Perspectives of Syncretism and its Modern Trend:
A Case of Christian and African Traditions

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Abstract

One of the major goals of the western missionaries was to plant the kernel of the Christian message within a given indigenous historical tradition without losing the essence of the gospel traditions. However, Christian churches initially failed to remove the aspects of the western culture that constitute stumbling blocks for the desired integration in the indigenous soil or to assimilate the aspect of indigenous properties that are essential for its survival. The result of this raises some theological problems. In the attempt to ascertain a balance, most times, the Christian missions in Africa for instance, find themselves oscillating between protecting the redeeming gospel of Christ with its superiority tendency and the astringent African traditions, often in contrast to the other. Thus, African Christianity is characterized by syncretism whereby African and western theologies mixed to the point that both systems seem to lose their basic structures and identities. Within this observed situation, what is the trend of this syncretism and its implications? This is the main question this paper intends to answer. Using evidence from the literature, this paper exposes and examines the modern trends of syncretism. Accordingly, it further identifies the major implications of syncretism on sustainable spiritual developments and concludes with some strategic choices that would hopefully improve the existing situation.

Introduction

Africans have had their system of religious beliefs and practices long before any other form of civilization. They have often been described as being notoriously religious since religion colours all aspects of their lives (Agu, 1992). Long before the advent of missionaries, some negative notions dominated Europe's concept of Africa. For instance, Homer (cited by Njoku, 2002) said that Africa is a remote place at the extreme of the universe where people worshipped and sacrificed to the gods. Hobbes (cited by Njoku, 2002) said that Africa is a timeless place in which there are no art, letters or social organization, but instead only fear and violent death. According to Hegel (cited by Njoku, 2002), Africa is a historic continent even though it has a geographic location. The people live in a condition of mindlessness barbering without laws and morality. Rousseau (cited by Njoku, 2002), said that the black people are unable to think in any reflective manner. Their engagement in arts is, therefore, a thoughtless activity which is the antithesis of the intellect. Comte (cited by Njoku, 2002) wrote that "Africans are people who lack the sophisticated linguistic skills, the scientific and political faculties of the European and are best suited to dancing, dressing up and singing" (p. 10). These ideas, in one way or the other conditioned the relationship between European missionaries and Africans: they undermined the worldview of the African people. The result of this remained the implantation of a Christian message that reflected western culture, without in any way, having any aspect of the indigenous belief and practices, leading to what Madu (2004) described as 'superficiality of faith' or what Ezenweke and Madu (2006) called 'skin-deep Christianity'. This is evident in the lives, beliefs and practices of those who call themselves Christians in many African communities. In these areas, the form of Christianity that is often witnessed called for question.

However, the early western missionaries assumed to plant uniform Christian missions with the reflection of western culture with little or insignificant forms of adaptation. Lately, the goal of every missionary work is to plant Christian churches that are both true to the word of God and historical tradition and indigenous at the same time. In the attempt to create this balance, most times, churches fail to remove the aspect of the indigenous culture that are contrary to the gospel and living tradition of the Church. Because of this incompatible mixture, they fail to penetrate the depth of the Christian message and find themselves oscillating between the redeeming gospel of Christ and their constricting traditions without settling for any. Situations have arisen when it has become imperative to once again examine the modern trends of syncretism in modern African Christian churches.

Syncretism

The English word "syncretism" comes from the Greek word *synkretismos*. Its origin is the custom of the people who lived in the Island of Crete in ancient days, who always fought themselves, but when enemies from outside attacked, they combined force with each other to combat their foreign enemy. They called this practice *synkretismos*, which comes from the verb meaning 'to combine'. The concept is also employed to refer to the uniting of quarrelling brothers in the face of common enemies. Generally, syncretism would refer to the attempt to unite together those elements which do not agree (Gehman, 2001).

Tippet (cited by Yamamori, 1975) defines syncretism "as the union of two opposite forces, beliefs, systems or tenets so that the united form is a new thing, neither one nor the other". This agrees with the understanding of Schreiter (1994), who defines syncretism as the "mixing of elements of two religious systems to the point where at least one, if not both, of

the systems loses basic structure and identity". Pinto (1985) has a dismal concept of syncretism. In his opinion, it is the "fusion of incompatible elements" or the "mingling of authentic notions and realities of the revealed faith with realities of other spiritual worlds". By this, he is saying that elements of other religions are uncritically borrowed and fused into Christianity, watering down or spoiling Christianity in the process (Chidili, 1997).

Heavily perturbed by the problem of syncretism, Schineller (1992) called for the abolition of the word because it bears many connotations and is no longer helpful or constructive. In so suggesting, he failed to suggest an adequate word to replace syncretism, and so the word is retained. As long as the church is universal and Catholic, she must dialogue with other religions, and if she must make herself truly present among them, she must take in something of other religions, so as to make Catholicism the religion of the people. Shorter (1977, p.43) speaks of "crude syncretism", while Saneh (1985, p.43) speaks of "uncritical syncretism".

In this case, we distinguish between "critical syncretism" and "uncritical syncretism". While a "critical syncretism" can be good, "uncritical syncretism" is misleading.

The Dividing Line between Syncretism and Enculturation

A definition of the theological content of inculturation can be considered from a variety of angles. Its content is contained in the words of the Gospel of St. John, "And the word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). It therefore finds its suit in the incarnational parameters already set by Christ, when, although he was God, took human flesh and lived within a human culture. According to Crollius (1986), enculturation means:

> The honest and serious attempt to make Christ
> and his Gospel of salvation ever more
> understood by peoples of every culture, locality
> and time. It is the reformulation of Christian life
> and doctrine into the very thought patterns of
> each people…. It is the continuous endeavour to
> make Christianity 'truly feel at home' in the
> cultures of each people. (p. 11).

In the contention of Arrupe (1990), enculturation is:

> The incarnation of Christian life and of the
> Christian message in particular cultural context,
> in such a way that this experience not only finds
> expression through elements proper to the
> culture in question, but becomes a principle that
> animates, directs and unifies the cultures,
> transforming it and remaking it so as to bring
> about a new creation. (p. 6).

Syncretism of the Christian gospel occurs when basic elements
of the gospel are replaced by religious elements from the host
culture. It often results from a tendency or attempt to
undermine the uniqueness of the gospel as found in the
Scriptures or the incarnate Son of God. In inculturation,
Christianity is not brought into a synthesis with something
alien to it. It is the seed of the gospel that is already present in
a particular culture. The reason for this synthesis is in fact the
possibility of compatibility. Inculturation is not a negative
phenomenon, but when it is not guided by the right principles
it could become a crude syncretism. Whatever distinction is
made here, there will always be disagreement between
churchmen and theologians on whether or not a particular
action is genuine inculturation/development of syncretism in

the pejorative sense. However, some degree of openness and tolerance is required in dealing with new views.

The Early Church and Uncritical Syncretism

In this section, the researchers would explore briefly a number of examples of what might be called syncretism by some, with examples from the church in its history and in the present. Right from her early days, the church has rejected syncretistic approaches to religion. One of the earliest expressions of the rejection of the amalgamation of incompatible beliefs is in the Letter of St. Paul to the Colossians. St. Paul makes it clear that the Christian belief is based on the risen Lord, and not from the synthesis of religious beliefs or practices from one religion or the other. He therefore warns Christians not to be captivated by "an empty, seductive philosophy according to human tradition, according to the elemental powers of the world and not according to Christ." (Col 2:8).

Acts of the Apostles chapter 15 records a critical syncretism. The event of the Council of Jerusalem in which the Pristine Church decided the fate of the Gentile nations vis-a-vis the Jewish concept of the newly emerging Christian religion. In this Council, it was decided that all Gentile converts should be allowed into the church without circumcision, and other Jewish dietary laws, meaning that one does not need to be a Jew in order to be a Christian. Obviously, this permission must have been seen by conservative Jewish Christians as compromising and therefore a gross dilution of the Christian faith (Chidili, 1997).

In Corinth, on a mountain top near the city there was the temple of Aphrodite (the goddess of love). Sacred prostitutes were on duty in this temple, and pilgrims thought that by sleeping with them they were in contact with the goddess herself. There were Christians among these pilgrims (Armellini, 2002). Paul states that this is like joining the body

of Christ to the body of a prostitute (I Corinthians (6:15-16); the Christians who went up to the mountain were syncretistic, because they were joining their Christian faith with idol worship, which were incompatible. Sceva, a Jew who cast out evil spirits with magical powers is reported in Acts 19:14-16, to have decided to add the name of Jesus to his collection of magical powers. In this process, the evil spirit overpowered his seven sons. This made the people of Ephesus to understand the superiority of the name of Jesus and the incompatibility of magical arts and the power of God. It is not surprising that they brought their magic books and instruments and burnt them before everyone.

The history of the early Church is the history of how the Church opposed syncretism and articulated her identity. As early as 70 AD, the Church was aware that it had a distinct identity that governed its relationships with other spiritual traditions. It was on this basis that it dealt with Judaism from which it emerged, the mystery religions which abounded at the time, and emperor worship which anchored the Roman social and political order. There was the controversy of the Ebionites, who wished to keep Christianity tightly bound with Judaism. There were the Gnostics, the Marcionites, Valentinians, Docetists, Monarchianists etc. The church declared their outlook as being incompatible with the Christian faith (Green, 1994).

Modern Forms of Syncretism

The clearest form of syncretism is that of the Catholic feminist movement known as Women-Church which is fast losing all connection with Catholic tradition. The underlying concern is that the Women-Church, in its attempts to be inclusive of all women is adapting the religious values, rites and practices into the Catholic faith. They are willing to accommodate many different spiritual traditions on an equal level with Christian

faith and practice. During their conferences, Green (1994) revealed that readings are selected every day from the sacred texts of Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Islam, as well as Christianity. On occasion, ancient festivals of the Celts or Saxons are remembered, and members dance around a maypole or fire-pit in the fields or forest. The Chapel is visually stimulating and instructive. Icons of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Risen Christ are placed side by side with statues of Buddha, Lord Vishnu and Moses.

Another form of modern day syncretism in the church is usually nurtured and propagated during interreligious dialogues. Because the world is becoming one politically, technically and economically there is a felt need to be drawn together in a universal brotherhood. Religions are also called upon to unit with one another. Christians, Muslims, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) are told to find common beliefs to unite them, and in many cases, this places a political pressure upon Christian churches, and the end result is syncretism and the compromise of the gospel. Here, the quality and compatibility of religions are justified by subsuming their various categories under generic categories. For instance, we say that the writings of various religions are "sacred". We speak of the different deities of the different religions as "transcendent". We say we serve the same God.

Syncretism is also found among African Independent Churches, which were founded as a consequence of resentment over missionary and colonial control. These churches try to reclaim some of their traditional beliefs and practices which had been rejected by missionaries. These beliefs and practices are inserted into Christianity without any criticism, this is expressed in their songs, dance and rituals especially. Sometimes, these elements are placed side by side to the gospel and sometimes exalted above the Christian tradition. When traditional beliefs and practices which are not

compatible with the Christian belief are included in the Christian faith, the result is syncretism (Gehman, 2001).

In Latin America and Brazilian religious cults, many of the traditional figures of popular religious cult, often with African roots, are given equivalents from Christian communion of saints. The result is often the modification and lessening of the challenge from the gospel values and from the examples of Christian saints. Pagan elements predominate over the Christian tradition, even if Christian names are given to such saints or matrons. In Cuba, for example, Yoruba divinities have been identified with Catholic saints: St Peter is Elegnara, St John the Baptist is Ogun (Schineller, 1992).

In the struggle against modernism, Pope Pius IX and Pope Pius X strongly opposed modernist ideas, in their effort to preserve the truth of Christianity. They feared that the mingling of modern historical, scientific and philosophical perspectives would overpower the gospel. The Second Vatican Council, called for a more critical relationship between the Church and the secular world, rather than a rejection of what it stands for (Schineller, 1992).

The Causes of Syncretism

Syncretism is caused by a couple of factors. And these factors would be the center of the consideration of this section of the research.

i. Geographical, economic and linguistic factors facilitate syncretism. For instance, cosmopolitan cities or business nerve centres could breed syncretism. A case in point is the city of Alexandria, which favours cultural contacts, language dissemination and the interchange of gods (Chidili, 1997).

ii. Another cause of syncretism is the policy of religious tolerance. In this case, syncretism becomes an effort to plug all the gaps in a given religion (Chidili, 1997).

iii. The innovations in Christianity is said not to provide for some of the functions the traditional values perform. The gospel displaces them without replacement. This is one of the reasons why the African Independent Church Movement is growing by geometrical proportion. These independent churches provide traditional needs for spontaneous prayer, exorcism and faith healing lacking in established churches (Luzbetak, 1992). While these satisfy the spiritual hunger of many Africans, they could have far reaching negative effects when exaggerated.

Catholicism and Uncritical Syncretism

The Catholic Church has an identity, her teachings and practices are based on the veracity of the original witnesses. Her ideas and beliefs are not drawn from a smorgasbord of beliefs and practices, from here and there. The church has a living spiritual tradition which is rooted in her historical experience as a community of believers. To be a member of the Catholic Church therefore implies commitment to her beliefs, practices and institutional disciplines. This is not to say that the Catholic Church is straight jacketed in her beliefs and practices. These take on a particular mode depending on the local culture within which the church finds herself, and this is where inculturation comes in. The faith is made visible to the people through the employment of their cultural categories, and in this process, their culture is Christianized and Christianity is made their culture, not by relegating their culture to the background but by making their culture blossom in the spirit of the gospel. While the practices of the church take a particular colour depending on the local church, in Catholicism, the church is universal. Its centre is in Rome and

its core beliefs, practices and disciplines transcend any particular form of it.

Catholicism is not a syncretistic religion and this explains why from the very beginning of the church she has worked hard to block the intrusion of syncretism in all its forms. Rather than speak of the Catholic Church as a syncretistic religion, I would speak of the Mother Church as a synthetic religion. Being a mother, she always seeks to give birth to something new as she learns from her interactions with every culture and religion. Because the church is Catholic she does not undermine the elements in other religions that are good and touched by grace. She enters into cultures that she may preach the message of salvation to all peoples through their language and cultural forms. In this process, the gospel message is not changed or compromised, because she has a critical function in relation to the culture she encounters. The Church discriminates what it assimilates in accord with her own identity.

Gehman, (2001) among other scholars, have accused the Catholic Church of syncretism. They argue that the church assimilated the Roman Law, Barbarian feasts, Mythologies, Arabian and philosophies etc. These scholars anchor on these positions because of their inability to differentiate between syncretism and synthesis. While the church assimilated these traditions, she transformed them. Green (1994) argues in defense of the Church's synthetic ability, that,

> It was the Church's synthesizing dynamic that led it into dialogue with Hellenistic thought and thereby added to the development of its moral thinking. St. Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius absorbed Neo-Platonic spirituality, and produced a Christian understanding of mysticism. Thomas Aquinas engaged

> Aristotelian philosophy, and developed that great synthesis of theology which continues to be a major source of spiritual and theological insight and practice even today. (p. 10).

He further argues that synthesizing and syncretism are radically different. This is because a syncretistic religion has virtually no identity of its own, whereas a synthetic religion has a clear identity of its own. Therefore, what Catholicism absorbs, it transforms, and that transformed element enhances rather than dilute her identity (Gehman, 2001).

Conclusion
From the foregoing, it is evident that critical syncretism is not bad in evangelization, unlike uncritical syncretism which threatens the identity of the church of Christ. When critical syncretism is well employed it leads to inculturation, and inculturation in its real sense is recommended for evangelization. This entails a sincere and honest appreciation of the dimensions of other cultures in so far it does not alter the main essence of the church's identity, to the point of the church losing her identity. In Africa, for instance, the kernel of the Christian message should be implanted in the African tone, language and outlook for it to be meaningful with no feeling of superiority or otherwise, both from the church or the culture to which the gospel message is introduced.

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