

# THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

## Inculturation

ON 6 JANUARY 1989 the present pope announced in Rome at the noon *Angelus* 'an initiative that will have great significance for the spread of the gospel'. He announced the calling of an African synod. The *lineamenta* for the synod were first presented at the Lomé meeting of the bishops of Africa and Madagascar this year and published in Rome the following day. The document lists five issues for the synod: evangelization, inculturation, dialogue, justice and peace and the means of social communication.

The Church of England Board of Mission and Unity set up some six years ago a 'mission theological advisory group' (MTAG) to discuss and report on theological issues connected with mission. They have already produced one document *The measure of mission* and are on the verge of publishing their second report which has as its subject the gospel and contemporary cultures, especially the different cultures to be found currently in England. As a member of this group I have experienced the range and depth of the problems involved in this issue.

These are just two of many practical attempts to come to terms with problems of inculturation. Books and articles abound. But the problem is not new. Schreiter<sup>1</sup> points out that the New Testament includes several different local theologies and even the most casual reader can readily detect the difference in approach between the Synoptic Gospels and that of John. The Latin fathers pursued a different tradition from that of the Greek fathers. There has always been a range of different liturgical rites recognized by Rome together with different canonical traditions. Perhaps Africa has made us more keenly aware of the need for inculturation, perhaps the dwindling numbers committed to the Church in Europe and America have led us to wonder whether it is our presentation that lacks meaning. Furthermore, Christianity's failure in Asia to impress where the great world religions have existed for centuries has prompted many Asian Christian theologians to write on inculturation and also prompted liturgical experimentation that has gone further than on other continents.

Inculturation is usually considered to be a problem met by overseas missionaries—how does one translate 'the Lord is my shepherd' into Eskimo? This notion that we have to make sense of the gospel across different cultures is sometimes referred to as synchronic inculturation. But there is also a diachronic problem. How do we make sense for our contemporaries who share our own culture of gospel texts and conciliar documents written centuries ago? Within the last forty years in Britain alone there has been a steady stream of versions of the New Testament 'in contemporary English'. For all that folk hanker after the King James

version (often those who attend church the least seem to hanker the loudest), asking the Lord to 'prevent our actions' is misleading for present-day listeners. And MTAG has made it clear that we do not need to travel far to encounter different cultures. The text of their forthcoming report draws attention to cultures in urban priority areas, not always literary cultures (perhaps writing is less and less the contemporary means of communication), middle-class cultures and our current enterprise culture, youth cultures, ethnic minorities.

The theological issues involved have been written on more and more since Pope John XXIII introduced the Second Vatican Council and made his famous distinction between truths of the faith and the form of their presentation. Basic to this writing is an understanding of gospel and an understanding of culture. And it is worth pointing out two erroneous positions often held. The first is that the gospel has been carved in stone in some objectively literal statement of some univocal fact. This often seems to entail a belief that the very words are themselves somehow the truth. Islamic understanding of the Qu'ran is that the Arabic text is actually written by the hand of God—the Arabic text is an exact copy of the text in heaven. Until relatively recently the Qu'ran remained untranslated for orthodox Muslims. To read the Qu'ran, one had first to learn Arabic. Such a fundamentalist approach to the gospel is not common among Catholic theologians but forms of it exist. The other false position is that there is an inviolable thing called 'culture' which is equally supposed to be carved in stone. Sometimes when one questions, say, polygamy, one is told that it is 'cultural' and therefore inviolate. Now whilst it is surely correct that sometimes missionaries have been too quick to attack what was strange to them, yet it is good to remember that cultures change, develop, assimilate, and that cultures can embody values that are contrary to the gospel.

The understanding of the relation of gospel to culture is linked to one's understanding of the nature of revelation and the relationship between grace and nature or the supernatural and the natural. Barth's insistence on the utter transcendence of God and the otherness of revelation means that there is, for him, nothing finite in revelation, the word of God is utterly other. Cardinal Ratzinger is perhaps reminiscent of Barth's historical situation. When he speaks of inculturation he chooses Nazi Germany as his instance of culture and naturally concludes that the gospel can have no truck with such a value system. David Tracy's 'orthodox' model of theology is similar: 'The claims of modernity are not understood to have any inner-theological relevance'.<sup>2</sup> The parallel position in liturgical concerns would be that of Lefebvre who holds that the Latin Mass of Pope Pius V cannot be altered even by a single word. It has also to stay in Latin. Some would hold that the Council of Chalcedon gave certain Greek words specific meanings. Words like *ousia*, *physis*, *hypostasis* have been given a definitive meaning within fixed dogmas. Nothing can be done with such words other than to translate or better transliterate them. Lindbeck<sup>3</sup> likens this to the belief that Christian

theology, orthodox theology, consists of a set of propositional truths. The orthodox statement corresponds to the structure of the known, there is a foundation in reality for each statement which is either true or false. Either there are three persons in the Trinity or there are more or less than three. There can be only one 'true' number.

Nobody would require that theology confine itself to mere repetition of the texts. The orthodox model would consider that the task of the theologian is to look for analogies in nature/culture and to use these analogies for a systematic understanding of the inter-connection of the truths of faith. In David Hare's play *Racing demon*, the Bishop of Southwark attacks what he sees as Modernism. 'You dismantle the beliefs. You endlessly reinterpret and undermine. You witter on until you become all things to all men. You drain religion of religion.' For him, the sheep are not fed any longer.

Underlying this whole approach is a quasi-scientific approach, not unlike the idea that 'NaCl' has a univocal meaning for all time and among all people. Exegesis consists in trying to find the mind of the original author. The text, or in our case, the gospel, is to be allowed to speak for itself. If we can unearth the intentions of the gospel-author and the interests of those to whom it was originally addressed together with their socio-cultural situation, then we will arrive at the original meaning. Charles Kraft has developed a rather more subtle approach to translation in his 'dynamic equivalence' model. One takes the original text, considers the effect it had on its contemporary audience, considers how one could achieve the same effect on a present-day audience and then finds the words in the present-day language which will have this effect. An Indian congregation could sit in the lotus position to pray where the original community sat or stood or knelt. An African community might dance to drums where the original community chanted psalms. The goal is to 'get inside' the mind of the original author. The gospel then is seen as existing separately from its cultural situation, as having its own existence quite apart from any socio-cultural context. Paul Valadier complained that *Evangelii nuntiandi* was written as though the gospel was ahistorical, as though there is an objective message that can be carried everywhere and proclaimed independently of the context.<sup>4</sup>

One alternative to this naïve approach is to require that the message conform to the rational processes of its audience. If all knowledge is ultimately reducible to rational processes then those processes must be the measure of the message. Radcliffe-Brown assumed that once we had sufficient information, and it was only a matter of time before we had it, then it would be possible to anticipate all human behaviour since it would all be describable by mathematical laws which have univocal meaning for all peoples. If there is nothing that exists that cannot at least in principle be measured, then God becomes totally immanent and the transcendent disappears and 'humanity comes of age'. The liberal and modernist theologian is committed to the basic cognitive and ethical claims of the socio-

cultural which he or she shares. The Christian gospel is to be re-written in accordance with the assumptions of contemporary thought. David Tracy quotes Schleiermacher: 'The theses of faith now become the hypotheses of the theologian'.<sup>5</sup> Anything might one day be disproved. Don Cupitt would be an obvious English example of this approach and some of the francophone African writers seem to be so committed to African practice that they feel justified in ignoring traditional Christian practice and belief. Their justification is usually that this Christian practice and belief was European. Sadly, there also seems to be an anger in some of their writing. The East African writers are nothing like as successful since for the most part they write with a European mind-set. Mbiti looks for African concepts of God, taking as his criteria the traditional Greek concepts, omnipotence, eternity, omniscience, impassibility and so on.

At another level this approach accepts the cultural practices of the society. 'God bless the squire and his relations and let us keep our proper stations.' The Vatican diplomatic service gives the impression that it would sign concordats with the devil provided the Church was left free to worship. Priests, religious and laity are urged not to upset the social structures but to be law-abiding and to keep order. Chaplains bless armies going into battle and politicians refuse to pray for fallen enemies. In the sixteenth century Matteo Ricci adopted the clothing and manners of a Chinese mandarin, the class of people learned in Confucian philosophy. A generation later de Nobili adopted the life-style of a Brahmin, the highest Indian caste. Both of them wished to direct their evangelizing to the ruling classes of the society they found themselves in. Some writers would hold that the Church in England has become too accepting of the competitive self-seeking society with its materialistic values.

Liturgically, it is urged that sacramental rites must reflect the culture—no bread or wine in lands where these are considered to be unknown, but the Eucharist to be celebrated with rice cakes and palm beer or whatever is the local equivalent. It is interesting however that nobody has yet attempted any truly radical re-writing of the eucharistic prayer.

The more fruitful approaches to inculturation have been attuned to our present understanding of the relationship between a text and its reader. For that is where the problem lies. The question is not 'Who is Christ?' Rather the question is 'Who is Christ *for us*?' Lonergan has written of the principle of the empty head. Nobody comes to a text<sup>6</sup> or to the gospel without their own experience, intelligence and judgement, without their own pre-conceptions. Everybody brings their own cultural framework to the work of understanding. It is impossible to come to the gospel with a blank mind. To interpret means to use my own preconceptions. To explain an action is to relate it to the underlying norms that make it possible. If my norms differ from the norms of the agent I might be led to say 'That isn't cricket' and so fail to understand the action. If I am a natural scientist I will consider my surroundings to be merely objects and

things and my 'explanations' will be solely in terms of causes and effects, but if I am fully human then these objects and things will be objects and things with meaning. And meaning is not just something that we recover but something that we produce or create. Interpretation must transform the world, not merely recover the past. In the case of the hearer of the gospel, of course, it is the hearer's world that is transformed. But for this to be possible the language cannot be totally alien. The gospel must be articulated by the Christian community under the conditions of present structures. God speaks in the secular about the secular.

An alternative is to reduce the gospel totally to the private sphere, to see the gospel as addressed to individuals for the saving of their souls. It is to see the kingdom as being of another world entirely with no relevance for this world, or even to see revelation as something internal only and without words, the supernatural as destroying corrupt nature.

Even to attempt to envisage a wordless revelation makes it clear that every individual is a social being. I am an individual in my social sphere. The gospel cannot be addressed to me in isolation from my being. It is the nature of the meeting between gospel and individual that we are concerned with. The Christian witness is not primarily to doctrinal statements, nor to ecclesiastical structures or ethical systems, rather it is to the divine action in our world now. This is not denying that there is a content. The gospel has continually to be rediscovered in our world and for our world. The good news must be addressed to our needs and hence many of the writers will say 'the world sets the agenda'. But as Dean Inge reminded us, 'the church that is married to the spirit of the age will be a widow in the next'. And so we come to the problem—what are the criteria by which we recognize that this is truly gospel, that this is truly God's action, that what has come about is truly appropriate to the Christian tradition? The demand for inculturation is a demand that the presentation of the gospel be disclosive for the hearer, that is, there must be symbols that can be related to the immediate lived experience of the hearer. But if the hearer's preconceptions are fundamentally non- or even anti-Christian what is then to be done? If I believe that nature is totally corrupt and fundamentally flawed I will simply ignore nature, expect there to be no possible inculturation. If I hold that God always speaks in and through nature and that grace builds on and does not destroy nature then I will seek inculturation. But I will still be aware of the sinful in nature and need to be wary of making the gospel conform entirely to the natural. Where do I find the criteria to distinguish?

Speaking at Sedos earlier this year, the Indian Jesuit Michael Amaladoss contrasted inculturation and mission. For Amaladoss the gospel is on mission precisely when it is counter-cultural, confrontational or prophetic. 'When the gospel raises its voice against what is sinful and limited in a culture then it is doing mission.' Such mission may suffer from over-inculturation. MTAG offers 'signs of authenticity' by way of criteria, by

way of ensuring that the inculturation has not ceased to be faithful to the Christian tradition. They are taken from the scriptures.

1. The recognition that the entire created order is a gift of God
2. The affirmation of the supreme values of justice and lovingkindness
3. The acceptance that all human beings must be accorded equal dignity and worth
4. The awareness of the existence of evil and suffering in the world
5. The experience of forgiveness and reconciliation
6. The fostering of hope in a transformed order of human life
7. The entering on a new way of being human
8. The enjoyment of responsible freedom
9. The creation of life in community
10. The celebration of the good news

These might perhaps look somewhat vague. But nobody can lay down precise criteria for every single local situation. Vatican II appealed to collegiality, to the notion that the local community must deal with its local problems. Through the history of the Church there has always been this tradition of pluriformity. There have been different liturgical rites, different sets of canon law, and even different approaches to the questions of systematic theology. When Aquinas shifted from a Platonic to an Aristotelian basis for his theology there was an outcry. When contemporary theologians look for a basis in Heidegger there is an outcry. We must go further and follow the tradition established by Ricci and officially approved, of using other philosophical bases. Ricci used Confucius. There is a wide range of Eastern philosophies available. Greek philosophy has no divine rights. The difficulty will be when we are called to assess their appropriateness, their fidelity to the Christian tradition. Already the Latin Americans complain that their praxis must not be assessed by European criteria. When Bishop John Robinson was asked by what authority he wrote as he did he answered: 'By the authority of the Christian community over the next hundred years or so'. In the end it is the Christian community that will have to safeguard its own tradition.

Some writers are asking: do we have to confine ourselves to the Tanach, the Jewish scriptures, as a basis for our Christian theology? Can we not build on, for instance, the Hindu scriptures and see how they are fulfilled in the good news? What of a Buddhist Christianity? When it is pointed out that most Buddhists would have difficulties with the notion of a personal God, the reply is that this concept of person is merely derived from one particular philosophical school and could be replaced.

Underlying this is the realization that we necessarily bring our preconceptions to our task of understanding. We bring our cultural prejudices. Necessarily, the hearer is part of the meaning. The locus of faith is our way of being in the world. Christ, a Galilean Jew speaking Aramaic in Palestine under the Roman occupation (all factors in some way constraining his witness), confronted Peter, and a new meaning was brought about in Peter's

life. In some way Christ confronted Paul too, a man with a different background and a different set of prejudices, and a new meaning was brought about in Paul's life. The hope is that the gospel which comes to us in and through the witness of another, perhaps even of a different culture, will somehow expand our own horizons and bring about new meaning for us too. If we believe, as the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians make clear, that Christ is somehow already present in all cultures, though hidden, then we hope that this dialogue between the gospel and the culture will bring the culture to its fulfilment, to the goal that God has in mind for it, so that 'knowing the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge, (it) may be filled with the utter fullness of God' (Eph 3,19).

Culture is a systematic meaningful ordering of persons and things. It is a meaningful patterning underlying and linking together all the different events, people, aspects, fields and levels of life in a society. It does not exist in the abstract. It will not be detectable except by inference from the way it handles material. Nor is it static. Newly absorbed material will alter future patternings. And religion is a cultural framework that shapes the whole of life and thought. Clifford Geertz says that a religion is a system of significant symbols. Given something new, such as the Christian proclamation, the hearer, the culture-bearer, will have to bring about new meaning from the two sources, the proclamation and the way of being in the world, or cultural process. But precisely because these two sources do not exist in the abstract, but are to be found only as witnessed to by culture-bearers, the problem of inculturation arises.

Whilst the theoretical approach to the problem can appear extremely abstract and difficult, practical approaches can be more accessible. MTAG identified certain cultural areas that raise problems—styles of leadership might be different for different cultural groups and the Church's usual style might be alien and unacceptable. Styles of worship are obviously different across the world. Ways of learning and training will have to vary—our classical pattern of priestly training, excessively rational and confined mainly to reading and lecturing, may well have become unsuited to many groups in this country, never mind other countries. Urban ministry will differ from rural, and ethnic minority groups will have different requirements. There is a need to identify the symbols of the group. Thus writers nowadays will call for anthropological analysis of a society. In Latin America there is already a strong tradition of social analysis in order to identify oppressive structures. The form of this analysis has been a bone of contention, but the theory underlying the analysis is that the gospel challenges unjust structures which therefore must be identified.

In the liturgical field the most development has been in Asia and Africa. Cardinal Tabera, the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship, said in 1971,

Liturgy is constantly on the move. It has no end in itself. When God and man meet in dialogue, liturgical forms express, guide and

accompany our turning to God. This liturgy constantly develops. . . . The instruction appeals to bishops to study thoroughly the religious and social conditions of their people and to investigate how best to help them in their situation.

Pope Paul VI in Kampala in 1969 asked: must the Church in Africa be European, or Latin or Oriental . . . or African? Since there are fully orthodox Latin and Oriental rites, why cannot there be an African rite? 'You can and you must have an African Christianity.' He went on to lay down two conditions—fidelity to the Christian patrimony and, in expression, manifesting the language and style of the culture. He commended pluralism of worship. The Zaire bishops set about creating a liturgy which would 'incarnate the message of revelation in the Zaire socio-cultural context and present the mystery celebrated by the Christian community in a comprehensive manner'. They sought the advice of anthropologists and liturgical experts and paid particular attention to the Ethiopian rite and other known African rites. The resultant rite, approved by Rome in 1988, tries to take into account some of the insights offered from these researches. Traditional African rituals begin with 'rites of contact' expressing a sense of the transcendent, bringing the visible into the presence of the invisible. The Zaire Mass begins then with the invocation of saints and ancestors. Traditional rituals move on to the union between the visible and invisible worlds and the Zaire Mass moves to the celebration of the Word of God. It is the Word of God which reveals to us our sinfulness and the traditional African ritual puts purification rites here. The Zaire Mass has the rite of penance, the aspersion of the congregation and the sign of peace after the celebration of the Word. The offering of gifts is extensive and patterned on the offering of gifts to a chief and involves the congregation in the prayers of offering. And the eucharistic prayer (which follows Prayer II) has many responses for the congregation who become much more actively involved themselves. Traditional rituals involve short texts with many responses. Music and chants are taken from traditional styles and using traditional instruments. The Good Friday singing of the Passion has been set to music by Cardinal Malula himself.

On the whole though, whilst there is a significant liturgical development which has come after careful research, the mould of the Roman rite has not been broken. Some would want to be far more radical. The next development must be the eucharistic prayer itself. Our life must be truly integral in our faith and our worship.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Schreiter, Robert: *Constructing local theologies*, New York, Orbis, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Tracy, David: *Blessed rage for order* (New York, Seabury, 1975), p 24.

<sup>3</sup> Valadier, Paul: 'L'évangélisation dans le monde moderne', in *Études* 344 (1976/4), pp 605-610.

<sup>4</sup> Tracy, David: *op. cit.*, p 27.

<sup>5</sup> Here 'text' is a shorthand for what Tracy calls the 'Christian fact'. The non-believer is confronted by symbols, rituals, events, witnesses, life-style and so on. What the philosophers have written about texts Tracy holds to be applicable to this whole situation.

<sup>7</sup> Amaladoss, A.: 'Mission: from Vatican II into the coming decade', in *International review of mission* (April 1990), p 213.

<sup>8</sup> Geertz, Clifford: *The interpretation of cultures* (London, Hutchinson, 1975), p 90.