

„OVIDIUS” UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANȚA
DOCTORAL SCHOOL
DOMAIN: THEOLOGY

PHD THESIS SUMMARY

RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM - EXPRESSION OF THE NEW-RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON. MISSIONARY EVALUATION

PHD COORDINATOR:
Fr. Prof. PhD. Gheorghe ISTODOR

PHD STUDENT:
Irinel Ciobotaru

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

1. Research rationale and objectives
2. The relevance of the research from a missionary point of view
3. Methodology and current state of the research in the Romanian and international space
4. Structure of the paper

CHAPTER I - RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY - THE CATALYST OF RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

- 1.1 Globalization and religious interaction
- 1.2. Contemporary Religious Pluralization
- 1.3. Modernization and secularization - possibilities of religious syncretism
- 1.3 Religious boundaries and identity demarcations
 - 1.3.1 Religious boundaries as limits and opportunities for mutual relations. Historical considerations
 - 1.3.2 The permeability of borders
 - 1.3.3. Where borders exist, interactions become encounters
 - 1.3.4. Current and future challenges of the fluidization of religious borders Conclusions

CHAPTER II - RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM - PREFACING CONFUSION IDENTITY

- 2.1. Syncretism in conceptual delimitation frameworks
 - 2.1.1 The theorization of religious syncretism
 - 2.1.2. Syncretism in the perspective of theological analysis
 - 2.1.3. Syncretism as an unprincipled mixture
 - 2.1.4. Contemporary positions
 - 2.1.5. Syncretism as metaxic dialog
- 2.2. Seven different models for approaching syncretism in theology
- 2.3. Psychological motivations of religious bricolage
- 2.4. Multiple religious belonging or hybrid religious identity - a derivative of religious syncretism
 - 2.4.1. Types of multiple religious belonging
 - 2.3.1.1. Cultural belonging
 - 2.3.1.2. Family membership
 - 2.3.1.3. Occasional membership
 - 2.3.1.4 Believing without belonging
 - 2.3.1.5. Asymmetrical belonging
 - 2.4.2. Degrees of multiple religious belonging
 - 2.4.3. Multiple religious belonging and religious pluralism
 - 2.4.4 Multiple religious affiliation as an obstacle to interreligious dialogue
 - 2.4.5 Multiple religious affiliation or hybrid religious identity
 - 2.4.6 The dynamics of multiple religious belonging
 - 2.4.7. Patterns of multiple religious belonging Conclusions

CHAPTER III - RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM - THEOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHICAL

- 3.1 Philosophical responses to syncretism
 - 3.1.1. Incompatibility

- 3.1.2. Syncretism condemned by Christian theological perspectives and the World Council of Churches
- 3.1.3. Rejection of syncretism not based on logic
- 3.1.4. Emotional involvement and the criterion of truth
- 3.1.5 Differences between and within traditions
- 3.2. Approaching syncretism in Christian theology
 - 3.2.1 Adolf von Harnack on syncretism
 - 3.2.2. The values of syncretism in Adolf von Harnack
 - 3.2.3. Hendrik Kraemer on syncretism
 - 3.2.4. The "complicated problem" of revelation and truth for syncretistic tendencies
 - 3.2.5. The revelation factor as a criterion of truth
 - 3.2.6. Inculturation, indigenization and contextualization - missionary paradigms applicable to contemporary pluralistic society?
- Conclusions

CHAPTER IV - CRITICAL POSITIONS TOWARDS RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MISSIONARY POINT OF VIEW

- 4.1. The Church's mission in the context of syncretistic drifts
 - 4.1.1. The mission of the Church in the horizon of new paradigms and contemporary challenges
 - 4.1.2. Approaches to mission towards other religions and cultures: dislocation and accommodation
- 4.2. Missionary reactions and pastoral urgencies to syncretism and new religiosity
 - 4.2.1. Syncretism as a vehicle of the non-religious phenomenon
 - 4.2.2. Neglect of new religions
 - 4.2.3. The apologetic approach
 - 4.2.3.1. Positive apologetics
 - 4.2.3.2. Negative apologetics
 - 4.2.4. Shortcomings of the apologetic approach
 - 4.2.5. The dialogical approach
- 4.3. Biblical-missionological responses to the challenge of syncretism
 - 4.3.1. Spiritual parenting: a biblical model of discipleship in the sphere of Christian truth
 - 4.3.2 The spiritual condition of those who adhere to new religions
 - 4.3.3. Preventive measures against involvement in a new religion
 - 4.3.4. Recovery of members of a syncretistic religion
- 4.4. A biblical and missiological perspective on the role of culture in preaching the Gospel
- 4.5. Contextualization as a missionary vector in the preaching of the Gospel
 - 4.5.1.
 - 4.5.2. Models of contextualization
 - 4.5.3. Context and Scripture
 - 4.5.4. Biblical and historical models of contextualization
 - 4.5.5. Differentiating between contextualization and syncretism
 - 4.5.6. Context helps us to communicate the biblical message effectively
- Conclusions

CONCLUSIONS

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Argument and research objectives

The complexity of the world in which we live today denotes the complexity of the challenges to which the Church of Christ is called to respond theologically, missionally and pastorally. The missionary exercise is a constitutive part of the Church's being and vocation to be in the world as the keeper and preacher of the revealed Truth, the Gospel. Given the reality of the year 2024, in which religious diversity is in tandem with secularization and religious indifferentism, the mission of the Christian Church must preserve its paradigmatic fidelity to the tradition of identity, but at the same time it must be oriented towards new strategies for articulating the witness to Christ, the risen Son of God.

An item on the agenda of contemporary mission studies is to understand what a missionary encounter with other world religions looks like and what can come out of it without falling into the compromise of religious syncretism. In the past, the Church was isolated from the different religions of the world, but today, every Church faces the fact of pluralism. Amid constant interaction with adherents of other faiths, non-syncretistic tendencies are increasingly difficult to maintain. Moreover, with the West losing prestige and power in the global community, patronizing attitudes based on cultural superiority are a thing of the past. Moreover, our notion of religion as a private department of life is being challenged by the global worldviews of the major world religions. All this raises complex issues. How are Christ and the Gospel unique amid other religious commitments? How are we to understand religions in terms of the Gospel? What is our mission to the members of these religious communities?

Answers to these questions cannot avoid the sensitive issue of syncretism. Religious syncretism is frequently mentioned in Holy Scripture. In many respects, the Ten Commandments are God's instructions against religious syncretism, for the first three commandments (Exodus 20:1-7) charge the Israelites "to stand distinctly before God, not relying on other gods."[\[1\]](#) The Ten Commandments are not to be used as a guide to religious syncretism. Just as the Israelites were warned against rejecting Yahweh and serving other gods (Deut 11:16; 4 Kings 10:23), so New Testament Christians were warned against dual loyalties and syncretism (Matt 6:24; 1 Cor 10:14; Rev 22:15).

Syncretism is a worldwide religious challenge. According to Michael Pocock, "*all peoples and religions* manifest syncretism"[\[2\]](#). Unfortunately, when discussing the influence of syncretism on the church, many tend to see it as happening outside of Western Christianity, as if the Western form of Christianity is immune to syncretism. But Andrew Walls and Scott Moreau argue that "syncretism is a greater danger to Western Christians than to African or Indian Christians"[\[3\]](#) and that "syncretism, in one form or another, has been seen everywhere the Church has existed."[\[4\]](#) In other words, syncretism is a common threat among Christians around the world as they express their faith either within their own culture or cross-culturally. One could argue whether or not Western Christianity is inherently more at risk of syncretism. However, for centuries, the historical role of Western Christianity as the dominant form of Christianity has, for centuries, conferred upon it a status of orthodoxy that is all too often unchallenged.

Scrutiny of the literature on religion and mission reveals definitions of syncretism with subtle differences. Synthesizing some of these definitions of syncretism is the focus of this section. Syncretism was first used by Plutarch to describe the temporary coming together of the quarreling inhabitants of Crete against a common enemy. The Greek word from which

'syncretism' derives refers to people coming together, in this case in battle. Erasmus later used it metaphorically to refer to an agreement between people with apparently disparate views. The new reference centered on ideas and beliefs. Seventeenth-century theologians then gave it a negative connotation, using it for what for them was the undesirable reconciliation of Christian theological differences. Syncretism became for them a threat to 'true' religion. To this negative judgment was added a more neutral point of view in the second half of the ninth century, when scholars and theologians began to use the word to recognize the mixing of religious elements from various sources, including Christianity, that had occurred and continues to occur.

Religious syncretism is now generally defined as the mixing 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 loses its distinct nature and speaks with a voice that reflects its culture."[\[5\]](#) For Lynn D. Shmidt, "a person who draws from two or more belief systems at the same time is guilty of syncretism. He or she is trying to get the best of two religious worlds."[\[6\]](#) 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 witnesses, in Shmidt's definition it is the individual believers who are to blame for drawing inspiration from non-Christian belief systems. Mark Mullins addresses the difference between the standard uses of "syncretism" in the social sciences and missiology. He points out that syncretism is usually understood as a combination of elements from two or more religious traditions, 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 cultural contact. However, in theological and missiological circles, it is generally used as a pejorative term to designate movements considered heretical or sub-Christian[\[7\]](#).

In his definition of syncretism, Mullins emphasizes that not everyone sees syncretism as a negative phenomenon and, in agreement with Van Rheenen, sees contact with a new culture as one of the factors that can contribute to religious syncretism. 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 to replace or dilute essential gospel truths by incorporating non-Christian elements. Syncretism in some form has existed throughout the Church.[\[8\]](#) Religious syncretism refers to the blending of various religious beliefs and practices into a new belief system or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs and practices from unrelated traditions.

The investigation of syncretism that we propose in this doctoral dissertation is not meant to be a mere theoretical exposition of syncretism, but an evaluation of this patchwork of religious identities and doctrines from the perspective of the Church's mission. Quite simply, syncretism is always present, either virtually or concretely, when Christianity meets other religions. From this reasoning, the Church's mission must be a vector as an act of demonstration in the staunchness of Christian Truth, a foundational factor on which to build the dialogical process with the other. This is the only way to preserve fidelity to authentic Christian teaching without compromising it with elements of synthesis in order to supposedly adapt Christianity to the logic and reality of contemporary man. It is all the more necessary to take such a critical

approach to religious syncretism, given that the non-religious phenomenon, the new religious movements, the new spiritualities have become a vehicle for syncretism.

We are now in a good position to specify the objectives of the research: a) to define religious syncretism and to evaluate it from the perspective of the Church's mission; b) to analyze the concept of multiple religious belonging and the consequences of this synthesis for the Church's pastoral ministry; c) to determine the factors that favor religious syncretism; d) to specify the measures to combat syncretism from a missionary point of view; e) to frame religious syncretism in relation to the process of contextualizing the Gospel.

2. The relevance of mission research

The fact that the world has become a religiously pluralistic space cannot be denied. People with diverse ethnic backgrounds and many different religious commitments live and share public life together. This globalization has put the world's major religions within reach of almost everyone. Worldwide migration patterns, international travel and trade, advances in communications technology and international media activities have introduced people to almost all religious traditions. Mission no longer comes only from the West; Islam and Eastern religions are also dynamically engaged in missionary activity. This has led to the possibility of cafeteria-style choices in religion, with many people choosing between various religious traditions and practices to meet their personal needs^[9]. If all religions are equally valid paths to salvation, as some claim^[10], 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 not only promotes many positive features of other religions, but also asserts that "all religions, including Christianity, are relative and that every religion is considered equally valid"^[11].

Underlying this assumption is the belief that different religious traditions are complementary rather than contradictory. As a direct result of this call for cooperation between different religious cultures, there is a growing positive public attitude towards other religions. Religious pluralism, especially in the West, seems to have become a spiritual adventure, to the extent that Claude Geffré even states that "the religiosity of today's Westerner is spontaneously syncretistic."^[12] The 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, thereby affirming the subjectivity of Christian statements of faith, the Church cannot but be threatened by religious syncretism. From the aforementioned, addressing syncretism from a missionary point of view is necessary in the context of today's religious pluralism.

The relevance of the research, which revolves around religious syncretism, also stems from the fact that in the spectrum of missiology, the encounter of the Gospel, of Christianity with other religious cultures, has generated various perspectives of approach. Thus, between *contextualization* and *syncretism*, it is difficult to establish the dividing line, and we believe that things need to be clearly demarcated.

As Dean Flemming points out, because the term is used by thinkers from a wide range of philosophical and theological perspectives, *contextualization* is a "slippery" term that is used by different people to mean a number of different things^[13]. Western missiologists see

contextualization as the process of relating the message of Scripture to local cultures and contexts. Flemming designates contextualization as "the dynamic and comprehensive process by which the gospel is incarnated in a concrete or historical situation."[\[14\]](#) Hesselgrave and Rommen also describe it as "the attempt to communicate the message, person, deeds, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God's revelation and that is meaningful to the respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts."[\[15\]](#)

A wide range of issues are described by missiologists as subject to the process of contextualization. For example, the literature on contextualization includes discussions of contextualized communication, relationship patterns, leadership, ritual forms, hermeneutics, and theology[\[16\]](#) Contextualization refers not only to the communication of the gospel by missionaries, but also to its application and expression by believers in all areas of life. It is commonly held that Scripture must take precedence over the context in which it is applied,[\[17\]](#) while elements of context (such as images, metaphors, rituals, and words) may be used to make Scripture intelligible and impactful, or by believers in general to express their faith, but these elements must not be allowed to distort the meaning of Scripture[\[18\]](#).

As noted, theologians define syncretism as the mixing of biblical faith with non-Christian elements, resulting in a negative impact on its integrity. For example, Moreau sees syncretism as "the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the Gospel by the incorporation of non-Christian elements."[\[19\]](#) Similarly, Van Rheenen suggests, syncretism is the reshaping of plausibly Christian structures, beliefs, and practices through the medium of culture so that they fit those of the dominant culture[\[20\]](#).

Definitions of syncretism usually contain two basic elements: a process (aspects of the Christian faith are blended with non-Christian elements) and a result (the Christian faith is compromised). However, the simplicity of these definitions masks a number of difficulties that missiologists have faced in defining and identifying syncretism. It is important to review these difficulties because they help to explain the confusion and lack of consensus in the debate about the Church's mission in the context of today's world.

First, there has been some debate about what exactly is mixed. Some, like Ringgren, limit syncretism to the blending of "two or more religions."[\[21\]](#) But this has been rightly criticized, since defining religion and separating it from culture is a notoriously difficult task. Moreover, the integrity of the Christian faith can be just as distorted when it is mixed with elements that do not come from another religion, such as cultural values or political ideologies. For this reason, many theologians regard syncretism as the mixing of Christianity with a different "worldview."[\[22\]](#) Doing so, however, raises a new set of challenges. As Moreau points out, "the very hiddenness of the worldview makes it difficult - perhaps impossible - to understand well enough to be used as an analytical tool."[\[23\]](#) Indeed, the vagueness of the worldview's conceptual framework has led anthropologists to abandon it. For this reason, Moreau himself avoids fully categorizing what is mixed, referring simply to the incorporation of "non-Christian elements."[\[24\]](#)

Second, the fact that "syncretism" is used in an objective sense by some but in a subjective sense by others has led to confusion. In the social sciences, the term is used objectively. As an example, Kamstra's definition ("the coexistence of extraneous elements within a specific religion")[\[25\]](#) is neutral, descriptive and non-evaluative. However, in theology and missiology, the term is usually used subjectively, as a negative evaluation, so syncretism

is a pejorative term. In recent times, however, some theologians have used the term positively,[\[26\]](#) and some theologians have used it objectively, with the result that other terms are needed to distinguish the acceptable from the unacceptable. For example, Hollenweger speaks of "theologically responsible syncretism," where some missiologists would simply use "contextualization."[\[27\]](#) In light of these multiple uses, some missiologists advocate abandoning the term altogether. For example, Zehner uses "hybridity" instead, arguing that a neutral term forces theologians to actively evaluate blending in an ongoing way.[\[28\]](#) However, most missiologists in the evangelical sphere have retained the term "syncretism" to refer to unacceptable blending, while using "contextualization" for acceptable blending.

A third dilemma with the use of the term "syncretism" is that it is used by different scholars to refer to two different types of mixture. Some use it to describe holding contradictory principles. For example, Baird uses the term to describe "cases in which two contradictory ideas or practices are brought together and are held without the benefit of coherence."[\[29\]](#) However, others use it to describe the result of a process in which the two elements are "relativized" or synthesized to create a third new element. For example, Kato speaks of a "synthesis" between the Gospel and the elements of the receiving culture, so that "an entirely new 'Gospel' emerges."[\[30\]](#)

Fourth, additional confusion about the meaning of syncretism stems from the fact that missiologists sometimes use the term to refer to a fatal spiritual state ("The gospel is completely veiled and salvation is not possible"), but on other occasions to refer to a non-fatal spiritual state ("The gospel is augmented or diluted, but not so compromised that the message of salvation through Jesus alone is lost.") Hiebert recognizes that the term is used in two senses: "In one sense, syncretism is a message that has lost the heart of the gospel. In another sense, it is heading in the wrong direction, away from a fuller knowledge of the gospel."[\[31\]](#)

Confusion arises when missiologists fail to explain the meaning they intend, especially when an author moves from one meaning to another. For example, when Van Rheenan states that "we are always, to some extent, syncretistic," he is certainly using the term in the sense of spiritually non-fatalistic. But in the same article, he uses the word non-syncretism as a loss of "the essence of the gospel."[\[32\]](#)

Finally, some have opposed any subjective use of the term on the grounds that when used subjectively it becomes a tool of oppression used by the powerful to "legitimize their own power in religious terms" and to suppress diversity and challenges to their authority. Although this objection is usually voiced by social scientists and some theologians. For example, Richard writes, "in Christian circles, [syncretism] is most often used as a pejorative term against developments in non-Western churches that do not align perfectly with Western Christianity."[\[33\]](#)

Charles. H. Kraft is even more explicit: "Those who have the power to admit or keep others out of organizations supposedly approved by God tend to set their standards according to their own cultural norms rather than God's intention."[\[34\]](#)

In short, there is confusion about the meaning of syncretism, and objections to its traditional usage (i.e., in an evaluative, negative sense) have been strongly articulated and alternatives proposed. As to how the terms *syncretism* and *contextualization*, Tanchanpongs's comment is useful here: "In the end, you can call it what you like, but the biblical authenticity of the Christian faith in a particular context must still be evaluated in some way."[\[35\]](#)

The purpose of our research is to carry out such an evaluation and, beyond a simple definition of terms, to seek a method for distinguishing the permissible and impermissible mixing of biblical faith with foreign forms. Despite the problems associated with the terms 'contextualization' and 'syncretism', they remain the generally accepted terms to refer to permissible and impermissible mixing, and are therefore used in this paper with the meanings theologians traditionally accord to them: 'contextualization' refers to appropriate articulations and applications of Scripture, and 'syncretism' to inappropriate ones. At the same time, care is taken to avoid the confusion and abuses described above. Of course, the decision to use the terms in this way does not resolve the important issue of how to distinguish between what is proper and permissible and what is improper and impermissible.

Missiologists frequently point out that it is extremely difficult to distinguish between *contextualization* and *syncretism*. Indeed, the literature abounds with claims that the two concepts are "in tension" or "seemingly opposed" and that "there is a very clear line between the two."[\[36\]](#) Missionaries are also described as having to "walk a very narrow path"[\[37\]](#) or as standing "on a knife's edge."[\[38\]](#) [\[38\]](#) The reason for this difficulty is that, as is clear from the above discussion of definitions, the two terms describe one and the same process: the process of relating Scripture, Christianity, to a particular context. In common evangelical usage, the only difference is a subjective and evaluative one, whereby contextualization is used for a positive evaluation and syncretism for a negative one. Consequently, as Corwin remarks, the discussion on this topic is "at the level of subjective feelings rather than objective standards," prompting him to comment wryly, "What is the rule of thumb for differentiating between contextualization and syncretism? Simple: it is contextualization when I do it, but syncretism when you do it!"[\[39\]](#)

However, missiologists have attempted to propose objective methods for distinguishing the two concepts. One approach - sometimes called *the structuralist approach* - is to focus on the process of contextualization. In this approach, the emphasis is on evaluating the elements of culture. If the elements are considered neutral or permissible, then their use is appropriate contextualization, but if they are impermissible, it is syncretism. Thus, for example, Poston applies this approach to argue that when Christians use local cultural forms, this is contextualization, but if they use local religious forms, it is syncretism.[\[40\]](#) This approach has been criticized for not taking into account how a particular form is used and what meaning is given to it. Tanchanpongs, for example, argues that this approach fails to recognize that "meaning is a function both of the cultural-linguistic system and of its actual use by people."[\[41\]](#)

Others have argued for focusing on the outcome of the contextualization process when attempting to distinguish syncretism from contextualization.

Tanchanpongs, for example, using a culinary metaphor, asserts, "Authenticity is measured not so much by the presence of certain ingredients as by the actual result of the cooking itself."[\[42\]](#) A variety of outcome-focused tests have been created. Some argue that the key question is whether the Gospel has been truncated or distorted, or whether it has lost its integrity or message. Others propose to investigate whether or not scriptural truths have been nullified.[\[43\]](#) Others suggest asking whether or not the contextualization process has produced an authentic biblical framework of beliefs and practices. While these tests are not objectionable, they alone have proven insufficient to distinguish contextualization from syncretism, for they

only raise new questions, such as how to determine whether gospel distortion has occurred. More specific criteria are needed.

In light of this need, some have attempted to identify a "gospel core," proposing that only the distortion of this core should be labeled syncretism^[44] For McGavran, this core is faith in the Holy Trinity, the Bible, and the basic commandments. He proposes that "anything that detracts from this core is forbidden syncretism."^[45] However, his approach has encountered a number of difficulties. First, proponents of this approach have failed to reach agreement on what the evangelical core actually is. Second, critics, such as Harvie Conn, have argued that the Bible itself makes no such distinction between an evangelical core and the rest of its message and have warned that the approach creates a canon within the canon. ^[46] While proponents of this approach have attempted to identify "the essential, core, and critical elements of Scripture," critics have responded that "the entire biblical corpus and all that Scripture intends to communicate" is "essential, core, and critical."^[47] Ultimately, the "gospel core" approach has not proven helpful in distinguishing syncretism from contextualization.

Paul Hiebert has proposed a model for distinguishing contextualization from syncretism called "critical contextualization."^[48] According to this approach, if a pre-existing form is either uncritically rejected (and replaced with a foreign form) or accepted by believers, syncretism is likely to result. However, if a four-step process of critical contextualization is followed by the relevant community of believers, the result is likely to be authentic contextualization:

- (a) Exegesis of the cultural form in question to establish its meaning and function;
- b) Identification and exegesis of the relevant Scripture;
- c) Critical evaluation of the form in the light of biblical teaching;
- d) Developing and implementing a new contextualized practice (the old form may be retained, rejected or modified).

Hiebert's critical contextualization usefully identifies the important steps to be taken to distinguish syncretism from contextualization and has been widely embraced by some missionary missiologists.

Finally, some missiologists have suggested that no single test or method can be devised that clearly distinguishes syncretism from contextualization. Instead, they propose a series of questions that need to be considered^[49] These include the question of whether contextualized practice :

- emphasizes or minimizes the differences between biblical faith and the alternative system of beliefs and values;
- emphasizes or minimizes the sufficiency of Christ;
- produces a Church that is identical with society or one that offers adequate biblical critiques of society;
- helps believers turn away from or retain idolatrous loyalties;
- allows the norms of the text to take precedence over those of the context.

As with Hiebert's critical contextualization, these questions have proven valuable to missionaries and their value is widely recognized. Missiological attempts to distinguish *syncretism* from *contextualization* have not brought a consensus to the debate because the teaching of Holy Scripture on permissible and impermissible religious mixing has not been thoroughly studied and understood. The criteria used by missiologists to distinguish syncretism

from contextualization have generally not been inductively formulated from biblical texts, with the result that the potential of the Bible to bring clarity to this crucial issue remains untapped. The missiologist A. Scott Moreau has recognized that the missiological discourse on contextualization and syncretism lacks biblical grounding. In an article on the subject, he lists a number of biblical texts that deal with syncretism, and then writes: "For each of the biblical examples, the Christian community must do careful exegetical work. It is quite clear that there are biblical limits on the degree of religious mixing permissible - but that these limits are not always as easy to draw as we might think."[\[50\]](#)

What is needed is a study that does this "careful exegetical work," examining the biblical data on contextualization and syncretism - including appropriation and resistance texts - and then developing appropriate criteria for evaluation. Missiologists agree that any contextualized practice must be consistent with Scripture. However, with regard to the use of forms from other faiths, there is no agreement or clarity as to what the teaching of Scripture actually is. Hiebert's critical contextualization appropriately asks communities of believers to identify and interpret the relevant scriptural teaching and then apply it to the practice in question. What is needed, therefore, is an identification of texts relating to the use by believers of the forms of other faiths and then a study of those texts that produces a comprehensive and balanced account of the Bible's teaching on the matter.

The new religious movements cannot be defined as new religions, but rather as concrete expressions of religious syncretism, for their defining note is religious mixing with the motivation to correspond to the religious tendencies of contemporary man.

3. Methodology and current state of research in the Romanian and international space

The methodology of this study centers around three main aspects. The first is the characteristics of religious syncretism. These particularities constitute the basic object of the analysis undertaken in this thesis. These characteristics will be used in a *mapping and projection* exercise into multiple religious belonging, which is the second main component of the methodology. The third aspect is the missionary stance towards the relativism of syncretism, which unfortunately makes itself a vehicle for new spiritualities devoid of the criterion of truth.

Through this mapping, as an exercise of spotting the points of realization or welding of religious syncretism between two or more religious traditions, we do not develop a new spectrum of analysis, but rather identify the landmarks that facilitate religious syncretism and the predilection for new spiritualities that are incorporated into multiple religious belonging. This method provides frameworks for interrelated definitions of syncretism and multiple belonging and offers connections in different ways and brings religious diversity or even multiplicity to the fore.

Religious syncretism is a multilayered, complex reality that calls for a missional response grounded in and modeled on the experience of the Truth of Christ. A carefully formulated and measured response.

In specifying the dimensions of religious syncretism we will also work with the *historical descriptive method*, in particular the formulation of this concept in Greek philosophy and its metamorphosis in contemporary thought. This research will be coupled with the *systematic-*

thematic method, with an emphasis on the critical evaluation of syncretism from the theological and missionary point of view. Last but not least, we have also launched the research in an interdisciplinary dynamic, involving psychological and philosophical facet analyses in the reception and critique of religious syncretism.

The use of a broader and more detailed mode of research in the analysis of syncretism aims to bring to light the interconnections between the missionary modes of the Church's relation to religious cultures (contextualization, acculturation, synthesis, etc.). Interpreting and reinterpreting these missionary landmarks opens the opportunity to go into a field that is in the process of missionary formation and adaptation.

In Romanian Orthodox theology we have recorded a critical analysis of religious syncretism. I mention here the doctoral dissertation *Syncretism - a major challenge to Orthodox mission* defended by Teodor Diaconu in 2017 at the "Ovidius" University of Constanta under the coordination of Prof. Gheorghe Istodor, a doctoral thesis [51]. Of course, the missiological professors in the faculties of theology in the Romanian space (Pr. Prof. Gheorghe Istodor, Pr. Prof. Gheorghe Petru, Pr. Prof. Aurel Pavel, Pr. Prof. Gelu Călină, Pr. Prof. David Pestroiu, Pr. Prof. Prof. Mihai Hincinschi) have referred in their university lectures, as well as in their books, to the challenges that religious syncretism poses at the micro (believer) and macro (community) levels. In unison they expressed the idea that syncretistic synthesis has nothing to do with the clarity and pattern of theological truth, formulated on the basis of revelation. Religious syncretism corresponds to a psycho-pietism in which the sacred is "commercialized" at will in the form of spiritual recipes.

In the international area of missiological theology, religious syncretism is being analyzed in all its complex details in order to formulate pertinent missionary positions against it. We mention here the contribution of . For this reason, the literature on the basis of which we have formulated our analysis is in English.

4. Structure of the work

The paper is structured in 4 chapters, each chapter being subdivided into several sections and subsections, in order to present the argument as clearly as possible. Chapter I - *Religious diversity - the catalyst of religious syncretism* - is intended as an introduction to the current religious context, a context that favors syncretism. The following themes are introduced in this chapter: globalization and religious interaction; contemporary religious pluralization; modernization and secularization - possibilities of religious syncretism; religious boundaries and identity demarcations; religious boundaries as limits and opportunities for mutual relations. Historical considerations; current and future challenges of the fluidization of religious boundaries

Chapter II - *Religious syncretism - prefacing an identity confusion* - frames the multivalent exploration of religious syncretism in the perspective of theological analyses, with the specification of seven different models of approaching syncretism. The psychological motivations of religious bricolage are also analyzed, and the last section of this chapter is reserved for the conceptualization of multiple religious belonging as hybrid religious identity.

Chapter III - *Religious Syncretism - Theological and Philosophical Approaches* - intends a pertinent, provocative analysis, carried out in a note of theological objectivity, of how the field of philosophy and two contemporary theologians (Lutheran Adolf von Harnack and

Reformed Hendrik Kraemer) relate to religious syncretism in terms of its admission, critique and acceptance.

Chapter IV - *Critical positions towards religious syncretism from a missionary point of view* - summarizes the evaluation of syncretism from the point of view of the Church's mission and the elaboration of pastoral-theological solutions to combat religious mixture. The following themes are developed here: the mission of the Church in the context of syncretistic drifts; the mission of the Church in the horizon of new paradigms and contemporary challenges; missionary reactions and pastoral urgencies in the face of syncretism and new religiosity; syncretism as a vehicle of the non-religious phenomenon; biblical-missiological responses to the challenge of syncretism; differentiation between contextualization and syncretism.

Notes:

[1] Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Modern and Postmodern Syncretism in Theology and Mission," in *The Holy Spirit and Mission Dynamics*, edited by C. Douglas McConnell, Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1997, p. 173.

[2] Michael Pocock, "Introduction: An Appeal for Balance", in *Missiology and the Social Sciences: Contributions, Cautions and Conclusions*, E. Rommen and G. Corwin (ed.), Pasadena, CA: William Carey, p. 10.

[3] Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002, p. 69.

[4] A. Scott. Moreau, "Syncretism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission*, edited by A. Scott Moreau. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000, p. 924.

[5] Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Modern and Postmodern Syncretism in Theology and Mission*, p. 173.

[6] Lynn D. Shmidt, "How Much Syncretism Is Allowed?", in *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* (January), 2013, p. 27.

[7] Mark R Mullins, "Syncretistic Movements", in *Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, ed. Scott W. Sunquist, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001, p. 810.

[8] A. Scott. Moreau, "Syncretism," p. 925.

[9] Amy Frykholm, "One Person, Two Faiths: Double Belonging," in *Christian Century* (January 25), 2011, pp. 20-23.

[10] See P. B. Thomas, "Any Other Name? A Response to Dialogical Theology", in *Many Other Ways? Questions of Religious Pluralism*, edited by M. Bage, R. Hedlund, P. B. Thomas, Martin Alphonse, and George David, Madras, India: McGavran Institute, 1992.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[12] Claude Geffré, "Double Belonging and the Originality of Christianity as a Religion", in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, edited by Catherine Cornille, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002, pp. 93-105.

[13] Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission*, Leicester: Apollos, 2005, p. 19.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989, p. 200.

[16] Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture*, Downers Grove, 2003, p. 24.

[17] A. Scott Moreau, "Contextualization: From an Adapted Message to an Adapted Life", in *The Changing Face of World Missions*, edited by Michael Pocock, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005, p. 335.

[18] Timothy Keller, *Gospel Contextualization: Center Church: Part Three*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013, p. 9.

[19] A. Scott Moreau, "Syncretism," in *EDWM*, p. 924.

[20] Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Syncretism and Contextualization: The Church on a Journey Defining Itself," in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, edited by Gailyn Van Rheenen, Pasadena: William Carey, 2006, p. 7.

[21] S. R. Imbach, "Syncretism," IN *EDT*, p. 1062

[22] Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008, p. 25.

[23] A. S. Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models*, Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012, p. 149.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] Jaques Kamstra, *Synkretisme: Op de Grens tussen Theologie en Godsdienstenomenologie* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), pp. 9-10.

[26] William H. Harrison, *In Praise of Mixed Religion: The Syncretism Solution in a Multifaith World*, Montreal: MQUP, 2014, p. x.

[27] John R. Davis, *Poles Apart? Contextualizing the Gospel*. Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 1993, p. 23.

[28] Edwin Zehner, "Orthodox Hybridities: Anti-Syncretism and Localization in the Evangelical Christianity of Thailand," in *Anthropological Quarterly* 78 (2005), p. 585.

[29] Robert D. Baird, *Category Formation and the History of Religions*, The Hague: Mouton, 1971, p. 147.

[30] Byang H. Kato, "The Gospel, Cultural Context, and Religious Syncretism," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, edited by J. D. Douglas, Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975, p. 1227.

[31] Paul G. Hiebert, "Syncretism," p. 44.

[32] Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Syncretism and Contextualization," p. 8.

[33] H. L. Richard, "Religious Syncretism as a Syncretistic Concept: The Inadequacy of the 'World Religions' Paradigm in Cross-Cultural Encounter", in *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 31 (2014), p. 209.

[34] Charles H. Kraft, "Contextualizing Communication," in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for*

Mission Today, edited by Dean S. Gilliland, Dallas: Word, 1989, p. 131.

[35] Natee Tanchanpongs, "Developing a Palate for Authentic Theology," in *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*, edited by Matthew Cook, Pasadena: William Carey, 2010, p. 113.

[36] John H. Connor, "When Culture Leaves Contextualized Christianity Behind," in *Missiology* 19 (1991), pp. 21-29.

[37] Larry Poston, "'You Must Not Worship in Their Way' When Contextualization Becomes Syncretism," in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, edited by Gailyn Van Rheenen, Pasadena: William Carey, 2006, p. 243.

[38] D. A. Hubbard, "Foreword," in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today*, edited by Dean S. Gilliland, Dallas: Word, 1989, p. vii.

[39] G. Corwin, "Telling the Difference", in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 40 (2004), p. 282.

[40] Larry Poston, "'You Must Not Worship in Their Way' When Contextualization Becomes Syncretism," p. 248.

[41] Natee Tanchanpongs, "Developing a Palate for Authentic Theology", p. 118.

[42] *Ibid.*

[43] D. A. Carson, "Church and Mission: Reflections on Contextualization and the Third Horizon," in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*, edited by D. A. Carson, Exeter: Paternoster, 1987, p. 254.

[44] Derek Brotherson, *Contextualization or Syncretism? The Use of Other-Faith Worship Forms in the Bible and in Insider Movements*, Pickwick, 2021, p. 36.

[45] McGavran, Donald A. "The Biblical Base from Which Adjustments are Made." In *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity*, edited by Tetsunao Yamamori and Charles R. Taber, 35-56. Pasadena: William Carey, 1975. p. 41.

[46] Harvie M. Conn, "Normativity, Relevance and Relativism," in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, a Challenge, a Debate*, edited by Harvie M. Conn, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988, pp. 196-197.

[47] Natee Tanchanpongs, "Developing a Palate for Authentic Theology," p. 115.

[48] Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," in *Missiology: An International Review* 12 (1984), pp. 287-296.

[49] Larry Owens, "Syncretism and the Scriptures", in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 43 (2007), pp. 74-80.

[50] A. Scott. Moreau, "Contextualization, Syncretism, and Spiritual Warfare: Identifying the Issues", in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, edited by Gailyn Van Rheenen, Pasadena: William Carey, 2006, p. 51.

[51] See also: Adrian Boldișor, 'The Place of Religious Syncretism in the History of Religions and its Dangers for the Contemporary World', in *Mitropolia Olteniei* 3 (9-12), pp. 116-138; Emil Floare, "Tolerance and Identity - The Conflict of 'Worlds' in the Breast of Syncretism and Multiculturalism", in *Astra Salvensis - revista de istorie si cultura*, 1, 2015, pp. 103-112; Catalin Vasile Bobb, "Syncretism imaginary/Imaginary Syncretism", in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 8, 2004, pp. 102-108.

BIBLIOGRAFIE SELECTIVĂ

1. *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*, tipărită sub îndrumarea și cu purtarea de grijă a PF Părinte Daniel, Patriarhul Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, cu aprobarea Sfântului Sinod, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodox Române, București, 2013.
2. Achimescu, Nicolae, *Noi Mișcări Religioase*, Editura Limes, 2005.
3. Arinze, Francis. „A Pastoral Approach to the Challenge Posed by the New Religious Movements.” *L'Osservatore Romano*, 15 April 1991.
4. Baker, George. „Language and Mind in the Study of New Religious Movements.” În *Understanding the New Religions*, editat de J. Needleman și G. Baker, New York: Seabury, 1978.
5. Bloom, W. *Holistic Revolution: The Essential New Age Reader*. London: The Penguin Press, 2000.
6. Boff, Leonardo. *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*. New York: Crossroad, 1985.
7. Boff, Leonardo. *Church, Charism, and Power: A Radical Ecclesiology*. New York: Crossroad, 1984.
8. Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991.
9. Cornille, Catherine. *Many Mansions: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002.
10. Corwin, G. „Telling the Difference.” În *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 40 (2004).
11. Grant, Sara. *Toward an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist Christian*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002.
12. Harrison, William H. *In Praise of Mixed Religion: The Syncretism Solution in a Multifaith World*. Montreal: MQUP, 2014.
13. Heelas, Paul & Linda Woodhead. *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Blackwell, 2007.
14. Heelas, Paul, și Linda Woodhead. *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
15. Heelas, Paul. *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism*. Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
16. Heideman, E. P. „Syncretism, Contextualization, Orthodoxy, and Heresy.” *Missiology* 25, 1 (1997).
17. Kamstra, Jaques. *Synkretisme: Op de Grens tussen Theologie en Godsdienstenomenologie*. Leiden: Brill, 1970, 9–10.
18. Kane, Ross. *Race and Revelation in the Study of Religious Mixture*. Oxford University Press, 2021.
19. Kato, Byang H. „The Gospel, Cultural Context, and Religious Syncretism.” În *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, (ed.) J. D. Douglas. Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975.
20. Melton, J. Gordon, și Robert L. Moore. *The Cult Experience: Responding to the New Religious Pluralism*. New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982.
21. Melton, J. Gordon. *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1993.

22. Moreau, A. Scott. „Contextualization: From an Adapted Message to an Adapted Life.” În *The Changing Face of World Missions*, editat de Michael Pocock. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.
23. Moreau, A. Scott. „Syncretism.” În *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission*, (ed.) A. Scott Moreau, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000.
24. Moreau, A. Scott. *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012.
25. Mullins, Mark R. „Syncretistic Movements.” În *Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, (ed.) Scott W. Sunquist, 810. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001.
26. Pessi, Anne Birgitta. „Privatized Religiosity Revisited: Building an Authenticity Model of Individual-Church Relations.” *Social Compass* 60, no. 1 (2013), pp. 3-21.
27. Phan, Peter C. „Multiple Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church.” În *Theological Studies* 64 (2003).
28. Poston, Larry. „‘You Must Not Worship in Their Way’ When Contextualization Becomes Syncretism.” În *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, (ed.) Gailyn Van Rheenen. Pasadena: William Carey, 2006.
29. Stewart, C., și R. Shaw (eds.). *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*. London și New York: Routledge, 1994.
30. Stewart, Ch. „The Meaning of ‘Syncretism.’” În *Syncretism in Religion. A Reader*, (ed.) A. M. Leopold și J. S. Jensen. New York: Routledge, 2005.
31. Stewart, Ch., și R. Shaw. „Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism.” În *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, (ed.) Ch. Stewart și R. Shaw. London–New York: Routledge, 1994.