Inculturating the Gospel

The Philippine experience

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Introduction

THE STATUE OF THE BLACK NAZARENE is considered to be miraculous. Clad in purple, down on one knee, carrying a cross and crowned with thorns, Jesus is imaged as a dark-skinned figure in anguish. Yet this seemingly powerless image, located in Quiapo Church in the middle of one of Manila's busiest commercial districts, attracts thousands of faithful from far and near every Friday, for they believe in its power to cure illnesses and to dispel malevolent spirits. The devotees of *Nuestro Padre Hesus Nazareno* (Our Father Jesus the Nazarene) may attend mass and say the novena prayers, but they also walk on their knees and wait their turn to rub a piece of cloth on to the revered image of Jesus to carry to the sick or as protection against evil spirits.

In Baclaran just outside Manila, the Shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, the largest church in the Philippines, is filled to overflowing every Wednesday. Throughout the day, more than 100,000 devotees pray the perpetual novena in Our Mother's honour. They fix their eyes on the icon above the main altar, also believed to be miraculous, as they recite the novena prayers, make their petitions and render thanks for favours granted. Before leaving they light a votive candle to make sure their pleas remain beneath Our Mother's gaze.

Whether in Quiapo or in Baclaran or in some other church or shrine, what these people manifest is their religiosity, or, in the words of Filipino theologian Carlos Gaspar, the 'subjective, simple, inculturated faith' of the Filipino.

The Philippines is the only predominantly Christian country in Asia. After over four hundred years of Christianity, has the faith really been inculturated? Using the guide questions from the editors of this issue, 'Why did the Church manage to inculturate itself here and not in other parts of the continent? Or is the level of inculturation relatively superficial?' this essay attempts to answer these questions.

The Philippines, located in the area designated as South-East Asia, is an archipelago of over seven thousand islands, with its major island

groups named Luzon, the Visayas and Mindanao. The population is over seventy-four million, consisting mostly of lowland Filipinos. Though over 80 per cent of the people are Catholics, the country has a variety of cultures and subcultures, with different ethnic origins, racial backgrounds, languages, customs and religious traditions. This diversity not only makes the definition of the 'Filipino' complex but also makes the study of inculturation in the Philippines problematic.

Inculturation deals with many aspects of Christian life, but to answer the questions posed, I will focus on the people's religiousness or religiosity, which is a vital component of culture, together with the other symbolic and operating value systems. Religiosity is the way people express their relationship with the Ultimate Mystery we Christians call God. The essay will contain four parts: the meaning of inculturation; the process of Christianization in the Philippines; the people's religiosity and inculturation; and the direction of inculturation in the country today. All this will be discussed from the perspective of lowland Catholicism.

The meaning of inculturation

Inculturation has been defined variously, but I welcome the description from the FABC Papers No 60,[1] where the term is understood as the 'deep and mutually enriching encounter between the Gospel and a people with its particular culture and tradition'. Moreover,

> Inculturation consists not only in the expression of the Gospel and the Christian faith through the cultural medium, but includes, as well, experiencing, understanding and appropriating the Gospel through the cultural resources of a people.

This description highlights not only the reciprocity between gospel and people, but also the people's active role in the process.

Inculturation goes beyond adaptation, accommodation or indigenization, words used in relation to preaching the gospel in non-western categories. While these make use of the native culture in some way, the mutuality in the process is absent. Some Asian theologians use 'incarnation' or even 'indigenization' as a synonym for inculturation. Some others suggest 'inter-culturation' as more appropriate since the exchange between gospel and culture is actually an exchange between two cultures. Still others prefer 'contextualization' as more comprehensive, because it takes into account not only a people's culture but

also their socio-economic and political realities, and the struggles arising from them.

The term was coined in the 1960s – a neologism for an old practice in Christianity. Inculturation finds its inspiration and model in the incarnation. Just as the Word became incarnate to reveal God's message of salvation to humankind (cf Jn 3:16; Heb 4:15), so God's 'good news' should also be 'incarnated' in every culture. The incarnation includes the whole of the Paschal Mystery.

> By his resurrection, Jesus transcends the confines of local particularity, and . . . is Lord of all cultures, histories and people . . . He must be born, die and live anew in every culture, history and people for these to be purified, perfected and ennobled.[2]

Such a model and process thus allows for pluralism. Without reference to inculturation, Vatican Council II affirmed the incarnational approach in *Ad gentes* and other council documents.

The attempt to inculturate the good news began with Paul in his argument with Jewish Christians who wanted to impose their cultural practices on all converts to Christianity. The intent to Judaize Christianity failed but Paul's effort paved the way for the successful inculturation of Christianity in the West – in Graeco-Roman terms. This westernized Christianity was what prevailed in the centuries to come. The conceptualizations and formulations from the West became normative for all Christians, and western culture was taken to be superior to all others. It was this brand of Christianity, with Iberian embellishments, that reached the Philippines with the Magellan expedition in 1521 under the aegis of the Spanish crown.

The Christianization of the Filipino

Before the coming of Magellan, the early lowlanders held a fundamental world-view which was the basis of their religiosity and culture. This gave meaning to their life experience, governed their behaviour and relations, and helped them to cope with natural calamities, human tribulations and the mysteries of life itself. According to their world-view, the whole cosmos is inhabited by a multiplicity of spiritual beings and invisible powers, to which the human world is subject and which are to be respected. These spirits (which include the souls of ancestors) are everywhere, each with its own nature, function or locality, though most are nameless. In effect, they control the whole created world. If

there is a supreme spirit above all, it remains inaccessible. Humans deal only with intermediate spirits, which can either be beneficial or harmful.

Since all natural and human phenomena are attributed to these invisible beings, humans placate them with sacrifices and offerings to obviate any untoward happenings. It is important how they relate to the spirits. Special rituals are left in the hands of mediators (*catalonan* in Tagalog, *babaylan* in Visayan), who are mostly women. These religious functionaries use charms, spells and incantations to contact the spirits, but there are no prescribed places for their rituals. For the ordinary day-to-day warding off of evil spirits, the natives wear amulets or magic charms, or rely on omens and divination. They also keep idols of stone, wood or clay. To summarize, the cosmic religion of the early lowlanders based on their world-view was marked by a strong reliance on, and relationship with, nature and the spirit-world. It was materialistic and this-worldly, with magic and bargaining playing an important part.

This was the native religion Ferdinand Magellan encountered when his expedition reached the archipelago. His primary purpose when he sailed westward from the Iberian peninsula was not evangelization, but to find a sea route to the Moluccas to capture some of the lucrative spice trade. A miscalculation brought the expedition to the Visayan Islands, then to Cebu.[3] It was in Cebu that Magellan's missionary zeal was fired up. After he persuaded the inhabitants of the superiority of Spanish arms and the Spaniards' religion, the native chieftain and eight hundred followers accepted baptism. But these first conversions proved abortive. When Magellan was killed in a battle shortly after, the newly baptized Cebuanos apostatized and killed a number of his men.

Not until forty-five years later did the simultaneous colonization and evangelization of the islands begin in earnest. The Legazpi expedition which sailed from New Spain (Mexico) in 1564 included Augustinian friars who had the task of converting the natives.[4] Five years later, however, the friars had baptized only one hundred natives, mostly children. Besides native opposition, the Augustinians themselves were careful not to baptize too readily, recalling Magellan's fiasco and being unsure of the permanency of their stay. Only in 1570 did King Philip II (after whom the Philippines was named) make clear his intention to retain this new Spanish colony.

With few exceptions, the natives resisted the Christian faith, though Christianity was not the first organized religion to touch their lives. The Spaniards discovered along Manila Bay some communities with Islamic rulers, but the people seemed only nominal Muslims with little

knowledge of Islam. There were also Indian and Malay religious influences, but on the whole, the natives held on to their indigenous beliefs and practices.

It was these 'pagan' religious patterns that the friars sought to eliminate. Despite opposition to the cross and open armed revolts against the crown (often identified together), the friars persisted in their labours and were consequently rewarded. Baptisms started to multiply. By 1594, approximately 85 per cent of the lowland natives had been baptized.

On the part of the friars, a few factors contributed to the increase in baptisms. Besides the arrival of more missionaries and their serious effort to study the local languages, there was their co-option of the local élite, the ruling class of pre-Hispanic times, renamed *principalia.* For certain privileges, such as exemption from the annual tribute and compulsory labour, the *principalia* were to give up their idolatry and superstitions, and because of their status and influence, were given the task of marshalling the populace to the Church.[5]

On the part of the populace, the principle of localization was at work. The people saw correspondence between aspects of the Catholic faith and their pre-Christian beliefs and practices. They equated Jesus and the saints with the intermediate spirits, the mass and sacraments with their sacrifices and rituals, the cross and religious statues with their idols, and so on. They saw magic and bargaining in the sacraments and devotions, and were attracted to the Spanish fiestas, pageantry and processions. They also found appealing the novel teaching on death and eternal salvation. While basically this-worldly, they were captivated by the 'idea of another life in another time'. In the present life, they were enmeshed in a social order consisting of Spanish patrons and the *principalia* on the one hand, and the populace on the other, but for the latter the reward of surrender and endurance was the assurance of a place in this other-worldly realm.[6] This teaching on the afterlife was likewise appealing to those natives who benefited from the relations of inequality: the *principalia.*

All these reasons notwithstanding, Aloysius Pieris' theory of cosmic (this-worldly, non-salvific) and metacosmic (transcendental, soteriological) religions[7] confirms why Christianity was subsequently implanted in the Philippines and not in other parts of the continent. A cosmic religion is 'an open-ended spirituality that awaits a transcendental orientation from a metacosmic religion'.[8] In the Philippines, the cosmic religion was relatively intact when Christianity arrived, while in the rest of Asia, other soteriologies had preceded Christianity by cen-

turies and had already domesticated cosmic religions into a well-integrated cultural system.

People's religiosity and inculturation

The coming of Christianity undoubtedly affected the natives' religiosity and culture, though it is questioned how much of the faith was really understood by the converts. Religious instruction and sermons were given in the vernacular, but the key terms, deemed untranslatable, were retained in Spanish, such as *Dios, Santisima Trinidad, Espiritu Santo, Virgen, Cruz* and *gracia.*[9] Many ideas were thus left to the natives' imagination, creating mental associations 'that had only the most tenuous connection to the original message of the priest'.[10] The new converts inevitably interpreted Christian teaching according to their world-view.

The natives absorbed much of Spain's popular piety and symbolism imposed by the colonizers. Being under the Moors for almost eight hundred years, Spain developed a popular religious tradition marked by a profound sense of tragedy. This brand of religiosity was particularly evident in the popular Spanish image of Christ – a tragic, agonizing, victim Christ or a dead Christ. Unlike the Christ of the Gospels, it is said that the Christ of Spanish folk tradition was either an infant or a corpse.[11] The natives thus assimilated the Spanish devotion, not only to the *Santo Nino* (Holy Child) and the *Santo Entierro* (Christ Entombed), but to the Virgin Mary and patron saints. Their veneration of Mary started when the church in each municipality under Spanish control was required to display a statue of the Virgin Mother. Devotion to Mary was, however, not alien. Some early native communities venerated female deities and most of the religious mediators were highly respected women *catalonan* or *babaylan.*

If the masses in general had a hard time grasping their new faith, it was not so with the upper class. From the beginning of colonization, the Augustinians favoured preserving the native élite as a privileged class.[12] The thrust of evangelization was to win over the *principalia,* rather than maintain the faith of the populace. Their sons were taken in as boarders in the friars' *convento* for more intensive religious instruction and some elementary education including Spanish. Later, they were admitted to schools originally intended for Spaniards, so they started adopting the Spanish language, Spanish attire and Spanish ways. So successful was their indoctrination that between 1698 and 1706 the first native priests were ordained from within their ranks. The

first religious congregation for native women founded in 1684 had the same social origins.

After centuries of Spanish rule, the result of this religious differentiation was the emergence of a two-track religiosity: the Hispanicized or 'prescribed' religiosity of the élite which adhered closely to church teachings, and the 'popular' religiosity of the rural, poorer majority, which combined the indigenous religion with aspects of the Christian faith, however these were understood. With only some alterations, this dual track in the people's religiosity remained even as the colonizers changed hands at the end of the nineteenth century, from Spain to the United States.

The revolution that finally overthrew the Spanish colonial government did not affect the structure of the Church. Though there were defections among the élite and later among the clergy itself, when Spanish colonial rule came to an end in 1898, it left behind a Spanish hierarchy intact and a largely Hispanicized church, at least in its externals. It was hardly an inculturated church, but there were two clear indicators of its need. One was the rise of popular religiosity and another was the clamour of the native clergy to 'Filipinize' the parishes.

Although the first ordination of natives was in the late 1690s, native vocations to the priesthood did not flower till much later because of the friars' insistence on the natives' innate racial incapacity to live up to the clerical state. In the 1850s there started to emerge a native clergy noted for their learning and priestly capabilities, who eventually asked that the Spanish friars in the parishes be replaced by native priests. The unheeded appeals both to the crown and to Rome finally led to the founding of the schismatic Philippine Independent Church in 1902, with a clear nationalistic orientation. This was followed by the formation of other indigenous churches anxious to preach Christ the Filipino way.

As another indicator, popular religiosity showed that even after centuries of evangelization, the common folk retained their pre-Christian beliefs and practices while professing the Christian faith, unaware of the inconsistencies between the two religious systems. They valued both the gospel and their culture, and were not willing to let go of either. The Catholic Church, however, did not attend seriously to these early pointers until the last decades of the twentieth century.

The direction of inculturation today

In spite of the shortcomings of Spanish evangelization, 'the faith was implanted deeply . . . When at the turn of the century, we rebelled

against the sword, we did not throw off the cross. We kept the traditions of our forebears in the faith.' Thus stated the Second Plenary Council in 1991 (para. 11).[13] When the US forces arrived in 1898, they brought a new set of evangelizers – this time Protestant missionaries – whose mission was 'to uplift and Christianize' the Filipinos, to use President McKinley's well-quoted words. Though some efforts were successful, the majority of lowland Christians remained faithful to the Catholic Church.

The new colonial government soon realized it needed the Catholic Church for its 'benevolent assimilation' programme. The new Church hierarchy accordingly adopted a strategy similar to that of the Spanish Church before them: to educate a new generation of Americanized élite, both women and men. English replaced Spanish, but in effect it was just another western church that reinforced the Graeco-Roman form of Catholicism. Catholic schools and seminaries continued to promote western-style Catholicism even as the Philippines became politically independent in 1946.

It was only after Vatican Council II, which encouraged adaptation, regional theologies, local churches, and use of the vernacular, that the Catholic Church in the Philippines gradually changed its attitudes and practices. The shift was evident at the Second Plenary Council (PCP II) which called for a 'Church of the Poor'. The emphasis was now on the Church as community-based instead of institution-centred, laity-focused instead of clerical, mass-oriented instead of élitist, inculturated instead of westernized. The council saw the importance of inculturation, speaking both of its 'fruits' and its 'lack'.

Even before PCP II, however, Filipino theologians and other church people were already involved in the work of inculturation, analysing reasons for its lack and proposing means to surmount them. It became evident that there had previously been little communication between the gospel and culture. Culture for the Filipino is both dynamic and static. The people were westernized through colonization, Christianization, modernization and, lately, globalization, to the point where they considered things western superior to their own. But despite the external influences, the primal this-worldly world-view was never effaced or replaced. It remained at the base of the people's lowland culture, religiosity and spirituality, and today stays alive in popular religiosity.

Because a this-worldly religious orientation was alien to the Graeco-Roman form of Christianity, it was quickly associated with superstition. It was not recognized as compatible with other forms of the Christian

tradition where the holy is found in creation and in people, where the divine is never understood just intellectually, where God is immanent, Emmanuel, God-with-us (cf Mt 1:23; Jn 1:14).[14] Most Filipinos value relationship and 'felt experience' over cognitive rationality in dealing with the divine, so external symbols they can see and touch are integral to their religiosity, and simply 'gazing' at the symbols and images is prayer. The gospel cannot ignore these religious patterns, among many others, in its dialogue with the people's culture. Neither can the belittling of the native culture due to westernization be disregarded; what was devalued must be re-valued, what was depreciated, re-appreciated. In the dialogue, the gospel itself needs to be reinterpreted in indigenous terms for the people to comprehend, live out and make their own.

On the other hand, the culture must also take the gospel seriously. It must allow itself to be critiqued, purified and transformed by the gospel. In relation to the divine, immanence must be complemented by transcendence, the affective by the cognitive; all aberrations need to go. Popular piety must be reminded that between an infant and a corpse, there was a man Jesus who inaugurated a reign of justice and peace, who showed a new non-dominating way of loving and relating, who came that all may have life to the full (Jn 10:10). And beyond Jesus' suffering and death was his resurrection, a promise for the future. It is against Jesus' person and message that people's culture and their religiosity – the subjective, simple, inculturated faith of the Filipino – will be judged.

It is evident that inculturation still has a long way to go in the Philippines. It is a slow ongoing process that involves the local community of the faithful, and not just a few experts or erudite researchers, as John Paul II in *Redemptoris missio* reminds us. It is imperative that evangelizers, both women and men, lay and religious, be formed in a 'Filipino way' (para. 210). The Church, then, needs to develop ecclesial structures and approaches responsive to needs of the Filipino people, especially the marginalized sectors – the youth, the women. This means the formulation of a catechesis, liturgy and theology that are not only inculturated, but holistic, integrated and inclusive as well. PCP II acknowledged that, for most Filipinos, the faith is centred on the practice of popular piety with the line between the two tracks getting slowly blurred: educated professionals, bejewelled matrons and uneducated market vendors kneel side by side in Quiapo and Baclaran, and prelates officiate in popular devotions. Thus popular religion has an important role to play. If inculturation is a true exchange between the

gospel and culture, then the process should begin at the very roots of the people's religiosity that have been kept alive by popular religion.[15]

Inculturation is one of the major challenges facing the Philippine Church today. In claiming inculturation as an urgent need, PCP II does so not for the benefit of the local Church alone:

> Inculturation is necessary for the sake of the (universal) Church itself . . . The catholicity of the Church is more fully realized when it is able to assimilate and use the riches of a people's culture for the glory of God. (para. 208)

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NOTES

1 Entitled *Theses on the local Church* by the Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), published in 1991.

2 Jose M. de Mesa, *And God said, 'Bahala Na!': the theme of Providence in the lowland Filipino context* (Quezon City: Publishers' Printing Press, 1979), p 21.

3 Most of the historical data in this section can be found in T. Valentino Sitoy Jr, *The initial encounter vol I: A history of Christianity in the Philippines* (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers, 1985).

4 The native inhabitants were not known as Filipinos until the nineteenth century.

5 See Mario V. Bolasco, *Points of departure: essays on Christianity, power and social change*, ed Edicio de la Torre (Manila: St Scholastica's College, 1994), p 13.

6 See Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting colonialism: translation and Christian conversion in Tagalog society under early Spanish rule* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1988), p 168 *et passim.*

7 See *An Asian theology of liberation* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988), pp 54–55, 71–74, 98–99.

8 *Ibid.*, p 54.

9 For the ramification of untranslatable terms, see Rafael, *Contracting colonialism*, especially ch 1.

10 Rafael, *Contracting colonialism*, p 117.

11 See John Mackay, *The other Spanish Christ* (New York: Macmillan and Co, 1933), p 102. Also, Douglas J. Elwood and Patricia L. Magdamo, *Christ in Philippine context* (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers, 1971), pp 2–4.

12 Most of the historical data in the rest of this section can be found in Bolasco, *Points of departure*, pp 13–15.

13 Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (Manila: Secretariat, 1992). The numbers following citations refer to the Conciliar Document.

14 Cf Leonardo N. Mercado, 'Inculturation and the Filipino religious experience' in Teresita B. Obusan (ed), *Roots of Filipino spirituality* (Republic of the Philippines: Mamamthala, Inc., 1998), pp 187–192 *passim.*

15 See Emmanuel Lantin, 'Conclusion: alien no longer' in Jaine A. Belita CM (ed), *And God said: Hala. Studies in popular religiosity in the Philippines* (Manila: De la Salle University Press, 1991), pp 183–184.