



Syncretism in Neo-Pentecostalism: Description and evaluation



Authors:

Marius Nel¹ Mookgo S. Kgatle² 

Affiliations:

¹Unit for Reformational Theology, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

²Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, Faculty of Humanities, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Marius Nel,
marinus.nel@nwu.ac.za

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The term 'syncretism' refers to the deliberate and purposeful blending or amalgamation of diverse religious beliefs and practices with a religious tradition in order to accommodate cultural elements. It is a phenomenon found among Neo-Pentecostals and necessitates the questions: to what extent is it compatible with the Pentecostal message of Spirit baptism and a lifestyle characterised by spiritual gifts, and how effective is it to address the cultural context of its audience? It is not necessary to describe the phenomenal growth of Neo-Pentecostalism, especially in the Global South, ensuring that it has become a global and widespread movement. Its links with Pentecostalism are in its emphases on spiritual gifts (like glossolalia and the interpretation of these tongues, prophecy and healing). Additionally, its theology includes the prosperity message related to the covenant curses and blessings found in Deuteronomy 27–28 and current music practices in worship. ability to present the Pentecostal gospel in ways that are relevant to people in diverse cultural settings However, do these practices, or some of them, contribute to syncretism, diluting the gospel message of Jesus Christ? When Pentecostal beliefs are merged with indigenous spiritual practices, folk religions, or local cultural norms, does it still represent the truth?

Parts of the Global South, including Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia, use pre-existing spiritual worldviews that include, among other practices, animism, ancestor worship and traditional healing practices. By integrating these practices into their church life, Neo-Pentecostal preachers, sometimes called apostles, prophets (and prophetesses) or bishops, particularly within the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) movement found the recipe to be relevant to their audiences.

To provide some examples that may be designated as syncretism, in Africa the New Testament command to engage in spiritual warfare is integrated with the belief in ancestral spirits, deliverance from evil spirits rituals closely resemble traditional exorcisms, and prophets or apostles serve as mediators with the spirit world, like traditional spiritual healers. In Latin America, Afro-Caribbean religious elements (e.g. Santería or Candomblé) are blended with Pentecostal worship styles while sacred oils, water and objects reminiscent of traditional folk practices are utilised. Furthermore, in countries such as the Philippines and India, Neo-Pentecostals' practices such as anointing or prayer services for healing closely resemble the indigenous healing traditions.

In evaluating the potential that some practices of Neo-Pentecostals may be syncretic, it is vital to remain objective because there are positive and negative aspects. Each individual practice should be researched and evaluated on its own. There are aspects that are certainly positive, such as facilitating the Pentecostal message in culturally relevant and accessible ways. The robe in which Western Christianity dressed the gospel can easily alienate people in other cultures, requiring them to sacrifice their cultural identity. In many cases, Neo-Pentecostals succeed in ways that marry the message and new faith with the known cultural world of their audiences, promoting their acceptance of it. In the Global South, marginalised communities find the language of spiritual warfare empowering to combat their oppression and survive their suffering because of political persecution, illness, poverty or misfortune. The outcome is that Neo-Pentecostals facilitate the rapid spread of the movement because their message resonates with the spiritual needs and expectations of the local population.

However, it is possible (and necessary) to point to negative aspects, including changing the message to accommodate cultural and spiritual needs of the audience so that the message of divine love and grace itself becomes diluted or negated. In the process, some doctrines may be relativised or overshadowed in attempting to accommodate local beliefs. In some cases, like the prosperity message, the question is to what extent it reflects the gospel message of grace leading

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to a lifestyle of service. It is also possible that the preachers may exploit superstitious practices found in the local culture and religion to accommodate their message and gain influence and power. In some cases, they enrich themselves while ignoring the plight of masses of poor people. In preaching divine healing or the prosperity message, their message may turn the biblical moral code into a transaction to guarantee miracles, money or transformation. Lastly, some Neo-Pentecostals desire to operate on their own, fragmenting the Christian community even further.

In conclusion, evaluating the appearance of potential syncretism in Neo-Pentecostalism is not a straightforward

issue. It is a complex and ambivalent phenomenon, reflecting both religious expression's adaptability to new contexts and enabling the Christian message to flourish, while at the same time raising red flags when local traditions conflict with foundational Christian teachings.

In this special edition, scholars representing various perspectives discuss their research on the challenges and opportunities that Neo-Pentecostals face in reaching people in diverse cultural contexts. Their purpose is to find the route that does not sacrifice doctrinal integrity to be culturally relevant. Contextualisation is vital but the core of the Christian message may not be compromised.