Culture and Inculturation in the Church

Forty Years on Dovetailing the Gospel with the Human Kaleidoscope

Robert Schreiter, C.SS.P.

An internationally recognized expert in the field of culture and inculturation, Robert Schreiter here surveys the use of these concepts in ecclesiastical documents and theological writing since Gaudium et Spes; he then identifies elements in this trajectory that have both helped and hindered healthy developments in the ongoing interface between Christian faith and the pluriform modes in which humans express their unique character as social beings.

One of the breakthrough dimensions of the Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes was its treatment of the concept of culture. Although the magisterium had noted the importance of culture many times in the past, it was left to the Second Vatican Council to make the first genuinely direct and extended presentation on the meaning of culture for Christian life (Pontificio Consiglio della Cultura, 2003). Since that time, culture has been a central concept in papal and Roman documents. Pope Paul VI gave it prime importance, and the concern for culture has been one of the hallmarks of the papacy of John Paul II.

Beginning especially in the 1970s, the idea of inculturation—the intense dialogue between faith and culture that leads to new expressions of faith in local settings—began to be elaborated both in magisterial documents and in theological circles.

Robert Schreiter, C.SS.P., is the Vatican Council II Professor of Theology at Catholic Theological Union and professor of theology and culture at the University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands. He is also editor of the Faith and Culture Series for Orbis Books.
Although the concept did not appear as such in the documents of Vatican II, the impetus for its development was clearly there. It has become one of the recurring themes in the discussion of culture for Catholics during the past thirty years. As the concept of the World Church and the diversity it implies have come more into focus for Catholics, inculturation has been a much discussed topic.

This article is an attempt at responding to what has become a central question for many Catholics: Just where are we with the concept of culture and the practice of inculturation today? Do the promises of the early years appear to be reaching some fruition or—as has been the case with other initiatives arising out of the council—has the concern for culture and inculturation been halted?

This article will develop a response to this question in four parts. First, some of the salient aspects of culture presented in *Gaudium et Spes* will be recalled, both as to what it said about culture, and how it laid the groundwork for developing the idea of inculturation. Then, in a second part, the many meanings of inculturation that have emerged in the past thirty years will be noted. A third section will note some of the important stances taken at the level of the papacy that have promoted or hindered new developments. A fourth part will offer an assessment of where we find ourselves, forty years after *Gaudium et Spes*.

**Culture in Gaudium et Spes**

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (hereafter, *GS*), was issued at the very end of Vatican II. It was surrounded with some controversy, inasmuch as it represented a very different genre of council document from anything that had come before. It was a constitution (therefore of the highest authority for a document of a council), but was not a dogmatic constitution as had been *Lumen Gentium* or *Dei Verbum*, nor a similarly authoritative constitution such as *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Rather, it was understood as authoritative teaching not so much on some aspect of the Church, but as addressing the world in which the church found itself. It was thus pastoral in nature. As it itself said, it reached beyond the members of the church to address the whole human family about issues of common concern (*GS*, 2). In so doing, *GS* presented a kind of charter for how the church saw itself moving into and with the world in addressing the challenges and problems of humanity.

*GS* had an extraordinary impact both on people within the church and those without. After more than a century of turning away from the world, this document resolutely turned the gaze of the church toward the world. Its tone was optimistic, yet marked by a realism about the nature of sin and the complexity of the world’s problems. For many within the church, it mapped out a way of engaging the world pastorally. For those outside the church, it signalled a commitment to the world that had not been in evidence for generations.
The shift in attitude was indicated by two interlinking ideas that wove their way through the opening paragraphs of the constitution. One was a commitment to engagement with the world, and especially with the poor. In the pontificate of John Paul II some fifteen years later, this commitment would be called "solidarity," a concept taken from nineteenth-century trade unionism, but one destined to become part of Catholic social teaching. This commitment was captured in the famous opening words of the constitution: “The joy and the hope, the grief and the anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and the hope, the grief and the anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts” (GS, 1). This motif of being with the world—rather than being above it or over against it—echoes through the entire document.

The second is the phrase "signs of the times," suggested by the French theologian Yves Congar. It appears in paragraph 4: “At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.” Giving significance to first reading those signs, and then interpreting them in light of the Gospel, laid the framework for the understanding of inculturation that was to emerge a decade after the council. In essence, this procedure suggested a method for how the church was to engage the world.

Chapter II of Part II of the Constitution (pars. 53–62) was devoted to “The Proper Development of Culture.” The exact definition of "culture" has always been a controverted issue. GS draws upon two different understandings of culture that are now sometimes referred to as the "classic" and "modern" concepts of culture. Its definition of culture classically understood “refers to all those things which go to the refining and developing of man’s diverse mental and physical endowments” (GS, 53). Culture here refers especially to those features that represent the highest achievements in art, music, literature, and technology in a society. The modern concept of culture is introduced a few lines later in the same paragraph: “Culture necessarily has historical and social overtones, and the word ‘culture’ often carries with it sociological and ethnological connotations; in this sense one can speak about a plurality of cultures.” Here we find the sense of culture as developed in the social sciences, especially anthropology—referring to the many different and distinct ways in which societies organize themselves and live in the world.

Gaudium et Spes

had an extraordinary impact both on people within the church and those without.
The constitution honors both senses of culture, but a careful reading of the document will reveal that it gives most of its attention to the classical understanding of culture. It is particularly preoccupied with how the culture of the modern world—that is, Western society—is developing. It does not ignore the more sociological and ethnographic sense of culture, but does not accord it the same attention. This is not at all surprising, given the social location of the council and the principal reasons it had been convoked by Pope John XXIII. Although bishops from all over the world attended (and in that sense it was indeed “ecumenical”), the challenge for the council was Western society with its Enlightenment thinking and tendency toward atheism. What Karl Rahner was to call the “World Church” in 1978 (Rahner, 1979) (and Walbert Buehlmann had called the “Third Church” in 1974) was not at the center of consciousness for the council fathers.

It is important to keep this fact in mind, since most of curial and papal documents have continued to favor this classical sense of culture, as we shall see in the third section below. While the development of the meaning of faith outside the West has become increasingly important, it was the culture of Western societies has been and continues to be of central interest to Rome.

The Development of Inculturation

Fr. Pedro Arrupe, the Superior General of the Jesuits, is generally credited with the first use of the term “inculturation” in a letter sent to the Society of Jesus after the 1973 General Congregation. It first appears in a papal document in the apostolic exhortation Catechesi tradendae in 1979. The neologism “inculturation” is intended to capture the social process of the entering of the Gospel into a specific culture, with the theological resonance of the concept of the incarnation. It has rough parallels in other terms such as “contextualization,” “local theologies,” and the like. While capturing this special sense of the relation of Gospel and culture, it often gets confused with the social science terms “acclimation” (learning a new culture other than one’s own) and “enculturation” (learning one’s own culture as a child). (See the descriptions in Shorter, 1989.) Be that as it may, “inculturation” has come to refer to this interaction of the Christian message of the Gospel and the many cultures around the world.

What has become more clear in the course of three decades is that inculturation and its cognate terms have referred to more than one process and one historical development. In these early years of the twenty-first century, it is important to be aware of this. A brief sketch of the many manifestations of inculturation may be useful in this regard.

When the term first emerged in the 1970s, it typically referred to the Gospel entering non-Western cultures. There was a perception that the Gospel had...
interacted with Western culture, however problematic that interaction had become. Inculturation in this non-Western perspective was part of the independence movements of former European colonies in Africa and Asia. Developing a distinctive identity over against a colonial past and a continued Western domination was of paramount importance. “Identity” was a key category in this understanding of inculturation (Ela, 1983; Schreiter, 1985).

At roughly the same time, oppressed minorities in Western society (especially African Americans and Latinos/as in the United States) asserted the need for developing their own distinctive identities in the midst of an atmosphere of discrimination and racism on the part of the white majority. White women raised a similar call in a new wave of feminism, followed in the 1980s and 1990s by women of color in the same part of the world.

Meanwhile in Latin America, and soon thereafter in other parts of the world, the development of distinctive theologies addressing issues of economic, social and political oppression began to emerge, known collectively as theologies of liberation. In meetings of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) beginning in 1976, debates often raged as to whether identity or social liberation should be at the heart of inculturation and its theologies.

The emergence of globalization in the 1990s lent new meanings to local and distinctive areas. The local was reasserted over the hegemonic pretensions of economic and cultural globalization, emanating from the West, and especially from the United States (Schreiter, 1997). The local had less to do with cultural distinctiveness than the right to local autonomy.

In the meantime, the growth of secularization in Europe and the United States led to calls for a distinctive inculturation in Europe and North America, focusing upon the need for revitalization of Christianity in those parts of the world (Newbigin, 1989). In other instances, inculturation was invoked as a way of engaging more deeply in Christian faith in those contexts itself (Sedmak, 2000, 2002).

These latter concerns have been redefined also by postmodernity, both in the Western world (Sedmak, 2003) and in postcolonial thinking (Abraham, 2003; Pranger, 2003). Here the concept of culture itself has moved from a modern to a post-modern sense. Whereas in modernity, culture typically referred to a unity of language, custom, and territory of a given self-defined people, in postmodernity, all of these are fragmented. “Culture” now becomes a force-field where identity is negotiated out of fragments of multiple identities (Bhabha, 1995; Tanner, 1997).
Inculturation in this setting, then, is about choosing an identity out of the multiple (fragmented) elements on offer.

Concepts of inculturation, then, have evolved with changing cultural and social contexts. The changing nature of what constitutes the site of “culture” necessarily will have an effect on what interaction with the Gospel might mean, and how that relationship might be construed. The concept of inculturation, then, has been far more unstable than it has often been imagined. Before taking this line of thought further, however, it is necessary to see how the church at its central and magisterial level has seen its part in the inculturation process.

The Church, the Gospel, and Cultures

In the forty years since the close of Vatican II, discourse about culture and cultures at the level of papal and magisterial teaching has been more intense than at any time before then. Two pontificates have covered nearly all of this time.

The pontificate of Paul VI (1963–1978) took up the discussion from GS in a deliberate way. While the concern for Western society and its culture was never far from sight, what was noteworthy was the development of the modern sense of culture in his teaching, having to do with the plurality of cultures in which Christianity now found itself. The concern for development of the newly independent countries of Africa and Asia was reflected in an early encyclical, 

Populorum progressio

But it was Paul VI’s visit to Africa in 1966, and his subsequent message 
Africae terrarum

that sounded a clarion call for what would come to be known as inculturation. In both instances he declared that the nascent churches of Africa must be at once thoroughly Christian and equally thoroughly African. The implication of such a statement was not lost on African episcopal conferences. The development of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa (parallel to the comunidades eclesiales de base of Latin America) became a topic of intense conversation in the 1970s. The bishops of Zaire petitioned for an adaptation of the Roman Rite to meet better the needs and sensibilities of that country. Religious communities experimented with including more African forms in their liturgical life.

The apostolic exhortation Evangelii nuntiandi of 1975 was imbued with the modern sense of culture. Evangelization itself was defined as entering deeply into the hearts, minds, and customs of a people. From this would develop the notion of the “evangelization of cultures” (somewhat of a malapropism, inasmuch as only people can be evangelized), intending to capture this sense of profound interaction between Gospel and cultural forms.

Pope John Paul II’s pontificate (1978–) began very much where Paul VI’s had concluded. Taking up the theme of inculturation in the Synod on Catechesis, con-
cern for culture has been a hallmark of John Paul’s program for the church. In 1982 he founded the Pontifical Council for Culture, citing the split between the Gospel and culture as part of the great drama of the age. His strong interest in the issue of the Gospel and Western culture, however, has been the focus of his concern. Interest in inculturation outside the West has been restricted to allowing local elements a peripheral role in the celebration of the liturgy (such as the use of native dance and local costume).

That commitment to Western culture has been formidable. The development and engagement with the work of the Pontifical Academies to address the issues in the natural and social sciences can only be called extraordinary—even to the point of reversing positions taken by the church in the early modern period against scientists such as Galileo and others. But he has not neglected the issue of plurality of cultures. Typically, in his trips to countries around the world, he gives two addresses in most places to the question of culture. One is directed to the artists, poets, and opinion makers of a culture. The other is to an indigenous minority within the country, reaffirming the right to their culture.

As genuine and committed as the concern for the latter might be, one must say that, on balance, the concern has been for the state of Western culture. This is so not only because of an ongoing concern for the West, but also out of a realization of the power of Western culture in an age of globalization. Symbols and artifacts of Western culture now circulate nearly everywhere in the world, carrying with them values that appear to many to be contrary to the Gospel.

Concern for culture—Western or otherwise—has run up against another feature of John Paul’s papacy, increasingly evident since 1985. There has been an ongoing debate about the nature of the world today and how the church should respond to it. While an affirmation of the world’s goodness, in spite of its fallen nature, has continued to be present, there has been a growing concern about the increasing plurality of the world, and the configurations emerging since the fall of the Berlin Wall. As a result, inculturation has come to be identified with an unnecessary or perhaps even dangerous plurality, and encouragement of inculturation has largely ceased to exist at the level of the Vatican. This has been most evident in the documents emerging from the Extraordinary Synods for each of the regions of the world (Africa, America, Asia, Oceania, and Europe) that led up to the Jubilee Year in 2000. While attention was still given to inculturation in the apostolic exhortation Ecclesia in Africa, it disappeared by the time of the
promulgation of the exhortations from the later synods. Indeed, a uniform consistency in structure and in theme belied any effort to look at how to respond to the “signs of the times” in each of the regions of the World Church. An overriding concern with relativism has replaced interest in a genuine dialogue between the Gospel and the cultures that make up the worlds of the faithful around the planet.

There had been early hope that inculturation would be especially present in the liturgy. The campaigns to insure utter uniformity in translation of texts and in ritual practice have precluded any further discussion in this regard. Thus, in the Lineamenta for the 2005 Ordinary Synod of Bishops, to be devoted to the Eucharist as “source and summit of the life and mission of the Church,” attention is paid to the universal nature of the celebration (pars. 19–20), but nothing is said about inculturation beyond one of the concluding questions (Synod of Bishops, 2004, no. 14). Only the traditions of the Eastern churches represent a legitimate inculturation.

**Conclusion:**

*Where Is the Church after Forty Years?*

So where do we as Catholics find ourselves in the discussion of culture and inculturation forty years after the promulgation of Gaudium et Spes? On the one hand, a commitment to trying to read the signs of the times and to live in solidarity with the plight and promise of the human community continues to be very strong among significant segments of the Christian faithful. These ideas have captured the imaginations of many. A solidarity with the church of the poor remains a commitment on the part of most missionary religious congregations and many other pastoral workers.

A concern for the power of Western culture, in both its positive and negative aspects, is reflected as well both in the praxis of many ordinary Christians and significant portions of the Roman magisterium. What appears to have been lost was a similar commitment to inculturation as it came to be understood in the pontificate of Paul VI, and as it was implied in the Ordinary Synods of Bishops of the 1970s. The “culture wars” that have been raging in the Catholic Church since the 1980s appear to have tilted against any further development of inculturation, at least from the perspective of the Vatican. In the sometimes dizzying plurality of the post-modern world, priority is being given to a uniformity that will serve as a bulwark against the range of ideas and opinions that would need to be vetted for a genuine dialogue between the Gospel and cultures. In view of this, the program proposed for an evangelization of cultures appears to many to ring hollow, since there does not appear to be the will to engage what is developing in these cultures. Assertion, rather than committed dialogue, appears to be
the preferred mode of communication. The tone and genre of the declaration _Dominus Iesus_ and the prescriptions regarding liturgical celebration are indicative of this.

Honest people on both sides of the divide in this debate can acknowledge that the optimism that marked the age in which _Gaudium et Spes_ was composed had indeed passed. We live in a much chastened atmosphere. The question remains, however, as to how to engage this world we now live in.

In a recent study of the extent to which inculturation has taken place in Eastern Africa, Tanzanian theologian Laurenti Magesa concludes that it has come far less than many had hoped (Magesa, 2004). The question however remains: Is that because efforts at inculturation have been discouraged? Is it because local churches did not try hard enough? Or is it because the idea of inculturation was too tied to an optimistic worldview that cannot be sustained in the conflictual realities of globalization and political and social instabilities? Camerounian theologian Jean-Marc Ela has reasserted that inculturation must engage not only issues of cultural identity but also the social and political challenges of a disintegrating world (Ela, 2003). Does his approach represent a middle way in the culture wars between embrace of the world’s diversity and keeping it at arm’s length through assertion of uniformity? Perhaps only time will tell.

**References**


Ela, Jean Marc. _African Cry_. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983.


