

GOSPEL AND CULTURE IN AND AFTER THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

*Dr. Michael Amaladoss, S.J.
Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions,
Chennai.*

The dialogue of the Gospel with the many cultures of the world came up directly in the Second Vatican Council. The final document of the Council, *The Church in the Modern World*, spoke of the “Proper Development of Culture” in chapter 2. Describing culture as “the cultivation of the goods and values of nature” (53), it suggests that thanks to science, technology and communications, “a more universal form of culture is gradually taking shape.” (54) It speaks of a new humanism in which people are aware of themselves as the creators of culture. (55) It is afraid that globalization may disturb traditional wisdom and the identities of cultures; that contemporary developments may turn people into machines; that cultures may claim an undue autonomy detrimental to religion. (56) Acknowledging that “God spoke according to the culture proper to each age”, the Church becomes aware that it “has been sent to all ages and nations and therefore, is not tied exclusively and indissolubly to any customary practices, ancient or modern;... it can then enter into communion with different forms of culture, thereby enriching both itself and the cultures themselves.” (58) Then it goes on to talk about the autonomy and promotion of culture, but without detriment to

the common good, referring even to the important role of women. (59-60) The focus here is on the Church, not the Gospel, dialoguing with culture. This will be a source of tension later.

Such an openness of the Church to the many cultures of the world is strengthened by two other documents. The *Document on the Liturgy* speaks of the need for revising the liturgical books to make possible a more full, conscious and active participation by the people. (21) After affirming that the liturgy could be adapted to different cultures (37) it goes on to suggest the possibility of “a more radical adaptation” in some places and circumstances and entrusts responsibility for this to the local Bishops’ Conferences. The status of these Conferences is of course strengthened by the vision of episcopal collegiality and of the universal Church as a communion of local Churches in the *Document on the Church*.

In 1974-75 a subtle shift takes place in the dialogue partner of the cultures from the Church to the Gospel. The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, at their first general assembly in Taipei, Taiwan in 1974, suggested that a dialogue of the Gospel with local cultures leads to the emergence of authentic local Churches. In 1975 in his post-synodal document *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI asserts that the Gospel must transform all cultures.

She (the Church) seeks by virtue of the gospel to affect and, as it were, recast the criteria of judgment, the standard of values, the incentives and life standards of the human race which are inconsistent with the word of God and the plan of salvation... The gospel must impregnate the whole life of man... The gospel and, therefore, evangelization... are above all cultures... They can penetrate any culture while being subservient to none. (19-20)

It is in this context that a new term *inculturation* is coined. It suggests that, just as the Word of God became incarnate in human nature and Jewish culture, the gospel today has to become incarnate in every culture in view of transforming it. Till then the Church was being transplanted with its theology, liturgy, canon law and spirituality everywhere. Some mild adaptations were timidly attempted here and there. The Bible and some liturgical texts were translated into local languages for private use. So the vision of inculturation came as a radical change. The local Churches in Africa and Asia reacted enthusiastically to this possibility. In the short space allotted to me I shall limit myself to what happened in India and to the questions that this history has raised for our reflection. I shall also limit myself to official or collective efforts that followed the Council. The first Indian Christian Ashram was founded in 1950 at Thannirpalli near Tiruchirapalli. Articles by individuals start appearing soon after the Council.

DEVELOPMENTS IN INDIA

In the area of theology, *Clergy Monthly* had a quarterly supplement specially focusing on Indian cultures and religion much before the Council. In 1971 the journal *Jeevadhara* was started. In 1974 there was a research seminar on whether we can consider the scriptures of other religions as inspired. The opinion of theologians was positive. They spoke of the three covenants of God with the humans: natural, Judaic and Christian. The scriptures of other religions were considered as belonging to God's covenant in nature. So they can be read and interpreted in the light of the Bible, just as we interpret the Old in the light of the New Testament. It was suggested that they can be used, not only in private reading, but also in the liturgy. Such official use in the liturgy was forbidden by the Vatican. But this has not hindered individuals and small groups. Fr. Sebastian Painadath is even

preaching retreats based on the Bhagavad Gita at the National Centre in Bangalore. In 1975 a meeting explored the theme of Ministries in the Church in India. In 1976 started a series of seminars on Prayer at the National Centre. It introduced participants to different Indian methods of prayer. This led to the proliferation of Bhajans in various Indian languages. This series was followed by another series on Indian Christian Spirituality. Then there was a seminar on "Inculturation in Theological Formation." In 1978 a national seminar in Pune focused on "Theologizing in India Today". In 1981 a national group explored the theme "The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society." In 1982 started the annual meetings of the Indian Theological Association, which has been exploring theologically different themes every year. In 1985 there was a national seminar on "Sharing Worship: *Communicatio in Sacris*". In the 1980s the Jesuits started their Regional Centres of Theology in Indian languages promoting contextual theologies. Indian theological reflection has been going on since then, in spite of repeated attempts by the Vatican to control it.

In the area of spirituality, the Christian ashram movement has also flourished. There may be today more than 50 ashrams scattered across the country. Some of them conduct seminars of initiation into Indian Christian spirituality.

With regard to the liturgy, attempts were made to introduce postures, gestures and other symbolic rites like *aratis*. The Vatican approved 12 such points, though an Indian Eucharistic prayer was not approved. These are not widely practiced. But they give an idea of what could be done, what should be avoided and how should we go about such projects. Indian Christian art and architecture also flourished for some time, sponsored by some enlightened individuals. Music and dance have been cultivated in a few centres. So we can see that there have been enthusiastic efforts to promote inculturation in the different areas of Church life.

INCREASING OBSTACLES

But such creativity and freedom have not gone unchallenged. Any movement in the area of the liturgy was stopped after the first ten years or so. There have been attempts to control Indian theological reflection, leading often to a sort of self-censorship on the part of the theologians. In any case formation programmes in the seminaries remain classical and controlled. However it is difficult to stop people from thinking. Similarly there has been some development in Indian Christian spirituality, though it has remained confined to a small group of the spiritual elite. The reason for these difficulties is the different way in which inculturation is understood.

As I had indicated above, the FABC thought that the dialogue between gospel and culture will help the local Church to emerge. But unfortunately the 'ideology' of inculturation is developed largely in western missionary and ecclesial circles. It speaks of a top-down process. The missionary has to empty himself and proclaim the gospel to the local culture. As the Word that becomes incarnate, the gospel that the missionary carries is there all ready to be incarnated. This means in practice that it is 'translated' and slightly 'adapted'. This is actually the process of 'acculturation' of the missionary. Real inculturation starts when the community, after having heard the gospel proclaimed by the missionary, responds to it in terms of its own culture through a transformed way of life, worship, spiritual practice and reflection. It is in this way that a local Church emerges. It has to be a bottom-up process. The agents of this process are the people, not the missionary, nor the authorities in Rome who seek to decide what is good for the local people. Unfortunately the local Church is not conscientized and empowered. Continuing to live in a post-colonial situation the people are ready to be told what is good for them. In any case there is, side by side, a flourishing popular religiosity to Jesus, Mary and the Saints to satisfy their religious needs in an inculturated way.

They leave the official liturgy, etc. to the priests. They also seem to profit by the various Pentecostal movements.

OFFICIAL LIMITS TO INCULTURATION

The official Church complicates the matter further by insisting that, not only the gospel, but its early inculturation in the Greco-Roman culture is providential and normative for all the Churches everywhere. Referring back to the Vatican II Document on the Liturgy, the Vatican quotes the phrase “provided the substantial unity of the Roman rite is preserved” (38), while ignoring the other provision that “in some places and circumstances, however, an even more radical adaptation of the liturgy is needed.” (4) Pope Benedict XVI in a celebrated speech in Regensburg, which drew a lot of flak for his comments on the irrationality of Islam, also attacked people promoting inculturation in an insulting manner.

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 anew in their own particular milieu. This thesis is not simply false, but it is coarse and lacking in precision. (Benedict XVI at Regensburg)

It is with the idea of making Hellenism normative for every one that he floated the term inter-culturation at a meeting in Hongkong.

John Paul II had said something similar, though he was more ambiguous. We have the following three statements in a single number.

When the Church deals for the first time with cultures of great importance, but previously unexamined, it must even so never

place them before the Greek and Latin inculturation already acquired. Were this inheritance to be repudiated the providential plan of God would be opposed, who guides his Church down the paths of time and history. .. Simply because the mission of preaching the Gospel came first upon Greek philosophy in its journey, this is not taken to mean that other approaches are excluded... An immense spiritual impulse compels the Indian mind to an acquiring of that experience which would, with a spirit freed from the distractions of time and space, attain to the absolute good. This is the time, above all for Indian Christians, to unlock these treasures from their inheritance. (John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 72.)

He says elsewhere in the same document: "The Church does not have a philosophy of her own, nor does she select a particular one to the detriment of others." (*Ibid*, 49)

Fortunately the Popes cannot control the People of God with regard to their spiritual sadhana and theological reflection. But they can control the official communitarian manifestation of its faith in the liturgical celebrations. The recent insistence on a literal translation of the Latin texts in the liturgy is a stupid example of the same attitude. The central authority in the Church, therefore, while repeatedly talking about the importance and need for inculturation, is doing everything to prevent it at official levels. Such confusion in the thinking about and the practice of inculturation is one reason that I prefer to avoid that word and to talk about gospel-culture encounter.

FEARS OF SYNCRETISM

Another obstacle to the process of gospel-culture encounter is the fear of syncretism, both at the popular and at the official levels. Every culture is animated by a religion. Actually religion offers a deeper dimension

of meaning to culture. Gospel-culture encounter supposes a meeting of the various cultures with which the gospel has interacted with the culture which it is encountering now. Such an encounter between cultures has its own processes and rules into which I am not entering just now. Besides, given the link between religion and culture, an intercultural encounter also becomes an interreligious encounter. For example, if I am going to talk about God or worship God in the context of my culture, I cannot avoid words and symbols of my culture. If I am talking about God in Tamil, I will use words like *Kadavul* and *Iraiva* rather than *Yahweh* as some Pentecostals do. If I am worshipping God I may wave in arati oil lamps and flowers as well as incense. Some people tend to identify these words and symbols as Hindu. This is to confuse religion with culture (language). Culture and language, while they help to express religion, also have a certain autonomy. Calling God *Kadavul* is not the same as calling God *Siva* and *Vishnu*. At an official level the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith had discouraged the use of Eastern methods of prayer and meditation like Yoga and Zen.

GOSPEL TRANSFORMS CULTURE

Another important and crucial area in the context of gospel-culture encounter is the dimension of cultural transformation. Just as the Word of God becomes human in view of divinizing the humans, the gospel has to take a new shape in every culture, transforming it in the light of the gospel. Every culture is a creation of the humans. So it is likely to embody their good and bad elements. Indian culture, for instance, is characterized by the inequalities and oppressions of the caste system and by the oppression of women through practices like child marriage, dowry, etc. When the gospel encounters Indian culture it must challenge it to conversion in these areas. Missionaries like Robert de Nobili did well to insist that an Indian can become Christian and

remain culturally and socially Indian, without becoming Portuguese. They did try to soften the inequalities of the caste system. But a few foreign missionaries could not be expected to transform a socio-cultural system that is more than 2000 years old. The Indian Church too may not be able to do much being a small minority of 2.5%. But we have had reformers like Phule, Ambedkar, Narayana Guru, Gandhi, Periyar and others in the last century. The Church has not stood at their side in promoting social reform. It has not mitigated the discriminations within its own body, even in official liturgical and para-liturgical celebrations. This is certainly an important issue which the process of gospel-culture encounter has to attend to. While the Church has been instrumental in promoting the education of girls, it has not done enough to promote their social status.

WHICH CULTURE?

When we think of gospel-culture encounter we tend to focus on the dominant culture of the Latin Church and Indian culture. When we think of Indian culture we may tend to ignore its rich diversity. We may tend to take an ethnological approach looking at its past expressions or at its dominant streams at present, ignoring cultural pluralism within the country and the subaltern traditions like the Dalits and the Tribals. We may also be ignoring the impact of modernity with its science and technology, which is leading to consumerism and secularization. Feudal attitudes and a culture of corruption have become pervasive in the country. Thanks to the media of communications, globalization is also a factor where the dominant global powers seek to shape the world to serve their own self-interest. A slow secularization of culture can be noticed. In such a situation we can no longer think of the gospel-culture encounter merely as a process of indigenization.

THE CHALLENGE OF POPE FRANCIS

As we celebrate the golden jubilee of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council a new wind of the Spirit seems to be blowing across the Church, thanks also to Pope Francis. I shall focus just on one of his ideas and show how it can start a new way of looking at gospel-culture encounter. Pope Francis wants the Church to be, not “self-referential” and inward looking but go out into the world on mission. We have to get in touch with the people, especially the poor. A self-referential Church focuses on itself and its own glorious liturgical celebrations, which are actually cut off from life and people, focused rather on the ministers. It seems more interested in encouraging a small group of the self-righteous “perfect”, while ignoring and marginalizing the people at large perceived as “sinners”. It seeks a strong centralization of power, so that a small elite can rule and control the mass of people. Pope Francis wants a Church that will be involved in the world, with the people, encouraging the local Churches by promoting subsidiarity and collegiality. Such an approach will lead us to a two-fold attitude. On the one hand, we no longer look to a sacred tradition in the Vatican that has to be protected and defended as the only authentic way to God. On the other hand, we encourage the people to live and celebrate the gospel in the world, in dialogue with all people of good will, even self-declared atheists. The focus is therefore on life, world, community, subsidiarity, pluralism and communion. We can see how this approach contrasts with the whole approach in which the Vatican controlled everything. It is said that St. John XXIII opened the windows in the Church. During the last 50 years people at the Vatican have been trying, somewhat unsuccessfully, to close it. Now Pope Francis is opening, not only the windows, but also the doors so that the Church can go out into the world, meet people where they are and dialogue, live and celebrate with them. This is the real dialogue of the gospel with the cultures of the world, focused on the people and not on the gospel and certainly not on

the Church. What would this new approach involve for gospel-culture encounter? I shall limit myself to a few indications.

TODAY'S CHALLENGES

First of all the People of God should be empowered to build themselves up as a community of the Kingdom and to be involved in the world in mission. The clergy will be at their service as ministers, not masters. Their life as Christians should not be church-centred, but community centred, in which the church too has a place. This would not be easy because, though we are in a democratic political order, our social system still tends to be feudal and conditioned by the hierarchical caste system, strengthened further by the ecclesiastical hierarchy which tends to sacralise power. The gospel-culture encounter should help the people to get out of this straight jacket and assert their freedom and creativity to build community within and without. They would be the real agents of the encounter, assisted by the clergy.

Secondly, at the moment, we have the official liturgical celebrations which tend to become primarily divine worship and not community events. Side by side with this we have need-based popular devotions centred around Mary and the Saints, though there seems to be a growing interest in Eucharistic adoration. But the sacraments and other sacramentals are primarily community events. The community should be their focus, not necessarily the church and the priest. The Eucharist, for instance, should become a community celebration where every social structure that divides the community disappears. If these divisions do not progressively disappear the community is lying and celebrating a lie. It may also be good to avoid an exclusive focus on the sacraments and to encourage the celebration of life in community and in nature, commemorating the various natural cycles, seasons,

etc. Once again the people are the celebrants with the ministers at their service.

Thirdly, in the area of spirituality, the focus has so far been on the 'elite' living in ashrams practicing contemplative prayer. There is no problem if a few are called to such a way of life, especially as symbols of the Kingdom of God for the others. But it will be unfortunate if this ashramic spirituality is proposed as a way of life for everyone in the modern, secularizing world. The Hindu tradition, for instance, seems to throw up popular gurus who cater to the modern people with simple methods of breathing or *pranayama* with yogic methods of concentration leading to inner peace. We have nothing corresponding to this in the Church, apart from the need-based popular devotions. Some seem to be attracted by charismatic prayer groups. Even they tend to become need-based. Apart from the official liturgy and need-based popular devotions what have we to offer to the people in the world today, especially the youth? We urgently need a popular Indian Christian spirituality.

In the area of theological reflection we have done a little better. There has been some focus on interreligious dialogue and various liberation theologies that attend to the oppression and exploitation of the poor, the Dalits, the Tribals, the women and creation. We do not yet have the courage to break out of the official scholastic system, since our theological formation is, unlike in the USA and Europe, seminary not university based. Much of our theological theses tend to be comparative studies than original reflections on our situations and problems. More importantly theological reflection seems to be cut off from the people and even the ministers who are not in a seminary. It is true that most of our people are poor and do not read books. But even our priests and religious do not seem to have acquired a habit of reading. Living in a religious country which has given birth to Hinduism, Buddhism,

Jainism and Sikhism and has welcomed Christianity and Islam almost from their beginnings, theology here will necessarily be interreligious, because the God of whom all the religions speak is one. (cf. Rom 3:29-30)

Finally our involvement in the world in order to transform it will necessarily lead to collaboration with all people of good will, even secularists and atheists. Such collaboration could be deepened through interreligious dialogue, but is independent of and prior to it, emphasizing the secularism of our democracy. We would perhaps discover the secular dimension of the gospel itself, according to which feeding the hungry and clothing the naked are more important than religious ritual. (cf. Mt 25:31-46.)