EVANGELIZATION IN A MULTI-CULTURAL CONTEXT

By ANDREW WINGATE

Look, you have cast out Love! What Gods are these
You bid me please?
The Three in One, the One in Three? Not so!
To my own gods I go.
It may be they shall give me greater ease
Than your cold Christ and tangled Trinities.

THIS IS THE VERSE ENTITLED 'The convert', which Rudyard Kipling puts at the head of his short story entitled 'Lispeth'. It is the deeply salutary tale of a Himalayan tribal girl, who is orphaned by cholera, and 'saved' by the Mission, and Christianized within the compound. Even her name is changed, though she can never say it properly. Her identity destroyed, she became totally dependent and foolishly took seriously the expression of love from a passing English butterfly hunter. Her missionary told her the man would come back. Day by day she watched, and he never did. Eventually, the missionary's wife admitted it—'We said it as an excuse to keep you quiet'. 'Then you have lied to me . . . ', said Lispeth.

> 'I am going back to my own people. You have killed Lispeth. There is only left old Jadeh's daughter, the daughter of a *pahari* [hillman], and the servant of Tarka Devi [tribal god]. You are all liars, you English.'

Lispeth returned to her people.

> She took to her own people savagely, as if to make up the arrears of the life she had stepped out of; and, in a little time, she married a woodcutter who beat her after the manner of *paharis*, and her beauty faded soon.
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> 'There is no law whereby you can account for the vagaries of the heathen,' said the Chaplain's wife, 'and I believe that Lispeth was

> always at heart an infidel.' Seeing that she had been taken into the Church of England at the mature age of five weeks, this statement does not do credit to the Chaplain's wife.

How sad a distortion, when the 'good news' of Christ has become precisely the opposite. Hence the poem above. 'I am the way, the truth and the life', has become rather a gate to falsehood and the death of the real person. At the centre of the gospel, in the end, Lispeth found no Love.

I contrast this with a visit by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to Birmingham two years ago. He addressed a gathering of leaders of various faiths. He expounded his gospel, which is that God loves you, whatever your culture or faith. That is what God has revealed in Christ, no more and no less. A prominent Jewish Rabbi was present. He replied, on behalf of those faiths present, and said, 'We have been anxious about this decade of evangelism. But if the good news is as you say, then we have nothing to be afraid of.' We saw such a gospel worked out in practice in Tutu's native South Africa last month. The *Church Times* reported a 'national peace accord' between President De Klerk, Nelson Mandela and Chief Buthelezi, achieved after great struggle. In this, Desmond Tutu was personally involved, and the article quotes his prayer after the signing of the accord, as being very moving to those present. The prayer referred to the accord as being a 'very miracle', and goes on,

> When those who were at one another's throats, and may still be at loggerheads, can hammer out a peace accord with such a measure of consensus and convergence, God, then there is hope for our beautiful country.

As we look then at what is evangelization, in relation to various cultures and faiths, we need first to see what is good news. No amount of inculturization will help, if there is no love at the centre. If we look at the New Testament, there is no one answer to this question. If we look at the Fourth Gospel, certainly the good news is the word made flesh, as he brings life and joy in its fullness. Faith in him brings one into a community which is to wash one another's feet, that the world may know God's very nature, in love of the Father and the Son. If we look to the synoptic gospels, the good news is of the coming of the kingdom, of justice and righteousness and peace, a kingdom where the world's values are reversed, and the rich become poor and the poor become rich. The beatitudes reveal above all who are blessed in that kingdom, and it is a surprising list. The rest of the Sermon on the Mount reveals a new and radical way of life offered as good news, and not burden or law.

If we look to Paul, we see the good news of a community of the baptized. What they have in common is the experience of the grace of God in baptism, where they have risen to new life in Christ. What the world is to see is the good news of a community where there is no Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free, no male nor female, but all are one in Christ. This is a community where cultures are not destroyed, but affirmed together in the Church. In Ephesians, we get this vision extended to the whole universe; the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge, will fill the whole universe, yet at the same time it is intensely personal, as the author rejoices that we are known by God before the foundation of the world.

Evangelization then is not just about one thing, converting individuals to Christian faith. It is about that certainly, but it is also about ensuring that faith, which is offered through the human instrument of the Church, is indeed good news and not bad. So evangelization is as much about how the Church is to be, as how preaching is to take place.

It is, too, about how the Church can become a sacrament of God's love within a society which will be more influenced by this than anything else. If it destroys people, as it did Lispeth, then why should people turn to it, with its complicated theologies and its 'cold Christ'? If it is about the sort of love which Desmond Tutu is speaking of, then indeed, 'how beautiful on the mountains will be the feet of those who bring the good news of salvation' (Isai 52,7).

In terms of our title, to save spending a lot of time on definitions, I would like to use those given in a recent book, written by a group I was involved in, *Good news in our times, the gospel and contemporary cultures* (Church House Publications, 1991). 'Culture' is defined as the compound of customs, priorities, values, assumptions and beliefs shared by a social group or community. It is therefore always historically conditioned and it is specific to particular localities, areas or countries and to particular times. 'Evangelization' is defined as from the English Catholic Bishops' Conference, 1990, as follows:

> Spreading the good news of the gospel is a task with many facets. The most common way this task is understood within our Catholic community is by witness of one's own faith in Christ by example, in the situations of ordinary life. The witness is also expressed and made explicit by the sacramental and social celebration of the

presence of God in the good and difficult things of life, and by action to bring Christ to bear on the society in which we live. This last has the two-fold dimension of supporting and developing the situations in society which conform to the gospel, and challenging those which do not.

With this introduction, I would like to look at the interaction of gospel and culture with reference to three areas I have experienced directly—in Tamil Nadu, South India, where I worked for seven years as a theological teacher and prison chaplain, in the inter-faith context in Britain, where I have been involved for the last 10 years, and within the mixed black/white British culture of which I am a part. We are talking here of interaction. Different cultures deepen our understanding of various aspects of the gospel, which is not, and never has been a static package. At the same time, the gospel highlights certain aspects of particular cultures, and brings change there. Cultures too are not static, but dynamic, and it is important to relate to them as they are and will be, and not just as they were, or as we might like them to be. An example is the question of how the gospel should relate to Indian culture. What is Indian culture? India is a sub-continent, as varied as Denmark is from Greece or Turkey. It has hundreds of languages, and sixteen major ones. Language is crucial to culture, as it influences how we think, communicate and indeed pray. The change from Hebrew/Aramaic to Greek was not a neutral change, as the Church spread through the ancient world.

Sanskrit is the classical language of India, and is Indo-European. It is the language of the Vedas, the Upanishads, and so-called classical Hinduism. It is also the preserve of the Brahmin, 'high', priestly caste. To relate the gospel to this language, is to take a particular stand; the language is beautiful, and an easy bearer of religious dialogue. But it is not the language of the vast mass of the people, particularly of the poor. Tamil is the language of fifty million people in South India. It too is a classical language, and has many deeply spiritual hymns and philosophical works from centuries ago, centred above all in an understanding of God's grace. To relate the gospel to this language is vital, in that area of India.

But which Tamil? As I knew to my cost, as I struggled to learn the language, there is the world of difference between the village language, and so-called high Tamil. This is a language revived in recent decades, as part of a political and cultural protest against North India and Hindi. All influence from the north is removed, and it has become a pure Dravidian, indigenous language. It is the language of high culture in Madras, and of the dominant Tamil ruling political parties, and of modern literature. It is not the language of the average man or woman in the street, whether in village or city. And then what of English? It used to be thought that this colonial language was on its way out, and I taught in a seminary where the predominant concern was to enable the Tamil language to become the vehicle for theology. Yet I have found over the years that, far from being less sought after, English education is more in demand than ever. Yet the English concerned is Indian English, now classified as a language in itself. We do not control the secular tide. And it is a fact that urban India, particularly with the young, is becoming a hybrid mixture of east and west. I notice how, far from the South Indian dhoti (long white skirt) being worn more in the seminary, it is being worn much less by students, as they wear more and more western trousers. It is the same with language. The use of English needs to be recognized as part of a complex jigsaw. And this affects how we look at the question of the rooting of the gospel in local culture. Moreover, in the midst of these changes has come a movement known as the Dalit movement, the demand of the oppressed, so-called untouchable and tribal people for liberation. They have their own traditions, songs, and indeed languages. We need to take them into account, as we consider the language in which the good news can best be communicated.

And if we consider more than just language, but also include art, architecture and music, we are faced with similar issues. The Ashram called Shantivanam, 'place of peace', in South India, has been led for many years by Father Bede Griffiths. It is a place of pilgrimage for many western visitors, as well as many from within India. It is a place that I love myself. But culturally, it should be recognized as being an imaginative way of relating spirituality and worship to the classical culture of the 'higher' form of Hinduism. It is not enabling us to relate to Dalit traditions of the poor, nor to increasingly secularized city dwellers. This is no problem, as long as we realize the limitations, and that this is not *the whole* answer.

Moving within particular cultures enables us to realize that no one culture can encompass the gospel. We all need each other, to be mutually enriched, as Paul emphasizes throughout his epistles. Let us look at certain aspects of the gospel, and how these have been sharpened for me by those of other cultures.

1. Christ as the suffering one, the one for others

In European culture, this was the insight experienced and communicated most vividly by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his *Letters and* *papers from prison*, and it was in that subculture of a Nazi prison that it came so vividly:

> Men go to God when he is sore bestead,
> Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,
> Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead:
> Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.

He goes on, 'It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life'. I recalled this insight in another prison, that in South India where I was working. A life prisoner, still a Hindu, gave a talk one day, during our Sunday service. He was a life prisoner, from a poor background, wearing the standard cheap rough-cloth shorts and vest of a prisoner's uniform. Around his head he had a cloth bound like a turban. This was not a religious symbol, but to cover up the wound from an exploratory operation, which had revealed a brain tumour. His sermon centred on the cross, and was quite simple—that only someone who had suffered like he had, could comprehend what it could mean that Christ himself had suffered to the point of despair on the cross, and that this Christ shows the nature of God. In his own culture, people suffer because of their destiny (karma), because of what they carry with them from their previous life or this. Now he knows that God in Christ identifies with him where he is. Later, this man was baptized, and the cultural way that he insisted on marking this, after a baptism by immersion out of doors, was to put on a new white dhoti, a new khadi shirt, and a new bandage!

This experience of Christ the suffering one is, of course, one discovered corporately by particular peoples. I tutored a South Korean student last year. He had come to Britain with a deep, but individualistic faith. By being with people of different cultures at Selly Oak, he came to see the corporate experience of suffering in many Christian peoples, and also that in his own country there was a theology which he now read, Minjung theology, which came out of the experience of the poor, of which he was not a part. When he left, after a year, he presented me with a print of Jesus, from that tradition, by Shin Yong Hun, 'Jesus in silence'. Its power lies not in the anguish (sometimes seen in paintings from other cultures) of Jesus on the cross, but in the impassive concentration of Jesus's face, as he is mocked and cursed. The poor in that part of the world seem to bear their suffering with such a face.

It was a South African priest colleague from the Transkei who, when I consulted him about this article, said, 'Include the culture of suffering'. There is something that unites those who have suffered as peoples, across all cultures. But there is something unique about the particular response of each particular people to their situation. From black South Africa there seems to come to us that combination of suffering and hope, as in the title of a book by Desmond Tutu. It is this that has enabled the extraordinary witness by South African leaders, who have spent more than two decades in isolation in prison, and yet who can work unceasingly and unbitterly for a multi-racial South Africa, where all can have a place.

This links too with what I have learned on this theme in Birmingham, where I have had much to do with the Afro-Caribbean Christian community. They are a community who know in their history the liberation from slavery, and the costly struggle and suffering involved in that period. It is revealed in many of the popular hymns and choruses we sing now in our British churches, though we have often emasculated them in practice, seeing them as personal hymns of evangelism and individual spiritual experience, and no more. They are of course this, but they enshrine also the suffering history of a people longing for political and social, as well as personal liberation. And today too, this community struggles within our British context. And again there is, I believe, a response within their culture that reveals to me the suffering, patient, and yet firm. I think of a Caribbean woman who has been looking after her sick, flat-bound husband in a tower block, for the last ten years. She works in a hospital, supports him, and has been the first black and woman churchwarden in her church. One day, she came home and found her husband had been locked into the bedroom by some white youth, and all her few valuables had been stolen. Her response was amazing—of thanks that her husband was safe, of proportion about the valuables, 'They are only things and we cannot take them with us to heaven', and of firmness, that she will not be kept a prisoner in her flat because of this, and a recommitment to her sustaining participation in church life. This response is, I believe, not just because of her own person, but is part of a tradition that comes from deep within her culture, and the way they have experienced Christ and Christian life.

2. The Church as the place where the barriers of culture are broken down, and the riches of culture shared, and the place of the sacraments within this

For the Epistle to the Ephesians, the breaking down of barriers between Jews and Gentiles is not just a sign of the gospel, it is the gospel. The truth of this has come to me again and again, where I have been lucky enough to serve in my ministry.

In the church where I have been a member for the last nine years in Birmingham, we have a congregation which is half black and half white. There can be pain and misunderstandings in such a mixed community. Fully black churches and fully white churches tend to thrive more. But in my experience, such a mixed community is a small sign of the kingdom. It can too be converting, if all can be free to be themselves, and share the riches from each culture: the harvest supper will offer ham and salad, and goat curry; in worship, intercessions may be led in a quiet and meditative traditional Church of England way, or with the freedom and exuberance of free prayer in the Spirit; music in the same service moves from 'O worship the Lord, in the beauty of holiness', to 'Swing low, sweet chariot'. Real friendships are made across cultures. I remember a white, rather conservative, older member of the congregation, who distributes the chalice, doing this with the black woman mentioned above. As they walk back to their seats afterwards, he always walks arm in arm with her down the aisle. He told me once, 'If you had told me five years ago that I would be a friend of this dear person, let alone, that I would walk like this, arm in arm with her, I would have laughed at you. Yet this is something I am so happy about, for this is what the church is about.' In a city where race divisions are always potentially explosive, and where black and white do not so often meet outside their work, here is a real witness to the reconciling power of the gospel. The white man here needed the enabling friendship with the black woman to know the gospel at all.

I found this most clearly in the Indian prison ministry. Here I learnt most about the sacraments as the signs of this reconciling power. Two Hindu brothers, from a high caste and a rich farming family, were imprisoned for a murder they did not do. They were very depressed, and it was then that they were befriended by a fellow prisoner, who literally put his arms round them, and talked through their problems. He was a member of our Christian fellowship, still an unbaptized Hindu, but committed to Christ. He introduced the two brothers to the fellowship. It was only then that they found out he was a dhobi, washerman, a member of a very low, untouchable caste. He was a man with whom they would have had no dealings outside the prison walls. But they slowly became disciples of Christ through his witness and love. Then they were released, and went back to their village. We asked if they would like baptism. They thought about it, and then replied after some time, 'We will wait until our friend is released. Then we will be baptized publicly with him. For baptism should be about breaking down the barriers between us. That is what Christ has done, through him.' Meanwhile, as a sign of what had happened to them, instead of taking food and water to their farm labourers from outcaste communities, and putting it in the field at midday, and going to eat separately, they resolved to eat with them, and share the same water pot. They also decided to run a youth club for the young men from the so-called untouchable village. 'Such people need community strength to stand up for their rights, and we will help them.' It is people from such a different culture who have taught me one of the centres of the meaning of baptism.

So also with the Eucharist. We held this week by week in the prison, and gave communion only to Christians, though more than half the congregation were Hindus, and some had been part of this for many years. I was led to open the Eucharist to all 'who love the Lord', by a conversation with a life-prisoner, who had killed his father because his father had been with another woman. His Hindu faith had not helped him at that time—it was a matter of his karma; and his caste culture demanded he take justice into his own hands. Contact with Christian preaching in our congregation made him feel his sin. But this left him feeling enormous guilt and depression. I asked him what would help him. He said, 'To know God's forgiveness, as promised by Christ'. I said this was declared in every service. He said, 'But I cannot take the bread and the wine. Unless I can kneel side by side with you, and share the same cup, I cannot know in my heart I am forgiven.' He expressed, more deeply than I can ever do, the essence of how the Eucharist is celebrated for the forgiveness of sins. We opened the table for all who felt this need, from then on.

I am now fortunate enough to be Principal of a college with members from usually more than twenty countries of the world. As we live together as a close Christian community, I learn through each year how we need each other. This is so in times of joy, both social and in worship, as we share the cultural riches of Latin America, of the Philippines, of the many parts of Africa, of South Asia and, yes, important too, of Finland and Germany, and Scotland, and Liverpool and Sussex. We find it too in times of trouble, when truly, when one part of the body hurts, then so does the whole. We found this last year, through the Gulf crisis, the Ethiopian famine, the Bangladesh cyclone, the Sudanese civil war, the massacres in the South African townships, and again too, the violence on our British streets. The prayers of one become the prayers of the whole. And this is the gospel.

3. 'For freedom, Christ has made you free'

This text from Galatians has always meant much to me, in a personal sense. The Christian gospel is about a deep inner freedom. But in terms of our theme, it is also about a potential freedom too from culture. We are not enchained by what we were born into, though by the grace of God we are what we are. St Paul was a Pharisee of Pharisees, yet he could transcend that for the sake of the gospel, and become a Gentile to Gentiles. And more than that, he could feel as a Gentile, and fight to the hilt for their place within the Church.

As I meet Christians from around the world at Selly Oak, I am struck again and again by the text, 'You who were no people, are now God's people'. How many of them come from backgrounds which, in the world's terms, are nothing. I think of an African woman here last year, whose father had beaten her as a child, and had drunk heavily, who had been widowed at an early age, who had been robbed of all her possessions, while living alone with her small children, but who could stand before an English congregation from a different, and so much richer world, and share both her joy at the welcome she was receiving beyond what she could ever expect, and at the same time, confront us with some of the economic facts of world order, which left her country so poor, while Europe was so rich.

I think of one of my theological students in India, who was the first ordinand in his diocese, from his 'lowest of the low' cobbler caste. He worked closely with me for the welfare of the families of prisoners, with whom he had a close identity and compassion, due to his background. I went to his wedding, in his village, and I have a photo from the function, of him wearing a grey suit that I had lent him money for, his father wearing a dhoti and white shirt, and his grandfather wearing a dhoti and no shirt. Part of me is sad, to see him leaving his village culture behind. But may this not be rather romantic? He is experiencing a freedom of choice that his parents have never known. That is gospel, if it continues to be a freedom he uses to fight for justice for those who have been oppressed like him.

In Birmingham I taught theological students too. I remember being pulled up by one of the students, a mother of four, who had a working-class upbringing, and who had also been widowed at a young age. I encouraged her to be herself and, when she was ordained, expressed my sadness when she put on a dog-collar, just like me, and I said I was sorry she had joined the middle class, and put on the male symbol of priesthood. She replied firmly, 'It is all very well for you, you have your background, and your education, and your Oxbridge accent, and your accepted male place. It is you who should take off the collar. For me it is essential, for I want to get things done, for the gospel's sake.' Why should she be enchained by her past, as I wanted to make her, though she is proud to bring all of her past into what she is doing.

It is in meeting with Muslims from the Asian subcontinent that I have become most convinced that this text is gospel. I have the greatest respect for Islam, as is clear from my book *Encounter in the Spirit, Christian–Muslim dialogue in Birmingham* (WCC Risk Series, 1988, 2nd edition 1991). But I have become ever more convinced that we have a great gift in our understanding of freedom. We are free to interpret the scriptures, and to rejoice at the variety of witness to Christ there, we are freed from rules-based ethics, to a grace-filled imperative to love God and love our neighbour 'because he has first loved us'. We are free to forgive, because we are forgiven. We are free to disagree one from another about very fundamental things, and to do this publicly. This may blunt the cutting edge of our preaching sometimes. But that is the cost we have to pay for what is a value of the gospel. We are not even enchained by Christianity itself. It is loyalty to Christ that is crucial, not this or that expression of our faith.

If we go back to our original story, Lispeth was freed from one culture, but did not then put on Christ, but another and alien culture. That has happened to so many in the centuries of European expansion. Instead of freedom, there was a new slavery. Nor was her life in the mission compound a chance to learn from a new culture, and to contribute at the same time something of her own. She was deculturized. Nor did she find anything but a cold Christ. Her experiences contributed nothing to the understanding of Christ held by the missionary. How different with someone like Desmond Tutu. He is not enchained by his culture, and indeed moves easily throughout the world. And his culture is that of a Mirfield Father, as he would admit, as well as a black South African. He is freed to fight for the freedom of his people. And his gospel is expressed in the phrase that we are all God's partners, whether black, white, brown or Asian. To understand Christ, we need each other; effectively to evangelize the world, we need ourselves to be evangelized by each other, from every culture and background, and that itself is gospel.