Issues in Inculturation and Interreligious Dialogue

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Abstract: The mission of the Church calls it both to dialogue with people of other faiths and to inculturate its own Good News in the meaning systems of diverse times and places. These two aspects of mission are interwoven, and the following essay explores this relationship, particularly in the context of the Church in Asia. The inculturation of the Christian message in other religions has been a historical reality and practice of the Church throughout its history. Contemporary Asia, by its very nature, demands inculturation that is interreligious; furthermore it demands an approach to inculturation that is informed by the practice of dialogue. Such an approach would in turn critique the dominant theology of inculturation, which centres on the analogy of the incarnation. Inculturation as dialogue advocates for the paschal mystery as a more meaningful symbol for the death and transformation that takes place in the encounter between cultures and faiths.

Key Words: inculturation; interreligious dialogue; Catholic Church – mission; Catholic Church – Asia; post-colonialism; Paschal Mystery

Inculturation and interreligious dialogue are deeply connected aspects of the church’s mission. Faith and culture are closely related. This is particularly true of Asia, where religion and culture are often indistinguishable. However throughout history, the Christian church has inculturated the Gospel, not only in new cultures but also in the meaning systems of other religions. Because of this, the theology of religions has had a significant impact on the development of inculturation, exemplified in Asia by the so-called ‘Chinese rites controversy.’ Inculturation is a primary concern in postcolonial Asia. The Asian mode of inculturation must be dialogue, because of the situation of the church as minority and the Asian value of harmony. Furthermore, interreligious dialogue complements and critiques the dominant theology of inculturation, which centres on the incarnation. Incarnation theology often recommends an adaptation approach, which, while useful, can also be superficial and sometimes insensitive to other living faiths. An alternative metaphor, that of the paschal mystery, is more consistent with the dialogical approach to inculturation, highlighting mutual change and humility. When these elements are part of inculturation, it can in turn promote and deepen interfaith dialogue.

The intimate connection between religion and culture forms the basis for the inculturation of Christianity in other faiths. Tillich’s schema, which names religion as the basis and content of culture, has been widely influential. Aylward Shorter, for example, places religion at the cognitive level of a cultural system; it provides the underlying

meanings and values upon which ideas and behaviours are built. Post-structuralism challenges such integrated concepts of culture as essentialist, neglecting the dynamics of power, contradiction and change. Nonetheless, the close relationship between religion and culture is played out for religious adherents in the problem of distinguishing one from the other.

Asia’s culture in particular reflects its faith traditions. As birthplace of most the world’s religions Asia possesses a cultural heritage strongly coloured by religious movements. ‘Culture and religion form an indivisible whole.’ Hence the Catholic Bishops Conference of India asserts that Indian religious traditions ‘form part of [Indian Christians] own cultural background and affect [their] own religious make-up.’ Indeed the CBI’s Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue seem at times equally concerned with establishing an inculturated identity as ‘Indian Christians’ formed through interfaith dialogue, as with dialogue for its own sake. Meanwhile calls for ‘Indianization not Hinduisation’ are based on a naive view of culture as secular. However, the histories of inculturation and interfaith encounter have intertwined from the very beginnings of Christianity as the church has used the practices and ideas of other faiths to understand and promulgate the Christian faith. The symbols of other religions are resources of the ‘deepest meaning and power’ for inculturating the Gospel, and though the term ‘inculturation’ found its way into the papal vocabulary in 1979, the mutual insertion of the Gospel and religious culture into one another has been a recurrent project throughout Christian history. The Jesus movement was called to cross boundaries from its Jewish beginnings into pagan Greco-Roman and Franco-Germanic culture. The church’s ‘Germanisation’ invoked central European folk religion, in the Christmas festival, votive masses and relics. The Scriptures themselves bear witness to interreligious influence. Paul is recorded to have preached at Ephesus using the terms of Greek culture and religion (Acts 19:9-10). Canaanite belief systems and practices encountered in the Promised Land have informed the First Testament wisdom writings and the Psalms.

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4 Schreiter, The New Catholicity, 74.
5 Phan, Being Religious Interreligiously, 116.
8 Ibid, par. 16.
12 Phan, Being Religious Interreligiously, 213.
13 Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 3.
15 Shorter, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, 109.
using texts of other faiths in prayer and liturgy. History demonstrates the contingency of many Christian forms, offering legitimacy and perspective to contemporary proposals for an inculturated Christianity.16

Because of the strong connection between inculturation and interreligious encounter, developments in the theology of religions have been crucial to the progress of inculturation. Positive theological approaches to other faiths have existed since at least the second century C.E., in the writings of Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria; nonetheless the exclusivist position, that those outside the Catholic Church are barred from salvation, dominated most of church history.17 However, as the intercultural encounter of global exploration brought Christians into contact with more believers of other faiths, the apparent contradiction between the universal salvific will of God and the necessity of Christ for salvation demanded theological change.18 By the twentieth century Rahner and others facilitated shifts that profoundly impacted the Church's orientation to other religions. Nostra Aetate voiced them magisterially for the first time:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.19 This positive attitude towards the spirituality of non-Christs would develop, in John Paul II's papal magisterium, into a pneumatology that acknowledged Divine presence in other cultures and religions: the Spirit's presence and activity affect not only the individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions.20 These statements exhibit an inclusivism that views other religions positively while making sense of them within the Christian paradigm. Animated by the Spirit, Christ is the final destiny of other faiths. This theology is a basis for inculturation,21 which becomes a valid evangelical strategy for uncovering "seeds of the Word" present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ.22 In Asia the controversy over ancestor veneration demonstrates the parallel between theological development and the advancement of inculturation. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Jesuit missionaries undertook an inculturated mission in Asia,23 allowing Chinese converts to retain the Confucian practice of ancestor veneration.24 This perceived compromise drew criticism from other orders and ultimately condemnation from the Congregation for the

16 Amaladoss, Making All Things New, 163.
17 Shorter, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, 256; Schreiter, The New Catholicity, 68.
18 W. Teasdale, Catholicism in Dialogue: Conversations Across Traditions (Lanham, Maryland: Roman & Littlefield, 2004), 104.
19 Teasdale, Catholicism in Dialogue, 82-87.
20 Shorter, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, 90-92.
22 John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio, par. 28; http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0219/__P5.HTM (accessed 5 April 2006). Hereafter RM.
23 Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 118.
24 RM 28; Amaladoss, Making All Things New, 161.
26 Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 111-115.
Propagation of the Faith and successive popes. Although Jesuits like Ricci and Martini skewed the debate by contesting the rites' religious nature, opposition was based on exclusivism.\(^{27}\) Since the dramatic theological changes of last century ancestor veneration has reappeared in the Asian Church, sanctioned by Propaganda Fide and explicitly referenced in Vietnamese liturgy.\(^{28}\)

Inculturation is a key concern in postcolonial Asia, where European cultural imperialism has often accompanied Christian mission. John Paul II identified the problem: 'most Asians tend to regard Jesus – born on Asian soil – as a Western rather than an Asian figure.'\(^{29}\) It was for the most part colonialism that brought this Western Jesus to Asia: the missionary movement was financed by foreign powers such as Spain and Portugal, and it has at times colluded with governments against native peoples.\(^{30}\) For Asian Christians the continuing legacy of colonialism is dependence upon the West and a foreign image,\(^{31}\) which arguably accounts for the relative failure of Christian proselytism in Asia, as its peoples reject Jesus as a foreign oppressor.\(^{32}\) While others may convert out of a desire for this perceived Westernness, they suffer from cultural alienation.\(^{33}\) Pieris describes Sri Lankan 'Catholic ghettos', where Christian illiteracy in the surrounding Buddhist culture inhibits their attempts to evangelise.\(^{34}\)

Furthermore, dialogue is the modality of developing Asian Christianity. The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) has declared that dialogue must be the mode of becoming a Church indigenous and inculturated.\(^{35}\) The FABC names a three-fold dialogue, with the poor, with Asian culture and Asian religions, as the Church's mission in Asia. These activities are interrelated - interreligious dialogue provides the context and content of inculturation.\(^{36}\) On a practical level Christians in Asia need to dialogue because as a minority they must engage with their neighbours in order to survive.\(^{37}\) Furthermore the Asian cultural predisposition towards pluralism and harmony is one of the realities into which Christianity must grow. According to Peter Phan, harmony is the 'soul of ... Asia', promoted by Asian religions and philosophies.\(^{38}\) For example, in Hinduism dharma holds together diverse reality, while Taoist Chang Tzu proclaimed: 'The cosmos and I were born together; all things and I are one.'\(^{39}\) This spirituality of harmony has arisen from Asia's religious plurality, and it is amenable to the Christian notion of all things being reconciliation in Christ by the Spirit.\(^{40}\) It is also consonant with contemporary Christian theology of religions, which calls for dialogue as an appropriate relationship of respect between the many faiths which may legitimately claim Divine presence.

\(^{27}\) Ibid, 117.

\(^{28}\) Ibid, 116, 124.

\(^{29}\) Phan, Being Religious Interreligiously, 237.

\(^{30}\) Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 14.

\(^{31}\) Amaladoss, Making All Things New, 33-34.

\(^{32}\) Ibid, 63-64.

\(^{33}\) Amaladoss, Making All Things New, 34; Shorter, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, 10.


\(^{35}\) Cited in Phan, Being Religious Interreligiously, 238.

\(^{36}\) Ibid, 241.

\(^{37}\) Phan, Being Religious Interreligiously, 238.

\(^{38}\) Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 143.

\(^{39}\) Cited in Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 143.

\(^{40}\) Ibid, 144.
Successful liturgical and popular inculturation by the earliest Indian Christians is itself evidence of ‘cultural and existential dialogue’ with surrounding faiths.\(^{41}\) It seems fair then to claim, as Phan does, that authentic inculturation is itself ‘an interreligious dialogue.’\(^{42}\)

The framework of intercultural dialogue offers a useful critique of and compliment to the ‘incarnation’ approach to inculturation. This paradigm was officially introduced at the Second Vatican Council:

> In harmony with the economy of the Incarnation, the young churches, rooted in Christ and built up on the foundation of the Apostles, take to themselves in a wonderful exchange all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance.\(^{43}\)

In 1979 the Apostolic Exhortation, Catechesi Tradendae, continued to draw upon the Incarnation.\(^{44}\) The metaphor is apt because it speaks of ‘the Word made flesh’ in a concrete historical milieu (John 1:14). It displays a dialogical dimension when expressed as the ‘unique interaction between the divine and human in Jesus.’\(^{45}\) It can reference Jesus’ ‘cultural solidarity’ with his fellow Palestinian Jews.\(^{46}\) It also makes theological sense given the causal link between the Incarnation and the subsequent sacramentality of the whole universe, which encourages dialogue.\(^{47}\)

However, incarnation theology, when viewed from the perspective of high Christology, can tend towards equating inculturation with adaptation. Incarnation ‘from above’ presents the Gospel as disembodied and culture-free, like the eternal Logos. Inculturation becomes a simple act of placing that universal message in a particular human culture. According to Phan, postmodernist theories of culture challenge this view, insisting that there is no such ‘virginal conception’ for the Christian message.\(^{48}\) Revelation is never accessible apart from culture, and so the faith that we inculturate is already replete with localised accretions.\(^{49}\) In liturgy, for example, the Roman rite is itself a cultural form; when we bring it into contact with the Vietnamese or Indian cultural system it engages in an intercultural encounter.\(^{50}\) The Gospel is ‘a complex of attitudes, ways of thinking, living, acting, celebrating’ - that is, it is a culture, not simply a series of propositions that can be translated.\(^{51}\) Failure to see the cultural limitedness of one’s faith may be a mild form of fundamentalism.\(^{52}\)

Approaching inculturation in this way can give rise to a view of inculturation as adaptation, which is at best insufficient and, at worst, another form of cultural domination. Incarnational emphasis on contextualising the Gospel recommends dynamic

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\(^{41}\) Catholic Bishops Conference of India, Guidlines for Inter-Religious Dialogue, par. 5.

\(^{42}\) Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 7.


\(^{44}\) CT, 53.

\(^{45}\) Lane, ‘Faith and Culture,’ 21.

\(^{46}\) Shorter, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, 81.

\(^{47}\) Lane, ‘Faith and Culture,’ 23.

\(^{48}\) Phan, Being Religious Interreligiously, 222. The phrase ‘virginal conception’ belongs to Shorter, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, 81.

\(^{49}\) Lane, ‘Faith and Culture,’ 20.

\(^{50}\) Phan, Being Religious Interreligiously, 227, 242.


\(^{52}\) Amaladoss, Making All Things New, 141.
equivalence as a means of inculturation. So, for example, the common practice in India is for parishioners to place hands together and bow to each other during the sign of peace - the dynamic equivalent of the Western hand-shake. This is a step towards localising Christianity, but it is certainly not enough to constitute an authentically Indian Church. Taken alone, not only does it leave the Church predominantly Western, but the broader Indian culture remains un-Christian because of the failure to dialogue on a more meaningful level.

Thus incarnation theology risks culturalism. Furthermore the introduction of local gesture, language and music into what the central authority on liturgy calls the ‘substantial unity of the Roman rite’ may constitute ‘theological vandalism.’ Indeed, many Christians are guilty of this in regard to Judaism, which they pillage for texts and practices, such as the Passover, for Christians use, without regard for the integrity of the non-Christian religious experience. This may be the praxis of inclusivist theology, with its emphasis on fulfilment; but it is disrespectful of other living faiths. Christians should engage in interfaith dialogue when utilising what belongs to other religions, so that they balance their own Christian perspectives with awareness of the texts’ and practices’ proper social and religious context.

The theological model of inculturation as paschal mystery is more fully consonant with dialogue. The paschal mystery ‘encompasses the mystery of the incarnation, the public ministry, the passion death and resurrection, ascension into heaven, the sending of the Spirit, and the promised second coming.’ It is an expansive concept that takes in the whole of the Christ mystery. Thus it includes features of the incarnation analogy but extends importantly to death and resurrection as Christological and ecclesiological realities. Christ’s death and resurrection enabled him, through the Spirit, to transcend the boundaries of his earthly life: “After the Resurrection, Christ belonged to every culture at once.” Thus Pieris, following the Pentecost event, describes inculturation as ‘learning the language of the Unspoken Speaker’ in the poor (most of Asia and mostly non-Christian), who are Christ’s continuing body on earth.

Similarly, the dialogue of inculturation results in mutual metanoia. This is profound transformation, not merely a change of outward signifiers, but the genuine animation of cultures by each other from within. Christianity must challenge and transform the religious-cultural systems with which it engages, both within the church, and in wider

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53 Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 73.
54 Shorter, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, 12, 81.
56 Phan, Being Religious Interreligiously, 243.
57 Amaladoss, Making All Things New, 176-177.
59 O’Connor, ‘The Threat of the Paschal Mystery,’ 2
60 Shorter, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, 83. The metaphor of paschal mystery has been drawn primarily from Shorter.
61 Pieris, Fire and Water, 128.
62 Shorter, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, 84.
63 Ibid, 11.
society in order to build up the Reign of God. Subcontinental Christianity for example needs to transform the (Hindu) culture of casteism. Thus, in contrast to the incarnation analogy, inculturation as paschal mystery takes up the counter-cultural aspect of the cross, avoiding culturalism. Christianity itself also changes in inculturation, through a constant process of death and resurrection in which the Gospel gives up its previous limited cultural expressions. Pieris tells the story of Buddhist monk who was so thoroughly unimpressed by a Christian rendering of Jesus’ death that he wrote his own passion play. This play was a ‘watershed’ in Christian literary history, because ‘the Buddhist cultural idiom... makes Christ shine in Asian splendour,’ revealing a fresh Christology. Of course, change requires discernment. Church authority offers criteria for judging the value of the cultural forms of the other, but there is also need to discern the variable and invariable elements of Christian faith. Ultimately, according to Amaladoss, faith guides transformation. He cites St Paul:

For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within. So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:11).

The passion of Jesus also promotes humility in dialogical interculturation. The term, "paschal mystery", directs our attention to the lived Christian life, characterised by surrender to God and dying to self as part and parcel of our mission to the world.' Phan describes the kenotic spirituality of presence - a ‘silent witness of life’- that is challenging for Western missionaries, but essential for dialogue and mission in Asia. This approach is sensitive to the dangerous power dynamics of culture revealed by postcolonialism, which sees culture as ‘a ground of contest in relations.’ Humility is wise in countries that lack religious freedom, where the status of Christian missionaries is precarious. It also represents conversion from arrogant evangelism of the past, in which ‘Asia has not been allowed to educate the church in listening and following the Word, since the church has been talking the whole time.’

Pieris insists that there must be listening before talking. He recounts his experience of asking Buddhists Jesus’ question: ‘Who do you say I am?’ This exchange leads Christians to understand Jesus’ ‘scandal of particularity’ in totally new ways. Such Asian insights are possible because, as the indigenous religious traditions demonstrate, Asians ‘have an inner affinity with the Universal Word.’ Thus a theology of inculturation as Pascal mystery, by insisting on humility, is compatible with the theology of religions that respects and celebrates the Divine in other faiths.

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64 Amaladoss, Making All Things New, 2.
65 Ibid. 6.
66 Shorter, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, 83.
67 Amaladoss, Making All Things New, 66.
68 Pieris, Fire and Water, 132.
69 Cited in Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 9.
70 Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 6.
71 O’Connor, ‘The Threat of the Paschal Mystery,’ 2.
72 Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 139.
73 Schreiter, The New Catholicity, 54.
74 Phan, In Our Own Tongues, 139.
75 Pieris, Fire and Water, 133.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid, 137.
Finally, when undertaken in this spirit, inculturation promotes interreligious dialogue and harmony. The history of the inculturation of the Virgin Mary in Vietnam, aided by parallels with the female figure of Quan Am Thi Kinh, has provided a starting point for dialogue, in the values of mercy, love and compassion shared between Catholics and Buddhists.\textsuperscript{78} Stories of Marian apparitions in Vietnam even bear within them instances of positive interfaith relations. The shared use and interpretation of non-Christian texts in a ‘truly Indian’ Church could also open the local Christian community to the dialogue of religious experience.\textsuperscript{79} Interreligious dialogue requires that Christians are firm in their own local identity as both Asians and Christians.\textsuperscript{80} It is then that a national or cultural ‘we’ can form the basis for relationship.\textsuperscript{81}

Inculturation and interfaith dialogue are interrelated aspects of the church’s mission. Reflecting the deep connection between faith and culture, interreligious inculturation has always been a Christian reality, and has paralleled the advancement of the theology of religions. In postcolonial Asia, because of the unity of religion and culture, inculturation must certainly be interreligious; furthermore the minority status of Christians and the culture of pluralism mean that it must also be in the mode of dialogue. This approach may challenge the notion of inculturation as incarnation, favouring instead a more expansive theology of inculturation as paschal mystery. If, following this, cultures and religions are willing to die in order to rise transformed, an authentic religious harmony and an authentically Asian Church may indeed be possible.

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\textsuperscript{78} Phan, \textit{In Our Own Tongues}, 107.
\textsuperscript{79} Amaladoss, \textit{Making All Things New}, 162, 178.
\textsuperscript{81} Amaladoss, Making All Things New, 8.