

Review

Syncretism of Basotho traditional religion and Christianity: Gateway to the syncretistic teaching of Basotho traditional religion and Christianity in Lesotho schools

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The article recommends that the teaching and learning of religious education in Lesotho schools should capitalize on the existing syncretism of Basotho Traditional Religion and Christianity in the church to extend it to the classroom setting. The discussion begins with a brief history leading to the acceptance of syncretism in the Church, then argues for the use of the term “syncretism” instead of the theologically accepted term “inculturation.” Factors that necessitated the formalization of syncretism in the church and which may be even more demanding to the school setting have been discussed. The avenues of why syncretism is needed in Lesotho schools in the teaching of religious education have been explored and the recommendations of how such venture could be advanced have been made.

Key words: Religious education, African traditional religion, syncretism, inculturation, Christianity, Afrocentrism.

INTRODUCTION

The current Religious Education taught in Lesotho schools is basically Christian oriented. Education system introduced in Lesotho and in Africa as general was the work of Christian missionaries with the aim of evangelization. The Christian missionaries were eager to use literacy training to introduce Christianity and be successful in converting Africans to their religion (Mart, 2011). The PEMS (Paris Evangelical Mission Society), Catholic and Anglican missionary groups were continuing to use education as a tool for expanding religious convictions and enlarging their own sphere of influence in Lesotho (Gill, 1997). The introduction of Christianity

mistakenly assumed that to become Christians, Basotho had to be removed from their indigenous cultural religiosity. Mothibe and Ntabeni (2002) noted that missionaries, and in particular the PEMS who arrived first in Lesotho, did not compromise to demand the Basotho who were converted to Christianity to discard of their religious and cultural beliefs and practices. Gill (1997) indicates that Basotho converts were further alienated from their religious and cultural practices by removing them from their villages and encouraging them to live in the mission stations even though they were later returned to their respective villages with the mandate to ‘leaven’

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paganism. According to Mothibe and Ntabeni (2002), this is why their work was met with minimal success, in which after a decade of their missionary work they had only converted 393 people out of 80,000 Basotho population in total in 1843 and only 13,733 converts out of the total population of 200, 000. Mart (2011) realized that Western missionaries believed that traditional religious beliefs and practices were inferior, and to accept Christianity, traditional customs had to be totally abandoned. However, acceptance to Christianity amongst the Basotho did not happen without resistance or problems, and as such, gave rise to the process which can be described as religious syncretism which still exists even today.

Syncretism in Lesotho according to Gill (1997) began in the 1860s when the prophetess 'Mantsopa blended Christianity and Traditional religion to call on abandonment of Western civilization and Christianity and for a return to the Basotho traditions and customs. 'Mantsopa had argued that a way to God is broader than narrowly presented by the missionaries as to renounce traditional culture in order to join Christianity. It further took root in the 1890s with the appearance of Ethiopian movement which joined forces with Methodist Episcopal Church to reject Western Christianity and Western education. Later on, another underground movement called Secret Prayer (*Thapelo ea Sephir*) which fused Christianity and Basotho Traditional Religion was formed and became popular with animal sacrifices for ancestors as much the indigenous religion does. Then in the 1920s Walter Matitta broke away from the PEMS mission church to form his own church that incorporated Christianity and Basotho Traditional Religion. Later on the Zionist and Apostolic churches were formed with the same aspirations.

Gill (1997) states that with the realization of the emergence of these movements, W.C. Willoughby, an LMS missionary in Botswana had made a remark at the Third South African Missionary Conference in 1909 that:

“To sneer at any form of religion, no matter how rude, is unworthy of a missionary of the Cross. We wrong the native by our sneer: but we wrong our own religion more. These primitive methods of worship should be the gateway by which we enter into the soul of the worshiper” (Gill, 1997:152).

Indeed selective formalization of syncretism of Basotho Traditional Religion and Christianity by the church was on the way.

Justification on the use of the phrase “formalized syncretism”

The wake of African independence in the 1960s marked the end of a local church that is run by the foreign missionaries and governed by mother church abroad. It was a time when the indigenous leadership took over

from the missionaries. The phasing out of missionaries endeavors was characterized by continuity and change in which African Christianity continued to be faithful to the inherited missionary Christianity with its education system in which religion and education are inseparable. African church leaders demonstrated uncompromising determination to carry on the Christian faith, church structures and education system planted by the missionaries. Change became eminent in other areas such as the development of different theologies that seek to incarnate Christian teaching in the African context (Baur, 1998).

The remarkable achievement of African theologians in the process of change was the formalization of syncretism in the church by recognizing the value and contribution of African Traditional Religion in the understanding of Gospel within an African worldview.

Syncretism refers to the synthesis of different religious forms. Syncretism is a contentious and contested term. Some understand it to refer to the Christian traditions which are believed to be ‘impure’ or ‘inauthentic’ because they are permeated by local ideas and practices. Others understand it as an explanation of religious synthesis that arose from resistance to cultural dominance. For example, African Indigenous Churches are described by others as syncretistic because they are believed to be impure, while others believe they are syncretistic because of their resistance against Western-Christianity that had colonized African culture. Generally, syncretism is understood negatively from theological point of view particularly scholars from Islam and Christian traditions, while it is accepted and used positively by anthropologist and religious studies scholars who work without any particular religious affiliation or commitment. Even though some historians and religion studies scholars have observed long ago that syncretism is a feature of all religions it has been difficult to be accepted in theological circles (van der Veer, 2005).

Theologians prefer to use the concepts such as *inculturation, contextualization, concretization, accommodation, adaptation, indigenization, localization, incarnation, Africanisation, hybridity and reformulation* to explain the formalization of the integration of African beliefs and practices with Christianity. The term syncretism comes from the Greek etymology *synkratein* which means pouring together. It is related to pouring one form of liquid into another just like pouring water into wine, as a result, obtaining a totally different substance which is neither purely water nor solely wine. From this etymological meaning, syncretism in religion came to mean a tendency of Hellenistic thought which tended to mix and to confuse most diversified cults. It refers to a mixture of rituals, practices and doctrines (Umoh, 2013). Syncretism therefore from theological perspective constitutes religious adultery. It means 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. As such,

theologians believe that it is far beyond the scope and even deviates from the target of inculturation, which has been promoted by African Theologians (Umoh, 2013).

Oleska (1995) argues that syncretism must at all costs be avoided because it distorts and corrupts the gospel message, while inculturation is inevitable and necessary. Schineller (1992) supports the idea that rejects syncretism as an appropriate word to be used in favor of inculturation because syncretism presupposes the replacement of critical and basic elements of the Gospel in the contextualization process by religious elements from the receiving culture. Schineller (1992) further mention that syncretism is the unjustifiable fusion of irreconcilable belief systems and practices or fusion of incompatible doctrinal elements or the mingling of authentic notions and realities of the revealed faith with other religious claims. In this process, elements of another religion are borrowed without being screened critically through Christianity lenses. At the end the basic Christian teachings are diluted or totally destroyed. In itself syncretism, has to be understood as a process of rejecting Christ or Christian teaching according to Schineller (1992).

However, in this paper where a stand view point is religious studies, syncretism is not used in this negative sense, but positively as Goosen (2002) argues that syncretism may have negative meaning just like the word *discrimination* which in today's society has acquired negative connotation of being associated with *unjust discrimination* while people may be encouraged to be discriminative in what they eat, drink, view, accept and so on. Other people have resorted to the use of *discernment* as a more positive word than discrimination. Syncretism as used in religious studies or social sciences, that is, in the fields of phenomenological or comparative studies or objective, scientific study of religion refers to the situation when "the facts of a fusion of beliefs or practices is reported" (Goosen, 2002).

The traditional concern over syncretism obscures the cultural process while imposing theological interests that do not explain those cultural processes, to the extent that theological explanations do not relate to the actual cultural situation and leave the consequential cultural formation largely unaffected by theological judgments. To substitute syncretism with terms such as inculturation can obscure the important point that syncretism concerns with, which is the relation between theological developments and cultural processes (Schreiter, 1993). Inculturation as a theologically preferred concept cannot happen without creating something new which is rooted in both the Gospel and the culture.

In theological terms, inculturation denotes a process wherein the priest or church agent evangelizes through the norms of the local community, using them as a sieve of interpretation, producing the hybrid "indigenous theology" (Norget, 2007:82-83).

When used positively syncretism and inculturation may

have the same meaning of producing something new when Christian teaching is fused with cultural beliefs.

This paper comfortably infers that the acceptance or formalization of inculturation was the same as the formalization of syncretism in the church. Stewart and Shaw (2005) maintain that religious scholars would always be comfortable to label many instances of inculturation 'syncretism' as long they involve the combination of diverse traditions in the area of religion. Van der Veer (2005) refers to syncretism as the process of borrowing, affirmation, or integration of concepts, symbols, or practices of one religious tradition into another through selection and reconciliation. Objection to syncretism is simply driven by politics of difference and identity and at stake is the power to identify true religion and to authorize some practices as truthful and others as false. Inculturation occurs when a dominant culture attempts to make itself accessible to a subdominant one without losing its own particular character, while syncretism denotes equal and mutual borrowing. Objectively, religious scholars will continue to use syncretism as an explanation of religious synthesis in human history.

Lindenfeld (2014) refers to syncretism from the above which is sanctioned by church authorities as opposed to the one from below which is perpetuated by local Christians who synthesis their traditional beliefs and Christianity. Lindenfeld (2014) explains that formalization of syncretism in the church could be understood from the pronouncements of Pope John Paul II when addressing a Native American audience in Phoenix, Arizona in 1987 in which he said:

"The early encounter between your traditional cultures and the European way of life was a harsh and painful reality for your peoples . . . I encourage you, as Native people . . . to preserve and keep alive your cultures, your languages, the values and customs which have served you well in the past and which provide a solid foundation for the future . . . These things benefit not only yourselves but the entire human family" (Lindenfeld, 2014:5).

Also Adamo (2011) states that in 1986 at the Assisi inter-religious prayer meetings for peace, Pope John Paul II asked for forgiveness for the past mistakes of the church from traditional religious leaders. In the same year Cardinal Arinze wrote a pastoral letter entitled 'Attention to African Traditional Religions' which signified the first Vatican document to recognize syncretism of ATR and Christianity in the African context. In 1988, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue issued a letter titled 'Pastoral Attention to ATR' in which the council recommended theological research on dialogue with Islam and ATR in Africa. In the first African synod of the Catholic Church of 1995 held in Rome, 'Interreligious dialogue' became one of the top priorities of the Church in Africa. At the Catholic Bishop Conference in the

Philippines in 1996, it was proposed that there should be a dialogue with followers of traditional religions, and it was at this conference where Archbishop Fernando Capalla asked for forgiveness from the traditional religious leaders, just as Pope John Paul II did (Adamo, 2011).

The formalization of syncretism was directed to the teaching in the church through theological discourse while in Lesotho schools Christianity is taught as purely as it has been implanted by the missionaries. Official teaching on inculturation is that all cultures have the right to an independent existence within Christianity and that the introduction of Christian teachings in a new culture must involve an 'adoption' that preserves the essential integrity of culture, its values, institutions, and customs. The main question is why the church got forced for syncretism in its teaching about Christian beliefs and practices. Are those driving forces not applicable to the school setting?

Reasons for formalization of syncretism in Lesotho

There are different factors that forced the church to formalize syncretism both internal and external, and some socially, some economically, others politically, and others religiously. Since the scope of this paper is on internal religious developments, only religious factors will be examined.

The overarching factor was that Basotho could not simply relinquish or surrender their traditional beliefs in order to become Christians for different reasons:

a) *Many Basotho had joined Christianity mainly for material gains other than religious purposes.*

From the very beginning of the invitation of the missionaries to come to Lesotho, Moshoeshoe 1 who was the paramount chief (*morena e moholo*) at the time had hoped to use missionaries in order to acquire guns and defend his nation against the Kora depredations and wanted to have diplomatic ties with these people who had powers to control the Kora (Gill, 1997). Eldredge (1993) opines that the missionaries themselves reported that the adoption to the European goods imported by the missionaries had contributed to the increased number of Basotho who were converted to Christianity.

b) *Christian teaching discounted the supernatural powers*

One of the tasks of the Christian priests was to instruct the converts in Christian religion and to encourage them to abandon their 'superstitions'. The so labeled superstitions were beliefs and practices that were in line with the basic principles of ATR (African Traditional Religion). The priests denounced these beliefs and

practices claiming that they were not based on facts. They concluded that they were simply the made-up explanations by primitive and unscientific people in order to explain events which they could not logically understand. Therefore, as results, priests opined that the Basotho understanding of sickness (as broad phenomenon not just bodily ailments) was caused by evil spirits or the living-dead was based on lack of scientific understanding of how illness worked. The priests also taught that the reason for the drought could be ascribed to meteorological causes and not the curse of the living-dead or the supernatural powers as the Basotho traditionally believed. Almost all the traditional beliefs that the Basotho held concerning the supernatural powers were considered to be a result of their ignorance in scientific thought. According to the Christian teaching, the supernatural only occurred within the sacraments. Christianity could not be taken to where people are in everyday life experiences but within the confined of the church building. ATR was untouched by Christianity to continue giving explanations and answers to the reality of the world in which the Basotho lived every day. African religion is principally practical. There are problem-solving sets of beliefs and rituals which provides immediate solution, whereas Christianity is based on faith and hope. In other words, Basotho resorted to syncretism because Christianity was seen as impractical. The result was that everything outside the church walls was still seen in light of ATR (Cox, 2008; Gill, 1997; Manyeli and Machobane, 2001).

c) *Christianity is foreign*

Basotho regard Christianity as a foreign religion. There is a sense amongst the Basotho in which they understand Christianity as foreign and different. The fact that Christianity first came to the land through white men from Europe and established mission stations in separation from Basotho villages has some foreign legacy. Basotho who joined Christianity are given new Christian names which are different from their traditional Sesotho names, the way the Church celebrates mass is very different from their traditional religious celebrations, and the education and health systems are different from their traditional education and health systems (Cox, 2008; Gill, 1997; Moitse, 1994).

d) *ATR permits syncretism*

ATR allows a person to practice both Christianity and ATR. In ATR, one is free to be baptized, attend church services, and take part in the sacraments of the church, while still practicing ATR. It is not necessary for Basotho to hold a tightly structured and logical belief system in order to function in their everyday life. Their theology is what they act out, not what they profess to believe (Cox, 2008; Manyeli and Machobane, 2001).

The need for formalization of syncretism in Lesotho schools

Syncretism/inculturation in Lesotho has been within the church walls as Lapointe (1993) indicates that it concerns itself with liturgy, doctrine and preaching yet the religious factors that necessitated integration of ATR in the church are also found in the schools and may be even more demanding in the school than in the church, and may be even compelling in this postcolonial period.

Post-colonialism is a controversial and complex term. It is used to describe the position of the once colonized country after it gained independence from colonial power as well after it has achieved a sense of economic and cultural autonomy. However, a country can be postcolonial in terms of political independence and remains economic and culturally colonized at the same time. This would mean the dismantling as well as continuation of colonialism and therefore denies the assertion that post-colonialism is the period after once-colonized countries gained independence. It may mark an end of political domination and control but continues in what has been popularly known as neocolonialism. Furthermore, it has been argued on how Christian mission and education could be linked to colonialism since the term mainly refers to the conquest and control of other people's land and goods. That is, colonialism is largely explained in political and economic terms. This would imply that colonialism had begun after the colonizers imposed their political power and social influence over the colonies and ended after colonies had reclaimed their political power, which does not correspond to missionary activities before and after colonialism. Even though many have analyzed how much colonial governments have worked hand in hand with the mission church and education, it has been argued that mission religion and education was not forced on Africans, but through negotiations and agreements (Pilario, 2007). However, colonialism had some social implications of civilizing component which did not restrict it simply to the occupation of a territory, but extends it to cultural and religious transformation and this is type of colonialism is popularly referred to in the postcolonial studies as 'colonization of mind' (Ducker, 2008). Colonization of the mind according to Dascal (2006) is a process in which there is an intervention of an external source - the 'colonizer' in the mental sphere of the subjects - the 'colonized.' This intervention works upon central functioning of mind's structure, mode of operation, and contents and has long-lasting effects that are not easily removable. This intervention is marked by uneven of power relations between the parties involved.

Dascal (2006) continues to show that the success of 'colonization of the mind' is achieved by inducing a set of beliefs in the colonized mind through a process that is cognitive by nature. When achieved, it is demonstrated by an implicit acceptance by the colonized to the

superiority of the colonizer. In other words, colonization of the mind is achieved when the colonized admits to existence between a 'primitive' mind – that of himself – and a 'superior' or 'civilized' one – that of the colonizer. Ducker (2008) opines that missionary religious education was and is still colonizing because its intention is to replace rather than interacting with local culture and religion, it is a one-way, non-reciprocal process. It has both financial and political power that enables it to dominate or subjugate local alternatives. The tool that is used by mission schools for colonization of African mind was to cut off Africans from their heritage and culture because people who are cut off from their heritage and culture are more easily manipulated and controlled. This process of 'deculturalization' and 'brainwashing' is still imminent even today where Africans feel ashamed of themselves and their culture, admire and respect foreign culture and religion, and be rewarded with more indoctrination to remain in the state of colonized. Deculturalization is continued through mis-education in the use of a pedagogy and curriculum that deliberately omits, distorts or trivialize the role and benefits of African Traditional Religion.

The teaching of ATR in schools would be a tool for de-colonization of the mind. As Dascal (2006) indicates, de-colonization process would mean a way to frame a psycho educational approach for cleansing African minds off cultural invasion by designing new-old (ATR-Christianity) structure and install it in African mind. The strategy used by the colonizer was the transmission of accepted beliefs, patterns of behavior and thought that are considered congruent with the intended 'culture' or 'identity.' Such strategy would be as well essential for the de-colonization process. Incorporation of ATR in religious education in Lesotho schools as a postcolonial strategy has a potential to feed the minds of Basotho with those life-sustaining social values, beliefs and customs that had enabled their ancestors to live harmonious, decent and peaceful life before their mental invasion. Postcolonial religious education would be truly an attempt to develop African Christian identity. Ferdinando (2007) argues that African quest for an authentic Christian identity has been bedeviled by the very missionary activities that brought the gospel in the first place. In consequence Christianity is still seen by some Africans as a foreign imposition and a religion that is alien to their African culture. The need to create a distinctively African Christian identity depends in large measure on a positive reevaluation and recovery of the traditional African religious past which was the precursor of Christianity.

Furthermore, negligence of ATR is to disregard the source of African Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) in general as Domfeh (2007) cites that Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) is a knowledge systems acquired over generations by communities through their interaction with the environment. It is a knowledge that is embedded in African traditional beliefs and has been

handed down through generations by cultural transmission. It encompasses spiritual relationships, religious beliefs in relationships with the natural environment and the use of natural resources, relationships between people, and is reflected in language, social organization, values, institutions and laws. Negation of ATR is the reflection of colonized mind in which according Nyuot Yoh (2004) Africans have been transformed to have negative perception of their culture. They have abandoned their knowledge of how they perceive the cause of rain; different types of crops and their growth, how diseases are cured and how babies are conceived. Rusinga and Maposa (2010) have realized that ATR is the main source for the production of indigenous knowledge. In a traditional African context religion provides guidelines for the use of natural resource, management and conservation maintained through spirituality, cultural practices, taboo systems and knowledge accumulated over centuries. The incorporation of ATR in Religious education taught in schools would be as well promoting and developing an integrated curriculum in which religious beliefs, moral values, ecology, health, history, agriculture and meteorological studies would be taught in single subject of religious study.

After all, the word education itself presupposes that education and culture are inherently related. The English word "education" comes from the Latin *e (out)-ducare* (to lead) or "to lead out" (Groome, 1980). The etymology of the word education points to the fact that education is meant to help people find a truth that is already within them. It is not just about a teacher transmitting knowledge to learners, but, about helping learners remember what they know so that they can critically reflect on their existing knowledge. It is to develop something new for the future. In other words, a good education that integrates the past, the present, and the future together helps learners develop their own pedagogy. The concept syncretism in which ATR and Christianity are hybridized can help Christian religious education to pay attention to the issues raised by the Basotho Christians in the context of their traditional beliefs and practices, and try to be attentive to cultural needs of Basotho society.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The gap between Basotho Christians and Christian life in Lesotho in which Basotho may continue to regard Christianity as foreign, can only be bridged by an effective religious education strategy. This strategy should be an Afrocentric approach. Afrocentric approach according to Mhlongo (2014) is a decolonization process of Africans from cultural and psychological chains of Eurocentric Christian tradition. Afrocentricity as van Wyk (2014) explains is educational, philosophical and theoretical paradigm which can be used for any educational setting. It involves an inclusive classroom in which educators, students and parents syncretize both

traditional and Christian beliefs for comprehensive learning. Afrocentric approach uses indigenous knowledge which is a set of traditional beliefs that are regarded as primitive and superstitious by Western education and Christianity and their legacy. Indigenous knowledge includes beliefs, values, symbols, art, oral narratives, proverbs, and performance such as songs, storytelling, wise sayings, riddles, and dances. Indigenous knowledge is a process of learning and sharing social life, histories, identities, economic, and political practices unique to each cultural group. van Wyk (2014) continues to show that Afrocentric approach is a critical pedagogy that seeks to make visible those traditional religious values and belief systems that have been suppressed by Euro-Christianity. Gay (2000) shows that Afrocentric approach is culturally responsive teaching that uses the cultural knowledge and prior experiences to make learning more appropriate and effective for the learners. It is an educational paradigm that builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived socio-cultural realities. It acknowledges the legitimacy of ATR as a legacy that affect students' disposition and attitudes, and as having educational content to be taught in the formal curriculum.

Afrocentric approach to religious education attempts to reconstruct the so-called classical Christian teaching from the perspective of Western culture that provides students with Western social customs, definitions of acceptable and unacceptable behavior, religious symbols, Western acceptable moral values and virtues. It is a way of forwarding beliefs and practices that were formerly suppressed by dominant Euro-Christian teaching. In essence, this means rejecting the pro-European and anti-African teachings of Christian education as well as disregarding the pro-European and anti-African messages conveyed to the students and deconstructing the pro-European and anti-African Christian indoctrination of the public schools.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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