CULTURE AND DIALOGUE

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There is a growing awareness among us Christians today of the implications of the pluralism of cultures for evangelization. The gospel is not tied to one culture, but has taken and can take many cultural expressions. Encountering a culture, it incarnates itself in it, promoting the good and purifying the imperfect elements and thus making it new. This natural process had been hindered, for various reasons, during recent centuries. It is now being rediscovered and affirmed. Goals, conditions, processes and implications of such inculturation of the gospel are being analysed and reflected upon.

There is also an increasing realization that we are living in a religiously and ideologically pluralistic world. In this context we are not only called to witness to Jesus and his good news; we are also challenged to dialogue with the living faiths and ideologies, expecting "to discern more about how God is active in our world, and to appreciate for their own sake the insights and experiences people of other faiths have of ultimate reality."[1]

Both these movements—inculturation and dialogue—must be seen "in the context of shared responsibility (of all people) for a common future, based on mutual respect, equal rights and equal obligations."[2] With this understanding I would like to reflect on the implications of inculturation in the context of dialogue with other living faiths and ideologies. Though inculturation and dialogue have been analysed and reflected upon, it is rare that one sees them explored with reference to their mutual interrelationship. My approach will be that of a theologian, but using tools of reflection borrowed from social sciences, together with my experiences as a Christian in India involved in both inculturation and dialogue.

Experience: from inculturation to dialogue

Twenty-five years ago I was busy studying Tamil language and culture in order to translate and adapt the gospel and Christian theology into linguistic and cultural categories that would be familiar to those to whom I was going to proclaim Christian truth. But the study of Indian, largely Hindu, religion and culture and contact with practising Hindus led me to discover many good and inspiring things in their tradition that I wished to integrate into my own Christian tradition. In the course of that effort, I realized that what I was really

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[1] "Issues for the Church and the WCC," "Witnessing in a Divided World," p. 44, in David Gill (ed.), *Gathered for Life* (Geneva, 1983).
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

looking for was an Indian Christian spirituality, theology, liturgy, etc., so that the gospel would incarnate itself into Indian culture, acquiring in this way a new cultural expression, becoming more catholic (universal) and at the same time purifying and fulfilling another culture. Such an incarnation, however, proved impossible without a living dialogue with Hindus, reading their scriptures, following their philosophico-theological reflection, interpreting their symbols and sharing their way of life and *sadhana* (spiritual pursuit). This tended to be an elite activity. Contact with the people, the poor and a certain impact of the theology of liberation made me see inculturation as an integral process of building up a new humanity (the kingdom), in which proclamation, dialogue and liberation had their place and in which I was called to collaborate with all men and women of goodwill.

This experience has helped me to understand more deeply the meaning of inculturation. In the beginning I was theorizing in the abstract about the encounter between gospel and culture. But, in practice, the gospel çomes to us in its European cultural expression, so that inculturation appears as a process of interculturation. Furthermore, the culture that the gospel is encountering is itself the expression of a particular religious tradition, so that interculturation includes within itself an interreligious encounter. Failure to understand the implications of this last dimension leads one to look for secular elements in culture as the only proper object of inculturation, and to misunderstand other people, who take the whole of the living culture seriously, as being guilty of syncretism. Finally, in a world dominated by science and technology and by secular ideologies of the right and the left, dialogue can become a call and an opportunity to collaborate to uphold common human and religious values as the basis and inspiration of a given culture.

Inculturation understood in this manner is made a difficult project in the contemporary world owing to many factors. I shall mention just three, interrelated ones. 1) All religions are under the pressure of the forces of modernization. Their response, however, is varied and, unsure of themselves, they become defensive. 2) When traditional cultural structures seem to be disintegrating in a fast changing economic and political climate, religious loyalty seems to be a source of a mass cultural identity, and this leads to fanatic, fundamentalist currents. 3) Christianity, at least in my country, still wears a colonial face and, when it is not actively opposed or looked at with suspicion, is marginalized as one more sub-caste.

Culture and religion: anthropological perspectives

Culture is the way people live. It is the way people understand themselves, organize themselves and celebrate life. They understand themselves in the context of the world in which they live. Their self-understanding results in a worldview that finds expression in myths and symbols, especially stories of their origin and end, and images of their ongoing life. Their self-understanding

finds a different kind of expression in the way their community is structured socio-politically, with differentiation of roles, kinship and other rules that govern mutual interaction, economic relationships that condition patterns of behaviour, and rites of passage that guide the process of socialization. Communal celebrations of life are the occasions when such self-understanding is actualized, invested with emotional power and given value. Culture is the way in which a community humanizes itself and the world in which it lives. Subject to the conditioning of economics, geography and history, the symbols, structures and patterns of behaviour through which such humanization takes place are the creations of the community. This is the root of cultural pluralism. But once created they acquire a certain objectivity and autonomy and structure the way succeeding generations of people live, though organic creativity and consequent social change remain possible. The process of creation-socialization is not a static, but an ongoing dialectical one. [3]

Religion is the deepest element in culture. Basically it has both meaning and a prophetic function, answering the question "why?" in terms of origins and goals of life and structuring relationships and behaviour with reference to this answer. It is the deepest because it operates at the levels of the ultimates. Religion is at the root of culture, animating it, while being structured by it. While its role of animation makes it a prophetic element in the life of the community, it is always in danger of being domesticated by the day-to-day business of living. But the prophetic element always bounces back in the form of holy people and radical movements for renewal.

In its relation to culture, various levels in religion can be distinguished. At a "cosmic" level, religion is simply the counterpart of culture. This is the level of tribal and popular religion. Even at this level it plays a double role. On the one hand it supports and justifies the current worldview and the structures based on it. On the other hand it keeps challenging, in the name of this norm, any serious deviations that may emerge in the course of ordinary day-to-day living. Religion can do this because, through its points of reference in the origin and the end of the community, it acquires, as I have indicated, an ultimate character, beyond the vicissitudes of its current cultural manifestation. The myths and the rituals are the carriers of this function. The great religions acquire a further "metacosmic" dimension, attributed to a special revelation or illumination. Ultimate reality is perceived as transcendent and becomes absolute, in relation to the world and culture, which are seen to be relative. Of course religions cannot remain "metacosmic" if they have to play their proper role with regard to culture. So they keep a cosmic dimension by integrating in themselves elements from popular religion, giving them a new meaning. These elements may belong to the culture from which they have emerged or to the culture into which they are inculturated. People who belong nominally to a

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[3] I have borrowed rather eclectically concepts from cultural anthropology. I owe a particular debt to Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago, 1969); Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York, 1966).

metacosmic religion, may continue to remain at a cosmic level. Even the absolutes of a metacosmic religion can express themselves only in the symbols and language of a particular culture. It is not my intention here to go into the philosophical implications of the symbolic nature of religious language. But we have to hold on to this absolute-in-the-relative character of religious symbol for any meaningful talk on religion, culture and dialogue. One is often tempted to move from an experience of the absolute to absolutizing the experience.

It is with the great religions that we discover fully the relationship and the differences between religion and culture. They are like the soul and the body. There is a level in which religion points beyond humankind and the world and demands the commitment of faith. But it becomes relevant to life only insofar as it is incarnated in a culture. A given religion can find self-expression in many cultures. Many religions can express themselves in terms of a single culture. From the encounter between religion and culture are born a world-view that provides a background, a system of values that guides choices, an ethos that sets the emotional tone and an ideology that orients action.[4]

Comparative studies of religions and cultures have shown that underlying a plurality of cultural and religious expressions are certain constants both of pattern and content. One may explain these in various ways, ranging from the common structure of the human brain and its functioning to a common cosmic revelation, through common human needs, similarity of human experiences and situations and a common human nature. Whatever the reason, a certain community is a fact of experience and is the basis for dialogue, even if this community is not identity, but dynamic or structural equivalence.

A poor man, busy earning his living, may have no time for religion, except at a very pragmatic level of a few rituals that meet certain basic psychological and social needs. A fanatic absolutizes either his experience of the absolute or the culture in which it finds expression (sometimes mixing ethnic elements with it). A secular outlook prescinds from religion. The focus is on ideology, even if around it one has to build up a worldview, an ethos and a value system. If religion is perceived as a threat, then the ideology will be antireligious. If religion is seen as non-threatening, it is ignored and/or tolerated and privatized. For the fervent, religion may become an acosmic pursuit of the absolute that alienates them from the real world and its problems. There will finally be some for whom religion is really meaningful and relevent to their daily living in community in view of a fuller life. Dialogue will be different in these different situations.

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[4] I have borrowed the terms "cosmic" and "metacosmic" from Aloysius Pieris, "Mission of the Local Church in Relation to Other Major Religious Traditions: The Non-Semitic Religions of Asia," in Mary Motte and Joseph R. Lang (eds.), *Mission in Dialogue* (New York, 1982), pp. 426-441. Other similar pairs are: transcendental/pragmatic (Mandelbaum), eschatological/ethical.

The Indian situation

To guard against abstract reflection, let me again turn my mind briefly to the situation in India today. India is a poor country. What little wealth it has is concentrated in the hands of a few and more than sixty per cent are below the poverty line. The social structures remain largely feudal, further strengthened by the pervading caste system. Politically it is broadly committed to socialism, democracy and secularism (that is, non-identification with any one religion). While the cosmic aspects of religion tend to sustain the existing order of things, the metacosmic aspects tend to lead to various types of acosmisms. There is an openness to the divine, a sense of the unity of all beings, a desire for liberation and fulfilment, a wholistic perspective, a spirit of tolerance, and a feeling of submission to a world order. Within an overall unity there is a rich diversity of languages, ethnic groups, subcultures, traditions and religions. With rigid structuring at the social level, there has been a tolerance and openness to mutual influences at the level of the mind and the spirit. While European culture and science and technology have had a powerful impact, no particular ideology seems to have taken root in the country. It is at the crossroads between the east and the west. At the moment, economic, social, regional and religious tensions are mounting. These tensions could be an opportunity for growth; they could also lead to disaster.

My Christian responsibility

What is my task as a Chrisian in this situation? I do not have a ready-made plan of action or solution. I am committed to building up a better humanity as the realization of the kingdom. I have some indications from the gospels of the general characteristics of this kingdom, such as freedom, fellowship and justice. I feel in me the power of hope and love in the spirit of Jesus. I do not have any examples to show where such a new community in Christ has become a reality. I do not wish to build up a ghetto church that would be an ideal incarnation of the gospel in Indian culture, even if I could manage it. The only course open to me is to get involved in the community as it is and to make my specific contribution to building it up. I start with the realization that we—the community—share a common responsibility and a common culture. I also accept that this culture is being animated by different religions. Can the religions engage jointly in this work of animation?

As believers we are committed to different absolutes. At this level—the metacosmic—I come together with my fellow believers to celebrate my faith. I try to do this in the symbols of my culture, with reference to my life situation. I dialogue with my fellow citizens of other religions in order to promote mutual understanding and harmony. We can also dialogue at the level of spiritual experience towards mutual enrichment from each one's spiritual heritage.

Finally, we can also work together to promote common human values of freedom, fellowship and justice. [5]

My key question is whether this collaboration is merely at the secular level, as it will have to be if I am working together with others who are following a secular ideology, or do our religions enter into and animate together this collaboration at the secular level? Are we working together at the secular level, each one inspired by his or her religion or do we receive some common inspiration from our religions through our religious dialogue? Do our secular collaboration and religious dialogue remain at two different levels, perhaps even with different groups of people, or are they integrated? My question is not an idle one. I know groups of religious people who meet to share their religious experiences or problems and who remain only at that level, even if some of them do have other social commitments. I also know people belonging to different religions working together for the promotion of justice and freedom at the socio-economic-political level, bracketing or privatizing their religious belief, when they do not claim to be a-theistic. It is my contention that true inculturation demands that this dichotomy between secular and religious levels be broken down and that interreligious dialogue becomes an integral part of collaboration even in the secular sphere. I would even say that such integration is the real test of authentic, non-alienating dialogue among religions, as of authentic inculturation in a multireligious community.

A convergent movement

What do I mean by common animation? Certainly I do not mean the kind of agreement on common policies and programmes entered into by political parties in a coalition. What I have in mind is that each person rooted in his/her religious commitment converges through dialogue toward a common worldview, system of values, ethos and ideology. A pluralism of approaches, based on different faith commitments is accepted and therefore there is no search for identity. But there is mutual openness and learning so that the convergence also includes complementarity. Total unity is required only in action programmes. But at the level of values, ethos and ideology a real convergent pluralism, born not of convenience but of mutual respect and dialogue, can be pursued. Such dialogue will have to be structured around a common commitment to community building (without which it will be just academic), in terms of common reflection and discussion, listening to the scriptures, exploring each other's tradition, prayer and celebration. Common symbols will have to be elaborated. I am not speaking here of one

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[5] The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (RC), at their first meeting in Manila in 1970, resolved: "We pledge ourselves to an open, sincere, and continuing dialogue with our brothers of other great religions of Asia, that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development."

community's participating in another's religious activity. I am speaking of common religious activities, created to express the fellowship one has achieved through dialogue. I do not of course exclude participation, under certain conditions, in each other's religious activity.

Two examples, quickly sketched, may clarify what I have in mind. Let us say that Christians and Hindus are committed to the promotion of human dignity. Christians see people as created in God's image, redeemed by Christ and called to share God's own life in fellowship with other people. The Hindus see in people a divine being growing towards liberation and fullness in fellowship with all beings. Both speak of a certain divinity in human beings, of the need for liberation, of a growth towards fullness, of fellowship. Christians speak of humankind's domination over nature; the Hindus stress its harmony with it. Christians, though they give importance to history as the field for human growth, easily dichotomize spirit and matter. The Hindu tends to be acosmic, but has developed the wholistic perspective of Yoga. Christians prize people's creative initiative. The Hindus set humankind's creativity in the context of the universal law of dharma. If the two traditions dialogue together they can build up a powerful image of the human person to inspire their common pursuit to defend and promote his/her dignity and wellbeing.

My second example is a person who had some success in authentic inculturation and dialogue. He is Mahatma Gandhi. He believed that a religious person in pursuit of truth has to be involved in politics and social reform. He developed the ideology of *Satyagraha* (the seizing of truth or reality) through *ahimsa* (active non-violence). The Gita called him to fight for *dharma* (righteousness). Christ suggested the way of suffering love. He did not lose his roots. But he was open to the world in a practical way. He promoted prayer meetings in which scriptures from different religions were read, hymns sung, and prayers said. He gave his own life to the cause of promoting peace between Hindus and Muslims. [6]

Some clarifications

It is time now for some clarifications of a theological nature that will throw further light on what I have been trying to say. Some of these are commonly accepted today; others may need longer development.

For me, evangelization is the spreading of the kingdom of God, which is being built up by people in history, in spite of all the conflicts, hatred and death. It is really the promotion of culture in the fullest sense of the term. It is the mysterious work of the Spirit leading the world to its fulfilment. We are the servants of this kingdom.

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[6] I have worked out the complementarity of the Hindu and Christian traditions with reference to the Indian situation in "Towards a Culture of Wholeness," *Vidyajyoti* 47 (1983), pp. 67-76.

The kingdom is not simply co-extensive with the church but transcends it. The church is at the service of the kingdom. It is called to discipleship and witness, not to promote itself but the kingdom. The Spirit may call people to join the fellowship of the disciples of Christ. But the church itself is for the world, called to be leaven. It is also wise not to identify the church with any single cultural expression of it. Continuing interpretation is required to distinguish the word from, but in, its historical concretizations.

Whatever our understanding of the unique mediatorship of Christ and of the role of the church in the plan of God—I am not denying them, but I need to reflect further in the light of experience—religious pluralism is a fact of experience, a sign of the times brought to our attention by the encounter of Christianity with the great religions in the post-colonial period. Religions have a role in God's plan for humankind according to his universal salvific will. This positive assessment will also apply to their scriptures, symbols, etc. This is not to say that they are free from human imperfection, which need have to be discerned. Dialogue therefore is really meaningful. If God has revealed himself in some way to my brothers of other religions, then that revelation is significant not only to them but also to me.

We have to develop an integral approach not only in considering God's self-revelation but also in the response of the human community. In multi-religious situations we have to think of basic *human* communities rather than of basic Christian communities. Christians will find themselves together around the eucharistic table on the Lord's day. At other times their life will be structured by the other human communities to which they belong. It is in the midst of the human community that the eucharistic community becomes meaningful. It is in building up the world that the church is being built up. It may be helpful to formalize proclamation, dialogue and liberation for clearer understanding. But they are mutually involved in each other as integral elements of evangelization.

The convergent movement I have talked about will be carried by symbols that are capable of a certain polyvalence around a central core and whose concrete connotations are controlled by the context of usage. This is what makes possible not only common reading of scriptures, common prayer, common celebrations, etc., but also the use of other religio-cultural symbols in the self-expression of the word. At the level of symbols a "both/and" perspective, in the Oriental fashion, is more valid than "all/nothing" or "yes/no."

A community, open and committed

There are no blueprints for a dialogue in the context of inculturation. Praxis must precede theory. While creative and discerning leadership is necessary, both inculturation and dialogue must become the activity of the people. Fanaticism in religion is triggered by fear: fear of what is perceived as evil; fear of proselytism and domination; and fear of the forces of disintegration not strictly religious, but against which religion seems to be the only cementing

force that can command unquestioning loyalty from the people. Focusing on the promotion of a basic integral humanism, in the pursuit of which people of all religions will commit themselves together, engaging also their religious fervour in the process, seems the only authentic way of promoting a fellowship among people of different religions. Unless we keep moving beyond a spirit of tolerance to one of collaboration in a common project there will always be the danger of sliding back into fanatical attitudes.

The spirit of collaboration demands an open community, having a clear centre but with open frontiers. Christianity in India appears rigidly structured around strong authority figures, defensive and triumphalistic at the same time. The prophetic religions in general seem more aggressive than the mystic ones. They not only witness, but condemn. They have not really come to terms with pluralism within and without. They tend to dismiss quickly the openness of South and East Asia as syncretistic. Yet the Asians seem to know how to combine commitment with openness and how to handle pluralism positively and creatively. Here is certainly something that we Christians can learn from Asia as a result of our inculturation there.

The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians started off with poverty as the reality of the third world. As they moved into Africa, they discovered the importance of culture. Asia made them aware of the religious dimension. These are the three challenges facing us today. I hope I have shown you one possible way of meeting this triple challenge in an integral manner so that, in the power of the Spirit, we can make all things new.

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