

RELIGION IS THE MATRIX OF CULTURE

Reflections on the Inculturation of Christianity

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It seems necessary first to recognize that not only the word "culture" in the corporate sense in which we use it today, but even the very concept is of late 18th century origin, not merely in the English language, but also in other languages of East and West. "Kultur" in German, meaning at that time refinement in the human person produced by education and training in the arts and sciences, according to Moses Mendelssohn, the German Jewish philosopher who was a contemporary of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), was a neologism in the German language in his time, and that too used only by the elite.

Even as late as 1948, T S Eliot did not dare define culture, but only wrote Notes Towards the Definition of Culture. And in 1971 George Steiner wrote his In Bluebeard's Castle: Notes towards the Redefinition of Culture. Both Eliot and Steiner, among the great minds of our century, could only grope for a definition of culture and provide some notes for it, but not say the final word as to what it is.

In fact the word is notoriously difficult to define, even to this day. In 1952 there was an attempt to bring together the various divergent meanings and definitions in various disciplines in Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions

Papers of Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology,
Vol. 47). It is one thing for an archaeologist, another for an
anthropologist, yet something else for the sociologist.

In archaeology Culture means that aspect of social
behaviour as can be reconstructed from the archaeological record,
which means mostly the material culture left by a society, hardly
a reliable guide to the essentials of a culture.

In anthropology, culture is what men and women create
out of nature for themselves and transmit to posterity. Culture
is regarded as the particular historical realization of the human
potential by a given society at a given time. Usually the an-
thropologist shies away from defining contemporary industrial-
urban culture, but prefers to make studies of pre-industrial or
"primitive" societies and cultures which still survive.

Culture comes from the Latin root "cultus" which can
mean cultivation as in agriculture or horticulture or piscicul-
ture; it can also mean training, discipline, mental culture,
civilisation, refinement. It is also used for the honouring,
adoration and worship of God or gods. The basic root of both
culture and cultus or cult is colo which means to tend, to care
for, to refine, to cultivate, to venerate, to worship.

It was in that sense that the Germans first used the
word Kultur. Education and culture - Bildung und Kultur were the
means to qualify for entry into the ruling class - the bour-
geoisie of the Industrial Civilisation. In the Feudal system,
aristocratic birth was the ticket of entry into the ruling class.
In the industrial-capitalist system it was education and culture
that lift you into the upper echelons. Today of course neither

education nor culture is necessary for entry into the ruling class. Sheer money power and muscle power (including goonda power or god-man power) can give one entrance.

But today when we speak of "Gospel and Culture" or "Christ and Culture", we do not mean that refinement which makes one a cultivated or cultured person. We mean more or less what the anthropologists and sociologists mean: the corporate social heritage of a community - the total body of material and spiritual artifacts produced and used by a community: systems of symbols, ideas, rituals, beliefs, aesthetic perceptions and expressions including art, music, dance, poetry and literature, distinctive forms of behaviour and social exchange, modes of family and social organization, mores and ethical norms, institutions of political and economic organisation and so on. Let us, for the time being, keep in mind that distinction between personal culture and corporate culture.

If personal "culture" as education and refinement was once the entrance ticket to the ruling class, corporate culture meant something entirely different - even the unrefined could be part of corporate culture. But do you think we had a word, for example, in Sanskrit, for either concept of culture? As far as I know, the answer is no at least for corporate culture, until we come to the modern period when our thinking is in western categories and we began to create words for concepts that do not exist in our "culture". Neither samskara nor samskr̥ti had either of these meanings until very recently.

Traditionally, the samskrit root samskr has a meaning parallel to Latin colo and cultus: to adorn, to grace, to refine, to polish, as the very name of the language is samskrta or a refined language of the elite, as opposed to prakrta or unrefined local vernaculars of the common people. Samskara was generally used in a cultic-ritual sense, namely to consecrate by the chanting of mantras, to purify a person by scriptural ceremonies, to consecrate, to sanctify. Derivatively it came to mean, as in the Latin, to refine, to polish, to educate. But its original meaning is a sacred rite: Manu mentions 12 such samskaras, others speak of 16 purificatory rites, including upanayana or the sacred thread ceremony. In this sense we speak in Malayalam of savasamskara. In our culture the word samskara even in the personal sense has a religious connotation.

But we do not find in Sanskrit the word samskara used for the corporate culture of the sociologists and the anthropologists. In Malayalam too the use of the word samskara for culture in a corporate sense, is a neologism, introduced when we adopted the western category structure.

For the sake of discourse we will accept this new western category of "culture" as a word for the corporate human heritage of a particular people, their way of life and thought and worship and artistic creativity, though such usage has many problems. The UNESCO once had a slogan: Technology is by nature universal; culture is by nature local. We know today that neither part of that statement is true. Culture always goes beyond the locality unless the boundaries of the locality are closed. And

technology cannot be the same everywhere.

II. CHRIST AND CULTURE

When I saw my revered teacher Richard Niebuhr's book Christ and Culture, I was glad he did not make the mistake of talking about Gospel and Culture as the World Council of Churches does. The WCC title comes from a mistaken Barthian category structure - the Gospel as something which comes from God, while culture is a human creation. Unfortunately I do not know any expression of the Gospel which is not culture-bound. Of course it may be the culture of the Old Testament, or Palestinian Jewish culture, but a pure Gospel without human language and expression does not exist. Even the angel speaks to Mary in human language and human categories. There is no Gospel totally free from culture. Unfortunately Niebuhr also makes the same mistake when he says: "Christianity, whether defined as Church, creed, ethics or movement of thought, itself moves between the poles of Christ and Culture". It is this polarity between Christ and Culture, as if they were opposites, that I cannot accept.

If you are speaking of Christ to mean the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, then He is very much a cultural entity. He could not have become incarnate without participating in human culture of a particular time and place.

Bangkok 1972 also fell into the same error when it said: "Culture shapes the human voice that answers the voice of Christ." The mistake is in not recognizing that the Voice of

Christ also speaks to us through a specific culture. Christ was incarnate within the Palestinian Jewish culture, though in his formation as a human being, many other cultures may have made their contribution. The point is that Christ himself is not independent of culture. If we speak of Christ and Culture, we must recognize the role of culture also in the formation of the humanity of Christ. We should take into account the culture in which Christ was formed, the culture of those who transmit what they regard to be the message of Christ, and the culture of those who respond to that message.

Let us take a quick look at the three waves in which Christianity was brought to India. In the first wave it is a Palestinian Jew, St. Thomas the Apostle, who brings the message of Christ to us. We can presume that St. Thomas came from the same culture as Jesus Christ. This is not the case with the two later waves - the Spanish-Portuguese-Latin, and the European-American. The message was brought wrapped in a culture different from the Palestinian Jewish culture of Jesus Christ. In the first wave there was a conflict between the responding community's culture and the Palestinian Jewish culture of the Message and the Messenger. In the second and third waves the conflict is three-cornered: Palestinian Jewish Culture, Western Culture and Indian Culture. The bearers of the Gospel had already lost touch, not only with the original Palestinian Jewish culture, but also with the Graeco-Syrian culture in which the Christian Church first formulated its own life and mind.

There is of course a conflict between the Palestinian Jewish culture and the Indian culture. Resolving that conflict

took the Indian Church several hundreds of years, but it did resolve it **and** create a way of life and worship which integrated the two cultures. Was Christ obscured in the process?

Today Indian Christianity is an odd amalgam, heavily dependent on western culture for ideas and methods of approach, incompetent or unwilling to make contact with the Palestinian or Graeco-Syrian culture within which Christianity originally took form, and very uncertain or uninstructed about the true nature of our own Indian cultural heritage.

III RELIGION AND CULTURE

Strangely enough, "Religion" too is a neologism with a meaning it did not have in pre-Enlightenment cultures. If Barth and Kraemer held that Religion was a human creation and the enemy of the Gospel, which was obviously a divine creation without any human admixture, I say that Religion in its present sense is also a creation of the European Enlightenment.

In its original sense, religion, though the word itself in that sense did not exist, was the all-pervasive framework and uniting centre of all thought and action - not a department of life specifically for dealing with God and so on. When the European Enlightenment wanted to enthrone Human Reason in place of Religion as the Supreme authority, the uniting centre and the framework concept, it had to banish something called religion from the centre of the public life to its margins; there in those

margins the present notion of religion took shape - as a particular religion like Protestantism or Roman Catholicism, and later on as world religions. While the mainstream and public life was to be based on science and human rationality, without any influence from God or God-based or Transcendent-oriented perspectives, such perspectives could survive on the margins - optional, private, individualistic religion, separated from all the important aspects of human life like political institutions, socio-economic systems, the powerful mass communication systems, from healing and health care, from education and the Academy. This strange hybrid, artificial, creation of the Enlightenment, which took shape and grew up in the dark outer margins of public life in the last couple of centuries, is what we call religion or religions today.

Even though there are cases of individual conversion in the New Testament, the Gospel is generally addressed to a community; part of that community responds positively, while the other part rejects the Gospel. The culture of the positively responding part is transformed by the Gospel and the Church that takes root in the culture. Old symbols, beliefs, rituals, standards are abandoned and new ones put in their place. The Seed of the Word of God thus takes root not merely in the hearts of individual believers, but in the new community of the Spirit.

The new culture that is created by the Gospel and the Church is not totally discontinuous with the old, though radically different from it in important ways. A people's clothing styles, eating habits, etc., may or may not change; they need not change, unless such change is necessary to create a new identity

for the believing community, recognizable from the outside. The most important cultural change is in the vision that guides everything else, in a new understanding of what God is doing and a fresh commitment to be involved in that process. Other changes follow: in community organisation and structures of authority and decision making; in rituals and forms of worship; in all human relations - parents-children, employer-employee, husbands-wives; in occupational choices, in the wise use of time; in the use of common and private resources for the service of others; in compassion and care for the oppressed, the down-trodden and the victims of injustice; in hospitality, especially to the stranger; in caring for the sick, for the aged and the infirm, for orphans and widows, and for whoever is in need. And so on.

The gospel or the Church does not create a brand new culture, but it takes the old and transforms it in radical ways. It is in this sense that we can see that Religion is the matrix of culture. The new culture is born again from the womb of the faith of the Church.

What about the old culture? It too was born in the womb of an earlier religious perception, in which maybe pagan gods set the norms for the people. In human history, every culture or civilisation, except the totally God-denying civilisation of the European Enlightenment in which we live today, was born in the matrix of some religion or other and shaped by its beliefs and perceptions.

The Christian faith, in an effort to survive in the midst of this Godless, Transcendent-denying, authority-defying civilisation which enthroned human rationality in place of God, has sought to do so by making cultural adjustments.

Both Liberalism and Fundamentalism are movements of adjustment with the modern rationalist paganism. Liberalism accepts its basic premise of the finality of human reason as supreme authority and is willing to jettison what in its heritage does not fit with that rationality; Fundamentalism tries to fly in the face of the culture of rationality by irrationally affirming some dogmas which they regard as more authoritative than any claims of the new rationality - infallibility of the Bible, its verbal inspiration, the substitutionary theory of the Atonement, the total sinfulness of all human beings, and so on.

Always in the past the Christian faith came to a culture born in a religious matrix and shaped by it. After the European Enlightenment, the Christian faith confronts a secular culture which not only claims to be totally independent of religion, but also regards other than European cultures as primitive and infantile, without even making much of an effort to examine them closely.

|√ TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

On the one hand the Christian Faith confronts a secular culture of affirming the human being as Supreme, owing nothing to anything superior - a powerfully pervasive culture which operates

through our educational system, our health care approach, our political institutions, our economic systems and our mass communication systems. All these systems are supposed to be exclusively governed by human rationality and recognizes no authority above human beings.

On the other hand we face the religious cultures of the world, born in the matrix of world religions, refusing to be wiped out either by Christian missionary aggression, or even by secularisation. All religions want to resist that missionary aggression. For those who work to bring harmony and mutual understanding among the religions, the fear of Christian missionary aggression and inherent suspicion of Christian slyness on the part of other religions remains a major obstacle to open dialogue.

In fact one of the major contributing causes to the Renaissance of World Religions in the 1st century or so is precisely this reaction against missionary arrogance and aggression. The wounds inflicted by that cultural arrogance go very deep in most world religious cultures - as was expressed a hundred years ago by Swami Vivekanada and today less charitably by writers like Arun Shourie.

The cultural arrogance that was pervasive in both the second and third waves of missionary expansion, i.e. of the Latin Christians in the 16th and succeeding centuries, and the North European and American Christians in the 18th century until this day, has practically foreclosed the possibility of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists ever becoming Christians, at least en masse.

This does not mean that the World Religions have not been profoundly influenced by the Christian Teaching and Social practices. In that sense there is no world religion which as a whole has not been influenced by the teachings of Christ and thus to a certain extent "evangelised".

But the damage done by cultural arrogance in aggressive evangelism remains fairly irreparable. If we now start a new evangelism which is less culturally arrogant, and more open to other cultures, the distrust and suspicion built up in the last five hundred years will not be easily removed.

God has now brought us into a world where the world cultures born in and shaped by world religions will have to remain in a global community of mutual respect and informed mutual understanding. As Vivekananda pointed out more than a hundred years ago, no religion, including the modern religion of Secularism, can hope to displace all the other religions and have a monopoly of the loyalty of humanity. Christian theology has to take account of this insight, and formulate their understanding of God's purpose in the world accordingly.

In India today our task is fourfold:

- a. first to become better acquainted at depth with original Palestinian-Syrian Jewish-Syriac-Greek Christianity; this original form of Christianity is culturally much closer to our own Indian heritage than the western version in which Christianity has been imported into India in the last half millennium.
- b. shed all cultural arrogance imbibed from western Christianity, which is very much alien to the Gospel and the Christian

faith.

c. become more deeply acquainted with the Indian heritage of which Hinduism is only part; we must learn also from Buddhism and Jainism, but also from the other religions which have come in or developed later including Islam and Sikhism. Perhaps a better acquaintance with Sufism may be one way in which we can see how a Middle Eastern Religion like Islam shaped itself in the matrix of Indian culture. Our pre-Vedic, pre-Buddhist, pre-Jain Adivasi culture and Samkhya/Yoga systems of life, reflection and practice should by no means be neglected, since these two cultures, both Adivasi culture and Samkhya-Yoga way of life, born in a religious matrix, form the foundations of the Indian heritage. Samkhya-Yoga, later bifurcated into two systems, is reflected in all three traditions - Hindu, Buddhist and Jain. Adivasi culture is deeply ingrained in our blood and bones, as we experience while facing up to the environmental problem created by the industrial culture.

d. The end result must be the gradual formation of a truly Christian culture, not secular, but cosmopolitan, with openness to all world cultures, and passionately concerned about the welfare of the whole of humanity.