RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN OUR RURAL CHURCH COMMUNITIES: PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

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Introduction

There are often absorbing risks and fears when exploring the concept of religious syncretism. Nevertheless, the proposal in this paper is to briefly highlight that the notion of syncretism is a problematic reality immanent in the crossroads of any religion; secondly, that syncretism has both negative and positive implications; thirdly I wish to suggest a few pastoral strategies and insights to reduce tensions and frictions between Christianity and cultural practices in our different rural communities in the name of ‘religious syncretism’.

However, there are some crucial questions that cannot escape our curiosity. In the first place, to what extent does religious syncretism militate against the growth of Christian faith in our rural church communities? Secondly, are there possibilities of promoting understanding and bridging the conflictual situations? And finally, how do we make Christian faith to be incarnated in ways appropriate to local needs? It is quite obvious that the communication of the gospel message to people with different culture and mentality is a commitment that requires deep and serious theological and pastoral exploration in order to elicit sustainable peaceful growth in the faith. Christianity ought to be a way of life and an identity for us. The realisation of this makes the problem of syncretism remote.

Understanding Religious Syncretism

I have been reflecting on the concept of ‘syncretism’ over many years in order to find out what it means really. I made a decision to detach myself from religious or denominational attachments or emotions so as to be able to arrive at something objective as well as something that can be helpful to our own people’s faith problem. The more I try to follow this step, the more confused I become. I encountered a lot of impasse in the process of defining what ‘religious syncretism’ connotes. As a theologian, I thought it could have been an easy task for me but it is not. As a way out, I went into Church history to search for traces of religion and
syncretism. To my greatest amazement, I discovered that it is a notion pervasive in the major religions of the world especially in the middle ages. Series of crusades were carried out because of the accusation of admixture or bringing foreign elements to a particular religion. I came to a situation where I concluded it has been a problem of the ages which has not been properly addressed in many areas. It is an issue that needs pastoral and theological approach. And so, I am adopting these approaches to propose ways that proffer helpful solution.

For many Christian theologians, the word ‘syncretism’ is not only seen as a constructed fusion of religion but also as a risk to genuine Christianity. Syncretism even though is a “very confusing and tricky term.”¹ In its various usages, it could be viewed as a fusion of differing systems of belief or a process by which elements of one religion are assimilated into another religion resulting to a change in the fundamental tenets or nature of the religions in question. The Hodder Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms holds that “…syncretism of the gospel occurs when its essential character is confused with elements from the culture. In syncretism the gospel is lost as the church simply confirms what is already present in the culture.”² With the above definition, the question that arises is how do we “find a spiritual quality of faith that can survive and flourish within the new complexity of culture?”³ Christianity obviously is a religion of contact. The problem of syncretism is encountered with each new outreach of Christianity with other cultures. This is not surprising because “the gospel is not good news unless it engages the culture of its hearers in a way which takes seriously that culture’s identity and integrity.”⁴ In this perspective, syncretism can be contrasted with contextualization or inculturation, that is, the practice of making Christianity relevant to people in their own culture. The underlying concept here is ‘relevancy’. If this is so, it presupposes that the dynamic interaction between the gospel and human cultures becomes a task of great importance. Jesus Christ commissioned the apostles to “go out to the whole world and proclaim the good news”. In the process of the proclamation of the good news they are to meet people of different languages, colours, cultures and worldviews. What will be the situation? Can there be initial points of interaction?

There is need to distinguish carefully between syncretism and contextualisation or inculturation. These theological concepts do not communicate the same message. Even though the gospel transcends all cultural embodiments,

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in reality a pure encounter with a culture-free gospel is impossible. Therefore, for contextualisation to become effective in any religious circle, ‘syncretism’ is inevitable. But the grand question here becomes the meaning and interpretation of what we hold as syncretism. I tend to see an inherent hermeneutical problem in various understanding and application of the concept of religious syncretism to what is happening in some of our rural communities.

**No Wall without At Least a ‘Lizard’**

Ideally, it is easy to discuss about a religion without any syncretistic element. However, historical overview and study of different world religions prove that there is no religion without syncretism, both in respect of its origin and its subsequent history. This goes to a large extent to affirm that no religion is a package completely ready-made from heaven. This notwithstanding, I use the concept of a reptile lizard in the subtitle as an icon to depict my personal approach to religious syncretism and delicate pastoral problems that resurface in our rural communities. Nevertheless, the harmfulness or the harmlessness of our local lizards in our different walls may depend on how we approach or confront the lizard. All the same, the phenomenal truism is that the lizard is always present in our walls whether furbished or not furbished.

How I wish the concept of the lizard above will offer a little insight to the problem we are trying to explore. Eugene Hillman calls our attention to the fact that “Christianity, no doubt because of its missionary dynamic and incarnational model, offers a more dramatic example of religious syncretism.” Furthermore, in his sketch of the historical development of Christianity, Hans von Soden holds that “in fact Christianity was a syncretistic religion from the very beginning, insofar as Judaism, which at that very period was very complex in its manifestation and far from the uniformity of the later anti-Christian rabbinism, had already become syncretistic itself.” It makes a little sense to accept that syncretism presupposes encounter and confrontation. The concept of evangelisation as a process of bringing the gospel to the people where they are rather than where you would like them to be provokes sober reflection. However, to a lot of fundamentalists, it sounds painful to hear something like this, because to them the word syncretism symbolises corruption of the ‘absolute’ truth and therefore always carries a negative connotation. To some reasonable extent they are right, in the sense that syncretism carries without doubt, implications of

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impurity and the capacity towards mixing seemingly incompatible cultural elements with Christian faith.

**Two Dimensions of Syncretism**

**Negative Dimension**

Every coin has two sides. More so, every knife serves both as a good servant and as a bad servant. The difference, however, lies on the ability of the user to know how to intelligibly handle the knife to bring the best out of it. A perfunctory and assuming attitude can cause unpremeditated damages and bruises. Syncretism as an outcome of contextualisation retains a negative connotation if the loyalties expressed to Christianity are diverse and confused. Healthy cultural elements are welcome in the worship of God. However, any element of the people’s culture that holds any human person hostage or denies his/her fundamental rights and rational freedom can never be promoted or allowed to survive by any true religion.

Looking at its negative influence, syncretism is not only a threat to the distinctive character of the Christian message but also an awful diminution of its goal. It is seen from many quarters as decline of the pure faith. From this viewpoint, the incorporation or accommodation of beliefs and practices that are incompatible or in serious tension to Christian values and insights leads to the point of losing its original identity. Inculturation, however, should not mean an unqualified acceptance of all the features of the existing culture. Human cultures usually involve features that need to be purified and corrected in the light of the gospel. For example, one might think of practices such as sorcery, human sacrifice, slavery, sacred prostitution, caste system, polygamy, and polyandry, oppression of widows and denial of their rights, etc. These are evils in themselves.

Therefore, Christianity has every right to ward off any element/s conceived as threat or antithetical to her true Christian identity and the growth of the church in our communities. However, this could be achieved not through violence but in a spirit of constructive dialogue.

**Positive Dimension**

The above negative implications notwithstanding, Christianity loses its missionary dimension when it ceases to encounter people in their respective cultures and worldviews. The gospel has to become part of a local culture and yet maintain a ‘critical distance’ in order to uncover life-denying aspects of the culture in question. Jesus did not fight/condemn every Jewish religious and cultural practice but rather he fought for and condemned the ones that were obnoxious and oppressive in nature. Lack of this approach and consideration questions the validity of the theology of incarnation. More so, given the belief of Christians in incarnation and what it symbolises in the economy of salvation,
appropriation of positive cultural symbols and values and their religious expressions become part of conversion and contextualisation. However, the problem is not appropriation as such, but what those symbols and practices point at, and whether they function to enable Christian faith be entrenched in a particular culture, or confuse Christian identity and loyalty towards Jesus Christ.

The idea of a “pure gospel” unrelated to people’s way of life is an illusion. W. Pannenberg suggested that syncretism might even be seen as a positive characteristic in Christianity, because it is the way in which the universal Christian message incarnates within other cultures. He holds the view that Christian faith may be enriched in contact with other cultures by the influence and the challenging questions which come from them. In the same line of thought, Peter Van der Veer holds that syncretism can give answers to situations of societal strife seemingly caused by insurmountable differences in religious or cultural identities. It can lead to a discourse of tolerance and communal harmony.

In a way of synthesis, it is only the positive cultural values, which edify and promote human dignity and which in themselves do not conflict with Christian values could the process of inculturation (incarnation) become possible. Pope Paul VI, in his Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi, stated that in the light of the Gospel, the Church must appropriate all the positive values of culture and of cultures and reject those elements which impede development of the true potential of persons and peoples. Similarly, Pope John Paul II maintains that a faith that does not become culture is a faith that is not fully lived out. How can we, then, constructively accomplish these to minimise conflicts and still maintain authenticity in Christian faith and Christian identity?

Minimising Conflicts in our Different Rural Church Communities in the Name of ‘Syncretism’

The mission of Christianity is a direct follow-up of the mission of Jesus Christ. To understand this mission, we have to pick up our Bible once more and read the gospels. It is never a private individual mission but that of Jesus. Therefore, the spirit of Jesus should be the underlying paradigm in our Christian missions, commitments, and goals. He is a good shepherd who gathers rather than scatters, he bridges every gap; his presence brings joy, hope, and security to people that has been battered by hunger, poverty, sickness, injustice and insecurity. He was part of the people and shared their life-style: dressing, feeding,

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7 Gort et al, Dialogue and Syncretism, An Interdisciplinary Approach, 13.
music, ritual, language and values. He appreciated them as they were and that was why he was able to penetrate their lives and cultures and reformed the things oppressive and unjust in their system. How I wish the disseminators or carriers of the Christian message conform to this way of Jesus and respond to situations in a positive and creative fashion. Teilhard De Chardin remarks that “Christianity is not, as it is sometimes presented and sometimes practised, an additional burden of observances and obligations to weigh down and increase the already heavy load…”\(^{10}\) which people are carrying.

**Valuing What We Have**

Our departure from our home environment to other continents makes us appreciate the deep religiosity of our people, the liveliness, the prospective, the enthusiasm of Christianity whose future is all before it, whose problems are of growth and expansion. These challenge our pastoral plans and creativities towards sustaining the richness of our values and positive cultural potentials to consolidate the Christian faith and make it more acceptable and more appreciable in our local communities. This is a homework, which I suppose has been on and still ongoing but has never received sufficient incentives. It was Yves Congar who expressed that ‘faith is lived, clothed, enveloped, expressed in a culture.’\(^ {11}\) Doubtless, the faith is robustly growing, but it is still searching for understanding and identity.

I am of the opinion that Christian life must be based on the communities in which everyday life and work takes place. This makes the people have a sense of belonging and see Christianity and Christian rituals as something that reflect their worldviews and communicate meaning in their lives and not a contradiction to what they value and cherish.

**Unity, Not Division**

More so, we need to reflect on the reality that Christianity is supposed to bring unity and peace and not disintegration, to bring happiness and not sadness and mourning, to liberate and not to ostracise, to promote shared community living and values. In these perspectives, I wish to propose that priests/pastors and pastoral workers in our respective communities reflect on how they carry out their pastoral duties and their methods of approach in the exercise of their duties to realise these objectives. There could be insensitivities and arrogance when working with people in our rural communities. Such attitudes hamper true Christian objectives and create pastoral problems.

Out of misguided zeal and distorted comprehension, we can destroy positive values and ancient cultural monuments/icons that are treasured by the

\(^{10}\) Teilhard De Chardin, *Le Milieu Divine* (Fontana), 70.

people because of implicit assumptions. This could cause emotional and cultural pain. Authentic Christianity does not encourage inflicting pains on people. We have to be sensitive and make inquiries/research before acting less we destroy the faith instead of building it up.

Transforming Power of Dialogue

The power of dialogue can never be undervalued when priests/pastors and pastoral workers exercise their duties within the community. Dialogue offers immense opportunities to understanding ourselves, the circumstances and the events around us. Even though the purpose is not always to reach a common conviction but to achieve an attitude of mutual respect, of mutual willingness to listen and to learn, of mutual readiness to cooperate for the well-being and harmony of the community. This approach lessens frictions and fosters enabling environment to faith growth and revival. Different Popes in the Church have often spoken of the existence of dialogue between Christianity and culture. Equally, they call for the evangelisation of cultures, asserting the necessity of regenerating cultures by an encounter with the gospel. Human cultures impoverish themselves when they exclude the riches of other traditions. Conversely, they always stand to benefit from opening themselves to the truth and goodness found in any cultural tradition, especially a tradition that has been leavened by Christian faith.12

Dialogue is a recognised method of evangelisation. It is a way of making spiritual and human contact. The outcome can sometimes be very amazing. John B. Kariuki Wakarega affirms that “the challenge demands that the evangelizer should not only be well-informed about the situation of the people being evangelised, but should also be aware of their contextual and cultural milieu. This knowledge is essential because it helps the evangelizer to address the relationship between evangelisation and the cultures and religious convictions these cultures enshrine.”13 The constructive result of dialogue depends on the clarity and intelligibility of what is communicated and the prudence, which makes allowances for the psychological and moral circumstances of hearers (Mt. 7:6). For instance, Avery Dulles lamented that in earlier centuries, missionaries tended to carry their own cultures with them. They did not clearly distinguish between the faith and its cultural expression. Converts were trained to express their newfound faith in the language and style of the missionaries, who came from the most part of Western Europe or, more recently, from North America. As a result, Christians in North and South America, Asia, and Africa tended to be highly

Europeans, or at least Westernised, and in many cases they remained small foreign enclaves estranged from the culture of their nation.\textsuperscript{14} Dialogue \textit{per se} is an exploration of the possibilities in the search for truth, and fundamental to this engagement is the recognition of difference and otherness. Genuine and fruitful dialogue cannot occur without the willingness to face the reality of the otherness.

Dialogue is often the key towards mutual understanding, respect, tolerance and harmonious co-existence wherever confluence of cultures become a reality of life. It is quite obvious that Christian message is often addressed to people with already an existing culture,\textsuperscript{15} which share a common language, customs, ways of social life, religious life, ways of understanding and interpreting the world they find themselves. As such, the communication and reception of the Christian message calls for a response from them as well. Analogically, dialogue can be likened to a visa which offers a traveller access to his/her destination. Without this travelling permit, an idea of crossing another country’s border becomes a wishful thinking far from reality. In a similar context, Catherine Cornille argues that the impulse to dialogue arises from the desire to learn, to increase one’s understanding of the other, of oneself, or of the truth. It thus presupposes humble awareness of the limitation of one’s own understanding and experience and of the possibility of change and growth.\textsuperscript{16}

In other words, it is not a mere sending of information, but a commitment that involves negotiating between people in order to foster understanding. This however, does not move forward in a linear fashion, but sometimes proceeds in a cyclical and somewhat jigsaw fashion. In the same line of thought, Donovan remarks that

Dialogue is no longer a luxury. It is a necessity in the world of today. No community or body on earth possesses absolute truth or the answer to the earth-threatening problems facing humankind. We must begin to look on “others possessing truth,” so that theirs might become ours, that we all might move out of the isolation in which we have been operating.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} Avery Dulles, \textit{The New World of Faith} (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2000), 114.
\textsuperscript{15} John S. Mbiti expresses the vehicular role of culture in reception and propagation of the Christian message. According to him “Our culture is the medium of receiving, diffusing, tuning in, and relaying the Gospel. Without culture we would not hear the Gospel, we would not believe the Gospel, and we would not inherit the promise of the Gospel.” John S. Mbiti, “Christianity and African Culture,” Kenneth Aman, ed., \textit{Border Regions of Faith: An Anthology of Religion and Social Change} (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 389.
\textsuperscript{17} Vincent J. Donovan, \textit{The Church in the Midst of Creation} (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 116-117.
Dialogue promotes genuine understanding and respectful listening. It helps to dissolve misunderstandings and prejudices. This dispositional approach inevitably deepens sacramental knowledge and understanding, and of course inspires a desire for the reception of the sacrament among the Igbo people. Though the path to dialogue is not easy, it is always a credible path to sustenance and appreciation in the midst of difference. David Lochhead views dialogue as a categorical imperative. According to him, there is no situation in which dialogue is not an appropriate relationship. There may indeed be situations in which dialogue is so undercut by our own resistance to dialogue that the relationship is never established. In whatever anyone sees it, there is no situation in which we escape from the dialogical imperative.\(^{18}\)

**The Value of Listening**

Listening is a positive feature of any human structure. Peace will be lacking wherever it is undermined and neglected. The tower of Babel collapsed because the people were no longer listening and understanding one another. Their proposed projects collapsed. Conflicts and wars erupt due to the fact that the parties involved could not listen to the voices of reason. The importance of being a good listener when living or working in any community needs to be highly developed and encouraged. Everyone is important and everyone deserves to be listened to. The faith given to the Church is not a private possession. It is a public trust to be passed on to others in very humane way.

_The New Oxford American Dictionary_ defines listening as “taking notice of and acting on what someone says: responding to advice or a request.” Listening involves making an effort by being alert and ready to hear something,\(^ {19}\) to hear somebody and to respond with respect to the other person expressing his/her beliefs, fears, pains and difficulties. Listening is not mere hearing and taking in the words spoken or gestured by the other party. It must address the whole message, which includes a deeper meaning that is often left unsaid. Even though it takes energy and commitment to listen really well, listening is one of the most powerful pastoral ministerial tools to demonstrate that one cares about the other person. Puchalski argues that

The most important skill is listening to the patient. In doing so, we need to put aside all the distracting thoughts and

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expectations of outcomes from our minds. In essence, we become receptacles into which the patient pours out, heart and soul, all of his fears, anxieties, despair, and pain.\textsuperscript{20}

Listening is a means of being present and acknowledging the humanity of the other person. Bill Kirkpatrick describes listening as “the key that ‘opens the way’ towards other people. It is an invaluable asset. Clearly, it is an art; with continual practice, it can become a great art, but for most people today, it is a lost art.”\textsuperscript{21} It is a spiritual magnetic and a re-creative force. It is sad to remark, far fewer of priests, pastors and pastoral agents are comfortable, or even think about their listening skill.

A lot of conflicts arise in our local church communities because of the inability to listen to one another, to consult and to read the signs of the time. The ability to listen to one another may even reduce prejudices or negative assumptions and unquestioned ideologies we may have about certain things. With listening skill, we discover that everyone is “understandable” and approachable. Listening is an art, but by achieving good listening skills religious leaders can inspire openness and trust within the communities they communicate the faith. This can facilitate diminution of conflicts in our local church communities.

\textbf{Education}

Education forms and informs the human mind and conscience. It can facilitate change of mentalities. Obviously, there can be cohesion when people are rightly educated. Knowledge is light while ignorance is obscurity. That is why it is important for priests, pastors, catechists and pastoral agents to commit themselves to collaborative and regular catechesis within the communities they work. It is culpable error to presume that everyone knows the right thing and that everyone thinks rightly. A position of this nature could be suicidal. People need to be taught. The mass media can also be used as another mode of communication in educating the people. However, no matter how effective this could be, it cannot take the place of person-to-person contact, which can reach the individual’s conscience. Tele-evangelists, it would seem, cannot achieve deep and lasting conversion without the follow-through provided by other factors, such as personal prayer, reading, and support of the faith-community.

The importance of catechesis can never be underestimated. It is obvious that it is because of ignorance and insufficient knowledge concerning Christian faith and local cultures that misunderstanding and conflict arise from time to time in our parish communities. In order to educate, you have to reach out and have

\textsuperscript{20} Christiana M. Puchalski, \textit{A Time for Listening and Caring: Spirituality and the Care of the Chronically Ill and Dying} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 232.

contact with the people. You have to convince them that you love them, that you are interested in their progress, happiness and what goes on around them. You have to identify with them in their joys and sorrows. Therefore, if periodic enlightenment forum in the form of seminar or symposium could be organised in different communities to deepen understanding and the rapport between Christianity and the local cultures, conflicts are bound to decline drastically. The work of priests, pastors and pastoral agents is to gather and feed the people in word and sacrament and not to scatter, starve and instil division in their lives.

The new media which play crucial role in the formation of the younger generation should be put into use. Electronics styles of communication are engendering a new mentality from which people accustomed to print culture are estranged. For the gospel message to be heard by this generation, it must be translated, as far as possible, into images and language that can be disseminated by film, radio, television, and computers. Centres of evangelisation should establish websites. It is pertinent to find ways to authenticate reliable presentation of the gospel and to prevent people from being misled by factual errors and false interpretations.

Conclusion

It is important to come with some conclusions at this point. Firstly, that contextualisation or inculturation if rightly understood is different from religious syncretism. The word syncretism sounds borrowed and imperialistic. Christianity does not encourage or promote syncretism in its faith life; rather, it searches in each culture, how to make itself better understood and appreciable. The gospel needs to root itself in our culture and never a captive to it. Secondly, syncretism can never be associated with the awareness and identity-consciousness that are rapidly growing with many Christians in our communities today. Even though tension between the universal gospel and local particularity is inevitable, the challenge is that the clergy and the laity should collaborate to minimise such and ensure that Christian faith becomes freed from the dehumanising and life-denying aspects of our local cultures and appropriate the life-affirming and positive values therein. If the points expressed above are reflected upon and put into practice, I think Christianity will be fully entrenched as a way of life in our society. This trend will gradually dissolve conflicts and unnecessary tensions in our different communities.