

SYNCRETISM AND INCULTURATION: THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND GHANAIAN RELIGIOUS CULTURE

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***Abstract:** This paper examines the encounter between Christian theology and Ghanaian religious culture through the lens of syncretism and inculturation. We argue that the perception that the Gospel is intrinsic to Euro-western culture is erroneous and accounts for the inability of the Christian church to transmit the Gospel to African cultures without transmitting Euro-western culture. This has been a major challenge to inculturation in Africa, not least Ghana. Further, we contend that a pejorative understanding of the concept of syncretism is accountable for Christian theology's rejection of Euro-western Christianity as syncretic. Through archival material and our own experiences of the Ghanaian situation, we demonstrate that Christianity has always been syncretic and its survival as a worldwide religion is precisely because of its irenic character. We conclude that the irenic character of syncretism and inculturation provide sustainable pathways for spreading the gospel message in the church and society.*

Key Words: Christian Theology, Ghana, Inculturation, Religious Culture, Syncretism.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the expression of syncretism and inculturation within the context of the encounter between Christian theology and Ghanaian religious culture. In Ghana, the different ethnic groups or societies have distinctive religious customs and practices which may be studied in their own right. At the same time, we can also perceive religious worldviews, customs and traditions that are significantly shared across the different ethnic groups in society. A common characteristic of Ghanaian culture evident in everyday life is the sense of the divine and transcendence. For example, Paul Gifford writes about the Akan ethnic group of southern Ghana:

In the pre-Christian religion, reality consists of beings and objects charged with varying degrees and qualities of supernatural power. There is a supreme being (*Onyame*) and lesser deities (*Abosom*).

The Ancestors too are honoured; and other spirits dwell in rocks, rivers, trees, animals and various objects.¹

This worldview implies that the sense of the divine and his interaction in people's daily life permeates every aspect of society. In a different body of research, Buah emphasized that "in Ghanaian society, the belief in a supreme being is considered to be inborn in each individual from the start of existence," as this is attested in the Akan proverb: *Obi nkyere abofra Nyame* which he translates as "the child does not need to be taught about the existence of God."² The centrality of this worldview is salient in the sense that "causality is to be discerned primarily in the spiritual, although natural causality is not entirely disregarded."³ Therefore, as a key worldview, the sense of divinity summons the meaning of all other worldviews and practices, and customs, such as the physical world, which is not held in dualistic tension or competition with the spiritual world as in Euro-western cultures. Rather, these two realms are "bound up in one totality: nothing is purely matter, since spirit infuses everything and changes occur as the result of one spirit acting upon another."⁴

The actions of the spiritual world are considered causes of the events of the physical world. In other words, the world of nature is explained by the world of spirits. Oduyoye refers to this characteristic of African (and Ghanaian) religious culture as a 'cosmic religion.' In this cosmic religion, she sees human experience "as being part of the cosmos. The experience and sense of being together with the environment, and of the spiritual dimension to existence has inspired the world's primal religions."⁵

Pre-Christian practical Ghanaian customs are reflected in the 'cosmic religious' worldview of the people and are preserved in rites of passage such as naming ceremonies, marriage rites and divination, which is a process of finding meaning and resolution to life's puzzles such as untimely death. Divinatory practices offer prophetic

¹ P. Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 83.

² F. K. Buah, *A History of Ghana*, rev. ed. (London: Macmillan Education, 1998), 50.

³ Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 83.

⁴ Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 83.

⁵ Cf. M. A. Oduyoye, "African Culture and the Gospel," in *One Gospel—Many Cultures: Case Studies and Reflections on Cross-Cultural Theology*, ed. M. A. Oduyoye and H. M. Vroom, (New York, NY: Rodopi, B.V., 2003), 42.

services by making known the plans and desires of the world of spirits, ancestors or the Supreme Being and how these impact the everyday life of members of society. Obedience to these revelations was constitutive of the maintenance of order and peace in the Ghanaian family, political institutions and larger society. But, there are also times when divinatory practices have occasioned confusion and division in families or marriages because of the controversial nature of the divinatory process and message.⁶

This paper is inspired by the thinking that, like the terms, ‘fetishism’ and ‘animism,’ syncretism has been used by some Western Christians and theological anthropologists derogatorily to relegate religious traditions and cultures of Africa, as described above, to an inferior status. At the same time, the Euro-Western world has, also, created an illusion – that Euro-western culture is intrinsic to the gospel, hence in their minds, western Christianity is not an amalgam and not syncretic despite the fact attested by Scripture that Christianity has been a mixture of European, Hellenic, Roman, and Jewish cultures, and, for that matter, cultural imports from the Ancient Near Eastern world. Therefore, we contend that a pejorative understanding of the concept of *syncretism* is accountable for Christian theology’s rejection of Euro-western Christianity as *syncretic*. The conviction that the Gospel is intrinsic to Euro-western culture — the central idea in the rejection — further accounts for the inability of the Christian church to transmit the Gospel without transmitting Euro-western culture as well onto African cultures, resulting in the challenges of inculturation in Africa, not least Ghana. To redress this situation, Christian theology must reconsider the original irenic understanding of *syncretism*.

The first part of the paper concerns the Christianisation of Africa through missionary activities in pre-colonial and colonial Ghana, accounting for how the negative conception of syncretism manifested itself in the way that missionaries approached evangelisation. This will be followed by a historical development of the concept of *syncretism* to reveal how it was altered from the irenic to the pejorative

⁶ S. Abukari, H. Issah and H. Y. Adam, “I Cannot Treat Stupidity: The Function of Divination in Planning and Managing Life Crisis within the Dagbong Traditional Society in Northern Ghana,” *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 10 (2022): 431.

understanding. The third part explains how African theologians have responded to the Christianisation of Africa by adopting the process of inculturation or an Africanisation of Christianity as some may want to put it and featuring an atavism and rehabilitation of the positive irenic meaning of *syncretism*. The conclusion will then follow.

Missionary Activity in Ghana - Christianisation of Africa

Ghana's political independence in 1957 – the first in sub-Saharan Africa – from British colonial rule brought many benefits in the different aspects of the people's life. Significant among these benefits was the freedom to consciously own (not without challenges) all that were imposed upon them, through colonialism, including religion. Thus, Ghanaian Christians, and indeed all African Christians after independence, began to process consciously the feeling of an artificial mixture in the faith they are practising. The quest for meaning in the practice of Christianity in Africa revealed that the approaches of Euro-western Christian missionaries before and during colonialism were, more generally, devastating and disrespectful of African cultures. In this section, we will show how the pejorative understanding of syncretism oriented the missionaries to 'christianize' Ghana in two periods: firstly, the pre-colonial period from 1471 to the mid-19th Century, and secondly, during the colonial period from 1884 to 1957. Missionaries in the two periods differ in their approach to the Christianisation or evangelisation process.

Missionary Activities in Precolonial Times

Most scholars of African studies, Christian anthropology, history, and theology maintain that the ultimate goal of the first Christian missionaries to Africa (in Ghana, before the 19th Century) was not the salvation of souls, but, one of the means to advance Euro-Western culture, political domination and the expansion of the empires from where they came.⁷ Writing on the period of European occupation in Ghana in the early 19th Century, Tufuoh argued:

The English, Danish and Dutch establishments on the coast usually had a chaplain on the list of officers; but when there happened

⁷ I. K. Katoke, "Christianity and Culture: An African Experience," *Transformation* 1, no. 4 (1984): 7-10.

to be chaplains on the coast, they limited their ministrations to the Europeans, their mulatta wives and their children.⁸

John Baur makes it explicit that the missionaries worked for the government of their countries. They functioned in cooperation with the explorers, who invited them, and with the military, who received “direct invitation from the missionaries as was the case in Uganda and Malawi.”⁹ The testimonies or narratives of Tufuoh and Baur suggest a trajectory by which European powers sought to expand their empires. In this trajectory, Christian missionaries played an important role alongside the explorers, merchants and the military of their home imperial governments. Finally, Ellingworth concludes his essay on “Christianity and Politics in Dahomey” in these words describing the way African kings, in general, perceived Christian missionaries from Ghana:

There is no evidence that either Ghezo or even Gbele [kings of Dahomey in the east of Ghana] had any conception of Christianity as transcending in principle the bounds of nationality, or of a European ‘fetishman’ exercising his functions in complete independence of his country’s secular rulers. He was ‘the English fetishman,’ ‘the missionary of the Queen of England.’ He was in some sense an agent of the British Government Even African mission workers were considered and considered themselves as British subjects. Their discussions with Ghezo and Gbele seem to have had little if any specifically evangelistic content. ...It is therefore not surprising that they should make little impression on the indigenous inhabitants; that they should be valued when British friendship was sought, appealed to when other means of communication with Britain were lacking, attacked when Britain was being defied....¹⁰

The narrative provides ample evidence enough to establish that the missionaries in the pre-colonial period, who were mostly chaplains, consciously or unconsciously functioned as religious instruments for wider political agenda. There was very little or no interest in evange-

⁸ I. Tufuoh, “Relations Between Christian Missions, European Administrators and Traders in the Gold Coast: 1828-74,” in *The History of Christianity in West Africa*, ed. O. Kalu (London: Longman, 1980), 216.

⁹ J. Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994), 420.

¹⁰ P. Ellingworth, “Christianity and Politics in Dahomey: 1843-67,” in *The History of Christianity*, 245.

lising the indigenous people. Apart from the pastoral care for their own and those indigenous people adopted by them, the missionaries served mainly as diplomats, envoys, and politicians¹¹ who used their holy offices to persuade and to negotiate with the kings on behalf of their explorers and merchants, a risky duty which saw some of them kidnapped and held as hostages.¹² It should be noted that at this time, the different European groups lived in different forts and castles along the coast while they engaged in the gold and slave trades.

Missionary Activities in Colonial Times

Towards the close of the 19th Century, owing to the competition and the scramble for monopoly over Africa the Berlin conference was called in 1884 in which it was enacted that “only factual occupation of a (an African) territory would entitle a power to political sovereignty over it.”¹³ Although the British had few settlements in Ghana, they officially assumed possession of it from this time on. This time, the approach of the missionary enterprise, also, changed. Firstly, the missionary enterprise now involved missionary societies from Europe, and missionaries were more independent from their home governments. Secondly, they were now aggressive and enthusiastic in evangelization of the indigenous which brought them face to face with Ghanaian traditional religions. However, the method here was primarily an imposition of Western Christianity and Western worldview. Eboussi Boulaga describes the consequences for the traditional worldview thus:

Western Christianity has been destructive to Africa. The traditional worldview was characterised by the missionaries as pagan, as unbelief, as an ignorance of true religion, as an idolatrous revolt against God. The whole of the traditional society and culture was dismissed as an evil that needed to be extirpated before Christianity could come to fruition. Having thus uprooted Africans from their own culture, Christianity proceeded to impose upon them a

¹¹ Cf. Tufuoh, “Relations,” 219. A perfect example of this was the British missionary Freeman who was a close ally to the President of the British merchants, Maclean. Tufuoh continues that “Maclean clearly saw that for a system of government like his in which influence counted for everything, administrative action could find no better ally than missionary enterprise.” Also, a certain Cruickshank, “who knew the man well, said of Freeman that he combined ‘the wisdom of the politician with the active zeal of the missionary.’” This was the model of a missionary.

¹² Cf. Buah, *A History of Ghana*.

¹³ Buah, *A History of Ghana*, 421.

form of ‘truth’ quite alien from their own experience of the universe. ... Acceptance of Christianity, therefore, resulted in an historical dislocation, a rapture with the Africans’ sense of continuity with their past, and shattering of their feeling of belonging to their ancestral culture.¹⁴

To become a Christian, the missionaries required the Ghanaian to denounce his or her ancestry and culture as Boulaga testifies. New European Christian names were given to replace the local African names. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye writes,

There was no dialogue. With the arrogance of foolish strangers, many walked over hallowed graves, desecrating them and causing great pain and anger to the whole community – dead, alive and yet unborn.¹⁵

Ghanaians who became new converts were separated from their families to break from their cultural traditions and values. It was, then, as it may still be the same among some Ghanaians today, a war between the world of evil and a world of good translated unto a war between Western Christian culture (good) and traditional culture (regarded evil). This created a negative perception in the minds of African Christians on the humanity of their fellow traditional religious believers and strained relations among once closely-knit extended family communities. This approach of displacing the Ghanaian traditional cultural practices and establishing Western Christianity brought the ‘christianisation’ of Ghana to a peak in the colonial period and was sustained to be handed on to post-colonial African Christians.

Niebuhr’s Theological Typology and Syncretism

We now make a theological assessment of the two missionary approaches in light of Niebuhr’s typology¹⁶ to show how they were influenced by the reigning understanding of the concept of syncretism at the time among theologians.

¹⁴ J. Parrat, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 106.

¹⁵ Oduyoye, “African Culture and the Gospel,” 48.

¹⁶ H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001).

Niebuhr offers five types of Christian ethics which we understand here as “Christianity” or five models of Christian life. These five types of Christianity are produced from the interaction between *the person of Christ* and *culture*. Niebuhr differentiates between these types following “the manner in which the two strains of Christian life (or poles – Christ and Culture) are united.”¹⁷ It is in the sense of the polarity between Christ and Culture that we now assess the approach of the first Christian missionaries in pre-colonial Ghana, that is, from 1471 to 1884. As we have accounted above, these earlier missionaries, for the most part, limited their ministry to their fellow Euro-western Christians and those connected to them by blood or conjugal relations. They maintained a distance from the indigenous Africans and only dealt with them on ‘secular’ concerns – business and politics. Analysing their actions one can identify an understanding of the separation between religion (Western Christianity) and culture (Ghanaian traditional practices). Understood in Niebuhr’s typological scheme, this translates into the “Christ against Culture” type. A Christian with a “Christ against Culture” orientation “uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture’s claims to loyalty.”¹⁸ As we shall see later, by maintaining a radical break between their Christian faith and indigenous Ghanaian cultures, the pre-colonial missionaries also reveal to us that they held strongly the pejorative connotation of *syncretism*, which had, then, been developed by protestant reformation theologians that rejected any form of the reunification of the separated churches with the Roman church.

The question may be raised whether the Christianity of these early missionaries to Africa (and of all who held the separation of Christ and Culture) had not already violated the typology’s principle since Western Christianity was an amalgam of the Gospel and Western Culture. In our view, although members of this Christianity claim to cling to the pure Gospel, we doubt if there can be such a free-standing Gospel or Christ out there without someone’s culture or tradition acting as a means of transmission. Hence, to answer the question raised, granting that this position strongly held a racist understanding of *syncretism*, Western Culture, for this position, is in-

¹⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, xliii.

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 45.

trinsic to the Gospel of Christ; thus, it is *non-syncretic*. At the same time, their radical separation of Christ from Culture distinguishes Christ against Culture from the theological type we discuss next.

The approach of the missionaries in colonial Ghana, described earlier, was destructive of Ghanaian indigenous cultures. We understand destruction in this case as elimination by assimilation or accommodation which is characteristic of the Christ of Culture theological type.¹⁹ The representatives of this type, like those of Christ against Culture, in our view, begin with the identification of their culture with Christ or the Gospel (although those against Culture would deny this identification). But, in the case of Christ of Culture, rather than separating from other cultures and social institutions, Christ goes on the attack of other cultures to eliminate them, again, by assimilation. Western Christian missionaries in colonial Africa believed that their culture was not just their culture but the gospel itself, hence there must be no opposition from the Ghanaian cultures. This led to the elimination of Ghanaian ancestors to be replaced with Euro-western saints, discounting and banning of drumming and dancing at worship and replacing them with organ music and kneeling and genuflections, outlawing libation as prayer and replacing it with a litany of saints, etc.²⁰

Today, many of these prohibitions are no more. Many Ghanaian churches are singing traditional songs with local drums and other instruments whilst their pastors or ministers have the privilege to explain the gospel message in the vernacular or dialects of their adherents. Therefore, both Christ of Culture and Christ against Culture have a common starting point, which is, the identification of European culture. From this identification, Christ against Culture rejects association with any other culture while Christ of Culture associates with other cultures to weaken or purge them of what is considered to be unchristian. Both, then, are hostile to culture but the consequent action of this hostility distinguishes them – one rejects culture and stays apart from it, while the other rejects culture and tries to weaken it. While ‘Christ against Culture’ may not qualify for any of the ‘models of contextual theology’ by Bevens due to its separation

¹⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 83.

²⁰ A. K. Anomah, “The Encounter Between Christianity and Asante Culture: Impact and Repercussions,” *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 42 (2019): 42, 28.

from culture, Christ of Culture, it seems to us, would be at home with the ‘translation model.’ As far as *syncretism* is concerned, ‘Christ of Culture’ also adopts the pejorative understanding which means that it is intolerant of the notion of two or more cultures being fused.

We conclude this part of the paper with a reiteration of its focus. In the above narrative we have historically accounted for the approaches of European missionaries to Ghana during both pre-colonial and colonial times were hostile to and destructive of Ghanaian indigenous cultures. We then employed Niebuhr’s typology to show that ‘Christ against Culture’ and ‘Christ of Culture’ were the theological ethics that embedded or influenced these negative approaches. We went further to link these two theological types with their influential cause, which is, the pejorative conception of *syncretism* that arose among protestant reformation theologians. Thus, this part represents a search for the source or ground of meaning responsible for the ‘Christianisation of Africa,’ a term in African theology that describes the hostile approach to African culture employed by Euro-western missionaries in the implantation of Christianity in Africa.

The Concept of Syncretism: A Historical Development

Historically, in Euro-Western Christian theology, a pejorative understanding of *syncretism* as a concept has been widely held and applied to non-Christian and the so-called ‘natural’ or ‘tribal religions,’ particularly, African traditional religions. However, since this concept did not originate from Christian theology, there is the need to account for its historical development to help redress some of the problems – like the Christianisation of Africa – caused by this negative understanding.

The *New Dictionary of Theology*, and other dictionaries and encyclopaedias of religion and theology, on which this part of the paper is partly dependent, are unanimous in attributing the first use of the term *syncretism* to the Greek historian, Plutarch (50 AD – 120 AD).²¹ His use of the word revealed its meaning to be both positive

²¹ D. A. Hughes, “Syncretism,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. S. B. Ferguson et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 670. See also W. Doniger, ed., “Syncretism, Religions” in *Merriam-Webster’s Encyclopedia of World Religions* (Springfield, MA: Merri-

and ‘irenic.’²² Furthermore, he is said to have applied the term to “the practice of the Cretans, who, though they often quarrelled with and warred against each other, made up their differences and united when outside enemies attacked.”²³ This irenic understanding was preserved even in proverbs that warned people against division and, instead, exhorted them to stay united or to stay *syncretic* to survive as a community. Therefore, the original understanding of *syncretism* was not just positive or irenic, but the term was used as a survival strategy – a way of bringing harmony and concord despite differences. Construed for centuries in this positive sense, *syncretism* was held to be the dynamic of all religions and cultures. Der Leeuw quotes and agrees with Wach on the concept thus:

A historic religion ... is a form, an organized system. Nonetheless, its characteristics are not fixed and rigid; rather they are in perpetual flux: not manufactured but growing, and in a state of incessant expansion. Every religion, therefore, has its own previous history and is to a certain extent a ‘syncretism’. Then comes the time when, from being a summation, it becomes a whole and obeys its own laws.²⁴

An important implication that can be drawn from Wach’s theory is that to be historic is to survive and to survive is to be syncretic; hence, Christianity as a historic religion has survived because “it takes in elements foreign to itself and in this way extends its influence.”²⁵

The change in this initial and centuries-old ‘irenic’ understanding of *syncretism* came with the modern meaning derived from “*synkeranumi* which means to ‘mix’ things that are incompatible.”²⁶ This meaning was popularized by the protestant reformation theologians, applying it to dissenters and betrayals against reformed orthodoxy in the 16th and 17th centuries. One of these theologians, Kraemer²⁷ used *syncretism* specifically to distinguish between Christianity and non-

am-Webster, Incorporated, 1999), 1048-1049; J. Bowker, ed., “Syncretism” in *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 936-937.

²² A. M. Leopold and J. S. Jansen, eds., *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 14.

²³ Leopold and Jansen, *Syncretism in Religion*, 14.

²⁴ Leopold and Jansen, *Syncretism in Religion*, 98.

²⁵ Leopold and Jansen, *Syncretism in Religion*, 60.

²⁶ Leopold and Jansen, *Syncretism in Religion*, 14.

²⁷ Leopold and Jansen, *Syncretism in Religion*, 39-47.

Christian religions, whereby the latter was considered as having “an *innate syncretistic apprehension*, which, in comparison with Christianity, displays the connotations of an illegitimate mingling of religions.”²⁸ *Syncretism*, for him, is a phenomenon like pragmatism, subjectivism, illusion, and empirical existence – all of which militate against “truth and objective validity.”²⁹ This is how Kraemer reconstructed a “pejorative and value-laden description of non-Christian religions,”³⁰ which would characterise Christian missionary work and also receive the attention of many Christian theologians.

The German History of Religion School entered the debate at the beginning of the twentieth century to shed more light on the term to recover its irenic meaning and its significance as a dynamic of religions. Together with Scripture scholars such as Gunkel (1862-1932), Engnell (1906-64), and Bultmann (1884-1976), the school argued that both “OT and NT religions are syncretistic in this sense – OT is a fusion of Babylonian and Hebrew, or Phoenician-Canaanite and Hebrew religion, whereas NT religion is a fusion of Hellenistic Judaism and primitive religion of Jesus.”³¹

However, the pejorative understanding had taken root within protestant theology albeit, in Roman Catholicism, it was eschewed altogether or frowned upon in their theological discourses. Pope Paul VI encouraged *adaptation* “in the whole area of the Christian life” but cautioned that it be done in a way that “every appearance of syncretism and false particularism” may be avoided.³² This was how many Euro-Western theologians came to feel uncomfortable with the term and adopted attitudes of avoidance of or lack of interest in the use of *syncretism*. Today, some Catholic theologians, such as Schreier, noticing that *syncretism* is being used positively in post-colonial social science settings to denote the formation of “new identities” from different “cultural elements,” advocated “for this more positive understanding of syncretism – or at least a balance between the positive and the negative understanding.”³³ Although Schreier’s

²⁸ Leopold and Jansen, *Syncretism in Religion*, 23.

²⁹ Leopold and Jansen, *Syncretism in Religion*, 42.

³⁰ Leopold and Jansen, *Syncretism in Religion*, 39-41.

³¹ Hughes, “Syncretism”, 670.

³² Leopold and Jansen, *Syncretism in Religion*, 19.

³³ R. J. Screiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 63.

position sounds a note of hope in the restoration of the irenic meaning, it is however not clear what he means by a “balance” in this case. It seems that his position of balancing the negative and positive understanding of *syncretism* corresponds to Niebuhr’s “Christ and Culture in Paradox”³⁴ theological typology. If this is tenable, then postmodern theology, by its embedding ethic of seeking

...to answer the Christ and Culture question with a ‘both-and’ would prove the most effective in first, restoring the concept of syncretism in Christian theological discourse, and second, producing appropriate evangelisation approach which would find a home in non-Euro-western cultures, especially, as the demographic shift of Christianity moves into these territories.³⁵

African Response – Inculturation

For most African theologians, the most significant process that offered a symbiotic relationship between culture and faith since Vatican II is inculturation.³⁶ But, what is inculturation? According to Arupe,

Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about “a new creation.”³⁷

In a related research Nche, Okwuosa and Nwaoga, define inculturation as a process in which “the doctrine of Jesus’ incarnation, should be incarnated, and wear the form of African culture to achieve the ultimate meaning in Africa.”³⁸ While we draw from the above definitions, we argue that inculturation must be an ongoing process of embedding the gospel message in a culture, whilst also allowing

³⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 149.

³⁵ L. Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 14.

³⁶ A. E. Orobator, “After all, Africa is Largely a Non-Literate Continent: The Reception of Vatican II in Africa,” *Theological Studies* 74, no. 2 (2013): 1.

³⁷ P. Schineller, “Inculturation: A Difficult and Delicate Task,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 3 (1996): 109.

³⁸ G. C. Nche, L. N. Okwuosa and T. C. Nwaoga, “Revisiting the Concept of Inculturation in a Modern Africa: A Reflection on Salient Issues,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2016): 2.

the cultural elements of a people to be embedded in the gospel message and teachings of the church. This means that inculturation can only be meaningful to the African people, and the Ghanaian church when it is grounded in the cultural genius and originality of the people.

When African Theologians decided to reconsider or rethink African Christianity, they did three things: firstly, they tried to take off the “veneer”³⁹ of Euro-western clothes to retrieve their pre-colonial indigenous traditions – this is the search for the African, not least Ghanaian cultural identity; secondly, they seek to distinguish between Western culture and the gospel. Then, thirdly, they seek to consciously create the environment for a fresh encounter – inculturation or incarnation – between the gospel and their indigenous cultural values, through a critique of both gospel and culture. In these three ventures, the original irenic understanding and concept of *syncretism* recovered by the German History of Religion School with modification becomes handy and serves as their guiding light – it is the dynamic that was not allowed to take place in Africa although it did take place in early Christianity.

In their tasks, African theologians noticed that the kind of Christianity existing in postcolonial Africa was a forced and false combination of elements of Euro-western culture, gospel and African traditional values and practices. African Christianity emerged from the negative approaches to cultural practices in pre-colonial and colonial missionary work as a kind of “chimaera.”⁴⁰ This is observable from the chimerical practices of many African Christians today. This is not *syncretic* in the original irenic sense. Laurenti Magesa presents what would constitute an authentic inculturation:

A mature, non-alienating encounter between the Gospel and Africa is extensive. The core issue is that both the African identity and the Gospel identity – as much of this identity as is preserved in the

³⁹ L. Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 139.

⁴⁰ J. M. Janzen, “Drums of Affliction: A Real Phenomenon or Scholarly Chimaera,” in *Religion in Africa: Experience and Expression*, ed. Thomas D. Blakely et al. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994), 161. “Chimaera, [is] a fire-breathing goat with lion’s head and serpent’s body” and “since antiquity ... [it] has stood for a combination of incongruous parts and therefore an illusion or fabrication of the mind.”

culture that introduced the Gospel to Africa – must be preserved. Neither may be diminished or destroyed if the encounter and the subsequent relationship between them are to be truly liberating work of God; else the encounter would be alien to the spirit of the Gospel and therefore theologically unacceptable.⁴¹

This is why, for Bediako, ‘identity’ was a paramount theological question shared by both early Hellenistic Christianity and 20th [21st] Century Africa.⁴² With his analyses, African theologians observe that pre-Christian Graeco-Roman myths, legends, philosophies and worldviews have been preserved in Western Christianity. Hence, there is no justification for the destruction or weakening of African worldviews to have African Christianity. The failure to identify and preserve both cultural and gospel values or identities led to a distorted religious phenomenon characterized by the alienation of traditions in Africa. Fashole-Luke says that Christianity must move from resident alien status to citizen in Africa.⁴³ To do this, the concept of Incarnation is the model par excellence for the process of inculturation. Here Magesa sees the translatability⁴⁴ of the Gospel message as meaning its transculturality which Bediako describes as an

...exercise [which] demonstrates that behind the Christian doctrine of the substantial equality of the Scriptures in all languages, there lies the even more profound doctrine of the incarnation by which the fullest divine communication has reached beyond the forms of human words into the human form itself.⁴⁵

The essence of this point of departure for African theologians is the identification of inculturation with incarnation. It seems, however, that this incarnation experience in the present condition of Ghana and Africa which are dominated by Western cultural values will take place only after carrying out the two ‘strippings’ or ‘retrieval’ of the two identities: the African identity by stripping off Western cultural elements that have been arbitrarily imposed or superim-

⁴¹ Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 142.

⁴² K. Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 63.

⁴³ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*.

⁴⁴ L. Sanneh, “Translatability in Islam and Christianity in Africa,” in *Religion in Africa*, 23 – 24.

⁴⁵ Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 148.

posed; then Gospel identity by stripping off Western cultural elements from Western Christianity. Without these two efforts, the Word cannot become African (flesh).

Inculturation in Africa needs a preliminary emptying so that both culture and gospel will experience each other's true selves. An anthropology that seeks to understand who the people truly are is a significant prerequisite for a meaningful inculturation. The trajectory of stripping, retrieving, and preservation of identities in the incarnation or inculturation process intimately relates to the concept of *syncretism* in the original, positive and irenic sense. This is seen in Oduyoye's example:

When compared with prayers from the psalms and prayers in African cosmic religion illustrate the fact that Africans who examine these sources of spirituality are not prone to define the meaning of syncretism negatively. ...⁴⁶

She asks that in considering *syncretism* with inculturation we should critically consider the role of power. This means that those who accused or labelled non-Christian religions as *syncretism* in the pejorative sense did so with imperial power as we have seen in the case of the missionaries in Ghana – in the context of pre-colonial and colonial oppression. Embracing the positive meaning of syncretism emphasizes the goal which the incarnation brings: liberation, indigenisation and inculturation have a common goal which is doing justice and restoring peace. Just as in Hellenization, Romanisation and Europeanisation of the Gospel were possible to the extent that Western Christians lost any distinction between their culture and Christianity or Gospel values, so there is the need for inculturation to function in a way that will preserve both the Gospel and African identity in a *syncretic* way so that the Gospel identity's translatability unto other cultures is guaranteed.

Conclusion

Using Ghanaian society as an example, the paper has argued that reinforcing the irenic character of syncretism and inculturation of the gospel message within Christian theology and Ghanaian religious

⁴⁶ Oduyoye, "African Culture and the Gospel," 46.

practice will provide a very significant path to meaningful evangelisation.

The paper has contributed to our understanding of syncretism in its irenic form and inculturation and shown how the two concepts have impacted Christian theology and improved understanding of the gospel message and increased faith and practice among adherents.

Additionally, we have demonstrated that the universality of the gospel message and the mission of Christ is not reducible to the culture of any one society. If God must save humanity, he must do so in the social and cultural categories that are meaningful to them. The universality of mission, is in our view, the universality of salvation for all who believe in Jesus Christ. Thus, no one can cap or limit the translatable, transcultural, transcontextual, hence, *universal* character of the Gospel.⁴⁷ The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch by Philip (Acts 8:26-40); the universal significance of the revelation to Peter (regarding Cornelius) that God is not a God of partiality (Acts 10:34-49); the story of Simon of Cyrene who carried Jesus' cross (Luke 23:26; Mark 15:21; Matt. 27:32) are shining examples of the inclusive, decisive and universality of salvation to all who believe. The demographic shift of Christianity to the East (Asia) and South (Africa and Latin America)⁴⁸ is not only a shift in the numbers of persons but also a shift in the quality and richness of cultures, faith and practice in the world.

The Gospel message cannot and should not be monopolised by any particular culture no matter when that culture encountered the message in history. Inculturation is an effective method of reflection and analysis of making the Christian or gospel message meaningful to the Ghanaian people.

There is no doubt cultural plurality and identity, and secular ideologies pose a great challenge to the implementation of inculturation in Ghanaian society. Nevertheless, these challenges do not mean that the church in Ghana cannot drive down the process of incul-

⁴⁷ L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (American Society of Missiology Series, 13; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 51.

⁴⁸ Sanneh, "Whose Religion is Christianity?," 14-20.

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turation in the different segments of faith and the practice of the gospel message.

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