

G O S P E L - C U L T U R E E N C O U N T E R

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The Encounter of the Gospel with culture began to take place with the incarnation. The very fact that Jesus, (the Gospel, the Good News) was born in a particular place, spoke the language of that place, followed largely its customs and traditions, lived the life experiences of his people, their religion, their philosophy and made his home there. We are right in stating that Gospel had come in contact with the culture of that place. He “lived” the culture of his place and was fully immersed in it. “There was no ‘in-culturation’ in the sense that he had to enter a foreign world with a readymade ideology and adapt to it.” He shared his God-experience with his people according to their categories of thought, their background and their mentality. He questioned some of their settled ways of life and “overthrew” whatever was life-negating in their culture. He touched the heartbeat of their religious culture, by cleansing the temple and prophesying “against” it.⁽¹⁾T

God assumed human nature; this implies that human nature is capable of being assumed by God. God’s Word comes in human words; this means that human words have the innate capacity to become God’s Word. We may continue to say that the human culture and genuine cultural values have the openness and aspiration to be assumed by Jesus-Culture and his values. “The Word of God transcends the cultures in which it has found expression and has the capacity of being spread in other cultures, in such a way as to be able to reach all human beings in the cultural context in which they live”.⁽²⁾ The corollary is: every culture can transcend its own limitations in order to meet the word of God and find acceptance.

All cultures, being human, have their limitations. As a result local cultures were not encouraged in relationship to the Gospel-culture. So Pope Paul VI felt that there was a conflict between the Gospel and culture. “The split between the Gospel and Culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelisation of culture, or more correctly of cultures” (EN 20). What is meant here is not just the use of cultures to express our faith, but the Gospel should come in contact with the culture of a place and it should promote whatever is life-giving in that culture, and confront and purify whatever is life-negating in the light of the Gospel. The Gospel-Culture-Encounter should become a force that animates, re-shapes and profoundly renews that culture, so as to create new patterns of communion. This encounter can take place in the local community. Therefore the community has to interpret the good News in order to make it relevant to its life and experience in the present and respond to it creatively. Cultural art forms are one attempt in this direction. EN rightly sums up saying that the Gospel has to “impregnate the culture and the whole life of man” (20).

I. GOSPEL ENCOUNTERING CULTURES

The Gospel, the Good News does not come in its pure form. The word takes root in a community in a given culture. When the Word goes from this community to another, it has to be freed from its cultural conditioning to be able to take root in another culture. The missionary Church will have to be ready “to throw off the cultural baggage that it has

accumulated through history, without clinging to it, so as to encounter new cultures more effectively".⁽³⁾ Though cultural forms are essential for the word, they cannot become normative to succeeding generations. "Our God is a living God who is active in God's people today as everyday and who transcends all cultures".⁽⁴⁾ The early Church found its own way to express its faith experience. Today we have to express our faith in the idiom of our time and culture. We learn to do it after we have learned the culture in which the Word is proclaimed, understand it in the given life-situation and apply it to the situation of our community. The early Church formulated its faith in credal statements to counteract the heresies. Our culture and situation is different.

The fact that we have four canonically accepted Gospels is a sign of the efforts made by evangelists to sow the seed according to the culture and life-situation of the community. The first Christian Community having been formed of converts from Judaism retained some of the religious traditions, practices and prayer forms. There was also at the same time a danger to identify Christianity with one particular culture and religious tradition: it was the trend of the Judaisers (cf. Gal). Paul was the champion of freedom and universality. The verdict of the council of Jerusalem was a first triumph for these values and an affirmation of the principle of Incarnation and hence of indigenization (Acts 15). When the Gospel penetrated into the Graeco-Roman societies, the languages of Greek and later on Latin, and socio-cultural signs were integrated into the liturgy. A similar process took place when the Gospel spread to East Syria, Egypt and countries of Northern Europe. The best example of in-depth and all-round inculturation was the transformation which took place in the culture of Western Europe. It made available new possibilities of expression for the Gospel and faith. Due to this inculturation, the Gospel became a living reality; it could fulfil its creative and recreative functions.

Since missionary expansion chiefly started from those countries and since the major missionary enterprises coincided with the period of western expansion through navigation, trade, colonization and conquest, it happened that the cultures of these countries were imposed upon the colonial people. The Church, being a part of society, knowingly or unknowingly transmitted along with the Gospel the cultures of the countries from which missionaries came forth.⁽⁵⁾ However, there were also many apostolic Churches and rites that gave different creative expressions to their faith. Gospel healed the wounds of cultures and made up for their limitations and at times transformed the culture so as to bring about a new creation.

II. VATICAN II

THE THEOLOGY:

Gospel-Culture-Encounter had begun much before II Vatican Council. The Council gave an impetus by recognising the presence of God's Spirit in all cultures that are life-promoting. Every culture, in its own way is a bearer of the universal values established by God and is open to his word. "Without doubt the Holy Spirit was at work in the world before Christ was glorified" (AG 4). "They (Christians) should be familiar with their national and religious traditions and uncover with gladness and respect those seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them...they must at the same time endeavour to illuminate these riches with the light of the Gospel, set them free, and bring them once more under the dominion of God the saviour"(11). "The seed which is the word of God grows out of good soil watered by the divine dew, it absorbs moisture, transforms it and makes it part of itself; so that eventually it bears much fruit. So too indeed, just as it happened in the economy of the incarnation, the young churches, which are rooted in

Christ and built on the foundations of the apostles, take over all the riches of the nations which have been given to Christ as an inheritance (cf. Ps 2:8). They borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their people everything which could be used to praise the glory of the Creator, manifest the grace of the Saviour, or contribute to the right ordering of Christian life” (GS 22).

III. INTRODUCING OF THE COMPARATIVE CULTURAL METHOD OF HERMENEUTICS

In our critical methods of interpreting Scripture, we need to be aware of the cultural conditions of the text to bring about a Gospel-culture-encounter. I propose here a comparative cultural method for this purpose. There is a parable of Jesus which inspires and encourages the comparative cultural method of hermeneutics, namely, the “parable of the seeds” (Mt 13:3-9). Though it is usually called the parable of the sower, its thrust and message do not concern about the sower, but rather about the seeds and the different types of the terrains which receive the seeds and respond to them. The seed is the Word of God as Jesus himself tells us. In our reflection the seed refers to the Word in three levels: (a) oral, (b) written and (c) incarnated. Now it may be suggested that the different terrains that encounter and receive the seed are the different cultures. These receptor-cultures are not the same in their capacity to encounter, receive, co-operate, assimilate and be transformed. Even the good soil produced fruits differently, some hundredfold, others sixty and some others only thirty. That means, even the so-called superior cultures may not encounter, and receive the Word of God, and cooperate with it in the same degree. As the Israelite culture itself was in need of Jesus – culture to be fulfilled and perfected (Cf. Mt 5:17 and the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount), so too all cultures and cultural values of the world are in need of Jesus – Culture and Jesus – Values in order to become “Divine Culture”, and “Divine Values”.⁽⁶⁾ Hermeneutics, therefore, should not only apply the revealed teaching to concrete situations, but also perceive the Word of God operative within the nature and the history of humanity. In other words, Christian hermeneutics should discover, recognize, appreciate, compare and coordinate the Word of God hidden in indigenous cultures and thereby pave the way for “mutual enrichment”⁽⁷⁾

IV. GOSPEL-CULTURE ENCOUNTER IN INDIA

When the new worlds of America, Asia and Africa were discovered or when communication with these countries was made easier and frequent, the original principle of Incarnation and the traditional process of indigenisation were not followed. Instead of taking the Gospel and announcing it to the new people in such a way as to facilitate sprouting and growth of a new Church, and spontaneous creative cultural expressions in those societies, they spread rather the already-developed western cultural expressions of the Gospel as they were used to do in their home countries. This approach and practice prevented a normal inculturation process in the new areas.

The new christians accepted the faith along with the western cultural expressions. Later they identified them as “The Christian Culture”. The Church in India and other countries appears by and large as foreign institutions, extensions or branches of western cultural area.

India is a country where various faiths live in harmony inspite of apparent contradictions among them and within them. It is recognised that Scriptures of Indian religions are also inspired but analogously. This has prompted the people to have an encounter not only

of Gospel and culture, but also Gospel and Scriptures of other religions. 'Incarnation' prompts one to disempower oneself in order to empower the powerless and it is a Gospel value. But in our Indian culture as lived today a lot of empowering the **POWERFUL** is going on. At the same time there is more emphasis on 'being' in our Indian culture, but as the Gospel lived by Christians in India, there is more emphasis on 'doing'. The Gospel and culture need to interact with each other. The Gospel continues to permeate the Indian culture, at the same time the Indian culture tries to help the Gospel to shed its baggage of western culture like patriarchy, sense of superiority, etc. The real encounter between Gospel and Culture takes place not in the missionary, but in the people who hear and respond to the Good News in the context of the culture of the community. People need to be given that freedom to respond in their own way. Local Churches have to make every effort to convert the foreign form of biblical interpretation into another form according to their own culture.

⁽¹⁾ LEGRAND, L., *Inculturation in the Bible in Rooting Faith in Asia*, Dias, S.M. (ed.), Claretian Publications, Bangalore, 2005, 215.

⁽²⁾ *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, NBCLC, Bangalore, 1995, 117.

⁽³⁾ AMALADOSS, M., *Beyond Inculturation*, Vidyajyoti Society, Delhi, 1998, 34.

⁽⁴⁾ *ibid.*, 28.

⁽⁵⁾ AMALORPAVADASS, D.S., *Gospel & Culture*, NBCLC, Bangalore, 1978, 40-41.

⁽⁶⁾ MARIASELVAM, A., *Comparative Cultural Method of Hermeneutics*, CBAI Papers, NBCLC, Bangalore, 2006, 1,3

⁽⁷⁾ *The Interpretation of the Bible*, 119.