

# **Religious Syncretism as a Worldwide Mission Challenge: A Biblical and Missiological Response**

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*ABSTRACT—Globalization has put the major world religions within the reach of almost everyone in the world today. Worldwide migration patterns, international travel and trade, progress in communications technology, and international media activities have introduced people to nearly all religious traditions. More and more thinkers, including some Christians, are advocating a pluralistic theology of religions, thus asserting the subjectivity of religious beliefs. As a result, many people are increasingly picking and choosing among various religious traditions and their practices to meet personal needs. Three major factors contributing to religious syncretism are discussed in this article. A biblical and missiological response addressing the challenge posed by religious syncretism to Christian mission is suggested.*

*Keywords: Mission, Syncretism, Postmodernism, Religious pluralism, Culture, Discipleship.*

## **I. Introduction**

Religious syncretism is frequently referenced in the Bible. In part, the Ten Commandments are God's instructions against religious syncretism because the first three commandments (Exod 20:1-7) charge the Israelites "to distinctively stand before God without reliance on any other gods" (Van Rheenen, 1997, p. 173). Just as the Israelites were warned against rejecting Yahweh and serving other gods (Deut 11:16; 2 Kgs 10:23), the New Testament also speaks strongly against dual allegiance and syncretism (Matt 6:24; 1 Cor 10:14; Rev 22:15).

Syncretism is a worldwide religious challenge. According to

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Michael Pocock, “all peoples and religions exhibit syncretism” (1996, p. 10, emphasis mine). Unfortunately, when the influence of syncretism on the church is discussed, many tend to see it happening outside Western Christianity as if the Western form of Christianity was immune from syncretism. But Andrew F. Walls and A. Scott Moreau argue respectively that “syncretism is a greater peril for Western than African or Indian Christians, and less often recognizable for what it is” (Walls, 2002, p. 69), and that “syncretism of some form has been seen everywhere the church has existed” (Moreau, 2000, p. 924). In other words, syncretism is a threat found among Christians universally as they express their faith either within their own cultures or cross-culturally. One might debate whether or not Western Christianity is inherently in greater peril of syncretism. However, Western Christianity’s historic role as the dominant form of Christianity for centuries has bestowed a seal of orthodoxy that is too often unchallenged.

The purpose of this article is to discuss three of the major factors contributing to religious syncretism and then to offer a biblical and missiological response to this worldwide religious phenomenon.

## **II. Understanding Religious Syncretism**

Scrutinizing literature on religion and missions reveals definitions of syncretism with subtle changes of nuance. Synthesizing some of these definitions of syncretism is the focus of this section.

André Droogers and Sidney M. Greenfield give a brief but succinct history of syncretism. According to them,

Syncretism was first used by Plutarch to describe the temporary coming together of the quarreling inhabitants of Crete in the face of a common enemy. . . . The Greek word from which the English “syncretism” is derived refers to people joining together, in this case in battle. Erasmus later employed it metaphorically to refer to an agreement between people with seemingly disparate opinions. The new reference centered on ideas and beliefs. Seventeenth-century theologians then gave it a negative connotation by using it for what to them was the undesirable reconciliation of Christian theological differences. Syncretism for them became a threat to “true” religion. To this negative judgment

a more neutral view was added in the second half of the nineteenth century when students of the history of religions began to use the word to acknowledge the mixing of religious elements from diverse sources, including Christianity that had occurred and continue to take place. (Droogers and Greenfield, 2001, pp. 27-28)

Religious syncretism is generally defined today as the blending of different (sometimes contradictory) forms of religious beliefs and practices. Gailyn Van Rheenen defines syncretism as “*the reshaping of Christian beliefs and practices through cultural accommodation so that they consciously or unconsciously blend with those of the dominant culture. . . .* Syncretism is the blending of Christian beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture so that Christianity [drops its distinct nature and] speaks with a voice reflective of its culture” (Van Rheenen, 1997, p. 173, emphasis in the original). For Lynn D. Schmidt, “A person who draws from two or more belief systems at the same time is guilty of syncretism. He or she is reaching for the best of two religious worlds” (2013, pp. 27-28). While in Van Rheenen’s definition it is possible for a church as a whole to succumb to syncretism through cultural accommodation in its effort to be relevant to the culture in which it bears witness, in Schmidt’s definition it is individual believers that are rather to be blamed for drawing from non-Christian belief systems.

In the *Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, Mark Mullins addresses the difference between standard usages of “syncretism” in the social sciences and in missiology. He points out that

syncretism is usually understood as a combination of elements from two or more religious tradition, ideologies, or value systems. In the social sciences, this is a neutral and objective term that is used to describe the mixing of religions as a result of culture contact. In theological and missiological circles, however, it is generally used as a pejorative term to designate movements that are regarded as heretical or sub-Christian. (Mullins, 2001, pp. 809-810)

In his definition of syncretism, Mullins points out that it is not everyone that sees syncretism as a negative phenomenon, and as Van Rheenen, he sees contact with a new culture as one of the possible contributing factors of religious syncretism.

In the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, Scott Moreau presents a more nuanced definition of syncretism. He defines syncretism as the

blending of one idea, practice, or attitude with another. Traditionally among Christians it has been used of the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements. . . . Syncretism of some form has been everywhere the church has existed. We are naïve to think that eliminating the negatives of syncretism is easily accomplished. (Moreau, 2000, pp. 924-925)

In the rest of this article, religious syncretism refers to the blending of diverse religious beliefs and practices into a new belief system, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs and practices from unrelated traditions.

### **III. Factors Contributing to Religious Syncretism**

Several factors are known to contribute to religious syncretism. Three of these factors that will be discussed here are: the growing acceptance of religious pluralism, mission approaches to other religions, and the inadequate discipleship of new converts.

#### **A. Growing Acceptance of Religious Pluralism**

That the world has become a religiously plural place is a fact that cannot be denied. People of diverse ethnic origins and many dissimilar religious commitments live and share public life together. This globalization has put major world religions within the reach of almost everyone in the world today. Worldwide migration patterns, international travel and trade, progress in communications technology, and international media activities have introduced people to nearly all religious traditions. Mission is no longer from the West alone; Islam and Eastern religions are also dynamically engaged in missionary work (Hedlund, 1992, p. 13). This has resulted in a kind of a cafeteria-style religion with many people picking and choosing among various religious traditions and their practices to meet personal needs (Frykholm, 2011, p. 20). If all religions are equally

valid ways to salvation as it is argued (Thomas, 1992, p. 28), then a cocktail of religious beliefs and practices is even better. As a result of this religious globalization, religious traditions other than Christianity and Judaism are no longer treated as “the work of the Devil.” Modern scholarship is not simply promoting many positive features of other religions, it is also claiming that “all religions, including Christianity, are relative. . . . [and that] every religion is considered equally valid” (Thomas, 1992, p. 28). Underlining this assumption is the belief that the different religious traditions are complementary rather than being contradictory. As a direct result of this call for cooperation among various religious cultures, there is a growing positive public attitude to other religions. Religious pluralism, especially in the West, seems to have become a spiritual adventure today (Halevi, 2002, p. 9) to the extent that Claude Geffré even affirms that “the religiosity of the Western person of our times is spontaneously syncretistic” (2002, p. 94). Pressure for syncretism comes from two directions: from non-Christian religions and from within Christianity itself. When Christian thinkers also advocate a pluralistic theology of religions, thus asserting the subjectivity of Christian belief statements, the Church cannot but be under the threat of religious syncretism (Thomas, 1992, p. 28).

### **B. Mission Approaches to Other Religions and Cultures**

Christian mission to other religions and cultures has sometimes gone to two opposing extremes. One extreme consists of the denial “that there is anything that is of God in non-Christian religions” (Nxumalo, 1980, p. 6). The other extreme is that in some contexts, both cross-culturally and intra-culturally, Christian mission has indiscriminately accommodated local cultures and religions. Both of these approaches, displacement and accommodation, have negative effects on the types of Christianity they produce.

The indiscriminate rejection of old religious practices either creates a void that is filled by imported practices leading to the gospel being misunderstood and rejected, or the old religious practices simply go underground (Hiebert, 1985, pp. 184, 188). Whenever old religious practices go underground, believers assent to orthodox Christian beliefs and join in the public denunciations of their old religious forms, but privately retain their loyalty to them especially in times of serious crises (Partain, 1986, p. 1067). This reversion to old religious practices is a direct result of the displacement model’s

exclusive focus on doctrinal and rational arguments in contexts where existential issues rather than clarity and orthodoxy are the most important considerations (Nürnberg, 2007, p. 66).

The accommodation paradigm tends towards an uncritical acceptance of traditional practices by the church (Hiebert, 1985, p. 185) since they are part of a people's cultural heritage that is cherished (Carpenter, 1996, p. 504). However, these traditional practices often contain syncretistic non-biblical elements from the receptor culture (Hesselgrave and Rommen, 2000, p. 1; Smith 1989, p. 29). This happens both in cross-cultural and intra-cultural missions. Throughout the history of Christian missions, one of the challenges has been how to be sensitive to different cultures and remain faithful to biblical principles at the same time. Unfortunately, sensitivity to local cultures has sometimes overshadowed faithfulness to biblical principles. Van Rheenen sees the root cause of syncretism in the fact that the church too often accommodates to the worldviews of its time. For him,

Syncretism frequently begins apologetically: The Christian community attempts to make its message and life attractive, alluring, and appealing to those outside the fellowship. Over a period of years the accommodations become routinized, integrated into the narrative story of the Christian community and inseparable from its life. . . . Syncretism thus occurs when Christianity opts into the major cultural assumptions of its society. (Van Rheenen, 1997, p. 173)

As such, the accommodation model indirectly minimizes change in the lives of converts whereas the gospel challenges people individually and corporately to turn from their unbiblical practices. This paradigm thus opens the door to syncretism as Christians continue to maintain beliefs and practices that stand in conflict with the gospel (Hiebert, 1985, p. 185).

In view of the above, both accommodation and displacement as mission approaches to other religions and cultures potentially promote religious syncretism.

### **C. Inadequate Discipleship of New Converts**

Some converts to Christianity revert to their previous religious practices or reach out to new non-Christian ones in times of crises.

This reversal sometimes comes as the result of an inadequate discipleship process before and after their acceptance into church membership. Because of this faulty discipleship process, converts do not experience completeness in Christ that is both culturally appropriate and biblically faithful. As such, it becomes difficult for them to continue to stand firm on Christian principles even if some of their pressing needs are not yet met.

The use of a baptismal model of mission rather than a discipleship model is another cause of religious syncretism. In the baptismal model, success is seen to have been achieved upon baptism. In the discipleship model, baptism is an early part of a long and continuing process.

In a baptismal model of mission, much discipleship is hasty and incomplete. Many of those who show interest in becoming Christians are taught and then baptized; the event of baptism often marks the end of the discipleship process for some of them. Once in full church membership, some converts are no longer shown the same degree of personal attention the church gave them prior to their baptism. It is implicitly assumed that the rest of the process will be taken care of by weekly sermons and prayer meetings. Unfortunately the sharing of Christian principles in Sabbath sermons or during the mid-week prayer meetings does not effectively address the deep issues some of the converts are struggling with.

Discipleship is not synonymous with simply presenting biblical truth no matter how crucial that truth is. The process of discipleship involves more than just an information transfer about doctrinal correctness.

#### **IV. Biblical and Missiological Response to Syncretism**

The following section discusses three points that can serve as a biblical and missiological response to the threat of religious syncretism: (1) spiritual parenting as a biblical model of discipleship, (2) a biblical and missiological perspective on the role of culture in the presentation of the gospel, and (3) how to deal with a person involved in religious syncretism.

##### **A. Spiritual Parenting: A Biblical Model of Discipleship**

The threat posed by syncretism is not so much with the converts' old religious beliefs and practices as it is with the underlying assumptions on which these old beliefs are built. People will not give up on their old beliefs so long as those old beliefs remain the only working alternatives they have (Van Velsor and Drath, 2004, p. 390). The only way out is for the gospel to not only change former beliefs, but also transform the converts' worldviews. If this does not happen the new beliefs will continue to be reinterpreted in terms of the old worldviews (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiéno, 2000, p. 177). A biblical model of discipleship is key to worldview transformation.

First Thessalonians 2:7-13 portrays a good biblical model of discipleship. It presents discipleship as a process of spiritual parenting. Here Paul uses the parent-child metaphor to describe principles of discipleship by referring to familiar things of life which both the direct recipients and the wider readership of the epistle were conversant with. This parent-child metaphor is still a powerful means of impressing on people's minds important spiritual principles about Christian discipleship. A brief analysis of this passage reveals the following four components of biblical discipleship:

### **1. Long-term Commitment to the Spiritual Welfare and Growth of Believers**

“Just as *a nursing mother cares for her children*, so we cared for you” (1 Thess 2:7, 8, emphasis mine). Paul and his missionary team cared for the believers in the congregations they established as a mother cares for her children. This probably involved tenderly and patiently teaching the Thessalonians to walk with God. They demonstrated intentional commitment to the spiritual growth and welfare of believers.

### **2. Modeling Spiritual Walk with God**

“Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of *how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed*” (1 Thess 2:9, 10, emphasis mine). They strove to be role models to the new believers. If Hampton Kathley's perspective on discipleship is correct, about 90 percent of what a disciple learns or applies is caught from the disciple's life rather than from his/her teaching. Because of that, he argues that “we should place our emphasis on being a friend and let people see how we deal with



things, how we study, how we pray, how we love, etc. We don't want to just give him all the facts. We need to allow him to see how we work through various issues and help him work through the issues himself" (Keathley, 2013). Without any doubt, this was what happened in Jesus' discipling ministry of the Twelve and his other early followers who so faithfully imitated him that when those who had observed them found no other way to call them but Christians (Acts 11:26).

### **3. Personal Attention to Spiritual Needs**

"For you know that *we dealt with each of you* as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory" (1 Thess 2:11, 12, emphasis mine). They gave believers individual attention and instruction as a father would do to his children with the intention to help each of them with unique needs. They understood that each believer's uniqueness meant individual attention. Hampton Keathley illustrates this need for personal attention as follows.

When we bring a newborn home from the hospital, we don't just put down the infant and say, "Welcome to the family, Johnny. Make yourself at home. The towels are in the hall closet upstairs, the pantry is right here, the can opener is in this drawer. No crying after 10 p.m. If you have any questions there are lots of people in the family who would love to help you so don't be afraid to ask." You laugh and say that is ridiculous, but that is what usually happens to new Christians. Someone gets saved and starts going to church but never gets much personal attention. We devote 18 years to raising our children, but don't even spend six months helping a new Christian get started in understanding the spiritual world. As a result, many people have been Christians for many years, but have not grown very much. Hebrew 5:12 refers to this phenomenon. So, new believers need someone to give them guidance and help them grow. Like a newborn, they need some personal attention. (Keathley, 2013)

Another important insight highlighted in Keathley's illustration is that discipling converts takes a lot of time. It is not an event limited to a two to three week evangelistic series or something that is taken care

of in a formal teaching setting (e.g., baptismal class). This makes mentorship inseparable from discipleship. Beside the formal teaching settings, spiritual mentors should be available to share their spiritual journey and experiences (both positive and negative) with new converts.

#### **4. The Teaching of Biblical Truth**

“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe” (1 Thess 2:13). Conforming themselves to the command of Matt 28:19-20, Paul and his companions made the Word of God an essential element of the Thessalonians’ discipleship process.

First Thessalonians 2:7-13 clearly shows that although the teaching of biblical truth was essential, it was not the sole component of Paul’s missionary team’s discipleship model. While the teaching of biblical truth is an essential component of discipleship because a convert cannot fully mature spiritually without understanding biblical principles, it must also be acknowledged that a convert may have considerable biblical knowledge and yet remain spiritually immature. For this reason the teaching of biblical truth must always be balanced with other components of biblical discipleship such as an intentional commitment to the spiritual growth and welfare of believers, a modeling of a spiritual walk with God, and personal attention to each believer’s spiritual welfare and growth needs. Congregational and small group teaching and personal attention of believers are needed on the road to their Christian maturity. Just as a baby needs an additional amount of attention, so do new converts need someone to provide them with attention and guidance to help them mature.

#### **B. A Biblical and Missiological Perspective on the Role of Culture in the Presentation of the Gospel**

In his book *Christ and Culture*, Richard H. Niebuhr presents five paradigms as the possible attitudes of Christians to culture: Christ against Culture, Christ of Culture, Christ above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, and Christ the Transformer of Culture (Niebuhr, 1951). His model portrays culture as a monolith to which a Christian must take a single attitude.

The Christ against Culture position perceives an opposition between Christ and human culture. It stresses that “whatever may be the customs of the society in which the Christian lives, and whatever the human achievements it conserves, Christ is seen as opposed to them, so that he confronts men with the challenges of an ‘either-or’ decision” (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 40). In other words, true Christians must be very serious about holiness which means withdrawing from the world into separate communities of believers (Johnson, 2011, pp. 4-7). Although it is clear that Christ is against some elements of every culture, this paradigm’s “call for separation tends to minimize the potential influence that Christianity may have for good upon society” (Allbee, 2005, p. 18).

The advocates of the Christ of Culture position perceive God’s total approval of human cultures through the incarnation of Jesus whereby he entered the history and the particularities of the Jewish culture, learned to speak their language, ate the same food as his contemporaries, dressed the way they did, and attended their social events. For them, Jesus is “a great hero of human culture history; his life and teachings are regarded as the greatest human achievement; . . . he confirms what is best in the past, and guides the process of civilization to its proper goal” (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 41). This position thus tends toward an uncritical accommodation of cultural values as it often feels no great tension between the church and the secular world (Tennent, 2010, p. 161). By making little distinction between Christ and culture, it also tends to drift towards humanism (Schrotenber, 1998, p. 319).

The Christ above Culture paradigm seeks to stay away from both an uncritical accommodation to culture and a complete denial of the validity of culture in the process of gospel transmission. While it elevates and validates the positive dimensions of culture, it rejects the cultural values that are antagonistic to the gospel (Metzger, 2007, p. 35). Nevertheless, this paradigm hardly acknowledges that even though God exists outside of human culture, the scriptures reveal that “he is willing to enter human culture and work through it in order to engage in meaningful communication with humans” (Rogers, 2004, p. 31).

The Christ and Culture in Paradox position is that of the dualists. By making a sharp distinction between the temporal and spiritual life, and between the reign of Christ and human culture (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 171), this paradigm is unable to reach a meaningful synthesis of Christians’ attitude to culture (Allbee, 2005, p. 19). It struggles with

the acknowledgement that although the world is in a fallen state, God still “uses human culture as a vehicle for interacting with humans” (Rogers, 2004, p. 27).

Niebuhr’s last paradigm, Christ the Transformer of Culture, “recognizes the corruption of culture but is optimistic and hopeful about the possibility of cultural renewal. Culture is perceived critically as perverted good, but not inherently evil. Conversion makes it possible for human beings and culture to move from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness” (Guenther, 2005, pp. 217-218).

### **1. Toward an Alternative Christian Attitude to Culture**

The “in the world” but “not of the world” concepts in John 17:14-18 constitute the basis of the recurrent problem involved in the discussion of Christians’ attitude to culture (Van Til, 2001, p. 15). Because the followers of Christ are not of the world, many Christians have taken a negative attitude toward culture. But because believers are also reminded of the fact that they are in the world, some see the need for Christians to interact with their culture. There is thus an ongoing conflict among Christians on what should be their attitude toward culture. In their struggle with the practical, everyday issues of life, Christians are confronted to the dilemma of how to be “in the world” but not “of the world” (Carter, 2006, p. 74). Therefore, an understanding of the role of culture and the Christian attitude toward it is of great importance both in determining what the Bible says and in communicating its message in meaningful terms that are comprehensible by people in various cultures (Okorochoa, 2006, p. 1467). My proposed Christian perspective on culture builds on Charles H. Kraft, Timothy C. Tennent, Paul G. Hiebert, and Glenn Rogers’ perspectives on the role of culture in the presentation of the gospel.

Charles Kraft argues that Jesus’ incarnation into the cultural life of first-century Palestine to communicate with people is a sufficient proof that “God takes culture seriously and . . . is pleased to work through it to reach and interact with humans” (1996, p. 33). He assumes that as God created humanity with culture-producing capacity, “he views human culture primarily as a vehicle to be used by him and his people for Christian purposes, rather than an enemy to be combated or shunned” (Kraft, 2005, p. 81). The “do not love the world or anything in the world” of 1 John 2:15-16 and “the whole world is under the control of the evil one” of 1 John 5:19 is not a call to reject culture but rather a call to refrain from participation with

Satan in his use of one's culture. God's true attitude toward culture is that he "seeks to cooperate with human beings in the use of their culture for his glory. *It is allegiance to the satanic use of that same culture that he stands against, not the culture itself*" (Kraft, 2005, p. 83, emphasis in the original). Although God is above culture as it is warped by the pervasive influence of human sinfulness, nevertheless "culture is not in and of itself either an enemy or a friend to God or humans. It is, rather, something that is there to be used by personal beings such as humans, God, and Satan" (Kraft, 2005, p. 89).

Timothy C. Tennent also argues that God acts in a redemptive way within human culture as its author and sustainer. He views the incarnation of Jesus as not only a revelation of God to humanity but "God the Father's *validation of the sanctity of human culture*. . . . The true union of God and man in one person is the ultimate rebuke against the *secularization of culture*" (Tennent, 2010, pp. 179, 181, emphasis in the original). He nevertheless warns against the uncritical divinization of culture (Tennent, 2010, p. 181).

Paul G. Hiebert also affirms that every culture has positive elements that can be used by Christians as well as aspects which express the demonic and dehumanizing forces of evil that must be challenged (Hiebert, 1985, p. 56). Nevertheless he strongly maintains that

all authentic communication of the gospel in missions should be patterned on biblical communication and seek to make the Good News understandable to people within their own cultures. All cultures can adequately serve as vehicles for the communication of the gospel. If it were not so, people would have to change cultures to become Christians. This does not mean that the gospel is fully understood in any one culture, but that all people can learn enough to be saved and to grow in faith within the context of their own culture. (Hiebert, 1985, p. 55)

First John 2:15-16 ("do not love the world or anything in the world") and 5:19 ("the whole world is under the control of the evil one") are not the only biblical references concerning the attitude of God or Christians toward "the world." The Greek word *kosmos* for "world" used in 1 John 2:15-16 and 5:19 is also the word employed in John 3:16 in reference to the world as the object of God's abundant love. *Kosmos* is also the word Jesus uses in his intercessory prayer for

his disciples in John 17:14-18:

I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.

In this prayer, Jesus does not ask the Father to take his disciples out of the world, but rather to protect them from the evil one as they remain in the world. Although Jesus also prays for his disciples' holiness ("Sanctify them by Your truth," v. 17) and calls us to holiness and warns us not to be conformed to this world, he nevertheless wants his followers to be in the world. "Probably Jesus recognized that the real problem with worldliness is not something 'out there in the world,' but rather something deep inside ourselves—our own unbelief, pride and ingratitude toward God. All this could easily come along with us, if we try to withdraw from the world into holy communities" (Johnson, 2011, p. 5). Therefore, 1 John 2:15-16 and 5:19 should not be interpreted as a call to reject culture. Read together with John 17:14-18, these texts are better understood as a call to live in real contact with culture without letting our identity, thoughts, priorities, feelings, and values be controlled by it. God does not only redeem us from the godlessness of our cultures (1 Pet 1:18, 19) when we accept Christ as our Savior, he also sends us back into the same godless cultures as light bearers to work with him for their transformation. In other words, while we continue to be in contact with the culture,

our identity, thoughts, priorities, feelings, and values should be continually sanctified by the truth—the living Word of God. And as such sanctified people, Jesus sends us into the world in a way that is similar to how the Father sent Jesus into the world. We can probably summarize the central thrust of this biblical text [John 17:14-18] by saying: *Jesus wants us to be in the world but not of the world for a very specific purpose: He has sent us into the world as hearers and bearers of the Word* (Johnson, 2011, p. 6, emphasis in the original).

God is not bound by culture. In his interactions with human beings, he can choose to limit himself to the capacities of culture because of human finiteness or transcend cultural limitations. Because human beings are created in the image of God, their cultures can be seen as God's creative design; but because of the far-reaching effects of sin, all human cultures are sin-tainted. However, despite the effect of sin God's revelation still occurs within the particularities of human culture (Tennent, 2010, pp. 172, 173). God's revelation of himself in the Old Testament and in the New Testament both took place within the context of human cultures. Today as well, God's self-disclosure still encounters people within their specific cultural settings with the gospel sitting in judgment over all cultures calling all of them to change. Glenn Rogers sums up this vital fact by pointing out that

God interacted with Abraham, Israel, and the Prophets, with Jesus, with the apostles, and with every one of us (including you and me) not in some otherworldly or heavenly context, but in the context of this material world, a world of human culture. . . . God uses human culture as a vehicle for interaction and communication with humans because human culture is the only context in which humans can communicate. This is not because God is limited. It is because humans are limited. Human culture is the only frame of reference humans have. If God wants to communicate with humans it must be within the framework of human culture. (Rogers, 2004, pp. 27, 28).

A crucial point to take note of is that sin neither invalidates the Christians' cultural mandate nor excuses Christians from fulfilling their God-given mission of participating in the redemption of fallen humanity. The Christian expectation of future glory and complete redemption has implications for believers' attitude toward culture. The salt of the world metaphor (Matt 5:13) is an evangelistic call to intermingle with the world and transform it. As disciple-makers and ambassadors for Christ (Matt 28:18-20; 2 Cor 5:20), and salt and light of the world (Matt 5:13-16) it is not possible to visualize the Christian movement apart from human culture (Van Til, 2001, pp. 17, 57). "Just as Jesus incarnated himself into Jewish culture, so his religion is to be incarnated into every culture" (Doss, 2009).

### **C. Dealing with a Person Involved in Syncretism**

Another important aspect of responding to the threat of religious syncretism is how to deal with people involved in it. The Bible advises speaking truth in love when it comes to dealing with someone that has sinned (Eph 4:15). Lynn Shmidt proposes a brief but very concise way of dealing with a person involved in religious syncretism (Shmidt, 2013, p. 30):

1. Christian communities must accept and respect people involved in religious syncretism. Unconditional acceptance of people fosters influence through relationship.
2. Religious syncretism must always be recognized and addressed whether in one's own culture or in cross-cultural experiences.
3. Scripture must always inform our thinking and direct people to the Bible as the one true authority. Cultural context, although important, is a secondary source. Cultural practices that are contrary to the best biblical interpretation should be regarded as sinful and abolished. Cultural practices affirmed in the Bible should be welcomed. If the Bible seems to be silent, then let the people involved make their best culturally-informed decision.
4. Everyone involved in mission must be aware of ethnocentrism and how it could lead someone to impose his or her own cultural convictions on a situation rather than relying on scriptural evidence to affirm or condemn a belief or practice. Biblical principles must clearly be differentiated from one's cultural baggage.
5. The Holy Spirit must be allowed to convict and lead through the process.
6. Responding to religious syncretism takes time; as with all mission, it takes a long-term commitment and process.

### **V. Conclusion**

No form of Christianity is immune from religious syncretism. The growing acceptance of religious pluralism, some mission approaches to other religions and cultures, and the inadequate discipling of new converts are some of the major contributing factors to religious



syncretism. To safeguard the church against this problem, it is essential to always engage in mission with a well-defined biblical and cultural model of discipleship, a balanced Christian perspective on the role of culture in the presentation of the gospel, and an appropriate way of dealing with people involved in religious syncretism. Also, the church must always encourage growth toward maturity in the Christian life. In other words, the presentation of the gospel as the gift for personal salvation must always be done with the corresponding call to discipleship (Pierson, 2009, p. 319).

Although every culture needs to be transformed by the Spirit and the Word of God (Pierson, 2009, p. 257), it is still essential that the communication of the gospel, in whatever setting, seeks to make the gospel concepts and ideas relevant to people within their own cultures (Hiebert, 1985, p. 55). However, the need to be culturally appropriate should always be closely coupled with an in-depth analysis of the Scriptures. Because “people can only understand that which is part of their cultural frame of reference” (Rogers, 2004, p. 65), the presentation of the gospel must be both biblically sound and culturally relevant in order to be meaningful to the receiving peoples.

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