

## **The Problem of Syncretism - Being Just Like Everyone Else**

In an attempt to remain relevant and attractive in a changing world, many Christians are apt to reflect the patterns and modalities of society at large. Playing “follow-the-leader” this way may be a logical soft option, but only conforming to the image of Christ will empower us to impact our generation. Christians must be contemporary as, indeed, Jesus was, but he was not “just like everyone else”. The life of God, multiplied exponentially by the Spirit living within gave him (and will give us) the burst of power we need to make a difference.

### *Which God?*

The mass over, the priest’s words were echoing around the niches and chapels built into the sides of San Francisco Cathedral in La Paz as the Aymara family next to me stood up and prepared to leave. Pulling his “chullo” down over his ears, to keep the cold off his head, Don Juan (not his real name) told me he was going home. I asked what the mass meant to him. He told me he had been coming to the church every week since he was a boy. Did he believe in prayer, I asked. He told me that he did, but that he didn’t understand some of the things that happened in the service. He was mainly concerned about keeping his family going. Religion was helpful, but he confided that it did not always meet his needs. When prayer failed the shaman in his village would say incantations over him, maybe sacrifice a chicken, so that the spirits would heed the sight of blood and give him the favour he needed. I asked him how he managed to balance two competing faiths. He told me they were one and the same, in his opinion. “They are all about God.” In his mind, shamanism and Christianity functioned as one paradigm. He saw no conflict, because that is how he had been brought up. He told me the spirit world of his village predated the arrival of the Spaniards and their gilt images five hundred years previously. It had kept his ancestors together and given them hope and power in times of need.

### *What exactly is Syncretism?*

The option of mixing faith systems and observing them as one is called “syncretism”. It is a framework, a process by which elements of a single set of world views are harmonized and assimilated into another, resulting in a change in the nature of both of them and the emergence of a new system, a revised set of beliefs and rules. It is a union of theologies. The synthesized form is a new product, although separate segments retain some identifiable components, such as a high altar, or a witchdoctor’s tools of trade. I have seen syncretism at work in some African churches, where animism and other traditional religions have been wedded to the Christian message. I have observed it in Andean villages in Peru, where indigenous religions are often mapped to Christianity, giving local deities new Christian identities, so that prayers are said in old ways to new names, such as the Virgin Mary or the Apostle Peter. When our Prime Minister recently attended a Christian church service to celebrate the opening of a new parliament, nodding his assent to the creed recited, and then went to help officiate at a Hindu ceremony, he was being syncretistic. Biblical Christianity and this type of accommodation simply do not mix (2 Corinthians 6:15-16).

Syncretism is usually associated with attempts by belief systems to be relevant, less confrontational, controversial and culturally alienated by mixing and matching with local ones. It removes absolutes and works on the assumption that any belief can be adopted, melded, re-shaped, discarded, denied or repudiated, depending on whether it suits the new operating environment. Syncretism involves representation of a limited and distorted part of the underlying message, so that it fits the values and traditions of outsiders, or is rendered acceptable to them. And it is all around us.

I have been to India a number of times. Hinduism is syncretistic. I recently read a fictionalised account of an Indian boy who met a Christian missionary who explained the Gospel and led him to accept Jesus Christ as his Saviour. The boy then went home and thanked Krishna for helping him find Jesus as his new god. In spite of its claim to be universally monotheistic, Islam is also practiced alongside traditional faiths in many countries. In Indonesia, millions of Muslims tolerate traditional Javanese folk religion, parallel to the mosque.

In the West, syncretism is widespread. In essence, it means “living like everyone else”, adopting their world views and mixing them with faith, so that the new soup is palatable to everyone and no one is offended by “fundamentalist” beliefs. It involves downplaying key elements of the Gospel that are considered “old fashioned” or “not cool”, so as to be more acceptable, less eccentric. Young people growing up in church have a fear - almost a phobia – about distinctiveness, of being rejected because they are different. They don’t want to be associated with the image of the small, traditional, suburban church with a hall, a manse and an aging membership. The church of the future must employ culturally sensitive evangelism, without being seduced to conform. Otherwise, the natural process of syncretism will increasingly lead to the acceptance and validation of extra-Biblical offshoots such as Christian feminism, Christian gay groups, atheistic evolution in Christian schools, removing Christ from Christmas celebrations and a host of similar developments in respectable ecclesial circles.

*So, what’s wrong with syncretism?*

Syncretism demands that worship of God be shared with competing deities. This occurred constantly in the Old Testament, as the values of the Canaanites, Babylonians, Assyrians and others permeated ancient Israel. On one occasion, the Prophet Elijah challenged the nation to stop dithering between two opinions and decide whether Jehovah or Baal was the deity worth following (1 Kings 18:21). That should have been a no-brainer, but Baal and other gods of the Canaanites had great influence. I have visited ancient Canaanite settlements in Lebanon and seen the influence of the deities that sought to displace Jehovah in the life of his people.

Church history is filled with the struggle against syncretism from political, social, religious and economic sources. In New Testament times, Greek, Roman and so-called “mystery religions” sought to undermine the Christian community through syncretism. In subsequent centuries (particularly after Christianity became the official religion of the state following the conversion of Constantine in

312 AD) it was easier to undermine Christian faith by mandating “toleration” rather than persecuting Christians, which only led to martyrs.

One crisis that faced the early church was acceptance of non-Jewish Christian converts. Many Jewish believers acted as though their faith was an extension of their national history and identity. When God began to save Gentiles many of them were horrified. Only a major conference in Jerusalem, under the leadership of wise men of God, was able to deal with the issue (Acts 15, Galatians 2). Now we know the people of God are not identified by ethnicity, gender or social status, but their relationship to God and to one another through Christ (Galatians 3:28).

Pressures exist on all sides today, as secular humanism strives to be the common ground for solving problems. Pluralism is proclaimed as the ground for melting all religions into a porridge of new religious ideas. The values of this world view strive for a place in the church's response to both the demands for conformity and the cries for liberation confronting it.

Some people argue (or act on the basis that) that the best way to reach people is to live in their space and be like them. This involves “contextualising” the Gospel. I once listened in horror as a visiting speaker in a church I attended told the congregation it was OK to break the law if imprisonment could be used by God to reach non-Christian prisoners. Where do we draw the line? When God is just like everyone else, the whole reason for being a Christian is up for grabs.

Syncretism of the Christian gospel occurs when basic elements of the Bible are replaced by religious elements from other faiths. It often results from a quest to make the Gospel acceptable, less alien, or embodied in a different cultural context. In many societies, including in the West, standing up for the absolutes of Christian revelation is a criminal offence. It is safer to look for common ground and inter-faith dialogue than run the risk of being labeled a “crank”.

The Bible teaches that truth comes by revelation, through the agency of the Holy Spirit. There are times when elements of traditional religion foreshadow aspects of the Gospel and can be a way of opening up communities to evangelism. This was the case in Athens (read Acts Chapter 17) and many Asian societies where missionaries eventually made inroads when they learned enough about local religions to show the people that Christ was the One they were looking for and encouraged them to abandon half-truths for the real thing.

Syncretism, on the other hand, involves adding other beliefs to Christian doctrine, with the intention of supplementing the salvation provided by Jesus - as if it were somehow incomplete. Syncretism springs from lack of faith in Christ's saving power. At issue are not methods of praying, clothing worn, songs that are sung, styles, forms and expressions that are used (let's celebrate Jesus with the best music available), languages that are spoken, or even objects used in worship, but the heart. Syncretism is a tool of Satan to water down revelation and separate God from his people by the accretion of symbols, liturgies, art forms and theologies that do not “offend”. It involves a loss of moral and spiritual authority.

*Squeezed, but into whose mould?*

Six billion people simply do not squeeze into fixed moulds. They are influenced by a host of cultural realities that include gender, education, ethnic space, occupation, family mores, taboos and semiotic frameworks. The global cultural economy is a complex network, a sophisticated multi-dimensional jigsaw. Culture is not unified. It is ideological, political and economic. If we are to be relevant Christians in a global village we have to recognize local dynamics, histories, subcultures, prejudices and imagined communities and try not to compartmentalize people or insist on a single “fix” on human dynamics that cannot be constrained by a single “snapshot”. Our message must be addressed to population fluidity, disjunctiveness and rapid global transformation. As Christians, being relevant in the modern world involves learning how to be simple, uncomplicated and transparent as we relate to the Eternal and His creation. It means being open to people but sticking to Truth. That is a hard juggle. If the balls fall, the message is compromised and people look elsewhere.

The First Commandment requires that we love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength (Matthew 22:37-38). Jesus is the only one through whom we can be saved (Acts 4:12). He said, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). These are categorical statements. The Bible says that the “natural mind” of the non-Christian cannot understand the things of the Spirit, but rejects them. They are “foolish” to him (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). When we strive to be like others, and reify their values in our lives, as our guiding principles and aspirations, we are not consciously bowing to false idols or making them our “gods”, but yielding in more subtle ways.

Our efforts not to be squeezed into everyone else’s mould (Romans 12:1-2) must not be confused with religious pride and self-effort, making us so out of step that our walk is disqualified and people are turned off by our lives. (People should be drawn to the message because of our lives, not driven away from it.) My father used to tell the story of a man who went to a passing-out parade to watch his son’s graduating class. As he sat in the stands, he looked hard to make out his son. Finally he saw him. “Look”, he cried out, “There is my son. He is the only one marching in time”. No doubt his listeners realized the poor man’s son was the only one marching out of step. Instead of surveying the whole, he focused on one small aspect and missed the obvious.

God is building a contemporary church, one that overflows with his abounding life, presence and purpose, in step with the Holy Spirit. He has come to show us how to live, and how to make the reality of Christ a compelling force in our generation, tearing down false images, rather than the other way around. Sections of the modern church are working hard to reinvent techniques of praise and worship, to make it more “real”, more tangible, but fully birthed of God. This is great news. Lamentably, some traditional elements of the Body of Christ respond with criticism, rather than rejoicing.

### *Holding to the simplicity of Christ*

In an effort not to be like the world around us, it is important that we not become so different as to turn them off. Let me give an example. I once took a flight from Perth to Melbourne, surrounded by several dozen men and women who

belonged to an exclusive Christian denomination and were on their way to a conference in Melbourne. The women wore scarves on their heads. The men were dressed and spoke conservative English (not unlike the vernacular used in the version of the Bible authorised by King James in 1611). One of their number, a middle-aged farmer who sat in the seat beside me told me the group refused to have formal contact with other Christian denominations, because they considered them a "too worldly". The longer we talked the more convinced I became that the focus of this group was not holiness but exclusivity. What was important, in their world view, was not the Body of Christ but externalities such as dress styles, forms of music and social intercourse. Their response to syncretism was to cut themselves off. In so doing, they lived as though they were the only ones left in God's Family. Jesus lived among us and we were attracted to him because the presence of the Spirit in Him created and celebrated overflowing life, not because he established an exclusive society. It is important that we not tie ourselves to legalistic bandwagons that focus on stereotypes about form, rather than substance. We are not different for the sake of being different, but as a consequence of a new inner life, living by new values, appetites and priorities. The normative family of God is above culture, nation, language or familial ties.

The Apostle Paul encouraged Christians in the first church at Corinth not to lose sight of their pure and simple devotion to Christ, not to add anything to it, but hold firm to the simplicity of the Christian message (2 Corinthians 11:3). We can add nothing to what Jesus has already done for us, but need to know what we believe and be committed to it, holding to the absolutes of Biblical revelation, living by our faith. God doesn't have to be so different as to be 'weird'.

### *People of influence*

How can we be people of influence, relevant, dynamic, attractive, persuasive and still be able to proclaim the message, with integrity to the truth. How do we avoid syncretism in our church, family and personal lives?

None of us is free from the innate desire to be accepted by others and to be like the world around us. The human heart reaches out to gods in all forms. Dealing effectively with the temptation to compromise on many levels is an essential part of Christian growth and maturity. We cannot long mask the subtle attachments we feel to "our" world, and the hunger to be part of what is going on.

God calls us to be different, to escape the downward drag and be re-made in the image of His Son. The Bible says that true liberty comes from the Lordship of the Holy Spirit, as He makes us less like others and more like Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). Only He can give us power to be different. Regardless of culture or personal background, believers don't have to live by the standards and patterns of everyone else, because they are "born of God" and their Biblical praxis is predicated on the person and presence of His Son. Let's allow Him to bring this about in a transforming way.