Religious Syncretism in Africa: Toward an Enduring Solution

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Abstract
Since the advent of Christianity and Islam, many Africans have become, at least nominally, monotheists. However, the story is more complicated. This paper is aimed at understanding the relationship between Christianity, traditional religious practices, and culture in Africa and positing an ethical response. After reviewing religious plurality from the perspective of cultural anthropology, I will argue that the solution is inculturation, as presented in both Catholic Social Teaching and the works of African scholars of culture and religion. Inculturation represents a promising path forward for the conversation on religious syncretism in Africa.

Introduction

Since the advent of Christianity and Islam, many Africans have become, at least nominally, monotheists. In 2010, Pew Research Center reported that more than six-in-ten Africans are Christians (63%), three-in-ten are Muslims (30%), 3% practice traditional religions, 3% do not profess any religious belief, and another 3% practice Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and other faiths.[1] However, the story is more complicated. Research has also shown that many Africans who call themselves Christian and Muslim do not completely abandon their indigenous religious practices.[2] People go to churches on Sundays and to mosques on Fridays and occupy important positions in these religious communities while continuing to value the rituals of African Religionists (native doctors), as they seek faithful solutions to their everyday problems.[3] My own experiences in pastoral ministry resonate with these observations, as I have witnessed the confessions of many people who worship in church as well as utilize native practices.

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[1] "Global Religious Futures Project," Pew Research Center, accessed March 1, 2022, www.globalreligiousfutures.org.

[2] Daniel Kasomo, "An Assessment of Religious Syncretism: A Case Study in Africa" in *International Journal of Applied Sociology*, 2(3): 10.

[3] Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

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African scholars and theologians have posited that the early missionary approach to assimilate African communities into Christianity via an eradication of indigenous culture and practices has been harmful. By claiming superiority of Christian theology over the theology of African religion, the missionaries shut the door on dialogue between both religions.[4] This paper is aimed at understanding the relationship between Christianity, traditional religious practices, and culture in Africa and positing an ethical response to the phenomena. After viewing religious plurality from the perspective of cultural anthropology, I will argue that the solution is inculturation, as presented in both Catholic Social Teaching and the works of African scholars of culture and religion. Inculturation represents a promising path forward for the conversation on religious syncretism in Africa.

Understanding the Cultural Anthropology of Religious Syncretism

Initially, European missionaries failed to understand traditional African religions in ways that would harm the communities that they hoped to serve. In his book *Religion and Faith in Africa*, A. E. Orobator argues that the early Christian missionary style that favored cultural erasure contributed to the syncretistic practices in African Christianity today. The relationship between Christianity and the local communities would have looked different if the Christian missionaries had prioritized understanding the African religious consciousness. This lack of understanding gave rise to harmful stereotypes: "Joseph Conrad called Africa the 'Heart of Darkness'; William Whitaker Shreeve baptized it 'The Whiteman's Grave'; Henry Morton Stanley nicknamed it 'The Dark Continent'; and *The Economist* magazine branded it 'the Hopeless Continent.'"[5] Orobator aims to take a firm stand in refuting incorrect notions about African religion, such as the false impression that these religions deny the existence of a supreme God. He narrates a childhood experience watching his father wake up every

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa: Confessions of an Animist* (New York: Orbis Books, 2018), 6.

morning to pray to the deity Osanobua. In these ways, African religious traditions were misunderstood and stereotyped by white missionaries. This had important and lasting consequences: "First, it meant that Africans did not in fact have a religion. At best, whatever ritual actions Africans performed were pale approximations of religion; at worst, they were animist and fetishist. Second, as a result of the first point, early European missionaries justified their aggressive attempts to eradicate superstition, magic, paganism, and fetishism in Africa and to foist a new religion on Africans."[6] But this missionary perspective failed to see the ways in which "African religious traditions represent an all-encompassing framework of meaning and practice that regulates political governance, economic transactions, and social interactions."[7] Similar to Orobator, Thomas Riggs also discusses the centrality of indigenous African religious traditions in the life of locals. For him, the traditional religion of the Africans is ingrained in culture, and as culture is a way of life of a people, it becomes very difficult to remove sacred cultural practices completely.[8] From a cultural anthropological perspective, traditional African religious practices are crucial to the everyday lives of African communities.

Ogbu Kalu looks to early forms of religious syncretism as examples of the possibility for inculturation. He notes that Ethiopianism was an initial response to missionary denigration of indigenous cultures:

> "The movement, dubbed Ethiopianism, could be regarded as the first response by the Africans. It challenged white representation of the African values, cultures, and the practice of the Christian faith. It challenged white monopoly of the cultic and decision-making powers within the church, and the monopoly of the interpretation of the canon and the cultural symbols of worship. Ethiopianism countered the denigration of indigenous cultures with a nationalist antistructure and a quest for the Africanization of the gospel."[9]

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[6] Ibid., 14.
[7] Ibid., 15.
[8] Thomas Riggs, *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices: Religions and Denominations*, vol. 1, 2006: 1.
[9] Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24.

Another such response to the early and exclusionary missionary message was that of the

African Initiated Churches (AICs) like the Zionists in South Africa, Abaroho in East Africa,

and Aladura in West Africa, who utilized prayers, ritual healing, indigenous symbolism, and

liturgy.[10] Kalu recognizes the fusion of both the traditional religious values and Christianity

in Ethiopianism and in the AICs as hopeful answers to religious syncretistic problems. Kalu

argues that Pentecostalism only amplified the cultural ideals and values that were already in

existence. For him, the culture and the worldview of the indigenous people gave

Pentecostalism its African identity. Therefore, any attempt to remove the Africanity of

Pentecostalism will spell doom for African Pentecostalism. Given that many Africans today

still hold on to beliefs derived from the traditional cosmologies and apply them to their

everyday lives, it is wise to discover their roots and see their cultural practices as inseparable

from their religious worldviews.[11] Although he lauds the blend of Pentecostalism with the

indigenous cultures through the AICs, he also laments that Pentecostals favor the destruction

of the past as a way of progression. Citing Adrian Hastings' *African Catholicism: A Voyage

in Discovery*, he warns that "Pentecostal attacks against indigenous culture constitute a

regression from the achievements by the African Instituted Churches on the gospel-culture

interface."[12] While there are examples of religious syncretism to celebrate, there is also

reason to practice caution in the wake of modern attempts to inculturate African religions,

given the history of the continent.

Birgit Meyer reiterates Kalu's worry that fossilizing the African religion prevents a

healthy synergy between Christianity and African religion.[14] Meyer argues that Christianity

tends to locate African traditional religions as things of the past, while the practices are very

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., 171-172

[12] Ibid., 171. Cf. Adrian Hastings, *African Catholicism: Essays in Discovery* (London: SPCK, 1989).

[14] Birgit Meyer, "'Make a Complete Break with the Past': Memory and Postcolonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourses," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3, 1998.

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alive and even on the increase.[15] The continued practice of traditional African religion is also impacted by economics in the post-colonial era. Jacinta C. Nwaka writes ethnographic research on the youth of Southern Nigeria. In her article, she emphasizes how colonial rule changed the communal system of African life, introducing a capitalist economy that impoverished a majority of the people, as "[w]ith its tight grip on the economy through monetary policy, colonialism undermined the communality which underpins African Traditional society and established a capitalist system that provided firm control of the economy for a privileged few at the expense of the larger population."[16] She blames neoliberal colonial mentality for the poverty of the people, which she claims lingered from the colonial era to the contemporary times of the twenty-first century. Naomi Haynes defines neoliberalism as "changes in the relationship between the state and the market, a reduction in government's role in the economy, the rolling back of the welfare state, privatization of industry and with it, a new emphasis on personal responsibility."[17] She argues that this is one of the factors that brought about the impoverishment of the people of the Zambian Copperbelt. In response to the unhealthy situation in the society, many people resorted to what Jean and John Comaroff referred to as occult economies.[18] These economic realities present reasons to exercise caution with religious syncretism, as the dominance of colonial economic systems has had deleterious cultural and financial impacts.

The examples and cultural theories presented in this section are nicely summarized by this statement from Orobator: "You can take an African out of African religion, but you

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Jacinta C. Nwaka, "The Return of the Gods? Trends and Implications of the Rising Popularity of Fetish Rituals and Occult Practices Among Nigerian Youth," *African Development*, vol. 45, no.3, 2020, 58.

[17] Naomi Haynes, *Moving by the Spirit: Pentecostal Social Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (California: University of California Press, 2017), 3.

[18] Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Post Colony," *American Ethnologist*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1999; Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, "Occult Economies, Revised: Enchantment, Spells and Occult Practices in Contemporary Economies," in B. Moeran and M. de Waal (eds), *Magical Capitalism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

cannot take African religion out of an African."[19] For many African Christians, one leg is in the church and the other is in African traditional religion. Instead of resisting or erasing these complex religious values, inculturation is the answer.

Inculturation: Toward an Enduring Solution

Inculturation has held a place of importance in both the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching as well as in the opinions of African scholars as the most appropriate approach to religious and cultural encounters. The concept appears in John Paul II's strategy for evangelization in his encyclical letter *Slavorum apostoli*. In this encyclical, John Paul II defines inculturation as "the incarnation of the Gospel in native cultures and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church."[20] Thus, for him, there ought to be a mutual symbiosis between the Gospel and culture for a full inculturation to take place. The Gospel does not come into a culture to expunge it, rather to complement it such that the culture, having been enlightened and transformed by the Gospel, becomes a manifestation of that same Gospel. In his address to the bishops of Kenya, he also remarks that "inculturation will truly be a reflection of the incarnation of the word when a culture, transformed and regenerated by the Gospel, brings forth from its own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought."[21] The gifts of inculturation have a prominent place in the Catholic tradition.

In the same way, Laurenti Magesa argues that in the encounter between faith and culture, the faith becomes part and parcel of the culture, fuses with the culture, and transforms it into a new religious, cultural reality.[22] From the perspectives of both John Paul II and African scholars of inculturation, the outcome should be a mutual blend whereby none claims superiority over the other. Odozor uses John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio* to

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[19] Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 69.

[20] John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli,* encyclical, Vatican, June 2, 1985, no. 21.

[21] Address to Bishops of Kenya, no. 6

[22] Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis books, 2004), 5.

emphasize mutuality. For him, inculturation is a two-way process: "While it is true that through inculturation, the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures, it is also true that through the inculturation of the Gospel in various local churches, the universal church herself is enriched with forms of expression and values in the various sectors of Christian life such as evangelization, worship, theology and charitable work."[23]

In another approach to inculturation, Orobator explains four terms or concepts that the Gospel and culture need to embrace. The first is adaptation, which he describes as "a selective modification of Christian faith and worship using elements from African religion that are considered compatible with the Christian message."[24] The second is accommodation, which means that although Christianity does not entirely accept the contents of other religious tenets, it "allows for or tolerates certain aspects of African religion."[25] The third term is indigenization, which is "allowing Africans to assume local responsibility for the affairs of the community called church and to giving the faith a local flavour and colour."[26] The last one is contextualization, which "recognizes the need to take into account the situation-in-life of the local people in understanding the meaning and practice of Christianity."[27]

For inculturation to be effective, I would argue that consideration of native language is of utmost importance. The language of the people is as important as their culture. Pope John Paul II lauded Cyril and Methodius for their patience in translating the scriptures to the Slavic language:

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[23] Paulinus I. Odozor, "An African Moral Theology of Inculturation: Methodological Considerations," *Theological Studies* 69, 2008, 586; cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio,* encyclical, Vatican, December 7, 1990, no. 52 § 3-4, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html.

[24] Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa,* 127.

[25] Ibid., 128.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid. Arij Roest Crollius and Theoneste Nkeramihigo in *What is so New about Inculturation?* also identify adaptation and accommodation as important aspects of inculturation. However, they reject indigenization, on the ground that the term 'indigenous' has a restricted meaning.

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> "In order to translate the truths of the Gospel into a new language, they had to make an effort to gain a good grasp of the interior world of those to whom they intended to proclaim the word of God in images and concepts that would sound familiar to them. They realized that an essential condition of the success of their missionary activity was to transpose correctly biblical notions and Greek theological concepts into a very different context of thought and historical experience."[30]

Learning the language of a people is an essential missionary strategy. A grasp of a people's language is a grasp of their culture and, by implication, their religion. On this, Orobator concurs that learning the language of the African people to be evangelized is akin to learning to read the African text from the perspective of the African religious and cultural standpoint and not from the European missionary perspective: "the process of inculturation ought to recognize the uniqueness and greatness of each religious tradition" while being "careful not to gloss over the shortcomings, aberrations and limitations."[31] Inculturation ought to present a Christianity that is truly Christian and truly African.

Inculturation aims to bring harmony between Christianity and African traditional religion. As Pope John Paul II stipulates, the Gospel must be made to be born or be incarnated in and from the culture of the people, "Christianizing" the African religion and "Africanizing" the Christian religion. What is now left for the African Church, moving forward, is to embark on an ongoing process of inculturation as Pope John Paul II has instructed. This will enable the church to arrive at a Christianity that is authentically Christian and African at the same time. By this, the African will not feel lost in Christian religion. The missionaries have done their part, and the work of inculturation is now left for the African Church.

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[30] John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli,* encyclical, Vatican, June 2, 1985, no.11.
[31] Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 134.

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