

# **SYNCRETISM: A CHALLENGE TO MISSION**

## **By Tite Tienou**

### **Introduction**

Syncretism is recognized today as one of the major challenges to authentic Christianity worldwide. This awareness has been highlighted in several recent international gatherings of evangelical Christian leaders. In 1974, at the International Congress for World Evangelization held in Lausanne, Byang Kato warned that

Christianity in Africa, or in the Third World for that matter, has come to the stage it was in the second century. Just as syncretism plagued the church in the days of the apologists, so it challenges the historic faith in Africa today (1975:1218).

The 1976 Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly held in Nairobi also dealt with syncretism in one of the plenary papers. Furthermore, the 1980 Consultation on World Evangelization, convened by the Lausanne movement in Pattaya, devoted three mini-consultations to reaching nominal Christians.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth noting that long before syncretism was discussed in such gatherings as mentioned, researchers and missiologists had already warned of its dangers. Louis Luzbetak, for instance, wrote in The Church and Cultures that “there are very few problems plaguing the Missions today that are as serious and as real as the problem of syncretism” (1970:239).

Luzbetak lamented the lack of research on syncretism by missionaries and missiologists. I agree with him. I would even suggest that our awareness of syncretism has not reduced the growth of this phenomenon. Consequently, my purpose here is to inquire about the nature of syncretism, to examine its various expressions and its spread and to relate the results of this inquiry to the task of missions.

### **Nature of Syncretism**

The concept of syncretism is not used exclusively by Christians or others interested in communicating their own religion. Anthropologists and specialists of comparative religion have studied various aspects of syncretism. Comparative religionists study all manifestations of syncretism. They remind us that it predates Christianity. They define syncretism as a fusion, a mixing of various religions in doctrine. They call attention to the fact that syncretism is largely an unconscious and widespread tendency to adjust. Comparative religionists also point out that syncretism is due either to the inadequacy of a particular religion or to a process of political rearrangement.

Missiologists and other Gospel communicators would generally agree with anthropologists and comparative religionists as far as the objective description of syncretism is concerned. Most would add a value judgment. That is why syncretism almost always has a pejorative connotation in missiological literature. The value judgment of Christians is evident in the concepts of nominal Christianity, Christo-paganism and cultism that are often used synonymously with syncretism.

Louis Luzbetak's definition of syncretism illustrates the concerns of missiologists. It is no accident that he reviews the notion of syncretism under the heading “Christo-paganism”. He explains the nature of syncretism in this way:

Fusion is the amalgamation of any innovation with an analogous element. If moral or religious behavior is involved, the amalgamation is known as syncretism... (It is) the fusion of *Christianity* and what is commonly known as “paganism”, resulting in a *theologically untenable* amalgam called “Christo-paganism” (1970:239).

Syncretism, in its very nature, involves a mixing of two religions. As such it refers to a hybrid reality.

### **Extent and Expressions of Syncretism**

The nature of syncretism makes it difficult to ascertain its extent with precision. It is not a phenomenon limited to countries where Christianity is more recent. On the contrary, syncretism takes new forms in countries with long established Christianity. In North Atlantic countries syncretism manifests itself in popular religion such as the current appeal of a gospel of health, wealth and prosperity.

It is, of course, easier to detect the phenomenon of religious amalgam in countries where “paganism” is more clearly identifiable. In Asia, the Melanesian Cargo cults offer the most vivid illustration of syncretism. In Latin America, the thriving Brazilian spiritism, with millions of adherents, mixes elements of Catholicism with aspects of the religions of the slaves brought from Africa.<sup>2</sup> In the African continent itself, syncretism maybe present in the approximately 8,000 so called African Independent churches are authentic Christians.<sup>3</sup> There are nevertheless many others who mix the Biblical message with African traditional religions.

Our task as Gospel communicators and as people interested in maintaining the purity of the faith would be easier if syncretism always had the same form. Such is not the case. A description of various syncretistic movements around the world may, therefore, be less helpful than an attempt to understand the mechanisms which produce syncretism. Robert Schreiter provides such a general framework for the study of syncretism. He identifies three forms of syncretism which, according to him

represent three foci around which many syncretistic phenomena can be grouped: 1) where Christianity and another tradition come together to form a new reality, with the other tradition providing the basic framework; 2) where Christianity provides the framework for the syncretistic system, but is reinterpreted and reshaped substantially, independent of any dialogue with established Christianity; 3) where selected elements of Christianity are incorporated into another system (1985:147-148).

The first form of syncretism is prevalent in Brazil and in the Caribbean Islands. The second group includes groups such as many African Independent churches, Melanesian Cargo cults as well as the Rastafarians who originated in Jamaica. Syncretism of the third kind is more present in countries like Japan and India where Shintoism, Hinduism and even Buddhism may incorporate the teachings and/or veneration of Jesus into their system (cf. Schreiter 1985:146-147).

Schreiter’s description and analysis shed an important light on the phenomenon of syncretism. His insights show us that there are literally millions of people who are syncretistic. Some of these people may even be respected members of evangelical churches. We are therefore faced with a problem without easy solutions.

So far in our inquiry we have defined syncretism and described forms in which it is expressed. We have also noted that it is an all pervasive phenomenon. We must no then deceive ourselves into thinking that syncretism is restricted to specific places of our globe.

Such seems to be the implication of this statement: “Syncretism is perhaps one major danger Christianity faces in Africa today. It is not only a danger but already an all too prevalent reality” (White 1977:1). Contrary to Paul White and others, I suggest that syncretism is a worldwide evil. We must, therefore, be prepared to encounter some form of syncretism wherever we are.

### **Syncretism and Mission**

Syncretistic people have a dual religious allegiance. They are neither totally of one religion nor of another. This, in itself, suggests that people influenced by syncretism would be resistant to the Gospel. The reason for the resistance is quite simple: many syncretists perceive themselves as Christians with no need to be evangelized. Others have tuned the Gospel out because they consider that what they received is sufficient for their needs. Whatever the case may be, syncretism is a serious challenge to Christian missionizing efforts. Surely none of us can “be satisfied with anything less than a Christianity that is in the truest sense of the word an integral part of the local life-way, a twenty-four (hour) a day affair: (Luzbetak 1970:180). How then shall we encounter syncretism?

We should begin with the recognition that the presence of syncretism means that somehow the success of the communication of the Gospel is incomplete. As Schreiter comments, “Christianity may be allowed into the culture, and even be tolerated, but it never becomes part of the culture” (1985:155). Consequently syncretism will disappear only when we intentionally develop ways of dealing with it. Let us remember that “syncretism will never vanish by itself” (Luzbetak 1970:244).

If Luzbetak is right in his assessment, what can be some possible suggestions for solving the problem of syncretism? He himself provides six principles for dealing with Christo-paganism (Luzbetak 1970:244-248). I will not list or review all of them here. I will only point out those which are most helpful for our purposes.

Luzbetak states his first principle as: “the first step toward a solution of the problem of syncretism is an exact historical analysis” (1970:244). In other words, one should always deal with syncretism in the local contexts where it takes place. General knowledge of the phenomenon is helpful for understanding how to proceed. It cannot replace the need for their investigation. All of us should be engaged in thorough analysis of our situation. That, in turn, will point us to ways of specific remedies.

After careful and thorough historical analysis of the situation, we can move to a consideration of the causes of syncretism. Luzbetak’s fourth principle is appropriate here: “One of the main reasons for syncretistic beliefs and practices is the fact that, as a rule, an innovation does not succeed in filling *all* the functions of the traditional counterpart” (1970:246). In typical anthropological and missiological language, Christianity is viewed as an innovation. As such, its acceptance into a specific culture implies a measure of disequilibrium. People will always seek to fill the gaps thus created. They will do so according to their own cultural patterns. That is why Luzbetak suggests that

the proper approach to displacing existing syncretistic beliefs and practices, therefore, is first to analyze their functions and then to find ways of filling the corresponding needs with theologically tenable patterns (1970:247).

Let us suppose that the veneration of ancestors is a problem in your region of the world. The way of eradicating it is to first understand the function of ancestral veneration in the culture. That will explain why Christians may still practice it. The second step would be

to suggest ways of remembering one's ancestors and honoring them in a Biblically acceptable manner. One cannot solve a problem such as this by telling the people it is wrong.

Luzbetak's fourth principle logically points to the need of sound teaching if syncretism is to be defeated. I will, therefore, conclude with his sixth principle: "Christo-paganism is, to a large extent, the result of unsound catechetical approaches" (1970:248). Relevant teaching of the Bible and theology is a major aspect of a solution to the problem of syncretism.

## **Conclusion**

We thank God that it has pleased Him to reach us with the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. We praise Him that churches are established in our countries. Nevertheless our hearts ache because there are so many deviations from the Gospel abroad today. We have given the name syncretism to those deviations in our present study. Let us take Paul's admonition to Timothy seriously (1 Timothy 1:3-6). The phenomenon of syncretism calls for many Timothys to consolidate the work. In a real sense, the preaching of the Gospel is not complete without the teaching of sound doctrine. May God help us accomplish the latter with the same zeal we have devoted to initial proclamation of the good news. The future and the health of the churches depend on it.

## **Notes**

1. The results of the three mini-consultations are published in three Lausanne Occasional Papers: #10 Christian Witness to Nominal Christians Among Roman Catholics, #19 Christian Witness to Nominal Christians Among the Orthodox, and #23 Christian Witness to Nominal Christians Among Protestants. These are part of the Thailand Reports.
2. John Maust writes about the influence of spiritism in Brazil in Christianity Today (December 13, 1985) pp. 48-50. The statistics are particularly disturbing.
3. Dean S. Gilliland wrote a helpful analysis of Africa Independent churches in Missiology, Vol. XIV, No. 3 (July 1986) pp. 259-272. It is entitled "How 'Christian' Are African Independent Churches?" He proposes the following grid: 1) Primary-evangelical Pentecostal, 2) Secondary-evangelical Pentecostal, 3) Revelational-indigenous, 4) Indigenous-eclectic.

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