

ongoing discussion is one very clear example of the tension between unity and pluralism in this emerging global church, which we will discuss further below.

Other experiences of the mutual influence of churches from different continents and cultures have occurred in various international meetings of theologians, such as the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), which began at Dar-es-Salaam in 1976 and held regular meetings through 1983,¹⁴ the five interecclesial conventions of CEBs, and the Theology of the Americas conference in Detroit in 1975 and its follow-up. The many trips to various local and regional churches of Pope John Paul II have certainly given visible expression to the global church and have provided opportunities for an exchange of views between the pope and the local churches. Some have felt that the pope spoke too much and listened too little; nevertheless, he gained firsthand knowledge of the difficulties and needs of the church around the world.

Since the incipient and hesitant actualization of the global church at Vatican II as Rahner suggested, we have had these and other experiences which give some further evidence that, in fact, a global church is in the making. The above examples are all from the Roman Catholic experience, but Protestant Christians have also been concerned with the interaction of the Gospel and the local cultures, as we will see below. But because the Protestant traditions give much greater emphasis to the local church, they have not been as willing to speak of a global or worldwide church as have Roman Catholics.

As should be clear, a global church entails that local or particular churches be truly embedded in their own cultures, although not isolated in them. To this process of inculturation and the problems it raises, let us now turn.

INCULTURATION

From a theological point of view, some form of **inculturation is implied by the mystery of the incarnation**. Christians understand that God's self-communication takes place in and through matter, in and through human words, symbols, and actions. We saw above that the African bishops at the 1974 synod used the language of a "theology of incarnation" to refer to this process of inculturation.

As a matter of practice, from the time of Paul's speech on the Areopagus to the Athenians (Acts 17:22-34), the church has attempted to

14. For a discussion of the origin and growth of EATWOT, see Rosalind Gibellini, *The Liberation Theology Debate* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988), chap. 4, 61-78.

present the Gospel to persons of diverse cultures in a manner they could understand and accept. Once they decided that converts to Christianity did not have to adopt all the forms of Jewish culture, the church was engaged in inculturation. But it is only recently that the church has appropriated a more sophisticated understanding of culture as developed by the social sciences.

Although there are a variety of approaches to culture,¹⁵ we understand it as defined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz: "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."¹⁶ As the church has gradually appropriated such an understanding of culture, it has become clear that there is more than one culture, that no one culture is normative for the others or superior to them. Such a "classicist" mindset had prevailed among European missionaries through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the time of Vatican II, Pope John XXIII in his opening address made a distinction between "the substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of the faith" and "the way in which it is presented."¹⁷ This recognition of a distinction between the faith and its cultural forms underlies the discussion of culture in *Gaudium et Spes* (53-63) and *Ad Gentes* (19-22), where the diversity of cultures was explicitly recognized and greater emphasis was given to the local churches.¹⁸ Hence, the dialogue between faith and a multiplicity of cultures has become a major concern in recent years.

Although a variety of terms has been used to describe this dialogue between faith and cultures — adaptation, accommodation, incarnation, contextualization, and indigenization — among Roman Catholic theologians, the word "inculturation" has become increasingly more common.¹⁹ Protestants are more inclined to use "contextualization."²⁰ The term "inculturation" needs to be distinguished from "enculturation" (the process by which an individual is inserted into his or her own culture, similar to "socialization") and "acculturation" (the encounter

15. For a discussion of these approaches, see Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 45-49.

16. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

17. Pope John's Opening Speech to the Council, October 11, 1962, in Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 715.

18. For a fuller discussion of the teaching of Vatican II and Popes Paul VI and John Paul II, see Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988), chaps. 14, 15, and 16.

19. Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 3-16, and Robert J. Schreiter, "Faith and Cultures: Challenges to a World Church," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 745-48.

20. See, for example, David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Fommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989).

between two or more cultures).²¹ Aylward Shorter suggests that the term "inculturation" was introduced and popularized largely by the Society of Jesus, and hence he cites the former superior general of the Jesuits for a definition:

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 (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation) but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a "new creation."²²

Such an inculturation is not a once-and-for-all event that takes place the first time Christianity encounters a particular culture, but is an ongoing process. It must continue to occur in the older, more established churches as well as in the younger or newer churches. Second, and following from this ongoing process, inculturation is not the work of the missionary but of the local church, the local Christian community. Further, if it is truly a dialogue, the Christian message will not only animate and transform the local culture, but will itself be penetrated by the local culture. If it is a true dialogue, both partners will be changed.

Avery Dulles has suggested that Christianity itself has some of the characteristics of a culture: "Like a culture, it is a system of meanings, historically transmitted, embodied in symbols, and instilled into new members of the group so that they are inclined to think, judge, and act in characteristic ways."²³ Hence, when Christianity encounters a particular culture initially a process of "acculturation" takes place insofar as it is an encounter of two cultures. In a pluralistic society, Christianity may be considered a "subculture."

Yet Christianity transcends, in one sense, all particular cultures. In the words of *Gaudium et Spes*, "the Church, sent to all peoples of every time and place, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, nor to any particular way of life or any customary pattern of living, ancient or recent. Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with various cultural modes, to her own enrichment and theirs too."²⁴

21. Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 5-7.

22. Ibid., 11, citing Pedro Arrupe, S.J., "Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation," 1978, in J. Aixela, ed., *Other Apostolates Today: Selected Letters and Addresses of Pedro Arrupe, S.J.* (St. Louis, 1981), 172.

23. Avery Dulles, "The Emerging World Church: A Theological Reflection," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 39 (1984): 5-6. For a fuller discussion of this notion, see Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 87-125.

24. *Gaudium et Spes*, 58, in Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, 264.

In another sense, however, Christianity is never independent of culture. It is always expressed in some cultural forms. There is no such thing as a disembodied faith. Historically, the process of inculturation has taken place when the faith, expressed in one cultural form, its Jewish form for example, moves to embed itself in another culture, the Graeco-Roman for example.

According to Ary Roest Crolius, inculturation takes place in three stages. The first stage he calls *translation*, when the church comes into contact with a new culture while still presenting the Christian message in the forms of another culture. At this stage, "Though minor adaptations are made and translations prepared, the Church has a foreign outlook, and so becoming a Christian often implies leaving behind one's own culture."²⁵ In the second stage, *assimilation*, with larger numbers and an indigenous clergy, inculturation proper begins, though it may be somewhat passive. In the third stage, *transformation*, the church will take a more active role in transforming the local culture. He concludes that "the entire process of inculturation is one of *integration*, both in the sense of integration of the Christian faith and life in a given culture and of integration of a new expression of the Christian experience in the life of the universal Church."²⁶ These three stages may occur concomitantly, and the whole is an ongoing and dynamic process.

The process of inculturation is dynamic and continuous precisely because cultures themselves are not static. Cultures are living and dynamic. They are always in the process of change. This is especially true today when rapid communication and transportation enable, indeed force, many cultures to impact on one another. Acculturation, the encounter of two or more cultures, has been dramatically speeded up. Many cultures in Asia, Oceania, and Africa are in the process of modernization (read Westernization) at a time when they are rediscovering their own cultural heritages long suppressed by colonialism. They are in turmoil and very fragile. In this situation, it is doubly difficult for Christianity to engage in a process of inculturation.

EXPERIENCE OF INCULTURATION

As indicated above, Christianity experienced inculturation as soon as it accepted Gentiles as Christians and began the move out of the Judaean culture, which itself was not homogeneous. The Apologists of the second century, such as Clement of Alexandria and Justin Martyr,

25. Ary Roest Crolius, S.J., "Inculturation: Newness and Ongoing Process," in J. M. Waliggo, A. Roest Crolius, S.J., T. Nkeramihigo, S.J., J. Mutiso-Mbinda, *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency* (St. Paul Publications, 1986), 42.

26. Ibid.