

**INCULTURATION, HISTORY AND AESTHETICS:  
CREATING AND READING THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT**

**INTRODUCTION**

Recent theory and practice of mission have included what is known as "inculturation". Yet there is also resistance to such a mission strategy for a variety of reasons. Some fear that the truth of their tradition will be lost or corrupted. There are also questions about the relationship of culture and theology. Whilst some theologians argue that culture can provide a language which is adequate for a redefinition of theology, others argue that culture is corrupt and cannot provide material that is fit for theological reflection. These arguments are not new. Bediako:1992 has reminded us of such a diversity of views within the early centuries of the church.

Mission history, with some honourable exceptions, showed a tendency to reject local culture and to import, consciously or subconsciously, an alien culture. That alien culture became holy through its association with religious experience. The downside was that local culture was demonised and spurned. It can therefore seem puzzling when attempts are made to inculturate the Gospel using positively what has previously been criticised or even demonised. In some instances there can be hostility to such endeavours. Inculturation can be perceived as a corruption of the faith, an accommodation with the world of paganism, or even a sell out. Such attitudes are far removed from those of the practitioners of inculturation. Their aim is not to corrupt the faith, but to make more acceptable, meaningful and relevant.

**WHAT IS "INCULTURATION"?**

Several other terms have meanings which overlap, to a greater or lesser extent, with inculturation. Briefly looking at these will set some limits. Two terms were used to describe the phenomenon now known as inculturation in earlier writing: "missionary adaptation" or "accommodation". These terms did not remain dominant because they were seen to be inadequate. Crollius notes that they:

express rather an extrinsic relationship between the Christian life and message and a

given culture.

(Crollius:1995, 111)

The term "contextualisation" has also been used, but this word does not seem to do justice fully to the relationship which exists between expressions of Christianity and culture. Contextualisation gives the idea that there is an essence of Christianity which is merely re-packaged in a different cultural dressing. The relationship is not so simple. Put crudely, the dressing or packaging of Christianity can change what might be called its essence. The re-writing of core Christian doctrines in the work of a liberation theologian like Sobrino is evidence of that. Furthermore he would claim that such a changing of the essence is necessary because what is claimed as that essence appears to him to be inadequate, if not fraudulent, when viewed from his cultural perspective:

Here in Latin America we can read many of the old, classic treatments of Christology as well as more current ones. When we do, and when we notice their practical repercussions on the life and praxis of Christians, we cannot help but formulate certain suspicions. Basically those suspicions come down to this: For some reason it has been possible for Christians, in the name of Christ, to ignore or even contradict fundamental principles and values that were preached and acted upon by Jesus of Nazareth.

(Sobrino:1994 (1978), xv).

A third term which has fallen out of favour is "indigenisation". In content this would seem to share many of the problems of contextualisation. Crollius ascribes its fall from favour as due to the negative connotations of the word "indigenous" (Crollius:1995, 111). Within African Christian circles both indigenisation and adaptation were rejected as suitable terms to describe the processes needed on the continent ( Martey: 1995, 67). The term which African Catholic writers had favoured was "incarnation" by which they meant:

immersing Christianity in African culture [so that] just as Jesus became man, so must  
Christianity become African

(Ukpong: 1984, 27)

However, African Roman Catholic writers who especially used this term had to face the fact that the Vatican disapproved of it (Martey:1995, 66). All the above terms were inadequate because each one was rejected somewhere by someone.

The Pan African Congress of Third World Theologians held in Accra in 1977 coined a term which all seemed prepared to use: inculturation. The term was first used officially in 1979 within the Roman Catholic church, in an address by Pope John Paul II to the Pontifical Biblical Commission (Sybertz & Healey: 1996, 26). Let us first note that inculturation is a process. Sybertz and Healey describe it as such:

Inculturation is the process of incarnating the good news in a particular cultural context. Most specifically it is a process by which people of a particular culture become able to live, express, celebrate, formulate and communicate their Christian faith and their experience of the Paschal Mystery in terms (linguistic, symbolic, social) that make the most sense and best convey life and truth in their social and cultural environment.

(Sybertz & Healey:1996, 26)

Described thus, inculturation would appear almost identical to contextualisation. It suggests a change in the packaging alone and does not seem to satisfy the criteria which Sobrino demanded. Nor would it make inculturation a term adequate to describe the theological enterprise which he has undertaken from a specific cultural viewpoint, namely, that of Latin America. A more dynamic view of inculturation is advanced by Justin Ukpong in describing the African context:

The theologian's task consists in re-thinking and re-expressing the original Christian message in an African cultural milieu. It is the task of confronting the Christian faith and African culture. In this process there is interpenetration of both...There is integration of faith and culture and from it is born a new theological expression that is African and Christian.

(Ukpong: 1984, 30)

What Ukpong describes as inculturation is much closer to Sobrino's thinking than to contextualisation. Contextualisation gives the impression of an essence being re-packaged. In Ukpong's view there can be no doubt that the changes which occur in the process of inculturation affect both the culture and the "Christian essence" which meet.

Ukpong's definition gives the process of inculturation an urgency which is mirrored by Theoneste

Nkeramihigo. For him, the task of inculturation is fundamental, and based on two factors:

- The awareness on the part of the members of the society involved in the cultural encounter, that this contingent event is part of the inescapable fate of their existence.
- The awareness that, to ensure its survival, the society in conflict must transform this fate into destiny, and reconcile the two traditions by searching for a new parental figure that gives a concrete form to its present yearnings.

(Nkeramihigo:1986, 68)

Ukpong's thesis that inculturation is a process of mutual change has also been recognised by two rather clumsy technical terms: "inculturation *ad extra*" and "inculturation *ad intra*" (Crollius:1995, 112). "Inculturation *ad extra*" describes how the Christian aspect "affects the cultural context of the local church" (Crollius:1995, 112): no area of human culture is beyond its claim (Crollius:1995,114). "Inculturation *ad intra*" describes how a culture affects the way in which Christianity is lived and expressed, specifically in the areas of liturgy, spirituality, theology and discipline (Crollius:1995, 114).

Inculturation, then, is a process in which the Christian message and a local culture interact and are both changed:

Inculturation is the integration of the Christian experience of a local church into the culture of its people, in such a way that this experience not only expresses itself in elements of this culture, but also becomes a force that animates, orients and renews this culture, creating a new unity and communion, not only within the culture in question but also as an enrichment of the Church universal.

(Crollius: 1995, 113-4)

## **INCULTURATION: HISTORICAL AND AESTHETIC READING®**

The debate about inculturation seems, when confined to ideas and theories, to raise a problem about syncretism. Syncretism has a bad press in Christian tradition. It is a way of describing the process in which the expression of faith in a fresh set of symbols, metaphors and expressions goes astray. When a

theology is accused of being syncretistic, the critic usually means that the *essence* of that faith has been somehow corrupted and distorted. It is not an old question. One could ask, if being naughty, whether or not one man's *syncretism* is another woman's *inter-faith*? And, if one does not, someone else, probably of a more fundamentalist disposition, probably will.

Such thinking begs a number of questions. Firstly, as we have seen above, it becomes difficult to talk about an unchanging *essence*.

Secondly, the method of inculturation itself cannot be condemned as syncretistic out of hand.

The writer of *Revelation*, whom we could do worse than call John, comes across as critical of pagan and Jewish religious practices. Even the most tin-eared of commentators (such things are known) admits this. I would venture that this John, who may (or may not) be the *Beloved Disciple*, John Mark, or someone else [anyone else] in the early church called John, is the most rabid critic of paganism. In comparison, Paul's mouth appears to be stuffed full of idol meats (*1 Cor 7*) or, in other Manuscripts, meal. Yet, John is not backward in using the very stuff of the religions he hates for the glorification of Christ. The *eyes of fiery flame* (*Rev 1:14*) flash also with the imagery of the evil eye (still potent today in those parts known then to John as Asia Minor). Is Christ the sorcerer to pass all sorcerers? He holds the *keys to death and the netherworld* (*Rev 1:18*- some say *Hell*, others , Greeks for the most part, *Hades*), just like, or rather more than, the Greek goddess Hekate: Christ the Hekate to pass all Hekates? Is this John guilty of syncretism? I think not.

When we turn to art the emphasis shifts. In the areas of painting, iconography and sculpture, the critic can ask , *is this a true likeness*? Is a Ghanaian Last Supper, or a Chinese Stilling of the Water true? Is the *Christ We Share* a chimera, a will-of-the-wisp, or a whole gang of them? Is our Snark a Boojum?

At the risk of sounding like Pontius Pilate (*Jn 18:38*), *what is truth?*. Is it even true that Pilate asking *what is truth?* is true? For only in *John* does he (Pilate) express an interest in epistemology. The Pilate of *Matthew, Mark and Luke* has no such concerns. That can all sound a little bit smug, but it does bring us to the root of the problem. For much of our wrestling with truth is also a grappling with history. The great

temptation is to equate truth with historical truth . But truth is many-sided.

Much of what I have said has dealt with John (him, or another John). Origen, the great Alexandrian theologian, now less read, is better remembered for *Sliding down the razor blade of life* (Lehrer). In his grapple with truth, as he found it in the Gospel of John, he wrote,

[ the purpose of all the Evangelists was] to give the truth where possible at once spiritually and corporeally [or outwardly], but where this was not possible to prefer the spiritual to the corporeal, the true spiritual meaning being often preserved in what at the corporeal level might be called a falsehood.

(*comm. In Jn, x.4*)

Even if we do not wish to trip down the primrose paths of the Alexandrian theologians, paths which were to say the least, winding, we can agree with Origen thus far: truth is not just found in historical truth. The truths of Greene's *The Power and the Glory* may say as much , or more, about priesthood as a three volume biography of the Cure d-Ars (with footnotes). With this possibility admitted our concept of truth becomes broader. There may be truth in art, even if there is not historical accuracy. And let us face it, were this not so we would (logically) need to become the most hatchet-faced and hatchet wielding of iconoclasts. No picture could claim complete historical accuracy, and thus, truth.

It is possible to reflect on the truth that can be found in works of art by reflecting on truths as found in story, as opposed to history. Templeton writes of the two parables of the Prodigal and the Samaritan

Aristotle is right to say that in entering sympathetically into the story -world, one is entering not the world of actuality, of what actually happened, but the world of possibility. The force of these two stories is to introduce something of the possible into the actual world, fortifying the hope of action even there, where in the actual world the possibilities of action seem to cease. Faith in God means that you can imagine and that you can think that things can be changed. It is possible to be convinced (perhaps falsely, of course) that that can become otherwise which might have been otherwise.

(Templeton:1999, 92-3)

What is at issue here is the way in which the reader reads, and the difference that it makes to the reading.

It matters whether one reads as an historian/historical critic or an aesthete/ literary critic:

The historian, when he looks at an aesthetic text, will conclude that the events recounted were not actual, but possible, while the literary critic, when he looks at the same text, will conclude that the events were not possible, but necessary: at this stage of his development, this is what the writer had to say. In that sense, his fiction (or fictions) was true. His emotions are truly expressed. The word, Atruth®, it is not unfair to say, is not out of order here, for >the opposite of Afiction® is not Atruth®, but Afact® (Pack 1958:122).

(Templeton 1999:94)

The same sea-change in thinking is necessary for the consideration of inculturated expressions of Christianity: the aesthetic, rather than the historical, approach.

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