

Evangelization in a Culture of Pluralism: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: *The two realities under consideration in my essay, namely evangelization and pluralism, seem prima facie to negate each other. On the one hand, 'evangelization,' understood in its etymology as announcement of the good news, presupposes a definite truth and even a set of dogmas to be held with the absolute certainty of faith, such as "Jesus is Lord and Savior." 'Pluralism,' on the other hand, suggests a plurality and diversity of views and ways of life and even skepticism to any absolute claim of truth. In many respects both the United States and the American Catholic Church have become increasingly pluralistic, and such a culture of pluralism poses severe challenges to evangelization understood broadly as part of the mission of the church. At the same time, however, it offers the Church unique opportunities to announce the good news of and about Jesus Christ in a more convincing and authentic way.¹*

Key Words: evangelization; pluralism; United States; Catholic Church; postmodern culture; inculturation; interreligious dialogue

A CULTURE OF PLURALISM: LIVING IN POSTMODERNITY

'Pluralism' is one of those catch-all words to characterize our contemporary situation whose meaning is far from clear. Like many "isms," it indicates not a mere factuality but also an ideology. The fact implied by this word, whose Latin root means several or many, is the simultaneous existence of different kinds of things, or more particularly of different and perhaps incommensurable world views or *Weltanschauungen*. As such, this fact is as old as humanity, or as a wit has put it, where there are three Irishmen, there are at least five opinions.

What is new, or at least relatively new, is the philosophical ideology, currently dominant in our culture, that promotes and celebrates diversity rather than homogeneity, multiplicity rather than unity, difference rather than sameness. Admittedly, there was already present in ancient Greek philosophy a school of thought that emphasizes plurality and multiplicity. For example, Empedocles, Anaxagoras and the Atomists held that reality is made up of a multiplicity of entities. In opposition to them, others, known as monists, such as Parmenides, maintained that all realities, despite their apparent multiplicities, form but one single substance. In addition to Greek pluralism and monism, there is also dualism, espoused for example by the French philosopher Descartes, according to which

¹ Several of the ideas I will develop here have been expounded in my trilogy: *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004); *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004); and *Being Religiously Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

there are only two kinds of realities or substances, that is, extended non-thinking substance and non-extended thinking substance.

It is to be noted that ancient pluralists, monists, and dualists, despite their significant differences, fundamentally agree that there is an objective reality which can be known with certainty and that there are self-evident criteria by which to adjudicate the validity of their philosophical positions. Furthermore, they believe that the perceptions they acquire, the meanings they understand, the truths they judge, and the values and customs they live by, in other words, their culture, are normative for all, irrespective of ethnic, racial, sexual, economic, political, and national backgrounds. Those who appropriate their culture and live by it are praised as “civilized,” and those who do not, are despised as “barbarians.”

This concept of culture as a universally normative pattern of living, interpreting, and acting in the world, shared by a social group, consisting of a set of material artifacts, symbols, notions, beliefs, customs, and moral norms, has been termed ‘classical.’ It was very much in vogue since the 18th century to the first half of the 20th century, a period often referred to as ‘modernity,’ with the Enlightenment’s belief in universal reason, equality, individual freedom, and limitless progress achieved through technology. Even Christian missions, both Catholic and Protestant, during these three centuries were imbued with this classical understanding of culture; indeed, the Church’s work of evangelization was intimately tied with the White Man’s *mission civilisatrice*, which consisted in the Westernization of the non-Christian parts of the globe, chiefly through education, health care, social welfare, and technology.

The Postmodern Ethos

Contemporary cultural critics have long noted that the mood of our time, at least since the First World War, is sharply different from modernity and the ideals of the Enlightenment. We are witnessing today a widespread critique of these ideals, at least in the forms espoused by the Enlightenment, as the result of an increasing awareness of their nefarious effects on society and the environment. In contrast to modernity, our age has been called, for lack of a better term, “postmodern.” Though the label is slippery and the contours of our age still remain hazy, there is little doubt that since the beginning of the twentieth century there has been, at least in the West, a disillusionment with modernity’s championship of rationality, individual autonomy, and technology. With the very weapons forged by the Enlightenment itself, postmodern thinkers direct their withering attacks against modernity’s celebration of the objective and universal reason, the benefits of technological discoveries, and the liberation of the individual from institutional control. While recognizing the undeniable contributions of modernity in these three areas, postmodern critics have argued that philosophic reason is laden with vested interests, that technology leads to the brink of annihilation for humanity and the ecology, and that individual freedoms collude with the subjugation of the powerless and the voiceless.

True to its underlying philosophical assumptions, postmodernism is a multivalent and even ambiguous phenomenon. Initiated in architecture and the arts, postmodernism rejects modernity’s preference for stylistic integrity and purity and espouses instead heterogeneity and polyvalence, bricolage and pastiche, and an eclectic mixture of disjointed and contradictory elements. In theater, postmodernism celebrates transience instead of temporal permanence and experiments with improvisation, group authorship, and viewer participation rather than continuing the tradition of performing a ready-made script.

In literature, the postmodern favorite genres are the spy novel and science fiction, the former juxtaposing a seemingly disjointed series of events and unconnected clues, the latter laying side by side two radically different worlds, the one real in appearance but turning out to be illusionary, and the other sinister in appearance but turning out to be more benign and real at the end. This phantasmagoria of the fictional and the real is further enhanced by the filmmaking technology that allows the viewer to perceive what transpires in the movies and on television, disjointed in time and space, as a unity in space and time.

The unreality of the real and the reality of the unreal are made even more indistinguishable by means of advanced techniques of computer-generated images and special effects. Added to all this is the Internet world of “virtual reality” in which the screen of the personal computer both connects the surfer with the whole wide world of other surfers and chatters and at the same time shields him or her off from the world of interpersonal, face-to-face relationships. In the virtual world, there is neither “objective” reality out there nor “subjective” reality in here; rather the events happen somewhere in between, blurring the distinction between subject and object, the very thing postmodernism says “reality” is.

Undergirding and perhaps also resulting from such cultural outlook is the philosophical stance that despairs of achieving objective truth and absolute knowledge of reality. Instead of yielding universal, supracultural and timeless truths about “reality,” knowledge is viewed as an ever-shifting social construction made by a particular community to serve its own interests. The best that can be obtained in our knowledge of reality, according to postmodern epistemology, is a “useful fiction,” and not general principles or overarching systems (“meta-narratives”) that can be legitimated by reasonable arguments. In this view, knowledge is inherently uncertain, incomplete, fragmented, interest-laden, relative, particular, and pluralistic.

Basic to the postmodernist epistemology is the respect for and celebration of particularity and “otherness” in all dimensions of human life, from race and ethnicity to gender to religion to culture. Diversity and plurality, which otherness implies, are seen not as curses to human flourishing to be exorcized or as threats to human unity to be suppressed. Rather, they are to be vigorously promoted and joyously celebrated as natural endowments necessary for genuine peace and justice. Plurality and diversity are perceived to be the essential safeguards preventing life-affirming unity from degenerating into deadening uniformity or, worse, into an instrument for the powerful to homogenize those that are different and to deny them their basic right to be who and what they are.

The Culture of Pluralism

This leads to the question of how in contrast to modernity, postmodernism understands culture. The modern concept of culture is represented by the anthropological concept of culture that emerged as a theoretical construct after 1920s, especially on the American scene.² This concept was used to account for differences in customs and practices of a

² For a history of the concept of culture, see Alfred A. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 1952). For a brief overview, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 3-24. Tanner surveys the meaning of “culture” as it was used in France, Germany, and Great Britain before its current usage in anthropology. For a presentation of Vatican II’s understanding of culture and its development, including the notion of culture in John Paul II, see Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith & Culture* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 36-55.

particular human society. They are explained in terms of cultures rather than in terms of God's will, racial or generational variations, or environmental factors, or differences in origin. Furthermore, in this understanding of culture, no evaluative judgment is made as to whether a particular culture represents a less noble or less developed stage of human evolution. In other words, no culture is inherently superior or inferior to another.

Like the classical concept of culture, this anthropological approach to culture tends to view it as a human universal. However, this universal is realized in particular forms by each social group as its distinct way of life. Culture is constituted by the conventions created by the consensus of a group into which its members are socialized. Given this notion of culture as group-differentiating, holistic, non-evaluative, and context-dependent, anthropologists commonly perceive the culture of a social group as a whole, as a single albeit complex unit, and distinguish it from the social behaviors of its members. Culture is seen as the ordering principle and control mechanism of social behaviors without which human beings would be formless. Above all, culture is seen as an integrated and integrating whole whose constituent elements are functionally interrelated to one another. These elements are thought to be integrated into each other because they are perceived as expressing a fundamental, overarching theme, style, or purpose. Or they are thought to be consistent with or imply one another. Or they are supposed to operate according to laws or structures, not unlike the grammatical rules in a language. Or, finally, they are supposed to function with a view to maintain and promote the stability of the social order. Thanks to this non-evaluative approach to culture, anthropologists can avoid ethnocentrism, concentrating on an accurate description of a particular culture, rather than judging it according to some presumed norms of truth, goodness, and beauty.³

The modern anthropological concept of culture has its own advantages. As Robert Schreiter has noted, the concept of culture as an integrated system of beliefs, values and behavioral norms has much to commend it. Among other things, it promotes holism and a sense of coherence and communion in opposition to the fragmentation of mass society, is congenial to the harmonizing, both-and way of thinking prevalent in oral cultures and many Asian cultures, and serves as an antidote to the corrosive effects of modernity and capitalism.⁴ Religion as a quest for meaning and wholeness is seen as a boon to these positive aspects of culture.

In recent years, however, this modern concept of culture has been subjected to a searing critique.⁵ The view of culture as a self-contained and clearly bounded whole, as an internally consistent and integrated system of beliefs, values, and behavioral norms that functions as the ordering principle of a social group and into which its members are socialized, has been shown to be based on unjustified assumptions.⁶ Against this conception of culture it has been argued that:

³ For a development of this concept of culture, see Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 25-37.

⁴ See Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 49-50.

⁵ For the following reflections on the post-modern concept of culture, see Peter C. Phan, "Religion and Culture: Their Places as Academic Disciplines in the University," in Peter Ng, ed., *The Future of Religions in the 21st Century* (Hong Kong: Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, 2001), 321-53.

⁶ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); George Marcus and Michael Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Toward a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Jonathan Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process* (London: Sage, 1994); Mike Featherstone, *Undoing Modernity: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity* (London: Sage, 1995).

- (1) it focuses exclusively on culture as a finished product and therefore pays insufficient attention to culture as a historical process;
- (2) that its view of culture as a consistent whole is dictated more by the anthropologist's aesthetic need and the demand for synthesis than by the lived reality of culture itself;
- (3) that its emphasis on consensus as the process of cultural formation obfuscates the reality of culture as a site of struggle and contention;
- (4) that its view of culture as a principle of social order belittles the role of the members of a social group as cultural agents;
- (5) that this view privileges the stable elements of culture and does not take into adequate account its innate tendency to change and innovation; and
- (6) that its insistence on clear boundaries for cultural identity is no longer necessary since it is widely acknowledged today that change, conflict, and contradiction are resident *within* culture itself and are not simply caused by outside disruption and dissension.⁷

Rather than as a sharply demarcated, self-contained, homogeneous, and integrated whole, culture today is seen as "a ground of contest in relations"⁸ and as a historically evolving, fragmented, inconsistent, conflicted, constructed, ever-shifting, and porous social reality. In this contest of relations the role of power in the shaping of cultural identity is of paramount importance, a factor that the modern concept of culture largely ignores. In the past, anthropologists tended to regard culture as an innocent set of conventions rather than a reality of conflict in which the colonizers, the powerful, the wealthy, the victors, the dominant can obliterate the beliefs and values of the colonized, the weak, the poor, the vanquished, the subjugated. This role of power is, as Michel Foucault and other masters of suspicion have argued, central in the formation of knowledge in general.⁹ In the formation of cultural identity the role of power is even more extensive, since it is constituted by groups of people with conflicting interests, and the winners can dictate their cultural terms to the losers.

This predicament of culture is exacerbated by the process of globalization in which the ideals of modernity and technological reason are extended throughout the world (globalization as *extension*), aided and abetted by a single economic system (i.e., neoliberal capitalism) and new communication technologies.¹⁰ In globalization geographical

⁷ For a detailed articulation of these six objections against the anthropological concept of culture, see Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 40-56.

⁸ The phrase is from Schreier, *The New Catholicity*, 54.

⁹ See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Press, 1975); *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994); *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1988); *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Bouchard and trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977); *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987); *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman and trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Routledge, 1988).

¹⁰ For a discussion of the historical development of globalization, see the works of Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic, 1974) and *The Modern World-System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600-1750* (New York: Academic, 1980); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); and Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992). In general, Wallerstein attributes an exclusively economic origin to globalization, while Giddens sees it rooted in four factors, namely,

boundaries, which at one time helped define cultural identity, have now collapsed. Even our sense of time is largely compressed, with the present predominating and the dividing line between past and future becoming ever more blurred (globalization as *compression*). In this process of globalization, a homogenized culture is created, consolidated by a “hyperculture” based on consumption, especially of goods exported from the U.S.A., such as clothing (e.g., T-shirts, denim jeans, athletic shoes), food (e.g., McDonald’s and Coca Cola), and entertainment (e.g., films, video, and music).

Such a globalized culture is not however accepted by local cultures hook, line and sinker. Between the global and the local cultures there takes place a continuous struggle, the former for political and economic dominance, the latter for survival and integrity. Because of the powerful attraction of the global culture, especially for the young, local cultures often feel threatened by it, but they are far from powerless. To counteract its influence, they have devised several strategies of resistance, subversion, compromise, and appropriation. And in this effort religion more often than not has played a key role in alliance with local cultures.¹¹

Like the anthropological concept of culture as a unified whole, the globalized concept of culture as a ground of contest in relations has its own strengths and weaknesses. On the positive side, it takes into account features of culture that are left in the shadow by its predecessor. While recognizing that harmony and wholeness remain ideals, it views culture in its lived reality of fragmentation, conflict, and ephemerality. Cultural meanings are not simply discovered ready-made but are constructed and produced in the violent cauldron of asymmetrical power relations. It recognizes the important role of power in the formation of cultural identity. Furthermore, it sees culture as a historical process, intrinsically mutable, but without an a priori, clearly defined *telos* and a controllable and predictable synthesis. On the debit side, this post-modern concept of culture runs the risk of fomenting fundamentalistic tendencies, cultural and social ghettoization, and romantic retreat to an idealized past.¹²

THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE CULTURE OF PLURALISM

Needless to say, this new culture of pluralism presents difficult challenges to the Church’s evangelizing mission, especially in the United States, where arguably pluralism in all aspects—ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, sexual, and religious—reigns supreme. Here I will consider only three areas: culture, politics, and religion. First, *politically and socially*, the United States is now the only superpower with overwhelming economic and military might. Embedded in this superpower, how can the Catholic Church credibly preach Jesus’

the nation-state system, the world military order, the world capitalist economy, and the international division of labor, and Robertson highlights the cultural factors in globalization.

¹¹ For a brief discussion of globalization, see Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 4-14. Social scientist Arjun Appadurai lists five factors that have contributed to the “deterritorialization” of contemporary culture: “ethnoscape” (the constant flow of persons such as immigrants, refugees, tourists, guest workers, exiles), “technoscape” (mechanical and informational technologies), “finanscape” (flow of money through currency markets, national stock exchanges, commodity speculation), “mediascape” (newspapers, magazines, TV, films), and “ideoscape” (key ideas such as freedom, welfare, human rights, independence, democracy). See his “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Economy,” *Public Culture* 2/2 (1990), 1-24.

¹² On these three tendencies or cultural logics dubbed ‘antiglobalism,’ ‘ethnification’ and ‘primitivism,’ see Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 21-25. For a lucid exposition and critique of postmodernism, see Dale T. Irvin, “Christianity in the Modern World: Facing Postmodern Culture and Religious Pluralism,” in Peter Ng, ed., *The Future of Religions in the 21st Century*, 253-66. For Irvin, postmodernism is liable to three temptations: facile acceptance of the processes of consumerism and commodification, disdain for tradition and memory, and reduction of the historical past to its Western cultural form.

teaching on non-violence, peace, and justice and act in solidarity with those crushed by the United States' economic, political, and military power? Second, *culturally*, new immigrants are bringing to the United States a vast array of diverse patterns of thinking, valuing, and living. In this cultural diversity, how can the church, whose hierarchy is still dominated by whites, relinquish its eurocentrism and white privileges and accept other cultures as valid ways of living the Gospel? Third, *religiously*, with immigrants hailing from non-European parts of the world, from Asia in particular, the United States has become religiously pluralistic. In this religious pluralism, how can the church, whose claims to uniqueness and universality are routinely asserted, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the teachings and the ways of worship and life inculcated by other religions?

Answers to these three questions that are based on appeal to universal reason or sacred authority are unlikely to find a receptive ear, especially in the postmodern age. Any attempt to construct a "meta-narrative" on the basis of either natural law or divine revelation that could claim universal validity and absolute normativeness, apart from particular social locations and practices, is illusory, since there is no acultural and atemporal ground upon which to stand to render a verdict on the alleged universal validity and absolute normativeness of such meta-narrative. We are ineluctably socially located and historically conditioned animals. There is no Archimedean point from which to survey the whole of history, which is still ongoing, or to intuit the unchangeable essence of things, which always exist in time and space and therefore are in the process of continuous becoming. Both the knower and the known are caught in a mutually conditioning nexus from which neither can be extracted to be either the unbiased observer or the neutral object of investigation. Apart from the object known there is no knower, and vice versa, without the knower there is no object known. This is all the more true in matters religious which are ultimately matters of life and death, where life-transforming decisions are not amenable to explanations by means of a rational apologetics and logical syllogisms.

All these considerations need not lead to scepticism, agnosticism, or relativism, as some postmodernist thinkers have argued. Rather what these reflections imply and require is an epistemological modesty that is becoming of finite (and in the Christian view, fallen and benighted) intellects that we are. In addition, we have at our disposal modes of knowing that are not purely rational, that appeal to the imagination and the heart, that do not make grandiose claims to absolute validity and universal normativeness, that do not produce an infallible *certainty* but anchor the mind and the soul in an unshakeable *certitude*, the kind of knowledge that is proper to interpersonal relationships, different from that of mathematical equations and physical laws, the sort of knowing that springs from and leads to decision and action.

Furthermore, human knowledge, at least of things that matter deeply, is not obtained by means of meditation in a solitary cell or in boisterous, hard-ball "talk shows" in which the sole purpose is to score rhetorical victories over one's opponents, but in a serious and thoughtful give-and-take of mutual learning and teaching, in a respectful and humble conversation with the tradition and the community of fellow seekers, in a word, in a genuine *dialogue* with the *other*, in which one's own insights are humbly offered, others' wisdom gratefully appropriated, and the quest for truth is undertaken together in mutual respect and love.

Faced with socio-economic, cultural, and religious pluralism, which is without doubt the hallmarks of Asia more than of any other continent, the Asian bishops and theologians, especially in the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) and

its offices, have repeatedly suggested that the only effective way for the Church to carry out its mission of evangelization, including the proclamation of Jesus as the universal savior, is dialogue. Indeed, the FABC prescribes a triple dialogue: dialogue with the Asian peoples, especially their poor and marginalized (liberation and integral development); dialogue with the Asian cultures (inculturation); and dialogue with the Asian religions (interreligious dialogue).¹³ Taking a cue from the insights of the FABC and Asian theologians, I will explore how the American Catholic Church can meet the challenges of the culture of pluralism in politics, culture, and religion.

A Church Embedded in the World Superpower: Liberation

For better or for worse, the American Catholic Church is a beneficiary of the United States as the sole superpower. Charles Morris's book *American Catholic* is aptly subtitled: *The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church*. Sinners and saints aside, thanks to its number, wealth, and political clout, the American Catholic Church is no doubt "America's Most Powerful Church" and wields the greatest power among the world's religious institutions, perhaps Rome included. Theologically and canonically, Rome is said to possess the supreme ecclesiastical power, but in terms of the de facto influence on the real world, it may lag far behind the American Catholic Church. It has been quipped, not without a grain of truth, that when the American Catholic Church sneezes, the other Churches will catch cold.

But this power carries with it immense costs and responsibilities. The costs flow from the church's "embeddedness" in its host country, a condition vulnerable to the risk of moral connivance and of muted prophetic voice. Politically, this moral ambivalence was most visible in the American bishops' failure to condemn, forthrightly and publicly, the "preemptive" Iraq War despite its flagrant infringement of the traditional criteria for a "just war" prior to its commencement, and especially after it has become incontrovertible that the reasons for going to war were totally bogus. It took the American hierarchy several years to arrive at the judgment that the American involvement in the Vietnam War was morally unjustified. How long will it take this time for it to wake up to the immorality of the Iraq War, which is much more obvious? Furthermore, the moral authority of the American Catholic Church was severely compromised when we failed to condemn and reject, publicly and unequivocally, the policies of the Bush administration with regard to the use of torture, the abuse of prisoners and the so-called enemy combatants, and the violations of human rights? Why were our tongues so tied? Was it the fear of further exposure by the media of clergy sexual abuse? Was it the hope for a quid pro quo for the current administration's stance for "family values" and against same-sex marriage?

Economically, the United States accumulates its wealth in part on the back of other nations. In the free-market game, which is propagated throughout the world through globalization, and by means of force if necessary, not all players come out as winners. Outsourcing may make bring profits to American companies and may even produce jobs in

¹³ The FABC was founded in 1970, on the occasion of Pope Paul VI's visit to Manila, Philippines. Its statutes, approved by the Holy See *ad experimentum* in 1972, were amended several times and were also approved again each time by the Holy See. For the documents of the FABC and its various institutes, see Gaudencio Rosales & C. G. Arévalo (eds.), *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1970 to 1991* (New York/Quezon City, Manila: Orbis Books/Claretian Publications, 1992); Franz-Josef Eilers (ed.), *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1992 to 1996* (Quezon City, Manila: Claretian Publications, 1997); and Franz-Josef Eilers (ed.), *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1997 to 2002* (Quezon City, Manila: Claretian Publications, 2002).

underdeveloped countries, but extremely low wages, long hours, child labor, unsanitary working conditions, lack of health insurance and other benefits, and ecological devastation are the high costs that the poor of the Third World are paying for the American “pursuit of happiness.” Multinational corporations do not always have the interests of the local people at heart. If the bottom line is in the red, they have no qualms in moving the factories to countries with cheaper labor. Indeed, it is a mantra among global economists that in recent years the poor are getting poorer, and the rich, richer. Even if the free-market economy proves to be the most productive of wealth, still it is the Moloch that devours the flesh and blood of the most vulnerable among us.

Willy-nilly, the American Catholic Church benefits from this injustice and exploitation. This collective sin—part of the “original sin”—the church must admit and confess, frankly and honestly, not out of an morbid sense of guilt, much less out of political correctness, but out of the love for truth and for the sake of the Church’s moral credibility. For only the truth will set us free. If the church’s teaching on social sin has any validity, it is here that it has its bite. No Christian can say: “I have nothing to do with this unjust situation.” It is not the matter of personally having robbed or cheated. Rather, no hand—yours and mine—is clean, because we would not be able to enjoy all the things we now take for granted in this country, unless our sisters and brothers somewhere else are unjustly or unfairly deprived of even the basic necessities of life.

This honest admission must not result in an empty orgy of *meas culpas* and forgiveness-begging. Rather, for the American Catholic Church to discharge its ministry in the economic and socio-political arenas credibly and effectively, this confession must be coupled with nothing less than a public and total commitment to and implementation of policies consistent with the “preferential option for the poor,” which in the name of the Gospel liberation theologians and, in their footsteps, Pope John Paul II have made the mission of the church. The “poor” here include, yes, the defenseless unborn, but not only them. The church’s stand against abortion will be credible and will not be misinterpreted as obsession with sex and repudiation of women’s rights only if it is accompanied by a sincere and effective solidarity with other categories of the “poor.” These “poor” include the homeless, those without health care, those living in poverty, the unemployed and underemployed, the victims of racism and gender discrimination, the gays and lesbians, the immigrants, and anyone who cannot afford a decent human life, here in the United States as well as elsewhere.

Here *liberation* comes into full play as one of the top priorities of the church’s ministry in the immediate future. We American Catholics must be truly persuaded that working for justice—liberation—is a *constitutive* dimension of evangelization, on the par with preaching the Word and liturgical worship. *Denouncing* injustice and *doing* justice, both to succor the victims of injustice and to remove unjust structures, are a strict demand of the discipleship to Christ and not the knee-jerk reaction of liberal Democrats or moderate Republicans. Not political partisanship but total faithfulness to Jesus demands that we speak truth to power when the country is engaged in an immoral war and is rumored to be preparing for another, possibly with tactical nuclear weapons; offers little healthcare for the poorest; provides massive tax cuts for the wealthy; violates human rights; refuses to establish effective policies to protect the life of the unborn (in spite of fervid anti-abortion rhetoric!); and imposes unconscionable burdens on future generations through a colossal federal debt. These are not just economic and political issues. They are quintessentially *moral* values—as much as the defense of life in all its stages and the family—that the Gospel places on us for the sake of the reign of God. Voting

against abortion and gay marriage is not hard; it does not make a big hole in our pockets. But voting in support of the poor and the powerless costs us money and requires personal sacrifices.

In addition to this preferential option for the poor, there is another urgent issue on which the church's ministry must focus in the near future, and that is the current American propensity to use violence and war to settle international problems. With the claim that the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 have changed "everything," there is now in the United States a widespread subscription to what Walter Wink calls "the myth of redemptive violence," a willingness to use military might to resolve international conflicts. Worse, this addiction to war, draped in patriotism, invokes God, the Bible, and the symbols of Christianity for self-justification. It is nothing short of idolatry and blasphemy. In this context, the church's most pressing ministry is to proclaim, courageously and unflinchingly, Jesus' teaching on non-violence as a way of relating not only among individuals but also among nations. Such non-violent resistance goes beyond pacifism and the theory of just war and points to the church's ministry of reconciliation. To put teeth into its non-violence policy, church leaders must publicly oppose any candidate for public office—Democrat as well as Republican—who espouse war for political gains.

Liberation in all areas of life, then, must be one fundamental form of Christian ministry of the American Catholic Church in the immediate future if it is to find again its bearings. This is no liberal or conservative agenda. Rather it is the absolute demand of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the distinctive teaching of the Jewish prophets; the solemn injunction of Jesus; the frequent exhortation of popes and bishops; and the inspiring example of countless Catholic lay women and men. The American Catholic Church has no future if it fails in this ministry of justice, peace, and reconciliation. Without this ministry, the church's teaching is empty rant.

The Church with a Multi-Colored Cultural Face: Inculturation

Like Joseph's "Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," the American Catholic Church is now displaying a dazzling variety of cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. From its very beginning, it has been an "institutional immigrant." Before the massive arrival of European Catholics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there had already been Catholics among Native Americans, Mexicans, and African Americans on the continent. Even though the Irish and, to a lesser extent, the Germans have dominated the hierarchy, the early presence of Eastern and Southern Europeans as well as of the Chinese, the Filipinos, and the Japanese in the church was not insignificant. However, with laws imposing a severely restrictive quota system of European immigrants in the 1920s and the anti-Asian immigration legislation in 1934, it was predicted that the flow of immigrants would slow down to a trickle. Furthermore, as Catholics moved into the American mainstream, they became less distinctive, and the immigrant character of the church less pronounced. With time, the face of the church as a mosaic of different ethnic groups became blurred, especially after World War II, so much so that some church historians have declared that the immigrant era of the church was over.

Recently, however, there has been a huge influx of immigrants, despite an economic slowdown, which tends to discourage immigration, and more stringent restrictions in the wake of September 11, 2001. Currently, more than 34 million immigrants live in the United States, 10 million of them illegally, and a majority of them are Catholic. Immigrants now make up 12 percent of the U.S. household population. The American Catholic Church is becoming an institutional immigrant again. Furthermore, and this is vastly significant for

the future of the church's ministry, within a couple of decades these "minorities" will constitute the majority in the church.

What is distinctive about the new arrivals is that they come mostly from non-European countries, especially from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and bring with them languages, customs, and cultures vastly different from those of their host country. More importantly, unlike their predecessors, these immigrants intend to preserve their native traditions. While working hard to move into the economic and political mainstream, culturally and, as we see below, religiously, these new immigrants refuse to be assimilated into the White, Anglo-Saxon culture. Rather, they want to maintain, for themselves and their descendants, their own languages, customs, and cultures. In addition to various cultures, the new immigrants also bring with them a different brand of Catholicism and a different experience of being church.

The persistence of these non-European traditions and the immigrants' distinctive experiences of being church present the American Catholic Church's ministry with two challenges. First, the church must devise a new style of being immigrant in the midst of the American society. The old immigrant style has been characterized by "group consciousness, defensiveness, willingness to use power to achieve concrete results."¹⁴ While some of these tactics still retain their usefulness, clearly, the new Catholic immigrants cannot be brought together by means of ecclesiastical centralization, especially around the parish (they do not live in the same neighborhoods), separate education in Catholic schools (which very few can afford), and the use of political power (which they do not as yet possess). Rather, the future challenge for the church is to help immigrants maintain and transmit, especially to their children, their languages, customs, and culture, which are the glue that bind the immigrants together. This cultural task should be carried out at the parish, diocesan, and national levels, with appropriate organizations and activities and with consistent ecclesiastical and financial support.

The second challenge is much more difficult and has barely been begun. It is known by the umbrella term of "inculturation," which is the double process of incarnating the already culture-laden Gospel into the various cultures and of bringing the cultures into the Gospel whereby *both* the Gospel and the cultures are transformed and enriched. Concretely, this inculturation in the American Catholic Church involves the interplay of five components: the message of the Gospel itself (divine revelation), the cultures (e.g., Semitic, Hellenistic, Roman, Germanic, etc.) in which the Gospel has been transmitted (the Christian Tradition), the American culture (mainly White, Anglo-Saxon, Enlightenment-inspired), the culture—predominantly pre-modern—of a specific ethnic group (e.g., the Vietnamese), and the cultures of other ethnic groups (e.g., Black, Mexican, Cuban, etc.). The areas in which inculturation takes place includes all aspects of church life: liturgy, catechesis, spirituality, ministerial formation, and theology. Of special importance for inculturation in all of these areas is what is known as popular piety or devotions or popular Catholicism.

It is impossible to foretell what the American Catholic Church would look like if its ministry of inculturation is taken seriously. However, one thing is certain: the church will be very different from what it is now if the resources of other cultures are marshaled to reconceptualize the whole gamut of the church's beliefs, liturgy, moral practices, and prayers. What if the God the church worships is depicted as a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-colored, gender-inclusive Deity? What if Jesus is presented as the Buddha, the Guru, the Sage, the Ancestor, the Eldest Son par excellence? What if the Holy Spirit is conceived

¹⁴ David O'Brien, *Public Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 55.

in terms of the Cosmic Breath and Power enlivening the whole creation and all religions and cultures? What if Mary is seen in parallel with Kwan-Yin, the Buddhist Bodhisattva of compassion? What if the Bible is read and interpreted in the context of other sacred writings such as the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*, or the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, or the *Qur'an*? What if the church is lived less as an organization and more as an extended family or a tribe? What if the sacramental celebrations connected with birth, growth, communion, reconciliation, sickness, marriage, and leadership incorporate the cultural traditions and customs that the immigrants celebrate on these occasions? What if Western monasticism adopts the spiritual practices of non-Western monastic traditions?

The Church Journeying with other Believers: Interreligious Dialogue

The last example brings us to the third feature of the new American context, namely, religious pluralism. Until recently, the religious landscape of America is occupied almost exclusively by churches (Catholic and Protestant) and synagogues. Now it is dotted, even in its heartlands, by temples, pagodas, mosques, and gurdwaras. Of course, America is still overwhelmingly Christian—a little over 80 percent of the population profess the Christian faith, and its public symbols are overtly Christian. Nevertheless, the subtitle of Diana L. Eck's book, *How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, which attempts to alert Americans of the new phenomenon of religious diversity in their midst, is not far from the truth.¹⁵ Despite their numerical minority, the new non-Christian immigrants strongly and loudly insist that they will continue to practice, publicly and proudly, their religious faiths—particularly Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism—and refuse to be subsumed into some kind of civic religion or Christianity.

For the Catholic Church, especially after Vatican II and in the light of Pope John Paul II's teaching and activities, religious diversity is not a curse but a blessing. More than the United States, the church has at its disposal vast philosophical and theological resources to deal with not only the mere fact of religious diversity but also the new theologies of religious pluralism. It does not regard religious differences as "a clash of civilizations" and as a threat to its identity nor does it limit itself to polite tolerance, which is at bottom disguised intolerance. Rather, the church views other religious faiths with respect and admiration and enters into dialogue with them in order to be enriched by them.

This does not mean of course that interreligious dialogue is not an arduous challenge for the American Catholic Church. Because religion and politics are inextricably intertwined, and because, as mentioned above, the American Catholic Church is embedded in the United States, dialogue between the American Catholic Church and the followers of other religions, in particular Muslims, is fraught with suspicion, given the current conflict between the United States and many Islamic countries. Fortunately, with its longstanding tradition of religious freedom and nonestablishment and its considerable religious diversity, the United States can be a fertile laboratory for interfaith dialogue. Hence, notwithstanding significant difficulties, the American Catholic Church enjoys a unique advantage in carrying out such a dialogue. It can demonstrate that religious diversity need not and should not lead to violence, as it has done in many other countries.

¹⁵ Diana L. Eck, *How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

According to official church teaching, this dialogue has a fourfold form.¹⁶ First, “dialogue of life”: it requires that American Catholics maintain friendly relationships and, where feasible, share their life as good neighbors with the followers of other religions. Second, “dialogue of action”: Christians should collaborate with other believers in working for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. Third, “dialogue of theological exchange”: both Christians and other believers must work to remove mutual misunderstandings and prejudices and to appreciate one another’s spiritual riches. Fourthly, “dialogue of religious experience”: Followers of different religions should come together to pray and even to pray *together*.

It may be urged that given the overwhelmingly Christian majority in the United States, interreligious dialogue is not—or at least not yet—an immediate priority for the church’s ministry, as it is in Asia, for example. While this may be true, nevertheless, the increasing frequency of interfaith marriages among Americans poses serious challenges to the church’s ministry, which so far has done practically nothing to assist interfaith couples to cope with the difficulties of their marriages and to live out their different faiths in a mutually enriching way. In addition to this pastoral need, the church will also be required through interreligious dialogue to rethink some of its fundamental beliefs such as the uniqueness and universality of Christ’s mediation and the necessity of the church as sacrament of salvation. In the process the church will have to consider whether it is theologically possible to affirm non-Christian religions as ways of salvation in God’s eternal plan, the nature of revelation, the modalities of the Holy Spirit’s presence in history, the revelatory status of non-Christian sacred scriptures, the spiritual fruitfulness of non-Christian rituals and prayers (in particular, popular religiosity), and so on.

A NEW WAY OF BEING CHURCH: THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE EVANGELIZER

Perhaps the decisive question currently facing the American Catholic Church in a culture of pluralism is not so much how to evangelize as a fundamentally new way of being Church. Searching for newfangled methods or even eye-catching gimmicks of evangelizing before examining the foundational question of how to be Church in the globalized and postmodern context of the twenty-first century is putting the cart before the horse.

It is no secret that the American Church has been going through a very rough patch, much of it of its own making. To recover its bearings and to carry out the triple dialogue described above effectively, nothing short of a spirituality deeply rooted in the imitation of Christ the Evangelizer is required. Of the four gospels, the gospel according to John most dramatically and almost on every page presents Jesus both as the missionary sent by the Father and as the one who sends us into mission. In one terse sentence, John affirms the intrinsic unity between Jesus’ mission and ours: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). The expression “as... so” underlines not only the sameness of *mission*, which is the mission of the Father, but also the sameness of the *modality* in which this mission is to be carried out. First, mission is not ours, not even of the Church. Rather, it is the mission of God, *missio Dei*. The Church does not own mission, nor can it control it or determine its realization. Secondly, the Church must carry out God’s mission in the same way Jesus did.

I would like to conclude by reflecting on this second aspect of the Johannine affirmation, that is, the modality of Jesus’ mission, since I believe that it is most appropriate for a culture of pluralism. I have suggested above that the postmodern culture

¹⁶ The Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (May 19, 1991), no. 42.

of pluralism celebrates diversity and otherness and that it tends to suspect the claim of any system of ideas or organization to possess absolute and universal truth as promoting its vested interests and power. Jesus' mode of mission, on the contrary, is rooted in his total renunciation of power. Master and Lord as he was, he chose to be a servant washing the feet of his disciples. Furthermore, he respected diversity and otherness, especially that of the poor, the lowly, the marginalized, the women, the children, the pagans, the sinners. What distinguishes him from all others is his ability to cross all kinds of borders in order to share the life of others and to be in solidarity with them. In a culture of pluralism, it is this kind of border-crossing, in humility and love, to reach out to the "other" that convinces and converts people, not brilliant systems of ideas and doctrinal propositions.

Clearly, Jesus was a border-crosser *par excellence*. He continuously crossed borders in his incarnation, ministry, and death and resurrection. The mystery of the Word of God made flesh in the Jew Jesus can certainly be viewed as an act of border-crossing. Essentially, it is the culmination of that primordial border-crossing by which the Triune God steps out of himself and eternity and crosses into the *other*, namely, the world of space and time, which God brings into existence by this very act of crossing. In the Incarnation, the border that was crossed is not only that which separates the eternal and the temporal, the invisible and the visible, spirit and matter, but more specifically, the divine and the human, with the latter's reality of soul and body.

In this divine crossing over to the human, the border between the divine nature and the human nature of Jesus functions as markers constituting the distinct identity of each. The one is not transmuted into the other, nor is confused with it; rather, the two natures are to be acknowledged, in the of the Council of Chalcedon, "without confusion, without change." Thus, in the Incarnation as border-crossing, the boundaries are preserved as identity markers but at the same time they are overcome as barriers and transformed into frontiers from which a totally new reality, a *mestizaje*, emerges: the divine and human reconciled and harmonized with each other into one single reality.

A border-crosser at the very roots of his being, Jesus performed his ministry of announcing and ushering in the kingdom of God always at the places where borders meet, and hence, at the margins of the two worlds separated by their borders. He crossed these borders back and forth repeatedly and freely, be they geographical, racial, sexual, social, economic, political, cultural, and religious. What is new about his message about the kingdom of God, which is good news to some and a scandal to others, is that for him it removes all borders, both natural and man-made, and includes all. Jews and non-Jews, men and women, the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, the healthy and the sick, the clean and the impure, the righteous and the sinners, and any other imaginable categories of peoples and groups, Jesus invited them all to enter into the house of his merciful and forgiving Father.

Standing between the two worlds, excluding neither but embracing both, Jesus was able to be fully inclusive of both. But this also means that he is the marginal person *par excellence*. People at the center of any society or group, as a rule, possess wealth, power, and influence. As the threefold temptation shows, Jesus, the border-crosser and the dweller at the margins, renounced precisely these three things. Because he was at the margins, in his teaching and miracle-working, Jesus creates a new and different center, one constituted by the meeting of the borders of the many and diverse worlds, often in conflict with one another, each with its own center which relegates the "other" to the margins. It is at this margin-center that marginal people such as the immigrants meet one another. In Jesus, the margin where he lived became the center of a new society without

borders and barriers, reconciling all peoples, “Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female” (Galatians 3:28). Strangers and guests as they are, immigrants are invited to become marginal people, to dwell at the margins of societies with marginal(ized) people, like Jesus, so as to be able to create with them new all-inclusive centers of reconciliation and harmony.

Jesus’ violent death on the cross was a direct result of his border-crossing and ministry at the margins which posed a serious threat to the interests of those occupying the economic, political, and religious center. Even the form of his death, that is, by crucifixion, indicates that Jesus was an outcast, and he died, as the Letter to Hebrews says, “outside the city gate and outside the camp” (13:12-13). Symbolically, however, hung between heaven and earth, at the margins of both worlds, Jesus acted as the mediator and intercessor between God and humanity.

But even in death Jesus did not remain within the boundaries of what death means: failure, defeat, destruction. By his resurrection he crossed the borders of death into a new life, thus bringing hope where there was despair, victory where there was vanquishment, freedom where there was slavery, and life where there was death. In this way, the borders of death become frontiers to life in abundance.

Like Jesus, American Catholics are constantly challenged to cross all kinds of borders, and to create, out of the best of each group of people whom these borders divide and separate, a new human family characterized by harmony and reconciliation. Like Jesus, we have to live out the dynamics of death and resurrection, or to use the words of Philippians 2:6-11, of self-emptying and exaltation. This is both the burden and the joy of all of us as we carry out our mission, deeply mindful of the terrifying fact that world peace and universal justice hang in the balance depending on the choices the American government and the American people will make in the years ahead.

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