

## A REVIEW OF NIEBUHR'S *CHRIST AND CULTURE*: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF INCULTURATION

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### **Abstract**

*The tension between faith and culture has existed since the Gospel began to be preached. With the spread of the Gospel message to new climes, disputes arose which bordered on how to adapt the Gospel to the environment within which it took root. The question would often be how to make Christ relevant to these new cultures. This work is a review of Helmut Richard Niebuhr's celebrated work, Christ and Culture. It revisits it as a guide towards a theology of inculturation. The discourse begins with an introduction which sets the pace of our discussion. Having given a brief biography of Richard Niebuhr, it gives a detailed summary and exposition of the work Christ and Culture. This leads to the theology of inculturation. Inculturation is defined and a brief history of inculturation is presented. Inculturation as a model for evangelization is established and this is backed by the Church's magisterium. The early missionary approach in condemning African cultures is identified as a hindrance to inculturation. A path is forged towards a theology of inculturation and the work is concluded.*

**Keywords:** Christ, culture, inculturation, Niebuhr.

### **Introduction**

The dialogue between faith and culture has been the theme of theological debates in the Church for a greater part of the last two centuries. This received greater boost after the Second Vatican Council. The faith – culture relationship is one often characterized by a lot of tension and friction and this has often led to the erroneous belief, especially in Africa, that it is not only possible, but also necessary, to separate one from the other. This resulted in the erroneous belief that one had either to be truly Christian or truly African. Over the past two centuries, numerous works on the subject have been written by authors in a bid to ease the tension between faith and culture. One of such works, popular for its attempt at exposing the relationship between the incarnated Jesus Christ, the God-man and human culture, is H. Richard Niebuhr's 1951 classic, *Christ and Culture*. This article

is aimed at revisiting Niebuhr's celebrated work with a view to establishing the possibility of a harmonious relationship between faith and culture, in order to encourage the evangelization of culture and the inculturation of the Gospel.

### **Brief Biography of Helmut Richard Niebuhr**

The son of Gustav Niebuhr, a minister in the Evangelical Synod of North America, Helmut Richard Niebuhr was born on 3rd September, 1894 in Wright City, Missouri. He studied in Elmhurst College graduating in 1912 and in Eden Theological Seminary graduating in 1915. He was ordained as a minister in the Evangelical Synod in 1916 and served there until 1918. He taught in the Eden Theological Seminary from 1919 to 1924 and later again from 1927 to 1931. He also served as the President of Elmhurst College from 1931 to 1962. H. R. Niebuhr, who specialized in theology and Christian ethics died on 5th July, 1962. Some of his popular works are *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929), *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937), *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941), and, most popular of all, his celebrated work *Christ and Culture* (1951) among others.

#### *Niebuhr's Christ and Culture*

In his celebrated work, Helmut Richard Niebuhr approaches the subject by, first of all, identifying what he called the enduring problem. According to him, "the enduring problem evidently arose in the days of Jesus Christ's humanity when he who 'was a Jew and... remained a Jew till his last breath' confronted Jewish culture with a hard challenge" (2). Next, Niebuhr faces the issue of definitions. Beginning with Christ, he refers to him as "the New Testament figure, crucified and raised from the dead, the One whom Christians accept as their authority" (11-13). He says, "belief in him and loyalty to his cause involves men in the double movement from world to God and from God to world" (29). Niebuhr believes that our definitions of Jesus are limited because "they do not fully capture His totality since they are culturally conditioned. However, he believes that "they are adequate enough for knowing Him" (14). Next he defines culture as "the artificial secondary environment which man imposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values." (32).

Niebuhr goes on to discuss the relationship between Christ and culture. His work shows that there are three major approaches: the first approach considers Christ in opposition to culture (Christ against culture); the second approach envisages an agreement between Christ and culture (Christ of culture); the third views a combination that incorporates ideas from the two previous views (Christ above culture). Niebuhr explains that within

this third framework, there are three variations: firstly, being a synthetic type that sees Christ as the fulfillment of culture (Christ above culture); secondly, a dualistic type that visualizes an enduring tension between Christ and culture (Christ and culture in paradox); and finally, a conversionist type that portrays Jesus as the converter of both culture and society (Christ the transformer of culture). Thus, we have five views as follows:

*a. Christ against culture*

For the Christ against culture position, Niebuhr presents, "Tertullian, Leo Tolstoy, the Mennonites, and some thinkers from the monastic tradition for whom the idea of loyalty to Christ and the Church meant the rejection of culture and society" (65). Niebuhr commends this group for one, they "have not taken easy ways in professing their allegiance to Christ. They have endured physical and mental sufferings in their willingness to abandon homes, property, and the protection of government for the sake of his cause" (66). Niebuhr believes that this position is inadequate first because it is not possible to attain this separation of the Body of Christ and the world; secondly because there is an exaggerated mindset that sin lies in culture and the Christian escapes sin by escaping culture; thirdly, for him, "this view does not adequately recognize the role of Jesus and the Spirit in creation" (80) He says "Their rejection of culture is easily combined with a suspicion of nature and nature's God:... ultimately they are tempted to divide the world in the material realm governed by a principle opposed to Christ and a spiritual realm governed by the spiritual God" (81).

*b. The Christ of culture*

For this position, Niebuhr refers to the Gnostics, Abelard, Albrecht Ritschl, and Protestant liberalism. He says, "this group sees no tension between the Church and the world because Jesus is the fulfiller of the hopes and aspirations of society" (91).. He is "the great enlightener, the great teacher, the one who directs all men in culture to the attainment of wisdom, moral perfection, and peace" (92). Niebuhr appreciated this view for the fact that "people in this category tend to attach themselves to important positions in society thereby making positive impact in the lives of people and society" (92). However, he found this view inadequate because of "the possible distortion of Christ with a view to making Jesus conform to the best of society. Also for the fear of allowing loyalty to culture supersede loyalty to Christ" (110).

*c. Christ above culture*

According to Niebuhr, "the Christ above Culture view is the dominant voice of the history of the Church. Church fathers like Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria as well as Thomas Aquinas are defenders of this position" (119). The fundamental issue is not between Christ and culture but between God and humanity. Niebuhr notes,

They cannot separate the works of human culture from the grace of God, for all those works are possible only by grace. But neither can they separate the experience of grace from cultural activity; for how can men love the unseen God in response to His love without serving the visible brother in human society? (119).

This position attempts to create “a balance between Christ as part of culture (incarnation) and outside culture (as God the sustainer of culture). With this, we can constitute a moral law for society” (120). The Church, “while functioning for a spiritual purpose, has also an earthly purpose of being guardian/custodian of the divine law” (136). The shortcoming to this view is “the institutionalization of Christ and the Gospel. There is also the tendency to absolutize what is relative. That is, to reduce the infinite to finite form, and to materialize what is dynamic” (145). Also, according to Niebuhr, “they do not... face up to the radical evil present in all human work” (148).

*d. Christ and culture in paradox*

This is the dualistic version of “Christ above Culture” position. For this group, “the tension between God and humanity is ever present and this conflict represents Christ and culture. In the words of Niebuhr, “Grace is in God, and sin is in man,” (151). The Christian life is full of paradoxes: “law and grace, divine wrath and mercy,” etc. Thus, “the Christian dwells between two magnetic poles” (151). Niebuhr names the apostle Paul, Martin Luther and Sören Kierkegaard as advocates of this view. Niebuhr believes, “this view rightly captures the biblical tension depicted about Christianity in the world, because man is “under law, and yet not under law but grace; he is a sinner, and yet righteous...” recipient of divine wrath and mercy” (157). However, he finds it inadequate “for its tendency toward antinomianism or cultural conservatism” (187). We tend to see both wrath and mercy and there is a danger that we may act in favour of neither.

*e. Christ the transformer of culture*

The Christ as Transformer of Culture position is the conversionist version of the “Christ above Culture,” view and advocates of this position are seen as those who have a more “hopeful view toward culture” (191). Niebuhr presents Augustine, John Calvin, and F. D. Maurice as its proponents and the Apostle John as a biblical advocate. For proponents of this view, “all of culture is under the judgment of God, but culture is also under God’s sovereign rule. They believe “the Christian must carry on cultural work in obedience to the Lord” (191). This group affirms the goodness of creation and seeks to transform that which is corrupted by sin and man’s selfishness. Thus, “about human culture, they believe it can be “a transformed human life in and to the glory of God through the grace of God”. This means that we work in culture and for the betterment of culture, because God definitely plays a role in human creativity, which is good (and can be better)” (196). Also,

we are expected to work for the transformation of culture because, despite the presence of sin in culture, there is hope for the redemption of cultures through Christ.

Niebuhr ends his classic by calling us to decision, “not because he believes that the last option is the best presented and most logical, but on the contrary, because he believes that the answers to the enduring problem remain “unconcluded and inconclusive” (230). *Christ and Culture therefore* ends with a postscript encouraging readers to not settle for one of these views at the expense of the others, because there is no “Christian answer” that remains valid for all time, since faith itself is ‘fragmentary’ and we do not have “the same fragments of faith” (236). H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* is one of the most significant theological and missiological works written in the 20th century. This is because it offers us an easy classification of the manner in which Christians have related to culture through history. This is essential as a foundation for the next part of our discourse.

### **A Theology of Inculturation**

Derived from the Latin root *cultura* and the French *culture*, the *Oxford Dictionary* defines ‘inculturation’ as “the gradual acquisition of the characteristics and norms of a culture or group by a person, another culture, etc” (Web. 10.11.2019). This definition implies that inculturation involves the adoption of a culture other than one’s. *The Oxford Dictionary* also defines it as “the adaptation of Christian liturgy to a non-Christian cultural background” (Web 10.11.2019). This brings the liturgical dimension of inculturation into view. Inculturation is a term often used by Catholics and the World Council of Churches to whom “inculturation is the adaptation of the way church teachings are presented to other, mostly non-Christian, cultures and, in turn, the influence of those cultures on the evolution of these teachings” (Web 10.11.2019). This means inculturation entails the entire methodology by which the Gospel message is made acceptable to people of non-Christian cultures and how their cultures influence the Christian message. Thus, inculturation is a two way venture. As used in this study, inculturation shall refer to the symbiotic systematic dialogue between the gospel message and culture that sees the gospel purifying the culture and the culture enriching the Gospel. The idea of inculturation has come a long way in the Church’s history. Despite the novelty of the term, it has existed in the Church’s life for a while. It has also recorded some successes. Let us take a brief look at the history of inculturation in relation to evangelization in Church history.

### **Brief History of Inculturation**

In the pastoral and missiological ambient, inculturation is a relatively novel terminology. Inculturation became popular among many African theologians after the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. Many African bishops and theologians favored inculturation as an appropriate evangelization model that could enable the Church in Africa to accept and express the Gospel message in a genuinely African way. For them, inculturation will make the Church in Africa to be truly Christian and truly African. Though the term inculturation seems to be of recent origin, the content of inculturation is not new, but it has precedents in both Christian history and theology. More details on the theological development of inculturation will be presented in Chapter Four. Credit is given to Pierre Charles for introducing the concept of ‘enculturation’ within cultural anthropology circles and even into missiology in France. However, it was J. Masson who was first known to have coined the phrase *Catholicisme inculture* (inculturated Catholicism) in 1962. Over time the idea gained acceptance among the Jesuits in the form of inculturation. In 1977, the Jesuit superior-general, Pedro Arrupe, introduced the concept to the Synod of Bishops. Pedro Arrupe, in his 1978 letter to his Jesuit brothers, defined inculturation as:

...the incarnation of the 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 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”. (1)

The Apostolic Exhortation, *Catechesis Tradendae*, which was a byproduct of the 1977 Synod of Bishops, adopted the term thereby giving it universal currency. Within a short time, “it was also accepted within protestant circles and has remained, till date, one of the most widely used concepts in missiological circles” (Shorter 10).

The foundations of inculturation can be traced back to the very beginning of salvation history, and the pertinence could be sensed throughout the Church’s evangelization life. If indeed, the Church is to achieve her mandate of bringing the Gospel message to all nations and to lead all peoples to salvation in Jesus Christ, then the Church has the urgency seeking and adopting suitable methodologies for presenting this message to all cultures in categories that are familiar and acceptable to them. Theologically, the foundation of inculturation is rooted in the Incarnation. The simple line of reasoning is that just as Jesus Christ, the Word of God (*Logos*), became incarnate in human nature, in the Jewish cultural milieu, so should the Gospel of Jesus Christ be allowed and encouraged to be incarnated (inculturated) in a people’s local culture and context” (10).

Just as Christ, by His life and ministry, transformed the Jewish culture, so should the Gospel transform every culture it permeates.

### **Inculturation as a Model of Evangelization**

The truth is immutable and so the subject matter of the Church's missionary activity, salvation in Christ, remains unchanged. However, the Church and her missionaries have over the centuries, employed different models and concepts of evangelization in order to make the Gospel of Christ more understandable and more acceptable in mission territories. These missionary approaches, which are called mission models, are to a large extent shaped by the inimitability of each era and the inspired by the theological reflections on the spiritual and pastoral needs of the time. We shall briefly discuss some of the popular models and concepts of Christian evangelization adopted by the Church over the centuries.

#### *a. Salvation of souls (salus animarum)*

It was not until the Second Vatican Council's explicit declaration that true and worthy values are present in non-Christian religions and cultures (NA 2), the Church found it very difficult to recognize other religions and cultures as part of God's providence and divine plan. Thus, the old adage "there is no salvation outside the Church" (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*) of Cyprian of Carthage was frequently quoted in defense of the view that those outside the Catholic Church had no way of attaining salvation. Unfortunately, this was the mindset that propelled the evangelization of Africa from 15th to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Nunes 34). Thus, what inspired the missionary zeal of this epoch was pity towards the poor souls of the savage Africans. As a result, Africans were baptized in masses without proper catechetical preparation. Traditional African religions and cultures were considered superstitious, fetish and devilish. At that time, without prejudice to the positive achievements of the early missionaries, most of them were ignorant of the fact that the principal cause of salvation is Christ Himself and that He was capable of revealing himself to Africans through their religions and cultures.

#### *b. Implantation of the Church (Plantatio Ecclesiae)*

The Implantation concept and model was developed from the 19th to early 20th centuries (43). It arose as an attempt at transplanting the Church model used in Europe to Africa. As a result, the organizational structure of the Church, the catechesis, liturgical expressions, personnel, and social works including schools and hospitals, were all modeled after those of Europe. Sadly, in spite of all these successes in structural development: churches, schools and hospitals, true and heartfelt conversions rarely took place. Many Africans still saw the Christian faith as an imported religion which was foreign to the African's worldview. This was because Africans were evangelized outside their culture and, as a

corollary, the Christian faith did not take root in Africa as it should. The implantation model of evangelization did not engender the creativity and active participation of Africans in ecclesial activities and Africans were taught to express their Christian faith in foreign words and thoughts (Ntrie-Akpabi 29).

*c. Adaptation (Adaptatio)*

Over the years there was a rise in the understanding and appreciation of the rich African cultural values by the West which prompted new attempts at adapting the practices of the Church to suit the Africans cosmology. This was also fueled by an invigorated African struggle for global recognition. Some of the characteristics of this evangelical approach were the translation of the Scriptures to African languages and dialects; the development of local catechisms; and new attempts to Africanize the liturgy (Nunes 44). However, though this evangelical approach improved a better appreciation of African traditions, it is criticized for selecting certain cultural elements for adaptation without considering the totality of African reality. Thus, it was not integral and holistic.

*d. Africanization or indigenization*

The Africanization or Indigenization model was an attempt by African theologians at developing a local based African theology. The objective of this approach was to create a theology that would re-express the Gospel message in African concepts. Africanization therefore implied a search for authentic African perspectives on the Christian faith (Ntrie-Akpabi 29). Typically, some scholars presented indigenization model as a method of Africanization and this was a common expression especially within Protestants theological circles. The Africanization or indigenization model was criticized for being one sided, thereby lacking mutual exchange between the Christian Gospel and African cultures. Besides, it presents culture as though it were static rather than dynamic.

*e. Incarnation (Incarnatio)*

By the 1970s, Catholic theologians had substituted the 'adaptation' for 'incarnation'. Though the adaptation approach was favored by the Second Vatican Council, it was seen as focused primarily on superficial and selective changes. It was guilty of not embracing African reality in its entirety. Thus, at the 1974 synod of Bishops in Rome, the African Bishops proposed the theology of Incarnation in replacement for the theology of Adaptation. For, Just as Jesus incarnated and became man, so too the Christian faith can also be incarnated to become authentically African (30). It is worthy of note that Pope Paul VI was skeptical of this incarnational model and condemned as dangerous all diversified theologies in these words:

Thus we consider necessary a word on the need of finding a better expression of faith to correspond to the racial, social and cultural milieu. This is indeed a necessary requirement of authenticity and effectiveness of evangelization; it



would nevertheless be dangerous to speak of diversified theologies according to continent and cultures. The content of faith is either Catholic or it is not (*L'Osservatore Romano* 9).

However, we must clarify that the aim of African theologians has never been to change the content of the faith (*depositum fidei*), but to take into consideration the context of the faith. So that, in the same way the Gospel was reinterpreted during the Christianization of Europe in a bid to make it more meaningful to Europeans, in a like manner, Africans deserve an interpretation of the Gospel message in African thought and categories, with a view to rendering it more meaningful and acceptable to Africans.

### **Inculturation in The Church's Magisterium**

It was not until the Second Vatican Council that the Church became more receptive of non-western cultures. The willingness of the Council to embrace other cultures and religions was a bold affirmation of the Church's commitment to her universal mission of evangelization. In her Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, she states:

Since the Kingdom of God is not of this world (cf. John 18:36), the Church or people of God which establishes this kingdom does not take away anything from the temporal welfare of any people. Rather she fosters and takes to herself, in so far as they are good, the abilities, the resources and customs of peoples. In so taking them to herself she purifies, strengthens and elevates them. (*LG* 13)

Thus, the Church began to recognize and encourage contextual theologies and approved liturgical celebrations. The Council used the term 'adaptation' rather than 'inculturation'.

However, it was not long before 'inculturation' became a recognized term in official Church documents and in theological discourse. The Council also recognized the allusions to inculturation in God's relationship with His people and the power of the Gospel in transforming cultures. In her Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, she states:

God spoke according to the culture proper to each age... the Church has been sent to all ages and nations and, therefore, is not tied exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, to any one particular way of life, or to any customary practices, ancient or modern. The Church is faithful to its traditions and is at the same time conscious of its universal mission; it can, then, enter into communion with different forms of culture, thereby enriching both itself and the cultures themselves. The Good News of Christ continually renews the life and culture of fallen man; it combats and removes the error and evil which

flow from the ever-present attraction of sin. It never ceases to purify and elevate morality of peoples. It takes the spiritual qualities and endowments of every age and nation, and with supernatural riches it causes them to blossom, as it were, from within; it fortifies, completes and restores them in Christ. (GS 58)

By this the Council acknowledges both the universality and the particularity of the Church. Also in her Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, she affirms the importance of inculturation in evangelization

If the Church is to be in a position to offer men the mystery of salvation and the life brought by God, then it must implant itself among all these groups in the same way that Christ by his incarnation committed himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances of the men among who he lived. (AG 10)

The importance and urgency of the evangelization of cultures is also evident in some post-Vatican II documents. Pope Pius XII, in *Evangelii Praecones* (Missionary Encyclical) addressed the missionary mandate and missionaries stating that:

The Church from the beginning down to our time has always followed this wise practice: Let not the Gospel on being introduced into any new land, destroy or extinguish whatever its people possess that is naturally good, just or beautiful. For the Church, when she calls people to higher culture and a better way of life under the inspiration of the Christian religion, does not act like one who recklessly cuts down and uproots a thriving forest. No. She grafts a good scion upon the wild stock that it may bear a crop of more delicious fruit. (66-67)

Calling for effective methods of evangelization, in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI states:

Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it addresses, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life. But on the other hand, evangelization risks losing its power and disappearing altogether if one empties or adulterates its content under the pretext of translating it; if, in other words, one sacrifices the reality and destroys the unity without which there is no universality, out of a wish to adapt a universal reality to a local situation. (63)

With this, the Holy Father warned about substituting the essentials in the name of inculturation. Inculturation should not sacrifice the integrity of the gospel message or compromise the universality of the Christian faith.

However, Paul VI, in his apostolic letter, *Africae Terrarum*, acknowledged Traditional African values as being “rich in individuality, and spiritual and social experiences... worthy of study and commanding respect” (7). He enumerated and discussed such values as their spiritual view of life, with the idea of God as its most important element; respect for the dignity of man; the sense of the family; the role and authority of the father in the family; the communal life; and their moral and religious values (8-13). He then states:

The Church views with great respect the moral and religious values of the African tradition, not only because of their meaning, but also because she sees them as providential, as the basis for spreading the Gospel message and beginning the establishment of the new society in Christ... The teaching of Christ and His redemption are, in fact, the complement, the renewal, and the bringing to perfection, of all that is good in human tradition. And that is why the African who becomes a Christian does not disown himself, but takes up the age-old values of tradition “in spirit and in truth”. (14)

The Holy Father, Paul VI, therefore, answers one of the most fundamental questions “Does one have to abandon his Africanness in order to be truly Christian?” Paul VI says ‘no’. On the contrary, the African Christian should embrace traditional values in spirit and in truth. With the Holy Spirit and the Truth, who is Christ, to illumine his path, one can be truly African and truly Christian.

On his part, Pope John Paul II, in *Ecclesia in Africa*, observes that the African continent: “is endowed with a wealth of cultural values and priceless human qualities which it can offer to the Churches and to humanity as a whole.” (42). He clarifies that “Inculturation includes two dimensions: on the one hand, the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration into Christianity and on the other, the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures.” (59). He also laid down guidelines for inculturation. This was to avoid any form of extremism in a bid to solve the problem. In *Redemptoris Missio*, the Supreme Pontiff declared as follows:

Inculturation must be guided by two principles: “compatibility with the gospel, and communion with the universal Church.”... in fact there is a risk of passing uncritically from a form of alienation from culture to an overestimation of culture. Since culture is a human creation and is therefore marked by sin, it too needs to be “healed, ennobled and perfected. (54)

Inculturation was a preferred term for John Paul II, because of its likeness to the word “incarnation” and the fact that it was an apparent theological parallel. Inculturation should be understood as the very attempt at the Incarnation of the Gospel within a particular cultural context. While the context in which the Gospel message is preached is very important, there is however an integrity of the Gospel as the Word of God that cannot be compromised or adulterated even as it becomes immersed within a particular context. Therefore, John Paul II’s use of the term “inculturation” remains faithful to the *Gaudium et Spes*’ prioritization of the Gospel first of all, then human culture, before other diverse cultures.

For John Paul II, the Church herself and situating of the Word of God within a particular cultural context (inculturation) should be conceived theologically in methods that are analogous to the Incarnation. This was his reason for favoring the term inculturation. John Paul II developed his approaches to evangelization which he says occurs in three phases: initial evangelization, pastoral care, and re-evangelization (Udoidem 70). It is important to note that each of these phases involves reciprocity, which on the other hand does not imply a simple bi-lateral exchange. In a speech in Nairobi, John Paul II expresses it as follows: “Inculturation, which you rightly promote, will truly be a reflection of the incarnation of the word, when a culture, transformed and regenerated by the gospel, brings forth from its own living tradition original expressions of Christian life.” (Doyle 8) Simply put, in John Paul II’s opinion, “...the reception of the gifts of any particular culture by the church universal takes place after specific elements of the culture have been lifted up and transformed by the purifying penetration of the Gospel, understood as the Word that needs to become enfleshed” (8).

The importance of inculturation cannot be overemphasized. In the words of John Paul II: “A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out” (Ezechi 221). From magisterial teachings in inculturation, we affirm that the Good News of Christ heals and restores cultures to their original dignity. Thus, our cultures do not need to be perfect in order to proclaim the Gospel message. Instead, when our cultures welcome Christ and His Gospel becomes incarnate in our cultures, Christ transforms and perfects our cultures.

### **Early Missionary Approach in Africa as a Problem of Inculturation**

In what he themed *The Missing Point in the Early Missionary Activities in Nigeria*, M. I. Nwafor began by acknowledging the European missionaries for great impact they made in enlightening the African people and other positive developments they brought to the continent. He however, indicts them as being guilty of the racism and “ideological fanaticism” of their era; an era that portrayed history as emanating and culminating in

Europe; an era that saw all other nations as existing on the corridors of the earth. As a result of this mindset, two errors arose: the error of misconception and the error of ignorance. According to Nwafor,

The error of misconception is that delusion which links directly to the superiority complex of the missionaries that resulted into their false conception of African people as less human, people without any idea of God or any spiritual reality even of the devil and with no sense of morality (4).

The direct consequence of these misrepresentations was the colossal fallacy of seeing most of African possessions and practices as emanating from the devil and consequently, should be obliterated. It is believed that European missionaries went as far as describing the African continent as the Devil's den. The famous South African Anglican Archbishop, Desmond Tutu once pointed out how the Scottish missionary, Robert Moffat (1795-1883), in one of his works, declared:

Satan has employed his agency with fatal success, in erasing every vestige of religious impression from the minds of the Bechuanas, Hottentots and Bushmen; leaving them without a single ray to guide them from the dark and dread futurity, or a single link to unite them with the skies (5).

Even the revered Irish missionary, Bishop Joseph Shanahan, who worked in Eastern Nigeria, and was portrayed as "sympathetic to the Igbo people", has an unfortunate statement attributed to him about the people he claimed to applaud; "Real difficulties await us in this new field: difficulties of transport .... We will be face to face with fetishism, infanticide, the methodical destruction of the elderly.... We know that the Igbos are not averse to a meal of human flesh" (5).

Next, Nwafor goes on to describe the error of ignorance which he captures in these words, "The error of ignorance is that witlessness in the missionaries that made them oblivious of the fact that most of what comprise African values and culture form a preparatory ground for the success and blossom of Christian teaching and practice in Africa" (6). An appreciation of African culture as a preparatory ground, would have enabled the missionaries achieve a more appropriate dialogue between the Gospel and African culture. On the contrary, the dichotomy created by the missionaries between these two elements that otherwise should have been engaged in dialogue, orchestrated the identity crisis prevalent in African Christianity. From the early period of Christianity in Africa, there have existed two reticent opposing camps. In the end, while the intention of the missionaries was to birth a "new baby" in the African people, they only succeeded in "producing monsters who neither follow them nor retain the old way" (5).

There has always been the debate on “whether conversion to Christianity demands radical discontinuity of one’s culture or continuity with only the positive elements in those cultures encountered by Christianity. Those in the discontinuity camp hold that to become a Christian, one must become a new person with a completely different identity from one’s original culture. On the other hand, those in the continuity camp, see conversion as involving a substantial continuity from one’s culture into the new Christian culture”(6). However, it was possible to be truly African and truly Christian without any critical friction. There is profound blend between European culture and the Gospel making it difficult to distinguish one from the other. Christianity as universal religion sprouted out of Jewish land with Jewish ancestry but with its expansion significantly extricated itself from Judaism. Unlike Judaism with its racial exclusivity, Christianity is racially all inclusive because Christ’s redemptive work is for all human persons.

### **Towards a Theology of Inculturation**

Culture is indispensable in the life of man. In culture we distinguish who man is (*esere*) from what he has (*averé*). Also, culture distinguishes one human group from another, because a group comes to proper self-expression in its culture. However, in its identity, no group should be so exclusive that it is totally closed to other cultures. While authentic humanity is only possible through culture, it is only meaningful through religion. This is because only in religion can man find the answers to the meaning of life. In order for culture to be able to create appropriate conditions for human freedom and growth it must satisfy both the material and spiritual needs of the people. Ntrie-Akpabi captures it succinctly thus:

A culture that focuses only on the material and neglects the spiritual has a great deformity, it risks being dehumanizing... Culture has a religious element which engenders a desire to search for the Absolute. “If we believe and accept the fact that we are not the source of our life but we are creatures of God; then we can also agree that our true identity and the meaning of our existence can only be found in God. We can reach our full humanity only in God. (11)

St. Augustine captures this beautifully in his celebrated expression “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” (*Confessions* Bk. 1.1).

Before the encounter between Christianity and African culture, the notion of God guided the people in their relationship with the supernatural and the moral laws which inspired their good actions derived from that. In essence, to achieve integral and authentic humanity, every culture must orient its adherents toward establishing an intimate rapport with God. This shows the intrinsic connection between religious faith and culture. For us

who are Christians, the Gospel message (religious faith) must permeate our cultures and orient them towards their ultimate destiny (*terminus ad quem*), God Himself. When our cultures: customs, traditions and institutions become illumined and transformed by the power of the Gospel, authentic inculturation is achieved. The Spirit of the Gospel should animate and orientate our cultures. When this happens, what we shall witness is a truly Christian culture in which the experiences of life are viewed through the lens of the Gospel message. In this way, human beings can come to the full realization of who they are. Only the Holy Spirit, the Principal Agent of Evangelization, can do this. This is what is the vision and objective of inculturation.

### **Conclusion**

We realized that as a man, Christ was subject to all laws that govern human nature. Richard Niebuhr gave us vivid detail of the Christ and culture debate and we settled for the transforming power of Christ over culture. Based on Niebuhr's call to decision, we also realized that no single approach is best but the time and context must be put into consideration.

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