

New Testament Pointers to Inculturation

Introduction

The term inculturation is a neologism that has come into vogue, especially among Third-world Theologians, in the last twenty or thirty years. It is used to describe the ongoing and much needed dialogue between Gospel and culture; an existential encounter between a living people and a living Gospel. It works on the premise that every authentic culture is, in its own way, the bearer of universal values established by God and reflects God's bounty to humanity. Hence every culture can and must become the medium of God's revelation to the people of that culture. The Good News which has been culturally conditioned to a particular milieu must be de-cultured in order to be re-cultured into a new situation.

In the words of P. Arrupe: "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.'"¹

The Incarnation

The outcome of divine consideration ('synkatabasis') to humankind, the incarnation which is the sign and the symbol of identification of the Word with a particular people and their culture is the primary motivation and perfect pattern of all inculturation. The "*in-carne*" of Jesus is the radical paradigm for the

1. Arrupe, P., On Inculturation: A letter to the whole Society, Rome, 1976.

"*in-cultura*" of his values and message as expressed in the Gospels as well as in the Apostolic Writings, into other cultures and traditions.

Vat. II affirms as a basic missionary principle the fact that "the Son of God walked the ways of a true Incarnation that He might make men sharers in the divine nature"² and it continues in the same breath the sane advice that "the Church must become part of all these groups for the same motive which led Christ to bind Himself, in virtue of His incarnation, to the definite social and cultural conditions of those human beings among whom He dwelt".³

The fact of the enfleshment of the Word is expressed by John through the term "*eskenosen en hemin*" (Jo. 1:14) which when rendered literally reads "he pitched his tent among us" (Authorized Version). The term could bear a better translation, "he dwelt among us" (R.S.V; N.E.B), and still better, "he lived among us" (J.B., G.N.B.). The translators of the G.N.B. have felicitously recaptured the meaning of the enfleshment of the Word by translating the whole phrase: "The Word *became* a human being and *lived* among us".

By this, two facts seem to be clearly asserted. Far from being an unseen and awe-inspiring presence of God as in the case of the tent or Temple in the O.T. (cf. Ex. 25:8; Num. 35:34) the enfleshment implies a presence both visible and personal. Secondly, it is a reality which is permanent and not transitory. Of the 435 times the Word "*skene*" is used in the LXX, it translates the Hebrew terms "*ohel*" (tent), "*mishkan*" (dwelling), "*sukah*" (thicket) etc., in that order of higher to lower frequency. Though the main equation is between '*ohel*' and '*skene*', yet the correlation between '*mishkan*' and '*skene*' also is very strong in the LXX

2. Vat. II Ad Gentes, 3 (Hereafter : A. G.).

3. A. G. 10; Note that Gaudium et Spes affirms strongly that "the Church...is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation nor to any particular way of life nor any customary pattern of living, ancient or recent" (G. S. 58).

so much so authors are of opinion that in Jo. 1:14 the *'mishkan*, element is dominant and it means a lasting presence, "the presence of the Eternal in time".⁴ The implications of this factor for inculturation are not far to seek.

The incultured Jesus

"For, anyone who is going to encounter a people, should have a great esteem for their patrimony and their language and their customs".⁵ This affirmation from Vat.II is simply a restatement of what Jesus himself has done in his earthly life. Not only did he have esteem for, but also he loved and lived the patrimony of his people, their language, belief, customs and traditions so that the people with whom he lived and conversed could say without any exaggeration, "he was flesh of our flesh and bone of our bones".

Because Jesus was one with the patrimony of his people "he (was) not ashamed to call them his brothers" (Heb. 2:11). This participation in the patrimony went to such an extent that he "shared in flesh and blood, (and) he himself likewise partook of the same nature" (Heb. 2:14) with all the consequent limitations. Since "he had to be made like his brethren in every respect" (Heb. 2:17), he was "tempted in every respect as we are" (Heb. 4:15) and "learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb. 5:8). This indeed is "*kenosis*" of which the Christ-hymn of the letter to the Philippians (2:7) sings in the words "he emptied himself taking the form of a slave being born in the likeness of men..." or, "taking on the likeness of human beings"! The same thought is continued by Paul more poignantly in the words: "for our sake God made him share our sin" (2 Cor. 2:21); and "he has become a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13), namely he has become part of sinful humanity. Thus the enfleshment of the Word is a profound historical reality in which the Word takes on an earthly existence like us with all its strengths and weaknesses with the

4. Cf. TDNT : vol, VII; pp. 367-373, 385-386.

5. A. G. 26.

exception only of sin (cf. Heb. 4:15). This is the paradox which distinguishes the Christian economy from others.⁶

Jesus' life was one with that of his people. In culture, customs, habits and language he was a Jew to the core. We may with confidence presume that Jesus spoke his native Aramaic, the language of his people then, since from the time of the Babylonian exile Hebrew receded more and more in to the background. We may not be wrong in affirming too that he would have known his language well to the extent of being able to use it fluently and picturesquely as is evident from the parables that revel in rural imageries such as fields, plants, seeds, shrubs, flowers, fruits, birds, animals, seasons etc., which are peculiar to his native land and also from his teachings which are abounding with distilled native wisdom.⁷ Since language is the primary medium through which a culture finds its expression, Jesus' insertion into his community is rooted in the language of his people with all its rich vocabulary, literary genres, stylistic devices etc.

In his cognizance of the Laws, customs and traditions of his people Jesus was equal to the masters of his time. He castigates the pharisees and the teachers of the Law through the very Law which he had at his finger tips (cf. Lk. 11:37-52). His affirmation of the need of inner disposition as against dead formalism and outward formalities proves that he was familiar with and was following the prophetic traditions of his community.

6. The whole Issue of Jeevadhara, May-June, 1976 deals with the topic of inculturation. It was a pure coincidence that I came upon it and the similarity in some of the ideas does not mean borrowing from or dependence on these articles; cf. Hill, R. C., *Breaking the Bread of the Word: Principles of teaching Scripture*, Rome, 1991, p. 41-42
7. Dalnan, G., *The Words of Jesus*, Edinburg, 1909, in which he firmly establishes that Jesus spoke in Aramaic to the people and his words which are recorded in the Gospels definitely display Aramaic influence; Black M; *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, Oxford, 1967; Jeremias, J., *The Parables of Jesus* London, 1963; id., *the Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, London, 1966; id; *Abba*, Gottingen, 1966.

It is with this background that we should view the scene at Nazareth. The question, "Is not this the carpenter?" (Mk. 6:2-3; Mt. 13:54-55) is double-pronged. First Jesus is recognized by his profession - a worker in stone, wood or metal as the term 'tekton' would imply.⁸ That is his identity. This is indeed a compliment to the person who had fully incultured himself into his trade and social milieu. Secondly, there is also a spring-up of surprise at the ease with which he goes about his new mission.

The additional questions: "Where did the man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands?" lead us to surmise that Jesus was also at home in both the prophetic traditions and also the wisdom of his people, namely the Torah - "a new prophet and a new rabbi" (cf. Lk. 7:16; Jo. 1:38; 3:2; 6:14). This event at Nazareth becomes a basis for Vat. II for enjoining inculturation on the Church. "From the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences, these Churches (must) borrow all those things which can contribute to the glory of their creator".⁹

The problem concerning tribute to be paid to Caesar is another instance of Jesus having been truly incultured. The provocative question posed here to trip him up: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (Mk 12:14-15), is a snare and one of political delicacy. But Jesus shoots out saying: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (12:17). A delicate question is delicately answered! Jewish nationalism as well as Roman rule have nothing to point their finger at. Jesus escapes the trap (cf. 8:11; 10:2) and is

8. Taylor, V., *The Gospel according to Mark*, Macmillan, London, 1966, p. 300; Nineham D. E., *Saint Mark*, Penguin, London, 1973 p. 165-166; Albright, W. F., and Mann C. S., *Matthew*, Anchor Bible 26, Doubleday, 1971, pp. 172-173 are of opinion that "tekton" would point out to a craftsman of considerable skill or an itinerant builder of some consequence and not just a carpenter!

9. A. G. 22; cf. also *Lumen Gentium*, 13.

able to adapt, adjust and incarnate himself into the particular situation! With Paul he would have been able to say: "I have become all things to all" (I Cor. 9:22).

One last remark about Jesus' predilection for the poor and the marginalized will close our reflection on Jesus the inculturator. The fact that he was born an "anaw" (Lk. 2:7, 12), lived out the life of an "anaw" (cf. Lk. 9:58; Mt. 8:20) and died an "anaw" (Mt. 27:35, 46-48) has also to be seen in the context of his frequenting parties and weddings (Mt. 22:1-10; Jo. 2:1-11), his staying with the rich and the well-to-do (Lk. 10:38-42; 19:1-10), his dining and wining with the upper strata of the society (Mt. 9:10; 11:19; Lk. 7:36-50) etc. Once again, Jesus was all to all and at home with everyone. "By his incarnation he confined himself to the precise social and cultural conditions of the people with whom he lived".¹⁰

This brief reflection on the life of Jesus is a pointer to the way of life which his disciples must adhere to. The basic attitude of Jesus must be the model and the guide to all our approach to inculturation. It is not the particular things Jesus did or did not that matter, but his basic orientation which must be rightly understood. The question naturally then is "why should I be 'in-cultura'?" The how "in-cultura" will look after itself.

The incultured New Testament

Both in the preaching of the Good News and in giving it a written expression, the Resurrection of Jesus played a unique role. The life and teachings of the incarnate Saviour break all the barriers of space and time and the later apostolic preaching solidifies itself in the light of the Resurrection of Jesus into well-stocked narratives in the genre which we now call "the Gospel".¹¹

10. A. G. 10.

11. Cerfaux, L., *The Four Gospels*, London, 1965, pp. 4-5.

But the fact is abundantly clear that this developing evangelical tradition needed to insert itself into the milieu in which and for which it was written. That is how we have four Gospels, "ONE GOSPEL" in its fourfoldness, namely that of Matthew, of Mark, of Luke and of John. We could today write four or even more lives of Jesus anchoring ourselves deeply in the basic nucleus, namely "the Christ-event", and at the same time firmly rooted in our own varied cultures and customs. One historical event becomes thus reincarnated in different cultures. What is culture-bound becomes culture-free.

The Gospels bear ample testimony to this fact. Thus for example, the pejorative expression "even the pagans do that", which in the context of the Jews whom Mt. is addressing (Mt. 5:47), sounds just and right becomes, "even sinners do that" (Lk. 6:33) in the broader context in which Lk is writing to his Gentile audience. Because Lk is sensitive to the sensibilities of the Gentiles he must reincarnate the wording of Mt into something inoffensive to his audience; and he has done justice to that. Thus, the phrase "Our Father in heaven" (Mt 6:9) is probably a Palestinian re-incarnation in Mt of the original Word "Father" (Lk. 11:2), to adapt it to the religious and liturgical background of the Jews to whom his Gospel is addressed. In the same way, "Be perfect" just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt 5:48) may be once again a Matthaean inculturation or re-incarnation of the Lukan "Be merciful just as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36) which seems more original in the context (cf. Mt. 5:43-47). Examples could be multiplied, but we must stop!

Still another remark is in place here from the point of view of the language in which the Gospels are written. Any one familiar with the Semitic languages may not fail to perceive the underlying Aramaic substratum behind our Gospels. Although Jesus conversed and preached in Aramaic, the common language of Palestine in his time, the Gospels have come down to us in Greek, the "lingua franca" of the people. Besides, the Greek used is of various categories. We have, on the one hand, the

rough, artless and unsteady idiom of Mk the "targumist" or interpreter of Peter; and on the other, the stylized literary composition of Lk steeped in the Greek of the Septuagint so much so Jerome speaking of this "most Greek of the Gospels" remarks that its style "is more elegant and smacks of secular eloquence".¹²

At the same time the Greek used by the evangelists is not the classical Greek of Homer, Plato or Aristotle but the so-called "koine" (common) Greek, that form of Greek which was the outcome of the conquests of Alexander and which through modification and simplification became the language of communication among the people. It is into this world of the common people the Gospels were incultured and introduced in their earliest written form.

Greek which was so foreign to Aramaic (the former belonging to the Indogermanic group and the latter to the Semitic) as Sanskrit (an Aryan language) is to Tamil (a Dravidian language), was used to express the ideas, idioms and linguistic categories of Aramaic. The fact that the translation from one language into another affects sometimes even the message translated¹³ did not come in the way of the early Church's acceptance of the Greek N.T. as the canonical text. In fact the Church accepted the forceful, dynamic, changeable idiom of the common people and not the safe, orthodox formulae of a "sacred" language in which the message was originally conveyed.

Thus the Gospels as we have them today are standing witnesses to the fact that their authors were far from being insensitive to the demands of the recipient cultures of the Gospels. From a monocultural oral proclamation they transform it to a polycultural written message, thus showing the direction in which the Gospels have to be transmitted in each local culture and language down the centuries in every corner of the world.

12. Barclay, W., *The Gospels and Acts*, I.; SCM, London, pp. 123-129; cf. also 186-210.

13. Note the Italian proverb which says "Translators are traitors" ("Traduttori sono traditori").

The incultured Church

We now come to the last stage of our enquiry, namely, how the early Church as she was struggling to pull herself out from the pangs of adolescence into a stage of maturity, was adjusting herself to the varied demands of the culture or cultures in which she inserted herself. She had to preserve her patrimony, the unicity of the Kerygma and at the same time encounter a diversity of linguistico-cultural milieu. One could see here three such culturally different entities confronting the early Church.

There was first the Palestinian Judaism comprising Aramaic speaking Jews, having Jerusalem as its centre, being proud of its chequered history, fanatical about the Law and the Temple and waiting for the realization of the promises made to Abraham and his progeny.

Side by side there was Hellenistic Judaism comprising Greek-speaking Jews who were more open and tolerant to other cultures and other experiences, having Antioch as its centre, spread far and wide in the diaspora, and having no regard for the Temple (Acts 7:47-50) and perhaps also for the Law.¹⁴

There was then the Graeco-Roman world constituted by the convert Gentiles having mystery religions and fertility cult at their background and adding to it a strong philosophical bend.

The early Church responded to each of these new situations through appropriating a new language and a new life style. Christology as a faith response of people to Jesus of Nazareth made use of whatever tools available which were derived from these differing world views and culture.¹⁵ Jesus accepted as

14. Acts 6:1 uses the rare word "Hellenists" to denote the Greek-speaking Jews as opposed to the Aramaic-speaking Jews or "Hebraioi" who boycotted the use of Greek. Cf. Williams, C. S. C., *The Acts of the Apostles*; London, 1964, pp. 95-96; Bruce, F. F., *The Acts of the Apostles*, Eerdmans, Michigan, 1979, p. 151.

"*Christos*" (messiah) by the Jewish Christians had to be "christened" as "*Logos*" (word) or "*Pleroma*" (fullness) for the Greek converts; and it was quite a natural and necessary thing to do. Paul gives the fine example of inculturation by preaching the message of salvation in Christ to the Jews at Antioch in terms of O.T. traditions (cf. Acts 13:16-41) and to the Greeks at Athens by recasting it after the reaching of the Greek poets and philosophers (cf. Acts 17:22-31).

If Christology was planted and took its root in each of these different segments, so were also the early ecclesial models part and parcel of the environment and culture in which they sprang up. There was the collegially structured Church of Jerusalem; there were the free charismatic communities of the Corinthian letters; there was also the monarchical as well as hierarchical church of the Pastoral letters. This diversity was shared in almost every line: catechesis, liturgy, morality and the like.

This testifies to the fact that the early Church was not a fossilized monolith, but, being sent to all and sundry (Mt 28:18), was at home with all places, peoples, customs and cultures.

At the same time the distinctive marks of Christianity that "those who believed were of one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32) and "they spend their days on earth and hold their citizenship in heaven",¹⁶ and their belief that "God Himself gave His own Son as a ransom for us.. the immortal for the mortal"¹⁷ etc., identify them.

Conclusion

Thus did the early Church face and experience a tension which made her authentic as bearer of the Good News to all and everywhere. This tension is a necessary consequence for the Church

15. Fuller, R. H., *Foundations of New Testament Christology*, N. Y. 1965, p. 16.

16. Jurgens, W. A., *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1970, pp. 40-42; Letter to Diogenetus; 97.5.9.

17. *id.* 99.9.2.

everywhere in so far as she is both universal and particular, same as well as different, unique, at the same time pluriform, in the world, yet not of the world, holding to the identity of faith and embracing the differences in the expression of that faith, keeping to the fundamentals and accepting the accidentals etc.

This process can be healthily fostered today neither in a passivist and tradition-bound Church nor in a radically aggressive or overenthusiastic Church, but in a Church which is willing to discern and to learn. Which way is the Church in India choosing?¹⁸

Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in Africa has said rightly, "Come with us as far as the Church has advanced so as to arrive with us where she has not yet advanced. I am bold enough to tell you, I speak everyone's language. I am in the body of Christ...she speaks the languages of all peoples. I too am familiar with all languages: my language is Greek, my language is Syriac, my language is Hebrew (and I may add, my language is Tamil or Hindi...), my language is that of every people because I am to be found in the unity of all peoples."¹⁹

R. J. Raja S. J.

18. Pontifical Biblical Commission : The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, NBCLC, Bangalore, 1994, pp. 113-127.

19. Augustine ; P. L. 37,1929.