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# Religious Syncretism in Port Harcourt: A Development or Denigration

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**Abstract:** *Every religion has an element of syncretism. Although critics believe it is denigration to the pure truth of the original practice thus view it as a distortion to the original believes. But proponents see it as a concept that can be applied to enhance the comprehension and appreciation of a particular religion in a new environment thereby leading to the development of such religion. It is therefore imperative to view these two concepts amongst the inhabitant of Port Harcourt City to ascertain its impact in the religious setting. In analyzing this research, the simple random sampling technique was adopted in different locations within the city. A sample size of two hundred responded represented the population of this study; the simple percentage method was used for obtaining information while a graphical tabulation was used in interpreting the information. The study proved that owing to the increasing influx of people into Port Harcourt in search of daily bread, syncretism is seen due to inter-religious and inter-cultural interactions. Thus syncretism should be seen as part of a religious development and growth and not denigration*

**Keywords:** *Denigration, religious syncretism.*

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## Preamble

Over the years, the city of Port Harcourt has grown in lips and bounds. In the face of industrialization, commercialization and urbanization, people from different religious and cultural backgrounds have been attracted to the city. The city that was once dominated by indigenes of one religious persuasion now experience adherence of divers' religions.

The different religious organization which accompany the growth of Port Harcourt, conversed for membership from the same population of Port Harcourt residence. In the course of time, adherence of the various religions moved from one religion to the other and some, back to their former. Others carry with them the believes and practices of their former religion to their newly found organization. Idowu (1965), in his book "Towards an indigenous Church" argues that "why Africans will be singing in the church, other gods I know not" under their armpits they have charms tied to their persons and as soon as church closes, they head straight to the home of a diviner". This is not peculiar to Africans who embraced Christianity. It is observed among adherence of other religion.

Before long issues of religious dialogue, co-operation and harmony became a major challenge. This paper examines religious syncretism in Port Harcourt as a developmental or denigrating factor in the socio-religious life of the people. The study adopts the multi-dimensional approaches in the discussion. It analysis development as a process which seeks to improve the lives of the people over time; It considers the ripple effects of religious integration

especially when a new religious belief is introduced in a new environment. The paper concludes that religious syncretism plays out in virtually all religions in varying degrees.

### **Religion and Syncretism**

Every religion irrespective of how indigenous it is to a people spreads in one form or the other; especially if their adherent travels outside their domain, this is because man is a homo-religious being. Thus, his religious inclination is expressed consciously or unconsciously anywhere he finds himself. Consequently, if a particular religious believe is to be appreciated by its host; there must be some level of syncretism but care must be taken in order not to alter the core believes of such religious system, using the birth of Christianity in Africa as a case study, Eliot (1968) in Lawrence-Hart (2015). It was discovered that certain syncretic concept were actually allowed to make plain the tenets of the religion to Africans. This paper therefore, recommends that syncretism cannot be completely said to be denigration of any religion but a concept that brings about development nevertheless caution must be applied in order not to drift from the intrinsic value of the religion.

Every religion has an element of syncretism, this is because of the multi-cultural nature of our society, modernity and advancement in technology has made it so easy for people to travel far and wide. However, some religions dislike this aspect calling it a drift from the original, where as those who practice it do it for the purpose of spreading their religious belief system to the admiration or acceptance of non-adherents.

This divergent view has led to polarization in various religious setting which has resulted to fanaticism, schism in religious group and formation of new religious movement etc. this has also adversely affected the society.

However, those outside the field of religion believe that religion is only a ritualized system of beliefs and practices which should not be included in the affairs of a society. Most of these people think religion and society are both completely different entities. Nevertheless, with the advancement of technology and science, many societies have abandoned or separated their religion from the society. People with this kind of thought about society feel that religion should be practiced in the spiritual places only. But if we think deeply we would find that religion and society are not separate entities at all. Religion and society both are interconnected and dependent to each other. Religion is not only ritual system but also a proper way of life. Religion is very important for a society to find peace and prosperity at the same time. With the advancement of technology and science in the society different religious believes are discovered every day due to the ease in interaction (Ndu, 2016 ). Therefore, if a person must fit into a new society certain adjustment and accommodation must be made even in the religious sphere to enable the person to cope in the new environment; this is where syncretism sets in.

### **Port Harcourt**

Port Harcourt is the largest city and the capital of River State in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. It is the commercial hub of the state due to the dominance of oil companies and multinationals in the state as well as institution of higher learning which include the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt Polytechnic, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education and Rivers State College of Health Science and Technology. There is also a good road net work and an International Airport which gives people the leverage to travel in and out of the city easily.

As the “Treasure Base of the Nation” (i.e. Nigeria), it host numerous multinational companies, corporation and businesses that engaged in the different facet of Oil and Gas sector (Rivers State 2012, Diary). This has attracted a lot of foreign nationals spanning from Europe, America, Asia, other African countries etc. coming into the state (transnationalism). These companies in doing their business has employed so many indigenes of Rivers State thereby providing a platform of not only technological interaction but also intercultural communication through interactions, association, religion etc.

Port Harcourt City lies along the Bonny River with a population of 1,865 as at 2016 (Onwuka, 2008). Historically Port Harcourt was founded in 1912 by Fredrick Lugard (Okafor, 1973).

### **Syncretism**

It is important to note what scholars have said about syncretism in order to have a better understanding of the concept in question. For Mullin (2001), syncretism is seen as a combination of elements from two or more religious tradition, ideology or value systems as a result of culture contact. He viewed it mainly from the social science perspective which makes it more objective and natural as against mixing of religion. R. Imbach {1984} maintains that syncretism is the process by which elements of one religion are assimilated into another religion resulting in a change in the fundamental tenets or nature of those religions. Syncretism, as defined by the American Heritage Dictionary, is “the reconciliation or fusion of differing systems of belief.” This is most evident in the areas of philosophy and religion, and usually results in a new teaching or belief system.

"Syncretism is often used to describe the product of the large-scale imposition of one alien culture, religion, or body of practices over another that is already present." Others such as Bentley, (1995), however, have argued that syncretism has also helped to create cultural compromise. It provides an opportunity to bring beliefs, values, and customs from one cultural tradition into contact with, and to engage different cultural traditions. Such a migration of ideas is generally successful only when there is a resonance between both traditions. While, as Bentley has argued, there are numerous cases where expansive traditions have won popular support in foreign lands, this is not always so.

Religious syncretism exhibits blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions. This can occur for many reasons, and the latter scenario happens quite commonly in areas where multiple religious traditions exist in proximity and function actively in the culture, or when a culture is conquered, and the conquerors bring their religious beliefs with them, but do not succeed in entirely eradicating the old beliefs or, especially, practices.

### **Syncretism and Contextualization**

Syncretism and contextualization are two inseparable concept that are like Siemens twins if a new religious idea must be understood and appreciated in a new environment. This is in line with Scott Moreau’s definition of Syncretism blending of one idea, practice, or attitude with another (1984). Traditionally among Christians it has been used in the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements. Syncretism of some form has been seen everywhere the church has existed.

The word ‘contextualization’ is gotten from the word ‘context’. The Webster’s New

Collegiate Dictionary defines it as part of discourse that surrounds a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning or the inter-related conditions in which something exists or occurs. Literally, Kato (1976) contextualization means making concepts and ideas relevant to a given situation. From the religious flank, Nicholls (1975) sees it as having to do merely with cross-cultural communication of the gospel while Bradshaw and Savage (1975) views it as development of theology done locally.

Going by these definitions the development of a new religious ideology cannot be achieved without a level of contextualization. Thus, Zehner (2005) argues that contextualization has a degree of syncretism which must be tolerated because it makes conversion become local and meaningful to new entrants/adherents. He further stated that syncretism and contextualization overlap thereby resulting to acculturation. Thus the conventional idea of syncretism and contextualization is a subtype of acculturation.

These two concepts cannot be downplayed in the development of any religion as it gives room for adaptation for the locals. Hence sometimes it is allowed to make it look less foreign.

### Methodology

Through simple random sample, 200 persons from different parts of Port Harcourt ranging from religious scholars, religious priest, sociologist and adherents of different belief system were selected to constitute the sample for this study. A graphical presentation of figures was used in analyzing the data. The researcher designed and administered a questionnaire with 20 items based on four Likert scales to address the issue of syncretism in the spread of a religious movement. The study investigated these variables with four research questions which are

1. Is Syncretism a bane or boom to religion?
2. Are there Religious beliefs without Syncretistic element?
3. What constitutes religious denigration?
4. Is Contextualization the basis of Syncretism?

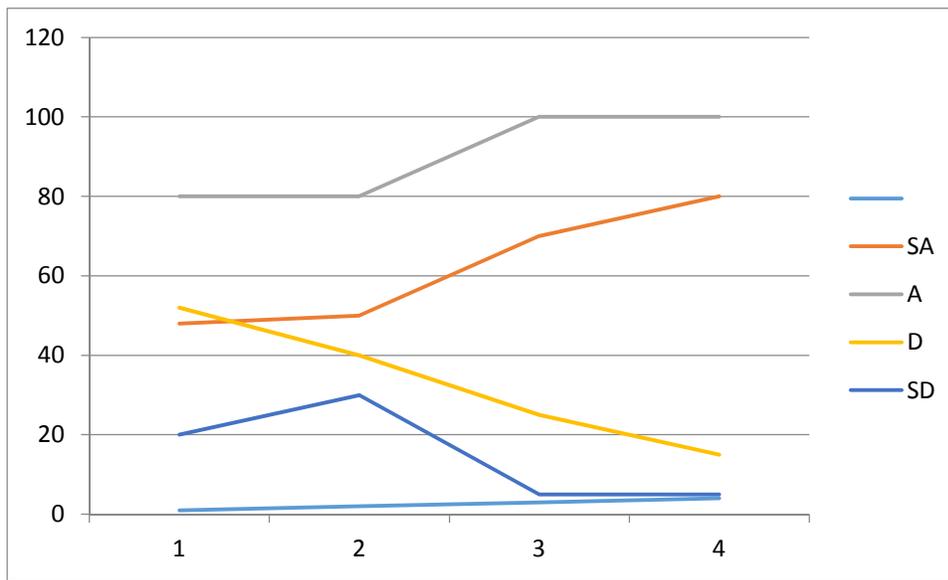
### Analysis of the Data

The analysis of the data was viewed from the degree of agreement and disagreement to the research questions viz (SA) Strongly Agree; (A) Agree; (D) Disagree and (SD) Strongly Disagree.

### Respondents view on research question one

Is Syncretism a bane or boom to religion?

s/n	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	Syncretism is a complete distortion to a religious belief	48	80	52	20
2	Syncretism creates a platform for people to appreciate religious concept	50	80	40	30
3	Syncretism gives room for contextualization	70	100	25	5
4	Syncretism causes division amongst religious organizations	80	100	15	5
5	Syncretism causes opportunities for growth and spread of religious beliefs	100	80	10	10



The graphical presentation shows that the graph is skewed in favor of syncretism being a platform for people to appreciate new religious concepts. Hence, it is a boom to religion as it gives leverages for innovations in respect to the dispensation and environment. This is in tandem with Owete {2012}. and Olusakin (2013) as they posit that the advancement of information and communication technology has made it possible for people to use their ingenuity to practice their religion in such a way that it will address contemporary needs. This practice according to Frisk (2012) is called “eclectism and syncretism”. This views buttress the fact that syncretism is at play in virtually all religion in varying degrees.

**Respondents view on research question two**

Are there Religious beliefs without Syncretistic element?

s/n	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	Every religious belief has a syncretistic element	120	75	04	01
2	Every religion is born into a culture	150	50	0	0
3	If a religion must thrive it must adopt and accommodate the culture of its host	80	100	16	04
4	Contextualization is part of syncretism	50	95	35	20
5	Adaptation to social influence is part of syncretism	70	105	25	10

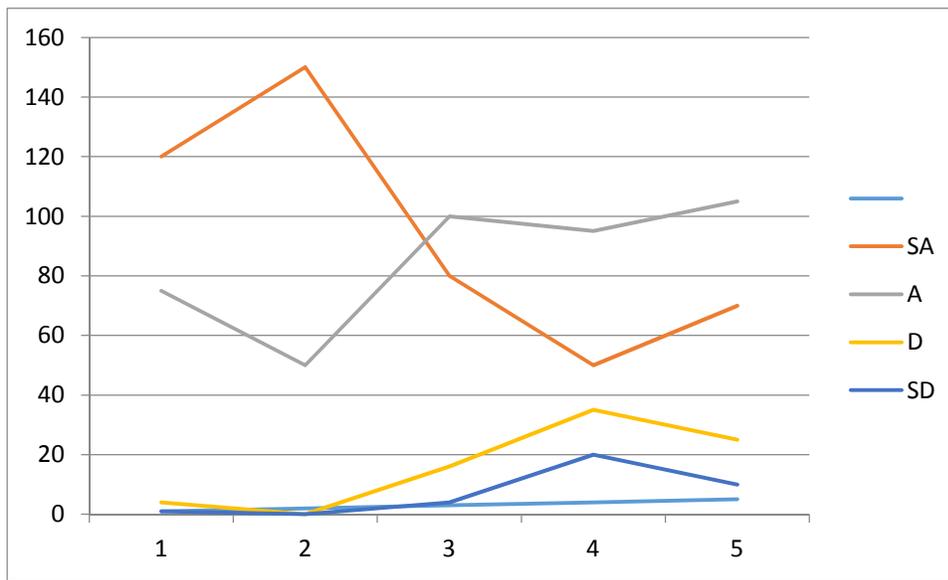


Table 2 indicate that the graph skewed in favor of syncretism being in virtually all religion due to the fact that every religion is born into a culture. More so, if any religion must thrive it must accommodate and adapt the culture of the host thus, syncretic element manifest in religion in different degrees. This however, negates the views of some adherents of religion who believe that syncretism is the corruption of the original religion hence they frown at it. Worthy of note is the fact that contextualization is also part of syncretism (Owete 2012) therefore, it can be said that every religious belief has one syncretistic element or the other.

### Respondents view on research question three

What constitutes religious denigration?

s/n	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	Any adjustment in the religious practice	20	27	100	33
2	The infiltration of other religion’s beliefs	80	100	15	05
3	A slight to a belief system	120	90	08	02
4	Wrong interpretation of a religious concept	70	95	30	25
5	Misapplication of a religious order	90	100	10	0

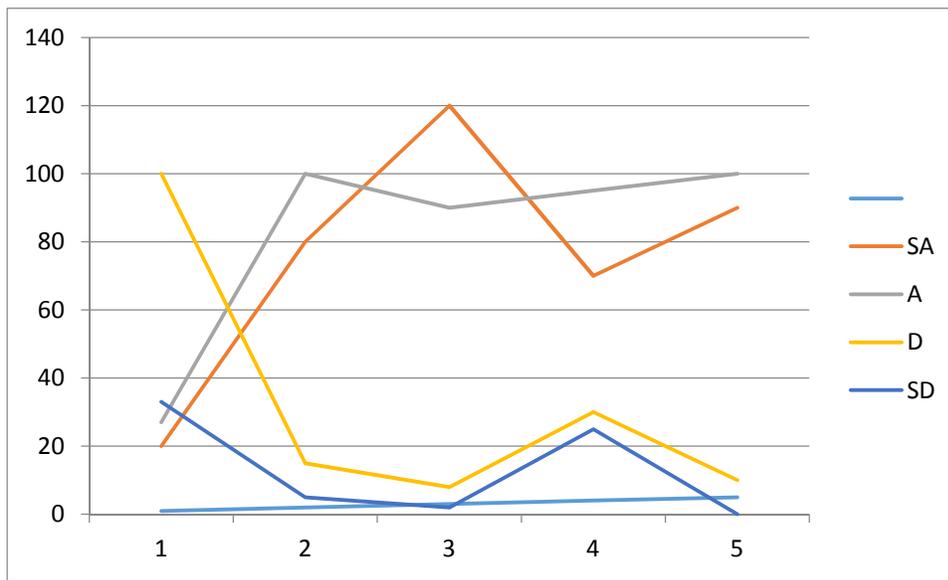
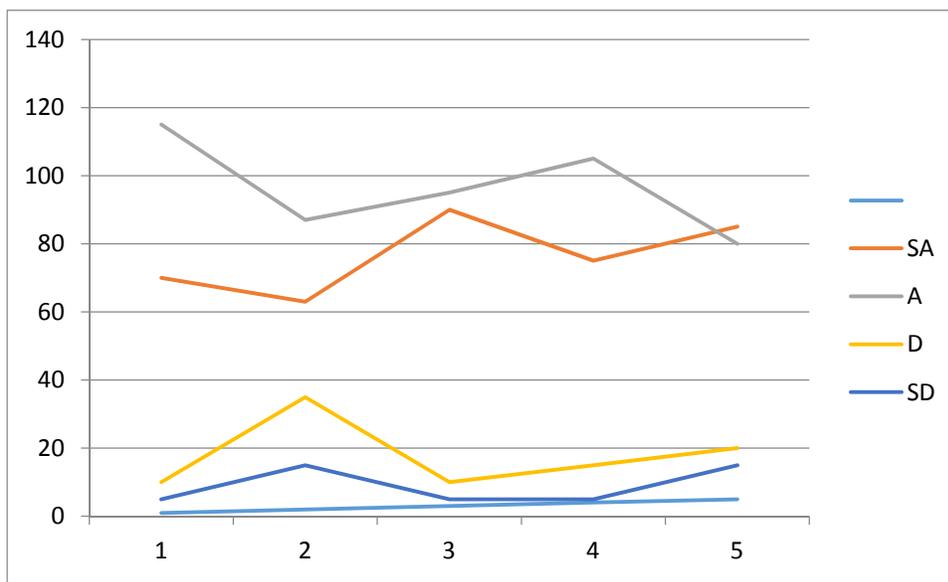


Table 3 reveals that what constitute religious denigration is slighting religious belief system, wrong interpretation of religious concepts and misapplication of religious order. This is clearly shown in the graph as presented. This also bring to the fore the fact that proper comprehension of syncretism at its various degrees will ease the tension that leads to the divisions, schism, and acrimony that arise as a result of syncretism. Instead what should be of interest is the caution that should be applied in order not to deviate from the original doctrine.

**Respondents view on research question four**

Is Contextualization the basis of Syncretism?

s/n	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	Contextualization breeds Syncretism	70	115	10	05
2	Contextualization go hand in glove with syncretism	63	87	35	15
3	Without contextualization a new religious idea would not be appreciated.	90	95	10	05
4	Contextualization derobes a foreign religion of its foreign attire	75	105	15	05
5	Syncretism takes place through contextualization	85	80	20	15



In table four, the graphical presentation show-case that believe in contextualization actually breads syncretism as it gives room for a blend of the culture of the environment in order to drive home its message, by so doing a new religious idea is impressed on the minds of new believers (Owete 2012)

### Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Our findings in research question one shows that syncretism gives room for development of religious faith as it creates a platform for people to appreciate religious concept through contextualization as against the belief that syncretism is a complete distortion of a religious belief with divisive tendencies. This implies that syncretism gives room for lofty ideas that will bring about the growth of a religious tradition. This is in tandem with Hughes (1998) position as he opines that syncretism is the process of borrowing religious element from other religion in such a way that the basic characteristics of the receiving religion is not changed. Hughes concludes by saying that every religion is syncretistic to some extent (1998). This is where caution is very important in order not to deviate from the core value of a religion because in the spread of a religious belief ideas and ingenuity must be employed to enable the receivers appreciate and comprehend a religious belief. Thus, S.Moreau (2007) sees syncretism as the blending of one idea, practice or attitude with another.

In looking at religion and syncretism, our findings reveals that religion and syncretism is embedded in every religion; because all religions has a syncretic element in varying degree since every religion is born into a culture which in turn influences such religion (Ejizu 2007). More so, contextualization is part of syncretism as the growth and development of a religion depends on the level of accommodation and adaptation of its host. Relating to Christianity (Mullin 2001) maintains that “the legitimate cultural reshaping of Christianity is referred to as inculturation or contextualization which in social science is called syncretism due to it cultural adaptation. This negates R,Mach’s (1984) view that syncretism result to a complete change in the fundamental tenets or nature of a religion because if religion must be appreciated it must be brought to the understanding of the people through the culture of the people.

Furthermore, it was discovered what actually constitute religious denigration is not the adjustment in religious practices but a slight to a religious belief system, wrong interpretation of religious concepts and misapplication of religious order. Going by these discoveries it can be said syncretism is not denigration to any religion but a development strategy. According E.Zehner (2005) it makes conversion into a new religion local to the people. It corroborates Bradshaw and Savage (1975) view of syncretism as a local way of developing theology.

Looking at contextualization as an aspect of syncretism, our findings shows that contextualization breeds syncretism since contextualization breeds syncretism, it births the quick appreciation of a new religious idea. This is in consonance with Nicholas (1975) stance as he views contextualization as a cross cultural communication of a religious belief while Kato (1976) see it as making concepts and ideas relevant to a given situation. This brings to bear that there cannot be development of any new religious ideology with some level of contextualization, thus, E.Zhener (2005) argues that contextualization has a degree of syncretism which must be tolerated as it makes conversion meaningful to new entrants.

### **Summary**

Syncretism is not as bad as critiques view it because of the vital role it plays in the growth and development of new religious idea. More so, the fact that every religion is born into a culture makes it very appropriate to contextualize in order to drive home the message of the religious tenets. For this, Bentley J. (1995) argues that “syncretism has helped to create cultural compromise as it provided an opportunity to bring beliefs values and custom from one cultural tradition into contact”.

### **Conclusion**

New ideas cannot be easily digested if relevant examples and illustrations that makes meaning to the intended audience is not taking into consideration. This also applies to religion. New religious ideas cannot be easily understood and appreciated if it not juxtaposed with the familiar elements, circumstance and conditions that are familiar to the audience. Port Harcourt as a metropolitan city has witnessed and still witnessing high level of influx of people from different religious background due to its industrial nature; the result of the influx of people among many other reasons is the birth of various new religious affiliation. These religions are not free of syncretism in one form or the other due to inter-religious and inter-cultural communication and the need to make a religious idea appreciated. Thus, syncretism most often is not intended to change a particular believe system or to denigrate it but to develop and grow the religion in a new environment. Hence, it is imperative for critiques who sometimes manifest as fanatics, fundamentalist and separatist to see it as growth strategy and work to see how caution can be applied in order not to deviate from the core value of their religion.

This is because misunderstanding of the concept of syncretism as an inevitable tool in religious growth and development has resulted to varying degrees of problems which would have been averted if there was proper understanding. This paper after considering other variables concludes by saying that syncretism is instrumental to religious development and growth. However, caution must be applied to avoid unwanted deviation which might degenerate to error in a particular religion.

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