

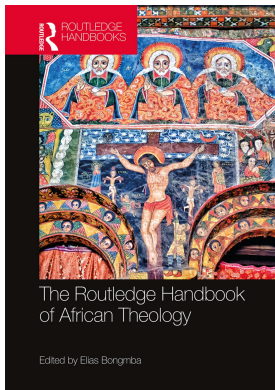
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### Theology of inculturation

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### 3

# THEOLOGY OF INCULTURATION

## History, meaning, and implications

*Laurenti Magesa*

### **“God does not show favoritism...”**

Chapter 10 of the book of the Acts of the Apostles narrates in some detail the encounter between the Apostle Peter and Cornelius, a captain in the Roman army there. Sent almost against his will by the Spirit of God, Peter comes to a remarkable and revolutionary perception of the kind that not only surprised Peter and his colleagues who followed Jesus, but was something people at the time would have found unthinkable. In his speech to Cornelius and the “large gathering of people” at his house, Peter condenses his newly acquired discernment of Jesus’ core mission into a single sentence, one that is truly the foundation of the universality of the Gospel. It is a fundamental understanding. “I now realize,” he confesses, “how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (Acts 10:34–35). But the elaboration he makes to the gathering gives flesh to this new appreciation and helps Cornelius and his party come to the same awareness as well.

You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with him.

We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem ... He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

*(Acts 10:36–43)<sup>1</sup>*

The main elements Peter is underlining, and that he insists cannot be separated from the task of the proclamation of the Gospel, include the fact that the universality of Jesus’ message arises from the identity of Jesus himself, “who is Lord of all” because he is the anointed one of God; that the works Jesus performs are under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and are aimed at the

liberation of humanity from every chain of evil; and that his works must be continued in various places, in the same way, and under the same guidance of the Spirit of God by his “witnesses.”

Peter’s is an excellent synthesis of the indisputable requirements of the proclamation of the Gospel across the ages. The commission of Jesus to his disciples is irreversible; it mandates them to go to “all nations” without exception and “preach the Good News to everyone” (Mk. 16:15, Mt. 28:19, Acts 1:8). Thus, the privilege of all peoples throughout the world to hear the message of the Gospel, on the one hand, and the responsibility of Christ’s followers to spread the message, on the other, were pretty much settled questions from the very beginning of the Christian movement, at least in principle. The contentious question was and in various ways continues to be *how* to go about this double task. Is the ideal method to let each people hear the message “in their particular tongue,” as happened at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13), or in one or another “favored” expression, as the early Judaizers insisted (Acts 15:1, also Gal. 2:1–19)? Again, in many subtle and palpable ways, the question still exercises the thinking of Christians and, as from the beginning, with several responses.

The history of the Christian churches shows that practical attitudes to this question have ranged from refusal to accept the legitimacy of cultural pluralism in terms of proclamation and reception of the Gospel in one extreme, through some degree of tolerance in the middle, to positive approval.<sup>2</sup> The first attitude was fuelled mainly by various forms of political colonialism with which the churches may have been associated at one time or another. The controlling dialectic in this situation was the supposed “superiority” of the culture or cultures of the evangelizers in which the Christian faith happened to be expressed over the receiving cultures that were invariably deemed “inferior” and “unworthy” of expressing the truth of the Christian faith. On close analysis, however, the issue here does not appear to have been the faith but essentially human ego, perhaps unconsciously disguised as faith. With the gradual recognition of the reality of the persistence or permanence of different cultures in the world and the inevitable translation of the message of the Gospel in different modes of perception, despite the attitudes of the evangelizers, cultural tolerance followed as a missionary strategy. The acknowledgment of positive religious values in every culture was grudging. Even though cultures are different, the realization grew in certain parts of the world that there can be no other way to impart the message of the Gospel except to “adapt” it to certain aspects of different cultures that cannot be easily wiped away, and that would cause great harm if they were.

But one approach to the interaction between the proclamation of the Gospel and human “language” or culture that has prevailed and seems most acceptable theologically today is the style and attitude dramatized at Pentecost. In terms of the history of the church in the Far East, as an example, it was fundamentally the style articulated in 1659 by the Vatican Congregation for evangelization for missionaries there to follow. The Congregation instructed European missionaries to the Chinese and Indo-Chinese peoples to

Put no obstacles in their way; and for no reason whatever should you persuade these people to change their rites, customs, and ways of life unless these are obviously opposed to religion and good morals. For what is more absurd than to bring France or Spain or Italy or any other part of Europe into China[?]. It is not these that you should bring but the faith which does not spurn or reject any people’s rites and customs, unless they are depraved, but, on the contrary, tries to keep them ... admire and praise what deserves to be respected.<sup>3</sup>

Although oscillating between observance and neglect at certain times and places, this approach to culture has stayed at the heart of the church’s proclamation of the Gospel.

## Current perspectives on evangelization and culture

In current times, the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church (Vatican II), meeting around the mid-20th century (1962–1965), was very specific about the relationship between the mission of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and human culture. One of the Council's most significant documents, the Constitution, on the relationship between the church and the world, *Gaudium et Spes*, declared that

There are many ties between the message of salvation and human culture. The Incarnate, Son of the Father, has spoken according to the culture proper to each epoch. Likewise, the Church in the course of time has used the discoveries of different cultures so that in her preaching, she might spread and explain the message of Christ to all nations. At the same time, the Church is not bound exclusively to any race or nation, any particular way of life. Faithful to her own tradition, she can enter into communion with the various civilizations. The Gospel of Christ constantly renews the life and culture of fallen man. It never ceases to purify and elevate the morality of peoples. By riches coming from above, it makes fruitful the spiritual qualities and traditions of every people and age. The Church, in the very fulfillment of her own function, stimulates and advances human and civic culture by her action, leading ... [people] toward interior liberty.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Council was speaking from the perspective of Catholic Christianity, the insights it offers on the subject are those also of many other major Christian churches. The evangelical mission statements at Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974 and the Affirmation of the World Evangelical Fellowship at Iguassu, Nigeria, in 1999 are examples. Both affirmed the same thing as Vatican II. The Lausanne Covenant states that “The Gospel does not presuppose the superiority of any culture to another, but evaluates all cultures according to its own criteria of truth and righteousness, and insists on moral absolutes in every culture.”<sup>5</sup> And according to the Iguassu statement, messengers of the Gospel must commit themselves to the task of constantly clarifying “the relationship between Gospel and Culture, both in theory and practice,” because “The Gospel is always presented and received within a cultural context.” Therefore, the statement directs, Christians must continue studying “how different cultural perspectives may enrich our understanding of the Gospel as well as how all worldviews have to be critiqued and transformed by it.”<sup>6</sup>

A paper prepared for a conference of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Athens, Greece, in 2005 on mission and evangelism specified that

In any culture, the message of Christ must be proclaimed in language and symbols adapted to that culture and in ways that are relevant to people's life experiences. There are different approaches to culturally sensitive evangelism. For some people and churches, such witness is implicit when churches regularly celebrate the liturgy, including in it, where appropriate, local cultural symbols. Others suggest that “a way of making non-intrusive contact with communities of other cultures is that of ‘presence.’ An effort is first made to get to know and understand people in that community, and sincerely to listen to and learn from them ... At the right time, people could be invited to participate in the story of the gospel.” In some cases, the gospel may best be conveyed by silent solidarity or be revealed through a deeply spiritual way of life. In contexts which are hostile to the voicing of the gospel, the witness could take place

through providing “a safe space” for spirituality to germinate, where the Jesus story can be revealed.” Others insist that in most contexts explicit testimony is called for that there is no substitute for preaching the word, following the manifold impulses and dynamics of the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

In a letter dedicated specifically to evangelism, Pope Francis has recently described the “adaptability” of the Gospel to different cultures as something to celebrate: it constitutes, in his words, the “joy of the Gospel.” The aptitude of the Gospel of Christ to enter into every culture and to be able to be expressed and proclaimed through the various cultures of the world is a joyous gift. As he insists (in criticism of certain mentalities and tendencies prevailing in some quarters of the church), “We cannot demand that peoples of every continent, in expressing their Christian faith, imitate modes of expression which European nations [for example] developed at a particular moment of their history.” Faith in Christ is universal; he insists it “cannot be constricted to the limits of understanding and expression of any one culture. It is an indisputable fact that no single culture can exhaust the mystery of our redemption in Christ.”<sup>8</sup> To explain this core point of the proclamation of the Gospel, he continues to clarify that

The People of God is incarnate in the peoples of the earth, each of which has its own culture. The concept of culture is valuable for grasping the various expressions of the Christian life present in God’s people. It has to do with the lifestyle of a given society, the specific way in which its members relate to one another, to other creatures and to God. Understood in this way, culture embraces the totality of a people’s life. Each people in the course of its history develops its culture with legitimate autonomy. This is due to the fact that the human person, “by nature stands completely in need of life in society” and always exists in reference to society, finding there a concrete way of relating to reality. The human person is always situated in a culture: “nature and culture are intimately linked.” Grace supposes culture, and God’s gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it.<sup>9</sup>

It follows, then, according to the Pope, that “When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity,” since “The Holy Spirit . . . transforms our hearts and enables us to enter into the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity, where all things find their unity.” In our cultural diversity, he observes, the Holy Spirit himself “brings forth a rich variety of gifts, while at the same time creating a unity which is never uniformity but a multifaceted and inviting harmony.”<sup>10</sup> As he sees it, this fact is also in tune with the logic of the incarnation, which is both deeply cultural at the same time as it is eminently transcultural. According to Pope Francis, therefore,

Evangelization joyfully acknowledges these varied treasures which the Holy Spirit pours out upon the Church. We would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous. While it is true that some cultures have been closely associated with the preaching of the Gospel and the development of Christian thought, the revealed message is not identified with any of them; its content is transcultural. Hence in the evangelization of new cultures or cultures which have not received the Christian message, it is not essential to impose a specific cultural form, no matter how beautiful or ancient it may be, together with the Gospel. The message that we proclaim always has a certain cultural dress, but we in the Church can sometimes fall into a needless hallowing of our own culture, and thus show more fanaticism than true evangelizing zeal.<sup>11</sup>

These and numerous other statements of a similar orientation from various Christian traditions<sup>12</sup> provide a synthesis of both the mission of the church in the world, which is evangelization, and the practical dynamics of approaching this charge, or Christian pastoral action. The church does not do mission as her own invention. Because it is essentially God's mission, she follows a scheme intrinsic to God's self-revelation to humanity from the beginning of creation, as it is expressed in the Scriptures. This "structure" forms the history of salvation. In one word, it constitutes the dynamics between divine revelation and human culture or cultures. This is what is referred to theologically as "inculturation," the process through which "the Church 'introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community,'" as Pope Francis explains. For

"every culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood and lived." In this way, the Church takes up the values of different cultures and becomes *sponsa ornata monilibus suis*, "the bride bedecked with her jewels."<sup>13</sup>

### Contextuality and divine self-revelation

The subtleties of the interplay between faith and culture, or inculturation, that are indicated in the churches' documents just exemplified also permeate the Scriptures. They are based on and arise from there. When Jesus is described in the New Testament as "Messiah" or "The Anointed One of God," for instance, the designation is not without foundation in the practical history of Israel. The title can only be properly understood within the context of this history. The narratives about the liberation of the people of Israel from the situation of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the land of Canaan, theologically recalled in great detail in the biblical books of Exodus and Joshua, provide a good clue to the context of the ascription "Messiah" later on to the person and work of Jesus. Moses was, of course, the principal figure in the initial movement of the freedom of the people of Israel. However, the person who succeeded him to complete the mission was Hosea son of Nun, who was christened "Joshua" by Moses himself, evidently to connote the saving activity of God in his successor.<sup>14</sup>

The salvation of the people of Israel by God's power through the actions of mentors he "anointed," like Joshua, is the central and overriding motif of the entire narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. The same theme is taken over from the very outset in the Christian Scriptures, the New Testament, as culminating in Jesus. For the New Testament, Jesus appears as the new Joshua for the new people of God, the Christian community. When the angel Gabriel announces to Mary the news of her being chosen by God to bear God's son, therefore, the salvation theme is obvious at every stage of the account. Jesus, as the new Joshua, is the preeminent Messiah—rendered in Greek as "the Christ." The angel pronounces this detail to Mary by alerting her to the effect that "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus [Joshua]." Luke's Gospel specifies that this new Joshua "will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end" (Lk. 1:31–33). In short, just as of old with Joshua in the liberation of Israel as a prototype, God will be acting through Jesus to liberate the entire humanity.

What this affirmation demonstrates is the fact that the saving activity of Jesus is founded in the liberating activity of God himself, as expressed in God's activity among the people of Israel's existence. Theologically, Israel is a prototype of the entire human race; her history of salvation is also archetypal of the history of humanity. Jesus' activity is the mystical representation or, in fact, the actual extension and completion of the divine activity of liberation for the whole of

the human race since creation. By prefacing, as he does, the saving activity of Jesus with a list of his genealogy in his Gospel account, Matthew also means to impart this exact lesson. He bases the messiahship of Jesus upon the salvation leitmotif of Israel by recording the major figures connected with it. In a more metaphysical but perhaps even more profound way, the evangelist John likewise begins his Gospel by reclaiming the same context of the divine self-revelation to and for humanity from the beginning of creation. The Word (the manifestation of God on earth) existed from the beginning, but he “became flesh [human] and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:4). The Word, who is Jesus, is now Immanuel, God amongst us, and he is the same as all of humanity in all respects but sin (see Mt. 1:23 and Heb. 4:15). This is the incarnation—the fundamental mystery for human salvation.

The incarnation and its natural extension and conclusion in the teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus constitute one process—theologically described as the Christ-event—that revealed completely and fully the meaning of God and his activity in the world concerning the ultimate goal of humanity. Like many others, Pope John Paul understands this process appropriately as a “sublime mystery.” It is

a mystery which took place *in history*: in clearly defined circumstances of time and space, amidst a people with its own culture, a people that God had chosen and accompanied throughout the entire history of salvation, in order to show through what he did for them what he intended to do for the whole human race.<sup>15</sup>

The Christ-event took place, and its consequences continue to do so, in real time and actual geographical and social locations and conditions, with God using the appropriate symbols and signs and language to impart his liberating message clearly, whether or not it is accepted by humanity. Whatever the case, however, comprehension by specific men and women, the addressees of God’s message, is essential to the process. There could not and cannot be any “revelation” at all without God’s direct engagement with the world; that is, God’s interaction with humanity in time and space. Revelation is truly a “dialogue” or a process of “communication” between God and humanity. Such also is clearly the case with the Christian Gospel carried on by the church in the world; it means that to be effective as such, the Gospel must be proclaimed in a “language” capable of being understood by the intended hearers. The Gospel must be contextualized in time and place if it is to have a meaningful reception and response.

For “Just as ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’” (Jn. 1:14), as Pope John Paul II explained, “so too the Good News, the Word of Jesus Christ proclaimed to the nations, *must take root* in the life-situation of the hearers of the Word.” This is what it implies to go out and preach the Gospel to all nations. Thus, in the view of Pope John Paul II, inculturation corresponds to the incarnation. “Inculturation is precisely this insertion of the Gospel message into cultures. For the Incarnation of the Son of God, precisely because it was complete and concrete, was also an incarnation in a particular culture.”<sup>16</sup> Like everything involved in human communication, the Gospel of Christ must be interpreted: salvation history is simply this dialectic encounter between God and peoples as formed by their cultures. It is an ongoing call and response, a continual dialogue which always and necessarily takes place in specific cultural contexts and never in a cultural vacuum.

Practically, the proclamation of the Gospel throughout the world makes certain demands on its messengers. It “presupposes that preachers and teachers enlarge their horizons to include an accurate and intimate understanding of the culture and language of the people they address.”<sup>17</sup> A problem arises if this requirement is ignored or forgotten and the Gospel is presented without

attention to variations of social settings. Anthony J. Gittins presents it as a thesis in “intercultural living” that

Since a particular culture (or constellation of cultural traits) marks every single person, it follows that a person’s faith can only be lived *culturally*; there is no lived faith without a corresponding lived culture. Faith is expressed in practice. This requires that everyone be encouraged to express faith through one’s culture and be made aware that failure to live deeply within and through one’s own culture can produce a kind of religious or spiritual schizophrenia.<sup>18</sup>

It becomes difficult for anyone to identify oneself fully with the Gospel if the message of the Gospel is expressed and presented as an “alien” reality, far removed from one’s deepest experience.

### Scholarly meaning of the concept

Given the conditionalities of the communication of the Gospel message within specific contexts, we may adopt it as one of the best technical and scholarly descriptions of the notion of inculturation that was provided by the Jesuit father Pedro Arrupe. In his 1978 “Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation,” Arrupe saw inculturation as the process of “the incarnation of Christian life and the Christian message in a particular local cultural context.” And this must take place

in such a way that the experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation), but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies a culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about “a new creation.”<sup>19</sup>

This is precisely the dynamics, according to Pope John Paul II, that makes the Christian faith a culture, something that is demanded by both Gospel and culture. “The synthesis between culture and faith is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith,” John Paul II declares. “A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not faithfully lived out.”<sup>20</sup>

Scholars isolate two fundamental properties of the process of inculturation, one mainly theological and the other explicitly sociological, even if the two are not completely unconnected. The theological aspect pertains to the nature and method of divine self-revelation that we have briefly discussed above. This is that God reveals God’s divine self through concrete events and locations in history. The Christian God is a historical God, not an abstract philosophical one aloof from humanity. The Christian God is, indeed, “Immanuel”—God with us, as already noted, a reality concretized by the fact of the incarnation, in the person of Jesus who lived and suffered and died for the liberation of humanity (Phil. 2:5–7). Therefore, in Christianity, the human relationship with God is also concrete, demanding the practice of love-justice, the imperative of doing the will of God, which is a sincere concern for and service of other human beings, especially those in need (Mt. 25:31–46). In this task, time and space, and therefore human culture, cannot be dispensed with, for it is in these situations that the divine will is revealed.

The sociological aspect of inculturation concerns itself with human dignity that, in the process of evangelization, is realized by recognizing and respecting the “otherness of the other.” Teresia Hinga describes this as everyone and every community’s “right to be different and the right to resist imposed difference.”<sup>21</sup> On the part of the recipients of the Gospel, inculturation,



therefore, demands the right of self-definition, or the ability to assert that “this is who or what I am.” One becomes an adult when one reaches this point in life. It is a liberating moment, even in theological terms, because it allows the faith to sink its roots into the very being of the individual and the community. One cannot avoid referring here to the empowering question Jesus posed to his disciples concerning his identity: “And you, who do you say that I am?” In Peter’s answer, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus acknowledges this moment and confirms the maturity of Peter’s faith and his readiness for the responsibility of leadership (Mt. 16:13–20).

At this point in the discussion on the notion of inculturation in academic scholarship, it is useful to specify what inculturation is not. Strictly speaking, even if the process has important overt sociological expressions and consequences, such as modes of conducting Christian ritual (liturgy), and a sense of personal and cultural dignity—as has just been pointed out—inculturation is primarily a theological term that essentially refers to “God and faith.”<sup>22</sup> It is much deeper than enculturation, acculturation, or adaptation, which are sociological processes.<sup>23</sup> But “when we speak of inculturation,” as Aylward Shorter specifies, “we are referring to a phenomenon that transcends mere acculturation. It is the stage when a human culture is enlivened by the Gospel from within.”<sup>24</sup>

From pastoral theology, therefore, what Gittins cautions about the popular usage of the phrase “liturgical inculturation” is important to keep in mind concerning other areas of church life as well. The subject of inculturation is faith, “not liturgy, ritual, translation, or adaptation.” If one is to be precise theologically, liturgy can only be “acculturated” or “adapted” to the relevant cultures. “If, however, liturgical modifications produce a harvest of renewal in the way the faith is lived, then that harvest—and not the liturgy itself—is inculturated faith.”<sup>25</sup> It means that genuine inculturation is always a deeper reality than its sociological manifestations. It encompasses these externals, it is true, but it works to transform the interior attitudes of persons and communities so that they have new perspectives on actual living. For this, perhaps the phrase “to be born again,”<sup>26</sup> if used correctly in its theological sense, is accurate: true inculturation should bring about “new life.”

### **Practical and theological dynamics of inculturation**

The historical dynamics of inculturation in the Christian Church contain necessary tensions about the distinction between what is “clean” or “unclean;” or what is permissible or otherwise based on Christ’s Gospel. Inculturation is, consequently, a narrative that pertains to what, legitimately, Christian people at any given time and place may or may not do. As such, inculturation is a highly dynamic and interactive process which has, as one of its main features, continuous explicit or implicit comparisons between or among modes of human existence in the world. The question of how “we” do things in relation, or as opposed, to “them” is always a major (even if often implicit) component of the narrative of inculturation regardless of what, in the end, the answer to the inquiry might be. For, in general, the sense of evaluation of the “other” belongs to the very nature of human communication and influences the direction of human interactions, for better or worse.

From the New Testament, the story of inculturation is clearly illustrated by tensions in the early existence of the church, leading to their (theoretical, doctrinal<sup>27</sup>) resolution at the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem at around 50 CE. The Apostle Peter’s spiritual transformation<sup>28</sup> is certainly analogous in many fundamental ways to that of Saul of Tarsus or Paul (Acts 9), and there are paradigmatic instances of inculturation both in primitive Christianity and today. Initially resistant to appreciating the “different other,” seen from their vantage points as impermissible or, indeed,

“unclean,” both Peter and Paul are led into a new insight to appreciate the other’s perception of reality, something that radically transforms them. They embrace a new perspective.

Whatever impression these and other accounts in both the Old and New Testaments portray, the transformation of this nature is not a sudden happening; it is rather a stretched out and usually unfinished development. Inculturation, the divine activity transforming peoples and cultures from within, as is also evident throughout the later history of the church as the proclamation of the Gospel moves from one place of the world to another, is similarly a long-drawn-out and ongoing development. In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II notes likewise that

The process of the Church’s insertion into peoples’ cultures is a lengthy one. It is not a matter of purely external adaptation, for inculturation “means the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration into Christianity and the insertion of Christianity into the various human cultures.”

The Pope continues to explain that inculturation

is thus a profound and all-embracing one, which involves the Christian message and also the Church’s reflection and practice. But at the same time, it is a difficult process, for it must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith.<sup>29</sup>

Still, the Gospel must, necessarily, even if gradually, take on the symbols and language proper to each locality. For, “From ancient times down to the present,” as the conciliar document of Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, puts it,

there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrate their lives with a profound religious sense.<sup>30</sup>

Inculturation must, therefore, encourage all people of faith to “find God in all things,” to borrow a phrase from the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola. This is one of its most important theological implications. Inculturation reminds us of the greatness of God, who cannot be captured or contained in human understanding at any one time or place, but must continually be sought “in all things.” Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue are, therefore, proper and necessary elements of the process. This is why, according to Vatican II, the Church

exhorts her sons [and daughters], that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these ... [people].<sup>31</sup>

### **Inculturation in Africa**

It should be clear how and why inculturation is a worldwide requirement of the Gospel. Nevertheless, it is more pronounced in some regions of the world where the message of Christ has been formally introduced only in comparatively recent times. This is the case with Africa south of the Sahara. Realizing this fact, Pope Paul VI echoed the spirit of the conciliar document

*Gaudium et Spes*, noted above, to the entire episcopate of the African Catholic Church gathered in Kampala in 1969. The Pope urged the bishops to take the African context seriously in the task of proclaiming the Gospel. Without mincing words, they said:

*you may, and you must, have an African Christianity.* Indeed, you *possess* human values and characteristic forms of culture which can rise up to perfection, such as to find in Christianity, and for Christianity, a true superior fullness, and prove to be capable of richness of expression, all its own, and genuinely African ... [Y]ou will be able to remain sincerely African, even in your interpretation of Christian life; you will be able to formulate Catholicism in terms congenial to your own culture; you will be capable of bringing to the Catholic Church the precious and original contribution of “negritude” which she needs, particularly in this historic hour.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, the final Communiqué of the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians stated in 1977:

We believe that African theology must be understood in the context of African life and culture and the creative attempt of African people to shape a new future that is different from the colonial past and the neo-colonial present. ... African theology must reject, therefore, the prefabricated ideas of North Atlantic theology by defining itself according to the struggles of the people in their resistance against the structures of domination. Our task as theologians is to create a theology that arises from and is accountable to African people.<sup>33</sup>

Numerous more references can be cited to the same effect. In short, the point being made, in the words of Bishop Bernard Agre from the Ivory Coast in 1990 is that the African church must stop being seen or seeing itself as “a carbon copy of Europe.” It is imperative for the churches of the continent, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to construct their Christian vision and history.<sup>34</sup> Essential to inculturation in Africa is the critical “rehabilitation” of African spiritual/religious values. “African religious experience and heritage ... should have formed the vehicle for conveying the Gospel verities to Africa,” as Archbishop Desmond Tutu once observed. “It ... [is] vital for the African’s self-respect that this kind of rehabilitation of his religious heritage should take place.” African spirituality, according to Tutu, remains “a great store from which we [Africans] can fashion new ways of speaking to and about God, and new styles of worship consistent with our new faith.”<sup>35</sup>

This exercise involves the human faculty of the intellect, the imagination of Africa. Imagination creates culture as much as it transforms it. For faith in Jesus to become a culture and to transform culture in Africa, Africans must envision what is possible for the church there under the guidance of the Gospel. In Africa, African theology must fulfill this role. African theology must address questions that African people and communities are facing. The questions John V. Taylor posed more than half a century ago (in 1963) must form the quest of African theology: these are such as “if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?” This is the question for African Christology. If Christ came into the African world as the liberator of the African person, how would he act? This is the question for African soteriology. And, finally, “if Africa offered ... [Christ] the praises and petitions of her total uninhibited humanity,” how in practice would this appear? This is the question for African ecclesiology and worship.<sup>36</sup> For inculturation in Africa, these remain the most urgent questions.

## Conclusion

Inculturation as a matter of “encounter” between the Gospel of Christ and particular cultures—the Gospel concretely meeting cultural human beings with their own strengths and shortcomings and with their values and customs, some responding positively and others negatively to Christ’s invitation to discipleship—must be acknowledged as the essence of evangelization or evangelism in the Christian Church. As briefly spelled out by M.A.C. Warren, the challenge of inculturation in the process of proclaiming the Gospel throughout the world is, therefore, always twofold: first, to constantly try to respond to “the deep human needs” of peoples of a particular location at a specific point in history, and, second, “to make peoples of different cultural backgrounds feel at home” in the new environment the proclamation of Gospel continuously constructs and establishes.<sup>37</sup>

In this sense, and pragmatic terms, inculturation cannot but be part and parcel of Gospel and of the Christian Church which is called upon to proclaim it throughout the ages. The document of the World Council of Churches, already referred to, states accordingly:

When the gospel interacts authentically with a culture, it becomes rooted in that culture and opens up biblical and theological meaning for its time and place. The gospel will affirm some aspects of a culture, while challenging, critiquing, and transforming others. Through such processes, cultures may be transfigured and become bearers of the gospel. At the same time, cultures nourish, illuminate, enrich, and challenge the understanding and articulation of the gospel.<sup>38</sup>

As the same document continues to elaborate, inculturation is, therefore, never anywhere a *carte blanche* but a complex affair. This is its ultimate challenge. To be faithful to the spirit of the Gospel of Christ, it must take into account the Gospel’s definitive vision and goal for the whole of the human race and the entire creation:

The gospel challenges aspects of cultures which produce or perpetuate injustice, suppress human rights, or hinder a sustainable relationship towards creation. There is now need to go beyond certain inculturation theologies. Cultural and ethnic identity is a gift of God, but it must not be used to reject and oppress other identities. Identity should be defined not in opposition to, in competition with or in fear of others, but rather as complementary. “The gospel reconciles and unites people of all identities into a new community in which the primary and ultimate identity is identity in Jesus Christ.”<sup>39</sup>

## Notes

- 1 For this activity of Jesus, see also Mt. 4:23. Scriptural quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible (NIV).
- 2 For documents from the history of the church that indicate these different attitudes, see, for example, Robert A. Hunt, *The Gospel among the Nations: A Documentary History of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).
- 3 Cited by Peter K. Sarpong, “Christianity Meets Traditional African Cultures.” In Hunt, *The Gospel among the Nations*, 176.
- 4 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 58. Incidentally, already in 1939. Pope Pius XII had written in a similar vein in his encyclical letter *Summi Pontificatus* (no. 44–45) that “The Church of Christ ... cannot and does not think of deprecating or disdaining the particular characteristics which each people, with jealous and intelligible pride, cherishes and retains as a precious heritage. Her aim is a super-

natural union in all-embracing love, deeply felt and practiced, and not the unity, which is exclusively external and superficial and by that very fact weak ... The Church hails with joy and follows with her maternal blessing every method of guidance and care which aims at a wise and orderly evolution of particular forces and tendencies having their origin in the individual character of each race, provided that they are not opposed to the duties incumbent on men from their unity of origin and common destiny.”

- 5 “The Lausanne Covenant (1974).” In Hunt, *The Gospel among the Nations*, 263.
  - 6 “Iguassu Affirmation of the World Evangelical Fellowship, 1999.” In Hunt, *The Gospel among the Nations*, 267.
  - 7 file:///C:/Users/Fr.%20Magesa/Downloads/Preparatory%20Paper%20No%201%20(2).pdf, no. 52.
  - 8 Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel – Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2013, no. 118.
  - 9 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 115.
  - 10 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 117.
  - 11 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 117.
  - 12 See some of these documents in Hunt, *The Gospel among the Nations*.
  - 13 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 116.
  - 14 For a discussion on this and related names, see Jews for Jesus, “An Introduction to the Names Yehoshua/ Joshua, Yshua, Jesus and Yeshu.” <https://jewsforjesus.org/answers/an-introduction-to-the-names-yehoshua-joshua-yeshua-jesus-and-yeshu/>
  - 15 John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, 1995, no. 60.
  - 16 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 60.
  - 17 See Frederick E. Crowe, *Christ and History: The Christology of Bernard Lonergan from 1935 to 1982* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2005), 186.
  - 18 Anthony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 4–5.
  - 19 “Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation.” Quoted by Carl F. Starkloff, “Inculturation and Cultural Systems – Part 1.” *Theological Studies*, 55 (1994): 69. For the entire letter, see J. Aixala, ed., *Other Apostolates Today: Selected Letters and Addresses of Pedro Arrupe SJ*. Vol. 3 (St. Louis: institute of Jesuit Sources, 1981), 172–181.
- In terms of inculturation discourse, there are two significant issues to note within Christianity. The first involves the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches and movements, for whom the question concerning inculturation does not arise, at least not as a point of theological speech. These churches’ main orientation is to apply the Bible as it is, an assertion that is usually prefaced by the mantra “the Bible says.” Consciously, therefore, many Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal communities reject the process of inculturation as an adulteration of the Bible. Yet this does not mean that they altogether escape the implications of the dynamics of the notion.
- There are also the indigenous Christian movements and churches in different parts of the world, one important expression of which are the African Initiated, Independent, or Indigenous Churches (AICs). Although these do not, as a rule, have a “theology” of inculturation, their practical expression of it is often extremely pronounced as a sociological reality. The practice of polygamy is a case in point in several African AICs, where these churches object to the rule of monogamy in the mainline churches in Africa as a cultural imposition. In this case, they appeal, if pressed for an explanation, to the practice of some of the patriarchs in the Old Testament for justification of their own behaviour. In the main, however, “inculturation” in these churches and movements takes place intuitively without much academic theological reflection.
- 20 Message of John Paul II to Cardinal Paul Poupard for the 20th Anniversary of the Pontifical Council for Culture. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/may/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20020514\\_message-poupard.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020514_message-poupard.html)
  - 21 Teresia Hinga, “Inculturation and the Otherness of Africans: Some Reflections.” In Peter Turkson and Frans Wijzen, eds., *Inculturation: Abide by the Otherness of Africa and Africans* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1994), 17.
  - 22 Gittins, *Living Mission*, 60.
  - 23 See Gittins, *Living Mission*, 56–60.
  - 24 Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 12.
  - 25 Gittins, *Living Mission*, 60.
  - 26 See Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in Jn. 3:1–21.

- 27 It is important to emphasize the *theoretical* or *doctrinal* aspect of the instructions of the Apostolic meeting of Jerusalem described in Acts 15 because, in actual fact, the conflicts continued. That intercultural tensions cannot be completely resolved once and for all is of the nature of human communication. Be it intra- or intercultural, inculturation is an ongoing process, a continual attempt to “adjust” modes of human existence and the message of the Gospel to ever-changing circumstances.
- 28 See above.
- 29 Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 52,
- 30 Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2.
- 31 Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2.
- 32 Paul VI, Address “To the Inaugural 1969 SECAM, Kampala.” See Teresa Okure, Paul van Thiel et al., *32 Articles Evaluating Inculturation of Christianity in Africa* (Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1990), 35–36. Italics in original.
- 33 Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, “Final Communiqué.” In Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres, eds., *African Theology En Route* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 193.
- 34 See Frans Wijzen and Harrie Hoeben, “We Are Not a Carbon Copy of Europe.” In Turkson and Wijzen, *Inculturation*, 72.
- 35 Quoted in Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 50.
- 36 John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 24. See also, Benezet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).
- 37 M. A. C. Warren, “Foreword.” In Taylor, *Christian Presence*, 8.
- 38 file:///C:/Users/Fr.%20Magesa/Downloads/Preparatory%20Paper%20No%201%20(2).pdf. no. 49.
- 39 No. 50.

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