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How Syncretic Is Taiwanese Religion? A Discussion of Its Category Formation and Research Method Based on the Religious Experience Survey in Taiwan (REST 2009)*

Yen-zen Tsai**

Abstract

Syncretism used to carry pejorative connotations such as incompatibility, ambiguity, alienation, superficiality, and adulteration. However, as it was found to be universal in world religions and a particularly prominent feature of East Asian religions, scholars have begun to reexamine the definition, content, and implications of syncretism in the study of religion. This article explores ways of viewing syncretism as a valid, analytical category that can be determined by using appropriate research methods. It draws on the REST and TSCS data and analyzes the statistics on Taiwanese people's religious identities, experiences of extraordinary powers, and understanding of life. It emphasizes that these three areas of experience establish a model that reflects an interrelated, flowing process. This discovery challenges the conventional view that sees categories as rigid pointers; it also redirects us to regard it as a flexible analytical tool. Based on this argument, the article hopes that the discussion of syncretic religious experiences in Taiwan with respect to its category formation and quantitative approach can provide a heuristic case for comparative studies.

Keywords: syncretism, Taiwanese religion, category formation, Religious Experience Survey in Taiwan (REST), quantitative approach

* I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers who offered me incisive comments and valuable information. They prompted me to rethink several terms and expressions the nuances of which I had missed in my original draft and to restate some sentences in a clearer way. In response to their critiques, I revised my paper to the extent I thought appropriate. All errors remain my own.

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Introduction

Syncretism commonly refers to the mingling or coexistence of different religious elements within a specific religion.¹ In the West, it used to carry negative meanings such as incompatibility, ambiguity, alienation, superficiality, and adulteration.² In an effort to redress these pejorative connotations generated by traditional Christian theologies, scholars have recently re-examined this term or concept from a broader and comparative perspective. Phenomenologists of religion have observed that syncretism is universal in world religions. It is normal or even indispensable for every living religion to absorb or amalgamate elements from other sources in the course of its development. In this way, syncretism facilitates the continuity of a religious tradition.³ Anthropologists have found that as a process of synthesis, syncretism reflects “the predicament of culture”.⁴ It is intimately associated with power and agency and is often employed to address issues of religious boundaries. In the era of globalization, characterized by mixed cultures, one should heed parallel or related phenomena like indigenization, bricolage, creolization, mongrelization, multiculturalism and pluralism, etc..⁵ Scholars of inter-religious dialogue added that to feel the power

¹ Helmer Ringgren, “The Problem of Syncretism,” in *Syncretism: Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Cultural Contact, Meeting of Religions, Syncretism*, ed., Sven S. Hartman (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1969), 7-14; André Droogers, “Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem,” in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed., Jerald D. Gort, et al. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 7–25.

² Hendrik M. Vroom, “Syncretism and Dialogue: A Philosophical Analysis,” in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed., Jerald D. Gort, et al. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 26–35; Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, “Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism,” in *Syncretism / Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, eds., Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 1–26.

³ G. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*. 2 vols. (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1967), 608-617; Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 183-186, 334-336; idem., *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 2. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 277-305; idem., *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 3. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 251-261, 267-274.

⁴ Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, “Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism,” 1.

⁵ Charles Stewart, “Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture,” *Diacritics*, 29.3 (1999): 40–62.

and influence of syncretic interpenetrations, the popular mass and their praxes, rather than the doctrinal beliefs, should be the focus of our close study.⁶

In these discussions, Western scholars have explicitly or implicitly designated Asian religions as ready candidates for syncretism.⁷ Indeed, many Chinese scholars, subscribing to views of their Western colleagues, have long noted that Chinese religions are syncretic.⁸ As Wing-tsit Chan writes:

[The] majority of China's millions...follow a religion which combines and overshadows Buddhism, Taoism (Daoism), and the ancient cult.⁹ They do not follow three separate, parallel, and conflicting religions at the same time, but a syncretic religion embracing the ancient cult as its basis and Buddhist and Taoist (Daoist) elements as secondary features....The fact that practically all continuing religious cults have perpetuated the tradition of religious synthesis clearly indicates that syncretism is a mandate of the Chinese people.¹⁰

To Chan, the so-called “three teachings” —Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism— and folk religion constitute the main content of Chinese religion and most Chinese embrace this as a harmonious phenomenon. This basic observation has been widely confirmed by scholars who studied religions in China,¹¹ in Taiwan,¹² and in Chinese communities in Malaysia and Singapore.¹³

⁶ André Droogers, “Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem,” in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed., Jerald D. Gort, et al. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 7–25.

⁷ André Droogers, “Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem,” 7–25; Dirk C. Mulder, “Dialogue and Syncretism: Some Concluding Observations,” in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed., Jerald D. Gort, et al. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 203–211.

⁸ Wing-tsit Chan, *Religious Trends in Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953); Heng-ching Shih, *The Syncretism of Ch'an and Pure Land Buddhism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992); Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁹ By “ancient cult”, Chan means Chinese traditional practices of sacrifice to Heaven, ancestor worship and the worship of spirits. While the first activity belongs to the obligation and privilege of the emperor, the second and third are “affairs of the masses”; see Wing-tsit Chan, *Religious Trends in Modern China*, 139–141.

¹⁰ Wing-tsit Chan, *Religious Trends in Modern China*, 141, 183.

¹¹ Xinzhong Yao and Yanxia Zhao, *Chinese Religion: A Contextual Approach* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 10–11.

¹² David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese*

Undoubtedly, scholars who reevaluated syncretism and those who highlighted the syncretic features of Chinese religion have contributed to our understanding of this term, but some questions remain unanswered. In the first place, scholars have rarely presented syncretism as a clear, identifiable category by which we can analyze corresponding phenomena in the real world. Merely to assert that syncretism is universal and particularly commonplace in Eastern or Chinese religions is inadequate. Secondly, most scholars have used syncretism as a descriptive term applied from without. They emphasize blending of elements that are inconsistent or conflicting in nature and in origin. This outsider's coinage of the term, however, may not concur with the believer's understanding that what has been experienced is consistent and coherent. In this sense a gap exists between what is observed and what is actually felt. Thirdly, in view of these two questions, can one address syncretism with a quantitative approach, in addition to the theological, historical, and anthropological ones, for a better solution? In other words, can a methodological innovation help us clarify such an important term or phenomenon as syncretism in world religions in general and in Chinese religion(s) in particular?

The present article answers the above questions by drawing upon the syncretic religious experience in contemporary Taiwan. It is primarily based on numerical data drawn from the Religious Experience Survey in Taiwan (REST) conducted from October 2008 to the end of 2009. It also refers to the Taiwan Social Change Survey (TSCS), a continuous annual survey of Taiwanese society covering multiple aspects since 1984, for supplementary purposes.¹⁴ By doing so, it aims to demonstrate the ways in which Taiwanese religions are syncretic; it further enriches our understanding of syncretism by means of a quantitative approach.

Sectarianism in Taiwan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 276-280.

¹³ Daniel P. S. Goh, "Chinese Religion and the Challenge of Modernity in Malaysia and Singapore: Syncretism, Hybridisation and Transfiguration," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 37 (2009): 107-137.

¹⁴ For more information about TSCS, see its website at <http://srda.sinica.edu.tw>.

Analysis of REST data

Area I: Religious Identity

The REST statistics indicate that the great majority of present-day Taiwanese believe in one religion or another. Folk religion is the most popular religion (38.4%), followed by Buddhism (18.6%) and Daoism (13.1%). The Buddho-Daoists, those who doctrinally and ritually adopt both Buddhism and Daoism, belong to sectarian organizations that make up a small but significant portion of the population (5.1%); their number is about the same as Catholics and Protestants combined (4.9%). I-Kuan Tao (or Yiguandao), an influential sect which derives its beliefs mostly from Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and, to a lesser extent, from Christianity and Islam,¹⁵ has a small percentage of followers (2.4%).¹⁶ It is clear that most Taiwanese today identify themselves with traditional Chinese religions. Buddhism might have originated from India two thousand years ago but it has entrenched itself on the Chinese soil after a long process of conflicts and resistance. In contrast, Christianity in the two forms of Catholicism and Protestantism is still considered a foreign religion and, as such, has met with limited reception.

The quinquennial surveys of Taiwanese population's religious configuration, which have been taken since 1994 as a part of TSCS, provide useful data for further understanding of religious identity in Taiwan. According to Table 1, although the figures of different religious affiliations occasionally fluctuate, the entire religious population has in general remained stable over the past fifteen years. Folk religion, Buddhism, and Daoism have been the three "big" religions in Taiwan. Buddhism appears to have undergone a gradual decline; Daoism, on the other hand, has increased the size of its congregation.

¹⁵ Cheng-tian Kuo, *Religion and Democracy in Taiwan* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 66-79.

¹⁶ The design of religious identity in REST is based on two considerations. The first follows the conventional names for religions that are popular in Taiwanese society so that the respondents can easily identify them. The other refers to similar classifications that are used in TSCS's previous studies for comparative purposes. There are nine choices in the question: None, popular religion, Buddhism, Daoism, I-Kuan Tao, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddo-Daoism, other (please specify), unable to determine, and decline to answer. When asked with which categories they were affiliated, the respondents selected one out of these nine according to their subjective understanding.

But this impression might be more apparent than real. As institutional Buddhism in Taiwan has recently expanded, its leaders insist that devotees go through an official ordination or initiation in order to qualify as a true Buddhist. During the interviews, this new understanding likely prompted the respondents to think more carefully about their religious identities. As a result, when deciding which religion they belonged to, they moved away from Buddhism (to which they thought they were formerly affiliated) toward other religions that are less institutionalized or more flexible concerning requirements of membership. In this case, folk religion is the largest pool that received these “shifTERS.” It would be farfetched to describe this kind of change as conversion. It would be more appropriate to see this as minor adjustments of self-identity within a large religious whole the constituents of which are usually mutually adoptable. This observation can be verified by the fact that the total number of followers of folk religion, Buddhism, Daoism, I-Kuan Tao, and Buddho-Daoism has remained roughly between 75% and 80% of Taiwan’s population over the past fifteen years, regardless of believers’ shifts of identity. Traditional Chinese religion as a whole, therefore, is still the dominant religion with which most people identify themselves. Classification of this religion into different denominations might be taxonomically convenient for scholars but it might not be the determining factor, as far as the believer’s religious identity is concerned.

Table 1: Religious Identity in Taiwan, 1994-2009

	TSCS 1994(%)	TSCS 1999(%)	TSCS 2004(%)	TSCS 2009(%)	REST 2009(%)
Non-religious	13.0	13.6	20.7	12.9	15.4
Folk Religion	31.0	33.4	30.6	42.8	38.4
Buddhism	38.5	26.3	23.9	19.4	18.6
Daoism	9.1	12.7	15.3	13.5	13.1
I-Kuan Tao	2.6	2.0	2.0	1.7	2.4
Catholicism	1.1	2.4	0.5	1.5	1.3
Protestantism	4.2	4.8	3.2	4.0	3.6
Buddho-Daoism	4.2	2.6	2.8	1.6	5.1
Other	0.5	2.1	0.9	2.7	2.1
N	1862	1952	1881	1927	1714

Area II: Experience of Power

Question no. 8 of REST asks the respondents if they “have experienced extraordinary powers that are beyond human control?” A list of nine different powers is provided for them to choose from: [a] the Mandate or Will of Heaven, [b] the Buddha or Bodhisattva, [c] karma, [d] God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or the Virgin Mary, [e] ancestors, [f] ghosts or spirits, [g] fate or fortune, [h] Dao or the Heavenly Dao, and [i] *qi*. For the purpose of exposition, I classify these items into four religious affiliations, according to their respective doctrinal implications (Table 2).

In the group of Buddhism, over half of the Buddho-Daoists and Buddhists identified the Buddha or the Bodhisattva as the extraordinary power they had experienced, followed by I-Kuan Tao members and Daoists. It is understandable that Christians in general reject this choice due to their monotheistic theology, but a small number of Protestants and Catholics also claimed to have had an encounter with this “foreign” god. When it comes to karma, the law of dependent origination, the majority of Buddho-Daoists and Buddhists opted for it, and so did half of the I-Kuan Tao and Daoist followers. What is noteworthy is that about one-third of Taiwanese Christians reported having felt the impact of this Buddhist power. This indicates that Christianity might be heterogeneous in Taiwan’s religious landscape and that Taiwanese Christians might generally maintain their separate identity, in the teaching of their theology, popular non-Christian concepts like karma can be easily incorporated.

Among the four kinds of power included in the Daoist category, each has influenced Taiwanese religious believers, though in different degrees. As a common Chinese religious terminology, Dao has spread widely in different religious communities, but it is subject to different theological or doctrinal interpretations. The Daoist Dao or the Heavenly Dao, in this context, may not appeal to all religious believers. Followers of I-Kuan Tao (61%) accepted it most readily, and Buddho-Daoists come next (39.1%). Curiously, these two figures are higher than the proportion of Daoists (23.6%), who are supposed to have experienced this power more extensively than others. About a quarter of Taiwanese population has experienced the power of *qi*. Again, it is those associated with I-Kuan Tao and Buddho-Daoism who have had a deeper relationship with it. But as *qi* has long caught the attention of Taiwanese society,

Table 2: Religious Experience of Extraordinary Powers in Taiwan

	Buddhism			Daoism			Folk Religion			Christianity		Total (%)
	The Buddha or Bodhisattva (%)	Karma (%)	The Mandate or Will of Heaven (%)	Fate or fortune (%)	Dao or the Heavenly Dao (%)	Qi (%)	Ancestors (%)	Ghosts or spirits (%)	God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or the Virgin Mary (%)	Other (%)		
Non-religious	18.6	38.3	28.8	48.9	15.5	22.7	23.5	12.9	11.0	1.5	100.0	
Folk Religion	36.3	41.0	35.0	51.4	12.6	21.3	33.4	15.8	5.5	0.9	100.0	
Buddhism	61.8	56.7	39.5	58.3	23.2	34.2	38.9	20.4	10.7	2.2	100.0	
Daoism	41.8	49.3	41.3	56.9	23.6	25.3	42.7	24.4	6.7	1.3	100.0	
I-Kuan Tao	48.8	53.7	48.8	63.4	61.0	41.5	41.5	12.2	12.2		100.0	
Catholicism	4.3	30.4	30.4	47.8	4.3	21.7	30.4	21.7	73.9		100.0	
Protestantism	14.5	37.1	43.5	40.3	21.0	27.4	24.2	17.7	85.5		100.0	
Buddho-Daoism	67.8	73.6	51.7	71.3	39.1	40.2	58.6	31.0	12.6	3.4	100.0	
Other	48.1	70.4	44.4	59.3	33.3	33.3	37.0	22.2	37.0	3.7	100.0	
Unable to determine	37.5	37.5	25.0	37.5	25.0	12.5	25.0	25.0			100.0	
	39.9	46.7	37.2	53.9	19.5	26.3	35.2	18.3		1.4		

its popularity has transcended the Daoist boundary and made inroads into other religious circles, including Christianity and the non-religious group. That explains why roughly equal percentages of people of different religious identities have sensed its existence.

The power of fate or fortune ranks at the top among different religious experiences of the Taiwanese. More followers of syncretic I-Kuan Tao and Buddho-Daoism than other religious groups have felt its presence. High proportions of Catholics (47.8%), Protestants (40.3%), and even self-claimed non-religious (48.9%), acknowledged the importance of fate. This shows that fate or fortune has grown from specific religious affiliations and become a common phenomenon that people of different religious backgrounds have accepted and experienced. The same tendency is found in the case of the Mandate or Will of Heaven. Almost half of I-Kuan Tao believers and Buddho-Daoists reported having experienced this power, and over one-third of Christians also experienced it.

The beliefs in ancestors and ghosts or spirits are attributed to folk religion. As ancestor worship is firmly related to the Confucian ethics of filial reverence, it has found strong support in Taiwanese society. On the contrary, it is widely believed that deceased ancestors or relatives become ghosts if denied proper funeral rites, burials, or worship. Thus, the power of ghosts or spirits is often read or experienced with repugnance.¹⁷ Statistics indicate that Buddho-Daoists have felt the power of ancestors most often (58.6%). Followers of Daoism, I-Kuan Tao, and Buddhism have reported having experienced this benign power to more or less equal degrees. A substantial number of Christians and non-religious have undergone comparable experiences. In contrast, far fewer Taiwanese admitted having experienced the power of ghosts or spirits. The Buddho-Daoists, again, rank the highest (31%). It is noticeable that Christians (Catholics 21.7% and Protestants 17.7%) have experienced this dark spiritual power more often than the believers of folk religion (15.8%) and I-Kuan Tao (12.2%). This may be interpreted as implying that Christian theology holds a strong and clear negative stance against demonic powers, and this helps Christians articulate their experiences.

¹⁷ David K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: the Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972).

The category of “God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or the Virgin Mary” is theologically peculiar in the context of Chinese and Taiwanese religions. As high as 73.% of Catholics and 85.5% of Protestants claimed that they had experienced the power of these divine beings, in sharp contrast with other powers analyzed so far. Nevertheless, a small minority of other religious followers, notably those of Buddho-Daoism and I-Kuan Tao, also reported that they had undergone similar experiences as the Christians.

In sum, one detects a pattern in experiences of extraordinary powers: the more specific a power is, the less popular it becomes; conversely, the less specific a power is, the more popular it becomes. If an extraordinary power is more specifically related to a religion, fewer people unrelated to that religion would experience it. Thus “God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or the Virgin Mary,” because of its distinctive Christian theological presupposition, would attract mostly, if not exclusively, Christians. The Buddha or Bodhisattva analogically appeals to Buddhists and Buddho-Daoists more strongly than to followers of other religions. But if an extraordinary power has gradually lost its original religious affiliation and become diffused, it would more easily turn into a commonly experienced phenomenon. In Taiwanese society, karma, fate or fortune, and the Mandate or the Will of Heaven are the best examples, and, to a lesser extent, ancestors and *qi* are also good candidates.

A general tendency observed among the different religious groups in Taiwan is that the more syncretic one is, the more are the powers one experiences. Except for the Christian case, the extraordinary powers associated with a specific religion may not be experienced most extensively by believers of that religion. Therefore, the Buddha or Bodhisattva and karma have not been experienced the most by the Buddhists. Likewise, the highest percentages of those who have experienced the Mandate or Will of Heaven, fate or fortune, Dao or the Heavenly Dao, and *qi* do not fall into the Daoist group. Neither the powers of ancestor and ghosts nor spirits find the strongest support from among the adherents of folk religion; the syncretic Buddho-Daoists and followers of I-Kuan Tao have generally experienced these different kinds of power most deeply.¹⁸

¹⁸ The experience of ghosts or spirits of the followers of I-Kuan Tao (12.2%) is the only exception to this observed rule of tendency.

Area III: Experience of Life

Question no. 21 of REST pertains to one's experience of "acquiring in a flash new understanding of or feeling for life." It evidently refers to an area of experience broader and vaguer than that delineated by the question on power just discussed. Eight statements are provided as multiple choices. Statistics indicate that in general, the overwhelming majority of Taiwanese people have felt positively about these statements. Based upon their respective nature and denotations, I classify these items into four religious groups: Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Christianity (Table 3).

About 70% of Taiwanese subscribe to the Buddhist-related philosophy that "Nothing is permanent in life; don't be so rigid." This world-negating attitude not only attracts the Buddhists but was also echoed among Catholics and Protestants. Followers of Buddho-Daoism and I-Kuan Tao most enthusiastically lean toward this religious understanding. Another statement "Good deeds will be rewarded; we must do good to merit future rewards," the core of Buddhist soteriology, found even more popular reception. Believers of almost all sorts concurred with it, including Protestants and the non-religious. Besides the Buddhists, again, it is the syncretic Buddho-Daoists (97.7%) and I-Kuan Tao followers (92.7%) who are most attracted to it.

The three statements included in the Daoist group appear similar in their basic philosophical tone. They express an understanding of life that is withdrawn and even fatalistic. As figures show, the statements have found widespread resonance among contemporary Taiwanese, irrespective of religious identities. Buddhists and Daoists both agree that "Life and death are matters of fate and heaven disposes fame and fortune." Buddho-Daoists rank the top in their feelings for this philosophy of non-attachment, and Catholics, interestingly, are equal in number to I-Kuan Tao followers in their reception of the idea. The percentage of Protestants in this regard may be the lowest, but still two-thirds of them view it as agreeable. Another statement "Detach myself from the world; just follow the natural course of thing" is also highly popular among followers of different religions. Adherents of I-Kuan Tao (95.1%) and Buddho-Daoism (89.7%) overwhelmingly subscribe to this, while Daoists (82.2%) and Protestants (83.9%) also have almost the same degree of acceptance. Likewise, with respect to the last statement "Life in the world is too tiring; better to merely

Table 3: Experience of Understanding of Life in Taiwan

	Buddhism	Daoism	Confucianism	Christianity	Total (%)
	Good deeds will be rewarded; we must do good to merit future rewards (%)	Life and death are matters of fate and heaven disposes fame and fortune (%)	Detach myself from the world; just follow the natural course of thing (%)s	Success of all things significant depend on optimal conditions in heaven, on earth, and among human being (%)	Other (%)
	Nothing is permanent in life; don't be so rigid (%)	Life in the world is too tiring; better to merely live a simply life (%)	We must study or work hard to bring honor to our family and forebears (%)	God arranges everything; follow God's will (%)	
Non-religious	62.9	66.7	72.0	58.3	3.4
Folk Religion	67.9	70.8	78.7	64.7	1.5
Buddhism	76.2	80.6	85.6	75.5	3.4
Daoism	70.7	75.1	82.2	62.7	2.7
I-Kuan Tao	80.5	78.0	95.1	85.4	4.9
Catholicism	73.9	78.3	69.6	52.2	8.7
Protestantism	64.5	61.3	83.9	64.5	3.2
Buddho-Daoism	81.6	87.4	89.7	86.2	1.1
Other	81.5	74.1	92.6	74.1	7.4
Unable to determine	50.0	62.5	50.0	25.0	12.5
	70.1	73.3	80.5	66.9	2.6

live a simple life,” believers of I-Kuan Tao, Buddhism, and Buddho-Daoism most readily embrace it, and more than two-thirds of Taiwanese Christians are inclined toward it.

About half of Taiwan’s population subscribed to the first statement classified under Confucianism, “We must study or work hard to bring honor to our family and forebears.” Buddho-Daoists (64.4%) and I-Kuan Tao members (61%) expressed higher enthusiasm about this Confucian ethical axiom. Other religious groups have relatively similar degrees of acceptance of it. The second Confucian saying, “Success of all things significant depends on optimal conditions in heaven, on earth, and among human beings,” resembles the Daoist worldview, if compared to the aforementioned statement, “Life and death are matters of fate and heaven disposes fame and fortune.” This connection may have partly contributed to its popularity: 67% of Taiwanese have a feeling for it, including a high percentage of Christians. The syncretic Buddho-Daoism (86.2%) and I-Kuan Tao (85.4%) had the deepest understanding of it, whereas Catholics, the least agreeable, still reached 52.2%.

There is only one statement attributed to Christianity: “God arranges everything; follow God’s will.” Because it has a very obvious Christian connotation (God), the statement should be viewed as exclusively Christian by non-Christians. Although as many as 85.5% of Protestants accept this saying, only slightly over half of Catholics (52.2%) subscribe to it. Curiously, in contrast, many believers of other traditional Chinese religions find it agreeable. Buddho-Daoists are the most notable (60.9%), followed by I-Kuan Tao (53.7%), Daoism (50/7%), and Buddhism (49.2%).

One discerns some common features after analysis of the data in this area, and they are comparable to those found in Taiwanese people’s experiences of extraordinary powers. The first is that the principle, “the less specific, the more popular,” emphasized in the preceding paragraphs, seems equally applicable in Taiwanese people’s understanding of or feeling for life. God, theologically very specific from the Christian group, has found the least acceptance. By comparison, all other statements, most of which express the renouncement of worldly thing or the transcending of worldly attitudes, have found wide agreements among contemporary Taiwanese. In this connection, it should be stressed that religious boundaries do not seem crucial. As we just saw, many statements attract Taiwanese people regardless of which religion they originated

from. Their contents rather than their affiliations count, as far as people's religious experience of life is concerned.

Further, except for the statement related to the Christian group, one does not detect any significant variances among opinions expressed by believers of different religions. Because Christians constitute only a small portion of the Taiwanese population, some of their "foreign" views of life do not seem to significantly affect the society. Rather, as the analysis disclosed, many Christians consented to the general beliefs of Chinese religion. This similarly applies to the self-claimed non-religious who in most cases agreed with the majority of adherents of religions in terms of the statements listed. Statistics indicate that Taiwanese people tend to converge on the mean and those practitioners of folk religion, the largest group, best represent this middle position. Buddhists and Daoists normally showed deeper interest than believers of Folk Religion in these statements about life. The syncretic Buddho-Daoists and I-Kuan Tao followers, inclusive and receptive as they are, registered almost the highest scores in every statement investigated.

Syncretic Religious Experience Model

Areas I, II and III analyzed above constitute a progressive relationship, as the Diagram illustrates. Religious identity, important to scholars for research purposes, is not fixed but flexible for Taiwanese believers. Conversions, for example, from folk religion to Christianity, surely take place but there are more cases of adjustments or changes of identity within traditional Chinese religions, i.e., folk religion, Buddhism, Daoism, Buddho-Daoism, I-Kuan Tao, and other minor sectarian groups. The statistics of TSCS and REST demonstrate these small-scale fluctuations and, at the same time the general stability of the Chinese religion as a whole. As religions in Taiwan are relatively loose with respect to membership, most Taiwanese are neither particularly conscious of their religious identity, nor are they fastidious about adhering to one religion.

When one moves outward to the area of experience of extraordinary powers, the flexibility of religious identity becomes quite evident. Except for a few powers that are religion specific, such as the Christian God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Virgin Mary, the Taiwanese religious believer tends to be open to different religious experiences. Since many different powers exist within

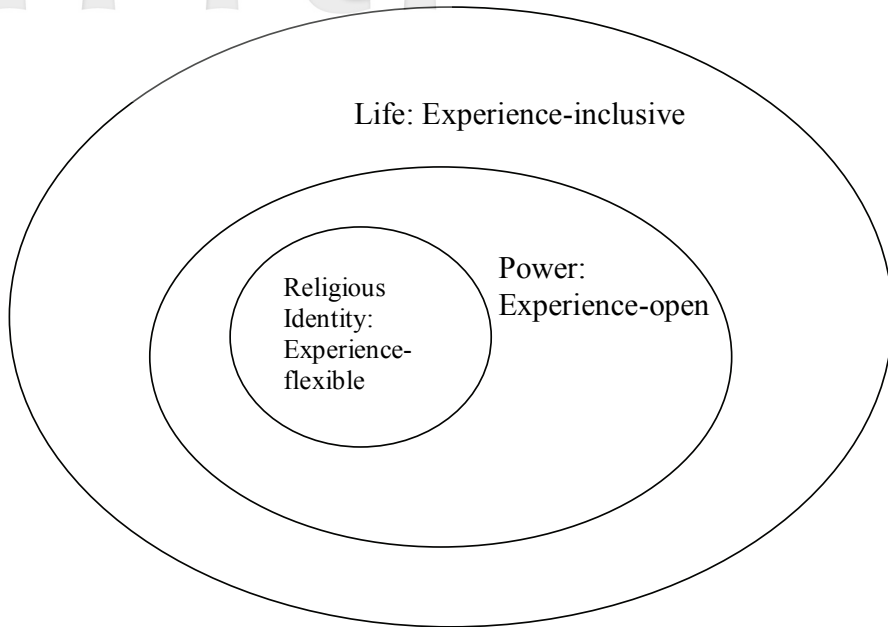


Diagram: Syncretic Religious Experience Model in Taiwan

Chinese religion, they allure believers to experience them without a prior check-up of their religious identity. As Table 2 has already indicated, cross-boundary moves of this nature are frequent. Many believers, notably Buddho-Daoists and I-Kuan Tao followers, have even experienced powers of a particular religion more enthusiastically than believers nominally associated with that religion.

When one continues to move outward, one comes to the area of experience of life. It is a huge pool that provides axioms of various sorts originated from different religions. But it is also an encompassing living context in which Taiwanese religious believers meet one another and share their common life attitudes. Religious affiliations, in this context, seem to have little impact. Statistics from the REST indicate that very high percentages of Taiwanese people concur with world-renouncing and fatalistic philosophies. They also subscribe to Confucian axioms in great numbers. Christian theology might be unique in contrast to other religious beliefs, it nonetheless gains allegiance from

half of the followers of traditional Chinese religions. It is this pervasive tendency of inclusiveness that makes religious believers' multiple experiences a common scene in present-day Taiwanese society.

The inter-connections of religious identity, experience of power, and experience of life serve as important parameters by which we can explore the syncretic religious phenomenon in contemporary Taiwan. Religious identity in this model functions as the starting point. It is nominally identifiable but flexible, as we just saw. This flexibility allows believers to change their religious affiliations and makes cross-boundary experiences possible. Experiences of extraordinary powers across religious affiliations increase extensively. In other words, one sees more overlapping experiences among believers of different religions. This intermingling phenomenon becomes even clearer from the believers' experience of understanding of or feeling for life. At this stage, the importance of religious identity recedes whereas fuller syncretic experiences come to the forefront.

Discussion

As syncretism reflects an ambiguous and amorphous cultural or religious phenomenon, scholars have often confronted it with hesitance.¹⁹ Delineating it with precision has been a problem. Robert D. Baird criticized that it is an "inadequate category" for religio-historical understanding and proposed that we cease using it in analysis. If it appears universal in the historical sense and what scholars want to focus on is to seek its origins, he argues, syncretism is too common to be useful. Any historical event has its antecedents fit for search. If, he further points out, scholars intend to emphasize the "fusion of various beliefs and practices," other terms such as "synthesis" and "reconception" should be good enough to serve that purpose. But if scholars want to highlight the

¹⁹ Frederick C. Grant, *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1953); Jacques H. Kamstra, *Encounter or Syncretism: The Initial Growth of Japanese Buddhism*. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967); Judith A. Berling, *The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-en* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Thomas L. Bryson, *The Hermeneutics of Religious Syncretism: Swami Vivekananda's "Practical Vedanta"* (Ph. D. diss. The University of Chicago, 1992); David Chung, *Syncretism: the Religious Context of Christian beginnings in Korea*, ed., Kang-nam Oh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).

conflicting or irreconcilable elements within a religion, “syncretism” applied from without appears irrelevant to insiders who usually consider the alien elements legitimate and harmonious.²⁰ Baird’s critiques well represent those who doubt syncretism as a researchable subject. At the bottom of his negative evaluation, however, lies the confusion about use of this term as an operational category. As it is not cognitively clear and specific, what it refers to can hardly become a useful area for scholars to explore.

Classification of different religions and their various themes has long been a serious issue in the study of religion. Western scholars used to take Christianity as the norm and classify other world religions into categories such as paganism, idolatry, and polytheism. The implied principle of this kind of taxonomy is based on the dichotomous division between ours and theirs, pure and impure, and true and false. As the global religious map was redrawn as a result of augmentation of knowledge in the related fields, world religions were re-counted and re-classified. Thus we saw the emergence of appellations of three, five, seven, or even ten world religions, according to membership, doctrine, ethnicity, culture, history and place, etc., that scholars may have happened to emphasize.²¹ Scholars relied on taxonomy to accrue knowledge, but the world has proved to be too complex to fit simple classification. If religion as a genus is broad and complex enough, its numerous subordinate themes all the more test our classificatory faculty.²²

“Syncretism” has been a victim of Western scholars’ taxonomic endeavor. As Jonathan Z. Smith incisively articulates, the adaptive dimension in religion used to be ignored:

²⁰ Robert D. Baird, *Category Formation and the History of Religions*, vol. 1 of *Religion and Reason*, ed., Jacques Waardenburg (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 142-152.

²¹ Wilfred C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978); Jonathan Z. Smith, “Classification,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion* eds., Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London and New York: Continuum, 2000); Robert F. Company, “On the Very Idea of Religions (in the Modern West and in Early Medieval China),” *History of Religions*, 42.4(2003): 287–319.

²² Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); Henry Goldschmidt, “Religion, Reductionism, and the Godly Soul: Lubavitch Hasidic Jewishness and the Limits of Classificatory Thought,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77.3 (2009): 547–72.

This is partially due to an ideological emphasis on purity of lineage. Hybridization, a positive adaptive mechanism in biological classifications, is denigrated in religious taxonomy, by terms such as “syncretism” and “accommodation.”²³

If scholars should still keep the intellectual habit of observing and analyzing data according to conventional, fixed categories, grey and fuzzy areas like “syncretism” would surely suffer neglect or distortion.

Syncretism is not an easily identifiable, static phenomenon. Rather, it is a process that takes place around people’s life. Syncretization assumes a flexible and pluralistic environment in which elements of origins of different religions interact. It also assumes that agents living in this context are open and tolerant, ready to receive new concepts and practices that are not theirs. After a considerable time of amalgamation, including in the process the possibilities of conflicts, resistance, negotiations, and harmonization, one gradually sees what were originally specific become accepted as common and general. Thus the whole and its particular components are interpenetrating, moving around in a constant flux.²⁴ The syncretic religious experiences in Taiwan we analyzed well substantiate this theoretical observation. As sticking to one religious tradition or organization is not emphasized, it allows Taiwanese believers to easily shift their religious identity. Given this flexibility, they open themselves to divine powers of various kinds and greet different religious worldviews that shape their understanding of or feeling for life. Taiwanese people share strikingly similar attitudes, no matter which religion they nominally belong to. Syncretization in Taiwan, therefore, is an interconnected process, increasingly expanding from the believers’ identity to their experience of divine powers and more generally to their experience of life.

The function of a thematic category is to facilitate the interpretation of uncharted phenomena. The more specific and refined this category is, the more conveniently we operate with it. In this regard, syncretism as a category seems far from ideal. But since syncretic religious manifestations are pervasive and are

²³ Jonathan Z. Smith *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, 171.

²⁴ Peter Van der Veer, “Syncretism, Multiculturalism and the Discourse of Tolerance,” in *Syncretism / Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, eds., Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 196–211.

extremely important to our understanding of world religions or, for our current purposes, Chinese or Taiwanese religion(s), it is still very useful as an analytical tool. What is required is rather an epistemic change, that is, from understanding syncretism as a static category to re-conceptualizing it as a fluid, interrelated process. If Baird objected to the “essential-intuitional” approach that takes interest in the metaphysical dimension of religion and insisted on a “functional” approach that singularly dwells on the religio-historical data, he might have taken religious syncretism more seriously than he was willing.²⁵

It is significant to note that recent discussions about the development of religion in the West bear resemblance to our present concern. As religion in the West is in decline, some sociologists have proposed new research agenda to grasp its new transformations.²⁶ One of the general observations about religion in “secularized” countries is that fewer and fewer people go to church nowadays. This, however, does not mean that modern people no longer have religious beliefs and practices; rather, it indicates that most of them have moved away from traditional church affiliations, hence the catching expression “believing without belonging”.²⁷ Because of their tenuous or even discontinued relationship with a church, what people today believe and practice is tangential to what is instructed and approved by the church authority. In this connection, as “religion” receded, “spirituality” has taken its place to meet people’s interest in the supernatural realm. The “spirituality” in vogue may contain what were previously suppressed or relegated to the corner like local religious traditions as well as New Age curiosities such as the occult astrology, fortune-telling, trance channeling, and transcendental meditation.²⁸ This new “spirituality” is thus vast in scope and rich in content. It is unstructured, absorbing, and protean, going

²⁵ Robert D. Baird, *Category Formation and the History of Religions*, vol. 1 of *Religion and Reason*, ed., Jacques Waardenburg (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 17-27.

²⁶ Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966); Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Judith Fox, “Secularization,” in John R. Hinnells, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*. (London and New York: Cassell, 2005).

²⁷ Grace Davie, “Believing without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain?,” *Social Compass* 37.4 (1990): 455–469.

²⁸ Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Laurel Zwissler, “Spiritual, but Religious: ‘Spirituality’ among Religiously Motivated Feminist Activitie,” *Culture and Religion* 8.1 (2007): 51–69.

through constant transformations along the way of its development. In a sense it is not unlike syncretism we have been talking about.²⁹

When confronted with this spirituality, Western sociologists of religion tend to resort to typological approach to make sense of it. We have here three examples as illustrations. Robert C. Fuller explored “unchurched spirituality” in America³⁰ and pointed out that although 62% of Americans belong to a church or a synagogue, fewer and fewer of them regularly attend church services or participate in its activities. There are three types of those “unchurched Americans”: secular humanists who are indifferent to religion, those who are only marginally connected with a church, and those unaffiliated with a church and yet concerned with spiritual matters. He particularly focused upon the last type and described them as “spiritual, but not religious”.³¹ “Religious” is public in nature, having to do with institutions, rituals, creeds, and clergy, whereas “spiritual” is private in orientation and related to “the pursuit of personal growth or development.”³² The unchurched Americans have shifted away from the public, institutional religion and turned to cultivate their private, inner spirituality.

Stark, Hamberg, and Miller³³ echoed Fuller’s interest and further elaborated “unchurched spirituality” into more typological classifications. Like Fuller, they fundamentally differentiated between two types of religion, one churched, the other unchurched. The churched religions are those that have formal creeds and stable congregations (traditional, organized churches). The unchurched religions lack the official creed but maintain certain religious outlook, “existing as relatively free-floating culture based on loose networks of like-minded individuals”.³⁴ Taking the nature of the official creed and of members or participants as points of reference, Stark and his collaborators

²⁹ Catherine L. Albanese, “The Culture of Religious Combining: Reflections for the New American Millennium,” *Cross Currents* 50.1/2 (2000): 16–22.

³⁰ Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³¹ Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*, 2–4.

³² Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*, 6.

³³ Rodney Stark, Eva Hamberg and Alan S. Miller, “Exploring Spirituality and Unchurched Religions in America, Sweden, and Japan,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20.1 (2005): 3–23.

³⁴ Rodney Stark, Eva Hamberg and Alan S. Miller, “Exploring Spirituality and Unchurched Religions in America, Sweden, and Japan,” 8.

divided the unchurched religions into three categories, with the first one having three more sub-types. Type 1a refers to “folk religions.” These religions have originated from and coexisted with organized religions, but they do not have creeds and congregations. Their beliefs and practices often circulate in the popular culture. Type 1b, called “audience religions,” includes religions associated with occultism and supernaturalism. They attract followers through mass media as audiences, not as congregations. Type 1c contains “privatized faiths” that emphasize the way people acquire their religious ends more than the contents they uphold. As privatized faiths, what practitioners pursue tends to fall outside of the permissible boundary of organized religions. Type 2, called “client religions,” characterizes itself by having exponents of creeds but without congregations. A group formed by a magician and his clients is illustrative of this type. Type 3 points to “creedless religious groups”. Unchurched religions of this type have weak congregations, but lack consistent creeds. Their participants tend to come together as a discussion group.

Woodhead and Heelas conceived “the main varieties of religion” in the modern West. Instead of starting from religious traditions, they adopted a phenomenological approach and categorized their data into three types.³⁵ The first, called “religions of difference”, primarily refers to religions that sharply distinguish between the creator God and this God’s creation, including nature and humanity. It emphasizes the importance of the transcendent realm that contrasts this-worldly existence. The second is termed “religions of humanity.” It points to such religions or beliefs that show strong humanistic concerns, with the characteristic emphasis on human authority and the exercise of reason. The third one is labeled as “spiritualities of life.” It is a type that seeks balance among humans, nature, and the divine. It espouses a holistic view, seeing the spiritual existing equally in self as well as in nature. Woodhead and Heelas argued that these three types do not constitute an evolutionary relationship or a unilinear trend. Rather, they were broached to illustrate how the sacred, the human, and the natural possibly interact in some important ways. No single religion fits neatly into either of these types. It is more likely that believers of every religion experience some parts of each of these three types, which

³⁵ Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, “Introduction to the Volume,” in *Religion in Modern Times*, eds., Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas (Oxford, UK and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 2-3,16-16.

demonstrates the complexity of religious phenomena. As Woodhead and Heelas observed, combinations of these types are common. For example, the most noticeable, combined types emerging in the twentieth century are “experiential religions of difference”, a synthesis of “religion of difference” and “spiritualities of life,” and “experiential religions of humanity,” another synthesis of “religions of humanity and spiritualities of life.”³⁶ Sociologists of religion and their typological interpretations of modern spirituality have helped us envisage a complex map through a convenient lens, but they have simultaneously brought up confusions that misguide our understanding of the actual territory they intend to explicate. In the first instance, what Fuller intended to do was to delineate a group of people whose religious expressions are different from those informed or shaped by traditional American denominationalism. They have moved out of the American society as a new and distinct type, and yet the contents and concerns of their spirituality are “syncretic” rather than innovative. As Fuller added, 55% of the church members also approved the occult.³⁷ This shows an overlap between church religion and unchurched spirituality. In this sense, it is sociologically heuristic to mark the emerging unchurched Americans, but to call them “spiritual, but not religious” seems to separate two domains that are internally inseparable.

In the second instance, the detailed classifications by Stark might be intriguing, but when they are contrasted with definitions of religion and spirituality these scholars offered, they easily cause suspicion. According to Stark, religion “consists of *explanations of existence* based on *supernatural assumptions* and including statements about the *nature* of the *supernatural* and about *ultimate meaning*”.³⁸ As to spirituality, all of its forms “assume the *existence of the supernatural (whether Gods or essences)* and assume that *benefits can be gained from supernatural sources*”.³⁹ Religion and spirituality thus share a commonality: they all deal with the supernatural from which believers obtain what they wish. The difference between them, however, lies in

³⁶ Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, “Introduction to the Volume,” 148-151.

³⁷ Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*, 9.

³⁸ Rodney Stark, Eva Hamberg and Alan S. Miller, “Exploring Spirituality and Unchurched Religions in America, Sweden, and Japan,” 4, italics theirs.

³⁹ Rodney Stark, Eva Hamberg and Alan S. Miller, “Exploring Spirituality and Unchurched Religions in America, Sweden, and Japan,” 7, italics theirs.

the fact that all forms of spirituality lack formal creeds and/or congregations. All unchurched religions, as expressions of spirituality, therefore, lack moral and intellectual standard or power with which to impose them on the society. Stark affirmed that this is the case in Japan, as well as in China.⁴⁰ Our analysis of syncretic religious experiences in Taiwan has indicated that an extremely high percentage of Taiwanese belongs to “unchurched religions” and their experiences of divine powers or the understanding of or feeling for life is based on diffused knowledge these different religions provide. Lack of formal creeds and congregation does not necessarily result in total absence of moral or intellectual power among them.

In the last instance, the typology Woodhead and Heelas offered is endowed with Christian theological preconceptions. For one thing, in Christianity, God, humanity, and nature have served as points of reference or as important categories for theological deliberations. The role of “God” was gradually replaced by the more neutral and generic expression of “the sacred” or “the divine”, and “self” grew more prominent in the recent development of Christian theology. That Woodhead and Heelas used these concepts for typological construction and distinguished these three types by the different degrees of relationships between God / the divine and humanity (respectively gauged as “highly differentiated”, “differentiated”, and “dedifferentiated” or “holistic”) bespeaks their Christian, as well as evolutionary framework. This being the case, they perceptively remind us that these types are not fixed but constantly changing, with possibilities of various combinations. In particular, their emphasis on experiential dimension as a pivotal cause for religious transformations is certainly very helpful to our discussion of the present subject.

The sociologists of religion aforementioned share some presuppositions in construction of their respective typologies. First, they implicitly assume the powerful impact that secularization has wrought on the modern world. Concepts such as “secular humanists”, “unchurched religions”, and “spirituality” were, therefore, conceived in response to secularization and its consequences. Second, they harbored a religious norm, deviations from and against which were highlighted and enumerated. If the former connotes “public,” “institutional,” “creed,” “congregation,” “authority,” the latter refers to “private,” “folk,”

⁴⁰ Rodney Stark, Eva Hamberg and Alan S. Miller, “Exploring Spirituality and Unchurched Religions in America, Sweden, and Japan,” 19.

“magic,” “creedless,” “client,” and so on. Third, they took Christianity, including its history, theology, and current development as the model on the basis of which they hammered out their typologies. Thus “God,” “churched,” “unchurched,” etc. were exclusively used, although some of them also were meant to include non-Christian religions or non-Western cases. Under their premises, it might seem clear to discuss such concepts or categories as “religious,” “spiritual,” and “humanistic” and their specifications in their Christian or Western context. However, I would argue that to be clear, specific, or normative is to limit or to set restraints. If “spirituality” in the West has been confirmed as a complex, amorphous mixture of different elements—old and new, Western and Eastern, orthodox and heterodox— then it transcends Christianity or any institutional religion. It would be more appropriate to see it as a flux or a process, as Woodhead and Heelas have implicitly suggested. In this connection, our discussion of syncretic religious experiences in Taiwan should serve as a very useful case from a comparative perspective.

Conclusion

Scholars in the history of religions, theology, anthropology, and other related fields have recently re-examined the content and definition of syncretism. As this term or concept often points to an ambiguous, fuzzy cultural or religious phenomenon and is used to carry pejorative connotations, they have been hesitant to determine its suitability as an academic subject. But as it is found to be universal in world religions, and particularly prominent in Eastern or Chinese religions, most of them are positive about the necessity of reevaluating this term and its implications.

To participate in the ongoing scholarly discussions, my article focuses on two issues: how to view syncretism as a valid, analytical category and how to approach it by using appropriate research methods. I first began by drawing on the REST and TSCS data and analyzed the statistics of Taiwanese people’s religious identities, experiences of extraordinary powers, and understanding of or feeling for life. My finding was that Taiwanese believers’ religious identities are flexible and accordingly they allow themselves to easily shift within the compass of Chinese religion that comprises folk religion, Buddhism, Daoism,

and other sectarian groups. Here one sees the first area of intermingling. With respect to experience of extraordinary powers, statistics show that many Taiwanese believers have not only experienced powers that are of one's own religion but also those of others. The principle that "the more specific a power is, the less popular it becomes; the less specific a power is, the more popular it becomes" well explains this finding. One sees more interpenetrations in this second area. In the area of experience of understanding of or feeling for life, statistics indicate that an overwhelming majority of Taiwanese believers, regardless of their religious affiliations, share many similar life attitudes or philosophies originated from Buddhism, Daoism, folk religion, or Confucianism. In this third area, they move across religious boundaries and the phenomenon manifests a high degree of hybridity. These three areas, I propose, constitute a model that reflects an interrelated, flowing process.

Based on this syncretic religious experience model, I engaged myself in debates over whether syncretism could be adopted as a valid category. I argued for an epistemic change that requires discarding the conventional view to see a category as a fixed pointer and opting for a new understanding of it as a fluid, analytical tool. By affirming the usefulness of syncretism as a thematic category, I proceeded to relate it to discussions of "spirituality" mostly conducted in the sociology of religion. I particularly singled out typologies raised by Robert C. Fuller, Woodhead and Heelas, and Stark et al. and argued that although useful, they are at the same time limited and misleading. As "spirituality" developed in the "secularized" societies has run parallel to syncretism in content and configuration, I suggest that sociologists of religion rethink their typologies by referring to the model proposed here. This discussion of syncretic religious experience in Taiwan with respect to its category formation and my adoption of quantitative approach might provide a heuristic case for future comparative studies.

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台灣宗教如何是混融性宗教？

根據「台灣地區宗教經驗調查(REST2009)」探討類型建構與研究方法

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摘要

「宗教混融」一詞本來帶有不搭配、模糊、異化、膚淺、雜合等貶意，可是學者發現這個特質在世界宗教尤其是東亞宗教中普遍存在時，即開始檢視它的定義、內涵以及在宗教研究中的含意。本文旨在探討如何藉由適切的研究方法，重新視「宗教融合」為一有效的分析範疇。為達此目標，本文根據「台灣宗教經驗調查」(REST)與「台灣社會變遷基本調查」(TSCS)的數據，分析台灣居民的宗教身份、超能力經驗、人生體悟三者。本文強調，此三類型的經驗恰可構成一相互關連的流動型模式，而此一見解剛好與一般認為範疇即是固定指標的看法不同，也重新導引我們如何運用它成為一彈性的分析工具。居於此論述，本文希望藉由討論台灣居民的宗教融合經驗，其中涉及的範疇建構與量化研究方面，能為俟後的比較研究提供有啟發性的例證。

關鍵字：宗教融合、台灣宗教、範疇建構、台灣宗教經驗調查、量化研究