



An appraisal of syncretism in the practice of religion in Nigeria

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Abstract

The mainline conservatives in Christianity always conceive syncretism as a practice which contaminates or dilutes Christian religion with elements that are incompatible with the gospel. In taking this stance, particularly in Nigeria, two basic mistakes are made. The first mistake is to identify the western culture with “sacred tradition”. The second mistake is to assume that western culture is a universal form of culture that has become part of what Christianity is. These mistakes call for the reappraisal of the concept and practice of syncretism in addition to raising the question: which religion is pure without external influences? Applying analytical and historical methods the article makes a critical appraisal of the concept of syncretism in religion and its practice in Africa with focus on Nigeria. It offers dialogue as a way forward to achieve authentic spirituality in any religion one may opt for. The article concludes that most religions of the world are syncretistic and that the wind of the spirit blows where it will.

Keywords

conservative Christianity; syncretism; religions; Nigerian context; dialogue

Introduction

Syncretism is worldwide and it affects almost any two religions that meet. It is also perceived in the encounters of two worldviews. The belief or practice is one of the chief challenges facing Religions in contemporary time, particularly in Nigeria and Africa in general. The widespread syncretistic beliefs and practices in Africa may have informed the theme of the 2010 Catechetical Week Programme of the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria. In the hastily edited brochure, the 2010 Catechetical Week Theme was: “Syncretism: A Challenge to the Christian Faith”. The organizers noted that no religion is as pure or original as not to find its elements outside

the confines. Expressing reservations and negative disposition towards the reality of syncretism, they note: “unfortunately, we are faced with a stark reality that the Christian faith did not permeate the culture of our people well enough, thus there is such confusion and a mirage of different practices while professing Christianity. This can be seen in our lifestyles and beliefs particularly in times of difficulties in life (2010 Catechetical Week program, 3rd–10th October:4).

The reality and complexity of the challenge posed by syncretism to the spread of Christian faith are often downplayed as lack of faith on the part of Christians and are attributed to the absence of proper catechesis, as if catechesis, preaching, and instruction were the total answer. The insight of Mbiti (1991) comes to the fore here. For him syncretism is inherently like a familiar spirit to all people on earth: “Even within Africa itself, religion takes on different forms according to different tribal settings. For that reason, a person from one setting cannot automatically and immediately adjust himself to or adopt the religious life of other people in a different setting. Even if they are converted to another religion like Christianity or Islam, they do not completely abandon their traditional religion immediately: it remains with them for several generations and sometimes centuries (14–15). The observation of Mbiti (1991) remains plausible and valid till date in most areas of Christian dominance in Nigeria. Hence, Sharpe (1986:2) notes that “differences of country and race and language would inevitably mean differences of religion.” The practice of syncretism in Africa today is as a result of culture change. And it has ushered in the age of cultural hybridization. Put another way, theologically untenable syncretistic beliefs and practices may not vanish quickly; syncretism cannot be wished away. As Quadri (2013:29) says, “In spite of the profession of Christianity and Islam, many Nigerians are involved in syncretism; they outwardly display Islam or Christianity while they are inwardly deeply entrenched in traditional religion.”

In the light of the foregoing, this article, applying historical and analytical methods makes a critical appraisal of the concept of syncretism in Religion and its practice in Africa with focus on Nigeria. Then it offers a brief sketch of the way forward for Christian religion and any other religion that perceives the practice as negative. In conclusion, the article submits that

no one can box the spirit or limit the work of God because the wind of the spirit blows where it wills.

Theoretical framework

Written materials on society and change in belief practices in ancient Africa usually hinge on the influence of external forces in the elimination of socio-cultural and religious institutions considered as nasty and the enthronement of new ones seen as dynamic and progressive. Augustine of Hippo, born in 354 AD was among the early scholars to articulate the idea of social change and what propelled historical change. As the proponent of the concept of divine providence, Augustine argued that the trend of human history is directed by beings rooted in the spiritual realm. In his submission, the meaning of this line of thought is that God is the cause of all changes. This line of thought ruled the world till the 18th century when the era of enlightenment became a challenge (Mbakwe 2005).

The outstanding minds that shaped the enlightenment period were Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel. Kantian-Hegelian theory emphasized the shift from spiritual agency to humans as the agents of historical change. Karl Marx and Frederick Engel stepped in and gave economic interpretations to Kantian-Hegelian theory of change. As noted by Marx and Engel, any change in society is propelled by the conflict between classes in society, and the most essential factor of this conflict is group economic interest (Thingan 1981:82). Furthermore, O'Brien and Shannon (2010:94) saw historical change within the context of mutual relations of nations and cultures.

Be that as it may, a number of scholars of African studies place socio-cultural and religious changes in traditional African settings on colonialism and missionary expansionism. Therefore, the two basic perspectives of change in Africa are: the neo-Marxist school and the Orthodox school (Mbakwe 2005:7). Nwabughuogu (1993:5-18), in his examination of change, particularly in Nigeria saw responses and initiatives as important factors of change in pre-colonial and colonial Africa. Thus, this article rides on the framework that the shock of external influence on the ways of life of the people contributed significantly to the present-day problem

of syncretism in Africa, if at all, syncretism is a problem. As Asiegbu (2007:139) correctly observed, “the resultant effects of decades of continued imperialism made enormous inroads into the African psyche and defaced African worldview: Not only did Africans lose their humanity, but they also imitated European cultural values and even exaggerated them.” The consequence of the obnoxious influence of external forces on the socio-religious and cultural life of the African is the widespread practice of syncretism in African-Christian faith living. Orobator (2008:74) buttressed the foregoing thus, “while it is convenient for some Africans to profess a nominal adherence to Christianity, in times of socio-economic and cultural distress this superficial profession of Christian faith easily gives way to familiar traditional religious practices, which Christianity claims to have superseded. Jesus Christ seems to disappear from crisis situations in the lives of some African Christians.” This is always the case because the only new religious thing that the missionaries brought to Africa seems to be Jesus Christ, not God. Nigerians of various cultures and Africans knew God long before the advent of missionaries. In the practice of syncretism, Nigerian Christian seems to be asking: “God we know; ancestors we acknowledge; but who exactly are you for us, Jesus Christ of Christianity?”

Christianity and Islam in Africa

The advent of Christianity and Islam in Africa is a well-articulated body of knowledge. There are many materials, both academic and religious, on the missionary activities of both religions in Africa. There are some other written works that focus on how Christianity and Islam became the dominant religions in most countries in Africa. One of the most visible works is the one edited by An-Na'im (1999), *Proselytization and Communal Self-Determination in Africa*. The work recognizes religion to include various traditional, cultural, and customary practices that could be adapted in various dimensions. It sees Christianity, particularly in Nigeria, as a religion that has transformed into a model of revivalist, evangelical and more radical (An-Na'im 1999:246). It went further to add that in the marketplace of religions in Africa, the rooms of contextualization and adaptation remain very wide.

Going further, the work sees Islam in Africa as the religion of the majority which is very debatable. It also recognized other traditions in Africa with different languages, adding that “religious pluralism is an important defining feature of the social landscape of contemporary Africa” (An-Na’im 1999:229). In Nigeria, Christianity and Islam arrived at different times and they both have made converts among the adherents of the indigenous religion and thereby creating a fertile ground for syncretism. It is not the intention of this study to overburden the discussion by reproducing the history of how Christianity and Islam came to Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Such effort would end up without adding much illumination to the theory and practice of syncretism in Africa. The concern here is to highlight the basic teachings and contents of both religions that make the reality of syncretism a given in Africa.

Jesus is the central figure in Christianity. He was a Galilean preacher who concerned himself to calling people to repentance. He refused to concern himself to those needs of the society which are met by organized religion. As Vermes (2003:11) puts it, “... there is no evidence, in my reading of the Gospels, that would point to any particular involvement by Jesus in the revolutionary affairs of the zealots, though it is likely that some of his followers may have been committed to them and have longed to proclaim him as king messiah destined to liberate his oppressed nation.” In the light of the foregoing, one notes that Jesus was a faithful Jew committed to the love of God whom he called father-abba. He also encouraged his listeners to have confidence in that God without necessarily discarding one’s identity, culture, and tradition. Again, Vermes (1999:13) writes, “... a challenge to Christianity, though it may not be its primary purpose, or intended at all. The implied challenge is that, if Christians wish to return to the historical Jesus, they must also return, in some measure, to the Judaism in which he lived and moved and had his being.” The climate here raises the issue of the value, theory, and practice of syncretism. Further illumination is added when one explores the metamorphosis of Jesus the Jew into the Christ of Christianity in the works of Paul, John, and the rest of the New Testament writers (Powell 2009:79–80). To make the explorations immediately would be going beyond the scope and limit of the article. It suffices to note that Christianity as a religion is highly syncretistic within the context of its

central figure and the circumstances that led to the emergence of the religion.

On the other hand, Islam, unlike Christianity, did not accept the religious texts of its forerunner religions. On the contrary, the religion posits that the traditions of Judaism and Christianity have been garbled where they disagree with the Glorious Quran. In this regard, Segal (2004:640) captures the watchword of Islam's faith thus: "there is no god but God, and Muhammad is His apostle." With this declaration, Islam claims to rank as the last and foremost of the Western monotheisms. Yet, it worships the same God as Judaism, Christianity, and African Religion. The concepts of revelation and prophetism exist in Islam as in other religions.

Implicitly, Islam claims that the revelation given to the prophet is the fullest and most complete revelation that benefits everyone. Thus, Islam in its classical form takes a liberal view of indigenous traditions like African religion than Christianity did in Africa and Nigeria in particular. Put another way, the ultimate aim of introduced religions in Africa was to take its new converts a considerable distance from their cultural and spiritual roots; yet in Islam and Christianity one finds conducive grounds that breeds syncretism. Functionally, therefore, both Islam and Christianity in Africa have an ever-wider degree of adaptation and freedom to reinterpret its contents within the context of African worldview just to continue to answer religions of conversion.

One thing is clear: Islam and Christianity have to become African, including the interpretations of its contents, in order to make meaning and become relevant to the natives. Hence, the practice of syncretism continues to flourish.

What is syncretism?

It was the historian-philosopher, Herodotus (c. 484–425 BC) who laid the foundation for the practice of syncretism. He gave a cryptic description of the religious practices and customs of the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Persians during his time. Not only did he describe what he saw and was told; he exhibited more than a passing interest in exotic religious phenomena (Sharpe 1986:4). As the father of syncretism, Herodotus was an initiate into

the various mysteries of the religions he encountered during the course of his peregrinations. As Sharpe (1986) submits, “he believed that Greek culture and religion had been derived in large measure from Egypt. He identified Greek gods and goddesses with their Egyptian prototypes – Zeus with Amon, Apollo with Horus, Hephaistos with Ptah, and many more,” just as in Nigeria, some people identify Jesus Christ of Christianity with “Moremi” of Yoruba ontology. In other words, syncretism is about culture meeting culture, and the necessary efforts some people are bound to make to interpret the one culture from the perspective of the other.

At the outset of Christian religion, diversity of nations and cultures were attracted to the Christian gospel. The nations included Medes, Elamites, Greeks, and Africans and so on. In this situation, Christian religion demonstrated an in-depth appetite for absorbing materials from other religious traditions. Therefore, there was constant need to return to the central position that Jesus Christ occupied in Christianity. The inability of any age to appreciate the centrality of Jesus Christ in Christian faith results in a bewildering negative syncretism. In other words, the development of a clear conception of the person of Jesus Christ that makes him feel at home within the framework of cultures in Nigeria and Africa remains a challenge. Harnack’s submission confirms that assured of her own distinctive character, the church believed herself able now to deal more generously with men, saints, and intercessors, who were thus semi-gods, poured into the church. Local cults and holy places were instituted. The different province of life was distributed afresh among guardian spirits. The old gods returned; only their masks were new. 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 (Harnack 1908:317). Harnack’s assessment of Christianity in this period projects her as syncretistic in developing multiple cultural traditions congenial to this message, yet the religion is not attached to any one culture. This is because the context of Christianity as a religion is not culture but a message, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

In the light of the above, other religions and cultures fertilize the ground for the Good News, the new grain, and seed to take its root and grow to be a mighty tree. In other words, Christianity has shown itself to be

syncretistic. It reveals a special kind of syncretism which may be described as syncretism of a universal religion with one name, the name of Jesus Christ summing up everything. Therefore, syncretism, seen as an external and primarily intellectual process of amalgamation is a positive element more so in the study of religions and less in the practice of Christian faith.

As all growth necessarily involves mutation, proclamation of new religious truth and identity also involves syncretism (Nwosu 2013:83). Syncretism is the function of place and circumstance rather than of the lapse of time. Legrand (2000:11) argues this point very succinctly when he says that:

The Israelite legal culture participated in the concern for justice of the surrounding world in general, emerged out of it, and continued to develop in symbiosis with that environment. It was rather a matter of shared life and common regard for justice.

Put another way, syncretism helps religions to find unitive elements within while projecting diversified pluralism. Thus, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and many other religions are said to be syncretistic religions. In this regard, Lefebure (2000:180) explains that borrowing perspectives from other religious traditions has been an age-old practice: “If religions, like all institutions, are ongoing self-organizing systems open to the flow of materials through them, then it is natural for them to borrow and appropriate expressions of truth, goodness, and beauty from the environment, while also rejecting elements that appear to threaten their identity.”

Understanding syncretism

Scrutinizing literature on theological exchanges, religion and missions highlights the proper definitions of the term “syncretism” with subtle and varying ways in which the term has been used by scholars. The proper definition of the term and what it signifies including the theological issues that makes it problematic is the focus of this sub-heading.

The term “syncretism” comes from the Greek word: *synkratein* which means to pour together. It is related to pouring one form of liquid substance into another just like pouring water into wine, thereby obtaining an entirely different substance which is neither purely water nor solely wine (Mokotso 2009:11).

From this etymological meaning, syncretism in religion came to mean a tendency to water-down, confuse or mix religious doctrines and rituals. Syncretism involves the synthesis of different religious forms, beliefs, and practices. The term is a contentious and contested one. Some see it as the Christian traditions which are believed to be “inauthentic” because of the presence of local ideas and practices. Others see it as the outcome of resistance to cultural dominance.

Generally, syncretism is understood negatively from theological point of view preferring terms like acculturation, inculturation or inter-culturality (Dorr 2000:98–100). The missionary account of the American priest, Vincent Donovan in the late 1960s and the reactions that followed years later comes to mind. The theological reactions highlight the problematic nature of the reality of syncretism.

Donovan (1926–), who is now 95 years, worked with the Masai people in the East Africa along the Tanzanian-Kenyan border. He designed a way of presenting the good news to the *Masai* that he believed would be appropriate to their situation. According to him, “the evangelization of the *Masai* would be quite similar to that described in the Acts of the Apostles. It would be like a new beginning which would lead to a genuine inculturation of the gospel in *Masai* culture, one that would respect all that is best in that culture and would not disrupt that traditional way of life” (Donovan 1994:51). The idea and effort of Donovan culminated in the writing of the book titled: *Christianity Rediscovered*.

Several years later, among professional missionaries and theologians including Cardinal Ratzinger, who is now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, Donovan’s idea of presenting the bare message of Christianity became a sign of contradiction. The human salvation anchored on a historical paradigm around Jewish history became the issue in addition to the close association between the gospel and Western culture. Could one not see salvation in cosmic terms which would be more in line with indigenous religions of Africa?

Against this background and question, Ratzinger (1995:5–6) expresses reservations about the word: inculturation and the whole idea of “the theology of incarnation”. He proposed inter-culturality instead in an effort to guard against the challenge and reality of syncretism. In his opinion,

with syncretism Christianity would be contaminated or diluted with elements of non-Christian religions which are incompatible with the gospel (Ratzinger 1998:150). For him, those who speak of inculturation or the theology of incarnation have a wrong conception of the faith or the gospel. They see it as quite independent of culture and therefore as something that can be inserted in a whole variety of different cultures. He notes that “with Christianity there comes a doubling of cultures” (Ratzinger 1995:5). He means here that every Christian now lives in two cultural worlds—one’s historic culture and the new one of faith. He concludes that the historical contribution of Western culture to Christianity has become part of what Christianity is.

Schineller (1992) supports the idea that rejects syncretism as an appropriate word to highlight inculturation. For him, syncretism, presupposes the replacement of critical and basic elements of the Gospel in the contextualization process by religious elements from the receiving culture. He describes syncretism as the unjustifiable merging of irreconcilable belief systems and practices or fusion of incompatible doctrinal elements or mingling of authentic notions and realities of the revealed faith with other religious claims. Put another way, elements of another religion are extracted raw without being screened critically through the lenses of Christian orthodoxy. At the end, the basic Christian teachings are diluted or entirely lost. In itself syncretism, has to be understood as a process of rejecting Christ or Christian teaching, Schineller (1992) argued.

Therefore, syncretism from theological prism constitutes religious infidelity. It implies an inauthentic principle of combining bits of various creeds, ideologies and views including those contradicting in order to formulate a doctrine that is completely new. In this regard, theologians believe that syncretism is far beyond the scope and even deviate from the aim of inculturation, which has been promoted by African Theologians (Umoh 2013:33). The variation in the usage of the term in theological circle revolves around a combination of beliefs and practices that are incompatible with the Gospel message. The theological pendulum swings around the contents that are expressions of unbelief and rejection of the Gospel message; as a process, they are largely unavoidable in relation to culture change; and they often reflect vital and central values of a society that demands recognition and respect (Luzbetak 1996:360).

In dealing with syncretism, the well-known theologian and anthropologist, Shorter (1988) holds that Christianity, being a historical religion, necessarily has its own cultural patrimony which he describes as “an accumulation of meanings and images which derive from a variety of cultural sources” (Shorter 1988:65). For him, this patrimony is variable and changing; and it is not to be identified with sacred tradition. He recommends constant reformulation in the light of other cultures. “As the church moves forward in time and outward to other cultures, some elements of the patrimony should be retained, some should be reformulated, and some, having outlived their usefulness, should be slugged off” (Shorter 1988:64).

In his classic study of the Church and the meaning of culture, Luzbetak (1996) explores the relationship between Christianity and various cultures. He notes that any synthesis of religious beliefs and practices is syncretistic, and, in this regard, he sees Christianity itself to be a syncretistic religion, the combination of Judaism, new ideas taught by Jesus Christ and his followers, and the many later cultural accretion and theological development and recombination of beliefs and practices that have occurred over the centuries (Luzbetak 1996:360).

Historians and religious studies scholars correctly observe that syncretism is a feature of all religions. This observation has been difficult to accept in theological circles. For theologians, the Gospel has priority over the indigenous culture and aims at Christianizing cultural content rather than culturizing the Gospel (Luzbetak 1996:370).

In this article from the prism of comparative religious studies, syncretism is not used in the negative sense. It is reappraised positively following Goosen’s (2000) thought that syncretism may have negative meaning just like the word discrimination which has acquired negative application of being related to unjust treatment while people may be advised to be discriminative in what they eat, drink or view. Syncretism as used in the field of social sciences and humanities, particularly comparative religious studies, refer to the situation when “the facts of a fusion of beliefs or practices are reported” (Goosen 2000:149). The basic concern over syncretism conceals the cultural process while imposing theological interest that do not explain those cultural processes to the extent that theological explanations do not relate to the actual cultural axioms and leave the consequential

cultural formation largely unaffected by theological judgments. When applied positively syncretism and the preferred theological term like interculturality as suggested by Ratzinger (1995) may have the same meaning of bringing out something new when Christian teaching is fused with cultural beliefs.

The remaining subheadings of this article ride on the insight of Stewart and Shaw (2005) that religious scholars would always be at home to label many instances of inculturation “syncretism” as long they involve the combination of diverse traditions in the area of religion. Syncretism denotes equal and mutual borrowing. Hence, religious scholars would continue to use the term to explain religious synthesis in any human context.

Religious and cultural landscape of Nigeria

Nigeria is a very vast country. It has a population running into millions in thirty-six states and Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Each of the states has various dialects and different cultures and people. When all these factors are put into consideration, it becomes quite intriguing to talk about syncretism in Nigerian context. Therefore, the religious and cultural geography of Nigeria is better appreciated as multicultural and multireligious. Following Orobator’s (2008:140) stream of thought, when it comes to Africa, and by inclusion Nigeria, “diversity best characterizes its geographical, cultural, and religious maps.”

Almost every Nigerian exists with a double religious heritage – the indigenous and the introduced faiths. The heritage is part of what informed many observers and writers to describe the people of Nigeria as very notoriously religious. The validity of the observation manifests itself in many ways. Anyone flying into Nigeria for the first time either through Lagos or Abuja International Airport cannot but be charmed by the number of religious places like cathedrals and mosques depicting the citizens and the country with “strong and profound sense of the divine that pervades the ordinary lives of many” (Orobator 2008:140). The intense religious and cultural awareness in Nigeria is so overwhelming that one can see, feel, and touch it in the manner people worship, sing, and dance. Discussing African spiritual landscape in general, Orobator gives insight that strongly

includes Nigeria as a country “charged with a palpable spiritual energy; this energy comes from faith in the existence of many spiritual realities: gods, goddesses, deities, ancestral spirits and so on” (2008: 141). Most communities in Nigeria, accepting that spirits are present in their midst and everywhere, still perform ritual of revering the good spirits and appeasing the malevolent and angry ones. The essence of the ritual worship is to maintain harmonious relationship with the invisible cosmic forces that are virtually regarded as gods and goddesses. People also seek favours from the deities through worship. In this regard, if Nigeria’s religious and cultural spirituality derives from the awareness of the fact that human beings are not alone in the universe, then the issue of syncretism would always manifest. For most Nigerians, “religion is a matter of practice; it happens in the ordinary events and experiences of daily life. To live is to be religious; to be religious is to greet God with many names in the multiple circumstances of one’s life here and now” (Orobator 2008:141).

With this religious and cultural diversity that forms the characteristic nature of Nigerian spirituality; one cannot run away from the reality of syncretism. Thus, there are obvious and crucial points of continuity and discontinuity in the religious practice of an average Nigerian (Lane 2011:224). It is not a uniformed experience; it unfolds with every echo of God’s presence resounding in the ancestral hills and caves where one encounters the great Earth Spirit.

Christian or Islamic spirituality draws on elements of African religion. The introduced or missionary religions draw from the rich resources of spiritual, cultural, and ethical values that are already present in African religion. Hence, syncretism is more of a positive outcome than negative.

Attitudes to syncretism

Attitudes or approaches to syncretism are dependent upon the social location of the theologian or the person pontificating. In history, pronouncements on syncretism have been made by those in privileged positions of power within religions. They are those described as conservatives; their concern is defence of the institutional knowledge and integrity. In the cosmo-religious space that centres on syncretism,

the conservatives exercise divine authority as “power-over” rather than “power-with.” In this approach the pneumatological perspective of issues is suppressed (Doak and Houck 2012:82). In other words, power has been a critical issue in any re-evaluation of syncretism projecting Eurocentric worldviews. An instance is the disposition of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, one time prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith who became Pope Benedict XVI. He expressed reservations about the Catholic use of meditation techniques coming from other religious traditions. He expressed the apprehension in his letter to the Catholic bishops of the world, “Concerning Certain Aspects of Meditation.” Lefebure (2000:179) notes: “while the tone of the letter was largely cautious and admonitory and at times very negative in its characterization of other traditions, Ratzinger repeated the principle of Vatican II that the Catholic Church “rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other traditions;” and he clearly affirmed the legitimacy of Christian use of meditation practices from other traditions as long as these are integrated into an orthodox Christian spirituality.” The conservatives, therefore, perceive religious identities and truth as fixed, sealed and delivered once-for-all (Fabella and Sudirtharajah 2000:193).

In contrast, most scholars from the developing countries, formed within the framework of post-colonial struggles, see religious identities as dynamic. This approach conceives religious practices as empty if they do not touch people’s lives. As people-centred, religious identities are relational and integrative. Religious meaning emerges within a process of communal interaction and social judgments (Fabella 2000:193). In this case, syncretism, seen as a process of integrating the gospel into cultural codes, is an inevitable part of living the faith within the matrix of a particular area. Njoku, discussing the pneumatological perspective of the divine in the encounter of cultures, agrees that the form that “Christianity assumes in any given culture is largely determined by a particular cultural matrix” (Njoku 2012:82). Put another way, there may be no such thing as Christianity expressed in one exclusive, normative culture for all people.

Dialogue as a way forward

There is life-giving as well as death-dealing syncretism which resonance the two forms of feedback that allow self-organizing systems to maintain a balance between order and openness. Negative feedback provides for continuity and change. Positive feedback incorporates and amplifies input, putting into the system in ways that powerfully increase its effect. Too much negative feedback leads to complete stasis and death; too much positive feedback leads to turbulence and disorder. A balance between the two provides stability and continuity amid openness, growth, and change (Lefebure 2000:176). Unhealthy accommodation of the gospel to extreme individualism and materialism among Christians is a clear example of death-dealing syncretism. Therefore, there is urgent need for Christians to engage across cultures and critique the various praxis that are in the name of Christianity.

Syncretism as generally seen to be the synthesis of two or more historically diverse beliefs and practices need to be present on the table of dialogue. The opinion of Sanneh (2003:18) resonates here, “Africans best responded to Christianity where the indigenous religions were strongest, not weakest, suggesting a degree of indigenous compatibility with the gospel, and an implicit conflict with colonial priorities.” This informed King’s argument that it is from the premise of syncretism that genuine religious coexistence and harmony would be achieved. He submits that: “it is from the premise of a convergence of religions, a confluence of the different currents, not in the sense of a merger that a meaningful development of relationship with each other exists” (King 1997:109). It is not out of place, therefore, to bring in the concept of syncretism in interfaith dialogue. One might say here that in spite of the religious differences of the world, syncretism could be a platform of collaborative working for justice and peace. Such development through dialogue would include implicit life-sustaining and energizing spirituality.

Conclusion

From the foregoing submissions, it is obvious that regardless of one’s theological background, the dominance of the Holy Spirit in the

proclamation of the Good News cannot be glossed over. Pneumatology here becomes an essential platform in the understanding of syncretism. The intrinsic plurality of cultures that the Good News encountered is the work of the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit also guarantees their compatibility with the gospel even when human beings see such as syncretistic. Therefore, through life-giving syncretism, the world comes to realize that it is of the very nature of the gospel to speak to all human cultures. Syncretism in religions is better understood as a different brick being used for the building of a single temple where the one God abides through the spirit (Eph. 4:15–16). In all that could be said about syncretism, what is certain and needs to be fully understood is that history and interiority are two equally valid ways of experiencing the divine. The God of history is also the ground of being.

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