

interprets it and passes judgments that influence the reader even more.

The task is not an easy one. If the mission historian misreads the past, or analyzes the research in a careless manner, he/she could leave a legacy of misunderstanding about the missionaries as well as Third World churches, or about the relationship between both. If, on the contrary, the mission historian is a successful storyteller and a keen analyst, his/her images of the past and allotment of praise and blame will be appreciated by both missionaries and indigenous churches as a true measure of their common history and relationship.

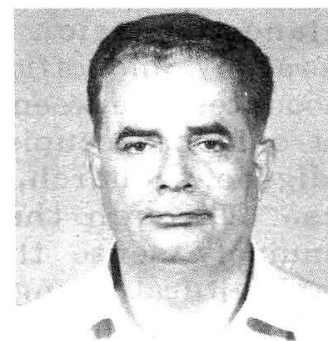
NOTES

1. Two articles addressing the question are worth mentioning: Paul Jenkins, "Mission History -- A Manifesto," Missiology, 10, No. 2 (April 1982); 199-210. Eric J. Sharpe, "Reflections on Missionary Historiography," International Bulletin of Missionary Research 13 No. 2 (April 1989): 76-81.
2. Sharpe, 80.
3. Walbert Buhlmann, God's Chosen Peoples (New York: Orbis Books, 1982), p. 66.
4. Maryknoll Fathers Archives, Maryknoll China History Project, Joint Advisory Board Minutes of February 14, 1980.
5. Jean-Paul Wiest, Maryknoll in China: A History, 1918-1955 (New York: M.E. Sharpe 1988).
6. Jenkins, 201.

The Idea of Inculturation in Catholic and Protestant Historiography

by Jean Charbonnier

Inculturation can be broadly understood as the expression of the Christian Faith within the context of a local culture. It includes the idea of "contextualisation" which is more familiar to Protestant circles and takes more into account the socioeconomic circumstances. In Western Christian History, the principle of inculturation was used by some Greek Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria and



Origen to promote an expression of the Gospel . within the context of the Hellenistic culture. In modern Asian history, Jesuit missionaries with a humanistic formation attempted to assimilate the leading cultural traditions of Asia. Robert de Nobili in India and Matteo Ricci in China may be considered as the pioneers of inculturation in the Asian context.

In the 20th century, nationalist movements and the accession of colonial or semi-colonial countries to full independence have spurred theological reflection and given a new vigour to the principle of inculturation. The principle applies first to pastoral work and catechesis. But its role in the writing of Christian history is equally important, especially in the case of China. Any new development in Chinese society has to be legitimized through an overall interpretation of history. And Chinese history means the continuity of a powerful cultural tradition involving a view of the world with deep moral implications.

Our purpose in this short essay is to evaluate how the idea of inculturation is presently used by Catholic and Protestant historians of Christianity in China. We shall select two cases from recent American works: Ralph Covell's history of the spread of the gospel in China, published in 1986 under the title: Confucius, the Buddha and Christ, and Jean-Paul Wiest's history, Maryknoll in China (1918-1955), which came out in 1988. There is some imbalance in comparing the contents of these two books: Covell deals with the whole of Christian history in China, while J.P. Wiest covers only the history of the Maryknoll Missionary Society in China in the first half of the 20th century. But what matters here is their common concern with the successes or failures of a real Christian inculturation in Chinese society.

China Church Development Seen As a Progress in Inculturation

Ralph Covell is Professor of World Missions at Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary in Colorado. His book is not a general history of Christianity in China. Rather he concentrates on the way the gospel has been presented at various stages in Chinese history. He analyses the contents of the message as it was transmitted and how it was understood, in what kind of cultural, social and political circumstances it was welcomed or rejected. His inquiry seems to be motivated by two major ideas: on the one hand, the foreign character of Christianity within the context of a civilisation fully conscious of its own moral values, and on the other, the theme of "contextualisation", which is an operational concept much favoured by current American missiologists.

Under the Tang Dynasty in the 7th and 8th centuries, Covell shows how the gospel preached by the Nestorians was closely associated with the essential teachings of Buddhism. When the Buddhists underwent

persecution during the 9th century, the small Christian minority suffered even more. Despite their integration into the local religion, these first Christians slowly disappeared. No doubt among the reasons for their disappearance was separation from their communities of origin in Syria and Persia. Covell is very brief in his comments on the Franciscan Mission in the 13th and 14th centuries. These messengers from medieval Christendom directed much of their efforts to establishing and maintaining friendly relations with the Mongol conquerors. Their use of the Latin and Mongol languages kept them at a distance from the Chinese cultural milieu.

In contrast, the arrival of the Jesuits with Matteo Ricci at the end of the 14th century holds the author's attention because it was the first serious attempt at cultural adaptation. The Jesuits, he notes, managed to present themselves to the imperial court as humble barbarians eager to learn from Chinese wisdom. They offered gifts to the Emperor in the manner of foreign tributaries seeking his protection. The apologetics of Matteo Ricci were drawn from religious and moral concepts found in the Confucian tradition and supported the literati against their Buddhist opponents. Ricci's treatise The True Idea of God was a rational introduction to revealed Christian truths which could be readily accepted by the Chinese mind. His Western logic appeared strange, but the power of his arguments were impressive. Covell is aware of some pitfalls in the Jesuits' approach. While their final purpose was conversion to Christ, their approach could also induce their sympathisers to accept a purely moral understanding of the message of salvation. He gives full credit however, to the merits of their method. Their failure in later years, he explains, should be attributed to Rome's interdiction forbidding the practice of Chinese rites in honour of Confucius and the ancestors. He does not examine the weight of this argument, which has been reiterated by generations of missiologists and is taken on face value by rank-and-file theologians.

Covell's contribution is more original when he deals with the Protestant missions during the colonial period of the 19th and 20th centuries. He brings to light some attempts to "indigenize" the Christian message which are little known in Catholic circles. He shows, for instance, how the first Christian tracts were inspired by popular Confucian tracts aimed at forming the moral conscience of the Chinese public. Karl Gutzlaff thus composed a 30 page booklet under the title The Perfect Man's Model. Protestant writers also worked at presenting a systematic natural theology which they thought would be more digestible to Chinese minds. W.A.P. Martin's Evidences of Christianity (Tiandao Suyuan), written in 1854, argues from the order of the universe and the innate capacities of the human intellect. The moral judgment, it shows, is the Divine Law inscribed in the human heart. With this kind of approach, Martin falls heir

to Matteo Ricci's apologetic tradition. Meanwhile, secular literature produced by the Protestant Missions contributed to the increased knowledge in China of western scientific and technical progress. This again responded to the aspirations of a Chinese intelligentsia eager to modernise their country.

Reviewing contemporary developments in the Communist and pre-Communist eras, Covell distinguishes two main streams of Protestant thought: the "liberal" and the "pietist." The liberal stream is directed towards social concerns and favours a secular interpretation of the gospel. The liberals first supported the Neo-Confucian attempt at "spiritual reconstruction" and, later, the Communist effort at "building up socialism." The pietist stream, on the other hand, is more radically religious, stressing personal conversion. Faith comes first; works then bear witness to a new life in the Risen Christ. The latest developments in Chinese Protestant theology are better understood against the background of these earlier trends. Today, the social orientation of Christianity is more officially encouraged, while the pietist stream has made significant inroads in popular, semi-clandestine circles. Covell considers as largely positive the present efforts toward the "contextualization" of the Christian message. Having suffered for their faith and deprived of any power, Chinese Christians, he seems to think, are able to witness to the gospel in society without falling into the trap of a materialistic secularism. Free from foreign interference, Chinese Christians, he notes, may now find their own way of expressing their faith in the present unparalleled conditions of openness to the gospel.

The same kind of optimism seems to be shared by P. Richard Bohr from the Midwest China Study Research Center, when he makes the following comment on J.P. Wiest's book, Maryknoll in China:

This long awaited book breaks new ground in the study of Christian missions in China... Its greatest contribution is to explain how the "Maryknoll spirit" inspired the transition from missionary Christianity to Chinese Christianity. The Maryknoll missionaries respected Chinese culture and developed some of the most farsighted efforts ever to indigenize the spiritual and social aspect of the Christian Gospel in the Middle Kingdom. By analysing the strengths of this effort, Wiest underlines the Maryknollers greatest legacy: the building of a foundation on which Chinese Catholics erected an autonomous church following the communist expulsion of the missionaries after 1949.

Such words of appreciation on the part of a Protestant theologian bear witness to the progress of the ecumenical spirit in America. They give strong support to the intentions of the author as expressed in his introduction.

The days of cultural absolutism are over. Nations and Churches are in constant evolution, thus making cultural certitudes, traditions, and even value systems relative. Four hundred years ago, the Jesuit Matteo Ricci and his companions, unknowingly perhaps, began to break down cultural barriers and to challenge autocratic thinking as well as one-nation self sufficiency. They were bridge-builders and agents of dialogue. They foreshadowed today's movement toward genuine pluralism based on mutual respect, equality, and intercultural exchange. Today the words of Vatican II in the Document on Missionary Activity continue to exhort missionaries to be familiar with the national and religious traditions of peoples gladly and reverently laying bare the seed of the Word which lies hidden in them.

This statement, however, is not meant to be a thesis which the author tried to prove in his writing of the history of Maryknoll in China. Whereas praise should be given to J.P. Wiest and his team for their scientific honesty and objectivity, the contents of the book itself may leave the overall impression that the American missionaries, in fact, failed to achieve real inculturation. Chapter 7, dealing with "Maryknoll and Politics", presents an important thread linking the successive stages of the American missionary enterprise by setting it against the context of that country's history. Attention should be given to the following points.

The birth of Maryknoll in the American context was far from ecumenical. The founders were aware of the American Protestant missionary activity in China. They did not want the Chinese to believe that Catholicism did not exist in America or that it was an outdated form of Christianity (the Protestants had branded Catholicism as "jiujiao", the old religion). Arriving in China, the American missionaries had to face all kinds of hardships: the hot and humid climate of Canton Province, the poor living conditions in the countryside, a difficult language with many different dialects, a very small Christian minority, and the miseries caused by armed conflicts among political cliques. Yet, they knew how to form close relationships with the local populace. At first, they relied heavily on catechists, who were invaluable interpreters and intermediaries. But the missionaries soon realized their need to assimilate the local dialects and customs if they were to integrate themselves more fully into the life of the country. Father Francis Ford, then Vicar Apostolic of the Kaying mission, advised his religious sisters to mingle with the local women in their kitchens and market-places. Life sharing, he understood, was an essential step in evangelization.

No matter what degree of success they achieved in adapting to the local culture, the American missions did manage to gain the hearts of

the people through their many charitable works: caring for abandoned babies and orphans, providing medical treatment for lepers, hospitality for homeless refugees, and distributing food to the starving. These works of mercy impressed the local population even during those times when sentiments of Chinese nationalism arose, marked by a strong anti-foreign and anti-Christian feeling. Such services however, depended on outside financial resources. The protection of society's victims was sometimes also linked to the prestige of the American flag, and missionaries in desperate situations could draw some comfort from the feeling of belonging to a rich and powerful nation.

Social evils were often too easily attributed to the "Bolsheviks" or the "Reds." Strongly opposed to atheistic communism, the missionaries had a tendency to close their eyes to the corrupt ways of the Nationalist regime. While Chiang Kai Shek's policy did give them an opportunity to take part in the educative and social enterprises of the New Life Movement launched in 1934, their enthusiastic support of this regime would redound on them after the Communist victory in 1949. Nor would their active support of the war of resistance against Japan gain them any credibility for patriotism with the new regime. On the contrary, their cooperation with the American army would provide the Communists with ammunition to use against them. They would be accused of spying, especially during the Korean War. Their patriotism was, in fact, more American than Chinese; it began with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941. Before that, the American missionaries serving in Manchuria were not hostile to the Japanese rulers of that part of China. Anxious to protect their missions, they kept silent on the misdeeds of the Japanese troops and labeled the Chinese resistance fighters "bandits." While these political compromises were aimed at safeguarding the missionary enterprise, they failed to take into account the deepest aspirations of the Chinese people.

By acknowledging these past mistakes, the History of Maryknoll in China tends to legitimise friendly relations with the new masters of China and to endorse its new socio-political order. Within this context, the author holds, the autonomous local church of China ought to be given encouragement. In fact, fruitful exchanges with this church have become possible in the 1980's, he points out. Projects approved by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association may now be funded by Catholic agencies in the United States or other countries on the condition that there are no strings attached, since the 3-Self principles are to be strictly adhered to. After all Chinese independence is absolute and is not to be encroached upon.

When the author of Maryknoll in China writes that "the days of cultural absolutism are over," he might have in mind the church in America where a great deal of self-criticism has been taking place. We may

wonder if the same optimistic view can be maintained when advocating inculturation in the Chinese context.

Critical Inculturation in the Light of the Gospel

In the past, mission history was church centered and tended to glorify the achievements of the missionary societies. Modern missiologists of China, some of them inspired by the life and views of Father Vincent Lebbe, have reversed this trend. They have condemned the overbearing attitude and the political compromises of the missionaries in the colonial era and stressed that a missionary should be Chinese with the Chinese. Their arguments were most welcomed by Marxist historians who condemned the missions as a form of cultural aggression stemming from Western imperialism. Chinese nationalists who do not share the Marxist vision of history are also critical of some missionary attitudes. Their arguments are based on a sense of cultural identity. This background has to be taken into account when we try to appreciate the context in which Ralph Covell and J.P. Wiest have written their histories.

In the American Catholic context of the 1980's, certain concerns have come to the fore as a result of the orientations given by the 2nd Vatican Council. Service of man, dialogue and presence in the world of today have been further encouraged by the constitution Gaudium et Spes. The relevance of the gospel to social justice and human culture has been even more dramatically perceived in the various currents of liberation theology. Another significant impact of the Council has been in ecclesiology. With the formation of episcopal conferences, more attention is being given to the growth of local churches. Church leadership in America, Canada, Brazil and other countries has showed some impatience with Rome's tendency towards over-centralisation.

Protestants for their part have shown interest in these new trends of the Catholic Church. The development of an autonomous Catholic Church in China could appear as a privileged case, or even as a test. We should mention here the thesis submitted to the University of St. Paul, Ottawa, Canada in 1986 by Kim-Kwong Chan, a research worker associated with the China Research Center in Hong Kong. Under the Title "Towards a Contextual Ecclesiology", he deals with "The Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China (1979-1983): its Life and Theological Implications". This contribution to the recent history of the Catholic Church in China is invaluable in its own right. Focussing on contextualisation, the author would like to present the Chinese experience as a model for building up an autocephalous local Catholic Church, which would not be schismatic and which would be well integrated into the life and culture of the country. But his honest inquiry results in demonstrating the ambiguities of the word "contextualisation" Is it adaptation,

compromises, inculturation, or secularisation? The author himself expresses some personal confusion about this matter when he asks the question: "What is the difference between the contextualisation and the domestication of the local Church?" (p.122)

This leads us to raise a key question: how to make critical use of the idea of inculturation in the light of the gospel? We make the following suggestions:

(1) "Chinese Culture" should be better analysed.

--It means first a sense of identity and the pride of belonging to an ancient and rich civilisation. Such consciousness is often coupled with a depreciation of what is foreign, especially where moral values are concerned.

--It is a compact system involving politics, literature, arts, religion, moral traditions and local customs with the whole system being regulated by the government in power.

--There are, however, differentiations within the system. We might speak of different cultural levels: first, the official culture, whether classical or revolutionary, which finds its formulation in the State ideology; secondly, the culture of the intellectuals from "a hundred schools" which may play a critical role vis-a vis the administration in power; and thirdly, popular culture as expressed in drama, novels, poetry, story-telling, cartoons, Taoist practices and local customs. Modern revolutionary writers such as Lu Xun have drawn the attention of the public to these non-conformist streams which are more alive among the poor. Lu Xun also focussed on youth, on women, on the sick. More recently criticism of the official culture has been revived in the spirit of Lu Xun by writers such as Bo Yang. The producers of the telefilm The River's Elegy have also made significant criticism of the cultural tradition of the past.

(2) Christians should exercise discernment in examining the cultural heritage.

Catholics should put an end to lamenting their failure to endorse the Chinese rites as practised by the officials of the Empire, or their inability to convert the intelligentsia. They should thank God for having been forced to spread the gospel among the poor in the countryside. The hardships endured in sharing the life of poor farmers have produced wonderful fruit. The Chinese church survives today and is most alive in the countryside and among poor fishermen. Official atheistic pressure can do nothing to impede the faith of these people.

Some Asian theologians have come to a better understanding of what inculturation means in the light of the gospel. This is true in the case of Wilfred Felix, an Indian member of the International Theological Commission. An inspiring article of his has been published in the Vidyajyoti

Journal for September 1988, under the title: "Inculturation: Reflections in the Asian context". As part of our conclusion we quote from his article.

Some of the attempts at inculturation made in the past, e.g. by Roberto de Nobili and Matteo Ricci, related to the higher strata of society. Underlying these attempts was the 'filter down theory', namely, the idea that by association with the culture of those at the higher echelons of society the masses at the base will automatically be influenced. Even the new spurt of enthusiasm for inculturation in the wake of Vatican II has been directed along the lines of absorbing into the Church the 'classical' culture fostered and cultivated mostly by elitist groups.

Today the local churches in Asia turn decisively towards the culture of the weak and the marginalized...

True inculturation would presuppose also a correct reading of history. It must be noted in this connection that there is a general trend to interpret history from the perspective of the dominant or majority group, and the traditions and cultures of the lower strata and of the minorities are passed over in silence or presented in a distorted way. A true history of culture must be comprehensive with due place given to the culture and tradition of every sector of the population.

These remarks on the general history of culture apply even more to the process of inculturation in Church history.

A final question should be raised: does being with the poor and the weak mean "marginality"? The answer obviously is a follow-up question: Should Christians be eager to baptise a culture which produces marginal people? We can console ourselves with the realization that being with the marginal people may mean being at the very heart of the silent majority. Bishop James E. Walsh struck the right chord when he wrote in The Field Afar many years ago: "I choose you sang in my heart as I looked at my awkward farmer boy, perfect figure of the underprivileged soul."

He made a good choice because these are the people who have written, and still write, the real history of the Church in China... with their sweat, and their blood, and their tears.