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The Concept of Inculturation in Roman Catholicism: A Theological Consideration

Dennis M. Doyle

Inculturation is the term that Catholic leaders and theologians have used in recent decades to denote a process of engagement between the Christian Gospel and a particular culture. The term is intended conceptually both to safeguard the integrity of the Gospel and to encourage sensitivity to various cultural contexts. Inculturation as a theological notion has been specifically associated with John Paul II's strategy for evangelization, including what is known as the "new evangelization" that focuses on cultures that had traditionally been Christian but which are now not clearly so. Yet inculturation, understood with a somewhat different emphasis, has also been associated with the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner's theological interpretation of Vatican II.

This essay explores the theological meanings of the concept of inculturation as it has been used in Roman Catholic thought in recent decades. First is explained how Vatican II's concept of culture, as relatively progressive as it was, contained safeguards against favoring diverse cultures to the detriment of the integrity of the Gospel. Then a discussion of theological divisions after the Council sets the stage for understanding John Paul II's concept of inculturation within the context of his agenda of correcting the course of the Council's reception and implementation. John Paul II's theological connection between inculturation and Incarnation is then explored in comparison with Rahner's use of inculturation in his theological interpretation of Vatican II. An examination of how the issues that surface carry through in a range of postconciliar theological uses of inculturation is followed by a naming of major challenges that arise in any consideration of inculturation today.

Theology and Culture at Vatican II

From the Journey of the Magi to witness the birth of Jesus to the symbolic presence of the Twelve Tribes of Israel at Pentecost, the theme of catholicity and culture

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has been an integral dimension of the story of Christ and the Church. At the time of the Second Vatican Council, the relation of theology and culture was of particular importance for several interconnected reasons.¹ The unfinished Vatican I (1869-70) had placed an imbalanced emphasis upon the papacy and the church universal in relation to the episcopacy and local churches. A strong papacy held several advantages for the Church in its struggles with an often hostile nineteenth- and early twentieth-century world, but the stress on the “universal” was not conducive to a focus on diverse cultures. There was a need to redress the balance by giving due attention to bishops and to particular churches. There was a significant connection between valuing the role of particular churches and valuing the contributions of diverse cultures.

These inner-church concerns were related to the background issues of the credibility of the Church in Europe in the wake of the two world wars as well as the growing sense of disgrace of the colonial powers in their treatment of native peoples of various lands. In Catholic theological circles as early as 1938, Henri de Lubac, citing John Henry Newman, identified cultural adaptation as a key element of Catholicism.² De Lubac argued that Christian salvation cannot be segmented off to another realm but is truly linked with human destiny and connected with human societies in a real way. Lutheran theologian H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic 1951 work, *Christ and Culture*, explores the strengths and weakness of various models, highlighting finally the need for faith.³ In the background of his work lingers *angst* over the awareness that the faith of many European Christians during World War II had proved to be more nominal than real and that European Christianity overall had failed in its obligations to transform culture as well as to oppose elements of culture that had become manifestly evil. At the same time another Lutheran, Paul Tillich, was developing his theological method of correlation by which human experience, understood with sensitivity to cultural diversity, poses questions to which Christianity must provide the orientation for an authentic response if it is to be existentially relevant.⁴

The theme of engagement with the world, and with it, inculturation, would be key elements not only of the Council document *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World), but also of *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) and *Ad Gentes* (Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church). *Lumen Gentium* emphasized the positive relationship between the Gospel and “whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peo-

1. The category “theology and culture” could potentially (and legitimately) be taken as encapsulating the entire turn toward human experience and as including various movements of reform, liturgical, biblical, ethical, and theological, in the decades leading up to Vatican II. I limit myself here to mentioning a few developments explicitly connected with a focus on diverse cultures.

2. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. by Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund, OCD (French orig., 1938; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 287-288; 295; see also 431-433.

3. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

4. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951, 1957, 1963). See also Tillich’s *A Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

ples” (17). *Ad Gentes* stressed especially the connection between culture and evangelization. It was *Gaudium et Spes*, though, that added the crucial theme of the development of culture. Although a few points in *Gaudium et Spes* can be traced to the preparatory schemata, the idea for producing a document intended to express something of the particular concerns of this Council at that time in history is said to have arisen on the Council floor. The Council’s opening in October 1962 was preceded in that same month by the Cuban Missile Crisis. If human beings were going to blow up the world and themselves along with it, should not the Church have something to say to them first? And so the idea for the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World was born. It must also be remembered, however, that *aggiornamento*, or updating, had been articulated earlier as a goal of the Council by John XXIII, and that he had spoken in his opening address of the need to express the faith, without changing its meaning, in contemporary terms with more penetrating effects.

Two points in particular in *Gaudium et Spes*’ treatment of culture stand out for their distinctiveness relative to popular presuppositions. First, in a section of five chapters that address “Problems of Special Urgency,” the chapter on culture comes second. One might expect that culture would be seen as the deepest issue and thus treated first as the most contextualizing among the other topics, such as economics, politics, and peace—and, indeed, these topics are the subject of chapters three, four, and five. What comes first is the chapter on marriage and the family. The message being given is that a consideration of Catholic teaching on marriage and the family logically precedes a consideration of particular cultures. Such is not to deny that there are many elements of marriage and family belief and practice that are legitimately diverse in relation to various cultures. It is, however, to set forth basic Catholic teaching about marriage as being monogamous, lifelong, and open to children as true in a universally human manner that transcends particular cultures.

A second notable point about *Gaudium et Spes*’ treatment of culture is closely related to the first point. Culture is first defined as a universally human phenomenon in a way that is prior to a consideration of a variety of diverse cultures:

The word “culture” in its general sense indicates everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he strives by his knowledge and his labor, to bring the world itself under his control. He renders social life more human both in the family and the civic community, through improvement of customs and institutions. Throughout the course of time he expresses, communicates and conserves in his works, great spiritual experiences and desires, that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family.

Thence it follows that human culture has necessarily a historical and social aspect and the word “culture” also often assumes a sociological and ethnological sense. According to this sense we speak of a plurality of cultures. Different styles of life and multiple scales of values arise from the diverse manner of using things, of laboring, of expressing oneself, of practicing religion, of forming customs, of establishing laws and juridic institutions, of cultivating the sciences, the arts and beauty. Thus the customs handed down to it form the pat-

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rimony proper to each human community. It is also in this way that there is formed the definite, historical milieu which enfolds the man of every nation and age and from which he draws the values which permit him to promote civilization. (53)

Thus, *Gaudium et Spes* understands “culture” to be, on the one hand, an ideal universal process by which human beings achieve progress and, on the other hand, a historical and social reality by which different lifestyles and values have resulted in different habits, practices, customs, and institutions. In the first sense, the one connected with the concept of a universal human nature (articulated earlier in *Gaudium et Spes* pt. 1, ch. 1), a new human community is being formed within the context of the new age in which we all live.

The document intends to foster a positive appreciation of culture in both of these senses. Regarding the first sense of “culture,” the Church is to contribute to a human culture that retains the concept of the whole person; that remains open to the transcendent; that balances autonomy with responsibility; that promotes the sciences, literature, and the arts; that supports fruitful dialogue; and that provides access to commerce and education to growing numbers of persons. Regarding the second sense of “culture,” the Church is to protect the legitimate patrimony, traditions, and customs of diverse peoples. In regard to both senses of culture, the Gospel of Christ is to purify and renew the morals and values of all people and to make fruitful their spiritual qualities and conditions. The Council’s expressed position on the relationship between the Gospel and culture provides built in safeguards against theological approaches that might tend toward an uncritical embrace of diversity at any cost, saying rather that “the Church recalls to the mind of all that culture is to be subordinated to the integral perfection of the human person, to the good of the community and of the whole society” (59). Diverse cultures are thus subordinate to a universal human culture which is itself subordinate to the Gospel of Christ.

Correcting the Course of the Council’s Reception

Paul VI explicitly built upon *Gaudium et Spes*’ definition of “culture” in his 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (On Evangelization in the Modern World; #20; GS #53), which responded to the 1975 Synod on Evangelization. He was attempting to give direction to the Council’s implementation on the tenth anniversary of its closing; by that time, however, there had emerged in Catholic circles a significant degree of pluralism with accompanying tensions. The ten years following the Council had been a time of sweeping change in Catholic thought and practice that was exhilarating for many yet alarming for others. Categorically distinct from the rejection of the Council by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and his associates was the disappointment and serious concern over the implementation of the Council expressed by some Catholic intellectuals whose work had been instrumental in the framing of the Council’s documents. Jacques Maritain, Charles Journet, Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and others upheld the teaching of the Council docu-

ments while warning that its interpretations and applications were running amok.⁵ Student riots in various European and American cities in 1968 along with the contentious reception of Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* with its controversial teaching on artificial contraception confirmed for these thinkers that the Church was in crisis. By 1970 de Lubac and Balthasar along with Joseph Ratzinger and Karl Lehman founded the international journal *Communio*, designed to offer an alternative to the progressive volumes of *Concilium*.⁶ The founders of *Communio* perceived the articles of *Concilium* as building upon a concocted trajectory of the Council, a trajectory that could include married priests, women priests, unrealistic ecumenical and interfaith openness, a naïve call for democratic structures of church authority, carelessly updated teachings on sexual morality, and an exaggerated emphasis on the freedom of conscience of the individual believer. The *Communio* founders expressed this ideal: "its editors and writers will work out of the Catholic tradition and with basic fidelity to the magisterium, while at the same time recognizing the possibility of diverse approaches to common problems."⁷ *Communio* authors tended to read the conciliar documents with a stress on their Christocentric orientation as well as their continuity with previous tradition.

John Paul II was an independent and original thinker whose approaches to leadership and theology cannot be simplistically reduced to one camp or school of thought. Still, it is evident that he had a clear agenda in his papacy, one that his critics called "restorationist" and that was well aligned with the wishes of the *Communio* founders. In my judgment, whether one is more supportive of John Paul II or of his progressive critics, the label "restorationist" is unfair and misleading. John Paul II was experienced as an enigma by many of his detractors who could only read his many progressive positions and actions as a contradiction relative to what appeared to be his conservative desires to push back the clock.

John Paul II's agenda, however, was radically distinct from that of the traditionalists who did not accept the Council documents. What distinguished his approach was the particular way in which he prioritized the Council's achievements. He held the shift from an overly juridical, institutional concept of the Church to understanding the Church more relationally, that is, as the Body of Christ and as the Bride of Christ, to be the single most important achievement of the Council.⁸ The realization of this

5. See, for example, Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garrone* (French orig., 1966; New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968); Henri de Lubac, "The Church in Crisis," *Theology Digest* 17 (Winter 1969): 312-325.

6. James Hitchcock, "Why *Communio*?," *Communio* 1 (Summer 1974): 216-217. *Concilium* was edited and written by many of the leading Catholic theologians of the time and was dedicated to implementing Vatican II in line with the best in theology as well as the social sciences. See also Christopher J. Walsh, "De Lubac's Critique of the Postconciliar Church," *Communio* 19 (Fall 1992): 404-432, which includes a description of De Lubac's participation in the founding of the journal *Communio*.

7. Hitchcock, "Why *Communio*?," 217.

8. My points about John Paul II's interpretation of Vatican II are derived partly from my analysis of *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, esp. §19.

change called less for adjustments in the Church's internal structures and more for renewal of its spirit and mission. All of the other points of emphasis of the Council, such as collegiality, the role of the laity, reading the signs of the times, ecumenism, interfaith relations, religious freedom, engagement with the world, retain a vital importance, but are subordinate to the shift of realizing more fully the Church's nature and mission as being more than an institution, as being the Body of Christ and the Bride of Christ present in this world. Promoting the Church as the Body of Christ did not require making institutional structures more flexible, but rather an awakening to the deeper dimensions of what the institutional structures were in place to support. For John Paul II, to push forcefully an agenda that included social justice and interfaith prayer while resisting internal structural changes represented not a contradiction but rather a deeply consistent alignment of priorities. His adoption of inculturation as a key dimension of his strategy for evangelization needs to be understood within the context of his overall agenda of correcting the course of the implementation of Vatican II.

Karl Rahner and John Paul II on Vatican II and Culture

In order to highlight comparatively some distinctive elements of John Paul II's approach to inculturation, I will first present briefly some concepts associated with the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner.⁹ Inculturation became for Rahner the fundamental key for interpreting the Council theologically. Neither Rahner nor John Paul II were grossly one-sided in their appreciation of both the need to guard the integrity of the Gospel and the need to be sensitive to diverse cultures. Speaking of them comparatively may overemphasize how each may appear to favor one pole relative to the other. Yet the contrast between their interpretations of inculturation and the Council helps to bring out the inevitable points of tension to be held together in any particular approach.

By the late 1960's Rahner had come to be regarded by Balthasar and others who were alarmed by the reception of the Council as a representative of what had gone wrong.¹⁰ Rahner is still thought by many to be the greatest Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, and his harshest critics have not been without praise for him. It is common for critics to distinguish between Rahner's own nuanced positions and those of some of his followers that did not retain such nuance.¹¹ What his critics most often found to be objectionable in his positions was that he was willing in some ways to

9. My use of Rahner mainly as a point of contrast for understanding John Paul II's approach stands in lieu of a direct positive treatment which would take much more space than would be possible in this essay. The literature by and about Rahner is immense. The beginner might start with *The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner's Theological Writings*, ed. Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

10. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, trans. by Richard Beckley (German orig., 1966; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 76-78.

11. See Joseph A. Colombo, "Rahner and His Critics: Lindbeck and Metz," *The Thomist* 56 (January 1992): 71-96.

use human experience as a starting point for systematic theological reflection. Some thought his method to be correlational, like that of Tillich, allowing human experience to be overly determinative of the questions which revelation would be allowed to answer. Some found his transcendental analysis of the nature of the human person to leave insufficient room for the explicit need for Christ, and they interpreted his idea of “anonymous Christianity” as a confirmation of the problem. Balthasar held that Christian theological reflection must begin with the reality of Jesus Christ, with first priority given to Christ crucified. Rahner’s approach was seen as a kind of extreme point on a horizon beyond which one would fall over a cliff. What was at stake was the transcendent reality of Christian revelation as a gift from God beyond the capacity of any merely human achievement.

Rahner came to interpret the Council in a way that associated an embrace of diverse cultures with its fundamental theological achievement, an achievement he named the Church’s “first official self-actualization as a world Church,” though he acknowledges that this happened only in an incipient way.¹² As a result, the Church is no longer to be understood along the model of a European export company. Rahner stressed the presence of indigenous bishops from throughout the world and the celebration of liturgy in the vernacular. He asked if an East African might not someday live in the marital style of the patriarch Abraham. He asked if natives of Alaska must always celebrate the Eucharist with grape wine. Moreover, he described three great epochs of the Church: the period of Jewish Christianity; the period of the Western (Hellenistic-Roman-Mediterranean-European) Christianity; and now, beginning with Vatican II, the period of the World Church.

Rahner himself used the term inculturation (*Enkulturation*) in his writings of this period. The examples that Rahner gave in his article on Vatican II and the world Church, however, represent what his critics might consider to be mere adaptation or accommodation. Adaptation and accommodation are terms that could be misinterpreted as implying compromise or concession or even adulteration, even though these terms themselves had originally been adopted for the purpose of fostering cultural sensitivity.

For John Paul II, inculturation became a preferred term because of its similarity to the word “incarnation” and the suggestion of a theological parallel.¹³ Inculturation is

12. Karl Rahner, “Toward a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40 (December 1979): 716-727.

13. John F. Gorski finds what may be the earliest usage of the term “inculturation” during the Missionary Week of Louvain in 1959, though the precise meaning of the term was unclear. The word became part of official Catholic discourse at the 1977 Synod of Bishops on Catechetics, where it was used with appreciation for its parallel with “Incarnation.” See Gorski, “Christology, Inculturation, and Their Missiological Implications: A Latin American Perspective,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28 (April 2004): 60-63. R.E. McCarron notes use of the Latin *inculturatio* at the 1975 General Congregation of the Society of Jesus. John Paul II used the term in a 1979 address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission and then later that year in *Catechesi Tradendae* (53), his apostolic exhortation in response to the 1977 Bishops’ Synod. See McCarron, “Inculturation, Liturgical,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Berard Marthaler, second ed. (Washington, DC: Thompson-Gale, 2002) 7: 384.

to be understood along the lines of the very Incarnation of the Gospel within a particular culture. There is an integrity of the Gospel as the Word of God that must not be compromised or adulterated as it becomes enfleshed within a particular context. John Paul II's use of the term "inculturation" is faithful to *Gaudium et Spes*' prioritization of first the Gospel, then human culture, then diverse cultures. It is also consistent with John Paul II's identification, in contrast to Rahner, of a realization of the Church as the Body of Christ and as the Bride of Christ as representing the most important development of the Council. *Lumen Gentium* makes this comparison:

... the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element. For this reason, by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature inseparably united to Him, serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the visible social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it, in the building up of the body. (8)

For John Paul II, both the Church itself and enfleshment of the Word of God within a particular culture are to be conceived theologically in ways analogous to the Incarnation. Such is the purpose of his use of the term inculturation. This usage of the term went hand in hand with his identification of the main advance of the Council as being a renewed appreciation of the Church as the Body of Christ and as the Bride of Christ.

John Paul II developed further his approaches to evangelization and to inculturation. He described evangelization as occurring in three phases: initial evangelization, pastoral care, and reevangelization.¹⁴ In each of these phases there is reciprocity. Still, reciprocity in no way implies a simple bi-lateral exchange. John Paul II's priority concerning the integrity of the Gospel message as the Word of Christ remains clearly evident in how he speaks of the contribution that particular peoples can make once it has been transformed by the Gospel. In a speech in Nairobi, he stated:

Inculturation, which you rightly promote, will truly be a reflection of the incarnation of the word, when a culture, transformed and regenerated by the gospel, brings forth from its own living tradition original expressions of Christian life.¹⁵

For John Paul II, the reception of the gifts of any particular culture by the church universal takes place after specific elements of the culture have been lifted up and transformed by the purifying penetration of the Gospel, understood as the Word that needs to become enfleshed.

14. S. Iniobong Udoidem, *Pope John Paul II on Inculturation: Theory and Practice* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996), 70.

15. *Address to African Bishops*, 1980, as quoted in Udoidem, *John Paul II on Inculturation*, 8.

Inculturation in Postconciliar Theologies

In the 1980's Robert Schreiter and Aylward Shorter each developed theologies that were yet more radically sensitive to local cultures than the approach of John Paul II. Schreiter treated the term "inculturation" as unhelpfully vague in the face of the technical dialogue with social scientists that cultural issues require, preferring the terms "contextual" and "local theologies."¹⁶ He was also critical of a "translation" model that was message-centered and insufficiently local-centered, implying a "kernel and husk" theory that treats diverse cultures as various containers for a substantially unchanged message. He was likewise critical of "adaptation" models that, while attempting to be sensitive to diverse cultures, still presupposed theoretical philosophical and theological frameworks more suited to the academy than to life on the ground. Schreiter developed his approach to "contextual theologies" that, while retaining concern for the integrity of the Gospel, elaborate the active and ongoing role of local contributions in a more basic and dynamic way. Shorter retained the term "inculturation," but he developed its meaning to include many of the dimensions of Schreiter's "contextual theologies." Both theologians stressed the need for evangelizers to be imbedded in a culture deeply enough to be able to hear what the Gospel message sounds like from the point of view of the people of that locality.¹⁷

Schreiter identified two basic types of contextual approaches: ethnographic theology and liberation theology.¹⁸ For the purposes of this essay, we will deviate semantically from Schreiter in order to associate the "ethnographic" with theologies that stress "inculturation." Inculturation theologies and liberation theologies that came to represent contrasting if not opposing schools of thought in the 1980's and 1990's in various parts of the world. Inculturation theologies addressed mainly the relationship between the Gospel and local cultures and paid relatively more attention to traditional doctrine and liturgical practices. Liberation theologies tended to downplay doctrine and liturgy in favor of the political and economic emancipation of peoples. This basic contrast between the inculturation theologies and liberation theologies played out in a variety of world contexts. Emmanuel Martey explained how liberation theology tended to dominate in northern Africa and in South Africa, whereas inculturation theology reigned in sub-Saharan Africa. He argued emphatically that both approaches needed to inform each other.¹⁹ Similar tensions could be seen in Asian theologies, as described by Michael Amaladoss:

In Asia, one can identify various theological streams. Besides liberation theologians, there are some who see evangelization as proclamation leading to a change of religious allegiance.

16. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 5-16.

17. Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

18. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 12-16.

19. Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

Others are interested in inculturation and the building up of the local church. These are also sensitive to the problems and tensions of interreligious dialogue, particularly in the area of spiritual paths, methods of prayer, etc. Asian bishops and theologians have tried to reconcile these diverse streams by describing evangelization as a threefold dialogue with the poor, the great religions, and the cultures of Asia. But tensions and mutual suspicions continue.²⁰

Early Latin American liberation theology also experienced conflicts with theologies that stressed inculturation. José Comblin identified the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall as a turning point in his beloved liberation theology, since Marxist and socialist ways of thinking had been discredited on the world stage. Other means would have to be found to try to humanize as much as possible the global embrace of market-driven economies. Cultural and economic matters interpenetrate and can no longer be treated as separate, let alone as opposed.²¹ In a U.S. context, Roberto Goizueta articulated a Hispanic theology that placed a stress on issues associated with inculturation, such as local traditions, ritual celebrations, and popular devotions, while making positive connections with the liberation theology heritage of Latin America.²² Goizueta identified the U.S. Hispanic approach with aesthetics and the Latin American liberation theology approach with ethics. He declared that the “aesthetic dimension of human experience is *mediated* by the ethical-political.”²³ In other words, there can be no true cultural beauty in the midst of blatant economic and social injustice. He pointed out, moreover, that the direction he was taking was paralleled by the direction that many liberation theologians were already taking at that time, such as exploring the value of popular devotions rather than dismissing them as if they were the opiate of the people.²⁴

Agency, Glocalization, and the Challenges of Inculturation Today

Despite differences in their relative balance of concerns, John Paul II, with his attention to reciprocity, and Schreiter, with his contextual model of local theologies,

20. Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), xi.

21. José Comblin, *Called for Freedom: The Changing Context of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), xv-xvii; 138-170.

22. Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

23. *Ibid.*, 128.

24. *Ibid.*, 101. Analogous issues concerning the meaning of liberation and its relationship to a variety of cultural issues arose in the 1990's when womanist theology, a theology that addresses the conditions and concerns of those who are persons of color, female, and poor, arose to challenge feminist theologies that often seemed focused exclusively on the concerns of affluent white women. Parallel developments in some feminist theologies were already at that time starting to include a wider range of cultural, economic, and class issues. See, for example, Diana L. Hayes, “And When We Speak: To Be Black, Catholic, and Womanist,” in Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis, eds., *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 102-119. See also Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 11.

were both attempting in some way to take account of the agency of local peoples in the process of evangelization. Agency has been a major topic in the work of Lamin Sanneh, who treats African natives not simply as victims of colonizers (though they were indeed that) but also as active agents in the encounters between peoples and in the dynamic reception and living out of the Christian message.²⁵ As the Bible was translated into native languages, African peoples built upon and transformed their own local customs, traditions, stories, songs, and practices.²⁶ Sanneh describes African cultures as deeply spiritual and as fertile ground for reception of the Christian message. Most Africans are able to read their own heritage in a way that parallels practices and modes of thought in the Old Testament. Sanneh explains that the rapid spread of Christianity across Africa in the past decade is due partly to the absence of pressure from colonizers that allows for a more open and free choice on the part of the natives, but also from the way in which native cultures seem to have been made for the reception of the Gospel. Sanneh explains that African cultures, because they are fundamentally spiritual and open to the transcendent, welcome the Christian message as the fulfillment of what they had been oriented toward all along.²⁷

This openness to transcendence on the part of African cultures (and traditional cultures throughout the world) contrasts with a relative lack of transcendence in the culture of the modern world. Writing in the 1990's, Hervé Carrier, a French sociologist who had been Secretary of the Pontifical Council on Culture, noted that evangelization had traditionally been a process of finding connections between the Christian message and the concrete points of openness existing in traditional cultures. The modern West, however, which stood in deep need of "re-evangelization" or what John Paul II called the "new evangelization," was in danger of losing its own points of openness to the transcendent.²⁸ It is difficult to preach the Gospel of Christ directly to a culture in which there appear few links with which to connect. Prior strategies of preevangelization need to be undertaken to challenge the materialism, rationalism, and extreme individualism of contemporary modern culture. Sanneh points out that it is hard for people in the West to fathom the explosive growth of Christianity in Africa in the past decade because they do not grasp how traditional cultures with their stories, sayings, spiritual beliefs, and communal practices can be so hungry for the message of Christianity once the colonizers are no longer directing all affairs.²⁹

Commentators are divided in their assessments of the dominant culture of the United States, but there is general agreement that U.S. culture, though not without some opposition, plays a dominating role on the world scene. Goizueta analyzes the

25. Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process: The African Dimension* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 82-96.

26. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

27. Sanneh, *Encountering the West*, 92.

28. Hervé Carrier, *Evangelizing the Culture of Modernity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

29. Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 16-21.

dominant culture of the United States in terms of an individualism that he breaks down into three categories: economic, political, and religious. In contrast, U.S. Hispanic culture fosters an experience of the human person as more basically relational and interconnected.³⁰ U.S. Hispanics find themselves living “in-between” the dominant culture and their more traditional one. In a way similar to that of Sanneh, Goizueta explains that a person shaped exclusively by the dominant culture of the United States cannot understand the religious practices and experiences of the U.S. Hispanic because their individualistic understanding of the human person can only allow them to regard Hispanic interaction with Jesus and Mary and the saints as magical and superstitious.³¹ Only a lived experience of human interconnection that includes Jesus and Mary as present members of the community can undergird an understanding of Hispanic religious practices as authentic.

Still, various peoples throughout the world are both influenced by U.S. culture and manage to live, as Goizueta calls it, “in-between.”³² Robert Schreiter speaks of the phenomenon of “glocalization” by which local peoples, strongly affected by the U.S. culture, nevertheless forge a distinctively local way of life that remains in many ways connected with their own traditions. A phenomenon emerges that cannot be understood adequately by taking either its global or its local elements alone.³³

Globalization and the proliferation of social media raise the question as to how long or even whether there still exist distinct traditional cultures into which the Gospel can be incarnated. Cultural diversity still exists, but rather than traditional local cultures there are more and more varieties of glocalized or hybrid communities. Some of these communities transcend geographical space. Virtually all contemporary communities are deeply influenced by a dominant world culture, even if only to be partially defined by being in opposition to it. If the dominant world culture itself is commercial and technocratic, tending toward a marginalization of cultural elements open to the transcendent, then evangelization and inculturation face huge challenges in the time to come.

A related large question arises concerning the status of Western culture in connection with Christianity. In his controversial Regensburg Address (2006), Pope Benedict XVI asserted the need to appreciate Christianity’s Greek philosophical heritage even as it strives to become more fully a “world church”:

In the light of our experience with cultural pluralism, it is often said nowadays that the synthesis with Hellenism achieved in the early Church was an initial inculturation which ought not to be binding on other cultures. The latter are said to have the right to return to the simple message of the New Testament prior to that inculturation, in order to inculturate it

30. Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 47-76.

31. *Ibid.*, 65.

32. *Ibid.*, 1-17.

33. Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 12. Schreiter attributes the concept of “glocalization” to Roland Robertson.

anew in their own particular milieux. This thesis is not simply false, but it is coarse and lacking in precision. The New Testament was written in Greek and bears the imprint of the Greek spirit, which had already come to maturity as the Old Testament developed. True, there are elements in the evolution of the early Church which do not have to be integrated into all cultures. Nonetheless, the fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the nature of faith itself.

In this passage Benedict XVI acknowledges the complexity of the issues at stake, but finally emphasizes the links between the Gospel and some basic elements of Greek culture present already in the New Testament witness. It is necessary, for example, to believe that the fundamentally good creation of God, though mysterious in a way that is far beyond a complete human understanding, is in principle rational and intelligible. A voluntarist understanding of an arbitrary God is incompatible with apostolic witness.

The tension between Western-centered and other-centered approaches to inculturation bring us back to the point with which we began. In recent decades, inculturation has been the term used by Catholics (and others) to signify a process of engagement between the Christian Gospel and a particular culture. Although some prefer terms such as “contextual theologies” and “interculturality,” contemporary attempts to pinpoint either what the Gospel is or what culture is raise seemingly endless questions. Still, the theological and pastoral task of struggling to be true both to the Gospel and to the variety of contexts in which it is lived out will go on.



About This Issue

We are pleased to publish our first issue on inculturation. This collection of articles is a blend of theology and history which underscores our identity as an interdisciplinary journal.

We are fortunate to bring together first-rate scholars. Dennis M. Doyle is professor of theology at the University of Dayton. David J. Endres is assistant professor of church history at Mount St. Mary's Seminary of the West in Cincinnati. He is also assistant editor of this journal and is a priest of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. Deborah Kanter is chair and associate professor of Latin American History/Latino Studies at Albion College in Albion, Michigan. Jorge Presmanes, O.P., is professor of theology at Barry University in Miami Shores, Florida. He is a Dominican Friar of the Province of St. Martin de Porres. C.J. T. Talar is a professor at the Graduate School of Theology of the University of St. Thomas at St. Mary's Seminary, Houston, Texas.

Christopher J. Kauffman

Postscript: Due to a series of unavoidable delays, our fall 2011 issue was published in March 2012. The next three issues, two on the Second Vatican Council and the fall issue on religious and liturgical music, will bring us back on schedule. Thank you for your understanding. —CJK