

Editorial

Introduction to Syncretism and Pentecostalism in the Global South

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Critiquing current neo-Pentecostal practices is complex and requires a nuanced approach because this movement's wide range of beliefs and practices. Scholars refer to syncretism as a significant factor in the phenomenal growth of this movement, especially in the Global South (Maxon 2019). It functions within general areas of concern raised by leaders and scholars. Two areas of concern are relevant. Theologically, neo-Pentecostalism is influenced by prosperity theology, emphasising material blessings and personal wealth as a sign of God's favour while exploiting vulnerable individuals and establishing a culture of consumerism, constituting a hierarchical leadership reflecting authoritarian leadership structures that concentrate power in the hands of pastors or prophets, potentially leading to abuse and exploitation and the selective interpretation of scripture, cherry-picking verses to support its teachings, neglecting the broader context and potentially distorting the overall message (Bafford 2019). The sociocultural concerns are the promotion of traditional gender roles by some members, which are limiting and oppressive for women and hinder gender equality as well as a negative, prejudiced approach to homosexuality, leading to the discrimination and exclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals and the exploitation of vulnerable people, promising miraculous solutions to poverty while extracting financial and emotional resources. Syncretistic elements colour all these concerns, reflecting, in many instances, traditional cultural and religious values that may compromise the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Dube 2014).

International Pentecostal scholarship has bloomed during the past fifty years regarding many relevant issues, but there seems to be a lack of evaluation of syncretism and its influence on this movement and potential threat to Pentecostal theology and practice. Therefore, this Special Issue's scope and purpose were the investigating the influence of syncretism on Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism in its various forms. Most articles link syncretistic practices to traditional religion and worldviews in the different contexts of the Global South, where Pentecostalism experienced an unprecedented wave of popularity. The contributors asked whether its popularity can be linked to incorporating some syncretistic features within Pentecostal practice and whether it fits into the ethos and paradigm of Pentecostalism.

The contributors utilised practical, systematic, sociological, and hermeneutical theological perspectives to focus attention on the theological values or dangers with which these practices may be associated.

Traditionally, Western missionaries reaching out to the unreached nations of the Global South called on new converts to abandon all traditional religious and cultural customs and enforced a new worldview, excluding the traditional tribal structural composition of traditional leaders and healers (Stewart and Shaw 2005). They presupposed that the biblical message is equal to their concept of Western "civilisation" (Adamo 2011). In time, some of these converts rebelled against missionaries' claims and encultured, contextualised, concretised, accommodated, and adapted a reformulated gospel in indigenised, localised,



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incarnated, and hybridised forms (see Lapointe 1993; Schineller 1992). They blended their view of God with the traditional concept of religion, arranged church leadership in traditional cultural forms, and established a worship service to account for the cultural values of their people. They valued their own symbols, art, oral narratives, proverbs, values, and performances, such as songs, storytelling, wise sayings, riddles, and dances. And they shared the social life, histories, identities, and economic and political practices unique to their own cultural groups (Domfeh 2007). To illustrate, in Africa, the Ethiopian movement starting in the 1890s, the African-Initiated Churches existing since the early 1900s, classical Pentecostals, and, since the 1980s, neo-Pentecostals emphasised the superiority of traditional religious beliefs and practices in contrast to Western practices. They accepted the traditional spirit world, reinterpreting the Bible and finding much support for their traditions in it. But did they compromise the essence of the gospel and the ethos of their movement (Norget 2007)?

The first contribution, the work of Molly Manyonganise, explores encounters between African religious practices and New Pentecostal Movements (NPMs), attracting thousands since 2008, in Zimbabwe. She asks whether Prophetic Pentecostalism, a prominent element of NPMs, contributed to Pentecostalism's growth. NPMs' emergence challenged Zimbabwean Pentecostal Christians by blending indigenous religious practices with traditional Pentecostal ones during a time when the country found itself in a political and economic desert due to the mismanagement and corruption of government officials. They taught of the value of using objects such as towels, handkerchiefs, wristbands, stickers, oils, and even condoms anointed by the prophet to ward off curses and demonic attacks and receive the blessings promised by the prophet. Such practices are steeped in Zimbabweans' religious worldview and characterize the 'Christianization' of indigenous religious practices.

Francis Marimbe, also from Zimbabwe, focuses on Pentecostal charismatic churches and explores whether their adapted practices represent syncretistic cultural hybridity. She defines hybridity as the creation of new cultural forms by combining elements from different cultures, blending religious practices with local cultural norms. Hybridity can be positive, leading to greater cultural diversity and adaptability. Negatively, it may erode traditional cultures and identities and compromise adapted worship styles, theological interpretations, and church governance. The author's insightful analysis of the interplay between cultural hybridity, convergence, glocalisation, and syncretism in New Religious Movements reveals a rich tapestry of unique religious expression. Prophets and pastors established the spiritual ethos and influenced their followers' socio-economic practices, in the process blending traditional African spirituality with traditional Pentecostal beliefs. The article is a significant reference point for understanding New Religious Movements and their capacity to blend the African religious worldview with global religious practices.

Thabang R. Mofokeng's research into the role played by the *sangoma*-prophet in South African neo-prophetism reconsidered syncretism and contextualisation in neo-prophetism against the backdrop of the African spiritual healing tradition represented by sangomas. Neo-prophetism is scarred by the negative publicity of several scandals. Does the movement reduce and confuse the Holy Spirit and ancestral spirits, and is the *sangoma*-prophet a valid continuation of the New Testament charism of prophecy? The author finds that contextualisation is inadequate as a paradigm of understanding the interactions between African traditional religions and neo-prophetism. What it requires is a defined Christian identity in continuity with the church's history but without repudiating the necessary discontinuities with African neo-prophetism as a requisite for discipline and intra- and interreligious engagement.

Themba Shingange's research reveals several interconnections between African Pentecostal Christianity and African spiritualities obtained by studying the use of material objects found within some neo-Pentecostal churches against the backdrop of South African cultures and spiritualities. Some categorically demonised the use of material objects, arguing that it is essentially syncretistic. This article problematises the syncretism narrative of the use of material objects and syncretism. It argues that the synchronism narrative

continues the missionary/colonial project that demonised all African cultural and material practices and constitutes a “cultural bomb” that seeks to eradicate African customs, cultures, and religious practices. It does not outrightly dismiss as syncretistic the use of material objects but uses texts referring to the early church’s practices as the basis for justifying the non-syncretistic use of material objects.

Klaas Bom and Jonán Monroy-Soto dialogue with Sepúlveda’s concepts of culture and theology. Sepúlveda rejects the existence of a pure gospel. All preaching represents ‘incarnations’. The only cultural option for Latin American Pentecostalism is the Northern American Protestant mission, but in the case of Guatemala, popular Roman Catholicism has become the cultural reality. This is also the case for indigenous Pentecostals: their reality includes both the indigenous elements and the popular Catholic ones. The concept of culture shifted from a modern understanding, focused on the continuing character, to a postmodern one, understanding culture as subject to change. Cultural values organise and shape those who belong to a given culture. Sepúlveda separates the cultural from the theological. The culture is foundational for theology without making the culture theological. The point of departure is the human being as the meaning maker. The result of this priority is that theology is reduced to a cultural activity of meaning making. He cannot make sense of the idea of a ‘direct’ encounter between God and the human being; his priority of the culture prevents him from understanding Pentecostal theology. Their cultural identity is based on their participation in a shared experience of God in the church. Does Juan Sepúlveda’s approach provide an adequate framework for the theological assessment of the possible syncretic characteristics of (Latin American) Pentecostalism? The authors think his approach is still valuable in regard to recognising culture as a fundamental element for understanding the syncretic character of Latin American Pentecostalism but that it needs to be corrected by a more fluid understanding of the constant change in cultural forms and values. They conclude that syncretism is not only an inevitable characteristic of faith but also a point of departure for transformation.

Banda’s article proposed to evaluate the way the African magical view of material wealth was incorporated by African neo-Pentecostal prophets. They taught that anointed objects, such as anointed oil and water, are needed to attain material prosperity. While acknowledging that the prophets empower people to engage with un(der)development that characterises their existence, their view of anointed objects betrays their reliance on the worldview of magic and a revival of premodern Africa. Instead, people need to develop their God-given human creative power to build sustainable economic systems as a condition for economic well-being. Without denying that God still performs miracles, these countries need scientifically and logically sound economic interventions to render them capable of addressing their un(der)development. The author proposes that the prophets’ premodern and uncritical view of material wealth cannot be in line with God’s command to humanity to rule the world. Confronting economic powerlessness through magical charms negates people’s ability to take responsibility for their own lives.

Matshobane provides a perspective on New Prophetic Churches’s popularity and attributes it to their syncretism with African Traditional Religion (ATR) by analysing the prophets’ practices and their syncretic nature. Two interesting case studies describe the ministry practice of prophecy, demonstrating its hybrid, mixed, enculturated nature, arguing that it proves the syncretistic nature of this practice. The author argues that although the incarnation of Christ was contextual, this does not imply that the church must approve all forms of contextual application of the gospel message. Uncritical and unbiblical syncretism imbibe the surrounding culture and allow it to prescribe the way the church should act (acculturation). This article concludes that the source of these prophecies is the spirit of divination or a familiar spirit rather than the Holy Spirit.

Mashabela addresses important representatives of African Independent Churches in South Africa, the Ibandla lamaNazaretha of Isaiah Shembe, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) of Engenas Lekganyane, and the St John’s Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) of Christina Nku. This study is a valuable contribution to their history and concludes that the churches

are characterised by the central role of the Holy Spirit, demonstrated by using salt, water mixed with salt, paper, etc., in a syncretistic manner, but argues that it is acceptable because they continually emphasise God's grace, healing, and spiritual power. They keep to vital Pentecostalism principles, implying that Pentecostals may view them as fellow believers.

Mzondi focuses on the black section of the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, part of the historical apartheid heritage before the church united in 1996. It regarded ubuntu as a biblical approach and did not consider it a sign of committing syncretism. It found the principle of African ubuntu in the events pertaining to 1906 Azusa Street, led by an African American preacher, William J. Seymour, and showed some indigenous African aspects. This mission functioned in continuity with similar biblical practices found in Acts. The author then proposes a biblical and theological approach that promotes the practice of the *charismata*, including prophecy, visions, and dreams with the sound interpretation of the Scripture and divine healing in Pentecostal churches.

Thinane investigates the practice of using holy water in African Neo-Pentecostal Churches. They consider water a powerful symbol of sanctification, purification, and spiritual cleansing. This water acquires mystical powers when applied in the church, and the leaders use it for rituals such as cleansing, deliverance, and bestowing blessings upon objects. In this way, several traditions of traditional African and Western Christian beliefs about the symbolic power of water are amalgamated. The author concludes that such claims about holy water covertly combine elements of two disjunctive belief systems.

Orogun discusses hybrid leadership in African neo-Pentecostalism, describing both its benefits and warning of the corresponding challenges, using four variables that represent the four areas of leadership. The variables refer to boundaries against extremism, the necessity of serving in leadership, the subjection of hybridisation leadership to moral questions, and balance. These variables serve as pointers to areas where leaders should exercise caution in order to ensure that they retain a balanced approach to defend this movement from its proclivity for extremism.

Kgatle's field of research is divine healing in New Prophetic Churches, and he evaluates their healing practices against the African Traditional Religions. Prophets use prophetic consultation, and Kgatle sees similarities with traditional African religions that may betray syncretism: the propensity of charging fees during consultations regardless of the client's economic status and the prescription of certain sacred products that should be utilised to heal the one in need of help. Although these similarities may illustrate syncretistic practices, there are also significant differences. A traditional healer diagnoses a problem by throwing bones, while a prophet relies on the ability of the Holy Spirit to provide prophetic wisdom with which to diagnose an illness. A traditional healer performs rituals to invoke the spirits when exorcising a demon that caused sickness and disease, while a prophet uses the name of Jesus to cast out the evil spirits. Scholars might not, in an imbalanced way, only concentrate on similarities and syncretism, but they should also consider differences.

Nel refers to the teaching of the prosperity message as one of the reasons for Neo-Pentecostalism's popularity and asks whether it is a syncretistic deviation from the gospel. He finds several defining features of primal spirituality shared by Pentecostal spirituality and African traditional religion. In the process, the African teaching of American prosperity theology adopted and adapted beliefs and practices that fulfil Africans' traditional spiritual needs. He argues that these theological features must be reconsidered by Pentecostalism. They may even lead to abusive practices, resulting in bad press reports that reflect on all Pentecostals. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that the New Apostolic Reformation or prophetic movement has contributed in various positive ways and represents a plethora of views and practices.

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