various arguments made in favor or against the religious mixing.

The book *Syncretism in Religion: a reader* by Anita Maria Leopold discusses how syncretism and culture are not so far apart from each other. Whenever we think about a country or a place we consider their culture. Factors that compel to be thought as culture could be typical food of the area, their music and another big one is religion. "New religious movements or new myth-making often incorporate "borrowed" elements from other religious sources as a way of legitimating new contemporary values, often disguised as old religious teachings as a means to contest orthodox values" (4-5). Then if syncretism also relies in the art of "borrowing" elements from other religious sources, the act of syncretism itself is to take characteristics of other religions to make theirs more contemporary.

If we consider that Buddhism has been around the globe since about the 5th century B.C.E. It is thought of this way mostly because the Buddha was born about 2565 years ago. On the other hand, Hinduism has been around since about c. 2000 B.C.E. (or at least the Hindu valley civilization, which the term Hinduism comes from). This is an important concept, because it brings up the idea that Buddhism is "borrowing" some characteristics from Hinduism (as the more "orthodox" religion between them) to incorporate them in their values in order to make this morals more explanatory to their followers. Syncretism after all is about the exchange and interaction of new elements into another religion.

In most of the resources read for this paper different authors from different backgrounds talk about how syncretism is hard to define because you can never measure how much of one religion it has. It is also mentioned that religions syncretize for different interest reasons (which gives us the clue to prove my thesis), but they also go under the path of syncretism being a phenomenon considered by most of colleagues as a sign of degeneration of a cultures' religion, as if the mixing of two beliefs intervened with the purity of it. Something worth of understanding is how people feel about the syncretism of their religions and why does it matter.

Religions: of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Sociologists and social anthropologists view religion as the world's common aspect. Religions teach various beliefs, rituals, spiritualism and symbols. According to the *Sociology* author, Alex D. Thio (369) religion appears in several forms, but there are two widely recognized religious forms. Along with Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism, Buddhism is an *ethical* religion. It attributes sacredness to moral principles rather than to a deity. On the other hand, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism are *theistic* religions. Their believers worship one or several gods.

If Buddhism is an ethical religion and Hinduism is theistic, how would they syncretize? "Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism are indigenous religious traditions: it is from India that they - particularly Buddhism- have spread to other parts of Asia and the world. Buddhism was practically wiped out of India by the eighth century but only after many of its ideas and ideals had been absorbed into Hindu thought. In fact, the Buddha was deified by the Hindus, not by the Buddhists." Is Buddhism then a derivative of Hinduism? How attached could a theistic religion and an ethical religion be?

What Huston Smith suggests in his book *The Illustrated World's Religions*, is that Buddhism finds its roots in Hindu beliefs. Buddhism is a man's created religion. The Buddha was a Hindu, before the world considered him a religious symbol. We must see Buddhism against the background of Hinduism from which it was born and from which it split. Unlike Hinduism, which emerged by slow, gradual spiritual growth, Buddhism appeared overnight (evidently, not in a literal form). In a large picture it was a reaction to Hindu "perversions".

Hinduism is more like a way of life. There is technically no religion called Hindu. The term Hindu is "purely one of geographic origin, referring to a river, Sindhu (pronounced as Hindu), where the particular religion- as also the language, arts, agriculture, and civics systems - synthesised with the ancient Indus Basin civilisation of around five thousand years ago, into its present form" Hinduism might be the oldest religion, but it was never stated that it was a defined group of people who had specific characteristics and manners of living.

Indians and scholars in general agree on two versions of the definition of a Hindu (who

follows Hinduism as a religion): the “centralist” and the “pluralist” view. The centralist view describes a single, mainly Indian, hegemonic, orthodox tradition, transmitted through generations primarily in Sanskrit language by members of the Brahmanic class. This tradition concentrates around the Vedic texts. The pluralist view conceives a more liberal and abundant range of ideas and practices. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* states:

“In principle, Hinduism incorporates all forms of belief and worship without necessitating the selection or elimination of any. The Hindu is inclined to revere the divinity in every manifestation, whatever it may be, and is doctrinally tolerant... Hinduism is, then, both a civilization and a conglomeration of religions, with neither a beginning, a founder, nor a central authority, hierarchy, or organization.”

Hinduism proposes to make life more perfect, comprehensive, universal, and truly human. On Hindu beliefs and practices, hardly a book has an outline for them. The closest information I gathered is that Hinduism accepts the reality of various religions and spiritual levels in peoples lives and acknowledges the fact that not every human being is the same, so it offers different approaches to guide individuals at their own level so they can experience *the path of faith* with the same intensity and attain the same goal. This quote of the words spoken by Krishna: “Whosoever follows any faith and worships me, under whatsoever denomination, in whatsoever form, with steadfastness, his faith shall I indeed reinforce” Paraphrased and adapted to our culture, it would say: Be a Hindu, be a Buddhist, be a Muslim, Jew or Christian; Krishna shall make you a better Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jew or Christian.

Hinduism as a religion is particularly good for syncretism. As it tries to bring up the best human being we can possibly be, it allows other religions (like Buddhism) to blend easily into their own. Their fundamental beliefs have no part in superstitions and superstitious practices that categorize themselves as a religion and there is no concept of religions “in war” or competing for more followers. “Ekam Sat Viprah Bahudha Vadanti” (— Rig Veda (Book I, Hymn CLXIV, Verse 46))

All is God, is One, though Sages know it by different names.

All Hindus worship their deities by using “devotional practices”. These are the art of communicating with the Hindu deities, which emphasizes a sharing of every aspect of one's life with a god (or gods). Devotional practices are referred as the act of meditation, in which the Hindu concentrates on a deity in order to further the relationship between them.

The fundamental teaching of Hinduism is that a human being's nature is not confined to the body or the mind. Beyond both is the spirit of God in our souls. According to Hinduism, this is not just a theory, but it can actually be experienced. Anyone who purifies and refines their mind and senses can feel the truth of this. This path can take various ways and is also known as *yoga*. The practitioners of these paths are called *yogis*.

If Hinduism then is a conglomeration of different aspects of one culture, how can we determine the division of Buddhists from Hindus, given for granted that they are not a single religion? Buddhism started with a man, Siddhartha Gautama, and his awakening (enlightening). He was the son of an Indian king/warrior, who had a princely life. But when he got bored of the banality of royal life, he took off to the world in search of understanding and enlightenment. After some real life experiences, Gautama was convinced that suffering lay at the end of all existence. He renounced to his kingdom and then became a monk, depriving himself of material possessions in the hope of comprehending the truth of the world. The ending point of his search for enlightenment came while meditating under a tree, when he finally understood how to be free from suffering and to achieve salvation. After this discovery Gautama was known as the Buddha, meaning the "Enlightened One." He spent the remainder of his life traveling around India, teaching others what he had learned.

The objective of Buddhism is to liberate oneself from transmigratory existence in this world and beyond. Transmigratory existence is understood as the little time human beings have as living and breathing entities in the Earth. Buddhist desire the eventual transcendence from this cycle to attain the states of Sukhavati where there is no suffering but only supreme happiness. Buddhists work actively and broadly to enlighten oneself as well as others and ultimately to

achieve supreme and perfect enlightenment commonly called “Buddha”.

This enlightenment process (the Buddhas’ discoveries) are also known as The Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth is that life is *dukkha*. The word is translated as “suffering”, although Buddha didn’t thought the suffering he acknowledged was unrelievable. What causes *dukkha*, life’s suffering? The Second Noble Truth answers that question. The cause of *dukkha* is *tanha*. *Tanha* is usually understood as desire. Not a normal desire though, a desire for private and selfish fulfillment. *Tanha* is the ego, which has selfish inclinations that pull against life to satisfy oneself even at the expense of others. These egocentric demands bring suffering. The law of life calls for seeing others as extensions of ourselves, not as our rivals. We should coexist, not rivalize.

The Third Noble Truth states that if *tanha* is the cause of our life’s sufferings, the cure relies on the overcoming of *tanha*. Releasing ourselves from the limits of self-interest into the existence with the universe. Only then we would be relieved from our torments. The Fourth Noble Truth brings the solution (or the path to follow) in order to overcome *tanha*. This path is also known as The Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path consists in being a moral individual, showing it through what we say and do and our livelihood, focussing our mind on being fully aware of our thoughts directions and actions, and developing wisdom by understanding the Four Noble Truths and compassion. The path is a process that helps to move beyond the actions or responses that won’t let your true nature shine. The Path is ultimately about unlearning all the bad habits and mischievous behaviors we must have been practicing in the course of our existence.

It should also be stated that there are three divisions in Buddhism: Hinayana, Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. Buddhist teachings can be understood and tested by anyone. Buddhism teaches that the solutions to our problems are within ourselves not outside. The Buddha asked all his followers not to take his word as true, but rather to test his teachings for themselves. In this way, each person has the option to decide and take responsibility for their own actions and understanding. This makes Buddhism less of a fixed package of beliefs which is to be accepted in its entirety, and more of a lesson package which

each person learns and uses in their own way.

The overlap:

When talking about both Hinduism and Buddhism, the overlap between some of their characteristics is noticeable. Both religions were born in India. As already said, Hinduism was born at the side of the Sindhu river, and Buddhism is a group of teachings which come from the Buddha who was born a Hindu. According to the Buddha, desire is the cause of suffering and if you remove desire from your life, then it results in the halt of suffering. Some Hindu texts (like the Bhagavad Gita) consider that actions motivated by desire would lead to an attachment to bondage and suffering and that actions without desire, only action with purely good intentions would result in liberation.

They both emphasize in the world's nature, the role of karma and the importance of dharma;

“Dharma: is generally employed in contemporary writing to stand for religion, but this usage is not satisfactory . According to Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, the universe is sustained by dharma. The Mahabharata says: “Dharma is so called because it protects *dharmat* (everything); Dharma maintains everything that has been created; Dharma is thus that very principle which can maintain the universe. [...] Next to the category of reality, that of dharma is the most important concept in Indian thought. Almost every Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, or Sikh, knows that dharma is the foundation of the good life.”

To the Indian population *dharmā* is a well known mantra. No matter what religion you practice, culturally this word is present in Hindu life. How can this be possible? If it's merely a religious concept, why would nearly the whole population know its significance? “The identity of the average Indian is a complex made up of religion, caste, language and region”. In both religions, the belief of karma, the transmigration of souls to “another world” and the cycle of rebirths and death, prevails. Both encourage compassion and a lifehood of non violence towards all living beings. They observe certain spiritual practices like meditation, concentration, and the cultivation

of a peaceful state of mind. They firmly believe in the renunciation of a materialistic life as a way to enter a fully spiritual life. Both consider desire as the ultimate cause of suffering.

In the book *Culture, Religion and Philosophy- Critical studies in Syncretism and inter-faith harmony*, there is an essay by Manis Kumar Raha called "Synthesis of Buddhism and Hinduism in Western Himalayas: A study of the Kinnauras of Himachal Pradesh". In this essay the author writes about how in this society religion plays a very important role and how the manners and beliefs of all people are guided by it. He basically talks about how in all their activities (economic, social and political) religion is a guiding factor. The Kinnaura community has adapted to a fatalistic theory of life which is a result of the lack of technology and harsh weather.

This tribe is situated in the Himalayan district of Kinnaur, bordering Tibet. It is divided in three administrative units named Poo which is religiously dominated by the Mahayana Buddhism, Nichar, in which the dominance of Hinduism prevails, and Kalp where there is a presence of both religious traditions. The Kinnauras live in a large number of villages spread over these blocks.

The author goes into a lot of details in how the Kalp district has an extraordinary intermingling of dual religious tradition. He explains that this phenomenon is caused by the continuation and presence of Hinduism and Buddhism and that it has had a great impact on the people. The population practises both religions and perform their rituals. They go to the Hindu temple as well as the Buddhist monasteries. The structure of their society and culture has been patterned accordingly to their religious influence and even though some differences have been observed between people of these districts, they agree that there is a smooth undertone of cultural similarities in the dilemma of cultural diversities. Apparently, this phenomenon has been occurring for several centuries now in the Kinnaura area.

Kinnaurs worship numerous gods and goddesses. These are subdivided in the categories of principal gods and subordinate gods. Each deity has its demarcated area over which it exerts authority and control. This control is not direct but through the social, religious and administrative aspects. No one undertakes any work, social matter, or otherwise without the approval of the deity

they worship. The cults of each area depend on the deity of a particular locality.

The religious functionaries of both Hinduism and Buddhism have an important role in social life and they all have different duties in their temples. As the common villagers don't have the right to approach their deity directly, they depend on these functionaries completely to solve their religious plights. Their major syncretic characteristic is the religious homogenization and the cultural syncretism of two local variants of Hinduism and Buddhism by the people who use both Hindu and Buddhist religious functionaries to perform local rituals. The predominantly combined religious roles in these religious domains give the Kinnauran society a unique character.

This is a clear example of how two religions can syncretize thanks to the proximity of the two communities they're practiced in and the peoples willing to accept different ecclesiastical functionaries in their practices. But what else can "pull" people to look for syncretism? I've talked about social factors and now even geographical and convenience factors. Another big player in religion is faith.

Practical meanings of religion:

"Religion...sees through the eyes of faith, and in doing so sees a different world. Or better said, it sees the same world in a different light."

By what faith means, I'll thoroughly try to explain. Its not faith's purpose to be practical in order to fit in society. It has to be meaningful, so deeply that people can trust it. It is the certainty that it will all make sense in the end.

Houston Smith's book, *Why Religion Matters*, talks a little about religions' social impact and the different approaches on it. He states that people will never agree on the world's meaning and that it seems safer that way. He also points out Kierkegaard's' point of view on it which is if we were told our mission or goal (the reason of our existence) in the world we would not like it because it would deprive us from our freedom. Buddhists claim that we as human beings are the luckiest of all because we have the power to decide what we want to do with our lives, what path

we want to follow and this choices should be the ones that will set us free from the banal world. Syncretism shouldn't be one of these decisions though. Faith is also about choices but sometimes society, culture and other factors conspire so syncretism happens merely by coincidence/accident.

“From its beginnings in early Japanese history, Shinto has been profoundly influenced by Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. A syncretic interaction with Buddhism, in particular, has been strong historically. Yet, at the beginning of Japan's modernization Shinto would be officially separated from Buddhism at the level of divinities worshiped, ritual practices, and institutional structures. On one hand, Shinto encompasses local community practices, while on the other it also includes the elaborate and highly structured ceremonial practices of the imperial institution and, in earlier historical periods, of the state.”

This idea's track is not trying to suggest that humanity should become religiously syncretistic, although it worked for Japan and they have lived in peace, the merits are different. This idea goes on how important mutual respect is and not to set a rivalry of multiple religions. This example shows how religion is meant to give meaning into peoples lives, so they are able to connect to something.

It is widely known that people have different approaches on what religion means and on faith. Related to this thought, William E. Paden says: “Our understanding of what religious language and practice can be is diminished if we do not have the most complete awareness of its possible variations. By looking at all the gods in religious history, we see more fully what a god is. The variations make the theme stronger and more interesting. By seeing all the different things observed in various rites, we see more fully what ritual can be.” Even if he is talking about the comparison of religions, he states a very important idea. Variations help us understand religion. Therefore, the diversity of religious associations the world has are important to understand a wider and meaningful concept. It gives humans the chance to construct the relativity of whatever sacred is in their own world in their different ways.

Research books about religions, syncretism and society in general are written by scholars

who study them from the outside. This makes it hard to define and harder to study, because it's all seen through the eyes of modernized and highly educated academics, who might not comprehend the true traditions, religions and beliefs. They are not living them. Buddhism and Hinduism are merely terms to help us understand their "group" of beliefs, in this way, it will be "easier" for us to explain that part of the world and their culture. But for Hindus and Buddhists, there is a less clear separation between religion and the rest of a person's life than it might be found in Western culture.

In trying to construct a faith or religious spirit, there exists a Westernized framework for viewing/embracing the diversity of religions. It's called Universalism. Universalism is a word for those views which affirm that all religions contain some common spiritual realities or that at least follow different paths to achieve the same goal. The 19th century saint Sri Ramakrishna, who was a famous spokesman for Hindu universalism said: "[...] The substance is one under different names, and everyone is seeking the same substance; only climate, temperament and name create differences". This is why Hinduism has a way of absorbing other religions. Hindu missionaries in the West claim that they are not so much try to draw Westerners away from the biblical religions as much to help them find the deeper, universal elements therein.

Evidently, this definition is not globally applied. Everyone has their own faith or lack of it, light or right path to believe in. They define it as they think it is accurate to, as they feel it. So faith is hard to define, but it does shape religion. Is faith strong enough to move societies until the point of looking for syncretism of two different religions? Maybe, but some people don't realize it because each person's faith/beliefs or motives are different, they feel it, so if the syncretism happens in behalf of culture or faith, it's ok. People just feel it.

I'm not trying to state that we all should be Universalists or that we should try to syncretize two religions that we like, but if our cultural environment, our inner feelings and state of peacefulness drag us to this phenomenon, it's inevitable. People look for comfort in religion, it gives the meaning and explanation to things we somehow don't know how to explain. It's the

people's need for the right path. Sometimes it could be "what my mom taught me to believe in", the link between someones' background, culture, and spiritual life a summary of practices, morals, and values that serve to explain what cannot be fully explained. "The problem with certainty is that it is static; it can do little but endlessly reassert itself. Uncertainty by contrast, is full of unknowns, possibilities, and risks." (Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist)

Syncretism is a concept allowing for the merging of two or more cultural and/or religious traditions. The merging of Buddhism and Hinduism is only one example. While not practising either religion those not familiar with the cultural, tend to want strict definitions of each, Hindus and Buddhists themselves might not use these labels or even differentiate between them. Instead they acknowledge a supreme being and follow a variety of different spiritual paths to achieve peace with themselves and this God.

Because cultures vary, religious attachments do as well. For example some Catholics might attend mass every Sunday and on important religious holidays. A Hindu, on the other hand, might regard his religion as a way of life without ceremony or formal worship. Syncretism is a western term for the blending or mixing of two religions that "normally" in our cultural understanding wouldn't blend. But for people practicing this syncretism, if you try to explain them that their religion is actually a mix of two religions, they might not see it. Their faith and culture is so well integrated and they are so used to it, so accommodated in this sweet spot that they don't even think about it being a different way. Whenever I thought about the syncretism of two religions I couldn't keep my thought away from the time when the Spanish conquered Mexico. Aztec beliefs were forced to transform into Catholicism, losing the importance and the heart of native Mexican cultures. I totally understood my mom when she talked about my origins and traditions. I also think it is important to preserve them, but is Catholicism really a Mexican tradition? As far as I know, it comes imported all the way from Spain.

Going back on my story, I decided to desist in my explorations and I kept going to church, just to

please my mom. I still felt unsatiated. Coming to a Quaker school helped a little, but my questions weren't getting answered. This community waits for the inner light to come out from peaceful silence. It resembles a little on meditation. In this silence, my head is most of the times talking, asking. Do I follow a religion? What would my mom say when I step my foot down about the religion she wants me to be part of? Mom please understand me, I rather meditate in silence. It helps me in my hunt for answers, it calms them and lets my mind ramble(?). I don't know if its faith or what, but that is the way I feel.

My wonders about Hinduism and Buddhism arose one day from the silence. I thought about this religions being kind if similar and I liked to imagine someone in another part of the world feeling just like me. Feeling that the religion he was born into wasn't enough and then deciding to blend two religions, thinking this could some how help his faith issues. The only aspect I didn't think about was that in whatsoever part of the world where Buddhism and Hinduism are practised, religion is viewed in a different way. To them there is no such thing as an unsatisfactory faith situation, there are just hard moments in which you have to meditate more or "get closer" to your deity. There is no real separation between their life and their religious life. Their daily work is full of opportunities to do the right thing (hacer el bien) free their banal being from this earth and transcend. In Buddhism and Hinduism the beliefs about the nature of the world, compassion and goodness (kindness?) in every person are very strong. You have to be the best version of yourself to have the deities favor or just to follow the right eightfold path, to coexist and exist in this and in the other life.

I do not know if my great grandmother's religious situation was perfectly blent with her daily livings, I'm assuming it might have been because I've heard stories about how she gave the sign of the cross to her trays of bread or cake before putting them into the oven. But I'm wondering if maybe the grandson of an Indian might feel the need of secularization and he would turn to Christianity because he is unsatisfied with the religion of his grandparents. I guess it all depends on how people raise their kids and what are they personal experiences.

Writing this paper I understood that really is not about going to church or not. It's about living your faith/religion/beliefs and finding in your life that light/path/god that will make you a better person. I still don't know how my mom would take the news. When I go back home, I plan on attending those meditations, but in the mean time I'll keep questioning myself and looking for my path in silence.

Works cited:

Batchelor, Stephen. *Bekenntnisse Eines Ungläubigen Buddhisten: Eine Spirituelle Suche*. München: Ludwig, 2010. Print

Belief Transformations: Some Aspects of the Relation between Science and Religion in Transcendental Meditation and The International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Rothstein, Mikael. 47

Bhargava, P. L. *Fundamentals of Hinduism: A Rational Analysis*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1982. Print.

Das, N.K, ed. *Culture, Religion and Philosophy. Critical Studies in Syncretism and Inter-faith Harmony*. Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2003. Print.

Encyclopedia Britannica

For Syncretism, Davi N. Gellner. 321

Hsü, Heng-chih *What Is Buddhism?: Theory and Practice*. Hong Kong: S.n., 1989. Print

Kathmandu Valley. -UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Web. Mar. 2014.

Leopold, Anita M., and Jeppe Sinding Jensen. *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.

Lopez, Donald S., Jr., ed. *Asian Religions in Practice*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1999. Print. II.

Madan, T.N. "Religion in India." *Daedalus*. 4th ed. Vol. 118. N.p.: MIT, n.d. 114-46. Print. Another India.

Michaels, Axel, and Barbara Harshav. *Hinduism: Past and Present*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2004. Print

Paden, William E. *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*. Boston: Beacon, 1988. Print

Prebish, Charles S. *Cooking the Buddhist Books: The Implications of the New Dating of the Buddha for the History of Early Indian Buddhism*, *Journal of Buddhist Ethic*. PDF. 2008

Religion Helps Shape Wealth Of Americans, Study Finds."Religion Helps Shape Wealth Of Americans, Study Finds. Web. 10 Apr. 2014. <<http://researchnews.osu.edu/archive/relgwth.htm>>.

Schweig, Graham M. *Bhagavad Gita: The Beloved Lord's Secret Love Song*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007. Print.

Smith, Huston. *The Illustrated World's Religions: A Guide to Our Wisdom Traditions*. San Francisco?: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995. Print

Smith, Huston. *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001. Print

Streissguth, Thomas. *Hinduism*. San Diego, CA: Lucent, 2002. Print.

Syncretism/ Anti-Syncretism in the history of Theosophy, Siv Ellen Kraft. 150

The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale. Shinto. Web. 10 Apr. 2014. <<http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/shinto/>>

The Illustrated Weekly of India, August 6, 1978

The Random House Dictionary

Thio, Alex. *Sociology: An Introduction*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986. Print.