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The Aboriginal Process of Inculturation

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A critical aspect involved in aiding the development of an Aboriginal Theology is the process of inculturation. The importance I give to this process is not just limited to superficial cultural dressings, but rather a deeper process that has been described as incarnational. Father Pedro Arrupe first described this in 1981; he states:

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'. (Arrupe, 1981: 173)

While the phenomenon of secularisation has brought about certain differentiation between social institutions like religion and culture, this has made us realise that inculturation is a continuing process and is never finished even among the so-called Christian community, but is rather an on-going dialogue between Gospel and culture. Even though the Gospel has to be deeply involved in the culture and provide its basic meanings, insofar as culture has its own autonomy and develops in different ways, so too does the Gospel also have to keep its own freedom to stand apart and challenge culture. The relationship between Gospel and culture, therefore, becomes dialectical, although this dialectic remains incarnational in so far as it is the interior to any given culture. The interaction between human culture and Christianity is a natural process. Transformation of religious symbols and societal structures are either strengthened or weakened; there is not only a reinterpretation of symbols, there also may be the creation of new ones. This is made visible even in the Old Testament, where the word of God is spoken to a people who have a culture, worldview, rituals and social structures of their own. This culture embodies already a first, founding, and revelation of the Word in creation both of the cosmos and of humanity as cited in John 1:1. This manifestation of the Word remains the context in which further manifestations of the Word acquire their significance as prophecy, referring back to the gift of God in all creation and pointing forward to the new creation to which God is calling us. So in this process of receiving the Word and responding to it in their lives, the peoples recreate, by transforming their culture. The Word of God does not come in an abstract form or message, but as events in a history that involve also socio-political, besides strictly cultural, dimensions. Thus Aboriginal People see the Old Testament as the outcome of such a process of inculturation.

Even in the early Church inculturation was a critical process in the struggle of those who sought to bind the Christian faith to Judaic culture, while Paul defended its liberation from such a narrow cultural identification. Unfortunately, the developments around the Reformation had made the Church defensive and suspicious of all pluralism. This led to the conscious efforts of the Church to promote uniformity. This ideological attitude was further nurtured through missionary expansion and added to by the colonial expansion. The ideology underlying both was a cultural attitude of superiority and domination, especially towards the Aboriginal Peoples they encountered. As a result of this history of colonisation and missionary entrapment, we must realise that in contemporary times if we speak about inculturation, we can no longer speak of it as a natural process. Because the natural process has been forcibly stopped for some centuries, thus requiring Aboriginal Peoples to deconstruct and undo the imposed artificial structures that are in place and to create an appropriate climate before the natural process can start to emerge. There is in this an element of correction that causes considerable difficulty, however, this can be avoided only if we understand and accept inculturation as a necessary process, not only for the life of the Christian community, but also for the Churches' ongoing mission. An Aboriginal Christian community may have been happy in the past to live with a hybrid culture, but today, the challenge is to become fully Aboriginal through the inculturation of Christ into our midst.

What Aboriginal People have witnessed over the past centuries has been largely the transplanting of the Western Church into Aboriginal cultural climates, with its liturgy, theology, spirituality, Western bureaucracy, arts and even language. The Second Vatican Council coincided with the re-emergence of the Aboriginal Peoples' assertion of their cultures in a post-colonial world, forcing the Church to be aware of its catholicity. The Church needs to realise that there is no one, universal Church, but rather a communion of local Churches and that Church growth happens as a result of the freedom that is given to the process of inculturation. But what we inculturate is not the Church, as there is no one universal Church which becomes inculturated into many local Churches. On the contrary, the universal Church is the communion of the local Churches. What is experienced by Aboriginal Christians over the world, however, is the tension between uniformity and communion as the means of expressing unity shows clearly that for many the Church needs to become a local Church everywhere through inculturation and to not force others to mirror their culture. Incarnation supposes a kenosis. So long as the Western Church is not ready to risk its current forms of self-expression in new cultural areas, no inculturation will be made possible. This is also a reason why the Church may become irrelevant in a rapidly changing culture. It is important to remember that the Church is not what is inculturated, but the Western Church can block the process of inculturation by imposing itself and its structures onto others. The need for the constant reinterpretation of the Gospel may keep alive the ongoing dialogue between Gospel and culture. One may think of this as an abstract process, however, one might forget that the Gospel comes to us, not in a pure form, not only as expressed in the language and with reference to a situation of a particular time, but

as handed down and understood in a particular historical tradition. Besides, in order to be effective, the Gospel does not so much incarnate itself, but rather, provokes the local community to respond to the challenge of the Gospel in a particular historical and cultural situation. The Gospel needs to be transplanted and interpreted so that it can effectively challenge one's culture, although we need to remember it is not the Gospel that is inculturated, instead it is our faith.

Inculturation is the process through which a particular community, in the context of its reality, culture and life, responds to the Word that is proclaimed. This involves two actions: first the message and second a response. The message proclaimed by Jesus is that the community of God is at hand; the idiosyncrasy associated with the rule of God is characterised through various biblical parables, which makes clear God's claim in the message and teachings of Jesus, and is therefore made visible though symbolically in the miracles accomplished by Jesus. This community of God is committed to, and works towards, establishing a community based on the values of freedom, justice, respect and fellowship. God's message is a prophetic call to us, which requires conversion, and leads to a deeper commitment of building such a community. This proclamation does not come as a bolt of lightning, but rather, it alludes to the covenant made between God, humanity and the whole of creation, in which Jesus came not to destroy, but rather to fulfil the promise made by the Creator, and therefore this promise is renewed at every age, in every situation, and to every people.

The original Word was made flesh in the life of Jesus, in a particular time, place and context, amongst a particular people, life situation and culture, and has been recorded within Biblical Scripture for us to read today. The task of Aboriginal Christians and theologians today is to incarnate the living Word not only into our cultural life and context, but also to enable the living Word to take shape in the blood, sweat and tears of Aboriginal People. This kind of reinterpretation is a necessary process of inculturation, through which the Word of God is made relevant to Aboriginal Peoples and contexts.

Further, we see then that inculturation as a dialogue between the Gospel and a community is a complex process that involves a mediation of culture at least at three levels: proclamation, conversion and celebration. For example, proclamation is interpretative, conversion is transformative and celebration is expressive. Thus inculturation requires triple process to be undertaken for success to be achieved. (Arrupe, 1981: 173)

In the past when speaking about liberation and justice for Aboriginal People in Australia, we have asked for change either in political power and economic structures or we have called for the repentance and change of heart of the oppressor. But, never have we stressed the change of cultures that mediates between the heart and reality. Human mediation in change, therefore, seems essential. The starting point for any radical change is the conscientisation of the people in understanding their oppression and dehumanisation, and faith alone will not become such a challenging and liberating symbolic action, if it is not the celebration of a revolutionary praxis at socio-economic and political levels. Social and cultural change must go hand in hand. A movement of the people for social justice and

change, therefore, seems to be the context for an effective cultural transformation. It is in this experience of poverty and oppression that rises a theology of liberation.

An Aboriginal Process of Inculturation

Theological reflection arises out of the dialectic between faith-experience and lived-reality. Today, we no longer look at faith as an affirmation of a creed, but as a response to God's self-revelation, both God's self-revelation and our response happen in the context of our life in the world. One is called to pursue this goal in an eschatological perspective of the 'already, but not yet'. Faith, as understood by Aboriginal People as their response to God's self-revelation, is a commitment shown in life through action, and therefore, faith for Aboriginal people is a lived experience. Faith, for Aboriginal people is to be proclaimed and celebrated; the proclamation happens primarily in the context of a celebration. Through the enactment of rituals, Aboriginal People became consciously aware of, and affirm, their faith in narrative and ritual: in word and symbolic action and especially through the Rites of Passage, is the community empowered. Aboriginal People, see their faith as questioning their lived experience and their experience questioning their faith; this enables reflection. Such reflection is always context-specific and is conditioned by space and time, because both the experience and the tools of reflection provided by culture are local, even if this localisation is not absolute since it is in the context of Aboriginal tradition and thought itself has a certain transcendence with regard to space and time. The three dimensions of faith keep interacting mutually; life challenges our convictions and the truth of our celebration, and celebration challenges life prophetically in the traditional context and provokes reflection, and reflection gives rise to new options for praxis and new and more effective symbols for celebration.

Spiritual Identity

So for me any endeavour towards the construction of an Aboriginal theology must encompass our cosmology, ontology and epistemology. This begins with creation and the Creator's actions and interactions with creation through our Ancestors, bestowing land to our Ancestors via language groups to be custodians and stewards. This forms the basis of our identity and relationship with God, the Creator. Through the Creator Spirit, our Spirit Ancestors laid the foundation from which today we continue to show our reverence to the Creator. In order to know Jesus Christ, Aboriginal People must begin with our Aboriginal identity. The Creator Spirit gave birth to our humanity and informed our identity. We are the People of the land, one tied body and soul with and to our Earth Mother. Only when we begin to see ourselves as one with the Creator, and through the Creator bound to our Earth Mother as a result of our Ancestors acts in and throughout creation, can we hope to find truth in the form of our identity which encompasses our Cosmogony, Ontology and Epistemology.

Experiential

An Aboriginal theology could not be done without setting the experiential context of the suffering of the Aboriginal Peoples. Experience, therefore, defines the Aboriginal Peoples' suffering and oppression of Western colonization and missionization in Australia, through theft of land, genocidal acts, segregation of Aboriginal People for British settlements, the government and church process of the stolen generations, Western environmental destruction of Aboriginal land and lifeways. Sadly, the most frightful aspect of the Church's complicity in the subjugation of Aboriginal People is the heartfelt sentiment usually expressed that it was done "with the best of intentions". This, however, does not alleviate the enormous pain and hurt inflicted upon the Aboriginal People. In defining the methodological process of the historical experiences and its impact upon the contemporary oppression of Aboriginal People, we must attempt to bring greater clarity to the mission history by critically analysing that history. As apparent from both the actual practice of the missionaries and from their writings, this evidence will demonstrate that they not only preached a new gospel of salvation, but also will highlight the great zeal missionaries had while imposing a new cultural model for existence on the Aboriginal People. The forced imposition of the Christian missionaries and, in fact, those denominations that worked among Aboriginal People, were partners with the Government in the genocide. Unwittingly no doubt, and always "with the best of intentions", but nevertheless, the missionaries were guilty of complicity in the destruction of Aboriginal cultures and tribal social structures—complicit in the devastating impoverishment and death of the people to whom they preached.

Other genocidal acts led to the crushing of Aboriginal identity and Spiritual beliefs. The history of colonisation is seen as the domination of the Western World; whether this be good or bad, it has impacted upon the Aboriginal People of the world, through the vehicle of missionization. One of the exceptional Native American Indian scholars, the Rev. Dr George Tinker expounds upon the destructive nature of colonisation and that which has fused into the Western minds is,

the 'Western World' mythology that has come to dominate the entire globe's economics, politics, and academics, imposing itself as the natural, unquestionable norm of human existence. This illusion of Western world superiority has functioned implicitly, and at times brutally explicitly, to facilitate the conquest and enslavement of native peoples, the exploitation of their labor and the natural resources, and genocidal destruction of whole cultures and peoples. The religious institutions of the 'West' have been consistently lent legitimacy to those acts. At some level the church has ultimately functioned to provide theological justification for acts of conquest, even when it has protested to the contrary or interceded at the surface level on behalf of the conquered. (Tinker, 1993: vi-vii)

This invariably resulted in the missionary's culture, values, and social and political structures, not to say political hegemony and control, being imposed on

tribal peoples, all in the name of the gospel. Tink goes on to clarify more clearly his criticism of the West, by stating, "That is to say, the kerygmatic content of the missionary's Christian faith became entwined with the accoutrements of the missionary's cultural experience and behaviour." (Tinker, 1993: vi-vii) Nevertheless this becomes a contribution to our understanding of why Aboriginal People have generally failed to enter the Australian mainstream and continue to live in poverty and oppression, marginalised on the periphery of society, resulting in the fact that Aboriginal people have not found liberation in the gospel of Jesus Christ, but rather, continued bondage to Western culture that is both alien and alienating, and even genocidal against Aboriginal People. It is in this context that we begin to deconstruct the cultural oppression and historical lies of colonization and the hypocrisy of Christianity of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and endeavour to reconstruct a history and theology based on truth.

Christ Our Ancestor

Aboriginal Spirituality and identity are given by the Creator God and are the foundation of our Aboriginal faith. So, if we believe in Jesus Christ as incarnated of God, then our Christology is a natural process in the development of our Aboriginal theology. Orthodox Christian theology holds that God is incarnated in Christ Jesus, making the Word flesh and a living example for us to follow. Is it not possible, then, also to say that Christ is our Ancestor, since, as stated above, the Creator God interacted in creation through our Spirit Ancestors in a living form? Christ is the divine link between the old lifeways of the Aboriginal People and the Creator God, and the nexus to the new lifeways. Just as we say that Christ is the New Covenant of the Bible—and the Old Covenant of Moses has been transcended through Christ—we can also say that, through our Ancestor Christ, we, the Aboriginal People, are embarking upon our New Covenant, as Christ enables us to transcend our own cultural limitations, through the ability to critique our own culture and position in society.

The Aboriginal process therefore, begins with the nature of God in our creation, spirituality, land and identity. It is in this aspect that we can truly grapple with being made in the image of God, and the implication that has for our humanity, laws, faith and identity in our relationship with the Creator God. It is only when Aboriginal People begin to draw upon the old Ancestral lifeways and the interaction of the Creator God in the old ways, that we can sustain and maintain our Spirituality and the reflected divinity of God, encompassed in our Identity. This is where Aboriginal People find their strength and the affirmation of their identity and self-worth, through the acts of the Creator God. From here we can struggle against the negative aspects of colonization and missionization and counteract the destructive impact and legacies of this history. The Western missionaries and colonists said we were a godless and soulless—and therefore doomed—people, thus denying the very foundation of our humanity's being created in the image of God. But, if we hold true Genesis 1:26-27, that humanity is created in the image of God and that humanity is created good, then this is not

only the basis of our self-worth through the Creator God, but also the redeeming factor toward our salvation.

Western Dichotomy/Aboriginal Wholeness

Western theologians have for centuries wrestled with their own perception regarding the dichotomy of the body and spirit, yet within the Aboriginal Weltanschauung there is no dichotomy; instead, the oneness is reinforced within our religious and spiritual life, because from my Aboriginal exegetical and hermeneutical application of the biblical text, I am able to interpret the text and draw upon my own Aboriginal epistemology in re-reading the Scriptures, that enables the creation of (w)holism to emerge.

In Genesis we find the narrative relating to the Creator God's actions in creation, and creating humanity from the earth and breathing life into male and female, made in the image of God. Here we find the integrity of humanity, possessing the breath of the Divine Spirit of God, and reflecting the image of God in human flesh. For the West the body is made to be subordinate to the Spirit, but for me I have a different interpretation. The flesh or body is equally important to the spirit, because it is through the flesh that we can experience the Spirit of God. Beyond this aspect, if we look at the meaning of the Logos, and the word becoming flesh, in Jesus Christ can we begin to see the (w)holism found in the union of the Body and Spirit.

It was through Mary that the word became flesh; through the human form of Mary did the Spirit of God create new life. Chosen by God, Mary conceived the Word, during her time of pregnancy, Mary brought about the miracle of incarnation, in the birth of Jesus. God did not choose to create Jesus from the soil of the earth, but instead chose a humble maiden girl named Mary to process and give life to the Word. The incarnation was not possible without Mary; through the Spirit of God did Mary conceive the Divine Spirit and through her flesh was the incarnation of the Logos able to take form. Through the womb of Mary was the incarnation made possible, the Word, cradled in her womb, nurtured and nourished, made of her flesh, took life in human form, in the birth of Jesus. So it is with this in mind that I regard Mary as the Mother of Incarnation.¹

Endnotes

¹. The Rt. Rev. V. Devasahayam also used this concept during his sermon at the United Theological College, Bangalore, India, 28 July 1999.

References

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