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Embracing Neurodiversity: Navigating the Christian Bibliocentric Perspective and Syncretic Challenges

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Abstract

Neurodiversity, the recognition of neurological differences as natural variations of the human experience, has always been viewed through multi-disciplinary lenses including psychology, philosophy, sociology, special education, and Christian theology. From the Christian bibliocentric perspective (CBcP), neurodiversity is best understood within the theological framework, especially of divine creation, emphasizing acceptance and inclusion. In contrast, a syncretic perspective on neurodiversity, incorporating elements from various belief systems, has often sought to understand by integrating both spiritual and secular perspectives. While both perspectives advocate for compassion and support, they differ in their approaches to intervention and accommodation. Some Christians reject the syncretic perspective due to concerns about theological integrity and strict adherence to biblical principles. The implications of these differing perspectives are far-reaching, affecting how individuals with neurodivergent traits are perceived, supported, and included within religious communities and the society at large. The CBcP approach may prioritize spiritual guidance and traditional support mechanisms, while the syncretic perspective may embrace a more holistic and inclusive approach, incorporating diverse spiritual practices and secular interventions. Understanding these differences is most crucial for fostering dialogue, promoting acceptance, and advocating for the rights and dignity of individuals with neurodiverse traits within Christian communities and beyond.

Keywords: *Neurodiversity, Christian theology, Syncretism, Inclusion, Intervention.*

Introduction

Neurodiversity is a concept that acknowledges and celebrates the natural variation in human neurological development (Armstrong, 2010; Murray et al., 2023). In the field of psychology, it has challenged the traditional medical model of viewing neurological

differences, such as autism (Chapman, 2018), ADHD (Moore, McIntyre, & Lanivich, 2021), dyslexia (Cooper, 2009), and others (Armstrong, 2010), as solely disorders that need to be fixed or cured. Instead, the concept of neurodiversity promotes

understanding these differences as variations in brain functioning that contribute to the richness of human experience.

From a sociological perspective (Casanova & Widman, 2021; Rosqvist, Chown, & Stenning, 2020), neurodiversity emphasizes the importance of inclusivity and acceptance of individuals with diverse neurological profiles in our society today. It calls for structural and attitudinal changes to create our current environments that can accommodate and support neurodivergent individuals, enabling them to thrive.

In philosophy, neurodiversity intersects with ethics and social justice, advocating for the rights and dignity of neurodivergent individuals (Chapman & Carel, 2022; Paletta, 2013). It challenges prevailing notions of normalcy and promotes the idea that neurological differences should be respected and valued as part of our human diversity.

In special education, neurodiversity advocates for educational approaches that recognize and accommodate the diverse learning styles and, more importantly, to cater to the needs of neurodivergent students (Armstrong, 2017). The concept of neurodiversity emphasizes strengths-based approaches that build on the unique talents and abilities of each individual, rather than focusing solely on their deficits or challenges (Mirfin-Veitch, Jalota, & Schmidt, 2020).

Within the Christian theology, neurodiversity encourages compassion, understanding, and acceptance of all individuals as God's unique creatures, regardless of their neurological makeup (Cartledge & Raffety, 2023; Evers, 2017). It invites the Christian community to embrace neurodiversity as a reflection of God's diverse creation and to ensure that all members in the humankind are fully included and supported.

Overall, the concept of neurodiversity transcends multi-disciplinary boundaries, promoting a holistic understanding of neurological differences and advocating for a more inclusive and accepting society where all individuals, regardless of their neurological profiles, can fully participate and contribute.

The Christian Bibliocentric Perspective on Neurodiversity

The Holy Bible is the sole sacred scripture of the Christians, in the same way that Torah is to the Jews and Quran is to the Muslims. Strictly speaking, the Holy Bible does not explicitly address neurodivergence as we understand it today. However, it offers principles that can guide the believers' attitudes and actions towards those who are neurodivergent. Central to these principles is the interlinked concept of love, compassion, and inclusion.

This is the bibliocentric approach (also known as bibliocentrism). According to Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, it is defined as "placing great or central importance on printed texts" (Merriam-Webster.com, 2024, para. 1), and in my own words, I describe it as the belief or practice that emphasizes the centrality, authority, or sanctity of books, particularly religious texts like the Holy Bible, Torah and Quran. Generally, it often involves interpreting all aspects of life through the spiritual lens of these texts. In other words, for example, when we say we are taking the Christian bibliocentric perspective (CBcP), I refer this to our understanding

of neurodivergence from a biblical perspective that focuses on interpreting neurodiversity through the lens of biblical teachings and principles.

Before we discuss any further about the neurodiversity from either Christian or biblical perspective, we need to be clear about what we mean if we say we are taking a Christian perspective or a biblical perspective on a topic such as neurodiversity. Hence, the first question that comes to mind is "Do these two terms - Christian perspective and biblical perspective - really mean the same or different thing?"

While the two terms are often used interchangeably, there can be a subtle difference between 'Christian perspective' and 'biblical perspective.' Personally, I define a 'Christian perspective' as referring to the viewpoint of a particular Christian individual or group (e.g., Anglican, Calvinist, Lutheran, Methodist, to list a few here), which could be influenced by various factors including personal beliefs, cultural context, and theological interpretation. On the other hand, I see the term - 'biblical perspective' - as typically implying an interpretation or understanding based directly on the teachings and principles found in the Holy Bible, without as much room for personal interpretation or cultural influence. So, while the two terms are closely related, the main difference, as I see it, lies in the potential for personal interpretation and cultural influence in the 'Christian perspective', whereas the 'biblical perspective' often aims for a more direct interpretation of biblical teachings.

In this paper, I have chosen to use the term 'Christian bibliocentric perspective' (CBcP) approach to encompass both Christian and biblical perspectives. I prefer defining a Christian bibliocentric perspective (or CBcP in short) as a worldview centered around the Holy Bible as the ultimate authority in matters of faith and practice. In other words, the term emphasizes the belief that the Holy Bible is inspired by God (Carroll, 1980; Diaz, 2016) and serves as the primary source for understanding God's will, principles, and teachings (Duvall & Hays, 2012; Zuck, 2023). This CBcP approach often involves interpreting all aspects of life, theology, and ethics through the lens of biblical teachings.

Returning to the bibliocentric approach that I have just mentioned, its aim is to seek proper guidance and accurate understanding for neurodivergent individuals within the context of religious texts (in this case, my focus is on the Christian viewpoint), emphasizing acceptance, support, and inclusion based on biblical teachings of love, compassion, and equality.

Firstly, the Holy Bible has always emphasized the inherent value and dignity of every human being, i.e., all of us are created in the image of God: "So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1: 27, New International Version). This is "the concept of *Imago Dei* which refers to ... 'first, the self-actualization of God through His created beings in His likeness, regarded as a level lower than His angels; and second, the concern of God for humankind' (Counterbalance Foundation, 1995, para. 2)" (Xie, 2020, p. 12). In other words, this foundational belief of *imago dei* should shape our interactions with neurodivergent individuals, treating them with respect and dignity (Kilner, 2015).

Secondly, Jesus's teachings have consistently emphasized love and compassion towards those who are marginalized or different from

us, who are typically developed. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:25-37), Jesus has taught the people that we should show compassion to all people, regardless of their differences or social status. In this regard, Christians are often reminded of “*Imitatio Christi* (i.e., Imitation of Christ) refers to the attempt to live and act as Christ lived and acted during His 33 years on earth” (Xie, 2020, p. 15). That is to say that Christians ought to display compassion to all people despite their neurodiversity. Xie (2020) has argued that “[T]he ideal of *Imitatio Christi* constitutes an essential constituent of Christian theology including ethics and spirituality (Jestice, 2004; Richardson & Bowden, 1983). References to this concept and its practice can be found in the many earliest Christian letters or documents, e.g., the Pauline Epistles (Jestice, 2004)” (p. 15).

Thirdly, the Holy Bible has never failed to encourage inclusion and acceptance within the community of believers. The apostle Paul has spoken about the church as a body, with each member having a unique function (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-27). This metaphor highlights the importance of valuing diversity and recognizing the contributions of all members of the church, including those who are neurodivergent.

Additionally, the Holy Bible calls for justice and advocacy on behalf of the vulnerable and oppressed (see Proverbs 31:8-9). This includes advocating for the rights and well-being of neurodivergent individuals, ensuring they, too, must have access to the support and accommodations in order for them to thrive.

In summary, while the Holy Bible may not directly address neurodivergence, its principles of love, compassion, inclusion, and justice provide a clearly defined framework for us and how we should approach and support neurodivergent individuals within our communities. By embodying these principles, we bear the responsibility and accountability to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all people, regardless of their neurodiversity.

What is Syncretic Perspective on Neurodiversity?

Syncretism (or syncretic perspective) is seen as a process during which the blending or merging of different beliefs, traditions, or cultural practices into a cohesive whole takes place (Leopold & Jensen, 2016; also see Stewart, 1999, for more detail). This form of philosophical stance typically occurs when two or more distinct systems of beliefs or practices come into contact and influence each other, merging to create of a new, combined system. It can happen in various aspects of culture, including religion, philosophy, art, and social customs.

In the context of neurodiversity, a syncretic perspective acknowledges and embraces the diverse range of neurological variations within the human population (Smith, 2023; Zhang, 2023). It rejects the notion that there is only one ‘normal’ or ‘typical’ way for brains to function and instead recognizes that human beings may have different cognitive styles, preferences, and abilities. This perspective emphasizes the value of diversity in neurological functioning and seeks to create environments that accommodate and celebrate this diversity.

From a syncretic standpoint, neurodiversity is not viewed as a deviation from a norm to be corrected or normalized. Instead, it should be seen as a natural and valuable aspect of human variation. It recognizes that neurodiverse individuals may have unique strengths and perspectives that can contribute to their society in meaningful ways. Rather than focusing solely on deficits or challenges associated with certain neurotypes, a syncretic approach considers the full spectrum of experiences and abilities that neurodiverse individuals can bring to the table.

In practice, a syncretic perspective on neurodiversity promotes inclusive policies and practices that respect the needs and preferences of all individuals, regardless of their neurological makeup. This may include accommodations in educational settings, workplace environments, and social interactions to ensure that neurodiverse individuals have equal opportunities to thrive. Moreover, it involves challenging stigma and stereotypes associated with neurodivergence and advocating for greater acceptance and understanding within society.

Generally, a syncretic perspective on neurodiversity emphasizes the complexity and richness of human cognition. It also seeks to create a more inclusive and equitable world for individuals of all neurological backgrounds.

How Christian Bibliocentric and Syncretic Perspectives differ on Neurodiversity

The Christian bibliocentric perspective (CBcP), depending on which denominations including the Roman Catholic Church, on neurodiversity often emphasizes the themes of acceptance, understanding, and inclusion within the context of God’s creation. Some Christian doctrinal interpretations suggest that neurodiversity is part of the divine plan, reflecting the diversity of God’s creation and serving a purpose within the larger framework of humankind. However, it is important to take note that CBcPs can also vary widely depending on interpretation and theological beliefs. Some may view neurodiversity through a lens of sin or brokenness from the times of Adam and Eve, when they were cast out from the Garden of Eden, while others see it as a natural variation that enriches human experience and community.

Syncretic perspectives, on the other hand, often blend elements from multiple religious or spiritual traditions, as well as secular philosophies. In the context of neurodiversity, syncretic perspectives may draw from diverse sources such as indigenous wisdom, Eastern spirituality, and contemporary psychology. These perspectives tend to embrace the idea of neurodiversity as a natural and valuable aspect of human existence, reflecting the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of honoring individual differences.

One distinct difference between Christian bibliocentric and syncretic perspectives on neurodiversity, as I see it, lies in their underlying frameworks and authorities. Biblical perspectives typically rely on religious texts, doctrines, and interpretations handed down through tradition, while syncretic perspectives may draw from a wider range of diverse sources and prioritize personal experience, intuition, and cross-cultural dialogue. Additionally, syncretic perspectives often emphasize holistic approaches to well-being, integrating several dimensions (i.e., physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual) of health and human experience.

Another distinct difference is that syncretism frequently draws its varied perspective from New Age Movement (Frigerio, 2016; Kernbach, 2014) and Eastern spirituality (Baird, 2016; Pandian, 2006), which refers to the religious and philosophical traditions originating from Asia, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. These traditions often emphasize inner peace, enlightenment, meditation, and harmony with nature. They have unique beliefs and practices distinct from monotheistic religions like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

In short, while the CBcPs on neurodiversity may vary depending on theological interpretations, they often reflect themes of acceptance and inclusion within the framework of divine creation. On the other hand, unlike the CBcPs, syncretic perspectives tend to draw from a wider range of sources and emphasize holistic understandings of neurodiversity as a natural and valuable aspect of human diversity. Both perspectives contribute to ongoing discussions and efforts to promote understanding, acceptance, and support for neurodiverse individuals within their society. Steward (2016) has argued that Christians must necessarily be syncretic, or at least more syncretic, and in this case, within the larger context of neurodiversity, to emphasize the importance of inclusivity and adaptability in religious practices to accommodate diverse neurological perspectives and experiences.

Why do some Christians reject Syncretic Perspective on Neurodiversity

There are also those Christians who may choose to reject syncretism. According to them, this is because the syncretic perspective dilutes the core tenets of their Christian faith by compromising their beliefs and leading to confusion among believers (Bastide, 2016; Madsen, 1967; Van der Veer, 1994). I have listed just three examples here in my attempt to illustrate and/or explain why these Christians are wary of syncretism:

- 1) **Doctrinal integrity:** Syncretism can lead to the distortion or watering down of essential Christian doctrines. Mixing Christian beliefs with incompatible ideas from other religions can undermine the clarity and integrity of biblical teachings;
- 2) **Worship practices:** Syncretism in worship can result in the adoption of rituals or practices that are contrary to Christian principles. For instance, blending Christian worship with practices from pagan religions may compromise the purity of worship and detract from the focus on God; and
- 3) **Identity and witness:** Embracing syncretism can blur the distinctiveness of the Christian identity and message. Christians are called to be salt and light in the world, representing the truth of the Gospel. Syncretism can muddy this witness, making it difficult for others to understand what Christianity truly stands for.

Being aware of syncretism allows Christians to discern and maintain the purity of their faith (Bauer, 2005; Bastide, 2016), safeguarding it from influences that could lead them astray from biblical truth. More importantly, syncretism, as described earlier, involves the merging of different beliefs or practices in an attempt to incorporate biblical tenets within the concepts of neurodiversity in ways that may challenge traditional Christian faith. I have listed

another three examples to explain why it could become a contending issue of concern as follows:

- 1) **Neurodiversity as divine variation:** Some syncretic movements may interpret neurodiversity - such as autism, ADHD, or dyslexia - as expressions of divine variation rather than deviations from a perceived norm. They might draw parallels between the diversity of human minds and the diversity of spiritual gifts described in the Holy Bible (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-11). This view challenges the notion of disability as a flaw or punishment, potentially leading to a reinterpretation of biblical teachings on healing or salvation.
- 2) **Inclusive interpretations of biblical stories:** Syncretic interpretations might reinterpret biblical stories through a neurodiverse lens, highlighting characters or events in ways that challenge traditional understandings. For instance, such interpretations may view figures like Moses or Jeremiah - who exhibited traits that could align with neurodivergent experiences - as models of divine purpose despite societal marginalization or communication differences. This can challenge the conventional understanding of biblical narratives and prompt a reevaluation of how diversity is valued within Christian communities.
- 3) **Spiritual practices for neurodiverse individuals:** Syncretic movements may develop spiritual practices tailored to the needs and preferences of neurodiverse individuals, incorporating elements from both Christian tradition and contemporary understandings of neurodiversity. This could include sensory-friendly worship spaces, alternative forms of prayer or meditation that accommodate different cognitive styles, or rituals that celebrate the unique contributions of neurodiverse believers. By integrating these practices into Christian faith communities, syncretism challenges the notion of a one-size-fits-all approach to spirituality and encourages a more inclusive understanding of divine connection.

In each of these examples mentioned above, syncretism blends biblical tenets with insights from neurodiversity to expand and enrich Christian faith. While this may lead to confusion or controversy within some Christian circles, it also offers opportunities for deeper reflection on the nature of diversity, inclusion, and divine purpose within the Christian tradition.

Implications of Differences between CBcP & Syncretic Perspective on Neurodiversity

I want to reiterate at this juncture that the CBcP on neurodiversity often emphasizes divine intentionality and purpose behind every individual's existence, including those with neurodevelopmental differences. As already mentioned earlier, this perspective views neurodiversity as part of God's diverse creation, where each person's unique traits serve a specific role in the grand scheme of things. The emphasis on acceptance and inclusion stems from the belief that all individuals are created in God's image, regardless of their neurological makeup. Thus, the Christian bibliocentric view advocates for compassion, understanding, and support for individuals with neurodiverse conditions, recognizing their inherent value and dignity as creations of God.

On the other hand, the syncretic perspective, as explained earlier, blends elements of various religious and cultural beliefs, often leading to a more pluralistic understanding of neurodiversity. In this view, neurodiversity may be interpreted through the lens of multiple faith traditions and cultural practices, accommodating diverse interpretations and beliefs about the nature and significance of neurological differences. Syncretism may encourage a more flexible and adaptive approach to neurodiversity, drawing insights and practices from different religious and cultural frameworks to support individuals with diverse needs.

The implications of these differences are multifaceted. The CBcP may foster a sense of belonging and affirmation within Christian communities for individuals with neurodiverse conditions, promoting acceptance and inclusion based on religious teachings. Conversely, the syncretic perspective may provide a broader framework for understanding and accommodating neurodiversity, integrating diverse perspectives and practices to meet the needs of a multicultural and multifaith society.

Ultimately, both perspectives offer valuable insights and approaches to understanding and supporting neurodiversity, each contributing to a more holistic and inclusive understanding of human diversity. Balancing religious beliefs with contemporary understandings of neurodiversity can lead to more compassionate and effective support systems for individuals with diverse neurological profiles.

Conclusion

The Christian Bibliocentric Perspective (CBcP) and the syncretic perspective on neurodiversity offer distinct frameworks for understanding and engaging with neurodiversity within the Christian faith. The CBcP approach places its emphasis on the importance of interpreting neurodiversity through the lens of biblical principles and teachings, viewing each individual as uniquely created by God with inherent dignity and worth. Within this perspective, there is an emphasis on inclusion, acceptance, and support for individuals with neurodivergent traits, grounded in the belief that all are made in the image of God.

As for the syncretic perspective, its approach seeks to integrate various cultural, spiritual, and scientific beliefs and practices into the understanding of neurodiversity. This approach acknowledges the complexity of human diversity and seeks to honor diverse ways of knowing and being. While some Christians may reject the syncretic perspective due to concerns about diluting or compromising core Christian beliefs, others see it as a way to expand understanding and foster greater empathy and inclusivity within the Christian community.

The implications of these differences are significant for both theological discourse and practical engagement with neurodiversity within Christian communities. The CBcP approach may lead to a more conservative approach, focusing on adherence to biblical teachings and traditional understandings of human nature and behavior. In contrast, the syncretic perspective opens up space for dialogue and exploration, inviting Christians to engage with diverse perspectives and learn from other cultures and belief systems.

Moving forward, the tension between these perspectives may continue to shape theological discourse within Christianity,

prompting reflection on how best to understand and respond to neurodiversity in light of Christian teachings. Ultimately, both perspectives offer valuable insights and have the potential to contribute to a more compassionate and inclusive understanding of neurodiversity within the Christian faith.

Acknowledgement

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