



Challenge to Discover Christ *within* Cultures

Jacob Parappally, MSFS

*Professor of Systematic Theology, Tejas Vidya
Peetha, Bangalore [parappally@gmail.com]*

Abstract: We need to discover Jesus Christ in the heart of human cultures. Though distinct from the reality of culture, Christ is not separate from it. Our contention is that Jesus Christ is not exclusively *above*, *against* or *of* the cultures. He is not *a paradox* in relation to cultures or a *transformer of the cultures* in the strict sense. He is *within* the cultures. No one can separate authentic human culture from him. So the relationship of Christ and culture is neither dualistic nor paradoxical. It is non-dualistic in the sense that Christ cannot be separated from culture even though it cannot be identified with him. Everything authentic in culture is Christic. Whatever is negative and dehumanizing, whether systems or structures of injustice, oppression and dehumanization whether it is social, religious, or political, is not authentically cultural. With him culture is already transformed. Therefore, the mission of those who believe in him is to discover the transformation he brought about in the culture by his becoming a part of it and to actualize it so that both humans and their world will become what they are called to become and find their destiny.

Keywords: Jesus Christ, Culture, Plurality, Incarnation, Non-dualistic Relationship, Docetism, Transformation,

Introduction

What has Christ to do with cultures? This was a question raised in a seminar on inculturation by a participant. Though

the question evoked a mixed reaction among the rest of the participants, the questioner was earnest in raising such a question. Obviously, some thought it was a naïve question. However, the questioner explained that whatever, he believed about Christ had nothing to do with culture. Jesus Christ was above all cultures. God chose to be born in history and so it had to be in one culture and among a particular group of people with their own traditions, social structures, ethnicity, religious belief-systems, attitudes, behaviour, life-style, food habits, and a way of social relationships and interactions. Of course, Jesus was born in a culture as all of us are. There is nothing more or nothing less to it. Each culture is unique and we need not bother about such trivial matters. If at all anything is needed, it is to liberate Jesus from the trapping of the Jewish culture so that he can remain universal as the Son of God. In fact, the dogmas and doctrines about him have done so. We need not inculturate him in any culture and relativise him. These were the main points of the explanation given by the one who thought that it is a futile exercise to discuss about Christ's relation to cultures. However, what the questioner himself failed to recognize was that even the term 'Christ' itself is a religio-cultural construct.

In this paper an attempt is made to 'see' Jesus Christ as a part of human culture whatever be its diversity of expressions, distinct from the reality of culture but not separate from it. Culture makes the inner world and world-view of a person in which s/he lives and finds her or his identity in the family, in the society with a language that helps the relationship with others through a system of symbols. Our contention is that Jesus Christ is not exclusively *above*, *against* or *of* the cultures. He is not *a paradox* in relation to cultures or a *transformer of the cultures* in the strict sense. He is *within* the cultures. No one can separate authentic human culture from him. With him culture is already transformed. Therefore, the mission of those who believe in him is to discover the transformation he

brought about in the culture by his becoming a part of it and to actualize it so that both humans and their world will become what they are called to become and find their destiny.

1. Christ's Relation to Cultures

In his book, *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr attempted to explain the relationship with Christ and Culture from the perspective of a Lutheran Theologian. In his approach he sees Christ in a double relationship. In his vertical relationship, Christ is in relation with his Father and his whole life is oriented towards him. Christ is primarily theocentric. At the same time in his horizontal relationship he is also anthropocentric. It is in this horizontal dimension of his relationship, culture plays a role. There is not much difference between culture and 'the world' mentioned in the New Testament. So what would be his relationship with cultures? Niebuhr suggests five ways of looking at the relationship between Christ and culture that are found in history. They are not mutually exclusive. In a way they are complimentary.

a. Christ against Culture

In its radical form the followers of this understanding of relationship between Christ and culture would argue that Christians should make a choice between Christ or culture. According to them both are incompatible. The culture stands for everything that is anti-Christ and anti-Christian. Therefore, there should not be any compromise with the culture one lives in. Those who subscribe to this view would find a basis for their argument in some passages in the NT. In the First Letter of John, the followers of Christ are exhorted to shun this world of lies and lust, murder and theft and all kinds of evil (I Jh 2:8-9, 11, 15,17; 3:8-11; 5: 4-5, 19). This negative attitude to towards everything in culture denies the possibility of anything good in culture. It is possible that those who see Christ as against culture have a disincarnated Christ in their faith-system and

they find that commitment to him means that it is necessary to disengage oneself from culture. Such an understanding in the final analysis is self-contradictory because culture is the way one is and thinks. One cannot dissociate even the most sublime faith in God from culture. What one can hold is to negate the values and attitudes that seem to be a part of the culture and would not be seen as compatible with one's belief in God revealed through Jesus Christ in a particular culture.

Christ *against* culture is the paradigm of radical following by desert fathers, ascetics and radical monastic orders. Even here an extreme denial of genuine culture is not envisaged. The allurements of the world and world as a principle opposed to God would be the world that is ungodly and not the world that manifests the presence of God. So too a culture that does not have any relation to the transcendence and has no relation to those values beyond the transitory and ephemeral would be the culture that is often seen as opposed to faith in Christ. Tertullian was the first one to develop a negative idea about culture in his books on *Apology* and on *Idolatry*. In Protestantism, there are sectarian groups like Mennonites and Quakers who developed a very negative attitude towards culture. They see that faith in Christ is incompatible with recognizing culture as a value.

The *countercultural movements* are often seen as falling into this paradigm of relationship between Christ and culture. But in fact, countercultural attitudes and movements do not fall into this category. It is not against culture as such but against a perversion of culture that creates oppressive structures and systems, dehumanizes humans and alienates humans from their authentic selves. Counter-culture is also culture albeit a culture opposed to the perversion of culture.

In the missionary enterprises of colonial time, the Asian religions and cultures were seen as opposed to Christian culture and values. Therefore, they were seen as opposed to

Christ. Christ *against* culture model was the force behind the legendary missionary zeal of hundreds of missionaries from the West. Here again Christ was seen as one who is against particular cultures which were considered as steeped in idolatry, superstition, ungodliness and under the power of Satan and not culture per se. Therefore, Christ *against* culture is an ambivalent model of relationship between Christ and cultures. On the one hand it cannot be against culture as such while it uses everything positive in the culture to articulate its own position and on the other hand it cannot deny the fact that God has become human in a culture and transformed it to be something different from what it was. At best it can be the affirmation of the dominion of Christ over everything and a rejection of everything in culture that is not Christic.

b. The Christ of Culture

This model of relationship between Christ and culture is seen as the opposite of Christ-against- culture. Christ is understood as the fulfillment of culture and so there is no conflict between Christ and culture. Culture can be interpreted through Christ and Christ can be interpreted through culture. This approach is often seen as accommodationism as the attempt here is to reconcile Christianity with divergent cultures and best in all cultures. In the early Church the Judaizers, the Gnostics and the Hellenists attempted to interpret Christ from their particular cultures and religious and philosophical perspectives.¹ Neibuhr sees in this model of relationship between Christ and culture an error equal to and opposite of the first position. In this understanding of concentration on the world Christ's relationship with the world is emphasized at the cost of Christ's transcendental or vertical relationship. Without emphasis on grace or after-life religion degenerates into legalistic 'self-reliant humanism' and idolatrous worship of humans and denigration of God.² This is considered by Lutheran theology as an accommodation of the world by

which both the horizontal relationship of humans with the world as well as the vertical relationship with God is distorted.

There are many who oppose this model of relationship between Christ and culture. They find that it would compromise with the Lordship of Christ when he is so much part of the culture. If Christ is of culture, then how would one explain the presence of sin, oppression, injustice, discrimination and all kinds of evil in all cultures? Therefore, this model would not be the right relation of Christ to culture. However, those who would hold the view “Christ of culture” find it the best way to express the right relationship of humans among themselves as well as the kingdom of God realized in the right relationship among humans as the children of God in this world. In the context of Asia the Christ of religions cannot be a relevant model of relationship between Christ and culture according to Aloysius Pieris.³ Christ of the culture is based on the fact that God became human and entered into human culture and became very much a part of it.

c. Christ above Culture

This model of relationship between Christ and culture too is based on his incarnation. Jesus Christ is both human and divine. As a human he is *of* the culture but as God he is *above* culture. The fact that Christ was God overtakes the human dimension of Christ and both cannot be equated. The emphasis is on the divine dimension of Christ. Therefore, though Christ is very much a part of the culture he is infinitely above culture. Justin, the Martyr and Clement of Alexandria could be considered the patristic representatives of this model. In the middle ages Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic theological tradition in general held this view of Christ’s relation to culture.⁴ This approach seems to synthesize the various opposing approaches. It is based on the incarnation of God in a particular culture. However, if this culture is elevated to a position of Christian culture and if it is made universal

it can lead to a cultural hegemony and it can stand against or even suppression of other cultures. In fact, there are many tragic instances of such approach to diverse cultures in history.

One of the other dangers of this approach is that it does not take the grace-filled world which was created and re-created by the incarnation of the Word seriously though it claims to do so. It is the consequence of a faith affirmation in Christ bordering on doceticism. Throughout the history of Christological development what the Church wanted to overcome was the heresy of docetics that Christ is not human but only appears to be so. As an offshoot of Gnosticism with its dualistic philosophy that matter is evil and spirit is good, true incarnation was thought to be impossible. So while Jesus Christ is truly divine he cannot be truly human. Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus fought such heresy and later in the council of Chalcedon (CE 451) affirmed the Church's faith that Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human. However, even today it is difficult for many Christians to believe that Jesus was truly human like anyone of them. It is easy to believe that he is God. In this context, Christ *above* culture would appear to many as Christ has nothing to do with any culture. Such an image of Christ, disengaged from any culture make him universal and people of any culture could relate with him as the transcendent God. So the fears expressed by those who are not in favour of this approach that the traditional synthesis achieved by this model does not take into consideration all that is evil and sinful in cultures, become unfounded. Christ can be thought of truly above all cultures. Though it seems to be a synthesis, in effect, in this model Christ has nothing to do with the cultures.

d. Christ and Culture

Beginning with Paul there is a certain dualistic understanding in the relationship between Christ and culture. In fact, in this model it is not a relationship between Christ and culture but

how a believer relates herself or himself with Christ and culture. The relationship with Christ is permanent, everlasting and grace-filled while with the world it is temporal, transitory and filled with God's wrath and severity. This relationship is expressed by Paul as our relation to the "earthly tent" and "a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternally in heavens" (2 Cor 5:1-2). Augustine would develop this theme further contrasting the earthly city with the heavenly city or the city of God. In Luther's view there are two kingdoms, namely, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. The first one is of grace and mercy and the second one is of God's wrath and severity. The Christian existence is between these two kingdoms till the end when there would be only one kingdom that is the kingdom of God.

The dualistic understanding of Christ and culture has its consequences for Christian commitment to transform this world. It recognizes the evils in the culture. Sin pervades culture, injustice, dehumanization, discrimination, oppression, exploitation, greed and violence rule cultures and societies. New cultures are created with all kinds of negative values that would further destroy the life of humans and the nature. Still a Christian can live a life without any commitment to this world and take a position of isolating oneself from this world and believe that s/he can remain uncontaminated by this world with the grace of God. Laws, regulations, duties etc., can be understood as necessary evils one has to bear with for a short time. As everything in this world is transitory one need not make any commitment to this world or its destiny.

The dualistic model of relationship between Christ and culture devalues the meaning of God's creation as something good enough that God freely chose it to be a part of God himself through incarnation or hominization. Dualistic attitude to Christ and culture makes Christ as the one who is above, separated and isolated from culture and negates the value of

culture as something good and as an inalienable dimension of being human. Any dualism between absolute and relative, infinite and finite, God and world, Christ and culture negates the possibility of God becoming human and thus denies this basic Christian belief.

e. Christ Transforming Culture

This model of relationship between Christ and culture claims to be based on the participation of the Logos in creation as well as in the incarnation. God created everything through his Word and it is the same Word, the Son who became human and redeemed the world. Therefore, the Logos transformed the world (Jn 3:16-18). It is said that in the sacramental vision of John the ordinary things are transformed into symbols that would be instruments of God's presence in this world as in the case of the sacrament of the Eucharist and baptism.⁵

In this model it is admitted that the Word became a part of the world but his function to transform the world would be as if it were from outside of the world. He does not seem to enter into the reality of the world, its cultures and history. Certainly, in this model Christ transforms and re-orientes cultures through his sanctifying and redeeming presence. According to Augustine, though originally everything that God created was good, it was vitiated, corrupted, lost and dead by sin. Therefore, Christ heals and renews what was perverted by sin. Since God is at work in creation and history, culture and institutions of culture have a positive value but it needs to be constantly converted to the Kingdom of God.

All these models of Christ's relation to culture emphasize one or other aspects of this relationship. If they are seen as mutually exclusive it would not do justice to the biblical understanding of God's involvement in our history. Though culture is built on nature, if that nature is viewed completely in a negative light any culture that evolves from the nature

of humans will also be something completely perverted and evil. Christ cannot relate with that culture. A very negative anthropology would give only a superficial recognition of even what is good and positive in any culture. But if we take the biblical witness seriously, we can see that culture is an extension of life of humans as humans in the givenness of a particular place with its accumulation of human experiences preserved, transmitted and lived in history. It is the 'world' of humans in which they live, move and have their being in their historical existence. It is through the cultural paradigms they relate with one another and even with the Ultimate Reality whom they call God or by any name, knowing fully well that this Ultimate is beyond name and form. So as humans cannot be separated from the culture in which they are born and have grown, the Word became human also cannot be separated from culture.

2. Christ *within* Cultures

If culture is the sum total of everything that gives meaning to a person's existence in history or if it is broadly described as *a way of life*⁶ as Michael Amaladoss expresses it, human beings cannot be separated from it. It is through culture that one finds her/his fundamental identification in relation to a family, to a society, to a language, to an ethnic group, to a religion etc. Though one may be able to make abstractions about human nature, a human person can be thought of only in a net-work of relationships. It is in a conscious and free relationship with other human persons and with the reality of the world and the Ultimate Source of everything that one finds one's identity as a human person. In a way it is culture that mediates relationship and qualifies relationships. Authentic culture is everything that gives meaning to one's existence as a human person. For a great majority of humans religion provides a meaning system in which one can discover her/his beginning and end or origin and ultimate destiny. No wonder

then, sociologists and anthropologists include religion in their definition of culture. If culture is such an all encompassing dimension of humans to be human then it must be assumed by the Word that everything authentic and true in it must become Christic.

If what we mean by culture is everything that makes human life to unfold itself as humans intended by God, Christ can never be against, above and paradoxical to culture. Christ is then really *of* culture or *within* the reality of culture. What is authentic in the culture is Christic. It is Christ who is the beginning and end, the alpha and the omega of authentic culture. Humans are the ones who develop culture with the evolution of their self-understanding as humans or pervert it to a dehumanizing one depending on how they use or misuse their freedom. Humans transform culture either for better or for worse. Authentic culture continues to evolve in history at different places and different times according to the self-understanding of humans as humans. Multiculturalism, migration, shared knowledge etc. open up ways of new self-understanding and development of humans and consequently cultures will also develop progressively. Christ is *within* cultures because it is in and through him culture will progress not for its own sake but to make humans to evolve to the “full stature of Christ” as Paul puts it. Humans become “mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). From the perspective of Christian faith, to become human like Christ is the goal of human existence. It is in authentic culture humans can reach this destiny. So Christ is not only an exemplar for the development of culture but it is Christ’s power working through his Spirit that gives dynamism to the evolution of culture as well as the standard to judge the authenticity of a culture.

In this sense, Christ is really of culture. But not in the way Niebuhr and others with a selective understanding of

culture perceive it. Christ's presence in the culture should not be seen as related only to a specific culture. This selective application of Christ's presence in the culture of one's choice limiting Christ to that particular culture is to make an idol of Christ. This was the problem of Judaizers or Gnostics. It would also be a problem if Christ is reduced exclusively to be a Brahmin Christ or a Dalit Christ or a Tribal Christ. Christ *within* the culture means that it is Christ who is the inner dimension of everything that is humanizing in every culture but not of anything that is divisive, discriminatory, and exploitative and in fact, dehumanizing in any culture. The specificity and uniqueness of any culture is not to be seen in its opposition to the other cultures but in its capacity to promote the development of humans opening up new vistas for the enhancement of human capacity to become more and more human and its possibility to relate with other cultures.

a. Christ and Culture: Non-dualistic Relationship

If we take incarnation and resurrection of Christ seriously we have to admit that by God's entering into history and by God's involvement in the movement of the world to its final destiny, Christ has assumed everything that is human except that which negates the unfolding of humans as humans. According to Origen whatever is to be redeemed must be assumed. God assumes human nature and culture. God's relation to human history and culture would be different from what it was before the incarnation. However, God was not far from everything human according to the Fathers of the Church. For Irenaeus God created everything with his two hands, namely, Logos and Pneuma, the Word and the Spirit. God has created everything for perfection and therefore there is an inner dynamism in all humans and the entire creation to reach its God-intended perfection. The Incarnation itself is for the purpose of leading creation to its perfection which will be finally 'recapitulated' by Christ and will be returned

to the Father. Athanasius would develop the theology of Logos present in the creation as distinct from creation but not separated from it. "In one sense indeed, He was not far from it before; no part of creation had ever been without Him who, while ever abiding in union with the Father, yet fills all things that are. But now He entered the world in a new way, stooping to our level in His love and Self-revealing to us."⁷ Further, he says, "You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against humankind have been foiled and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be."⁸ By incarnation God's relation to the world is revealed as non-dualistic. The Word, though distinct from the world is not separate from the world. As human, the Word assumed everything that makes human as human. Therefore it is also the assumption of culture which cannot be separated from the reality of being human. Certainly, the cultural dimension of his humanity was expressed in a definite and historical Jewish culture. Culture cannot be separated from its expression. By being a part of the Jewish culture Christ is related to every culture. Being in a "single house" as Athanasius would affirm, Christ affects every house. By being in one culture Christ is present in every culture. He is the heart of every culture that provides the 'world' for every human to relate with everyone and everything in such a way that s/he evolves into an authentic human being.

b. Negation of Culture and Christ

A question can be raised about the presence of evil and sin, ungodliness and inhuman values in every culture. What about the culture of greed, war and violence? How can Christ be

related to these so called cultures of inhumanity and cruelty? How can one justify the perverse presence of discrimination in the name of caste, class, gender, ethnicity etc.? Is it not the absence of Christ one finds in such human attitudes and behaviour? Is it not a naïve understanding of culture to see Christ within the cultures when we look at only what is true, good and beautiful in cultures and ignore the cruel aspects of culture?

It must be admitted that in all cultures there are systems and structures of injustice, oppression and inhumanity. There are humans in cultures who develop attitudes and create systems and structures in order to amass wealth, power and position at the cost of other humans. They would go to any extent of dehumanizing themselves to achieve their evil ends. No culture is free from such persons who become a law unto themselves by alienating themselves from God who is the ultimate source of everything, from their own true selves, from other humans and nature. Everybody and everything become a means for them to exploit to reach their goals. Blinded by their own greed and selfishness they would not be able to see the road to destruction they are treading on and the suffering they cause to God, other humans and the world. Therefore, perverse behaviour of humans by misusing their freedom cannot be considered as culture. In every culture we find such humans who misuse their freedom and negate culture and Christ. The term culture cannot be used for any expression of humans' inhumanity to humans through personal agenda, systems or structures that destroy humans or thwart the innate dynamism of humans to evolve to the fullness of humanity.

c. Discovering Christ within Cultures

The Logos theology of John and the theology of the Cosmic Christ in Paul affirm that the reality of Christ encompasses everything that is human and cosmic. If everything is created in him, through him and for him and everything is glorified

through his resurrection, Christ's presence in all cultures through his Spirit needs to be constantly discovered by the believer. Therefore, it must be with reverence one must delve deep into one's own culture as well as enter into the depths of cultures other than one's own. If God has become human in order to reveal what humans are and what they can become according to God's plan for humans, then the humanizing forces of cultures must be discovered and promoted. This is possible only through genuine dialogue among people of different cultures sharing their riches so that the further evolving of humans are made possible through integration of them in their lives.

If anything authentically human is Christic, discovering the humanizing elements in every culture is, in fact, discovering that dimension of Christ hidden from those who had no previous experience of that particular culture. Thus authentic culture becomes a means of revelation not only of God's diverse presence but also the possibilities of humans to unfold themselves. The riches of every culture thus reveal the goodness of God that gifted such a variety of gifts through humans for humans to become what they are called to become. Christ has already transformed culture. It is the mission of the disciple to discover the transformation that Christ has brought about through his presence in the culture and proclaim it so that it becomes a challenge to humans to accept it for their transformation as better human beings.

It is only through a contemplative attitude towards cultures one will be able to discover the presence of Christ within the cultures. As humans and their culture are in a non-dualistic relationship, Christ too is in a non-dualistic relationship with cultures. What is authentic in all cultures is a manifestation of his person because there is nothing that is humanizing outside the reality of Christ. Precisely, because of his presence in the culture everything that is dehumanizing and everything that

is a perversion of authentic culture must be prophetically denounced. Those structures and systems that dehumanize humans or individual attitudes, behaviour or misuse of power and positions that hinder authentic human relationship need to be opposed with the strength of human spirit for the sake of Christ and culture. In truth, authentic culture would express the presence of Christ and bring people to live in harmony, peace and communion. Thus culture becomes the temple of God. It needs true freedom, openness and an attitude of reverence to discover him in culture and a plurality of its expressions.

Conclusion

A narrow vision of Christ and culture would find both Christ and culture as opposed to each other or Christ above cultures. Culture is permeated by the presence of Christ as everything is created in him and through him and for him. So the relationship of Christ and culture is neither dualistic nor paradoxical. It is non-dualistic in the sense that Christ cannot be separated from culture even though it cannot be identified with him. Everything authentic in culture is Christic. Whatever is negative and dehumanizing, whether systems or structures of injustice, oppression and dehumanization whether it is social, religious, or political, is not authentically cultural. They cannot be considered as elements of culture but as a misuse of freedom by humans who alienate themselves from their ultimate source of life, themselves, others and their world. This has to be prophetically denounced. Christ is *within* the culture and through the dynamic power of his Spirit makes culture as means to cultivate human spirit to move to higher levels of being human and thus become the glory of God. God's plan for humans begun at creation through his Word and further deepened by incarnation and transformed through resurrection becomes expressed in varied ways through all authentic elements of culture. Therefore, authentic

culture becomes a sacrament of Christic presence and means of communion among humans.

Notes

1. Benne, Robert. *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995, pp. 26-44.
2. Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture*. New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1951. (First Harper Torch Book, 1956.), p.113.
3. Aloysius Pieris, "Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation: Some Religio-Cultural Guidelines," in *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, Virginia Fabella (Ed), Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1980, p. 75.
4. R. P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, p. 409.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 411.
6. Michael Amaladoss, *Making Harmony: Living in a Pluralist World*, Delhi:ISPCK, 2003, p. 63. See also Michael Amaladoss, *Beyond Inculturation. Can the Many be One?* Delhi, ISPCK, 1998.
7. Athanasius: *The Divine Dilemma and its Solution in the Incarnation*, No.8.
8. *Ibid.*, No.9.

Article received: Feb 2, 2016

Article approved: Sept 12, 2016

No of words: 5440

