Inculturation

What Is to Be Done?

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The author, a noted professor of historical and systematic theology, recognizes the complexity of the reality we call “culture” and the difficulty of inculturating the faith in today’s world of globalization. He asks whether to do so is possible, desirable, and even morally acceptable, and goes on to suggest that an approach built on dialogue replace one rooted in domination.

After noting that humans “can come to an authentic and full humanity only through culture,” the Second Vatican Council raised a number of problems to be faced, among them: “What must be done to prevent the increased exchanges between cultures, which ought to lead to a true and fruitful dialogue between groups and nations, from disturbing the life of communities, destroying ancestral wisdom, or jeopardizing the uniqueness of each people?” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 56). Since the council, the processes of globalization have greatly “increased exchanges between cultures” and made this question and others all the more urgent. Further, in the years following the council there has been a growing awareness of the importance of culture for embodying the faith. The Catholic Church has realized how deeply the faith was embedded in Western European culture but affirms that it is not bound to any one culture (*GS*, 58). Now the faith needs to be articulated in other non-Western cultures. The church has committed itself to the project of inculturation around the globe. Popes Paul VI and John Paul II have encouraged the process and the latter established the Pontifical Council for

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Culture in 1982. Despite such official encouragement, the actual experience of inculturation has been at best ambiguous. Some would say it has been a case of one step forward and two steps backward. The Synods for Africa (1994) and for Asia (1998) are good examples of the frustration born of raised expectations.

Today, the inculturation project has become increasingly problematic and this for several reasons. First, the more we know about culture, the more complex it appears, and the more difficult it becomes to “read” or “listen” to cultures. Second, although cultures have always been porous and dynamic, the processes of globalization have increased the rapidity of change in all cultures and have furthered the impact of cultures on one another. No one culture stands in isolation, and territory has become less and less of a factor in cultural identity. Third, if every culture has at its core a world view and basic or fundamental values (religion broadly construed), then the attempt to inculturate Christianity is in conflict with the core of other cultures and could be another form of cultural imperialism or cultural hegemony. In this article, then, I want to examine the problematic character of inculturation in the light of the complexity of cultures and the impact of globalization. Is inculturation realistically possible? Is it desirable? Is it morally acceptable?

Before taking up these three issues, let me clarify how I am using the term “inculturation.” Simply put, inculturation is the on-going dialogue between faith and cultures. A fuller definition, widely referenced, is that given by Pedro Arrupe, S.J. in his 1978 “Letter on Inculturation to the Society of Jesus”:

In inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this 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 the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about “a new creation.”

He went on, somewhat presciently, to say: “In today’s world, a large contact between cultures is inevitable, and this provides a providential opportunity for inculturation. The problem lies in a wise channeling of this intercultural influence.” Many of the critics of globalization today would say that this large contact between cultures has not been a wise channeling but domination of the rest by the West in a new form of cultural colonialism. What seemed like an opportunity to Arrupe now appears to be what the council feared—“disturbing the life
of communities, destroying ancestral wisdom, or jeopardizing the uniqueness of each people.” The project of inculturation is much more problematic than it seemed in 1978.

Difficulties of Understanding Cultures

One of the main reasons why inculturation has become more problematic is the difficulty of understanding culture, any culture. Those who are professionally committed to studying cultures, cultural anthropologists, have gone through a period of intense self-scrutiny and methodological doubt (e.g., James Clifford, 1988). The old model of the “participant observer” relying on “informants” to produce an objective ethnographic account of some aspect of another culture no longer obtains. They realized that their own cultures were the lens through which they were interpreting other cultures. And “interpretation” is the operative word. Clifford Geertz led the way in regarding culture as a “text” of symbols requiring interpretation to get at their meaning. A close “reading” or “thick description” of a cultural text (Geertz’s “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” is a classic example), yields the meaning behind a cultural artifact. This interpretative or symbolic anthropology has been the most influential among theologians interested in problems of inculturation.

But, sophisticated as this approach may be, it too has problems. The metaphor of “text” still suggests more distance between the interpreter and the object of interpretation than is in fact the case. The anthropologist (or other interpreter) is still very much involved in the culture they are interpreting. Second, it is a selective interpretation of some aspects of a culture and hence not very systematic. Third, a microanalysis of a particular aspect of a culture neglects the larger historical and political context which is not merely external to the culture, but already affecting it internally.

Further, the model of an isolated, insulated, territorially bound culture no longer holds. Under the impact of globalization, cultures are interacting with one another in ever increasing ways, are in instant communication, and spill over national borders. Iranian culture exists not only in Tehran but in London, Los Angeles, and Paris. Many cultures never were coterminous with the territorial boundaries of nation-states as is now clear in Eastern Europe and Africa. The porousness of cultures has increased dramatically. All cultures are in flux,
though some more so than others. All are, to some degree or another, hybrids (Nederveen Pieterse, 45–68).

Cultures have always been dynamic but globalization has greatly increased the rapidity of change. As one anthropologist put it, “Cultures do not sit still for their portraits.” By the time the Synod for Africa held up the family as the model for an inculturated church on that continent, the family in Africa was being assailed by many forces: husbands and fathers being forced to leave home and migrate to find work, by the AIDS epidemic, by Western values carried by television, videos and the Internet. The African ideal of family was changing before our very eyes.

Not all cultural change is impelled from external pressures however; there are internal sources of dynamism as well. Cultures are not the neatly unified wholes sometimes portrayed, but rather there are conflicts and contradictions within culture which can also give rise to changes (Tanner, 42ff.). Some aspects or values of a culture may rise to prominence at one time and other aspects at another time. The pace of change is not uniform or consistent but today it is considerably greater than in the past, making it much more difficult to “read” a cultural text.

In addition to the difficulty posed by the rapidity of cultural change, there is the fact that cultural meanings are not evenly distributed within a society. Ulf Hannerz identifies three dimensions of culture—ideas and modes of thought, forms of externalization, and social distribution (Hannerz, 7ff.). Those interested in inculturation usually pay attention to the first two dimensions but neglect the third. By “social distribution” Hannerz means “the ways in which the collective cultural inventory of meanings and meaningful external forms [the first two dimensions] is spread over a population and its social relationships.” Cultural meanings are differently understood and construed by men and by women, by young and old, by experts and non-experts. This social distribution further complicates the difficulty of “reading” or “listening” to a culture.

Cultural meanings are also differently construed depending on the social location or situation in the power structure of the society. As Kathryn Tanner points out: “How situations and the actors in them are understood makes a difference in what it is these actors can conceive of doing. Power is therefore at stake in the interpretation of beliefs, values, or notions with a cultural currency. Struggles over power come to be enacted in struggles over meaning” (47). Interpreters of cultures, including both anthropologists and theologians, can miss or ignore the power dimension of contested meanings.
All the above difficulties in interpreting or understanding cultures make the project of inculturation more problematic today than it seemed in the 1970s and 1980s. By way of summary, let me cite Tanner again:

It seems less and less plausible to presume that cultures are self-contained and clearly bounded units, internally consistent and unified wholes of beliefs and values simply transmitted to every member of their respective groups as principles of social order. What we might call a postmodern stress on interactive process and negotiation, indeterminacy, fragmentation, conflict, and porosity replaces these aspects of the modern, post-1920s understanding of culture. . . . (38).

**Impact of Globalization**

We have already pointed out that some of the factors that make the understanding of cultures more problematic today, such as the increased porousness and dynamism of cultures, are brought about or driven by the processes of globalization. By the processes of globalization I do not mean only the economic factors of the movement of capital, labor, and manufacturing plants around the world, although these are important and receive much attention in the popular press. Globalization also entails the movement of cultural ideals, values, and meanings across territorial boundaries. The technologies of radio, satellite TV, email, and the Internet have blurred or made fuzzy previously clear cultural boundaries. This need not imply a homogenization or Westernization of cultures as the terms “Coca-colaization” or “McDonaldization” sometimes imply. Local cultures receive and modify these global cultural flows each in its own way. There is an interpenetration of the global and the local. Roland Robertson has referred to this phenomenon as “glocalization” (Robertson, 173–74). This means that the local culture has been changed by the impact of the global but it does not mean that it is destroyed or even submerged. Indeed, if anything, there has been a resurgence of particular cultures concomitant with the processes of globalization. But the particular cultures now see themselves situated in the larger global and historical context that they can no longer ignore.

Various metaphors are being employed to help understand the results of the impact of cultural globalization on local or particular cultures, the two most common are “creolization” and “hybridization.” Hannerz suggests that “creole cultures—like creole languages—are intrinsically of mixed origin, the confluence of two or more widely separate historical currents which interact in what is basically a center/periphery relationship” (264ff.). But for Hannerz “the cultural processes of creolization are not simply a matter of a constant pressure from the center toward the periphery, but a much more creative interplay” that “increas-
Hybridization refers to much the same process and is defined by Nederveen Pieterse as “the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices” (49) or, more simply, “hybridity concerns the mixture of phenomena which are held to be different, separate; hybridization then refers to a cross-category process.” What results is a melange or collage rather than a homogenization. The most obvious examples are the postcolonial societies of Africa and Asia. But Western cultures also have been impacted by non-Western cultures and so we have such phenomena as “Thai boxing by Moroccan girls in Amsterdam, Asian rap in London, Irish bagels, Chinese tacos and Mardi Gras Indians in the United States, or ‘Mexican schoolgirls dressed in Greek togas dancing in the style of Isidora Duncan’” (Nederveen Pieterse, 53). Globalization has produced a cross-fertilization of cultures with amazing results. We have societies where the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern exist simultaneously in the same societies in what is referred to in Latin America as tiempos mixtos. This renders the understanding or interpretation of cultures all the more difficult.

These cultural hybridities are not only the result of the impersonal forces of communication technologies but also have been borne by people. One of the most important vehicles of globalization has been the vast migration of peoples and greatly increased travel. As Hannerz points out, “What we see is increasingly the back-and-forth movement of people, on a global scale and in a bewildering variety of forms and frequencies” (246). This is not just a case of migrants seeking better economic opportunities, but business people, tourists, and young people hiking. These people take their cultures with them and pick up some others in the process. The United States has long been a multi-cultural society, but this is now also true of Western European countries such as France and Germany and even in once homogeneous societies such as Japan and Korea. This is to point to the “deter-ritorialization of culture.” Algerian culture is now produced and reproduced in Paris; Indian culture is produced in London; and Turkish culture is produced in Frankfurt as well as Istanbul. Cultural groups living in a diaspora situation still maintain some sense of cultural identity with, and very often have an impact on, the home base, as in the cases of Iran and Iraq where expatriates continue to influence the politics of those countries.

Globalization also entails the movement of cultural ideals, values and meanings across territorial boundaries.
Although I have stressed that cultural flows are in two directions from and to both center and periphery, this relationship “while mutual” is a-symetrical. There is no doubt that the cultures of the United States and Western Europe have more of an impact on African and Asian cultures than the reverse. Nevertheless, it is too simple to equate globalization with Westernization/modernization. There is a variety of forms of modernization—“many modernities.” It remains true, however, that the new world system of globalization shapes all cultures, rendering them more dynamic and difficult to interpret.

**The Ethical Question**

In addition to the three dimensions of culture suggested by Hannerz above, there are other ways of describing the various elements constitutive of cultures. Aylward Shorter offers two versions of these levels of culture. The first, citing Donald Jacobs, consists of concentric circles: (1) the outermost is the “relatively superficial level of industrial technology”; (2) the second level refers to the culture of the home and of leisure pursuits; (3) the next is the level of values; and finally (4) the innermost circle is that of the “worldview,” the culture’s “particular way of understanding, and acting towards, the world.” The second scheme, from T. F. Zuern, is similar: “An outer circumference of tangibles contains an inner circle of structures and a final centre of intangibles” (Shorter, 35–36, 317). The latter “represents the body of meanings which a culture communicates through its symbol system.”

In either scheme, the innermost circle or center of a culture is its worldview or cosmovision and system of values based on it. It is how a people understands its place in the cosmos, seeking answers to the great questions about life, death, suffering, and ultimate reality: Where did we come from? Where are we going? Is there any meaning or purpose to it all? These are the questions with which the culture’s cosmogonic myths (see the work of Mircea Eliade) deal. These are its religious questions. The center, root, or heart of any culture is its religious faith. Paul Tillich summed it up in his famous dictum: “Religion is the substance of culture; culture is the form of religion.”

If it is true, then, that the religious dimension is the deepest, innermost, core of a culture, then the goal of inculturation as stated by Arrupe—that the Christian life and message “becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation,’”—would seem to be a direct attack on the religious root of another culture. It seems to seek to displace or replace another religious tradition with Christianity. Given the increasingly positive value with which we regard other religions, can or should Christians have such a goal? In other words, is inculturation so understood morally, ethically, acceptable? What becomes of our commitment to religious pluralism?
inculturation a form of not only cultural imperialism but of religious imperialism? Should we abandon the project and even the language of inculturation? By posing the question so sharply, I do not mean to imply an answer, but to suggest that we need to continue to rethink the relationship between faith and culture. Niebhur's classic typologies are still helpful, but today we understand how much more complex cultures are and how globalization has increased the porousness and rapidity of change of all cultures. Hence, the questions with which I began this article: Is inculturation realistically possible? Desirable? Ethical?

Michael Amaldoss has suggested that the problem is with the basic metaphor underlying inculturation. He says:

The term is obviously a theological term patterned on the incarnation: just as the Word of God became human in Jesus by taking on human flesh, the gospel finds embodiment in various cultures. This is theory. What happens in practice is that a community with their inculturated version of the gospel encounters another with its culture sustained by its religion. What follows is an inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. It is from this dialogue that something new should emerge. But unfortunately the Christian discourse about inculturation evokes the image of the gospel going out into the world to conquer cultures, expressing itself in them and integrating them and thus enriching the various cultures. This is an image of domination and conquest (Amaldoss, 16–17).

Even though “domination and conquest” was not the intention of Arrupe when he wrote in 1978, it does seem now that that is what inculturation implies. On the basis of his experience in India, Amaldoss suggests that dialogue—with cultures, with religions, and with the poor—is a preferable way to think about the encounter between faith and cultures. Thus, “pluralism of cultures and religions is inscribed in the very terms of the process.” Dialogue seems to be more respectful of the differences of cultures and religions. Dialogue does not imply abandoning one’s own convictions and commitments as some seem to fear, but it does imply a lot more listening and a lot more learning from other traditions.

In a globalized and post-modern world we have become much more conscious of pluralism and difference than we were in the 1970s and 80s. Globalization has made the “other” our daily companion and our next door neighbor. Pluralism is not just a problem to be tolerated and eventually overcome. We can now see that pluralism of religious traditions is part of God’s self-manifestation and God’s plan for the salvation of all humanity and of the entire cosmos. It is this greater awareness and appreciation of pluralism that leads us to rethink the notion of inculturation.

What are we to make, then, of the injunction at the end of both Matthew’s gospel: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the
name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20)? Is the missionary thrust of early Christianity to be abandoned? Or is it a question of how this universalizing thrust is to be carried out in a pluralistic and globalized world? Amaladoss is proposing dialogue as a method of carrying out the great commandment in a pluralistic world, not a denial or refusal of it. Referring to inter-religious dialogue (but it is also true of inter-cultural dialogue), John Paul II has said, “Interreligious dialogue is a part of the church’s evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission ad gentes (“to the nations”); indeed it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions” (Redemptoris Missio, 55).

The relationship between faith and culture in a pluralistic and globalized world is best thought of in terms of mutually respectful dialogue. This dialogue, however, does not take place between two abstractions. As Amaladoss points out, in practice it is always between peoples and communities. Globalization is forcing the exchange between more and more peoples and communities. It is a matter of the attitudes we bring to these exchanges. Inculturation suggests that our way of life should correct and transform your way of life. Dialogue suggests that we both have something to learn from each other and that both will be transformed. In any culture and in any time, Christians may be called upon to explain themselves, as 1 Peter says, “Always be ready to make a defense to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope that is in you, and make it with modesty and respect” (3:15-16). Modesty and respect are the attitudes appropriate for the dialogue between faith and culture in today’s world.

References


