Alevi Studies and Syncretism

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Summary
Syncretism refers to the formation of new religious or cultural expressions that emerge from the interaction of diverse belief systems and practices. While in academic literature it is commonly used to analyse processes of religious or cultural blending, in the context of Alevi studies, the term can also function ideologically -as a rhetorical tool used to marginalise Alevism. On one hand, syncretism is employed to explain Alevism's historical and cultural hybridity; on the other, it can serve to portray Alevism as a "mixed" or "incomplete" phenomenon, thereby denying its distinctiveness. In this way, the concept risks becoming a barrier to understanding Alevism as an autonomous identity. Therefore, it is essential to critically examine how syncretism is used in Alevi studies.

Keywords: Alevilik, Alevilik Çalışmaları, Anti-Senkretizm, Bektaşilik, Etnosantrizm, Halk İnançları, Kültürleşme, Misyoner Dervişler, Senkretizm

Etymology, Historical Background and Political Shifts in Meaning

Syncretism, as an analytical concept in cultural theory, often refers to efforts to harmonise belief systems or ritual forms that may be foreign to one another -sometimes even in opposition. It is also used to describe interactions between everyday cultural patterns and social traditions, or between competing philosophical schools of thought, resulting in new syntheses. In this sense, syncretism points to the dynamic transformation of cultural elements -be they religious ideas, rituals, behaviours, symbols, or material objects- through

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processes such as migration, war, conquest, colonisation, trade, and exchange. Ultimately, the term functions as an analytical tool to describe processes of merging, blending, or hybridisation (Brix 2006, 2095-98).

In its modern usage, syncretism has largely become an interpretive framework for analysing religious aspects of culture. In anthropology, it is often understood as the religious counterpart to acculturation, one of the discipline's foundational concepts. Human societies have always been in motion, interacting with one another throughout history. These interactions -shaped by both internal and external social dynamics- generate cultural change. As cultural elements travel, they are integrated into new settings and redefined in locally specific ways. While acculturation refers to these incorporated cultural forms in general, syncretism specifically focuses on the religious (or mythic) aspects: sacred texts, rituals, cults, and symbolic systems (Gültekin 2020, 942-45).

Etymologically, the term is closely tied to politics. It derives from the Greek syn (together) and krasis (mixture), forming synkrasis, which later evolved into syncretismos. Though absent from classical Greek texts, the word appears in Plutarch's Moralia, where he uses it to describe how the city-states of Crete put aside their differences and united against a common enemy. In this usage, syncretism implies strategic, even political unification through blending (Gültekin 2020, 942-45).

Although the term syncretism disappears from usage between antiquity and the 16th century, it reemerges in Erasmus's Opus Epistolarum as a reference to "the positive union of differing views." During the Renaissance, scholars revisited classical Greek philosophy and sought to harmonise it with Christian theology, creating hybrid interpretations of religious doctrine. This tendency toward reconciliation gained momentum as Enlightenment ideas began to challenge religious orthodoxy and lay the foundations for secular legal and social frameworks. In this context,

syncretism took on a new role: as both an intellectual bridge and a political defence mechanism. However, by the 16th and 17th centuries, the term also began to acquire negative connotations. What was once a descriptive term for convergence became loaded with meanings such as “corruption,” “degeneration,” and “deviation from purity.” In early modern Europe -particularly during the Protestant Reformation and the rise of competing Christian sects- efforts to reconcile emerging interpretations of Christianity with Catholic orthodoxy were increasingly condemned as syncretic. The term came to signify a threat to religious purity and theological consistency. In this form, syncretism was weaponised in theological and political debates, denoting the dilution or contamination of true faith (Leopold & Jensen 2004).

Despite its pejorative uses, syncretism has also served as a strategic tool for religious expansion. Both Christianity and Islam, at various stages, supported syncretic adaptations through “missionary priests” or “dervishes” who consciously integrated local sacred elements into broader theological frameworks-often to ease conversion or extend state control. This practice echoes much older patterns, found in ancient civilisations and even Neolithic state formations, where conquerors assimilated the sacred symbols of subjugated peoples into their own belief systems (Gültekin 2020, 942-45).

Syncretism in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Anthropology, Nation-States, and Ideology

Throughout the 19th century, syncretism continued to be used in relation to popular religion and folk beliefs, often as a means to describe the cultural assimilation of earlier or foreign religious elements that had persisted alongside centralised religious institutions and rituals. With the rise of modern nationalism and the consolidation of nation-states in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, perceptions of syncretism evolved yet again. Its meaning became increasingly shaped by ideological frameworks (Leopold &

Jensen 2004).

In multicultural nation-states, syncretism was sometimes viewed positively-as a mechanism for integrating local cultural diversity into a shared national identity through narratives of coexistence, loyalty, and common heritage. However, in national ideologies that emphasized ethnic purity or cultural essentialism, syncretism was framed negatively. It was seen as a marker of "degeneration," "impurity," or "loss of origin." In such settings, anti-syncretism emerged as a theoretical stance advocating for cultural or religious purity, often aligning itself with orthodox discourses (Gültekin 2020, 942-45).

In the second half of the 20th century, especially after World War II, classical anthropology witnessed a shift. The traditional "primitive" or "traditional" societies it had once studied were now undergoing rapid and often violent transformations due to global capitalism, decolonisation, military conflicts, and technological change. With increasing instability, fieldwork in these regions became politically risky. Scholars now encountered refugee movements, liberation wars, separatist struggles, and authoritarian repression. In this context, anthropological studies of religion began to focus on how communities used syncretism to adapt to dramatic socio-political change. Migrants, exiles, and minorities negotiating life in multicultural states or in diaspora increasingly became the new subjects of syncretism studies. Whether in terms of religious adaptation, cultural negotiation, or state integration, syncretism was no longer a passive process of blending, but an active strategy of survival and identity-making. (Leopold & Jensen 2004; Birx 2006, 2095-98; Gültekin 2019, 67-69)

From the late 20th century to the present, global waves of ethnic and religious revitalisation have profoundly shaped the ways in which cultural identities are expressed and politicised. In this climate, discussions around the authenticity, purity, historical roots, and boundaries of religious and cultural identities have become central to both

public discourse and academic scholarship. The political tensions of this period increased the prestige and strategic use of academic terms like syncretism. In academic texts and public debates alike, syncretism has become a catalytic explanatory framework invoked whenever cultural identities -particularly religious ones- are being redefined or contested (Gültekin 2020, 942-45).

Depending on the context, the term has acquired both positive and negative connotations. On the one hand, in disciplines such as cultural anthropology, syncretism has been used affirmatively to highlight the complexity and layered nature of cultural forms -emphasizing how distinct elements converge to produce new, unique cultural expressions. It serves as an argument against essentialist views of identity, stressing that socio-cultural exchange and hybridisation are natural, even inevitable, parts of human evolution. Scholars have applied this perspective to analyse areas like religion, kinship, language, literature, and political systems -often in debates on globalisation and localisation. (Gültekin 2020, 942-45). On the other hand, the concept has also been deployed to delegitimise certain identities. When syncretism is framed through an ethnocentric lens, it can imply cultural "impurity" or "contamination." Many religious and political authorities use the term to label beliefs that differ from dominant doctrines as illegitimate or corrupted. In this negative framing, syncretism ceases to be an analytical tool and becomes a rhetorical weapon of exclusion.

Syncretism in Alevi Studies: Contradictions and Political Uses

In Turkish scholarly and public discourse, syncretism is often translated as "bağdaştırmacılık", and its application has been shaped by the country's socio-political and ideological turbulence. One of the clearest fields in which these tensions manifest is the study of Alevism and Bektashism. Since the 1980s, Alevi studies have rapidly gained prominence, parallel to the politicisation of cultural identities in Turkey.

Within this expanding field, a strong polarity has emerged between “essentialist” and “syncretic” approaches, producing often conflicting interpretations of Alevism (Bruinessen 1997, 27-38).

These divergent perspectives also expose the conceptual contradictions surrounding syncretism. On one side, certain interpretations avoid viewing Alevism as an autonomous belief system. Instead, they frame it as a unique synthesis of pre-Islamic Turkic religious traditions blended with Islam, while deliberately separating it from any Christian, Jewish, or Iranian religious influences. This line of thinking often interprets comparative analysis with other regional traditions as politically motivated efforts to undermine Turkish national identity. On the other side, some scholars define Alevism as a syncretic belief system shaped by a wide array of historical, religious, and social influences. These include ancient Anatolian traditions, Iranian and Indian philosophies, and early monotheistic religions. Both approaches treat syncretism as a key analytical category for understanding Alevism’s development. Yet the meaning of the term shifts depending on how the knowledge is deployed: in some narratives, syncretism serves as a legitimising concept; in others, it becomes a discrediting label used to question Alevism’s authenticity (Gültekin 2020, 942-45).

Although syncretism is widely used in academic literature to describe processes of religious transformation, cultural exchange, and doctrinal hybridity, it also carries ideological risks -especially in the context of Alevi studies. Since the 1980s, as cultural identity movements gained momentum in Turkey, the way syncretism has been employed in relation to Alevism has become a matter of critical concern.

In the academic literature on Alevism, syncretism tends to be used in two major ways. On the one hand, it highlights Alevism’s historical development as a dynamic, multifaceted belief system that emerged through interactions with various religious and cultural traditions. This reading emphasises

flexibility, transformation, and creative synthesis. On the other hand, particularly in contexts shaped by orthodox Islamic frameworks -both in academia and public discourse- the term is used to frame Alevism as "impure," "incomplete," "hybrid," or "lacking authenticity." This second use reflects a major epistemological problem: syncretism, in these cases, is no longer a descriptive or analytical concept but becomes a rhetorical device that renders Alevism marginal, inferior, or deviant. Instead of acknowledging its complexity, syncretism becomes a theoretical pretext for presenting Alevism as a "deficient" form of religion-one that diverges from a presumed Islamic centre. This underscores a broader issue in Alevi studies: academic discourses about Alevism are inevitably shaped by political, ideological, and historical forces. Syncretism, once an analytical term for understanding cultural contact, can become a subtle mechanism of academic discrimination -denying Alevism the status of a distinct theological and cultural system, and confining it to the margins of dominant religious paradigms.

Conclusion

In light of the discussions above, it is essential to approach the use of syncretism in Alevi studies with a critical lens. While the term can offer a valuable framework for understanding historical transformations and cross-cultural religious encounters, it also holds the potential to obscure, distort, or marginalise Alevism -especially when employed uncritically or ideologically.

In some academic contexts, syncretism has served to highlight Alevism's rich and layered history, portraying it as an adaptive and transformative belief system. In others, however, it has been used to imply a deviation from Islamic orthodoxy, positioning Alevism as a derivative, hybrid, or even failed version of religion. This dual function reveals a deep tension between academic interpretation and ideological appropriation.

To move beyond this impasse, Alevi studies must adopt a

more reflective stance -one that carefully examines not just the content of scholarly claims, but also the conceptual tools used to produce them. Is syncretism being used to illuminate complexity and hybridity, or to impose boundaries and hierarchies? Is it a lens of understanding or a gatekeeper of legitimacy?

Ultimately, this critique extends beyond Alevism. It invites scholars to consider how key theoretical concepts in identity, history, and religion -syncretism among them- are shaped by and contribute to the political and epistemic contexts in which they operate. In doing so, we reaffirm the need for pluralistic, historically grounded, and self-aware scholarship that resists reproducing exclusionary or essentialist narratives under the guise of academic objectivity.

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