INCULTURATION AND THE ISSUE OF SYNCRETISM: What is the Real Issue?

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What is the real issue? Is syncretism always wrong? Can there be good
syncretism? Is syncretism inevitable? Are syncretism and inculturation
incompatible? Is there any clear, agreed upon definition of syncretism? Is
syncretism a necessary step in the slow process of inculturation? These are
some of the questions that are raised when syncretism and inculturation come
face to face.

     My own judgment, conclusion, and thus strategy, as we will see, is that
the employment of the word "syncretism" is no longer helpful or
constructive, because the word itself has so many contrasting connotations,
meanings. Many of these are pejorative. Yet there are a number of theologians
who try to view syncretism more positively, often approaching it more from the
anthropological rather than the theological perspective. For them it is a
necessary stage in the process of inculturation.

     In light of this deep seated ambiguity, and in spite of attempts at
redefining the word, my view is that the word cannot be redeemed, and it might
be better not to enter into the controversy surrounding the word. Even though
I will discuss the meaning of the word syncretism, the main thrust of this
presentation is to shift to what I believe is the crucial issue, namely the
criteria by which to distinguish adequate from inadequate inculturation. I
will try to show that the important issue is how to judge the validity or
invalidity, adequacy or inadequacy of inculturation, or of specific examples
of inculturation.

     I will proceed in three stages. First, explain what syncretism usually
means, but also show that it is a very ambiguous, and I believe, unhelpful
word. Secondly, I will give a number of examples of inculturation, and then
ask whether the word syncretism is helpful in examining whether these are
adequate or inadequate examples of inculturation. Third, I will enter into
what I think is the real issue, namely the very difficult question of the
criteria for judging whether a particular form of inculturation is valid or
invalid.

                    I. The Many Meanings of Syncretism
     Both in the history of its usage, and in contemporary usage, the word
syncretism has had varied meanings. Originally it was applied to political
alliances in ancient Greece, to the cities of Crete which came together. Then
it described the way the Old Testament assimilated elements from surrounding
cultures. In the age of the Reformation it pointed to the links between
Christianity and humanism, and to the need for Protestant and Catholic
churches to come together. Today it retains many of these varied meanings,
with either positive or negative connotations. As used by anthropologists
and historians of religion, it is generally used positively. As used by
theologians and church leaders, it is used either positively or negatively.
Whether one takes a negative or positive view to syncretism will depend on how
one defines it, and this points usually to either a conservative or liberal
stance. This may be obvious, but worth stating. Let me give some examples
of these descriptions or definitions, mostly from current theological
writings.
     OUTRIGHT NEGATIVE VIEWS.   Syncretism occurs "when critical and BASIC
ELEMENTS of the Gospel are lost in the process of contextualization and are
replaced by religious elements from the receiving culture, there is a
synthesis with this partial Gospel" (Conn, 176). Conn also refers to a

theological declaration which calls syncretism an "uncritical affirmative approach to the evaluation of eastern religions and cultures," and "the unjustifiable fusion of irreconcilable tenets and practices" (Conn, 177).

An theologian from India refers to a common definition as the "fusion of incompatible elements" or the "mingling authentic notions and realities of the revealed faith with realities of other spiritual worlds" (Pinto, 22). One borrows elements of another religion, without critically passing them through the screen of Christianity. Hence Christianity is watered down or destroyed in this process. As another author puts it, syncretism is but another form of Christ(c)rejection (Hesselgrave, 113).

We might note that Vatican II, in its decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, in a section on the need for a more profound adaption of the faith, warns against syncretism. "Every appearance of syncretism and false particularism will be avoided" (No 22). The concern of the Council Fathers is that true Christianity will not be nourished by such syncretism, but rather diluted or destroyed.

NUANCED, CRITICAL VIEWS: Some authors seem to wish to save the word syncretism, but to rescue it from inadequacies. Thus Shorter warns that many religious movements in Africa are "crudely syncretistic" (13) which means that some movements may not be "crudely• syncretistic. Lamin Sanneh speaks against an "uncritical syncretism" (1989: 43),
which again implies that there can be a critical syncretism. Pinto writes that "not all types of syncretism are negative and to be shunned" (22). Luzbetak asks, "must syncretistic assimilations always be judged pejoratively?" (60).

In general this is the view that I would hold, that particular cases of syncretism or the inculturation of the gospel must be examined, to see whether or not that inculturation is adequate and authentic. In this sense the word syncretism refers to the necessary, ongoing process of the development of Christian life, practice, and doctrine.

POSITIVE VIEWS; More recently, a number of writers, of a progressive bent, seek to use the word syncretism solely in a positive sense, and see it as inevitable and necessary for the growth, development, and enrichment of the church and its doctrines. Those who have studied, and are open to or have been influenced by the social sciences, especially cultural anthropology, tend to use the word in a positive sense.

Thus Kirwen writes: "The term syncretism is used in the sense of a developmental process of historical growth in religion by accretion and coalescence of originally conflicting forms of beliefs and practices through processes of interaction, suppression, and development" (Kirwen, 3, unpublished paper). We only understand and assimilate the new in terms of the old. For him, therefore,it does not involve religious compromise or inconsistent eclecticism.

Eugene Hillman believes that syncretism is more often than not both desirable and necessary for the progressive universalization and tangible catholicization of Christianity" (Hillman, 60). Sanneh writes that "the charge of syncretism, so often invoked against
the increasing importance of African leadership in the church loses its force" (1983; 245). He sees Christianity as one of the most syncretistic of religions, basing this upon his understanding of its central doctrine of the incarnation. The incarnation means that the transcendent and the terrestrial continually merge in human focus. Pinto writes that "at times syncretism may be even indispensable in the process of casting of the old man and putting on the new" (22).

Most positive of all is Leonardo Boff, in his book "Church, Charism, and

Power.• Chapter seven is entitled "In Favor of Syncretism: The Catholicity of Catholicism." Here syncretism is seen as something positive and a normal process for Catholicism. It reflects Catholicism at its best, searching openly and courageously for true catholicity. He admits that there is true and false syncretism, and thus tries to establish criteria for authentic syncretism that will lead to the growth and emergence of the true catholicity of the church.

II.   Examples or Cases of Possible Syncretism.
     Here I will try to explore briefly a number of examples of what might be called syncretism, by some but surely not be all. These examples stem from the church in its history and in the present. Whether one calls the specific example syncretistic or not will depend upon one's definition, or the connotation (positive or negative) that one gives to the word syncretism. The examples are wide(c)ranging, and not given in any particular order.
1. The Jerusalem Council in the Acts of the Apostles. The church decides to allow gentile converts to become Christian without being circumcised or without following all the Jewish dietary laws. It is clear that to some (Jews) this was seen negatively, as a watering down of Christian faith, a loss of the Jewish roots of Christianity. But to the gentiles it was seen as a true and valid development of doctrine, a true adaptation or inculturation of the gospel into their culture. We note that Rahner sees this Council as one of three key moments in the history of Christianity. He believes that the breakthrough achieved at that Council is parallel to the breakthrough of Vatican II to a world church (83(c)85).
2. The feast of Christmas. Christian decided to celebrate the birth of their leader, Jesus Christ, the light of the world, at the time of the pagan winter feast of light, a feast of the sun. Their goal was to suppress or to overwhelm that pagan feast by the good news of Jesus Christ. Many felt this was syncretism, this was giving into pagan ideas, (some in Nigeria still feel this way). But overall, it was a feast that did take root, won out and prevailed. We now celebrate December 25th as the birth of Christ and not as a pagan, pre(c)Christian feast of winter light.
3. St. Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle. Thomas studied, learned from, assimilated, and built upon the philosophy of the pagan Aristotle. This was opposed by many fellow theologians and bishops (c) some teachings of Thomas were condemned by the archbishop of Paris soon after his death. Opponents felt that Thomas was giving too much weight, authority to the pagan philosopher, and was diluting the gospel. Was he being syncretistic in his employment of categories and arguments from Aristotle?   But Thomas won out, and he exemplifies the marvelous catholic principle that "grace builds on nature."
4. Christianity and modern culture. In the struggle against modernism, Pius IX and Pius X strongly opposed modernistic ideas, in their effort to preserve the truth of Christianity.   They feared the mingling of modern historical, scientific, and philosophical perspectives would overpower the gospel. In contrast to this, at Vatican II the bishops speak more positively of the Church in the modern world, and even of learning from modern cultures and science. This is a major shift in policy. They ask for a critical relationship to the modern world, rather than a rejection of what it stands for.
     More recently, a theologian such as Lesslie Newbigin speaks of the neoªpaganism of the West, the first world. He feels, with many others, that Western Christianity has been overpowered by the values and disvalues of the modern world (1987). Modern culture is resistant to the gospel message. Christians too easily identify with contemporary Western culture, and lose the ability to be critical in light of the gospel. We are guided less and less

by Christian principles, and more and more by secular, and even pagan values. He remarks that a new, negative syncretism between Christianity and modern culture has been forged (c) and that the future of Christianity is at stake. A few examples where this might be true is in the increasing denial of the doctrine of hell, increased divorce rates among Christians and Catholics, denial of the reality of the devil or evil spirits in first world nations.

Whereas in a traditional culture such as Africa, a Christian may attend the Catholic Church and also visit the traditional healer, so in a modern culture, many are tempted to take their sin and guilt, their religious problems, not to the priest, but to the psychiatrist (a modern equivalent of the traditional healder). Thus the criticism of dual religious allegiances among Africans could be turned back upon many Christians in modern cultures.
5. Latin American, Brazilian religion and cult. Many of the traditional figures of popular religious cults in Brazil (often with African roots) are given equivalents from the Christian communion of saints. The result is often the modification and lessening of the challenge from gospel values and from the examples of the Christian saints. Pagan elements predominate over the Christian tradition, even if Christian names are given to such saints and patrons. In Cuba, for example, Yoruba (West African) divinities have been identified with Catholic saints: St. Peter is Elegbara, St. John the Baptist is Ogun.
6. In the Old Testament the Jewish people take over from Persian, Babylonian, Phoenician, and Egyptian mythologies some of their stories and myths, and incorporate them into the Hebrew tradition and the Hebrew Scriptures. Examples might be the stories of creation, the flood, the covenant, and the celebration of various harvest feasts.
7. Independent Churches in Africa. Often in their ritual, song, and dance, they incorporate many elements of traditional religion and culture, and place these side by side, or above elements from the Christian tradition. Many of these churches have healing at their center. A glance at the gospels reveals that healing was indeed often at the center of the ministry of Jesus. This healing ministry has been lost in many of the western, modern expressions of Christianity.
8. The Zairean Rite. A modified form for celebrating the Eucharistic liturgy that incorporates many elements of Zairean culture into the Mass (c) processions, dances, musical instruments, forms of prayer, invocation of ancestors, vestments.   This has evolved over time, and has been approved by Rome for limited use.
9. Finally, we refer to cases in the history of church teaching where official church teaching has been changed or reversed. Slavery was seen as legitimate for 1400 years, use of torture upon heretics, and the burning of heretics was allowed. Only with Vatican II, was the church's view onÜh   Ü religious liberty positively formulated. What was once considered right, is now seen as wrong, or vice versa (see Principe).

All of these various cases are examples of inculturation and the development of a tradition.   They are judged to be successful or not from the viewpoint of the central Christian tradition. Admitting that each of these cases must be studied in more detail, a few general observations can be made.
First is that there will always be disagreements among churchmen and theologians on whether or not a particular action is genuine inculturation/development or is called syncretism in the pejorative sense.
Secondly, it takes time to evaluate inculturation. For example, some teachings of Thomas Aquinas were judged by some to be heretical, but later history has vindicated him. Slavery, once allowed, is now seen as contrary to the gospel. What first appears to be syncretistic may later be judged to be orthodox.

Thirdly, those who are in power, or control will naturally be critical or sceptical of any movement or change which threatens to weaken their power, and will try to call it heretical, or call it syncretism, to destroy its effectiveness. This is the natural conservatism of those in power, especially in large institutions.

Fourth, some degree of openness or tolerance is needed in responding to new views. The principle of Gamaliel in the Acts of the Apostles might be recalled. If it is from God, no one can stop it, if from humans, it will die on its own.

One further conclusion, important for our purposes, is that the application of the word syncretism to some or all of these examples is not very helpful. In my view, the word syncretism is too ambiguous, too open, too subjective, and has too many different connotations, to be used fruitfully in the discussion of these or other cases. Even though I incline towards those scholars who see syncretism as a positive, necessary, and helpful word to describe development of a tradition into new cultures, I do not feel that it can be saved. If one enters into a discussion of syncretism, one's energy is lost in the "lis de verbis•, the quarrels about the meaning of words. And, I believe, the all important issue that the question of syncretism raises is sidetracked, namely the issue of the criteria for distinguishing adequate and inadequate inculturation.

III. Criteria and Attitudes for Inculturation

We enter now into the positive, constructive part of this paper, the discussion of the criteria of valid inculturation. First, an important prenote: inculturation is not simply an option for some churches or some theologians to be entered into or not, depending upon their situation. Rather it is an imperative of all churches and all church leaders. There is no turning back the clock (c) we have passed that point. Inculturation is a given, is urged upon the church by Vatican II (without using that specific word) and by popes and synods since Vatican II. The strong statements of Pope Paul VI and John Paul II in Africa ("you may, you must have an African Christianity") make clear that each church is under obligation to inculturate gospel values in its particular cultural situation. The recent encyclical of John Paul II on "The Mission of the Church" explores the necessity and meaning of inculturation in the ongoing mission of the church (No. 52(c)55).

The question remains, however, of "how• to judge whether a particular move
or development is truly Christian and truly African. And "who•, which individual or which body will make this judgment. This is no easy question toÜh   Ü
answer, as the examples from history have shown. There will be disagreement, and in many cases, winners and losers, and it will take time and effort to move to viable solutions.

This is no easy question to answer, since as we will indicate, a variety of criteria must be applied in judging cases of inculturation. At the same time, several attitudes or virtues must be present, if inculturation is to be successful. We now turn to the criteria and the attitudes.

The basic schema for evaluation, in my view, is seen in the employment of the pastoral or hermeneutical circle which consists of three poles, namely the Christian message, the cultural situation, and the pastoral agent or agents (Schineller, 1990: 61(c)73). An inculturation will be successful and Christian if it is faithful to the Christian message and tradition, if it is faithful to the positive, valid insights of a particular culture or tradition, and if it can be lived and prayed by the pastoral agent or agents and their communities of faith.

1. Faithfulness to the Christian Message: under this pole I include

above all Scripture. This means that each new inculturation of the gospel must be in accord with the Scriptures, and not contradictory. It need not be found in so many words in Scripture, but must be faithful to it. The Scriptures must not only be maintained as basic source, but must also be carried forth, creatively proclaimed in new circumstances and situations. We must remember too that the Scriptures themselves are pluralistic, written over a long period of time, in different places, and include within themselves religious developments. But the Christian message is not only Scripture but the history and tradition of the church. The councils and creeds hold a special place, and attention should also be given to the writings of theologians, and to the lives and examples of the saints. This history is quite complex and diverse, comprised of many different schools of theology, many different spiritual traditions, and even different canon laws for east and west.

In regard to both Scripture and tradition there is the difficult question of distinguishing what is essential from what is accidental. Women covering their heads in church is seen in USA as accidental, but often not that way in Africa. Jesus Christ as risen Lord is essential for the universal church. To make these distinctions, not only bishops, but also scholars, theological experts must be involved.

2. Insertion into, understanding of, and critical evaluation of the Cultural Situation: Grace does not destroy, but builds on nature and on culture. The Christian gospel should not destroy what is good in particular cultures, but rather save and preserve it. Care must be taken in examining and evaluating aspects of culture, with the help of anthropologists and social scientists, so that only what is good is kept. For example, the exposing of twins can never be a Christian option. Yet traditional dance as a way to praise and worship God may well be. The theological base for taking seriously the culture is that the "seeds of the Word" are found in all cultures, according to Vatican II. If we do not discover them, then we are overlooking the creative presence and challenge, the richness of the mystery of God's presence throughout human history and culture.

3. A faith(c)filled, Spirit led, pastoral agent or agents. Inculturation is basically to be done by the people, but they need guidance and leadership. Ultimately this comes from the authorities of the church, and it comes more immediately from local leaders and from theological scholars. They have the task of moving the church and its gospel into new, uncharted areas, with trust in the guidance of the Spirit. They will be making decisions, choices, of how best to live the gospel in a particular situation. Then, this is shared with the larger church through its official leaders who should be respectful, listening, but also critical when necessary. For example, charismatic Catholics should continue to pray and worship in accord with their special call and gifts, but they must also keep in contact with the larger church to be assured that their direction is within the Christian/Catholic tradition. There will be tensions, disagreements, and there may be no simple authoritarian solution to many of them. But if there is dialogue, communication, sharing of faith, then there is hope that the Spirit will be the guide, and not the whims of one particular group or leader in the Church.

                    Attitudes needed for Successful Inculturation.
1.   All inculturation involves risk. This is clear in the Council of Jerusalem and in the theology of Thomas Aquinas. No risk no gain. Courage is needed, courage based upon the conviction of the active presence and guidance of the Spirit of God in human history and in the Christian community as well as in its leaders and theologians.
2. An attitude of freedom. There is no creativity without freedom. Surely freedom has its limits (c) it cannot function otherwise, but there must be not only toleration of diversity and growth, but also positive encouragement on

the part of church leaders.   The words of the ancient hymn to the Holy
Spirit come to mind, ""flecte quod est rigidum." •   What is rigid is often
dead, what is flexible is ready to move and to grow. As another venerable
proverb expresses it, "salus animarum suprema lex.• People's lives in the
present, in new circumstances, rather than a nostalgia for the past are most
important.

3. A sense of the reign of God.   A theology of development will be an
ecclesial theology, seeing the importance of the church. But it must see
beyond the church to the larger realm of God's kingdom or reign, and see the
church to be a witness to, in service to that kingdom. Otherwise it becomes
too narrowly focussed and unable to expand with the freedom of the children of
God, led by the Spirit which blows where it wills.

4. Patience is needed. Change comes slow, and can be painful. And when one
is very close to it, it is difficult to see where it is heading, and whether
it is faithful to the gospel. It may take years for the genius and creativity
of a Thomas Aquinas to be recognized. Pope John Paul II speaks of
inculturation as "a slow journey," and "a difficult process," "for it must in
no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith"
(No. 52).

5. Sense of God at work in the world, in human lives today. While the bible
is all important, it functions not as an end in itself, but to help us to see
God at work in human lives today. The bible functions as eyeglasses (c) not to
be looked at, but looked with and through to see the reality and love of God
in the world today. Tradition too is a resource, and not an end in itself.

6. Sense of the people, the people of God. Traditionally, the "sensus fidelium•
becomes a key criterion for Christian doctrine. Can it be lived? Does this
particular teaching or way of praying increase the quality of the faith life
of the Christian community? As one author writes, "the authenticity of
inculturation has to be sought in the concrete living out of the Gospel by a
community of people in a determined cultural context" ((Wilfred, 434).

7. Listening. I see this as the final word. A critical openness, an
attitude of learning and listening both to the Christian message in all its
richness, and the various human cultures in all their richness and diversity.
This listening attitude touches the Spirit of God, the spirit of truth
present in all cultures in new and exciting ways that we are still toÜh   Ü
discover. True catholicity remains ahead of us, a pilgrim goal still to be
achieved. (see Schineller, 1989).

        In conclusion, we have discussed the question of inculturation and
syncretism by commenting on the various, ambiguous meanings of the word
syncretism, and then by suggesting that we avoid that word, and move rather to
the real issue, namely the criteria and attitudes for discerning correct or
adequate inculturation.   There is no simple answer, no simple criteria
because we are dealing with complex realities, with a rich Christian
tradition, and marvelously diverse and rich human cultures. It is even more
complex because we are dealing with changing cultures. No longer is it
simply a traditional culture in Nigeria that we must try to inculturate the
gospel into. Rather it is a traditional culture that is changing rapidly,
influenced by the march of modernity, of modern science and technology. This
is all the more reason for theology to be creative and prophetic. It cannot
simply protect the past, maintain the old. It must move, develop, grow, like
a living organism. Theologians and church leaders must have the courage to
risk, to be willing to make mistakes, if they are to carry out the mandate of
Jesus Christ (c) to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth until the end of
time.

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