


# Syncretism in South African Neo-Pentecostal pastoral counselling: A theological–ethical critique

**Author:**Solomon S. Mahlangu<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology, Faculty of Humanities, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Solomon Mahlangu,  
mahlass@unisa.ac.za

**Dates:**

Received: 18 June 2025

Accepted: 02 Sept. 2025

Published: 30 Jan. 2026

**How to cite this article:**

Mahlangu, S.S., 2026, 'Syncretism in South African Neo-Pentecostal pastoral counselling: A theological–ethical critique', *African Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 3(1), a78. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajops.v3i1.78>

**Copyright:**

© 2026. The Author.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Background:** Syncretism in South African Neo-Pentecostal pastoral counselling has emerged through the blending of biblical theology with culturally embedded healing practices. While this fusion reflects contextual engagement, it also raises serious theological and ethical concerns that require critical evaluation.

**Objectives:** This article explores the phenomenon of religious syncretism in Neo-Pentecostal care and counselling by critically examining how traditional African religious elements such as symbolic rituals, ancestral references and spiritual diagnostics are assimilated and integrated into Christian pastoral care. The article seeks to evaluate these practices in light of doctrinal fidelity and pastoral integrity.

**Method:** Using a qualitative document analysis approach, the study engages theological literature, ecclesial practices and academic critiques. Theological–ethical reflection guides the evaluation of syncretistic tendencies within pastoral care and counselling.

**Results:** The findings reveal that many Neo-Pentecostal care and counselling practices are shaped by a hybrid spiritual epistemology, which blends Christian theology with African traditional religious cosmologies. This syncretism often leads to ritualised, fear-based counselling sessions that compromise the sufficiency of Christ and the authority of Scripture.

**Conclusion:** While cultural contextualisation is vital, the uncritical incorporation of indigenous elements risks distorting the gospel message. Theological formation, rooted in the Christocentric foundations of the gospel and ethical pastoral practice, is urgently required.

**Contribution:** This article contributes to African practical theology by proposing a theologically grounded and ethically responsible model of pastoral care and counselling. It challenges faith communities to uphold doctrinal integrity while meaningfully engaging Africa's spiritual heritage within Pentecostal contexts.

**Keywords:** Neo-Pentecostalism; pastoral care and counselling; syncretism; theological ethics; contextualisation.

## Introduction

The growth of Neo-Pentecostalism in South Africa has led to a dynamic reconfiguration of religious belief and practice, especially within pastoral care and counselling. This movement, characterised by a strong emphasis on prosperity, healing, prophecy and spiritual warfare, continues to grow rapidly across various urban and rural contexts. Amid its expansion, Neo-Pentecostal pastoral care and counselling have increasingly adopted culturally embedded forms of spiritual care, drawing from both Christian and African traditional religious frameworks. While this intersection has generated vibrant and relatable religious experiences, it simultaneously introduces theological ambiguities that call for critical reflection. At the centre of this discourse lies the phenomenon of religious syncretism, which, within the Neo-Pentecostal care and counselling context, refers to the integration of Christian symbols, rituals and doctrines with indigenous African spiritual elements. This includes practices such as the use of holy water, blessed objects, ancestral references and spiritually diagnostic practices, alongside prayer and scripture. Such syncretic approaches are particularly prevalent in counselling settings, where emotional, spiritual and physical healing are sought.

Historically, syncretism has carried negative connotations among theologians and missiologists, associated with theological impurity, the erosion of biblical orthodoxy and betrayal of the gospel (Bevans 2022). Scholars like Moreau (2000:924–926) define this as the dilution or replacement of

**Note:** The article is a contribution to the topical collection titled 'The Challenge of Syncretism in Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism', prepared under the expert guidance of guest editors, Prof. Marius Nel and Prof. Mookgo Solomon Kgatle.

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

essential gospel truths through the incorporation of non-Christian elements. Conservative theological critiques warn that such blending undermines key Christian doctrines, including the uniqueness of Christ, the authority of Scripture and the nature of salvation (Ott, Strauss & Tennent 2010:310). Conversely, contextual theologians urge a more nuanced understanding of syncretism. They contend that what is often labelled as syncretism may, in fact, represent legitimate contextual theology, organic theological adaptation responding to colonial legacies and cultural marginalisation. Scholars such as Schreiter (1985) and Sanneh (1989) advocate for critical engagement with indigenous worldviews, emphasising that contextual expressions of faith can embody authentic and theologically valid Christian witness.

This article undertakes a theological–ethical analysis of syncretistic tendencies in Neo-Pentecostal pastoral care and counselling in South Africa. It critically investigates how and why syncretism emerges in these settings, assesses its compatibility with foundational Christian doctrines, and evaluates its implications for ethical pastoral praxis. By engaging with both doctrinal critique and contextual sensitivity, the study seeks to clarify the boundaries between contextualisation, inculturation and theological compromise. Ultimately, this article aims to contribute towards a framework for discerning the integrity of ministerial practices within culturally adaptive forms of Christian counselling. Rather than dismissing syncretism wholesale, it calls for rigorous theological reflection on how faith communities can remain rooted in the gospel while engaging meaningfully with their cultural contexts.

## Methodological approach

This study adopts a document-based theological–ethical analysis rather than empirical field research. The primary sources include peer-reviewed theological and missiological literature, denominational statements, pastoral guidelines, case reports and documented practices within South African Neo-Pentecostal contexts. These materials were purposively selected because they represent the theological debates, ecclesial positions and ministerial practices that shape pastoral counselling in this tradition.

The analytical process followed a qualitative document analysis approach (Bowen 2009), but one oriented towards theological reflection. Each source was read critically through three theological–ethical criteria: (1) *doctrinal fidelity* – assessing whether practices align with central Christian convictions such as the uniqueness of Christ and the authority of Scripture; (2) *pastoral integrity* – evaluating the implications for ethical care, responsibility and the dignity of counselees; and (3) *contextual legitimacy* – considering how cultural elements may be engaged without distorting the gospel.

The approach also draws on theological–ethical method as described by Gustafson (1988) and Hauerwas (1983), who emphasise the role of moral discernment in relation to doctrinal commitments. By framing the study as a

theological–ethical critique of documentary sources, the intention is not to generalise empirically about all Neo-Pentecostal practices but to provide a normative evaluation that clarifies the boundaries between contextualisation and syncretism in pastoral counselling.

## Understanding religious syncretism in the African context

The word ‘syncretism’ comes from the Greek word ‘synkretismos’. Plutarch (1931) was the first person to use this term in his book *‘On Brotherly Love’* to talk about how the Cretans worked together politically, even if they did not like each other (Plutarch, *Moralia*, c. 1st century CE). ‘Syn’ means ‘together’, and ‘Kretismos’ means ‘the people of Crete’. At first, it meant coming together politically rather than religiously, but over time its meaning changed significantly. During the Renaissance and Enlightenment, historians started using the word in a religious sense to talk about how many spiritual traditions came together (Leopold & Jensen 2004). When people talk about theology today, syncretism means merging multiple religious traditions. This is especially true in colonial or postcolonial circumstances when native beliefs combine with Christian teachings that were brought over (Stewart & Shaw 1994). According to Droogers (1989: 20-21):

Some individuals believe that syncretism is a good illustration of how theology and culture can be flexible and adapt to different situations. Others, nevertheless, are apprehensive that it could undermine the purity of theology.

The concept of syncretism remains one of the most contentious and debated topics in both moral theology and pastoral praxis, especially in the context of global Christianity and intercultural mission. The word frequently has bad connotations since it is linked to impurity or inauthenticity that mixes local beliefs, rituals or symbols with orthodox teaching. People who use the word ‘syncretism’ in this way see it as a departure from biblical orthodoxy and a danger to the distinctiveness of the Christian gospel (Bosch 1991:452–455). More conservative theologians and mission strategists tend to agree with this view. They say that taking in indigenous religious elements without thinking about them hurts core Christian teachings, especially those about Christ’s exclusivity and the authority of Scripture (Ott et al. 2010:310).

On the other hand, some academics say that syncretism should be understood in a more nuanced and contextualised way, seeing it not as a doctrinal perversion but as a theological response to cultural dominance, especially in colonial and postcolonial times. In this way, syncretism can be seen as a natural blending of religions that happens when local groups make the gospel message their own, frequently as a way to fight against Western conventions (Stewart & Shaw 1994:1–3). These theologians think that what detractors call ‘syncretism’ might actually be a real contextual theology that is based on the realities and spiritual cosmologies of non-Western civilisations (Sanneh 1989:212–214; Schreiter 1985:151–153). Syncretism has been observed in every location where the

church has existed (Moreau 2000:924). It poses a universal hazard to Christians as they articulate their religion within their own cultures or beyond cultural boundaries. One may argue whether Western Christianity is naturally more susceptible to syncretism. For centuries, Western Christianity's historical position as the predominant version of Christianity has conferred upon it an unassailable mark of orthodoxy. From this point of view, the border between syncretism and inculturation becomes less clear from a theological point of view, and thus we need to carefully think about the ethics and meaning of each.

Theologically, this argument brings up difficult moral issues: Should we accept cultural adaptation because it works for our mission, or fight it because it is theologically dangerous? What are the signs that show the difference between real contextualisation and syncretistic compromise? These unsolved difficulties make syncretism not merely a topic of scholarly discussion but also a real problem for pastoral counsellors, missionaries and theologians who operate in religiously mixed and pluralistic settings. The truth is that all Christian forms, both historically and around the world, show some level of cultural adaptation. The problem is figuring out when this adaptation turns into distortion (Moreau 2000:924–926).

The discourse on religious syncretism within African Christianity cannot be approached without attending to the deep ontological and epistemological structures of African traditional religion. The African worldview, as articulated by seminal thinkers such as Mbiti (1975:12) and Bediako (1995:108), is inherently holistic. It resists compartmentalisation between the sacred and the secular, viewing life as a unified spiritual continuum. In such a setting, the introduction of Christianity did not necessarily displace pre-existing cosmologies; rather, in many cases, it coexisted with them, sometimes in tension, and other times in fusion. Bediako (1999:94) asserts that this fusion has theological potential, allowing Christianity to be 'truly African' without being syncretic in the pejorative sense. However, such optimism must be approached with caution.

This article contends that syncretism, when uncritically assimilated into Christian ministry, particularly within pastoral counselling, can become not a bridge, but a distortion. The task of inculturation theology is not to baptise every cultural element, but to subject such elements to theological scrutiny. Kato (1975:11), writing from an evangelical standpoint, warned that Africa's theological future would be compromised if discernment between contextualisation and compromise was not maintained. This warning remains relevant, especially in Neo-Pentecostal contexts where the blending of Christian and ancestral logics often escapes theological interrogation.

The works of scholars such as Oduyoye (2001:37) and Pobee (1991:62) suggest that African Christianity must embrace its cultural grounding in order to survive colonial residues. While that argument is valid in relation to cultural recovery,

it becomes problematic when epistemic equivalence is assumed between Christian revelation and indigenous spiritual knowledge. This is especially significant in the pastoral counselling space, where ancestral appeasement rituals, the use of symbolic materials (such as salt, oil or water) and recitations rooted in traditional spirituality are being integrated into Christian settings. These practices are not just cultural accessories; they embody spiritual assumptions that require theological clarity.

Theologians such as Turaki (2006:48) have rightly observed that many African Christians operate with a 'dual allegiance' epistemology, trusting in Christ publicly while privately appealing to traditional systems in moments of crisis. The pastoral task, then, is not simply to affirm African identity but to transform it in light of the gospel. In counselling spaces, the use of culturally familiar rites must be accompanied by doctrinal accountability. Without that, syncretism becomes not a tool of missional relevance but a threat to doctrinal coherence.

This study acknowledges that African traditional religion has epistemological value. However, that value is not neutral. All spiritual systems make truth claims, and the theological task is to evaluate those claims in relation to the person and work of Christ. As such, syncretism must not be discussed merely as a cultural phenomenon but as a theological one. While Mbiti (1975:13) saw African cosmology as preparing the way for the gospel, later thinkers such as Byang Kato and Lamin Sanneh rightly cautioned against romanticising indigenous systems that may, at their core, contradict the foundational claims of Christian revelation (Sanneh 2003:167).

Thus, this article approaches syncretism not with hostility but with theological seriousness. It insists that any integration of African religious elements into Christian counselling must be grounded in a coherent theology of revelation and a robust understanding of pastoral vocation. In this light, religious syncretism is not merely an anthropological or sociological issue; it is a test of the Church's theological integrity.

### **The integrity of the Christian gospel and syncretism**

Many people think that religious syncretism in Christian theology means adding non-Christian beliefs, rituals or symbols to the Christian faith in a way that changes or weakens the main ideas of the gospel. This happens when important truths of the gospel, such as the fact that Christ is unique, the Bible is the final authority, or salvation is only possible through Jesus, are watered down or replaced with cultural or traditional religious aspects from the host setting. Moreau (2000:924) says that syncretism is 'the replacement or dilution of essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements'. This theological distortion may come from well-meaning efforts to make the gospel relevant to many cultures, but it could also weaken the gospel's ability to change lives and go beyond what is normal.

In the past, missionaries and contextual theologians have had a hard time figuring out the difference between inculturation, which is a valid and essential doctrinal change, and syncretism, which can change the gospel's main message (Bavinck 1960:178). Schreier (1985:146) says that syncretism happens when adaptation goes too far and becomes a theological compromise, like when 'local symbols are allowed to carry meanings that go against Christian doctrine'. In modern times, especially in African and Latin American forms of Christianity, the risk is that ancestral mediation, ritual manipulation or prosperity-driven interpretations of faith will take the place of the person and work of Christ. This goes against the gospel's call to discipleship and covenantal fidelity to God (Tiéno 1990:85).

### Revivalism and charismatic identity in Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism is a unique branch of Christianity that started in the early 1900s. It focuses on personal religious experiences, spiritual empowerment and direct interactions with the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals usually say that you need to have a sudden conversion experience, which they call being 'born again', and then be baptised in the Holy Spirit, which is shown by speaking in tongues and other charismatic signs like healing, prophecy, exorcism and divine revelations (Anderson 2013:13–15).

Allan Anderson, a well-known expert on global Pentecostal studies, says that Pentecostals are people who 'emphasise the reality and immediacy of the supernatural and the experiential work of the Holy Spirit' (Anderson 2004:13). These experiences are not only for one person; they are thought to be good for the whole body of Christ. Pentecostalism is dynamic because it believes that the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit are not just things that happened in the past but are still available and working in the Church today.

Kärkkäinen (2002:12) also says that Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are revivalist groups that have a strong sense of mission, holiness and the immediacy of God's work. These movements frequently have spontaneous worship, a lot of laity participation and a narrative spirituality that speaks to people who feel left out or powerless. Pentecostals believe that the Spirit's gifts are not just for personal growth, but also for healing, freeing and empowering people in the church and in society as a whole (Hollenweger 1997:18).

### Neo-Pentecostalism and the challenge of dual spiritual systems

The rise of Neo-Pentecostalism in South Africa has introduced a form of Christianity that is both vibrantly contextual and deeply contested. Unlike classical Pentecostalism, which was historically anchored in ecclesial accountability and doctrinal parameters, Neo-Pentecostal churches often revolve around the spiritual authority of charismatic leaders whose legitimacy is derived less from theological training and more

from perceived spiritual power. This shift has significant implications for how counselling is conceptualised and practised. It also raises theological questions about the epistemological sources from which these ministries draw their authority.

Kgatle (2017:4) describes South African Neo-Pentecostalism as a 'theology of performance', wherein demonstration of power is privileged over fidelity to doctrine. In pastoral counselling contexts, this tendency manifests in the use of prophetic rituals, dream interpretations and ancestral terminology, which are not subjected to critical theological reflection. These practices are often legitimised by appeals to 'African spirituality', a concept that remains both theologically underdeveloped and epistemologically unstable in much of the Neo-Pentecostal literature. While proponents argue that such forms make Christianity more relevant to African contexts, this article argues that relevance without discernment leads to confusion, especially when two distinct spiritual worldviews are treated as if they were mutually compatible.

Orogun (2023:7) is incisive in his observation that many Neo-Pentecostal leaders operate within a hybrid epistemological model, one that draws simultaneously from biblical categories and African traditional cosmologies. In this dual system, evil is understood not merely as sin but as an ancestral curse, and healing is achieved not merely through prayer but through ritual performance. The danger here is not simply methodological; it is theological. If pastoral counselling becomes a theatre of symbolic ritual rather than a space of theological guidance rooted in the gospel, then the minister ceases to function as a servant of the Word and becomes instead a kind of spiritual technician. This is not a trivial shift. It entails a redefinition of what it means to counsel, care and proclaim hope.

Scholars such as Kalu (2008:202) have noted that Pentecostalism's growth in Africa is largely because of its engagement with local cosmologies, particularly those that address the realities of illness, misfortune and spiritual attack. However, such engagement becomes problematic when the biblical framework of spiritual warfare is supplanted by ancestral appeasement and ritual purification. A counselling session that opens with Scripture but ends with a culturally derived deliverance performance, devoid of theological coherence, cannot be defended as inculturation. It is syncretism in its purest form.

The literature often attempts to differentiate between syncretism as 'creative contextualisation' and syncretism as 'doctrinal compromise'. Yet in practice, the line between the two is rarely clear, particularly in Neo-Pentecostal circles where theological education is often replaced by experiential spirituality. Kgatle and Ngubane (2023:6) highlight the troubling trend of pastors invoking ancestors, prescribing rituals and using objects such as ropes, sticks or herbs in counselling sessions. These acts are not neutral. They function within an epistemological framework that

competes with biblical theology, creating a dissonance that undermines both ministerial clarity and congregational trust.

The effect of such syncretism is not merely theological, but pastoral. Counselees are offered spiritual solutions that mirror the very cosmologies from which they converted, thereby re-inscribing fear, fatalism and spiritual insecurity into their Christian journey. In this way, pastoral counselling becomes an exercise not in liberation but in religious relapse. As a result, the pastor ceases to be a shepherd and becomes, unwittingly, a mediator of spiritual confusion.

This article contends that unless Neo-Pentecostal care and counselling ministries intentionally confront these dual epistemological systems, they risk not only compromising the integrity of their theology but also failing in their ethical duty to provide faithful pastoral care. As such, theological formation must be prioritised alongside spiritual experience. It is only when the epistemology of Scripture governs the interpretive framework of pastoral counselling that syncretism can be discerned and resisted in love, rather than accommodated in error.

## Documented syncretistic practices

To avoid the impression of generalisation, it is necessary to name and document specific practices that scholars have identified as syncretistic within South African Neo-Pentecostal pastoral counselling. Recent studies reveal that counselling sessions often extend beyond prayer and Scripture to include ritualised objects, symbolic acts and practices that closely mirror African Traditional Religious (ATR) forms. These practices, while often framed as biblically inspired, function epistemologically in ways that compete with or obscure the centrality of Christ and the authority of Scripture. Table 1 provides a summary of some of the most frequently cited examples from recent literature.

These examples demonstrate that syncretism in Neo-Pentecostal counselling is not a vague or peripheral concern but a recurring pattern, raising serious theological and ethical questions about pastoral integrity and doctrinal fidelity. It is therefore necessary to move beyond description towards a critical evaluation of the theological and ethical implications of these practices, which the following section addresses.

**TABLE 1:** Documented syncretistic practices in South African Neo-Pentecostal counselling.

Syncretic practice	Description	Sources
Ritual use of salt and oils	Applied during counselling or healing to remove curses or blockages	Kgatle and Ngubane (2023)
Use of ropes, sticks or herbs	Given as symbolic objects for protection or deliverance	Kgatle and Ngubane (2023)
Prophetic consultations	Paid sessions for spiritual diagnosis and solutions	Banda (2020); Kgatle and Spaumer (2023)
Invocation of ancestors	References to ancestral spirits in counselling or healing rituals	Kgatle and Ngubane (2023); Orogun (2023)
Ritual cleansing	Prescribed washings resembling ATR purification rites	Kgatle and Ngubane (2023)

Note: Please see the full reference list of the article, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajops.v3i1.78>, for more information.

ATR, African Traditional Religious.

## Theological and ethical implications in pastoral counselling

The convergence of Neo-Pentecostal pastoral practice and African traditional spiritual logics gives rise to significant theological tensions, particularly within the counselling encounter. At stake is more than liturgical aesthetics or ministerial style; what is at stake is the theological epistemology that undergirds the act of care. Pastoral counselling is not a neutral or culturally detached practice; it is inherently theological in its assumptions about the human condition, the nature of healing and the means of spiritual transformation. When syncretistic elements are introduced into this sacred space, they bring with them not only new practices but also new truth claims, many of which stand in direct contradiction to the Christocentric narrative of redemption.

Banda (2020:3) has drawn attention to the ecclesiological crisis that emerges when deliverance rituals and ancestral references replace Scripture and prayer as the primary tools of pastoral engagement. In such settings, counselling is no longer a ministry of the Word but a performative spectacle, often calibrated to meet emotional expectations rather than spiritual maturity. The ethical risk is substantial: counselees, already vulnerable, are placed in environments where theological clarity is sacrificed at the altar of immediacy. In these moments, the pastor functions less as a moral and spiritual guide and more as a ritual specialist, blurred in role, ambiguous in authority.

The lack of ethical boundaries in such spaces is compounded by the commodification of spiritual services. Kgatle and Spaumer (2023:9) note that many Neo-Pentecostal ministers receive payments – sometimes exorbitant – for counselling sessions framed as ‘prophetic consultations’. This introduces not only a socio-economic barrier to care but also an ethical distortion in which healing is transactional rather than sacramental. Within such a framework, the dignity of the counsellee is often subordinated to the performative charisma of the pastor. Counselling becomes a space not of liberation but of dependency, reinforcing the very spiritual vulnerabilities it purports to resolve.

From a theological standpoint, one must also consider what is being communicated about the nature of divine agency in these contexts. If healing is said to be contingent upon symbolic actions drawn from ATR – be they salt circles, ancestral prayers or ritual washings – then one must ask whether God’s action in Christ is perceived as sufficient. Quayesi-Amakye (2009:42) argues that the growing trust in ‘spiritual technology’ reflects a crisis of confidence in divine grace, one that reduces Christ to an optional mediator in a pluralised spiritual system. This presents a direct theological contradiction to both the Reformed emphasis on *solus Christus* and the Pentecostal affirmation of the Holy Spirit’s sufficiency.

Calvin's insistence on the centrality of the Word and the Spirit in all ministerial action remains instructive here. In *Institutes* IV.3.1, Calvin (1559:IV.3.1) is unequivocal that pastoral authority is valid only insofar as it flows from the proper administration of Word and sacrament. Where the Word is eclipsed by spectacle, and the Spirit is presumed to act through syncretic ritual rather than through the means of grace, the pastoral office is fundamentally undermined. The role of the pastor becomes not a herald of divine truth but a negotiator of spiritual formulas, each more theatrical than the last.

From an ethical perspective, the uncritical inclusion of ATR elements in Christian counselling also raises the issue of spiritual coercion. Ndhlovu (2020:18) describes counselling settings where counselees are told that their breakthrough or deliverance will not manifest unless specific ritual acts are performed. Such claims, often clothed in biblical language, impose a new form of spiritual law, contradicting the ethos of pastoral care grounded in grace, discernment and the patient work of sanctification.

Neo-Pentecostal counselling practices that adopt syncretic rituals without theological critique do not merely introduce cultural colour – they risk reintroducing religious bondage under the guise of empowerment. Zalanga (2014:99) rightly notes that such ministries inadvertently reinforce pre-Christian worldviews, thereby neutralising the transformative epistemology of the gospel. In the process, pastoral counselling becomes a site of doctrinal dilution, not spiritual formation.

To preserve the integrity of both theology and ethics in pastoral care, ministers must engage in serious epistemological self-examination. They must ask: What is the source of our authority? What epistemology undergirds our counsel? Are we ministers of Christ or cultural intermediaries adapting to spiritual demand? These are not merely academic questions; they are pastoral imperatives. The answer to each determines not only the shape of a church's counselling ministry but also the soul of its theological witness.

## The ritualisation of pastoral counselling and the epistemology of fear

One of the most striking patterns across Neo-Pentecostal ministries is the ritualisation of counselling. Counselling is no longer conceived primarily as a reflective, dialogical or scripturally grounded engagement, but as a ritualised event, framed as a spiritual confrontation between the counsellee and hidden forces. Counselling sessions regularly involve the use of anointing oils, salt, blessed water, cloths and prophetic tokens, with the goal of breaking 'spiritual blockages' or reversing ancestral curses.

Such practices are not merely symbolic; they function within a spiritual worldview that implicitly affirms the causal power of ancestral spirits and the need for physical ritual to disrupt

spiritual interference. Kgatle and Ngubane (2023:7) document instances where pastors advised individuals to cleanse themselves using prescribed materials, reminiscent of traditional cleansing rituals. This raises a serious theological concern: Is the pastor acting as a biblical shepherd or as a Christianised sangoma?

From a Reformed standpoint, this ritualisation represents a collapse of the distinction between sacrament and superstition. Calvin (1559:IV.10.9) was uncompromising in his view that rituals not instituted by Christ, however comforting, become distractions from the gospel. Moreover, Barth's insistence on revelation through the Word alone challenges counselling models built on spiritual mechanics, where God's grace is presumed to be triggered by human action (Barth 1956:127). Theologically, these rituals displace Christ as the centre of spiritual authority and reposition the pastor as a mediator of hidden power, a role alien to New Testament pastoral theology.

A second theme is the dominance of fear-based epistemology in counselling rhetoric. Counselees are often counselled not towards freedom in Christ, but towards vigilance against curses, ancestral spirits or witchcraft. Deliverance becomes a never-ending process, as spiritual threats are multiplied and diagnostic categories grow more elaborate. Pastors are positioned as specialists in spiritual warfare, whose knowledge of the unseen is essential to survival.

Ndhlovu (2020:19) argues that many Neo-Pentecostal churches exploit spiritual anxiety as a tool of control. Pastoral care and counselling in these spaces is not a ministry of healing but of ongoing spiritual surveillance, where congregants are told to return repeatedly for further 'check-ups' or prophetic scans. This contradicts Boisen's (1936:10) pastoral anthropology, where the counsellee is a subject of divine dialogue, not an object of spiritual experimentation.

Theologically, this reflects a deficient soteriology – one that views deliverance not as completed in Christ but as a continuous struggle requiring ritual maintenance. This tension mirrors what Barth describes as the anthropocentric distortion of pastoral work, where human rituals and spiritual technologies displace divine initiative (Barth 1956:132). In such an epistemology, grace is always provisional, and freedom is never secure.

## Practical implications for ministry

The theological–ethical critique advanced in this article is not merely diagnostic but intended to shape constructive pastoral engagement. Theological reflection on syncretism must ultimately inform the training of pastors, the structuring of curricula in seminaries and the ethical practice of pastoral counselling in local churches.

Firstly, pastoral training in Neo-Pentecostal contexts must be both doctrinally grounded and contextually sensitive. Ministers require formation that equips them to understand

African religious worldviews while also maintaining a Christocentric centre. Odeleye, Afolaranmi Ojo (2024: 8–9) stress that culturally competent training programmes are essential if pastoral caregivers are to resist syncretistic drift and provide care that speaks to local realities without theological compromise.

Secondly, theological education curricula need to include explicit modules on syncretism, contextualisation and pastoral ethics. Such training will help students discern the boundaries between faithful contextualisation and practices that obscure the gospel. Nel and Kgatle (2024:12–13) warn that without such clarity, pastoral counselling risks being reduced to commodified rituals that exploit fear rather than liberate believers. One way this could be implemented is through a curriculum module on *Syncretism and Contextualisation in African Pastoral Counselling*. Such a module would begin with biblical and theological foundations, emphasising the uniqueness of Christ and the authority of Scripture as normative benchmarks. It would then introduce students to ATR and other contextual influences, highlighting the anthropological role of ritual and symbolism in African communities. A third component would engage students in theological–ethical discernment, using case studies of Neo-Pentecostal practices such as the ritual use of oils, ropes and prophetic consultations to illustrate the tension between contextualisation and syncretism. Finally, the module would conclude with practical application, equipping students to develop counselling approaches that resist commodification and fear-driven ministry while establishing ethical safeguards that promote pastoral integrity and human dignity.

Thirdly, pastoral counselling practices themselves must adopt ethical safeguards. These include avoiding the commodification of ministry through the sale of ritual objects, rejecting fear-driven rhetoric that manipulates vulnerable counselees, and refusing ritual dependency that undermines the sufficiency of Christ. Instead, counselling should be shaped by pastoral integrity, authentic care and a commitment to human dignity.

By embedding such curricular and pastoral safeguards, the church can resist syncretism while cultivating a Christocentric pastoral practice that is both theologically faithful and contextually responsive.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the phenomenon of religious syncretism in South African Neo-Pentecostal pastoral counselling through a theological–ethical lens. It has been shown that while contextual realities shape pastoral practices, the uncritical incorporation of ritualised objects, symbolic acts and ATR elements into Christian counselling undermines doctrinal fidelity, pastoral integrity and contextual legitimacy. By analysing these practices against Christocentric and scriptural benchmarks, the study has highlighted how syncretism compromises both the theological content and ethical character of pastoral care.

As argued throughout this article, the persistence of syncretistic practices in Neo-Pentecostal pastoral counselling demands not only theological–ethical critique but also constructive proposals for ministerial formation and practice. The practical implications outlined earlier, particularly in relation to training, theological education and ethical safeguards in counselling, point towards pathways of renewal that are both doctrinally faithful and contextually responsive.

Ultimately, the task of pastoral counselling in South Africa is to embody a ministry that is contextually engaged yet uncompromisingly centred on Christ. Only by resisting syncretism and embracing ethical, Christocentric approaches to care can Neo-Pentecostal pastoral counselling fulfil its redemptive calling in the lives of believers and communities.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

### Author's contribution

S.S.M. is the sole author of this research article.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

## References

- Anderson, A., 2004, *An introduction to Pentecostalism: Global charismatic Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Anderson, A., 2013, *To the ends of the earth: Pentecostalism and the transformation of world Christianity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Banda, C., 2020, 'Unsafe spaces? An ecclesiological evaluation and response to recent controversial practices in some South African neo-Pentecostal churches', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 41(1), 302. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v41i1.2108>
- Barth, K., 1956, *Church dogmatics, volume IV: The doctrine of reconciliation*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh.

- Bavinck, J.H., 1960, *An introduction to the science of missions*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, Philadelphia, PA.
- Bediako, K., 1995, 'The significance of modern African Christianity – a manifesto', *Studies in World Christianity* 1(1), 51–67.
- Bediako, K., 1999, 'Gospel and culture: Some insights for our time from the experience of the early Church', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 2(2), 8–12.
- Bevans, S., 2022, 'Syncretism and Christian tradition: Race and revelation in the study of religious mixture', *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 46(4), 595–598. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393221096476>
- Boisen, A.T., 1936, *The exploration of the inner world: A study of mental disorder and religious experience*.
- Bosch, D.J., 1991, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY.
- Bowen, G.A., 2009, 'Document analysis as a qualitative research method', *Qualitative Research Journal* 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Calvin, J., 1559, *Institutes of the Christian religion*, IV.3.1 and IV.10.9, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Droogers, A., 1989, 'Syncretism: The problem of definition, the definition of the problem', in J. Gort, H. Vroom, R. Fernhout & A. Wessels (eds.), *Dialogue and syncretism: An interdisciplinary approach*, pp. 7–25, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Gustafson, J.M., 1988, *Ethics from a theocentric perspective, volume 1: Theology and ethics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Hauerwas, S., 1983, *The peaceable kingdom: A primer in Christian ethics*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN.
- Hollenweger, W.J., 1997, *Pentecostalism: Origins and developments worldwide*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA.
- Kalu, O., 2008, *African Pentecostalism: An introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Kärkkäinen, V.M., 2002, *An introduction to ecclesiology: Ecumenical, historical & global perspectives*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL.
- Kato, B.H., 1975, *Theological pitfalls in Africa, Kisumu*, Evangel Publishing House, Kenya.
- Kgatle, M.S. & Ngubane, S.E., 2023, 'Sangomas on the pulpit: Syncretistic practices of some pastors in neo-Pentecostal ministries in South Africa', *Religions* 14(12), 1499. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121499>
- Kgatle, M.S. & Spaumer, A., 2023, 'Integrating professional counselling during marriage counselling within neo-Pentecostalism', *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 57(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v57i1.2920>
- Kgatle, M.S., 2017, 'The unusual practices within some Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa: Reflections and recommendations', *HTS Theological Studies* 73(3), 1–8.
- Kgatle, M.S., 2023, 'Consultations in new prophetic churches and African traditional religions: A case study of divine healing in assessing syncretistic practices in South Africa', *Religions* 14(3), 400. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030400>
- Leopold, A. & Jensen, J.S., 2004, *Syncretism in religion: A reader*, Routledge, London.
- Mbiti, J., 1975, *Introduction to African religion*, Heinemann, London.
- Moreau, A.S., 2000, 'Syncretism', in W.A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical dictionary of theology*, 2nd edn., pp. 924–926, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Ndhlovu, J., 2020, *The attitude of evangelical churches towards syncretism in Tshwane townships*, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, viewed 28 May 2025, from <https://scholar.ufs.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11660/10960/NdhlovuJ.pdf>.
- Nel, M. & Kgatle, M.S., 2024, 'Introduction to syncretism and Pentecostalism in the Global South', *Religions* 15(6), 636. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060636>
- Odeleye, D.A., Afolaranmi, A.O. & Ojo, S.O., 2024, 'Training and education of pastoral care and counselling professionals in Africa', *International Journal of Contemporary Research in Humanities* 2(1), 102–109.
- Oduyoye, M.A., 2001, *Introducing African women's theology* (Vol. 6), Sheffield Academic Press, London.
- Orogun, D.O., 2023, 'Hybrid leadership in African Neo-Pentecostalism', *Religions* 14(5), 632. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050632>
- Ott, C., Strauss, S. & Tennent, T., 2010, *Encountering theology of mission: Biblical foundations, historical developments, and contemporary issues*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Plutarch, 1931, *Moralia: On brotherly love*, transl. F.C. Babbitt, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Pobee, J.S., 1991, *Religion and politics in Ghana: A comparative study of Christianity and traditional religion*, Asempa Publishers, Accra.
- Quayesi-Amakye, J., 2009, *Let the prophet speak: A study on trends in Pentecostal propheticism*, University of Cape Coast, viewed 29 April 2025, from <http://ir.ucc.edu.gh:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/1546/QUAYESI-AMAKYE%202009.pdf>.
- Sanneh, L., 1989, *Translating the message: The missionary impact on culture*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY.
- Sanneh, L., 2003, *Whose religion is Christianity? The gospel beyond the West*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Schreiter, R.J., 1985, *Constructing local theologies*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY.
- Stewart, C. & Shaw, R.D., 1994, 'Introduction: Problematizing syncretism', in C. Stewart & R.D. Shaw (eds.), *Syncretism/anti-syncretism: The politics of religious synthesis*, pp. 1–26, Routledge, London.
- Tiénou, T., 1990, 'The theological task of the church in Africa', in T. Tiénou & G.H. Anderson (eds.), *Mission trends no. 3: Third world theologies*, pp. 79–93, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Turaki, Y., 2006, *Foundations of African traditional religion and worldview*, WordAlive Publishers, Nairobi.
- Zalanga, S., 2014, 'Christianity in Africa: Pentecostalism and sociocultural change in the context of neoliberal globalization', in S.D. Brunn (ed.), *The changing world religion map*, pp. 1827–1861, Springer, Dordrecht.