

Article

Reconsidering Syncretism and Contextualization: The *sangoma-Prophet* Phenomenon in South African Neo-Prophetic Pentecostalism

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Abstract: The emergence of African Christianity from missionary tutelage towards the close of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century raised concerns of syncretism that only eased with arguments of contextualisation in the 1970s. The arguments some missiologists in Southern Africa made, especially about the older Spirit churches (Zion and Apostolic churches) as indigenising agents, almost retired the concept of syncretism in relation to these churches in favour of recognising them as being responsive to their context—hence, agents of contextualisation. The advent of the neo-prophetic movement requires a reconsideration of both the concepts of syncretism and contextualisation of the Christian faith, especially in light of the alleged interaction of some in this movement with ancestral spirits. The article concerns itself with the question: why does the advent of neo-prophetism require a conceptual reconsideration of syncretism and contextualisation and to what end? The search for an answer to this question adopts a qualitative desktop research approach. The study seeks to understand the reasons for the traditional healing (*sangoma*) prophet phenomenon requiring a reconsideration of the mentioned concepts.

Keywords: African christianity; African spirituality; contextualisation; mission-initiated churches; neo-prophetism; syncretism



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1. Introduction

A recent major development in the religious scene is the advent of neo-prophetism in South Africa and beyond (Kgatle and Anderson 2021), which Kgatle (2021, p. 2) labels as the fourth wave of Pentecostalism. Scholars have addressed this development from several perspectives including ethical and Christological. From an ethical perspective, Dube (2021, pp. 139–41), Kisungu (2021, pp. 58–60), and Shingange (2021, pp. 118–22) are some of the scholars that have raised concerns about falsehood, abusiveness, physical endangerment, financial predation, etcetera, characterizing some ministries within neo-prophetism. Frahm-Arp (2021, pp. 158–59) and Shingange (2022, p. 101), on the other hand, have highlighted the movement's Christological challenges in which these new prophets seem to have assumed Christ's mediation role while continuing to proclaim him as Lord and Saviour. In most descriptions of the prophets' *modus operandi*, candles, oils, water, and other objects appear as tangible means of transferring spiritual power to effect diverse outcomes (Resane 2021, p. 96). The inclusion of the abovementioned objects and exercise of diagnostic prophecy in the healing and miracle-producing repertoire of neo-prophetism together with weakened Christology, which Mngadi (2022, p. 19) considers almost non-existent, are not lost to Mofokeng (2021a, pp. 41–42), Shingange (2022, p. 108), and others who note similarities with older African Independent Churches (AICs) and, beyond that, with African Traditional Religions (ATR) in which indigenous healers including *sangomas* in South Africa are specialists. Similarities between neo-prophetism and ATR practices are not much of a concern as they understandably arise out of a conscious choice to operate within the African worldview traceable to the emergence of AICs since 1884 when Nehemia Tile

established his Thembu National Church (Roy 2017, p. 105). What raises concern are the implications of Mokhoathi's (2021, p. 2) findings from a study involving ten adult males and females, all participants in African Christianity, which he considers to be a product of syncretism. According to Mokhoathi (2021, pp. 4–5), some of the participants with nominal mainline church membership, who additionally act as indigenous healers, “perceived no incompatibility between belief in Christ and their ancestral mediation practice”. Only those committed to their Christian faith on one side and those with “rigorist” adherence to African tradition on another maintained the view of incompatibility between the two religious systems (Mokhoathi 2021, p. 10). Admittedly, Mokhoathi's research does not feature neo-prophetism. However, it exposes the reality of persons and communities who claim allegiance to Christ while concurrently possessing charismatic abilities sourced from ancestral and nature spirits. A confirmation of the same comes through Apostle Makhado Ramabulana, a South African participant in neo-prophetism and a self-confessed former false prophet, who admits to having been initiated into the occult and initiating other prophets and *sangomas* (Ramabulana 2018). Further confirmation comes from Resane (2021, p. 96), who, writing in the context of the commercialization of the gospel by neo-prophetic ministers, asserts that “[I]t is becoming common for the commercialist preachers to pour libations on the ground as a way of enhancing church growth”.

This background serves as a basis to argue that the advent of neo-prophetism requires a reconsideration of the concepts of “syncretism” and “contextualisation” in a quest to pronounce God's “yes” and “no” to aspects of ATR. The article concerns itself with the question: why is it necessary to pronounce God's “yes” and “no” to aspects of ATR and why reconsider the concepts of syncretism and contextualisation?

2. Definitions

The following concepts need clarifying: African Christianity, syncretism, and contextualisation. Their clarification will follow the order in which they appear. The first one is African Christianity, which I define in a similar fashion to Kgatle and Mofokeng (2019) as well as Ukah (2007, p. 2) as “encompassing the beliefs and practices of the Christian faith held and engaged in by believers whose immediate religio-cultural background is characterized by worldviews peculiar to African indigenous cultures”. Such believers span church organizations inclusive of Western missions, and AICs in their Ethiopian, Zionist, Apostolic, and old, new, as well as prophetic, Pentecostal types.

The second concept is that of syncretism. Defined from its Greek roots, *synkretismos*, which alludes to the historical coming together of warring parties on Crete island to face a common enemy, the concept of syncretism expresses a negative evaluation of a specific interaction of the gospel and the culture of its recipients, considered a marriage of convenience under duress (Ezenweke and Kanu 2012, p. 73).

The third concept, contextualisation, here refers to a process of transformation of the Christian faith from structures and forms of expression grounded in missionary culture to those of recipient cultures (Chai 2015, p. 5). As such, contextualisation is necessary. However, as a paradigm of relating to expressions of the Christian faith in ways that discourage negative pronouncements, fostering a relativist attitude, contextualisation threatens the viability of Christian witnesses. This is the sense in which its reconsideration is raised.

3. Methodology and Methods

The study uses a qualitative desktop research approach on relevant secondary source material in the form of books and articles mostly available online. The relevance of the literature was ascertained based on its direct engagement with key elements pertinent to the research problem, namely, neo-prophetic Pentecostalism, the African indigenous healing tradition of *sangomaism*, as well as the concepts of contextualization and syncretism (Booth et al. 2016, p. 66). The modifier, “desktop”, contrasts the research concerned with both laboratory-based and fieldwork-based research types while the qualitative aspect

refers to its concern with text instead of numbers. The gathered literature was subjected to multiple readings and data from each source were allocated to themes that coalesced into four main divisions (Booth et al. 2016, p. 93). The divisions are arranged and discussed as follows: modern missionary Christianity and syncretism, a reappraisal of modern syncretic Christianity, reconceptualizing syncretistic Christianity as contextualisation, and challenging the inadequacy of contextualisation. The research assumes a South African perspective although interacting with relevant data from other geographies on the African continent, especially West Africa.

4. Modern Missionary Christianity and Syncretism

The coming together of missionary societies into the General Missionary Conference since 1904 and the formation of the Christian Council of South Africa (CCSA) in 1936, which ultimately became the South African Council of Churches (SACC) in 1960, meant an increasing distance from concerns to disciple African Christians in particular ways to concerns with socio-political issues, mostly to do with racial politics (Roy 2017, pp. 148, 150–62). It appears as if the operative belief was that Africans associated with missionary Christianity held to orthodox theological formulations, and true to rationalist tendencies in this stream, such assent was adequate to absolve the African adherents. The Africans within missionary Christianity exposed the inadequacy of such an approach by retaining and actively seeking the comfort of ancestral spiritism for their daily concerns (Anderson 1993, p. 30; Manala 2006, p. 50; Mulutsi 2020, p. 41). In continuing to patronize the ancestral cult, these African believers mended the brokenness fostered by a dualist approach to personal and social life (Anderson 1987, p. 82; Clark 2001, p. 81).

The intellectualization of faith that characterizes missionary Christianity associated with the mainline churches has led classical Pentecostals, who themselves are part of missionary Christianity, and neo-Pentecostals to suspect the former's Christian claims. The suspicion arises out of the observations of both classical and neo-Pentecostals, collectively labelled evangelical Pentecostals (Mathole 2005, p. 184). Furthermore, scholarly testimony confirms that many African Christians in missionary-initiated churches (MICs) continue customary practices, some of which involve the ancestral cult (see Baer 2001; Degbe 2014, pp. 261–63; Denis 2004, p. 181; Manala 2006, p. 50; Mofokeng 2015, pp. 112–16; Mulutsi 2020, pp. 41, 43). This observation contrasts sharply with one of the defining characteristics of evangelical Pentecostalism—the explicit opposition to the ancestral cult and associated rituals (Anderson 1993, pp. 30–31; Clark 2001, pp. 91, 95; Degbe 2014, p. 263; Larbi 2002, p. 148). In its opposition to this cult, evangelical Pentecostalism does not consider itself any less African (Anderson 1993, p. 31; Clark 2001, p. 98). Added to its self-perception are the observations of scholars such as Amanze (2008, p. 4) and Clark (2001, p. 85) that evangelical Pentecostalism, whether in its classical or neo-Pentecostal forms, expresses an African religious genius in its orality, lively body movements, sensitivity to pneumatic realities, consideration of the spirit realm as a source for ailments and misfortune as well as remedies, and so on. Anderson (2000, p. 373) ascribes these same traits to pneumatic AICs, upon which he argued for their consideration as African Pentecostals.

5. Reappraising Modern Syncretic Christianity

Historically, the syncretism of missionary Christianity hardly came to mind such that the term “syncretism” attached itself to, as well as invoked, developments within African Christianity beyond the control of missionaries. The Ethiopian¹ part of African Christianity, although acknowledged to be closest to missionary Christianity in theology, liturgy, and organization, elicited concern for being sympathetic to African customs (Daneel 1987, p. 217). The main concern with Ethiopianism lay in the direction of its politics, which both the governments of the South African colonies and the missionaries considered to be antagonistic to the colonial project by aspiring for Black nationalism within and across colonial boundaries (Mogashoa 2009, p. 181). In addition to and beyond Ethiopianism was Zionism, an African charismatic movement emerging out of, and associated with,

classical Pentecostalism, although denounced by the latter (Bond 1974, p. 14; Kgatle and Anderson 2021, p. 4).² From missionary Christianity's perspective, with its theologically trained ministry and pneumatologically cessationist stance (Amanze 2008, p. 5), Zionism had the misfortune of an already suspect parentage in classical Pentecostalism. The Dutch Reformed Church, which had experienced a pietistic and Pentecostal-like revival in the second half of the nineteenth century, distanced itself from charismatism at the beginning of the twentieth century (Burger and Nel 2008, p. 26; Motshetshane 2015, pp. 17, 54). These charismatics became part of the early Pentecostal movement.

Early classical Pentecostalism's disenchantment with formal education, both public and for ministry, as well as its openness to conversion that did not require catechizing through the schools, attracted many illiterate and semi-illiterate people, further complicating how missionary Christianity perceived classical Pentecostalism and subsequently Zionism—an anti-civilizing mission (Maxwell 1999, pp. 254–55; Nel 2016, pp. 2–3). Although classical Pentecostalism worked itself to some level of respectability, thus overcoming, to a large degree, the perceptions of itself as a sect (Nel 2017, pp. 58–59), Zionism remained suspect even to classical Pentecostals (Bond 1974, p. 14; Kgatle and Anderson 2021, p. 4). Moreover, the rise of neo-Pentecostalism within the mainline church sector during the 1960s and 1970s, followed by the emergence of nondenominational neo-Pentecostalism, starting with Rhema in 1979 and further manifested in the neo-prophetic and Apostolic church groups in the 2010s, has adversely impacted the perception of this Spirit movement by mission-initiated Christianity. This negative sentiment is particularly pronounced due to the association of non-denominational neo-Pentecostalism and the neo-prophetic and Apostolic church groups with the prosperity message (Anderson 1987, p. 74; Frahm-Arp 2018, p. 7; Mathole 2005, pp. 180–81, 206). A consideration of various scholarly observations and arguments on the prosperity message leads to a conclusion that its proliferation, especially in Africa, relates to the contextual concerns many Africans experience daily, something that MICs have not prioritized and to which they lack a theological response (Manala 2004, p. 1502; Tsekpoe 2019, p. 282). Some of these concerns include “sickness, poverty, unemployment, loneliness, evil spirits and sorcery” (Anderson 2000, p. 376). MICs' failure to respond to the above concerns traces back to the influence of Euro-American enlightenment with its individualist approaches to life and dualism in its conceptions of the world (Manala 2004, p. 1503). Hence, the only Christian traditions to attract and penetrate the African worldview are those that eschewed the enlightenment influence in favour of a world in which community is possible, with that community seen to extend beyond materiality (Beyers and Mphahlele 2009, p. 3). The classical Pentecostals, the Zionists, the Charismatics, and the new prophets had and continue to have a transcendent vision of community, in agreement with both the Bible and African perspectives from which to tackle the felt needs of the African person (Kgatle and Anderson 2021, p. 4). The ongoing response to these felt needs occurs despite reservations, especially from the classical and neo-Pentecostal side, grounded in typical evangelical soteriology and modern cultural forms of expression of the faith, including objects used to mediate divine power (Kgatle and Anderson 2021, p. 4).

Missionary Christianity's appropriation of the orthodox label while excluding African Christianity outside of missionary control results from the former's conscious and systematic theologizing (Ukah 2007, p. 4). The consequence of this is visible in the conceptual and evaluative control this brand of Christianity wields against other forms, especially in postcolonial societies. Understandably, missionary Christianity has the pride of place as a facilitator if not an originator of other forms of Christianity that are chronologically younger and institutionally weak (Mbago 2020, pp. 2–3). It is from this perspective that concepts like “mainline churches” were synonymous with missionary Christianity despite its allusion to the peripheral placement of non-missionary Christianity (Mulutsi 2020, p. 41). Scholars like Park (2014, p. 12) have begun to be sensitive against this implication, pointing at the numerical growth of non-missionary Christianity versus the declining numbers of missionary Christianity (Goodhew 2000, p. 358). The issue they raise, by implication, is the future appropriation of the term “mainline” by the formerly and allegedly heterodox if

not syncretistic “sects”. The future mainstreaming of non-missionary Christianity is not without researchers and theologians indigenous to the movement who contribute an emic perspective to articulating issues this movement is about, including its identity.

The recently emergent phenomenon of African neo-prophetism struggles to find sympathy among the scholarly observers of Christian religious developments. The lack of sympathy derives in part from the absence of interlocutors from within this developing stream. Consequently, the African neo-prophetic phenomenon is being studied by scholars with prior commitments like me. This observation raises an interesting question about the conceptualization of neo-prophetism as “cultic” or “occultic” and sheer religious commercialism (Kgatle 2021, pp. 7, 24, 73). How would an internal interlocutor describe and explain the traits so judged? Until somebody internal to neo-prophetism arises or a sympathetic study is conducted that seeks to understand the worldview and theology of the movement, this question shall remain. In the meantime, Resane (2022, p. 55) points to neo-prophetism as conflicting with the religion of the Reformation, especially evangelicalism. He identifies and discusses six areas of conflict, which include ritualism, commercial miracles, extra-biblical prophecies, *sangoma*-like formularies, the “deliverance techniques [and attendant] physical manifestations”, and “the prosperity gospel” (Resane 2022, pp. 56–59). The identified areas of conflict are not solely applicable to the cessationist strain of evangelicalism. They apply to evangelical Pentecostalism too despite its participation in the reality of the Spirit together with all churches so categorised (Kgatle and Anderson 2021, p. 5; Kgatle and Mofokeng 2019, p. 3).

The discussion in the above paragraphs demonstrates the predicament of modern African Christianity, which has attracted concern from its inception. The existence of the concern and the label resulting from it are important as they influence perceptions, attitudes, and approaches in the context of ecumenical relations. However, it is not only the existence of the concern and the label arising therefrom. Rather, it is what occasions the concern and its attendant labelling too. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the concern revolved around the political aspirations of African clergy, followed by the faith–culture conversation that unfolded in African-led spaces from the beginning of the twentieth century (Mogashoa 2009, p. 188; Park 2014, p. 12). While some viewed this faith–culture conversation in African-led Christianity as either the displacement of Christ or his accommodation in an otherwise ancestral office, including confusion of the Holy Spirit with ancestral and other spirits, others deemed it necessary that Christ should incarnate within the African milieu as an ancestor (Anderson 1993, pp. 30, 36; Beyers and Mphahlele 2009, p. 3). The present concern arises from a near complete engrafting of the fundamentals of the religion of the Reformation onto an African stem—potentially a semblance of a decolonised Christianity. Characteristic of this whole development is the predominance of the etic perspective. One of the main concerns from the outside of neo-prophetism is whether Christ enjoys pride of place and a role concomitant with biblical revelation in the theology and practice of the movement or not, to which Kgatle et al. (2022, p. 1) suggest that pneumatic AICs deemed it necessary to augment the biblical Christ with tangibles to render him effective. Another concern involves the identification and source of spiritual power manifest in the movement. Both these concerns are theological instead of pragmatic, for at the pragmatic level, there cannot be a denial of serious attempts to meet the needs of the African person as felt and formulated by the African self.

6. Reconceptualizing Syncretic Christianity as Contextualisation

Syncretism as a concept invoked against African Christianity outside missionary control almost fell into disuse, especially among theologians and missiologists from the 1970s. Two main reasons were that missiologists like Daneel (1987) studied these churches in interaction with the emic perspectives of their believers and not polemically. Secondly, the rise of black theology in the 1970s and African theology centred on the socio-political and cultural experience of (poor) Africans as an important informant to theology, thus further adding to the reinterpreting of African achievements with Christianity (Mofokeng 2021b,

p. 77). Consequently, syncretism as a concept came to be seen as not only negative but a mistaken conceptualization of what had transpired with African Christianity outside of missionary control (Oduro et al. 2008). However, the processes within African Christianity still required labelling. Contextualisation became the new label appended to African Christianity. It explained the “African” in the Christianity of Africans, ranging from experiments with culture to experiments with the socio-political context. The difference between the two experiments was that the former was believer driven while the latter was clergy/scholar driven, therefore more synthetic.

The shift from considerations of syncretism when addressing African Christian experiments with culture to considerations of these experiments as contextualisation occurred mostly among scholars and scholar-activists who began working with AICs and hosting workshops where AIC’s emic perspectives were registered. Thus, the Christian Institute of Southern Africa (CISA) and the South African Council of Churches’ (SACC) Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) worked with some AICs around theological capacitation (Conradie and du Toit 2015, p. 463; Walshe 1977, p. 468). Out of these engagements, especially under the aegis of ICT, the voice of the AICs emerged in the publication of Bishop Ngada’s *Speaking for Ourselves*, and several other publications have since appeared (Ngada and Mofokeng 2001, p. ix). As for experiments with the socio-political context, which were clergy and scholar driven, there is not much evidence of them becoming effectively influential on the ground except for statements like the Belhar Confession and the Evangelical Witness in South Africa, which took on an institutional form in the formation of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa in 1994 and The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa, respectively (Adonis 2017, p. 360; Balcomb 2004, p. 30).

The conceptual replacement of syncretism with contextualisation when speaking of African church-driven experiments with culture, including the turn towards engagement with the socio-political reality, increasingly became normative, at least among scholars. This reconceptualization notwithstanding, Kgatle and Anderson (2021, p. 4) note the refusal of African Pentecostals in both mission-founded churches and those belonging to independent ministries to give their counterparts in Zion churches any Christian standing. They blame this attitude on white Pentecostal missionaries (Kgatle and Anderson 2021, p. 4), who, as cultural outsiders, according to Stanley (2007), were bound to interpret the faith–culture experiments among African believers differently. Therefore, the ongoing missionary activity among the Zion churches, premised on the latter’s perceived “lack of soundness in knowledge of God and the Bible”, invokes concern when seen from a positive appraisal of faith–culture experiments in the AIC sector (Zion Evangelical Ministries of Africa 2013). Allan Anderson is one of the missiologists who appraises the faith–culture experiments positively and has, consequently, played a critical role in influencing young Pentecostal researchers through the inclusive conceptualization of churches in which the role of the Spirit is paramount (Kgatle and Mofokeng 2019, p. 3). Among these Spirit churches can be found the new prophets whom Kgatle (2021, p. v) classifies as representing the fourth Pentecostal wave.

7. Neo-Prophetism, Sangomas, and Contextualisation

Although contextualisation has held sway as an argument for a less adversarial treatment of African indigenous Christianity since the popularization of this concept in the 1970s, there is an increase in research that highlights the resurgence of syncretism or raises concern with the contextualisation paradigm, which is considered responsible for syncretism as a phenomenon. For example, Mulutsi (2020, pp. 65–79, 86) argues against Christian “syncretism with ATR”, for which he holds “independent exorcists” responsible for a deliberate act of deviation from the Pentecostal–Charismatic “rejection of syncretism”. Central to the Pentecostal–Charismatic rejection of syncretism as a phenomenon lies the quest to protect the supremacy and adequacy of Christ both doctrinally and materially (Ndhlovu 2020, pp. 137–43). The role of contextualisation as a paradigm through which to appraise instances of gospel–culture interactions attached to specific believing communities

threatens to silence any protest against the perceived erosion of clear biblical distinctions in favour of an amorphous Christianity that lacks doctrinal acuity, persuasive moral vision, and an energizing sense of mission.

The resuscitation of the concept of syncretism no longer attaches it solely to the old Zionists and AICs. Rather, the concept is now invoked in the context of neo-prophetic Christianity that gained popularity towards the close of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Mulutsi's (2020, p. 67) "independent exorcists" belong to the neo-prophetic movement, which Magezi and Banda (2017) and Tsekpoe (2019), among other scholars, have evaluated from different perspectives, but within the context of theology, and noted its challenges. One of the treatments of this type of Christianity considered its Christology (Kgatlé 2022), a subject central to considerations of orthodoxy, which, if misconstrued, endangers human salvation. Magezi and Banda (2017, p. 2) raise this very point in their consideration of the position neo-prophetic ministers occupy in the lives of their followers. These authors see these prophets assuming the mediatorial role of Christ, thereby endangering the salvation of their followers (Magezi and Banda 2017, pp. 5–6). Magezi and Banda's (2017) observations are echoed by Katlè et al. (2022, p. 1) who note the "shifts in the Christologies" of neo-prophetism which they link to the "freedom of perceiving Jesus according to one's context". The mention of Christology here is to suggest syncretism at the level of doctrine or its contextualisation. Another treatment of this type of Christianity considers cultural forms and approaches which involve the mediation of healing, exorcism, and divine provision for life's needs. While evangelical Pentecostalism limits itself to means such as prayer accompanied by the laying of hands, neo-prophetism includes in its healing and deliverance repertoire the use of oil, water, and burning candles (Kgatlé 2022, p. 1; Nyamnjoh 2018, p. 41). All these are used by indigenous healers too. That itself says nothing as earlier scholars of AICs such as Sundkler (1961, p. 55), Daneel (1987, pp. 233, 235), and Togarasei (2005, p. 372) already explained the use of African traditional objects in the healing repertoire of AICs as merely formal while the Holy Spirit was the underlying source of power. Although the same logic could apply to the neo-prophetic adoption of the same healing means, Katlè (2021, p. 67), drawing from Ramabulana's (2018) autobiographic testimony of dabbling into the occult, claims there is widespread occultic involvement of the neo-prophetic clergy, facilitated by indigenous healers. In addition to Ramabulana's admission to being initiated into the occult, a prominent Ghanaian traditional priest, Nana Kwaku Bonsam, claimed to have initiated one thousand six hundred pastors and prophets across the African continent, with another West African, initially operating from Zambia before relocating to South Africa, popularly called Seer 1, claiming to initiate prophets into traditional power preceding the arrival of Christianity (Mofokeng 2021a, p. 30).

The above claims of the involvement of neo-prophetism not just with the broad African tradition but specifically with the spiritual functionaries of this tradition to the extent of participating in the initiation rituals confuses the confessed allegiance to Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. In the resulting confusion, Degbe (2014, p. 264) opines a conceptual merging of the Holy Spirit and ancestral spirits especially, which becomes a christening of the latter to operate in neo-prophetic spaces. It resuscitates the concerns of syncretism that Bond (1974, p. 14) directed against the older pneumatic AICs in which he attributed the power operating in these churches to traditional spirits and not the Holy Spirit. The similarities between the older pneumatic AICs and the neo-prophetic movement include a much closer interaction with African traditional culture and the use of physical objects to mediate spiritual power (Kgatlé and Mofokeng 2019, p. 5). These movements diverge at the welcome operation of ATR initiates as prophets in neo-prophetism (Ramabulana 2018). Although an objection can be raised against the idea that neo-prophetism welcomes ATR initiates based on Frahm-Arp's (2021, pp. 154, 158–59) assertion that the attitude of the prophets in her study was "diametrically opposed" to ancestors and their veneration, she observes a Christology truncated by her prophetic subject's assumption of Christ's mediating role. Shingange (2022, p. 101) observes the

same and accuses neo-prophetic ministers of insincere proclamation of the Lordship and Saviourship of Christ while “they overtly demonstrate that they themselves have taken the place of Christ”.

To the degree that it is acceptable to consider *sangomas* as guardians and purveyors of African “traditionalist” culture, to that same degree, they are important in the re-Africanization of a detribalised populace. Although the meaning and goal of re-Africanization of the detribalised populace are subjects of debate, in the context of the challenges of daily living, the cries for African solutions to African problems, increasingly punctuated in some political contexts, invokes the centrality of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) to which *sangomas* are a critical stakeholder (Kgope 2023, p. 95). Mainstreaming IKS, potentially laudable from the decoloniality school as a reversing of “epistemicide”, pits missionary Christianity, broadly, as a participant in the alleged epistemicide (Galvin et al. 2023, p. 2). Therefore, the claimed interaction of neo-propheticism and *sangomaism* suggests a radical epistemic shift with implications for all forms of Christianity in South Africa.

The epistemic shift in the foundations of Christianity among Africans exhibits the schizophrenic tendencies of classical Pentecostalism seeking to eradicate spiritism and witchcraft while simultaneously holding their fear before adherents (Kgatlhe 2020, p. 7). The noted fear at the centre of African traditional experience, resulting from the African’s constant struggle against spiritual malaise driven by all kinds of spirit entities, is the need for spiritual protection and power, and the lack of efficacy of the Euro-American enlightenment version of Christianity has resulted in a form of Christian adherence that, although orthodox, especially in the MICs, requires augmenting with African traditional solutions (Mulutsi 2020, p. 48; Togarasei 2005, p. 373). This situation is worsened by neo-prophetic dabbling in African indigenous spiritism and adherence to a contextualist paradigm that frowns on any attempt at maintaining boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable beliefs and practices. Some of those beliefs and practices worth pronouncing God’s “yes” to include the reinstatement of scripture in its authority to guide faith and action (Kisungu 2021, p. 65; Ndhlovu 2020, p. 137); rediscovery of Christ’s adequacy to save and deliver from fear through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Ndhlovu 2020, pp. 142–43; Tsekpoe 2019, p. 288); and regaining agency as God’s stewards on earth (Banda 2022). For anyone who considers the above situation detrimental to the continuance of the Protestant reformational legacy, a reconsideration of the concept of syncretism becomes necessary.

The conceptual reconsideration of contextualisation away from being a paradigm of understanding neo-propheticism to being again a needful process to seed the gospel into African cultures and subcultures is important. Only then shall the reconsideration of syncretism as a concept be seen as a necessary invocation of boundaries and a passing of judgment in favour of the maintenance of such. A reconsidered concept of syncretism facilitates decrying the perceived transgression of orthodoxies and/or orthopraxis associated with specific believing or ideological communities. The maintenance of such orthodoxies and orthopraxis then becomes an exercise in group discipline to produce group coherence. Therefore, syncretism, once understood, becomes a definitional tool, which, in a pluralistic and assimilative world, will contribute a boundedness that results in a creative tension between assimilative and distinctive forces. Admittedly, the awareness of the communal grounding of both orthodoxy and orthopraxis as well as invoking syncretism implies communal raptures, which in a healthier environment invite recognition of the underlying bone-of-contention by all participants and how their differences may be an attempt to pronounce God’s “yes” and/or “no”. The recognition of attempts to pronounce God’s “yes” and/or “no” becomes an invitation to ongoing theological engagement and discernment with potential benefit to the “old” and “new” communities, both of which represent different responses in a changing context (Kgatlhe 2021, p. vi). Failure to engage threatens the hardening of attitudes with potential complications for the church’s missional task, regardless of who constitutes the church—old or young communities rebelling against the older communities.

8. Conclusions

The question of interest this article engaged with was about the reasons for the reconsideration of the concepts of syncretism and contextualisation in relation to the claimed symbiosis of neo-prophetism and the African spiritual healing tradition represented by sangomas. The discussion took a historico-thematic structure. Hence, the themes of syncretism in modern missionary Christianity, a reappraisal of syncretistic (African) Christianity, a reconceptualization of syncretism as contextualisation, and neo-prophetism, sangomas, and contextualisation.

Syncretism as a concept invoked against African Christianity outside of missionary control almost fell into disuse, especially among theologians and missiologists who from the 1970s began to consider African Christian experiments with culture positively as contextualisation of the faith into the socio-political and religio-cultural milieu of African life. However, the advent of neo-prophetism with its much-publicized scandals and an even more pronounced integration into ATR has galvanized academic outcry. Of special concern to this study was the reduction and confusion of the Holy Spirit and ancestral spirits, which, if the claims are true and the situation is allowed to develop further, leaves Africans in the stranglehold of fear and without any chance of resolving it. Hence, a reconsideration of the concept of syncretism to re-establishes boundaries and pass a judgement in favour of the maintenance of such is enjoined. It means a declaration of intention to pronounce God's "yes" and/or "no" whenever the situation demands. From the above, a few reasons may be advanced for reconsideration of the concepts of syncretism and contextualisation considering the claimed relationship between neo-prophetism and sangomas. The first reason is the rising interest in the research of syncretism as this special edition itself testifies. The second reason is the seeming frustration with the inadequacy of contextualisation as a paradigm of understanding the interactions between ATR and neo-prophetism, especially the influence of ATR spirituality in the latter. The third and last reason may be a desire to hold on to a defined Christian identity, in continuity with the past of the church, without repudiating the necessary discontinuities considering the African situation. Without a defined identity, there cannot be discipline, and the possibility of clear intra- and interreligious engagement is rendered null.

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Notes

- ¹ By Ethiopian is here meant the African-founded churches that sprang up in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the end of the second decade of the twentieth century (Roy 2017, pp. 71–72). These churches emerged from the mainline missionary movement and remained closely related theologically and organisationally. Their central slogan was inspired by Psalm 68:31, "Ethiopia shall lift her hands to God" (Roy 2017, p. 71).
- ² Chronologically, the Zionist movement predates Pentecostalism as some of the early Pentecostals came out of John Alexander Dowie's Zion Church (Mofokeng and Madise 2019, pp. 2–3). However, in the South African context, and in common usage, Zionism is an African charismatic Christian movement, deeply engaged with African indigenous culture. This movement held to the teachings of JA Dowie and Pentecostal Spirit baptism.

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