



Weeding Syncretism from Pentecostal Wheat in Zimbabwe


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Abstract

The swift spread, establishment, and dynamism of Pentecostalism has in its diverse manifestations stirred a multitude of complex questions and dilemmas. While its contextualization is intertwined with syncretism, by which is meant the incorporation or attempted amalgamation of different religions with diverse schools of thought, the exceptional growth of Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe far surpasses its connection with syncretic elements. This study reveals that most Pentecostals are diligent and aggressive in praying, planting churches, and living out their faith. Their commitment extends beyond mere words to contextually needful exploits, such as prophecy, healing, deliverance, and economic prosperity. However, their inclusive contextualization has at times ensnared them in potentially detrimental syncretic practices. Problematically, the evaluation of their syncretic practices is complicated by the delicate distinction between contextualization and syncretism. It is akin to the challenging task of removing weeds from a field of wheat, where there is a risk of uprooting the wheat prematurely. Engaging with existing literature, employing interpretive phenomenology and participative observations, this article explores how we should respond to Pentecostal syncretism. Refactoring the development of Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe through a number of factors such as its missionized apostolic governance, diversified economics, transformational *leitourgia*, aggressive *kerygma*, and contextualization, it draws lessons from the parable of the wheat and weeds (Matthew 13:24 to 30, and verses 36 to 43) to propose sustainable strategies that can be used to manage syncretism without ravaging the integral Pentecostal missionary being.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, African spiritualities, contextualization, syncretism, weeds.

Introduction

Current scholarship concurs that Pentecostalism is experiencing massive growth in and beyond Africa. For example, in exploring Neo-Pentecostal pilgrimage in Africa, Pasura (2023) uncovers that Pentecostalism has grown tremendously across and beyond the Global South. This observation is echoed by Theleni (2017: n.p.), who asserts that "...the startling growth of Pentecostalism in non-Western contexts is amazing and/or frightening the rest of the Christian world...". In agreement, Vijgen and van der Haak (2015) further emphasize the remarkable global expansion of Pentecostalism, noting that "one quarter of the two billion Christians in the world are Pentecostal or Charismatic; making Pentecostalism one of the fastest growing religions in the world" (Vijgen & van der Haak, 2015: 1). Locally, within Zimbabwe, the focal point of this study, Chitando and Biri (2016: 74) observe that "...the period since 2009 has witnessed a dramatic expansion and intensification of the Pentecostal movement in the country". This sentiment finds



agreement in Togarasei's (2016: 1) assessment where the movement is characterized as an "explosion of Pentecostal Christianity on the Zimbabwean Christian landscape". This viewpoint is shared by many other scholars, including Mwenje (2016a: 1), who affirm that Pentecostalism has been growing at a fast rate in and beyond Zimbabwe and Africa. In his overview of African Pentecostalism, Forster (2021: n.p.) states:

Over the past 50 years, the number of Christians in Africa has grown five-fold, from just above 100 million in 1970 to almost 700 million in 2020. All major Western denominations have members in Africa, and to be relevant in African cultural sensibilities, they have all, to varying degrees, faced the need to 'pentecostalise'. As such, African evangelicalism comes with Pentecostal and Charismatic flavours. Countless mainline churches have taken on Pentecostal tendencies (if only to stop the exodus of their members to Pentecostal churches). African Pentecostalism has grown large enough to begin to influence world Christianity—African Pentecostals are key players on the European Christian scene...

Presenting itself in a wide array of forms, ranging from the conventional classical to neo-Pentecostal mega-churches, Pentecostalism has embraced contextually expressive and demonstrative methodologies. These include televangelism, print and electronic advertising, and banner posters. This multifaceted nature of Pentecostalism is the reason scholars, such as Mayrargue (2008: 2–5), Lindhardt (2018), and Machingura, Togarasei, and Chitando (2018: 7–9) concur that Pentecostalism has exhibited impressive growth and adaptability, both within Africa and beyond her borders. This is evidenced by the emergence of more dynamic, self-governing prophetic and charismatic churches (Gunda and Machingura 2013).

In analysing the developments of African Pentecostalism, Princewill (2017: n.p.) views Africa as a 'dark continent' because Africans tend to over-spiritualize extreme opposites, such as interpreting extreme wealth or extreme poverty and exceptional largeness or smallness as superstitious. Such thinking is imbalanced and problematic because superstitions cannot darken a whole continent which is rich with natural, material and human capital like Africa! However, over-spiritualization of extreme opposites is agreeable in this context as the exploitative developments of Pentecostalism have correspondingly triggered multiple questions, especially after followers and scholars noticed some syncretic beliefs and practices such as divination, sacrifices, rituals; using magic, traditional artefacts, symbols, and idolizing leaders.

Nevertheless, the rise of syncretism in Pentecostal spiritualities is indisputable. Scholars such as Ike (2022), Orogun (2023), Kgatle and Thinane (2023), and Sande (2017) extensively investigated Pentecostal syncretism and put forth various propositions from their diverse contexts. These proposals encompass redefining identities and revising hermeneutics. Challengingly, no research has extensively provided universally perfect solutions to the problem of syncretism. Discerning the complexity of syncretism in light of Matthew 13:24-30, and verses 36-43, this contribution explores an inclusive and courteous way forward without disturbing the crucial proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. Beginning by defining key terminologies that form the bedrock of this discourse, the following sections provide phenomenologically interpreted factors behind the growth of neo-Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe and offer considerable recommendations and conclusions.

Understanding Integral Concepts

Pentecostalism

'Pentecostalism' is a multifaceted phenomenon, as articulated by Nel (2015: 2), who explains that:



...it exists both in continuity and differentiating discontinuity with other Christian spiritualities represented by, for instance the Roman Catholic, Reformed, or Orthodox traditions... It is more Catholic than Protestant in emphasizing sanctification-transformation more than forensic justification; it is more Protestant than Catholic in the conviction that the Word is the authority over the church and tradition, for matters pertaining to faith, practice, church government, and discipline.

Due to its complex nature, defining Pentecostalism is challenging. Nonetheless, for the scope of this study, it is referred to as a pneumatic, energetic, and contextualized movement through which adherents focus on believing and living out the Trinitarian power of God. This is achieved through various practices such as long, loud prayers, glossolalia, casting out demons, healing the sick, working miracles, and declaring messages of widespread prosperity. As expressed by Wariboko (2017: n.p.):

Principally, three types of movements or churches that fall under the rubric of Pentecostalism in Africa are first, spirit-empowered movements, which arose either independently or out of Western mission churches. These are generally known as African-initiated/independent churches (AIC). The second set comprises churches that were established on the continent by Western Pentecostal denominations (such as the Assemblies of God, Four Square Gospel Church, and the Apostolic Church), known as classical Pentecostal churches. Finally, there are neo-Pentecostal or charismatic churches... neo-Pentecostals, has three main groups in it: the new urban-centered Charismatic prosperity-oriented churches; trans-denominational fellowships, like the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International; and renewal movements within historic mission denominations.

Given the specific focus of this article on neo-Pentecostalism, it is essential to provide clarification that neo-Pentecostals stem from classical Pentecostalism. Both branches emerged as outcomes of the American revivals that transpired at Charles Parham's Bible school in Topeka, Kansas, and at Azusa Street in Los Angeles between 1901 and 1904. Subsequently, adherents of these revivals spread across the globe, engaging in evangelism and establishing Pentecostalism in various regions. Articulated succinctly by Tagwirei (2022a: 4), classical Pentecostalism is the mother of Pentecostalism. It wholeheartedly adopts baptism, faith, leading, living, and manifestations of the Holy Spirit in all areas of life. This is exemplified through practices such as glossolalia, miraculous encounters, healing, and all forms of deliverance.

On the other hand, neo-Pentecostalism arose during the 1950s and 1960s with the aim of seeking more profound and miraculous experiences (Orogun & Pillay, 2021: 2). Taking into account the cyclical nature of neo-Pentecostalism's occurrence, this analysis specifically addresses the recent wave that impacted Zimbabwe from 2008 up to the present day. Togarasei (2016: 9–11) has historically characterized this phase as the new, contemporary, and exceptionally dynamic manifestation of independent and charismatic Christianity. This trend is exemplified by mega churches like New Life Ministries, United Family International Church (UFIC), River of Life, Prophetic, Healing and Deliverance (PHD) Ministries, Zoe Life Changing Ministries, Heartfelt International Ministries (HIM), etcetera, which were born from classical Pentecostal denominations.

African Spiritualities

The concept of 'spirituality' is very difficult to define (Nel, 2015: 1; Ohajunwa, 2019: 42). This complexity predominantly stems from the intricate and diverse tapestry of African ethnicities, religions, and contexts, all of which exert an influence over individual beliefs and communal practices. Moreover, spirituality is further complicated by its inherent transience, a quality that has



become even more volatile due to the sweeping effects of globalization. Consequently, spirituality lacks a fixed form and is marked by its ever-changing nature. Additionally, owing to the diverse array of people, spirituality takes on a pluralistic character. Given Africa's multicultural landscape, spirituality varies widely from one person, family, group, society, and culture to another.

However, the term spirituality is traditionally used interchangeably with allusions to individual or collective ways in which people express and conduct their spiritual beliefs, philosophies, values, norms, and principles through different religions and engagements. As posited by Masango (2006: 932–935), spirituality encompasses religious beliefs and practices that bestow significance, guidance, illumination, transformation, principles, and values upon life. This encompasses concepts like Ubuntu, particularly the submission and behavior of humanity guided by the presence and direction of God through different religious pathways such as African Traditional Religions (ATRs), Christianity, and Islam.

In a broader sense, African spirituality maintains the belief that all of humanity originates from God, obviating the necessity for a conversion back to God and adherence to specific dogmas. This perspective is highlighted by Masango (2006: 932–934) who contends that African individuals view their ancestors as intermediaries to God, simultaneously honoring and venerating their deceased while also remaining submissive to God. As a result, “they found themselves practicing the African way of life, and also kept Christian principles which were foreign and western” (Masango, 2006: 935) .

Well in view of Singh and Bhagwan’s (2020: 407) understanding that “Spirituality in the African paradigm is connected to a sense of respect for the departed, who ultimately guides an individual to God and who always listens ...”, African spiritualities are used in this article with close connection to the engagements of people with their God, not through ancestors and other traditional mediums reserved for ATRs, but through Jesus Christ, and ‘men of God’ whom neo-Pentecostals venerate. Drawing from one of the most prominent African theologians, John Mbiti, it is noted that Africans are notoriously religious (Mbiti, 1969: 1). In light of contemporary consensus regarding the substantial expansion and influence of African religiosity (Howard, 2020; Sanni, 2016; Agbiji and Swart, 2015), along with the profound contextualization, growth, and impact of Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe, Africa, and globally, the syncretic nature of African spirituality is undeniable. Later after overviewing some factors behind its growth, this article will explore effective strategies for managing syncretism. Meanwhile, the next subsection conceptualizes contextualization as one of the key terms of this submission.

Contextualization

‘Contextualization’ is a broad term that has been used extensively. Generally, it refers to aligning one’s messages with recipients’ context. Educationally, Perin (2011: 4) explains that contextualization is known in various ways as content-area literacy, integrative curriculum, situated cognition, anchored instruction, and infused instruction. These terms emphasize the integration of learning with real-world events and practical applications.

From a theological perspective, contextualization refers to the interpretation and application of the gospel through the lenses of the receivers. That is why Engle (1983: 86) historically defines it as the appreciation, adaptation, application, engagement, and/or embracing of the cultures of those who receive it. Similarly, Simango (2018: 2) explains that contextualization involves making concepts, ideas, or principles relevant within a given situation. Thus, it emphasizes a given cultural setting and the interpretation of Scripture for such a setting. Langmead (1998: 46) suggests that contextualization can also be understood as the incarnation of the gospel. For Mashoko (2005: 9), it is the praxis of mission. In concurrence with Newbigin’s (1989: 121)



definition, mission encompasses the entire purpose for which the church is sent into the world. Consequently, the sender's work converges with the recipients. In doing so, mission embodies contextualization by communicating, fellowshiping, and living with people in their own languages, attire, norms, and values. In line with Hitchen (2014: 1), “[C]ontextualization is all that is involved in faithfully applying the Word of God in a modern setting”.

Adding to the same viewpoint, Kehinde (2017; 98) asserts that “models emphasizing scripture usually define contextualization as the translation of biblical meanings into contemporary cultural contexts. Therefore, images, metaphors, rituals, and words that are current in the culture are used to make the message both understandable and impactful”. Such understanding reserves the sovereignty of God and Scripture while appreciating and relating with receptors’ cultures. “In this context, when the cultural background is prioritized, God’s meaning is sought experientially within the cultural traditions using the Bible as a guide...” Similarly, Ponniah (1986: 1) depicts contextualization from the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) that “the world into which the church is sent is a colorful mosaic of peoples and cultures, each one unique in its ways and values, each one also challenging the proclamation of the Gospel in its own way”. Consequently, the church must engage with people's cultures to facilitate their acceptance, comprehension, discipleship, and way of life. This principle is exemplified by the actions of one of the eminent biblical apostles, Paul, as illustrated in the following Scripture passage, emphasizing the significance of contextualization:

19 Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (NIV Bible-Gateway: n.p.).

While taking into account that contextualization tends to polarize people, especially with regards to the delicate integration of the Bible with culture, vulnerability to compromises, and syncretism, Wu (2019: n.p.) says that Christians must prioritize Scripture over culture. Wu says that Christians must be able to divide theology and culture in order to express and embody biblical truth in cultural forms. For him, “contextualization cannot be defined merely in terms of communication or application. I suggest that contextualization refers to the process wherein people interpret, communicate, and apply the Bible within a particular cultural context...Good contextualization seeks to be faithful to Scripture and meaningful to a given culture”.

Considering this, holistic contextualization extends beyond the gospel itself, encompassing various aspects such as diverse ecclesiologies, hermeneutics, and liturgies. As a result, the effectiveness of gospel propagation and the reception of the church hinge on its capacity to engage with the specific environment in which it operates. Therefore, while extracting the Scripture from its original contexts and languages (i.e. Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek), the church must undertake the task of contextualizing the gospel within the contexts and cultures of the recipients.

Syncretism

The English word ‘syncretism’ comes from the Greek word “*synkretismos*”. According to Ezenweke and Kanu (2012: 73), it means to combine, or unite different elements together to



accomplish particular purposes. Sanou (2013, 133) takes syncretism as “the blending of different (sometimes contradictory) forms of religious beliefs and practices”. Aptly, Gatti (2016) views syncretism as a loaded dialectical, political, spiritual, and social phenomenon that encompasses dialogue for mutual appreciation, understanding, integration, and acceptance.

Etymologically linked to animal breeding and agriculture, the concept of hybridism may imply (and often does) the ‘pure’ origin of elements ... hybrids are characterised by sterility and ‘un-naturalness’ ... Hence, hybridism does not imply the elimination of essentialism in the ‘offspring’ in the product of breeding. Hybridism can also displace this essentialism onto the genitors, which are then classified in static, homogeneous categories (Gatti 2016: 71).

Concurringly, syncretism mixes two different elements for desired (re)production. Nonetheless, Musoni, Machingura and Mamvuto (2020: 5) discuss syncretism as “a combination, or incorporation of incompatible spiritual, or two or more religious belief systems to inform one’s spirituality”. They interface syncretism with inculturation and argue that the two blur and eventually ruin religious identities. In this regard, they mention incompatible examples which cannot be inculcated, such as God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, as well as what they think can be shared, such as translating the Bible into local languages, accommodating local musical instruments in church services, accommodating the African worldview of ancestors to explain that Jesus Christ is the “Proto Ancestor”, and inculcating African spiritual elements into their church liturgies.

Agreeably, Nyuyki and Van Niekerk (2016: 391) present syncretism from a Christian perspective, defining it “as indiscriminate or uncritical incorporation of religious and/or cultural practices into Christianity in order to make it relevant to the receiving cultural context”. That way, Ezenweke and Kanu (2012, 75) observe that “syncretism of the Christian gospel occurs when basic elements of the gospel are replaced by religious elements from the host culture”. They elaborate that syncretism results from a tendency or attempt to undermine the uniqueness of the gospel as found in the Scriptures or the incarnate Son of God. In view of contextualization, or inculturation, or incarnation, Christianity is not brought into a synthesis with something alien to it. “It is the seed of the gospel that is already present in a particular culture. The reason for this synthesis is in fact the possibility of compatibility” (Ezenweke & Kanu, 2012: 75).

Through historical analysis, it is evident that syncretism is not a new phenomenon. Scholars concur that syncretism’s existence dates back as far as Christianity itself. Nyuyki and Van Niekerk (2016: 383) elaborate that the history of missionary endeavors, extending from the early Jewish context to the Hellenistic world and persisting to the contemporary era, has been full of syncretism.

In other words, there has been no period without syncretism in whatever degree... Christianity spread to other areas it carried with it an irreconcilable attitude to polytheism, from the Judaic heritage... Christianity, though committed to monotheism, soon found that translating their message made it vulnerable to secular influences and to the threat of polytheism (Nyuyki and Van Niekerk 2016, 383).

Consequently, it is plausible that Christianity itself was susceptible to being shaped by the encompassing culture. This susceptibility persists and impacts Pentecostalism to this day, as adherents endeavor to contextualize the gospel, their ecclesiologies, and hermeneutical approaches. In this article, syncretism is defined as the process of integrating neo-Pentecostal Christianities into the broader Zimbabwean social, economic, and political landscape.



Problematically as weeds affect wheat (as well explained below), syncretism can blur religious identities and lead to excessive inclusivism and polytheism.

Weeds

The term 'weeds', and the subsequent term 'wheat', are employed in this article with a direct reference to their metaphorical usage in Matthew 13:24-30 and verses 36-43. A metaphor is commonly recognized as a figure of speech that alludes to one thing while implying another. The author or speaker of a metaphor utilizes certain attributes of one element to illuminate a subject that may initially appear unrelated to the former.

Olajide (2015: 51) defines a metaphor as “a systematic conceptual mapping from one conceptual domain (the source) onto another (the target)”. Metaphors serve to enrich the comprehension of recipients by employing creative analogies. Similar to how the concept of a 'body' was utilized to symbolize the unified nature of the church (1 Corinthians 12:12–31), metaphors are frequently employed to fulfill diverse functions within their respective contexts. Lookadoo (2022: 5) adds, “Metaphors are rhetorically useful because they enable authors to enhance an audience’s understanding of the topic that they desire to address by bringing another, perhaps better-known, object into the conversation”. Drawing insights from metaphorical depictions of God in the Old Testament, such as 'rock' (Psalms 18:2-3), 'father and potter' (Isaiah 64:8), 'sun and shield' (Psalms 84:11), and 'Shepherd' (Psalms 80), Hesse (2023: 240) interprets metaphors as “non-literal, figurative use of language where one kind of thing (the target) is characterized in terms of another...”.

Employing the metaphor of 'weeds' within the context of this article is particularly fitting, as Olajide (2015: 54) points out that metaphors are dynamic, intricate, and enlightening, much like the utilization of proverbs in African culture and literature. In agreement with McIver’s (1995) understanding of weeds as an evil community, along with Schumacher’s (2019: 256–257) reference to bad, wrong and compromised, and Rigdon’s (2020: n.p.) perception of weeds extending beyond mere undesirable plants to encompass entities that take up space, consume nutrients, and require removal, and taking ‘weeds’ in Matthew 23:24-30 with reference to compromised, or compromising people, ‘weeds’ are used in this article to denote syncretic practices compromising Pentecostalism and all other Christianities and religions – such as using magic, witchdoctors powers, accommodating some evil cultural practices and idolizing leaders in church. This approach is undertaken while taking into account the observation made by Pacanoski and Mehmeti (2021: 81), who point out that 'weeds' rank among the most persistent and significant challenges, second only to soil erosion, predominantly within the realm of agriculture. Weeds, due to their pervasive nature, inevitability, disruptive impact, and obstruction to the comprehensive sustainability of human endeavors, are considered metaphorically analogous to the challenges present within African spiritualities.

Wheat

Similar to the above-mentioned metaphor of 'weeds', the term 'wheat' is equally used with reference to Matthew 13:24-30, and verses 36-43. According to Viljoen (2020: 3), wheat symbolises the sinless, righteous, good, moral, or upright. Koplitz (2020, 160) interprets wheat as representing 'true believers'. Daliman and Suparti (2021: 12) state that “wheat is a picture of the children of the Kingdom of Heaven”. In an illuminating sermon, Catsle (2020: n.p.) likens weeds to 'darnel', a term defined by Laskow (2016: n.p.) as “a mimic weed, neither entirely tame or quite wild, that looks and behaves so much like wheat that it can’t live without human assistance...”. It originates from Syria.



Much like the perplexing and hazardous resemblance between plants and weeds, true clarity only emerges during the harvest when ripe wheat takes on a brown hue, while the darnel turns black. Consequently, the act of removing weeds (representing bad, and or compromising wrongs) from among wheat (representing good, right, correct and uncompromising) before the harvest (symbolizing judgment) is fraught with the risk of inadvertently uprooting the wheat. In this article, wheat is taken as the upright, as well as the gospel, goodwill, and right objective. Grant (2015, n.p.) posits that it represents “the truth of the gospel” and the “good news”. These meanings become increasingly evident over time, amidst the plethora of worldly philosophies and fantasies. That is the same wheat that Löflund (2020, 249) through “...the allegory of the strife between good and evil, between Christ and the devil and their struggle for the souls of men, wheat” as good seed – meaning the gospel and its transformative fruits. Consequently, 'wheat' refers to the beneficiaries and participants, individuals of the heavenly kingdom, believers, and those who aspire to emulate Jesus Christ in their worship of God.

Refactoring the growth of Neo–Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe

As an interpretive phenomenological study which prioritises lived experiences (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Greening 2019, 89), it is pivotal to review the growth of neo–Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe. From 2008 to the present day, neo-Pentecostalism has experienced a remarkable surge of growth in Zimbabwe. This growth has been driven by a series of monumental movements. Alongside the impact of syncretic contextualization, several other factors have played a pivotal role, including dynamic governance and leadership, economic innovativeness, transformational leitourgia, aggressive kerygma, and strategic ecclesiology. In light of this, the following section provides an overview and addresses the complexities of these dynamics.

Integrated Apostolic governance

The majority of neo-Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe use mixed apostolic governance and leadership styles. These churches have gained insight from their previous experiences and recognized deficiencies within the administrative structures of their former congregations. They acknowledge that various forms of church governance such as Presbyterian, episcopal, and congregational polities each possess both merits and drawbacks. Bureaucratic complexities, for instance, are evident across these models.

Considering that congregational, Presbyterian, and episcopal decisions tend to take long and delay Opus Dei (the work of God), most local neo-Pentecostal founders centralize supreme power to themselves. While that is equally highly problematic as it is vulnerable to personalization and other kinds of abuse for selfish gains, the same centralized governance quickens decisions and commands subordinate obedience. Unlike congregational and Presbyterian polities which allow insubordination, delay decisions, and implementation, neo-Pentecostal centralized governance enhances the rapid execution of leaders' visions, missions, and advances church growth. In order to elaborate on this, let us look at one of the fastest growing neo-Pentecostal denominations in Zimbabwe – Harvest House International (HHI).

According to Tshuma (2011), the HHI was founded in 1995 by Apostle Colins Nyathi and his wife, Dr Sarah Nyathi, in the second largest city of Zimbabwe, Bulawayo. The church is overseen by an apostolic council both at an international and national level, led by the founder. At a provincial level, it operates under the guidance of senior reverends, and congregationally, it is managed by branch reverends, pastors, ministers, elders, and departmental leaders, respectively. To expand the growth of the church, the founding apostle, who also uses the title 'bishop', shares his God-given vision and mission with his apostolic council members, who subsequently cascade them



down to their subordinate national, regional, provincial, and local leaders, and grassroots followers.

In a discussion with two of their pastors about the church's governance and growth in Bulawayo at the end of July 2023, one of them said that their visionary leader (founder and apostle) and the apostolic council set missionary targets, and all subordinate leaders and followers are taught and mobilized to rally behind them. With the visionary leader holding executive authority and assistant leaders receiving similar authority from their subordinates, everyone is motivated to exhibit diligence, dedicated service, loyalty, and accountability in line with their respective roles.

Such a strategic system is yielding huge results as Dube (2021, n.p.) chronicles that the HHI has planted, established, and grown to more than 45 churches in Bulawayo, and 800 churches around the world. All in all, the HHI example is a great testament that, although it has its own challenges, the neo-Pentecostal apostolic governance is missionized, and it promotes massive growth.

Surviving Tactility in a Casino Economy

The term 'casino economy' was first used in Zimbabwe by the former Reserve Bank Governor, Gideon Gono, in 2008, "to describe the rife speculative activities taking place in Zimbabwe that were akin to gambling, during the era of hyperinflation" (Chagonda 2010, 1). Deriving from Mwenje's (2016a, 2016b) and Tagwirei's (2022b) studies of the Zimbabwean economic context and Pentecostal church economics, most progressive neo-Pentecostal churches realized that Zimbabwe's economy had become hyperinflationary, citizens succumbed to abject poverty, and traditional sources of income (i.e., freewill offerings, tithes and other collections) became unsustainable. So, they tactically began investing in various business projects to diversify their sources of income. Although many scholars have looked at church entrepreneurship mainly from one negative angle of commercializing the gospel (such as Marongwe and Maposa 2015; Madzokere 2018; Chibango 2016; Chitando, Gunda and Kügler 2013), surviving in a 'casino economy' is tricky and demands strategic inventiveness. Thus, I agree with Munyoro and Ncube (2020) that neo-Pentecostal churches such as the United Family International (UFI), and Prophetic, Healing and Deliverance (PhD) Ministries, through their diversified income streams, display tactical enterprise. They attract citizens grappling with poverty and, as a result, draw substantial numbers of followers, thus ensuring their growth. One could argue that by channeling investments into sectors such as health, mining, agriculture, and education, among others, these churches have significantly expanded their economic capabilities. This financial growth has enabled them to finance extensive local, provincial, national, and international *kerygmatic* missions, support human and material resources, and establish a multitude of new churches.

On the other hand, those who have not pursued investments, such as classical Pentecostals, have become reliant on tithes, offerings, local contributions, and donations. Tagwirei (2022a, 5) posited that these conventional revenue streams are unreliable, inconsistent, and unsustainable. Remarkably, neo-Pentecostals have undertaken enterprising initiatives, bolstered their economic capacities, empowered their proclamation of the gospel (*kerygmatic* work), and achieved substantial success in harvesting souls both within and beyond the borders of Zimbabwe.

Massive Kerygma

As mentioned previously, most neo-Pentecostal churches profess and actively engage in extensive *kerygmatic* work. Defined by Tagwirei (2022b, 95) as acts of evangelizing, converting, following up, and winning souls, kerygma speaks to the proclamation of the salvific message of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ. During their evangelistic endeavors, a significant portion of neo-Pentecostal denominations focus on church planting. They allocate resources, deploy pastors and branches, and engage in nurturing and equipping disciples to evolve into disciplers. This approach enables them to establish more assemblies around their respective constituencies.



Using such a strategic kerygma and multiplication discipleship strategy, HHI, for example, has planted more than five branches in the Bulawayo city centre, at least one assembly in each suburb, a minimum of three in every city across Zimbabwe, with each branch boasting no less than 100 members. Under the umbrella of the first sub-section of integrated apostolic governance, this strategy resulted in the denomination producing more than 800 churches globally. That way, HHI, and similar neo-Pentecostal denominations, multiply and continuously sustain themselves. They conduct evangelistic programs under different labels such as ‘crusades’, ‘revivals’, and related gatherings. During these events, it is widely known within Zimbabwe that neo-Pentecostals openly declare and showcase the gospel. They do so by engaging in activities such as offering prayers for healing the sick, facilitating the deliverance of those afflicted by demons, casting out various evils, and working a range of miracles that directly impact the lives of believers. Just as Mbiti (1969, 1) discerned that Africans are notoriously religious, Zimbabweans epitomize the same. They spiritualize almost all their social, economic, and political problems. Consequently, they do not only need the gospel in word. They need it to be demonstrated to address all areas of their lives. That is why they flock to neo-Pentecostals who preach and strive to demonstrate its power. Unlike most other Christianities which focus on correctness of theology and hermeneutics, neo-Pentecostals believe and seek abundant life, miracles, and exploits as reflected by the following Bible verses: John 10:10, “... I have come so that they may have life, and have it abundantly” and John 14:12, “I tell you the solemn truth, the person who believes in me will perform the miraculous deeds that I am doing, and will perform greater deeds than these, because I am going to the Father”.

True to this, the gospel of Jesus Christ is holistic enough to address human life in its totality. Although Nel (2023) finds those who foster the prosperity gospel syncretic, and locally, Zimbabwean scholars such as Chari (2018) and Mahohoma (2017) identify them as greedy and fake, thousands of Zimbabweans still flock to neo-Pentecostal churches. It is undeniable that the majority of neo-Pentecostals, especially prophetic and prosperity ministers have commercialized the gospel at the expense of poverty-stricken and gullible followers as well unpacked by researchers like Guvamombe (2014, n.p), Mujaji (2021, 196), Muyambo (2020), Gudhlanga, Madongonda and Manyonganise (2023). However, the consistent mass attendance cannot only be out of followers’ gullibility. For me, it also implies that some of them actually need what neo-Pentecostals offer. If all the neo-Pentecostal sermons, miracles, healings, and deliverance were fully fake, surely a considerable portion of believers would have woken up to this and left. Building upon this premise, this paper argues that neo-Pentecostalism’s retention of a massive following suggests that its proclamation and demonstration of the gospel impacts and wins numbers. Accordingly, while syncretism is undeniable, as will be discussed later under ‘contextualization’, integrated kerygma seems to have contributed much to the growth of neo-Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe.

Transformational Leitourgia

Leitourgia is a Greek term that means liturgy in English. It is simplified by McGregor (2019, 75) as activities of worship and the glorification of God in church gatherings. In this submission, *leitourgia* is taken with reference to prayers, such as intercession, thanksgiving, supplications, petitions, praise, and worship singing, which submit everything to God as well as related church services. This study perceives that *leitourgia* is one of the crowd-pulling pillars of neo-Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe. The largest neo-Pentecostal denominations in Zimbabwe, including United Family International (UFI), New Life Covenant (NLC), Heartfelt International Ministries (HiM), Wealthy Word International (WWI), and HHI churches, begin and end their mid-week and main Sunday services with praise and worship sessions that last no less than an hour. Additionally, their prayer lives are publicly reinforced by regular worship programs under various names such as ‘all-night prayers’, ‘prayer vigils’, ‘worship nights’, and ‘conferences’.



Engaging in a phenomenological approach, this researcher attended ten different worship services in the above-mentioned churches from June to July 2023. The observations revealed that each worship service is characterized by powerful, prayerful worship concert music, long mass prayers, loud weeping unto God, and manifestations of visible enjoyment. Throughout the worship services, liturgists usually shout Bible verses and declarations which stimulate congregants to pour out their hearts to God, engage in deep communication with Him, and expect corresponding divine encounters.

Various believers often encounter the Holy Spirit, speak in tongues (glossolalia), and experience noticeable manipulation of their faces, bodies, and involuntary utterances as the Holy Spirit inspires and enables them. Consequently, some of the congregants testify that they have been healed or delivered from demonic possession, while others share diverse testimonies like job, business, and financial breakthroughs following prayers. Although some may fake such testimonies for their own reasons, it remains undeniable that earnest worship services facilitate a profound connection between attendees and God. These services guide participants into an immersive encounter with the transformative presence of God, in alignment with the sentiment expressed in Psalms 100:1–2. Furthermore, as attendees engage with Bible verses, their faith is bolstered. Meanwhile, as the Early Church was very prayerful, faithful, praising God, ministering His word, and living in favour with people; the Bible tells us that God added thousands to their numbers daily (Acts 2:47; 5:14; 6:7; 16:5).

Similarly, it remains possible that, just as in the case of the Early Church, the neo-Pentecostals, through their collective prayers, witness an increase in their numbers by the divine intervention of God. Moreover, the vast populace of Zimbabweans, much like their fellow Africans, necessitates such transformative *leitourgia* that goes beyond their individual spiritual practices. This is essential for God to effectively address the multifaceted political, economic, and social challenges that they face. Consequently, the assertive nature of the neo-Pentecostal *leitourgia* stands as a central element contributing to their remarkable numerical expansion, as thousands of people keep flocking to their gatherings.

Inclusive Contextualization

It is discernible that neo-Pentecostal churches have strategically adapted their ecclesiology, message, methods, and approach to effectively attract new believers, foster growth, and secure their establishment. As previously elucidated in the 'definitions' sub-section, contextualization involves bridging the gap between the message, deliverer and the recipients by appreciating and engaging with the recipients' cultures. In terms of ecclesiology, Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostals have contextualized their approach to governance by diverging from dominant foreign missionary influences and local bureaucratic mother churches. This shift has facilitated the emancipation of indigenous ecclesiological principles, leading to the pursuit of adaptable, self-administrative, self-sustaining, and self-determining structures.

To provide an example, His Generation Church stemmed from a White founded urban-based mega celebration church that is characterized by affluence and excellence, thereby attracting the wealthy and leaving the poor somewhat uncomfortable. Observing that, Pastor Evan Mawarire formed His Generation Church in Harare on 8 August 2010 to create an inclusive, friendly, and conducive environment for people from all social classes.

Another example is HHI, which is mentioned earlier in this paper. HHI emerged from Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA). According to Biri (2020: 172), one of the largest denominations from Zimbabwe, which has planted churches in more than 50 countries, ZAOGA's



leader and founder, arch-Bishop Ezekiel Guti, who died recently on 5 May 2023 at the age of 100, used and established an authoritarian, neo-patrimonial and dynastic governance. When HHI founder Apostle Collins Nyathi, who was an elder in ZAOGA moved out and started HHI in 1995, he contextualized and missionized his ecclesiology. This involved assigning pastors apostolic roles, facilitating the establishment of new churches, and empowering elders and subordinate leaders to lead ministries in accordance with their God-given gifts.

Besides ecclesiology, most neo-Pentecostal churches contextualized and branded their message manner, *leitourgia*, and *koinonia* as declarative. For their message, they commonly address indigenous issues such as witchcraft, poverty, and ailments. While John 10:10 promises life in abundance, and Jesus Christ Himself addressed contextual issues of His time, some neo-Pentecostals go to the extremes in search of exploits as John 14:12 promises believers. In doing so, they seem to have shelved the eternal salvation and become more like witch doctors than gospel ministers. Therein lies the danger of contextualization.

While the gospel remains fundamental in both its proclamation and practical demonstration, Magezi and Banda (2017, 4–5) contend that it tends to verge into syncretism when it is correlated with addressing various challenges, assuming the mediating role attributed to Jesus Christ, and incorporating elements of ATRs rituals, like praying for rain. The same applies to their authoritative manner and methods which relate to ATR. As traditional healers present themselves as divine word-bearers and instruments for humanity, Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostal charismatic, prophetic ministers do the same and some of them allegedly get supernatural powers from witchdoctors (Karengazeka, 2014, n.p; ZimEye, 2021: n.p). Whereas ATRs use traditional artefacts such as water and oil, local neo-Pentecostals use anointing oil, anointed water and other ‘anointed’ objects (see Zivengwa 2015, Rupapa and Shumba 2014, n.p; Tafira, 2015: n.p and Banda, 2020: 2). However, in all this, neo-Pentecostals identify themselves as unlimited servants of God, and base their prescriptions on Jesus Christ who used nature, such as mud and water, for healing and deliverance (John 9:6–7). There is evidence that touching the garment of Jesus Christ could bring healing to the sick, as exemplified by the story of the woman with hemorrhaging (Mark 5:27–29). Additionally, it is noted that Peter’s shadow had the ability to heal the sick (Acts 5:15), while Paul’s handkerchiefs were believed to hold the power to heal and expel demons (Acts 19:2).

Likewise, Zimbabwean neo-Pentecostals claim to be powerful instruments of God, believing that their bodies and belongings carry divine power in any context. Thus, their *leitourgia* incorporates musical expressions, dances, and attire that harmonize with the cultural backgrounds of their members. Regrettably, while this approach has made neo-Pentecostalism contextually relevant, it has opened doors for worldliness in the church. As stated in the Bible (John 17:14-18), the Scripture highlights that the church exists within the world yet remains distinct from the world. This presents a significant challenge: the church must welcome individuals from all walks of life, meeting them where they are, while concurrently guiding them toward a transformative journey through the gospel, ultimately cultivating godly attributes within them. Hence, the principle of contextualization is not only necessary but also aligned with godly principles. This is evident as Jesus Christ Himself demonstrated contextualization by immersing Himself within Jewish communities, and similarly, the Apostle Paul applied this approach within the diverse contexts of the Roman world. However, they were not changed by their contexts. They wisely stroke a balance between contextualization and transformation by consistently upholding the primacy of the gospel. As such, contextualization is delicate because of its vulnerability to syncretism. That is why, acknowledging the transformative nature of neo-Pentecostalism and the gospel, this contribution finds Matthew 13:24–30, and verses 36-43, invaluable texts for effectively addressing and managing syncretic elements.



Managing Pentecostal weeds in view of Matthew 13:24–43

Regarding Pentecostals as integral members of God's kingdom, and viewing the contextualized gospel as akin to sown wheat, while identifying syncretic elements as weeds, this sub-section offers a strategy to counter the negative effects of syncretism. The aim is to tackle these challenges without compromising the genuine efforts of transformational gospel advocates and the sanctity of the gospel itself. In the view of this author, we can draw some constructive lessons from Matthew 13:24-30, and verses 36-43, which is quoted below.

24 Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. 26 When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. 27 "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 28 "An enemy did this,' he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 29 "No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'" ... 36 Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." 37 He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. 40 "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear". (NIV Bible Gateway, n.p)

Aligned with the insights of scholars like McIver (1995: 644), and guided by the interpretation expounded by Jesus Christ in Matthew 13:36-43, the metaphoric parable of the wheat and weeds clarify that God sowed the good seed of His gospel through Jesus Christ in the world. The devil then planted misconduct which affects the righteous on a daily basis. Generally, just as the servants in the above quoted parable reflect, public thinking suggests that we should do away with compromises and everything associated with it to protect whoever and whatever is good. Applying the teaching of Jesus Christ that pulling out weeds can also destroy wheat, this paper recommends the following to address the problem of syncretism:

Prioritising the gospel

Recognizing that undoing syncretism could potentially disrupt needful contextualization, advancing the gospel will submit everything to God. As previously noted, engaging in syncretism involves incorporating indigenous languages, clothing, and incorporating local musical instruments in church services. Should gospel ministers and the church condemn these practices, they risk estranging themselves and appearing foreign to the very communities they aim to reach. Consequently, natives would not appreciate and accept them. Congruently, they would also not accept the gospel.



Thus, just as Jesus Christ taught through the aforementioned parable, uprooting the weeds could potentially damage the wheat as well. Therefore, while acknowledging that some syncretic practices might be unwholesome, exercising wisdom suggests preserving contextualization until the ultimate judgement day. Of course some grave syncretic practices such as using magic in attempts to demonstrate the gospel deserve prompt admonitions as waiting for judgement day may be late. Meanwhile, it is incumbent upon gospel ministers to declare that individuals who embrace the gospel, repent from their sins, and wholeheartedly follow its teachings will undergo a transformation that shields them from syncretism. These individuals will be welcomed into God's presence, much like the harvested wheat. In parallel, those who persist in their wrong ways will face dire consequences, being cast into the fiery depths of hell and consumed like unwanted weeds.

Demonstrating Grace

Furthermore, it is evident that allowing the coexistence of good and evil within the righteous community highlights the boundless grace of God. The Scriptures remind us of God's gracious nature, wherein His grace empowers individuals to stand firm against evil, embody virtue within the world, and patiently anticipate the eventual return of Jesus Christ (Titus 2:11–14). It is by the same grace that God does not want anybody to perish. He wants everyone to come to the knowledge of truth and be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). Interfacing that with His gracious stance on weeds and wheat, it becomes plain that God's example urges humanity to refrain from being judgmental, embrace a spirit of graciousness, and exercise patience when confronted with evil influences.

In the Zimbabwean context of syncretism, this mirrors the approach of sharing the transformational gospel with others while waiting for God. Drawing from that, Pentecostals can nourish their own spiritual growth and extend the same to others through the gospel of grace. This involves contextualizing the gospel and teaching the undefiled gospel to withstand syncretism – that is what graciously submitting the issue of syncretism to God herein means. Eventually, some of those who are currently syncretic will be transformed by the gospel while those who do not will be judged at the end.

Effecting transformation

When people are transformed by the gospel, it should also be kept in mind that they become the 'salt and light' that Jesus Christ spoke about in Matthew 5:13-16. They should not be separated from the world but rather reminded to demonstrate righteousness, influencing the evil to become righteous as salt flavours food. As the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 3:2, believers are like open living letters of Jesus Christ that others read, know, and get inspired to follow Him. Instead of demonizing misconduct, if the righteous live in a Christlike manner and exemplify what is godly, others can eventually learn from them and turn to God as well. Thus, in view of syncretism, if Pentecostals minister and live the gospel, they can effect transformation within their communities and eventually dismiss syncretism as light dispels darkness. Working gradually as light gains momentum from dawn until darkness disappears, sharing brotherly correction, evangelizing, converting and discipling those who are syncretic with the undefiled gospel can eventually effect transformation. The implementation of gospel-loaded contextualization will ultimately overshadow and surpass the influence of syncretism. Therefore, rather than attempting to directly reverse syncretism, focusing on elevating the significance of, teaching the gospel, actively exemplifying its principles, and nurturing transformative change can effectively address syncretism without causing harm or disruption. In accordance with Jesus Christ's teachings in the parable of the wheat and weeds, it is clear that those who persist in wickedness will face judgment and will ultimately experience the consequences of their actions by being burnt in hell at the end.



Conclusion

While observing that syncretic practices are often very entrenched, real, common in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism and many other African contexts, this interpretive phenomenological study has unveiled that the remarkable growth of Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe transcends its connection with syncretism. Various factors have contributed to its evolution, such as its dynamic apostolic governance and leadership, contextually viable economics, transformational *leitourgia*, aggressive kerygma, strategic ecclesiology, and inclusive contextualization. While recognizing the intertwined nature of contextualization and syncretism, similar to the coexistence of 'wheat and weeds', it is imperative to recognize the sensitivity of assessing and addressing syncretism. This cautious approach is vital to prevent an undermining of the genuine transformational potential of the gospel, which Pentecostalism advances not only through proclamation but also through a holistic demonstration in all areas of life. As eloquently elaborated in this study, prioritizing the gospel, embodying grace, and fostering transformation will ultimately triumph over syncretism. In the final reckoning, those who persist in syncretism and polytheism will face judgment and condemnation, much like weeds being consumed by a fire. Conversely, those who embrace the gospel's message will experience salvation and redemption, akin to the preservation of wheat.

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