

## SYNCRETISM: A CASE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE GBAGYI TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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### **Abstract**

*It has become common that people no longer find themselves as complete strangers in religions other than what is theirs. This is, to a larger extent, because of some familiar elements that exists within the two religions. These common elements find themselves into two or more religions because the people practicing those religions have knowingly or unknowingly borrowed and integrated those concepts, symbols and practices of one religious tradition and reconciled them into their faith expressions. This is called syncretism. Gbagyi Catholicism is characterized by syncretism whereby Gbagyi traditional religion and Christianity mixes to the point that both systems seem to lose some basic structures and identities. This article looks at syncretism among the Gbagyi people of Tafa Local Government Area of Niger State in Nigeria. It discovers that neither Catholicism nor Gbagyi Traditional Religion is totally pure and free from elements of syncretism or traces of an encounter between them. It elaborates the consequences and implications of syncretism to the Gbagyi Catholic members, whether it promotes religious tolerance or the decline of the pure faith. Using narrative research technique as evidenced in the literature and the author's experience with the Gbagyi people, this paper exposes, examines and identifies the major implications of syncretism on the Gbagyi Catholics and gives solutions that would hopefully improve the existing situation.*

**Keywords:** Syncretism, Roman Catholic Church, Christian, Gbagyi, Tradition, Religion.

### **Introduction**

Having sufficient correct knowledge about ones' faith practice helps people to remain committed to a single way of worship. However, "there is a point where contextualization becomes syncretism, and Christian content is eroded, losing the conforming of a Church's

life to standards outside itself, standards which may cut across everyone's culture pattern" (Walls, 188). This calls for sensitivity in our approach to faith life and expressions. For lack of sensitivity and strictness about our faith values may lead into syncretism. This syncretic practice comes out clearly among the Gbagyi Catholics of Tafa Local Government Area (LGA). A good number of elderly Gbagyi Catholics are known to be good in traditional medicine, very often the Church treasurers keeps money in the black clothe wrapped together with a piece of charcoal and black chicken feathers to stop magicians from stealing it, there are some rivers and forests prohibited to be visited without the consent of the community leaders, and some trees cannot be cut unless with permission from those selected to be responsible for them. The researcher discovered that some Gbagyi Catholics sometimes goes even to an extent of using charm for acquiring Church positions, village chieftaincy or political leadership. Syncretism is real among the Gbagyi Roman Catholics, they believe very much in the power of God the Almighty but also the gods of their ancestors.

#### **Understanding the term 'Religion'**

Perusing through various scholars' definitions of the term 'Religion', one come to discover that it is quite complicated to get a common agreement on what could really be a definitive understanding of religion. According to Gustave, the word 'religion' is "elastic and difficult to define in such a way that it will suit all men and be adequately applicable to all the phenomena which men label as religious" (1). It is difficulty to come up with the understanding of religion that fits every religious person. Nevertheless, George F. Thomas defines religion as a "relationship between man and that which he regards as holy or divine" (48). For Biddle, religions are "the social institutions which are designed to help men achieve the realization of personal God and establish a positive relationship with Him" (114). While Alward Shorter meant that, "Religion is a social reality, which powerfully affects human thought and behaviour" (38). Sahaya Selvam understands religion as a "system of information that provide individuals with knowledge and resources for living a life of purpose and direction" (40).

For Taliaferro and Marty, religion is "a body of teaching and prescribed practices about an ultimate, sacred reality or state of being that calls for reverence or awe, that guides its practitioners into what it describes as a saving, illuminating, or emancipatory relationship to this reality through a personally transformative life of prayer, ritualized meditations, and moral practices like repentance and personal regeneration" (197). Many things needed for good human life living is found in our religions. We are to be faithful adherence of what we believe in because it sanitizes us and determines our way of life. We cannot really underestimate the vitalness of religion in our societies. There is a great need to pay

attention to whatever is going around us and find solutions from the teachings of our religions.

Talking about religion and what it does to humanity, Spilka provides the following points:

- 1) A set of meanings for the individual that permits one to make sense out of much, if not most, of what happens in life, especially when naturalistic explanations appear inadequate;
- 2) The wherewithal to feel that one has some control over the course of events through the holding of various beliefs and engaging in certain practices and behaviours; and
- 3) A sense of personal worth, dignity, and esteem, a feeling that one is a special product of creation and continues to occupy a privileged place in the scheme of things (326).

Following intelligently the different interpretations of religion in this paragraph, what comes out sharply is that feeling someone has towards the supernatural or supreme being. It sounds as if in religion the relationship is established between the unequal, the inferior and superior, man and God or gods. Religion maintains the ultimate values of a society and manages tensions in the personalities of individual members of a society. It functions as an integrative force between groups and within individual personalities. Religion provides what people need to live as human beings. Most of the religions are guided by the following elements:

- 1) The beliefs of the community about God;
- 2) The beliefs of the community about God's relationship with the world;
- 3) The ways in which the people of the community worship God and pray to him;
- 4) The rules which the community follows because of their beliefs about God; 5) The places and people which the community believe to be holy and to belong to God in a special way (Brown, 8).

People have different ways of expressing love to their beloved ones. This is as well true to Religion, which is the "external, social, institutionalized expression of our faith in God" (McBrien, 1254). Religion is the best way to express our faith in God. All what pertains religious activities confirms our love for the Almighty Father. It is thus not surprising to see people wearing rosaries, traditional rings or string of Muslim prayer beads. They are all forms of expressing their love for God. This is because religion is a "system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in people by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Shorter, 41). There are symbols in the Churches, in the

Mosques, in the house of the traditional chief, in the far and nearby bushes. All these symbols express peoples' religion. Within the symbols, if looked beyond the mere symbol your naked eyes are able to see, there comes what is spiritual that can only be seen by the believer with the eyes of faith.

### **Understanding the term 'Syncretism'**

Syncretism is a merging of the elements of the Roman Catholic Church doctrines and of the Gbagyi religious beliefs and practices. Taliaferro and Marty stated that Syncretism is "the combination of various beliefs and practices to form new ones" (223). While for Bennetta Jules-Rosette, syncretism is a "cultural and religious admixtures, such as the combination of Christian healing with traditional views of sorcery. It is any adaptation of a religious practice within a given culture, the combination of traditional beliefs with an evolving doctrine" (18). We have heard and seen some Men of God who claim to have healing powers yet they visit witch doctors to perform their so-called miracles. Some of them to protect themselves have been found putting snakes in bottles filled with water in their bedrooms. In this case the men of God are being syncretic. Syncretism is simply the attempt to unite elements that do not agree together, like putting traditional medicine in the Church money to stop the money from being stolen by the witch or wizard. The trust in God's protection over the Church money and putting traditional medicine on money are incompatible.

However, "syncretism is nothing new in religion" (Pruyser, 95). Reading about the past life of the Roman Catholic Church, one discovers that there were moments in the life of the Church when traditional cultural values infiltrated into Christianity. The faithful had to deal with the situation within their powers. In some situations, they ended up following Coulson's conviction who understood syncretism as the "reconciliation of diverse or opposite tenets or practices" (859). They mixed up different religions, cultures, or school of thoughts as they tried to reach the Supreme Being for their spiritual utmost satisfaction. They believed that religious syncretism through fusion of diverse religious beliefs and practices, allows an inclusive approach to other faith expressions. This comes out clearly in the words of Antoine Kambanda that, "Some Christians engage in some degree of syncretism; they practice the Christian faith but continue their traditional religions. This occurs particularly when they face problems such as sickness or other dangers that drive them to seek security in traditional practices" (66). This implies that, for some Christians, as long as everything is fine, they remain faithful in their Christianity, but once issues comes up that cannot be treated by their Christian faith system, they return back to their traditional religious solutions.

Syncretism in Roman Catholicism means that some Catholics are not making personal total commitment to Jesus Christ. When they become unhappy with Christianity, the natural tendency is to turn back to their traditional beliefs and practices to rejuvenate their inner joy and peace. Aylward Shorter said that, “syncretism is the absence of dialogue or perhaps, the failure of dialogue; to avoid it there must be a continuous and consistent exchange of meanings” (6). Syncretic Catholics at times are not available for any dialogue of faith practices but goes the way that best suits them depending on the circumstances that surround them. A sign that a concerned person has no desire to modify his old beliefs or lose them for the sake of the new faith being embraced.

Syncretism is the result of trying to bring together two beliefs or practices which cannot mix. They simply do not agree together. They mix two things which cannot be mixed, the gospel values and non-Christian elements of culture. Syncretism is “the tendency, especially in religion, to combine elements from different belief systems” (Mautner, 607). These combined faith elements are like water and kerosene. No matter how much you try to combine the two, there comes the time when clear layers, that of water and that of kerosene, become obvious. In the same vain, traditional belief practices combined with what is Roman Catholic will one day come out to show their differences. They are incompatible; they do not belong to the same class for them to mix up in their totality.

What we find out is that syncretism has some basic characteristics. These basic characteristics help people to identify the specific practice if it is syncretic or anti-syncretic. They are out of the syncretic personal belief. They include the following expressions:

Syncretism denies that the Christian faith is the result of the unique revelation of God. Syncretism denies that Christ is the only way to God, that the Bible is the only inspired revelation of God’s will without error. Syncretism tries to unite different beliefs of one religion with conflicting beliefs of another. Syncretism is really being unfaithful to one or the other religion (Gehman, 256).

If you try to unite beliefs which do not agree, then you must change some things and be unfaithful to one or both of the religions. There is no way you can remain faithful to one religion while following the other religion. Definitely, willingly or unwillingly, one religion will at one time or the other take priority than the other. As a result, there will be experience of being unfaithful to one religion. Some Roman Catholics, for instance, have expressed their unfaithfulness to Jesus through their trust in traditional protection. You could see a good number of them especially the males having traditional tattoos, which they believe protects them from bullets, or sharp objects that can be used by their enemies.

Compromises are made in order to accommodate irreconcilable faiths, especially when traditional beliefs and practices are not in agreement with the Bible. A traditional person wants to be satisfied spiritually in his or her own way; there is a dire desire to meet the traditional felt needs and satisfaction of one's conviction. Once the person is convinced in one religious belief, what he or she needs is something higher than what is believed in already. Whatever is less to one's conviction will not change the mind-set of the convinced person totally, otherwise, there will be only pretense while within the heart they follow personal convictions. It is quite a challenge to transform someone's mind-set, yet this is the only way out if the result is to be achieved.

With the words of Paul W. Pruyser, syncretism is "the loss of authenticity which occurs when incompatible ideas are allowed to distort original and cohesive conceptions" (95). The researcher would like to experience anti-syncretism among the people regardless of whichever life of faith they follow. Trying to remain committed to one religion is the way forward to achieving purity since there will be no mixing up of faith elements from the two or more religions. The purity achieved is not only for the concerned person but also for the religion. For when one person is confused of which religion to follow, those around him or her are also confused.

### **Syncretism among some Gbagyi Catholics**

The schools, hospitals, hospices, and other amenities provided by the missionaries helped a lot in the field of evangelization. Many people came to know the Roman Catholic Church through those amenities, and some people even decided to become Roman Catholics. In consonance with Odetoyimbo Kayode Peter, as he talks about the Roman Catholic Church and her contribution to development of some communities, he concluded that, "the school offered them basic education, playing time where they related together" (146). But were the people given proper catechesis? Did the facilities established by the missionaries help people to understand their faith and live by it? The attitude of some people raises much concern. Some converted Catholics have traditional attitudes dominating their daily lifestyle. This leads one into syncretism, which is "a union or attempted fusion of different religions, cultures, or philosophies" (Egunjobi, 45). We see that at times facilities or amenities provided as means towards proper evangelization does not result into true conversion. People become Catholics yet within their hearts and lifestyles remain truly ethnic.

There are things some Catholics do regardless of their new status as converted people. They forget that conversion is a "reorientation of self" (Spilka, 202). When one is reoriented, it means that the person has changed his direction or way of looking at his

religion; he moves his compass from one religion to the other. This is because religious conversion is “the process which leads to the adoption of a religious attitude; the process may be gradual or sudden” (Thouless, 104). Some Catholics are not willing to abandon their traditional religion belief quickly and some of them do not even think of doing so. Mbiti experienced that “even if they are converted to another religion like Christianity, they do not completely abandon their traditional religion immediately: it remains with them for several generations and sometimes centuries” (14). This is because the people are sure that in every situation of their daily lives, traditional religion had provided them with correct answers to their aspirations and directed them in life. Traditional religion is their security, so leaving it is like taking a great risk. They prefer to follow two or more religions that grant them a greater sense of security than to leave behind their old beliefs and practices.

When some people are “converted to other religions, they often mix their traditional religion with the one to which they are converted. In this way they think and feel that they are not losing something valuable, but are gaining something from both religious systems” (Mbiti, 15). They find it more reasonable and wise to mix two religions than losing one. They enjoy the good values from the two religions. They believe that gaining the right norms from two religions makes them better people than others who are inclined to single religious belief and practice. This is the obvious reason why when people convert; “they do not simply exchange one set of perceptions about the divine for another, nor perceive them as equally valid. To change faith is not, for most people, an action like changing one’s wallpaper. The act of conversion is also an act of repudiation” (Wilkinson, 222). An act of repudiation means declining, refusing, rejecting or turning away by not accepting or considering one for the other. It takes time for sincere and full conversion to reach its totality. Some people end up dying in their old age without being hundred percent Catholics. They die with a divided heart, half traditional and half Catholic.

They experience some difficulties whenever the spirit of conversion hunts them. Within peoples’ religious way of life, “they know who they are, how to act in different situations, and how to solve their problems” (Mbiti, 15). Some of them courageously take a stand to never detach themselves from the religion of their ethnic group. For to detach themselves from their traditional religion “is to be cut from their roots, their foundation, their context of security, their kingships and the entire group of those who make them aware of their own existence. Therefore, to be without religion amounts to a self-excommunication from the entire life of society” (Mbiti, 2). Self-excommunication from the society’s religion is not something palatable not only for a traditionalist but also for Catholics with weak faith, those finding it difficult to sacrifice one religious practice for the other.

The convertor is to learn the language of that ethnic group, accept their thought patterns, fears, relationships, attitudes and dispositions. Since traditional religions “occupy the whole person and the whole of his life, conversion to new religions like Christianity must embrace his language, thought patterns, fears, social relationships, attitudes and philosophical disposition, if that conversion is to make a lasting impact upon the individual and his community (Mbiti, 3). This quote challenges the convertors that in the procession of conversion, the convertor has a big role to play. You cannot convert the people you do not show any sense of love. The first thing in conversion process is to forget about oneself and embrace most if not all of the other. It is like humbling oneself before the other, respecting them with all that is theirs, even before we can expose our identities. The “thought of a particular people cannot be understood without first appreciating and understanding their cultural background (Makumba, 8). Those working in new environments and are ready to help the natives with conversion should first of all make an effort to study the cultural values of the people they are working with.

Flannery reports that:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience, those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given to him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life (*Lumen Gentium*, 335).

The Roman Catholic Church in this statement put emphasis on the acts of people, whether converted or not converted, the good works they do earns them a lot in the life of faith. There are a lot of good elements in traditional religions. The good elements are to be traced and be used as a foundation of the natives’ journey from their traditional beliefs to Catholicism.

The claimed religious experiences are so many such that one wonders which ones are the genuine ones. There are “many types of claimed religious experience. Some are corporate, when a group is affected, and some are individual. But it is important to remember that even when an experience is corporate, each member of the group will directly know only her own experience, other people might be faking their emotions and actions to belong to the group” (Wilkinson, 312). There is no way that two people can have same experience of God at the same time because the fruit of experience is personal determined by



individual character and attitude. Religious experience is “a feeling of absolute dependence. It is a sense of appeal, dependence, and surrender” (Allport, 4). Every follower of religion surrenders himself to the Almighty in his own way, mainly determined by his most inner heart desires.

There are some challenges that people go through at the point of their conversion. It is true that “once converted, people grappled in various ways with the relationship between their new faith, their cultural inheritance, and the needs and obligations of their immediate environment” (Isichei, 159). This is partly due to the fact that “conversion involved not simply a replacement of the old by the new but, more accurately, a layering of new on top of old and gradual reconciliation of the two” (Volz, 124). The converted person has to start a new way of life full of adjustments just to match with the expectations of the new religion. For Whitehead, Religion is “the art and theory of the internal life of man, so far as it depends on the man himself and on what is permanent in the nature of things” (16). At last, due to freedom, man is the one to decide what he wants for his life.

### **Syncretism and Religious Beliefs**

Syncretism is all about mixing different religious beliefs. As long as people continue encountering various spiritualities, may it be traditional or Christianity in the midst of other religion, syncretism will continue having its own aspect. This is because it is hard if not impossible for some people to forego completely their original or past religious beliefs. Religious beliefs are the feelings of certainty people hold about various spiritual things as opposed to material or physical things. They are products of peoples’ spiritual experiences of the world around them. They act as compasses directing individuals towards a certain goal to be achieved. Bandawa defines belief as “any guiding principle, dictum, faith or passion that can provide meaning and direction in life” (64). Since people before becoming Christians have been guided by different beliefs in their daily living, it becomes rather critical for them to embrace the new guide or religion. The change that the new religion seeks in the life of the converted has to start with the change in one’s faith belief. This is because it is not the events of our lives that shape us, but our beliefs as to what those events mean.

Some Africans believe that human beings and spirits live and interact on a daily basis. However, some people are assigned to serve in that capacity to facilitate and make the daily interaction possible. One of the religious belief that contributes to syncretism, as sighted by Elizabeth Ngozi Okpalaenwe is that “Africans are known for their strong belief in one supreme God who created all things. They believe that it is not easy or wise to approach God directly without going through intermediaries created by God such as

ancestors” (5). This belief in the supreme God is learned and embraced from childhood. Some Africans are made to know that the creator of all things cannot just be approached unless with the help of the intermediaries that includes the ancestors. Most of these ancestors have vague knowledge of the Christianity as compared to their traditional religion. As a result, it becomes almost impossible for them to transmit well Christian beliefs as they do for traditional beliefs. This reality puts one into syncretic faith practice between what Christianity teaches and what the intermediaries have transmitted.

Africa being so complex, depending on the area in which you find yourself, you are likely to experience all sorts of religious beliefs that sustain their spiritual life. Most of these religious beliefs are similar in different African cultures while others may have contrasting explanations suiting the specific clan or tribe. However, the common religious beliefs in African Traditional Religion include, though not limited to “Belief in one supreme God; Belief that God works through intermediaries; Belief in continuity of life through the ancestors; Belief in the unity of life within the world, and Belief that the practice of ritual, magic and medicine can maintain or restore this unity” (Kearney, 7). It seems that all true African traditional religions are guided by those religious beliefs in their daily spiritual life. With them an African person finds himself at peace, his life assured and is able to experience belongingness.

Talking about religion, Tom Kearney, in the book *Psycho-Spiritual Practices in African communities* writes:

The religion is a practiced religion. It has no dogmas and little preaching or proclaiming, and does not have a recorded sacred literature. It is based on oral transmission within each particular clan/tribe or culture. It is not written on paper but in peoples’ hearts and minds. It is the oral history, the rituals, cause of the shrines and the religious functions. It covers all aspects of life from before birth until after death. It is integral and holistic in nature and character. For the African, religion is literally life and life is religion. Consequently, it is a lived experience rather than theoretical” (7).

The last part of the quotation is very interesting, that religion is life and life is religion. If truly religion is life and life is religion, then the probability of the new religion to erase all that has been infused in the traditional person will be rather challenging. The traditional religion interpretation of life is part and parcel of the traditional person. Any new religious element is simply an addition to what has made the person who he is already. The sacred oral traditions are handed down from generations through ritual, education and rites of passage. In some African cultures you cannot undo the rituals and rites of passage already performed as that can lead to life threatening incidences. This makes an African

person accept Christianity with all that he is or has, the values of the rituals and rites of passages goes with him in the new religion.

In accordance with Tom Kearney, “The African peoples live out their religion daily in their local area according to the way of life they have adopted. Hence, cultural complexity, local environment and geographical district, the lifestyles of the people and the resources available for the expression of religious needs all contribute to the diversity in the practices” (8). This diversity in religious practices by specific locations are made possible because “each has its own cosmology and cultic ritual practices expressed and lived through rituals, ceremonies, festivals, sacrifices in shrines, sacred places and religious objects set apart, art and symbols, myths and legends, customs” (Kearney, 8). Their unique way of religious performance makes one more comfortable to attend rituals or ceremonies in his area than in a foreign land. Sometimes a person from other places attends the religious practices but the impacts of the ritual performed are not as meaningful to a foreigner as it is to a native.

The religious beliefs mould the individual and communal spirituality. In agreement with Elizabeth Ngozi Okpalaenwe, “Spirituality is the tendency to orientate oneself toward a larger transcendent reality that binds all things into a unitive harmony. Spirituality is the way you can find meaning, hope, comfort and inner peace in your life. Spirituality is the ability to see the sacred in the ordinary” (13). In some ways, we can say that spirituality reflects the personal search for connection with a larger sacredness through the ordinary means. It is about who we truly are and who we want to become. It is about deeper desire for the encounter with the supreme God.

There is no religious belief in the vacuum. Every religious belief is made real in a specific place or area. And that area has its culture that influences the expression of religion. McCaskiel assert that, “All cultures possess an idea of god” (65). In other ways, “every culture has a religious tradition of some sort, and there are as varied as the cultures that gave them birth” (Stewart, 3). Culture is simply the shared values, traditions, norms, customs, arts, history, folklore, and institutions of a group of people. Laurenti Magesa believed that “all the elements that constitute a culture, its philosophy, social, political and economic organization as well as moral orientation, are embedded in, and in turn give rise to religious values” (41). It is the sum total of the learned behaviour of a group of people that are generally considered to be the tradition of that people and are transmitted from generation to generation. According to Okpalaenwe pronouncement, “In Nigeria, as in most traditional Africa, spirituality is very central to peoples’ lives and culture. It permeates all dimensions of their lives and infuses the economic, social and political aspects with meaning so pervading that it is often said that the cultural people live, breath

and eat religiously” (13). Here we see that culture and traditional religion are intimately related. This relationship seems to be very tight in such a manner that any foreign religion that intends to separate the two will find it difficult to achieve its goal. It is easier for some Africans to incorporate Christianity than to forgo their traditional religion because getting rid of their traditional religion is like getting rid of their culture. And remember, the African culture defines the African person. It is the culture that distinguishes the members of one group of people from another. The very reason why “within every culture there are individuals who are well grounded and versed in the basic fundamental principles that underlie that culture” (Odhiambo, 3). Their role is to explain the details of the specific cultural values.

The African people believe in the divinities of the ancestors who have proved to be more exemplary than others and have been elevated to the level of deity. It is good to note that, “all deities provide a theory of what life is about and resolution to the problems life raises” (Barnes, 23). These good examples ancestors, who by virtue of their lifestyles have become deities, are venerated in their specific communities. Ancestor veneration is “an extension of a belief in and respect for elders. Followers of traditional African spirituality believe that ancestors maintain a spiritual connection with their living relatives” (Okpalaenwe, 14). The spiritual connection between the ancestors and the living grants the ancestors the privileges to be guardians of family affairs, customs, traditions and ethical norms. The “ancestors are called upon because they are believed to be near to the people and at the same time close to God” (Sindazi, 48). People actually believe that “the ancestors and God work hand-in-hand” (Odiko, 65). The traditional man would not find it easy to leave the ancestors for Jesus Christ. He has personal experience of the ancestors, what they can do and cannot do depending on one’s disposition are well known.

Okpalaenwa reports that, “Most ancestral spirits are generally good and kind. The only negative actions taken by ancestral spirits is to cause minor illnesses to warn people that they have gotten into the wrong path. To please these unhappy ancestors, usually offerings of food and meat are made” (14). Otherwise the ancestors’ main roles are “to protect the living; give identity; bless people; moral guardians; intermediaries between God, people and other spiritual beings; owners of land, property, and vital resources; source of life; role models and custodians of culture” (Kirwen, 20). The ancestors and the living have their own way of communicating especially when something goes wrong. Even when an individual cannot understand his condition, there are some gifted elders in the community who are ready to interpret whatever goes on in one’s life. The elders are aware that “The ancestral spirits have the potential power to affect the living both for good, if they are respectful and properly venerated, and for evil, if their worship is

neglected” (Basil, 5). This is the reason why a well brought up traditional man will be very sensitive in the way he treats the elders of his land knowing the implications and repercussions that comes with his attitude towards them.

Traditional people are expected to comply with the strict provisions of cultural taboos and norms in order to ensure peace and harmony in their relationships with each other, with the ancestors and with the entire celestial realities. Apart from the cultural taboos and norms, and “in order to cater for the religious, psychological and political dimensions of peoples’ lives, there are communal shrines, initiation rites and ritual objects” (Okpalaenwe, 14). The cultural taboos and norms, the shrines and ritual objects, all provide values that reveal the totality of people’s opinion, their aspirations and decisions as to what should be judged as good or bad, right or wrong. Perhaps a concerted and unified effort of the community people could “identify these essential elements of traditional African religion that are sacred and bring them to life with African Christian communities” (Simon, 78). African Christian communities wishes to be connected with their traditions but this can only be possible once the essential elements of African religion are identified and honoured.

### **Solutions to Syncretic Practices**

Catholicism was successfully planted in Tafa LGA among the Gbagyis in the year 1976. With the advent of Catholicism, some Gbagyi traditionalists had a rival attitude towards the Catholics despite the fact that actually it was their brother who first expressed interest in Catholicism. Some Gbagyis feared that if they become Catholics, their gods would bring disaster to them. Others refused to embrace Catholicism because they thought that the converted and the missionaries wanted to destroy their culture. Despite these reasons and threats, Catholicism began to win converts in Gbagyi land of Tafa LGA.

The Catholic Church established schools and employed the villagers whose job was not limited only to academic excellence but became very active in molding the attitudes of the converts. Churches were built and remained open to everyone in the area. Making the Catholic missionaries properties the places of education and religious instructions. This made the conversion of the people into Christianity easier, especially for the Gbagyis who were not yet properly rooted in their ancestral ideas and practices.

Conflict is a universal phenomenon that is inevitable in human interaction. Hence, it cannot be avoided in the interaction between Catholicism and Gbagyi traditional religion. Since Catholicism came into contact with the Gbagyi religion, there have been lighter conflicts, not as sharp as it is in some other traditional set ups, between the traditionalists and Catholics. The lightness in their friction could be due to the fact that their family set

ups usually accommodate both Catholics and Traditionalists. Since they live in the same houses or compounds, their misunderstandings are not as obvious as other cultural areas where specific families belong only to one religion. Conflicts between the two faith beliefs have been a normal one. The nature, pattern, rationale of their conflicts do not lead to destruction of lives, property or demolition of the peoples' homes. Some of the misunderstandings between the Gbagyi traditionalists and Catholics include doctrines, selfishness, lack of respect, uniqueness in life approach, worship, sacrifice, ancestors, and polygamy.

Gbagyi traditional religion is a heritage given to them by *Shekwoyi*, the Supreme Being. God is known by the Gbagyi people before the introduction of other religions. The introduction of Catholicism brought many challenges to the growth and expansion of Gbagyi traditional religion. In fact as at now, only few elderly people are considered to be purely traditionalists, the rest either practice two religions or only Catholicism. What is clear is that Gbagyi traditional religion will continue to co-exist with Catholicism. The Gbagyi Catholics say that the two faiths are partners in progress and are given to mankind by *Shekwoyi*. They find no reason why one religion should be favoured more than the other.

Cardinal Lavigerie, the founder of the Society of the Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers), instructed his missionaries as they were about to set out for Central Africa that,

Do not Europeanize the people. Rather, make yourselves what they are, as far as your priesthood permits. Speak their language; adopt their customs, live among them as brothers. Even should they become Christians, encourage them to retain all of their culture which does not conflict with their new faith. If you can give a Christian interpretation to their customs, their songs, their dances, do so, but change nothing which you cannot replace with something of value (Tryers, 7).

This is high standard of tolerance that can lead to appreciations of the differences that exists in different faith systems. When a traditionalist feels appreciated and acknowledged for what he is, the values found in his culture and proper interpretation is made against confusing elements of his faith, he may end up accepting Christianity and forget about the non-essentials of his belief. The approach to one another's religion matters a lot in the life of faith.

The Gbagyis have taken different religious affiliations as part of their family life. They cannot be separated as a family just because of the different ways of worshipping the same Supreme Being. The Gbagyi can correctly fit into Ali Mazrui's observation of religious scenario of typical African milieu thus: "Many African families are multi-religious in composition without strain. One brother could be Muslim, another Roman

Catholic, a sister protestant and the father a practicing member of a traditional African religion” (94). This is typical of the Gbagyi families, the reason why there are fewer problems as far as religious issues are concerned among the Gbagyis. Another uniqueness of the Gbagyi people is that those families that are hundred percent Christians do have their settlements alone, and the families with two or more religions settle in separate areas. What demarcates the settlements sometimes is just about the distance of a kilometer.

In the area of faith adherence, there should be tolerance between the Catholics and those living two religions. Tolerance of each other will improve peoples’ understanding of their different faith values. The syncretic people should be given the necessary encouragement they need in improving the quality of their faithfulness to the truth. The belief of committed Gbagyi Catholic converts should not promote opposition that lead to disintegration and lack of unity within the body of Christ. The Catholics should rather brace themselves for inculcating the revelation contents of Catholicism, namely, the existence of one God, who is to be worshipped wholeheartedly and with undivided heart. They should take it as their duty to teach and explain to the struggling Catholics the objective definition of Catholicism. They should try to modify the method of prayer, to make it more Catholic especially during family meetings.

The Gbagyi land is still a mission territory. The Gbagyi Catholics find their native music irresistible. Any special program going on in the Church is taken as an opportunity to portray their traditional values like dancing culturally, and dressing traditionally without covering their bodies apart from the private parts. This is somehow scandalizing for some people to see an old woman or man almost naked, just covering the private part in the house of God in the name of the culture. And yet, this is what the Catholic Church mean when it stated that,

In some parts of the world, especially mission lands, there are people who have their own music traditions and these plays a great part in their religious and social life. Due importance is to be attached to their music and a suitable place given to it, not only in forming their attitude towards religion, but also in adapting worship to their native genius (*Sacrosantum Concilium*, 119).

This is what makes a true Gbagyi Catholic fully Gbagyi and fully Catholic. Their traditional values are to be felt even in the house of worship. They feel accepted and so they accept some Church teachings which are new to them.

The Catholic Church believes that there are spiritual and moral truths found in other religions. Because of this fact,

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines, which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture (*Nostra Aetate*, 2).

This is the official teaching of the Catholic Church; the Catholic teaching appreciates the spiritual and moral truths found among the Gbagyi. This is what philosophy of religion is all about too, studying the beliefs of a certain religion without being too judgemental but considerate knowing well that in that specific belief of the traditional man, if only I can take time to study and observe critically, I can find spiritual elements of great value.

According to Nnaji, “Religion in a secular sense currently has employed thousands of people in Nigeria into its organizations and institutions, which include schools, hospitals, rehabs, banks, transport companies, radio, and television stations, printing and publication houses” (81). These environments are not strictly meant only for the followers of the specific religion but the doors are left open to every person who needs the service or to serve. Different people coming from different religions meeting in the same school or hospital expresses that religious tolerance and focus on only what matters most, which is love for one another. Nnaji went further that “Religious bodies also play massive roles in controlling and keeping together marriage bonds and families, including controlling juvenile excesses, and managing the dead and dying, often called hospices” (82). It is a desire for every true religion to promote the common good and development of not only the individual person but also the society at large.

At a time when we can be tempted to undervalue or neglect interreligious dialogue, the experience going on in Nigeria reminds us that it is still vital. When we look around, listen to radios or watch televisions, what appears mostly is bad news provoked by religious indifferences or lack of proper understandings of what religion is all about. The researcher believes that through interreligious dialogue, and the challenges that come with it, people may discover that, in fact, even what they thought they knew was not true knowledge of the reality. There is an urgent appeal to persevere in dialogue between the Catholics and Gbagyi traditionalists. Whatever they do, let them acknowledge the importance of interreligious dialogue if they truly take part in the actual mission of God whom both religions preach.

The Catholic Church respects the religions and the cultures of peoples, and wishes in her contact with them, to preserve all that is noble, true and good in their religion and their



cultures. This study envisages a fruitful dialogical encounter between Catholicism and Gbagyi Traditional Religion, with promises of a mutual enrichment for both and genuine coexistence. This will be possible once the traditional religion is better understood by the messengers of the Gospel, and Catholicism is presented to the Gbagyis in a more appropriate fashion. A study of traditional religion will identify the underlying felt needs of the Gbagyis, and clarify the manner in which Catholicism can respond to them. This way, the Church will be at home in the Gbagyi land, and the Gbagyis will feel more and more at home in the Catholic Church.

This dialogue with the Gbagyi traditional religion can take place at two levels, first, with the people who adhere to traditional religion and who do not yet desire to become Catholics. With such persons, dialogue has to be understood in the ordinary sense of encounter, of mutual understanding, of respect and a mutual search of the will of God. Second, with those who desire to become Catholics, and with Catholics converted from Gbagyi traditional religion, the dialogue has to be understood in a wider sense of a pastoral approach to traditional religion, in view of presenting the Gospel of our Saviour Jesus Christ in an appropriate manner, so that the Church takes deeper roots on Gbagyi soil.

As part of the pastoral attention to Gbagyi traditional religion, an appropriate research is to be established for research purposes into Gbagyi traditional religion, to discern the principal tenets of its beliefs: particularly God the Creator, the place of the spirits of the ancestors, the fundamental rites in this religion, sacrifice, priesthood, prayer, marriage, the human soul, life after death, religion and the moral life. There is a need for the Catholic Church to take Gbagyi traditional religion seriously, to give it urgent pastoral attention, to study it, and to enter into dialogue with it. The idea of holiness in Gbagyi Traditional religion is to be examined, as well as the motivations for dialogue with Catholicism. We are to intensify the dialogue with traditional religion for our common good.

## **Conclusion**

This article found out that the traditional religion beliefs and practices are still the most important part of the life of some people. In almost every human community people have prayed and worshipped. Traditional religion has continued to grow and develop in its own way. The ways in which people live have been changing and developing, thus affecting their faith expressions. The traditional religion has changed as the lives of her followers have changed. This has happened partly because people are traveling to different places where they acquire more experiences and knowledge, where they practice their traditional

religion faith openly or secretly depending on the environment and life circumstances surrounding them.

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