

INCULTURATION AND IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY

By MICHAEL AMALADOSS

THOUGH INCULTURATION IS A very popular term in mission circles today, people use it in various senses. A few months ago it was reported that, at a meeting of the Bishops' chairmen of the Theological Commission of Asian Bishops' Conferences in Hong Kong, Cardinal Ratzinger suggested that we should no longer talk about inculturation. It implies that the gospel is somewhere 'in itself' so that it can be incarnated in various cultures. He thought that we should rather talk about inter-culturation, since what happens is an encounter between two cultures, one already embodying the gospel and the other receiving it. In discouraging the use of the term inculturation, I think that the Cardinal is understanding phenomenologically what is really a theological term. Such possible confusion is one of the reasons why I do not like the term.

What is inculturation?

In the history of terms in the theology of mission to describe the process of building up a local church, the term inculturation is certainly an advance over other similar terms like transplantation, adaptation and translation. It refers to the Word of God incarnating itself in every culture, just as it became incarnate in the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. Fr Pedro Arrupe's description is classic:

Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a 'new creation'.

We see that this description evokes, beyond the paradigm of the incarnation, those of the paschal mystery (transforming) and of the Pentecost (remaking). There are three interrelated activities here: building up the local church as a particular cultural manifestation of the Word, challenging the culture to be converted in the light of the gospel

read more at www.theway.org.uk

and the ongoing effort to promote an alternative culture. While the gospel is organically related to the culture in the local church in the first activity, in the second and the third its impact may reach out beyond the boundaries of the local church. Through a person like Gandhi, for example, the gospel may have influenced Indian culture much beyond the boundaries of the Church in India.

From above and from below

I said above that inculturation is a theological paradigm and not a phenomenological description of what actually happens in the field. But if it is understood phenomenologically, then its point of view is from above: the 'pre-existent' gospel that takes form in a new culture. The focus is on the missionary who brings the gospel into a new cultural situation and has to 'inculturate' it for the benefit of the 'natives'. Looking at the process from below one can discern different moments in it. A community listens to the gospel. It is challenged to conversion. It responds to the challenge by transformation and by expressing that change in life and celebration.

One can see here three ways in which culture is involved in the process of mission. The community interprets the gospel that is proclaimed to it in its concrete cultural context. The conversion itself involves not only a personal (freedom and attitudes), but also a cultural (world-views and value systems) transformation. It expresses this conversion not only in life, but also in symbolic celebration.

Looked at in this manner, the agent of inculturation is primarily the community that is receiving the gospel, not the missionary who is proclaiming it, whatever his or her efforts at 'inculturating' the Word to make it relevant to the situation. One can also see that the encounter between gospel and culture is an ongoing, never-ending process in every culture – not only in the 'missions'. I think that the term inculturation does not usually convey the complexity of these processes. Because of its origin it tends to be used from the point of view of the 'foreign missionary'. This is a valid, but very inadequate point of view. I prefer to look at it as the encounter between gospel and culture. While one tends to theologize about inculturation, one can analyse, explore and experiment with gospel-culture encounter at a phenomenological level.

A dialogical process

Another reason why I do not find the term inculturation adequate today is that it refers to an ideal community in which the gospel is the 'soul' of its culture. Such communities do not exist any more, if they ever

existed. Because of the process of modernization and secularization, there is a differentiation between religion and culture as elements of society. Cultures are secularized. Religion still has a role in the life of the people as an element of inspiration and motivation in the horizon of ultimate perspectives. But cultures have an autonomy in their own sphere, as recognized by the Second Vatican Council (*The Church in the modern world*, 59). Pope Paul VI lamented that today this autonomy tends to become absolute (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 20).

Secondly, every culture today is increasingly animated by a plurality of religions and ideologies, in spite of the valiant efforts of the fundamentalists to turn the tide. The gospel, therefore, can never become organically interior to a culture as in an idealized Christian society.

Cardinal Ratzinger was right in pointing out that the gospel does not exist in itself, but is always expressed in a culture, starting with the biblical one. When it is proclaimed in another culture, it becomes an *intercultural* encounter. It is never a mere translation of the gospel from one cultural system of symbols to another. There is also a cultural interaction, which may further be influenced by various forms of cultural domination.

As every culture is animated by one or more religions and ideologies, the gospel cannot really encounter another culture without encountering these religions and ideologies. Thus the gospel-culture encounter becomes also an *interreligious* process.

We should remember however that all this takes place in an ongoing manner in the life of a community to which the gospel is proclaimed and which is responding to it in the context of its culture. In broad terms one could describe this as the evangelization of culture, in the context and at the service of which a local community – church – lives and expresses its own faith or response to the Good News.

Ignatian spirituality and gospel-culture encounter

What can be the role of Ignatian spirituality in this process? I think that this can be broken down into four further questions. Does Ignatian spirituality *encourage* the process of gospel-culture encounter in a creative way? Can Ignatian spirituality become a way for people of *different* cultures? How can Ignatian spirituality, in so far as it is a particular way of living the gospel, challenge and *transform* the cultures of the people that make use of it? In what specific manner does Ignatian spirituality challenge *contemporary* (modern) culture? I shall reflect briefly on each of these four questions in the remaining pages.

One of the obstacles to ongoing gospel-culture encounter is a fundamentalistic attitude to God's self-revelation in the Bible. Ignatian

spirituality counters such an attitude in many ways. Ignatius invites us to look at the world and at our lives here and now. We have to seek and find God's will for us at present and in the future. God's saving interventions in the Bible are not seen as once for all events, but as paradigms or symbols for God's continuing activity in the world today. While we contemplate God's self-manifestation in the past, the question always is what does God want me to do here and now? Even the contemplations on the mysteries of Christ are in some way de-historicized. The effect of seeing oneself as a participant in the events in the life of Christ is not to take one to the past, but rather to make the past events relevant to the present situation in view of discernment and decision. Thus the historical events of the life of Jesus become mysteries meaningful to us today. This implies, not a literal reading of the Bible as a book of history, but an interpretation that makes it relevant to life today and every day.

The radicalism of Christ's prophetic call to conversion is preserved in all its purity and vigour. But the Christ who is calling is a living Christ, not merely a historical figure. He calls us to follow him today, not literally to imitate him as he was in the past.

By placing Christ's prophetic action in the horizon of the action of the Trinity, Ignatius avoids what has been called 'Christo-monism'. Our attention is not simply on the mysteries of the redemption. Redemption is set in the context of creation and of the ongoing activity of God in the world and in history. The mysteries of Christ are placed in between the Principle and Foundation and the Contemplation for Obtaining Love. God's act of salvation is seen as a cosmic process guided by the Trinity, as in the Contemplation on the Incarnation, within which God's salvific interventions in history acquire their full significance. Such a broad perspective makes it possible to have a positive attitude to other religions and cultures. God's action is not limited to what God does in Jesus. Ignatius strongly defends the freedom of God, precisely as creator, to act in the interiority of each human person. There is no reason to limit such an action of God to individuals and not extend it to human groups and to their histories. The complexity of God's actions in history may escape our attempts to arrange them in a single framework. But our purpose in contemplating God's action is the very practical question of what God wants us to do here and now.

Ignatius has a keen sense of sin as the deliberate choice of human liberty. But he does not demonize nature (creation) or culture. He has a positive view of them. The 'indifference' he speaks about is a human disposition with regard to the use of creation, not a quality of creation itself. Creation manifests the goodness, love and glory of God. It is the

field in which human and divine purposes find their fulfilment. The Contemplation for Obtaining Love shows how creation can become the mediation of love in promoting divine-human and interhuman fellowship.

Culture can be the creativity of the humans in the pursuit of doing God's will in the world and in the human community. It can be the field of sin too. But the responsibility remains that of the humans and not of creation or of culture in themselves.

People who are following the spirituality of Ignatius will therefore be open to the ongoing encounter between gospel and culture and will also be equipped to make it a fruitful one in their own life and in the world.

Ignatian spirituality and cultural pluralism

How far is Ignatian spirituality conditioned by the historical and cultural circumstances in which it had its origin? Does it adapt itself easily to other cultural situations? I think that it depends very much on the approach one adopts.

Faced with the pluralism of cultures, one approach that people adopt is that of translation. Translation can be literal or it can be creative. But the attitude is that we have a fund of meaning that has now to be expressed and communicated in another language or culture. Another approach is that of comparative study. One studies, for example, the meaning of detachment or discernment in Ignatian and Indian traditions. This is an academic approach, foreign to the purpose of spirituality.

Ignatian spirituality, particularly the Spiritual Exercises, offers a framework and a method. It does not offer primarily a theological content. Its sources are not the history or the culture of a period, but the God-experience of a person, even if this experience finds expression in cultural categories familiar to him. It does not aim at recreating that experience, but offers us a method that can help us to interpret, understand and discern our own experience of God. Its role is paradigmatic, facilitating similar experiences. God is the prime actor in the Exercises.

When Indians are making the Exercises, what makes the whole process Indian is that their God-experience is characterized by their historical and cultural situation. Ignatian spirituality offers them tools to understand and discern this experience and to come to a decision. Culture is not a direct factor in this process, but religion can be. Our experience of God is often conditioned by our images and the traditions in which they are inherited. The European Christian tradition which

Ignatius had inherited was accustomed to see God-experience as an interpersonal relationship. The Indians have their tradition of *bhakti* (love or devotion). But they also have apophatic and *advaitic* (non-dual) traditions. These are not absent among the mystical traditions of Europe too. The Indians feel the need to integrate in themselves their Indian and Christian roots. Indian followers of Ignatius will have to integrate also the Ignatian mysticism of service. But this is an inter-religious process that transcends culture just as the gospel transcends culture.

Cultural differences, however, can have an impact at other levels. Ignatius proposes different methods of prayer in the Exercises. But they do not represent a closed system. Ignatius is open to other similar exercises. The only requirement is that they must facilitate God-experience and produce the fruit that one is looking for. People in India may find other methods developed by the Indian tradition useful, including certain techniques of the Yoga, for example. The criterion for choice is whether they are adequate for the purpose. The originality of Ignatius does not consist in the methods of prayer he proposes, but in the framework and process he has given us for discernment.

While the Ignatian method of discernment may transcend cultural differences, it does not exclude other spiritualities. For example, Zen Buddhism proposes a particular goal and a special method adapted to it. I am open to the possibility of a Christian Zen. Some people claim to practise it. But I can hardly imagine Ignatian Zen. One can argue to a difference between religion and culture. One can imagine people belonging to different cultures following the same spirituality. But one can also have different spiritualities, even within the same religion. These can influence and enrich each other in mutual dialogue. But the differences must be respected. I think that the pluralism of religions and cultures is a complex area and needs a lot more exploration and reflection.

Ignatian spirituality and cultural change

One of the fruits of gospel-culture encounter is the transformation of culture. In so far as Ignatian spirituality is one concrete way of living the gospel, what role can it play in transforming culture? There is no doubt that traditionally Ignatian spirituality has focused on personal conversion. The reflections of the theologians of liberation have made us sensitive to the need also of change in social structures. Neither the gospel nor a spirituality can directly change economic and political structures. This is done by appropriate economic and political action.

But choices in the field of economics and politics depend upon the world-view, value system and ways of relationship and behaviour characteristic of a culture. It is the role of religion to challenge culture in the light of its experience of God and to transform it. Through conversion of persons and the transformation of culture it has an impact also on economic, political and social structures.

In view of promoting socio-cultural transformation we will have to start with discovering the social dimensions of Ignatian spirituality. The reign of God that Jesus proclaims is a community of freedom, fellowship and justice. Instead of merely focusing on the call of Jesus to follow him and our response to become disciples, one could elaborate the social dimensions of the reign of God and their implications for our discipleship. Similarly, one could explore the social implications of the use of creation for the honour and glory of God. In the Contemplation to Obtain Love one could deepen the dimension of the love of God which is lived and expressed in the love of the others. To offer oneself to God is to offer oneself to the community, to love and to serve.

Culture is a social reality. While individuals and small groups can play a role of leadership, the community has to be involved in some way in the process of cultural transformation. We should explore possibilities of promoting Spiritual Exercises for groups. The vision of the reign of God and the call of Christ are addressed to the whole Church. The Church itself is the symbol and servant of the reign of God. The practitioners of liberation have developed methods of promoting group awareness and conscientization, conviction and commitment, involvement and praxis. This is often done in terms of an ideology. I do not see why the same thing cannot be done in the context of Christ's vision of the reign and his call to collaborate with him in its service. We speak today of the Exercises in daily life. I can imagine a group being taken through a cycle of experience, reflection, prayer, discernment, action or struggle and evaluation. I do not see any reason why the Contemplations on the Incarnation, Reign of God, the Two Standards and to Obtain Love cannot animate and motivate a group for collective discernment and action, as they do individuals. Today we have developed techniques for promoting discernment in community. Therefore I think that the Spiritual Exercises can be adapted to a group process oriented to cultural transformation through common action. In this process the group itself becomes a model of an alternative community, symbolic of the reign of God. It becomes the animating centre of a people's movement that leads to the change and growth of the whole community.

Ignatian spirituality and contemporary culture

The relevance of Ignatian spirituality to the various cultures of the world has to be explored in the different concrete situations. I can, however, conclude with a few reflections on modern culture which seems to be becoming a universal phenomenon, even if it is interacting in various ways with local cultures.

The development of science and technology and of rapid and mass media of communication has offered to humanity the possibility of satisfying everyone's needs and of promoting leisure and creativity. But we are still in a world marked by poverty and injustice, inequality and unfreedom. The reasons for such a situation are some of the characteristics that dominate contemporary culture. Without going into an elaborate analysis, for which I have no time and space, I shall be satisfied with pointing to three tendencies. The first is the spirit of immanence. Science seeks to explain phenomena in terms of immanent causes. When this attitude becomes an ideology then any transcendence is denied. One has a self-sufficient, secularized world. It is also a mechanical, objectified, inhuman world. Secondly, there is a spirit of aggressiveness and dominance that is shown in relation to the material world as well as to people, particularly the poor and the weak. Technology gives the human a sense of power and control in relation to matter. Imperceptibly it becomes a general attitude. The arms industry and the prevailing violence are only symptoms of a general pursuit of power. Finally, science and technology produce an abundance that encourages consumerism and selfishness. One does not hesitate to exploit anything and anyone for one's own benefit and pleasure.

Nature and women seem particularly vulnerable to this attitude of objectification, domination and exploitation. One would even say that such an attitude is culturally a 'masculine' one and therefore an outcome of a patriarchal social order. Ecological and feminist movements have been pointing to these evils of modern culture.

Anyone who is familiar with Ignatian spirituality can see immediately how it offers a critical antidote to such 'masculine' tendencies of modernity. Though the language of the Principle and Foundation may give the impression of instrumentalizing nature, the Contemplation to Obtain Love shows it as the mediation of the loving presence and action of the divine and capable of mediating our own love for God and the others. The Exercises are an effort to break out of the attitude of immanence through the search for God in things, persons and situations. Transcendence is the horizon in which the dynamic movement of the reign of God becomes meaningful. The spirit of love is one, not of

exploitation, but of sharing and service. Self-gift and humility, not pride and the will to power, dialogue, not domination, are the characteristics of the way of Christ and his followers in the promotion of the reign of God.

Conclusion

Studying Ignatian spirituality more than twenty-five years ago as a young Jesuit, I used to wonder how 'modern' and 'oriental' the Ignatian experience was. Ignatius' own intellectual baggage and that of his early commentators may have led to the interpreting of that experience in familiar Scholastic categories. Encounter with other cultures and peoples is one way in which the original charisma of Ignatius can be rediscovered. It will then be freed from its cultural conditions to continue to facilitate, in ever new ways and situations, the growth of the reign of God among peoples.