

syn- cret- tism:

the combination of different forms of belief or practice

How Much Syncretism Is Allowed?

Lynn D. Schmidt

Aidan was a superior student in the undergraduate degree program at the school where I taught intercultural studies. In fact, he was awarded the outstanding graduating senior distinction. So it was no surprise that such an astute question came from him. Aidan had just come from his evangelism class and had asked the instructor the question, "How much syncretism is allowed in the Church?" Aidan, however, was not satisfied with the answer.

The heart of the question lies in the age-old discussion of contextualization vs. syncretism. What one assesses as

good contextualization another will label syncretism and heresy. This discussion began in the early Church and has continued through today. The terms contextualization and syncretism “function on the boundary line between heresy and orthodoxy, with a strong suspicion that syncretists have crossed the line into heresy while contextualists have enabled people to experience new creativity and depth in their faith” (Heideman 1997, 38).

Good missiology would suggest that contextualization is the goal and is normally framed positively. Logically, this seems to suggest that rejecting syncretism should be a complemen-

with it. The *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* reports that the issue of contextualization and syncretism was prominent in a workshop held at their meeting in September 2009. Workshop moderator H. L. Richard referred to an “insider paradigm”—believers who retain their cultural involvement. The key is maintaining one’s faith in Jesus while living contentedly (legally and socially) within one’s society.

What answer did Aidan receive from his evangelism instructor? “None, of course.” No syncretism is allowed in the Church—the point being that the Church is to be pure and all that is be-

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tary goal, which is usually described in negative terms.

Of course, the issue is larger than just a theological question, and bleeds over into the practice of Christians. Lesslie Newbigin asks the question, “How far should the gospel be ‘at home’ in a culture, and how far should it resist domestication?” (1989, 144). The debate comes to light especially in the Majority World, where new believers strive to live in faith to Christ and yet retain their cultural identity.

One of the more prominent examples of this struggle is Messianic Judaism; however, former Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus are also wrestling

lied and practiced should be biblical. As the Church, we must never give in to syncretistic or sinful practices or imperfect beliefs.

My initial response was that we must always allow for some syncretism in the Church, because the earthly Church will never become completely without fault or failure while it remains on earth. My response was inadequate, but the question stimulated my thinking.

What Is Syncretism?

A general definition of syncretism suggests the blending of religious traditions. Simply put, a person who

draws from two or more belief systems at the same time is guilty of syncretism. He or she is reaching for the best of two religious worlds.

This type of syncretism was illustrated to me while I was among the people of Botswana and observed the way they sought physical healing. Botswana, being semi-arid, was hot and dry, and consequently people constantly used products to keep their skin moist. One useful product was Vaseline, which was often sold in small round tins. It was common to see people take out their small tins and dab a bit of the ointment somewhere on their faces or heads.

I thought nothing of it other than they were moisturizing their skin. However, a local pastor confronted me one Sunday, advising that we needed to do something about the large number of believers who were using *muti* (or medicine) from the witchdoctor (referred to as a traditional doctor in Botswana). He claimed it was so bad that you could even see them using it in church.

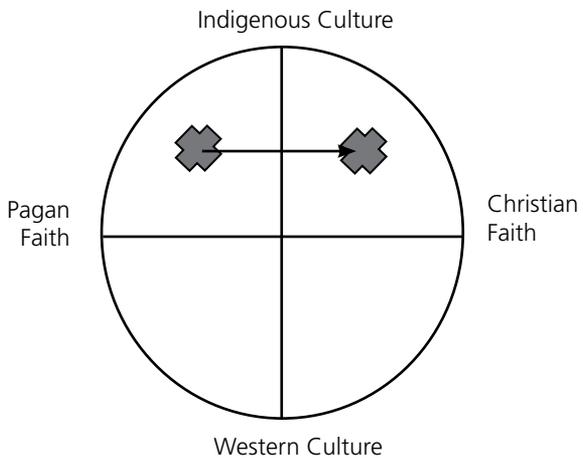
He explained further that traditional doctors used the Vaseline tins to distribute their healing concoctions, often mixed into the Vaseline. As an outsider cross-cultural minister, I thought the use of Vaseline tins was totally innocent, but to the insider local pastor, their use signified a syncretistic faith among his people.

If this is the extent of the meaning of syncretism, then I would

agree with the pastor who suggests we should allow no syncretism in the church. This type of blended system suggests an incomplete conversion or a simplistic faith without much depth or transformation of one's worldview.

I find a more appropriate explanation of syncretism in Darrell Whiteman's article, "Effective Communication of the Gospel amid Cultural Diversity" (1984). Whiteman articulates a culture/faith matrix by which effective communication of the gospel moves an indigene from the pagan/indigenous quadrant of the matrix to the Christian/indigenous quadrant (see illustration below). The goal is to communicate the Bible through indigenous cultural forms so that no cultural dislocation takes place.

However, an ethnocentric approach by a cross-cultural minister may introduce Western Christian forms without adequately conveying the associated Christian (biblical) meanings. In this scenario, an indigene is essentially converted to a Western form of Christianity. Whiteman suggests that syncretism may result through the ascription

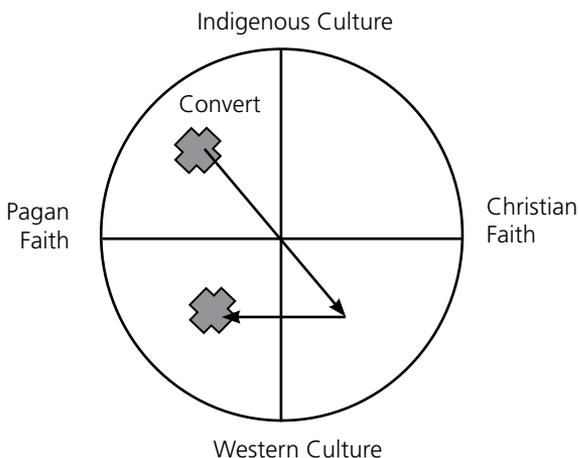


of local or indigenous meanings to Christian or Western forms used in the church (see illustration to the right).

In this case, the indigenous believer looks Christian by Western standards, but may internally attribute his or her own cultural understanding to the new Christian practices. Western forms of Christianity given indigenous meanings are syncretistic.

I was brought face to face with this issue while preparing a group of local pastors in Botswana for a large evangelistic gathering. Our plan was to minister physical healing in one of the services, and we were discussing the logistics of the service. Near the end of the training, I told the pastors I would provide vials of oil for anointing the seekers coming for healing. Suddenly, one local pastor erupted, "I will never anoint my people with oil for healing!" Initially shocked by his somewhat violent reaction to the use of oil, I asked for clarity.

While most of the experienced pastors accepted the customary use of anointing oil, this pastor and several newer pastors had a very legitimate fear. They feared that if they used oil to anoint the sick, their people would associate the act with magic. That truly would be syncretism: using the Christian form of anointing with oil but associating a worldview of magical manipulation to it. The pastor was wise and suggested that he wanted his people to know that healing was only by the grace of God through prayer.



I believe Whiteman's explanation of syncretism causes us to rethink our response to syncretism. Meanings communicated must be Christian, whether the form used is Western, Hebrew, or indigenous to any other culture.

Going back to Newbigin's perspective on the gospel and culture, he states, "There is no such thing as a pure gospel, if by that is meant something which is not embodied in a culture" (1989, 144). There is truth that is above culture, but for us to appropriate it, truth must have meaning within our realm of understanding (that is, the gospel is interpreted through cultural forms and structures).

Our struggle to communicate the gospel in cultural forms is not new and therefore, the debate between contextualization and syncretism is also not new. In fact, the struggle for Christian authenticity has been a long-standing missionary worry in each culture and society touched by the gospel. Wilbert Shenk summarizes,

This is understandable, for missionaries were encountering exotic cultures and try-

ing to communicate in strange languages. They learned early that terms important to the Christian faith either had no parallel in the other language or meant something quite different. They had to make many choices in working out a presentation of the gospel that was culturally and linguistically understandable and yet faithful to what they understood it to be. *Missionaries continually walked a tightrope between adaptation to culture and rejection of those features that could not be reconciled with the gospel.* An uncritical accommodation led to syncretism that diluted or denatured the gospel, while failure to adapt would have meant that the gospel remained foreign and inaccessible. (1999, 127, emphasis mine)

Walking that tightrope is essential for churches today. Shenk terms it "critical syncretism" (1999, 127) by which the Church communicates the gospel credibly through meaningful adaptation to the surrounding culture, maintaining the position of being salt and light to the culture rather than merely being a religious reflection of the culture.

If I take the view that syncretism has been and is in the Church, then my questions may rather need to be, "*How much syncretism should be expected?*" and "*What is the appropriate response to the syncretism found in the church?*"

Responses to New Questions

The Bible presents an ongoing struggle between contextualization and syncretism within the lives of the people of God. A Bible/theology colleague rightly points out that simply reading the Bible is a serious cross-cultural experience and the task of the Christian today is to re-contextualize the gospel. The Bible is contextualized in the "skin" of the ancient Hebrews and then of the first-century Greco-Roman world. The New Testament au-

thors struggled with contextualization of the gospel into new cultural settings, as we see in the multitude of problems and questions they must address. Amid a multitude of biblical examples of syncretism, I have settled on two.

Example 1: Exodus 32. Let's look briefly at the episode in Exodus 32, when the people of Israel break the covenant they had recently made with God. Because Moses is on the mountain with God for an extended amount of time, the people become doubtful of God and his leadership into the future. So, following the customs of the surrounding nations, they construct a golden calf to be their god, giving it the honor that rightfully belonged to Jehovah. This is clearly syncretism of the first type discussed above, "mixing and matching" pagan beliefs and practices with those revealed by God.

Example 2: Acts 8. Another stark example is in Acts 8 when Simon, a former sorcerer of Samaria, believes in Jesus and becomes baptized. Having seen the Holy Spirit fall on people who are touched by John and Peter, he seeks to receive the same power as the disciples. However, he seeks the gift wrongly, wanting to buy the power from them. Simon continues to act from his former worldview as a sorcerer, believing that supernatural powers are something he can manipulate and obtain by means that are not of faith. This is syncretism of the second type, in which a Christian form (laying on of the hands) is imbued with an indigenous meaning (that the result is an imposition of one's will on a higher will for one's own benefit). Simon's worldview is still that of a magician.

From these two examples I want to draw three significant conclusions.

no syncretism allowed!

Responding through **PRIEST**

Person:

Accept and respect the **person** involved in syncretism. Regard him or her as someone genuinely seeking God, authentically striving to know God, although not yet matured to a fully orthodox Christian in belief and practice. Acceptance of the person fosters influence through relationship.

Recognize:

Recognize and address syncretism when it is found. Whether in one's own culture or in cross-cultural experiences, syncretism should be identified because it represents a fusion of opposing religious systems and ultimately leads to a diminished understanding of God.

Inform:

Let scripture **inform** our thinking and direct people to the Bible as the one true authority. The biblical narrative must be taken very seriously as it informs theology and practice, while cultural context is a secondary source. Cultural practices that are contrary to the best biblical interpretation should be regarded as sinful and abolished. Cultural practices affirmed in the Bible should be welcomed. If the Bible seems to be silent, then let the people involved make their best culturally-informed decision.

Ethnocentrism:

Be aware of **ethnocentrism** and how it could lead someone to impose his or her own cultural convictions on a situation rather than relying on scriptural evidence to affirm or condemn a belief or practice. Allow the local people (instead of ourselves) to have the responsibility of giving a definitive response and determining compliance.

Spirit:

Allow the **Holy Spirit** to convict and lead through the process.

Time:

Recognize that responding to syncretism takes **time**; as with all mission, it takes a long-term commitment and process.

First, God is displeased with syncretistic beliefs and practices because they dishonor him. In Exodus 32:7, God speaks of the people of Israel as being “corrupted” because of their action. He says, “They have turned quickly out of the way I have commanded them” (v. 8). In Acts 8:21, Peter proclaims to Simon that “your heart is not right in the sight of God.” Beliefs and practices dissimilar to the revealed truth of God will not please him.

Second, God uses human agents to address syncretism. In Exodus, Moses is that agent, going to the people to rebuke them for their sin (v. 21) and proclaiming the consequence (vs. 26-29). In Acts, Peter speaks up immediately when con-

plea demonstrates his great devotion to God and to the people of Israel. He fears that God’s name will be dishonored among the nations if they perish in the wilderness after such a great deliverance from Egypt by God.

Then, when Moses returns to speak to God after delivering his rebuke and discipline to Israel, he identifies so completely with the people and their sin that he concludes his plea for mercy with the words, “...but if [you will not forgive their sin] blot me out of your book which you have written” (v. 33).

In Acts 8, we see in Peter’s response his absolute adherence to God’s truths and also an offer of mercy to Simon. He says to Simon, “You have neither

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fronted by Simon, rebuking him, “Your money perish with you, because you thought the gift of God could be purchased with money” (v. 20). God gives discernment to his people to distinguish between truth and falsity, and he uses people to accomplish a true contextual understanding of God.

Third, when confronting syncretism, God expects his human agents to uphold the highest biblical standards of belief and practice while tempering their attitudes toward weaker believers with mercy. Moses exemplifies this principle in Exodus 32. He pleads for mercy on Israel’s behalf and even turns from God’s offer to begin a new nation through Moses (vs. 10-11). Moses’

part nor portion in this matter” (v. 21), implying that Simon’s understanding and pursuit of the ministry of the gift of the Holy Spirit is totally out of line. Peter’s response draws attention to the truth that the gift is from a sovereign God who is not controlled by humans, but who freely gives according to his desire. Peter condemns Simon’s request and his spiritual condition (v. 23) as wicked, but then offers Simon a merciful remedy, “Repent therefore... and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you” (v. 22). Being God’s agents for addressing syncretism requires a role that encompasses devotion to God’s holy standards and a heart to serve others with compassion.

My Response

Two voices that direct us to a proper response to syncretism are Gailyn Van Rheenen and Paul Hiebert. Van Rheenen reminds us that Paul teaches in Colossians to stay centered on Christ as a “check on syncretism” (2006, 13). Hiebert acknowledges the necessity to study scripture, but adds that we should not “reject the study of humans [culture] for fear of losing the Gospel” (2006, 33).

Because God entrusted his revelation to humans in history, and revealed himself most definitively in the incarnation of Jesus, our struggle to know the gospel encompasses the dimensions of understanding both scripture and our human contexts. The role that I believe unites the voices of Van Rheenen and Hiebert is the role of priest through the example of Jesus, who acts as our Great High Priest, upholding the highest standards, yet responding to people in their context with great compassion. I suggest that serving as priest is the most appropriate response to syncretism. See box on page 31 for principles for responding to syncretism using the acronym PRIEST.

Conclusion

In the West, we tend to want to draw a line between contextualization and syncretism, using categories of “either/or”, and so in some way quantifying them. But the truth is that it may be more of a fuzzy line or at least a convoluted line that has no absolute explanation. However, the concepts are worthy of ongoing discussion and debate, and as mediators

of the gospel, we need to critically assess syncretistic/contextual questions in the Church. The real danger is if we no longer recognize the distinctions and the debate ends. Then maybe we have abdicated to our cultures and the relevance of the gospel is lost.

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Lynn D. Schmidt is an experienced mission practitioner and educator. He spent eighteen years in southern Africa among the Shangan and Tswana tribes. More recently, he has taught cross-cultural ministry in the

U.S., currently as associate professor at Asbury University.