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Syncretism and inculturation in the Nso' context of Cameroon

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Abstract

This article gives a brief history and meaning of the terms syncretism and inculturation. The article highlights the fact that over the centuries Christianity has wrestled with syncretism. Following Lamin Sanneh (1989) the authors discuss three styles Christianity has employed in engaging cultures with the Gospel. The three styles are: quarantine, syncretist, and reform. The article draws examples from the history of missions to illustrate how this went on; showing what happened when Christianity engaged the Jewish community and the Greco-Roman world. The article argues that inculturation is not "everything goes". Using the Nso'[1] context of Cameroon, the authors critique inculturation which leads to syncretism and suggest holistic "translatability" and holistic "critical contextualisation" as a way out.

Key words

Syncretism; inculturation; Christian; mission; contextualization

1. Introduction

In their book, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today,* Bevans & Schroeder (2004:60-61) indicate that theologians who begin their theologising with a reverence for culture would say that syncretism

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1   Nso' is one of the largest ethnic groups in Cameroon. It is known in the country for its rich cultural heritage. It is as well considered by many Cameroonians as a stronghold of Christianity. Nso'land occupies the eastern corner of the North West Region of Cameroon.

as a process is inevitable and that the risk involved is a risk well taken. According to the report *Mission-Shaped Church* (2004:91), all attempts at inculturation struggle with the danger of syncretism and in the attempt to be "relevant" one may fall into syncretism, and in the effort to avoid syncretism one may become "irrelevant" (Mission-Shaped Church, 2004:91).

The above assertions depict the struggle Christian mission faces when it comes to making the Gospel relevant to its context. Simply put, there has always been a struggle or tension between syncretism and inculturation. Indeed, throughout the centuries, Christianity has operated within some or other culture (Oborji, 2006:17; Bosch, 1991:291; Sanneh, 1989:9-11). The first century of its beginning was in the Jewish culture where it tapped some elements from Judaism to enhance its spread. Later when it crossed to the Greco-Roman worlds it equally tapped elements from the Greek and Roman beliefs to sustain its validity. This act of adapting elements from one culture or the other to enhance Christianity was a normal and obvious process since Christianity never encountered a vacuum. Sooner or later the process started having names like syncretism, which sounded negative, and inculturation, which was considered positive.

This article is intended to show the major cause of syncretism and how it could be curbed. The authors hold that what they call uncritical inculturation is the major cause of syncretism. Using Lamin Sanneh's concept of translatability and Paul Hiebert's analysis of critical contextualisation, they show how uncritical inculturation that leads to syncretism could be curbed. The authors of this article have chosen to use the context of Nso' in Cameroon because of its rich religious and cultural heritage. Nso' is known in Cameroon and even beyond for these riches. Geographically, it is situated at the eastern corner of the North West Region of Cameroon. Before engaging the context of Nso', the article looks at the history, and meaning of the terms syncretism and inculturation respectively.

2.   A brief history and meaning of syncretism

This section tackles in brief the history of syncretism as well as its meaning. It is intended to show that syncretism has been an on-going issue in Christian mission.

2.1 A brief history of syncretism

According to Ezenweke & Kanu (2012:73), the word "syncretism" comes from the Greek word *synkretismos*. They point out that the word originated from the people who lived in the Island of Crete in ancient days. These people used to fight against each other but whenever an enemy or enemies from without attacked them, they combined forces with each other to face them. The people of this Island thus called the practice *synkretismos,* which comes from the verb meaning "to combine". The history of missions from the Jewish setting to the Hellenistic world and to the present has been full of syncretism. In other words, there has been no period without syncretism in whatever degree.

In discussing "mission and the issue of syncretism" Sanneh (1989:36) points out that the Jewish factor in the expansion of Christianity was important for safeguarding the monotheist core of the gospel. Consequently, as Christianity spread to other areas it carried with it an irreconcilable attitude to polytheism, from the Judaic heritage. The practice of monotheism was equally inherent in Islam, but Christianity, though committed to monotheism, soon found that translating their message made it vulnerable to secular influences and to the threat of polytheism (Sanneh, 1989:37).

According to Sanneh (1989:37), the degree to which Christianity became integrated into a particular culture was a means of determining the level of its compromise. He points out that once an entire culture opened itself to the Christian presence it was possible for the missionary to influence and mould that culture without fear of total rejection. In this way, Christianity was in turn likely to be influenced by the entire culture itself. Yet, this risk appears to be no greater than that incurred in the Judaic or Islamic tradition. On the contrary, if, as early Christians believed, God is the universal source of life and truth, then, they are obliged to pursue that conviction across cultures. This conviction accordingly implies that no culture would be fundamentally alien to the source of life and truth, and therefore mission was assured of continuity with that source.

Mission, however, also represented the challenge and promise of a new beginning in faith and obedience. The apostolic proclamation actively sought a serious ethical and religious commitment, on a double front. First, it announced the completion of tendencies introduced in earlier

ages. Second, it signalled a fresh point of departure in religious and ethical life. In this way, mission encouraged self-affirmation while requiring self-transformation at the same time. This according to Sanneh (1989:37) was the risk and the hope, the "com-promise" and the promise.

According to Sanneh (1989:37-38), historians make a great deal of the view that a certain level of cultural unity was essential to the success of primitive Christianity, taking the position that had the church encountered stiff external barriers its faith would have been negatively different. Although Sanneh (1989:39) agrees with the fact that historical factors played a role in the expansion of Christianity, he resists the conclusion that historical circumstances also determined the content of Christian message. He points out that the apostles certainly came up against major obstacles in their path. For example, Christians were externally tortured by the Roman authorities. Internally, there was the obstacle of religious and philosophical challenge, which sought to undermine the gospel from within.

Nevertheless, in the midst of these obstacles and tussles with their detractors, Christians emerged better furnished with materials and more amply endowed with resources of expansion. However, in the initial stages, much hesitation and even reluctance marked the community of believers as they stood on the frontier of the Greco-Roman world, conscious of the receding shadows of Palestine behind them and the threatening vistas of radical indigenisation ahead (Sanneh, 1989:38). At this juncture, the Judaic heritage again proved invaluable and one important idea drawn from rabbinic sources, indicating that mission was a risk in which the advocate committed his or her resources without the assurance of commensurate recompense, though one could believe that a higher reward awaited in the kingdom to be established (1 Cor. 9:20-22) (Sanneh, 1989:39).

In the midst of all the experiences, Christians came to be familiar with three basic models, which as Sanneh (1989:39) indicates were not necessarily phases that succeeded each other in clear, differentiated fashion. Rather they offered styles of religious organisation. The first style is called quarantine, when, from timidity, anxiety, expectation, or eschatological fear, the believers maintain a close vigilance over their life and conduct in relative seclusion from the world. The second style is syncretistic in nature, although in the transition to that stage the primitive church held onto the forms of certain teachings while substantially modifying the contents.

Keeping aside the secure walls of quarantine, the believers encountered the world of other beliefs and ideas, which insinuated themselves into the main body of Christian teaching. For example, the practice of circumcision, upheld in quarantine, is considerably modified outside quarantine until it is dropped altogether as a prerequisite of faith. The third style is reform and prophetic witness. It is the style which holds that Christians are in the world but not of it.

According to Sanneh (1989:40) it is a delicate line, which only the most gifted, and almost certainly only the minority, might hope to draw. The majority of believers as he points out would continue to occupy the broad area of overlap with the world to pursue life mindful of bread-and-butter issues, accordingly, it is toward such instances of likely compromise within the household itself that the prophetic word is directed initially.

Reform in itself as Sanneh (1989:40) indicates, does not reject the world, nor does it reject human instrumentality in setting the world aright. Rather it distinguishes between the earthly kingdom and its heavenly counterpart and consequently distinguishes between human means and the divine end for which these means might be employed but not exchanged.

The examples above are a clear proof that Christianity was born in a cross-cultural milieu and that it could not go on without syncretism, as indicated below:

> Christianity may just be as truly called a Hellenic religion as an Oriental, a native religion as a foreign. From the very onset it had been syncretistic upon pagan soil; it made its appearance, not as a gospel pure and simple, but equipped with all that Judaism had already acquired during the course of its long history, and entering forthwith upon nearly every task in which Judaism was defective (Harnack, 1908:314 quoted in Sanneh, 1989:42).

The syncretist motif, as Sanneh (1989:42-43) points out, persisted through the extraordinary range of Christian appeal. First, diverse nationalities were touched by Christian preaching. Second, Christian religious practice showed an enormous appetite for absorbing materials from other religious traditions, and this indicated success in penetrating the wider society. It however posed a threat of uncritical syncretism. Harnack assessed the situation as follows:

> Powerful and vigorous, assured of her distinctive character, and secure from any risk of being dissolved into contemporary religions, [the church] believed herself able to deal more generously and complaisantly with men… Saints and intercessors, who were thus semi-gods, poured into the church. Local cults and holy places were instituted. The different provinces of life were distributed afresh among guardian spirits. The old gods returned; only their masks were new. Annual festivals were noisily celebrated. Amulets and charms, relics and bones of the saints, were cherished eagerly. And the very religion which erstwhile in its strictly scriptural temper had prohibited and resisted any tendency towards materialism, now took material shape in every one of its relationships. It had mortified the world and nature. But now it proceeded to revive them, not of course in their entirety, but still in certain assertions and details, and… in phases that were dead and repulsive. Miracles in the churches became more numerous, more external, and more coarse. Whatever fables the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles had narrated, were dragged into contemporary life and predicated of the living present (Harnack, 1908:315-17 quoted in Sanneh, 1989:43).

Although it is not the subject of this section, it is worth noting that most of the issues Harnack has mentioned above are still taking place in churches today. This is especially evident in the quest for miracles and material possessions. This reference to materialism relates to the second commandment: ''You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below….'' (Ex 20:4f). The quest for miracles and materialism is propagated by charlatan preachers and prosperity gospel propagandists. Returning to Harnack's assessment above, Sanneh (1989:43) points out that although Christianity was syncretistic in finding multiple cultural systems congenial to its message, it was not a parody of any system. According to Harnack, Christianity showed itself to be syncretistic but:

> …it revealed to the world a special kind of syncretism, namely the syncretism of a universal religion. …Unconsciously, it had learned and borrowed from many quarters; indeed it would be impossible to imagine it existing amid all the wealth and vigour of these religions, had it not drawn pith and flavour even from them. These religions

fertilized the grounds for it, and the new grain and seed which fell upon that soil sent down its roots and grew to be a mighty tree. Here is a religion which embraces everything. And yet it can always be expressed in absolute simplicity: one name, the name of Jesus Christ, still sums up everything (quoted in Sanneh 1989:43-44).

Sanneh (1989:44) posits that Christianity entered the multiple world of the cross-cultural encounter with an open mind and a firm faith. The risk that it took, with the first step; he goes on, it exploited with the second. Consequently, the Greco-Roman world, which left its mark on the faith, was itself profoundly moulded from within. He further points out that both quarantine and accommodation (syncretism) threaten religious integrity: the former by cutting Christianity from the world and the latter by surrendering to it. Reform on the other hand points to God's action at the stage where the message intersects the world of culture, and mission is the promise and engagement with action (Sanneh, 1989:46). Thus, whether in the quarantine style, or the syncretistic or reform and prophetic style, God's mission was not thwarted. Everything happened in the midst of cultures and affirms Bosch's assertion that culture has been one of the four "relationships" by which major compromises of the Christian mission across the centuries have occurred (Bosch, 1991:291).

The issue of syncretism has continued to be mentioned and discussed at many levels, especially in the World Council of Churches (WCC). For example, in his article "Economic, Culture and Syncretism", Tesfai (1995:7) points out that at the 1990 Canberra WCC's assembly, the discussion on syncretism reached a more reasonable step and ever since, a new stage in the history of the church has become a possibility. In this new possibility, he sees transition from a specific culture to world cultures, from a "western" to "a world church." In this process, the whole gamut of the legacy of the Church, from its faith to the cultural expression from which it was wrapped, is subject to scrutiny.

Furthermore, Tesfai (1995:7) indicates that the issue of syncretism is as old as the inception of Christianity. He points out that as Christianity has developed throughout its history, it has been marked by syncretism. Even the Western Christian tradition, which has been propagated to the rest of the world as the normative expression of the faith has been shaped by

syncretism. He further adds that from its beginning, Christianity has been marked by religious elements that were taken from local cultures in which it found itself. This is evident in regard to the relationship of Christianity to the Hellenistic cultures and philosophy.

According to Wolfhart Pannenberg, Christianity did not only link itself to Greek philosophy, but also inherited the entire religious tradition of the Mediterranean world – a process whose details have still not been sufficiently clarified, but which was probably decisive for the persuasive power of Christianity in the ancient world (cited in Tesfai, 1995:7).

2.2 Meaning of syncretism

In this section, we look at various meanings of syncretism so as to test and deduce the one that may be considered a working definition for the article.

Tippet defines syncretism as the union of two opposite forces, beliefs or tenets so that the united form is a new thing, neither one, or the other (cited in Ezenweke & Kanu, 2012:73). Agreeing with Tippet, Schreiter 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 its basic structure and identity (cited in Ezenweke & Kanu, 2012:73).

According to these views syncretism produces a completely new form of a system. This explanation seems to agree with HW Turner who, in his article "A Typology for African Religious Movements", uses the word "syncretist" to refer to the "neo-pagan" groups incorporating selected elements from both traditional and intrusive religions in a new synthesis that remains pagan rather than Christian. The examples of such groups are: "The People of God" and the "Cult of Ancestral Spirits" in Kenya and "The Ancient Religious Societies of the African Descendants Association" in Nigeria (Turner, 1967:7, 14).

According to Turner (1967:14), the word "syncretist", is used in its strict sense for one of the forms of neo-paganism, where a new eclectic religion is derived from both Christian and pagan sources, and remain pagan rather than Christian. Then it would be impossible to speak of a "syncretist" church. This is because, the word church as he points out is a Christian category, and any syncretism at a fundamental religious level could produce only a new kind of paganism.

That notwithstanding, Turner (1967:14) indicates that there are other uses of the term syncretism to refer to a religion that has borrowed elements from another religion and cultures, and has so transposed them in the process that its own basic features have remained intact and merely been given new modes of expression. He thus opines that this might be termed a cultural rather than truly religious syncretism, and will be found to have occurred very widely and above all in Christianity.

If syncretism has to do with the borrowing of religious and cultural elements as Turner indicates, then he cannot talk of cultural syncretism only but of religious-cultural syncretism since both the religious and cultural elements are involved in the process. This type of syncretism could be termed critical syncretism. And if it pertains to Christianity then it has no problem because its basic features remain intact. It is seemingly a desirable way of inculturation as we shall see in the section on inculturation below.

In his book *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication,* Hesselgrave (1991:182-187) indicates that syncretism takes place "when respondents choose parts of the message that appeal to them and, rejecting other parts of the message, incorporate the accepted elements into non-Christian religious systems to make a new whole" (1991:185). The "new whole" here is in line with the neo-paganism mentioned by Turner above.

The African Initiated Churches (AICs) define the word "syncretistic" as "the mixing of different religions in which a new religion is the result, sometimes seen as giving a false account of the truth" (Oduro, et al 2008:228). It seems necessary to note that one of the first scholars – Bishop Sundkler who studied the AICs seriously drew the following conclusion: "The syncretistic sect becomes the bridge over which Africans are brought back to heathenism" (Sundkler 1961:297, cited in Oduro, et al 2008:9). Sundkler seems to have drawn such a conclusion about the AICs from a distance. His close study of the AICs twenty-eight years later proved that his earlier statement was wrong and he admitted that. Accordingly, the bridge he earlier cited was not seen as one back to the religion of the traditional past, but a bridge to the future, to "newness of life, health and wholeness, a new identity" (cited in Oduro, et al 2008:9). A close relationship with the AICs would thus help one to understand them and consider them partners in mission, God's mission and not antagonists.

Let us consider one more approach to syncretism before deciding which should be our working definition. Luzbetak (1989:360) seems to propose two distinctive meanings of syncretism which could help clarify the direction one needs to take. First, he points out that syncretism in anthropology is any synthesis of two or more culturally diverse beliefs or practices, especially of a religious character. According to him any synthesis of religious beliefs and practices to anthropologists is syncretistic. Furthermore, he indicates that in anthropological terms, Christianity itself can be said to be a syncretistic religion, an amalgam composed of Judaism, new ideas taught by Jesus and his followers, and the many later cultural accretions and theological developments and recombinations of beliefs and practices that have occurred over the centuries (Luzbetak, 1989:360). Second, he posits that in missiology, the term syncretism involves Christian theology and accordingly is more narrowly defined, namely as any theologically untenable amalgam. He indicates that to the missiologist, syncretism is not necessarily terminal and may be an intermediate stage or process.

Accordingly, the usage of the term in missiological anthropology refers to a combination of beliefs and practices that are theologically untenable. Luzbetak points out three basic problems with theologically untenable amalgams: First, as far as their content is concerned, they are untenable, for they are forms of Christopaganism. Second, as a process, they are largely unavoidable and subliminal inasmuch as they reflect psychological "laws" associated with all culture change. Third, they often reflect important, and sometimes central, values of a society that demand respect. Their existence thus produces an enormous missiological dilemma, which threatens the practice of inculturation (1989:360-361).

This threat of the practice of inculturation echoes the fact that all attempts at inculturation struggle to grapple with the danger of syncretism. This implies that in the attempt to be "relevant" one may fall into syncretism, and in the effort to avoid syncretism one may become "irrelevant" (Mission-Shaped Church, 2004:91). That notwithstanding, there is a need to avoid any extremes by striking a balance when selecting what to incorporate into Christianity. This could be done by not refusing to relate everything from culture to Christianity, and not also taking everything from culture into Christianity without a critical look (see section 1.5).

The definitions of syncretism above are seemingly not very clear. They seem to term every act of synthesising and incorporating of religious and cultural elements into other religious systems syncretism. Hence, the authors of this article would like to define syncretism from a Christian perspective, as indiscriminate or uncritical incorporation of religious and/or cultural practices into Christianity in order to make it relevant to the receiving cultural context. Inculturation as we see in 1.2.2.2 below might just become the opposite of syncretism.

3.   A brief history and meaning of inculturation

This section tackles briefly the history of inculturation as well as its meaning. It is intended to show that inculturation has been an on-going phenomenon in Christian mission.

Inculturation was first used in mission circles in 1962 (Bosch 1991: 447), but there was reflection on related issues before, for example JH Bavinck's discussion of the topics accommodation ("(T)o what extent must a new church accommodate and adjust itself to the customs, practices, and mores current among a people?") and *possessio* – "The Christian life does not accommodate or adapt itself to heathen forms of life, but takes them the latter in possession and thereby makes them new" (1960: 169, 178-179, first published in Dutch in 1954). Although Bavinck was fairly pragmatic and flexible in his approach, inculturation introduced a new level of close association and interaction with culture.

3.1 A brief history of inculturation

According to Oborji (2006:17) the first major inculturation took place when the Gentiles were admitted into the church without imposing Jewish law on them (Acts 15). This was a transition from Judaeo-Christianity to the Christianity of the Gentiles. When the Council of Jerusalem resolved the problem, Christianity spread gradually beyond its original Jewish surroundings into the Gentile world. As the church spread it came to appropriate new structures, categories, and symbols in an effort to make Christianity relevant to the people of the new sociological milieu (Oborji, 2006:17). In the process, philosophical categories and some cultural elements of the people of the Mediterranean region, especially the Greeks

and later the Romans were adopted to formulate central theological categories like Christology and forms of liturgical celebrations (Oborji, 2006:17).

Oborji (2006:18) points out that once that was done, the category or symbol so adopted acquired a new meaning that transcended its original meaning because of the novelty of the Christian faith. According to David Bosch the early Christians did not merely express in Greek thought what they already knew; rather they discovered through Greek religions and philosophical insights into what had been revealed to them (Bosch 1991:190 cited in Oborji 2006:18). Similarly, Christian liturgy would not have emerged if it had not developed with structures adopted from elements of the Roman culture (Newman 1989,373 cited in Oborji, 2006:18).

Following the historical background above, it is thus clear that the exigency of inculturation is not new in the life and history of the church. What appears new is the term "inculturation" with the shift of emphasis from adaptation (Oborji, 2006:18). Theologically, the foundation of inculturation is the incarnation. The basic argument being that just as Jesus Christ, the Word of God, became incarnate in a human culture in the Jewish milieu, the gospel of Jesus Christ should be allow to be inculturated or incarnated in the local culture and context (Mt. 5:17; Acts 10:34) (Oborji, 2006:19). In this wise, incarnation as the theological model of inculturation could be explained in two senses. In the first one it means the process of mutual penetration of the gospel and culture so that Jesus Christ may be present "today" in every culture. The second sense refers to the event of Bethlehem, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Accordingly, it is the primordial inculturation of the Word of God in human flesh and history, and therefore the foundation and model for subsequent inculturation. "It is the redemption of humanity in Christ" (Oborji, 2006:20).

3.2 Meaning of inculturation

Inculturation has been defined as the "incarnation" of the Christian life and of the Christian message in a 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 culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation (Pedro Arrope, 1978:97ff cited in Oborji 2006:20). According

to Justin Ukpong, inculturation involves immersing Christianity in the local cultures of the people so that just as Jesus became man, so must Christianity become the cultural religion of the people (Ukpong, 1984:27 cited in Oborji, 2006:20).

This understanding of Christianity has over the years been accompanied by what could be termed uncritical inculturation, which has been the root cause of syncretism. In the section that follows the authors attempt to show how it is practically taking place in the context of Nso' in Cameroon. Before that, they define inculturation as critical incorporation of religious and/or cultural practices into Christianity in order to make it relevant to the receiving cultural context. In this way care is taken that the gospel is not compromised. It remains supracultural.

4. Syncretism and inculturation in Nso', Cameroon

In this section, the authors intend to answer the following questions: when is the incorporation considered syncretism and when is it considered inculturation? How does syncretism or inculturation actually occur? What parameters can one use to determine whether the incorporation of cultural elements into Christian beliefs is syncretistic or not? What parameters can one use to determine that the incorporation of such elements into Christian beliefs is inculturation?

Here are possible ways of determining if the incorporation of cultural elements into Christianity is syncretism or inculturation: when the incorporation is such that the Gospel is compromised then it is uncritical inculturation, which is syncretism; but when the incorporation is such that the elements facilitate the understanding of the gospel then it is inculturation. The example below may help to clarify the issue.

When an *ngwerong's* bag is used to carry the Bible in a liturgical procession, there may be the danger of projecting *ngwerong*[2] rather than the gospel. The projection of the *ngwerong's* bag rather than the gospel is syncretism.

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2   *Ngwerong* is one of the traditional social groups in Nso' that the missionaries prejudicially and derogatorily termed a secret society without any studies. It is an association exclusively for men (not all men but royal retainers, known in Nso' language as *nshiylav,* i.e. singular, and *nshiyselav,* plural).

On the other hand, there may be an opportunity for the Christians to understand that the act of using the bag demystifies the bag. It is now in this procession, a normal container for the carrying of the gospel of Christ. It is just a container and not the Gospel itself. Hence, this is an example of critical inculturation. It testifies the place of culture, the place of arts in the spread of the gospel. Here the valise from the West is kept aside. The gospel was brought in the Western cultural valise, the Nso' people can now take it in their own bag to the church. This makes the gospel somehow theirs and not a foreign message.

Yet, in using the bag, there is that danger to be syncretistic, and avoiding its use, there is that danger to be irrelevant. The gospel has to face this danger. Practitioners of inculturation need to be careful not to project their culture rather than the gospel. One needs to understand how the use of the "peace plant" known in Nso' language as *kikeng* (*dracaenea*), dancing with *samba*[3] instruments, (machetes, dressing, xylophone, drums etc.) and so on transmit the message of the gospel and not something else. When care is not taken, these incorporations yield nothing but syncretism, since in most cases there is the tendency to compromise the gospel. This is caused by what we call here uncritical inculturation (indiscriminate incorporation of cultural elements into Christianity). Faced with this danger of syncretism, what parameters can one use to check uncritical inculturation? The section below attempts an answer.

5. How to check uncritical inculturation

It is obvious that in the name of inculturation Christians, especially in Africa, have employed funny approaches. Hence, there is a need to guide against such approaches which have often led to uncritical inculturation whose end product is wild syncretism. Writing on "the limits of inculturation", Bosch (1991:455) indicates that inculturation must have a critical dimension. The faith and its cultural expression – even if it is neither possible nor prudent to dislodge the one from the other, he points out, are never completely coterminous. According to him inculturation

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3   It is a dance, a traditional social group that the Roman Catholic Church in Nso' has adapted. Members hold their meetings in church compounds.

does not mean that culture is to be completely destroyed and something new built on its ruins; neither however does it suggest that a particular culture is merely to be endorsed in its present form. Hence, he warns that the philosophy that "anything goes" as long as it seems to make sense to people can be catastrophic.

Translatability and critical contextualisation could serve to check uncritical inculturation. According to Lamin Sanneh (1989) the word translatability in its broader use includes not merely linguistics but also the entire process of the faithful transmission of the gospel across cultural frontiers (cited in Tennent, 2010:352). The authors of this article have used the concepts of translatability and critical contextualisation to explain how uncritical inculturation could be curbed. To these concepts, they have added one word: "holistic" and they thus call the approach holistic translatability and holistic critical contextualisation. By this they mean that which is both anthropologically and counterculturally sound; loving the culture but being critical about some of its practices that could jeopardise the gospel message. In this way, cultural romanticism is curbed and the gospel takes the lead.

Following the principle of translatability, Skreslet (2012:37) posits that according to the understanding of God's linguistic economy, all the world's vernaculars are gifted with a capacity to receive the gospel. In this wise, *Lamnso* (the language of the Nso' people of Cameroon for example) is as important as Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. Skreslet (2012:39) further points out that advocates and critics of a particular translation may disagree with one another, but after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) opened the door for Catholics to use vernacular forms of scripture in worship and study, virtually no contemporary supporter of Christian mission would think to ask if Bible translation is theologically justified. Translation, he goes on, is now accepted as an indispensable element of mission, a kind of contextualisation that the gospel not only allows but seems to require. Translation thus, remains an invaluable task in Christian mission and has to be taken as such and put into practice. It seems necessary to note that the Nso' community of Cameroon with the help of CABTAL (Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy) completed the translation of the entire Bible in *Lamnso* at the close of 2016. This project took them about ten years.

Tennent (2010:352) points out that the word translatability reminds us that we must always remain faithful to both the apostolic message and the particularities of the target culture. Furthermore, he indicates that since the word translatability is an extension of the primary idea of Bible translation, the priority of the biblical message is guaranteed. He equally indicates that the language of translation serves as an ongoing reminder of the necessary boundaries to translatability. According to him Bible translators undertake their work with the greatest care, because they must be constantly vigilant against the possibility of a mistranslation of a biblical text.

Tennent (2010:353) decries the overwhelming pressure today to sacrifice the gospel at the altar of the "market," which treats the recipients of the gospel as consumers who must be satisfied by giving them what they want to hear rather than the unpopular message of repentance and a crucified Saviour. Yet, he holds that translatability is a valuable theological principle, which, alongside the careful use of contextualisation, can serve an important function in helping the church to be faithful to the gospel in various cultures. In addition to translatability as discussed above, Hiebert's "critical" contextualisation could also serve as a check to uncritical inculturation and syncretism.

Hiebert's model which he adopted from Jacob Loewen and John Geertz (Hiebert, 1994:88) has three stages: The first step in critical contextualisation is "exegesis of the culture": In this step, one has to study the local culture phenomenologically. The purpose here is to understand the old ways, not to judge them. For example, the pastor or missionary may ask the Christians how they should bury the dead. Here the people would likely analyse their traditional rites, describing each song, dance, recitation etc. (Hiebert, 1994:88-89). The second step is "exegesis of Scripture and the Hermeneutical Bridge": in this step, the pastor or missionary leads the church in a study of the Scriptures related to the question at hand. Using the example of burial practices, the leader teaches the Christian beliefs about death and resurrection (Hiebert, 1994:89). The third step is "critical response": this step is for the people corporately to critically evaluate their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings and to make decisions regarding their response to their new-found truths. Here note is taken that the gospel is not simply information to be communicated but a message to which people must respond (Hiebert, 1994:89).

The results of the three-step approach will be "new contextualised practices": the arranging of the new practices into a new ritual that expresses the Christian meaning of the event. Such a ritual will be Christian, for it explicitly seeks to express biblical teaching. It will equally be contextualised, because the church has created it, using forms the people understand within their own culture Hiebert (1994:90-91). In this approach, Hiebert suggests the following checks against syncretism:

- Critical contextualisation takes the Bible seriously as the rule of faith and life. So contextualised practices, like contextualized theologies must be biblically based.
- Critical contextualisation recognises the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers open to God's blessings.
- In critical contextualisation the church acts as a hermeneutical community. The priesthood of all believers as Hiebert (1994:91) warns is not a license for theological "Lone-Rangerism". "We need each other to see our personal biases, for we see the ways others misinterpret Scriptures before we see our own misinterpretations" (Hiebert, 1994:91).
- There is a growing discussion among evangelical theologians from different cultures, which may lead to consensus on theological points.
- Critical contextualisation does not operate from a monocultural perspective. Nor is it premised upon the pluralism of incommensurable cultures. Rather, it seeks to find metacultural and metatheological frameworks that enable people in one culture to understand messages and ritual practices from another culture with a minimum of distortion.
- Critical contextualisation sees contextualisation as an ongoing process in which the church must constantly engage itself, a process that can lead people to a better understanding of what the lordship of Christ and the Kingdom of God on earth are about.

6. Applying Hiebert's concept to the use of Ngwerong's bag in Nso'

As indicated above, Hiebert's model – "critical contextualisation" has three phases. The first step concerns "exegesis of the culture". In the context of the bag, it would mean seeking to know the significance of the bag to the *ngwerong* members in particular and in Nso' culture in general. In this wise the pastor needs to ask the members some questions. For example, what is the significance of the *ngwerong's* bag? Following their answers, which might not be anything apart from a container for preserving one's cup, cap, and other more portable *ngwerong's* paraphernalia the pastor could now go to the next step. This step is the "exegesis of Scripture and the Hermeneutic bridge". In this phase, the pastor considers scripture relevant to the use of bags and/or containers and sees how they could be related to the *ngwerong's* bag. The pastor then explains to the *ngwerong's* members what the scripture says about such containers. Then comes the third and final phase, "critical response" which is for the people to corporately critically evaluate their own past meanings attached to the bag in the light of their new biblical insights and to make decisions regarding their response to their new-found truths. When the people take part in deciding on the next step to take they will enforce decisions arrived at corporately and there will be little likelihood that the customs they reject will go concealed. Furthermore, their involvement helps them to spiritually grow through learning discernment and applying scriptural teachings to their own lives (Hiebert, 1994:89).

7. Conclusion

Throughout the centuries, the attempt to make Christianity relevant to its varied contexts had suffered from various forms of syncretism. It had not been possible in any context, be it Jewish or Gentile, be it Western or African, to have Christianity void of syncretism. The more an attempt was made to avoid syncretism the more irrelevant Christianity became, and the more an attempt was made to make Christianity relevant the more syncretistic it became. Syncretism thus remained a dilemma in Christian mission. This article has however given another approach to this dilemma: holistic translatability and holistic critical contextualisation.

The authors of this article have defined syncretism as indiscriminate or uncritical incorporation of religious and cultural elements into Christianity to make it relevant to the receiving context. They define inculturation in an opposite way to syncretism as critical incorporation of religious and/ or cultural practices into Christianity in order to make it relevant to the receiving cultural context. In this way care is taken that the gospel is not compromised. It should remain supracultural while it is inculturated. Every attempt at inculturation needs to be critical so as to dismiss the view that there cannot be inculturation without syncretism. The article thus suggests the use of the concepts of translatability and critical contextualisation as a means of checking uncritical inculturation that leads to syncretism. According to the authors of this article, when religious or cultural elements are incorporated into Christianity without compromising the Gospel, the result is inculturation and not syncretism.

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