

African Journal of Contextual Theology

SIST, Attakwu – Enugu

P.O. Box 9696, Enugu, Nigeria

ajct@sistenugu.com

Subscriptions

The *African Journal of Contextual Theology* – AJCT – (ISSN 2141-3037) is published annually. The subscription price is the following:

Nigeria: N500 per issue

Foreign: US\$20.00 per issue (including postage)

Payment may be made in cash or by cheque, payable to:

Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu

Enugu, Nigeria

The issues are available from Spiritan International School of Theology (cf. address above).

Permissions

For information on how to request permissions to reproduce articles / information from this journal, please visit www.sistenugu.com / SIST Journal.

All editorial correspondence should be sent to:

The editor-in-chief

African Journal of Contextual Theology

Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu

P.O. Box 9696 Enugu, Nigeria

e-mail: editorajct@sistenugu.com ; nmarysylvia@yahoo.com

Advertising

Enquiries about advertising and requests for review of Books should be sent to:

THREE

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE CHALLENGE OF INCULTURATION

Philip IGBO, CMF

1. Introduction

Christianity was planted in Africa during the period of colonization. The Christian message which the missionaries brought to Africa was thoroughly western in form, teaching and values and quite unrelated to the cultural ethos of the people. Because of fear of syncretism no real attempt has been made to incarnate the Christian message in the African cultures. Although many Africans profess the Christian faith, they quickly revert to their traditional faith and world-view in times of crisis, such as misfortune, illness and death. This happens because the Gospel has not penetrated deeply enough to transform their worldview. A Christian message which is abstract and divorced from the concreteness of everyday life loses much of its force and impact on the people. This paper questions the ability of the African to be authentically African and at the same time authentically Christian. It discusses, especially, the tasks which different arms of the Church must undertake in order to inculturate the gospel validly in Africa. The challenges which face the missionary today is how to preserve the "pure faith" and at the same time root the Gospel in the culture of the people. The task African theologian is equally confronted by a similar task of more profound weight, that of presenting the Christian message in the language and mode which the people will understand. After discussing the problems involved, this work, therefore, proposes that African Christians need a theology which is authentically Christian,

but which must have reference to the African context, a theology which would enable Africans to feel at home with the Christian religion. In order for the Church to fulfil this task, it should be missionary in orientation. This discussion begins in the next paragraph with an exposition of the nature of the missionary Church.

2. The Missionary Church

The Church's mission of evangelization has its roots in the mission of God. The OT expresses the fact that God is a missionary God, that the people of Israel were a missionary people. The history of salvation starts with God's plan to communicate himself to all human beings. The whole of history is an account of God's saving act – a history of salvation.¹ In Abraham, God reveals His plan of redemption. God said to Abraham, "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:3; cf. Gen 26:3-4, 28:14).

Israel is the recipient of the divine revelation. In the early days of her history, Israel had to struggle to defend her patrimony, to preserve the purity of faith in the One God and to live among the pagan nations without being corrupted by them. In fact, after the exile, Israel realized more clearly than before that her destiny was not that of a politically powerful or materially wealthy nation which could rival other nations. Its mission to the world is to be a vehicle through which the One God is made known to all families of people.²

¹ M. Amaladoss, "The Challenges of Mission Today," in *Trends in Mission*, Ed. by W. Jenkinson et al., Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991, pp.364-364; E. De Bekker, Church and Mission, *AJCT* 7/4 (1965) pp.285-306.

² A. Shorter, *Theology of Mission*, Theology Today Series, 37, Cork: The Mercier Press, 1972, p.27.

First, Israel was God's *treasured possession*, a *kingdom of priests*, and a holy nation. The holy nation was to function among other nations in her priestly role. A priest is a mediator between God and man; so, as a kingdom of priests Israel was called to be the vehicle of the knowledge of God to the nations of the earth. Israel's mission, however, is no mission in the literal sense. Israel's mission to the nations is not so much effected by Israel going out to evangelize the nations, but rather Israel's life and conduct are the things that attract the nations to God. Isa 2:2-5 depicts an eschatological picture in which all nations stream to Zion to learn the ways of righteousness (cf. also Isa 9:2-7; 11:1-10) and to worship in the temple (see. Isa 56:7). Jerusalem will be a home for all nations and their return will be the final homecoming (cf Isa 60:11). Thus having come to the knowledge of Yahweh and having learnt the way of righteousness they embrace peace. The Old Testament presents the figure of the "Servant of the Lord," a mysterious, prophetic and royal figure. He is a docile instrument of God, "chosen" and called to be a covenant to his people Israel and a "light to the nations" (Isa 42:5-6) and to bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth (Isa 50:4-11).³ Jeremiah was "appointed as a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5) and declares that God's salvific purposes extends to "the nations" (Jer 16:19-21).

An important difference between mission in the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT) may be seen in the manner in which God's knowledge spreads to the nations. In the Old Testament, Israel was to communicate the message primarily through a holy life and worship of the only true God, whereas the mission in the NT first and

³ T. Federici, "Pneumatological Foundation of Mission," in *Following Christ in Mission* Ed. By S. Karotemprel, Pasay City: Paulines, 1996, pp.66-67.

foremost entails spreading the good news to those who have not heard it. The NT consists firstly in the kerygmatic affirmation that Jesus of Nazareth is the expected Messiah promised by the OT prophets. Jesus Christ is not only the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures; He is the one who gives authentic interpretation to the OT prophecies. The Gospel of Christ is indispensable to salvation to everyone who has faith (Gal. 1:6-9). The Church is commissioned to proclaim the Gospel to all the nations (Matt. 28:19-20). In *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI says that evangelization means "bringing the Good News to every sector of the human race so that its strength may enter into the hearts of men and renew the human race".⁴ The Church is not an appendix to the mission of Christ. It is simply an organic extension of the mission of Christ and the Spirit.⁵

This definition of the missionary character of the Church conditions our understanding of the task of evangelization. In order to define this task for the present Church, a brief review of evangelization in the African context is necessary.

3. The Evangelization of Africa

Christianity was planted in Africa during the period of colonization. The first Europeans who arrived Africa came brought the gospel, but they were also driven by economic motives. One of these motives, as Kwame Bediako notes, was the traffic of slaves "for the white man's economic enterprises in the New World."⁶ The colonialists were mostly

⁴ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n.18.

⁵ Federici, 1996, p.69.

⁶ K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh Uni. Press, 1995, p.6; quoting K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity III, 1500-1800*, New York: Harper and Row, 1939, p.240.

driven by economic interests, and not the development of Africa. Owing to the colonial theories of racial hierarchy, Africa was relegated to the bottom of the scale.⁷ The missionary encounter, however, was itself a different kind of benevolent European involvement. The early missionaries who evangelized Africans worked very closely with the colonizers. In most cases, they and the colonizers were of the same nationality and racial origin.⁸

The Christian message which the missionaries brought to Africa was a Europeanized Christianity clad in European cultural outfit.⁹ It was, as J. Osei-Bonsu remarks, a Christianity which was thoroughly western in form, teaching and values and quite unrelated to the cultural ethos of the people. Because of this identification of Christianity with European culture, any attempt to incarnate the Christian message in the indigenous cultures was perceived as a distortion of Christianity.¹⁰ The majority of the early evangelizers were intolerant of the African culture.¹¹ Thus

⁷ R. July, *The Origin of Modern African Thought: Its Development in West Africa from 19th and 20th Century*, London: Faber & Faber Publications, 1968, 213.

⁸ L. Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation, Transforming the Church in Africa*, New York: Orbis Books, 2004, p.139

⁹ E. Hillman, "Missionary Approaches to African Cultures Today," *AFER* 22/6 (1980) p.345; D. J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission, Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, New York: Orbis Books, 1996, p.448.

¹⁰ J. Osei-Bonsu, *The Situation of Evangelization in Africa*, A talk given at the Symposium Africa-Europe, Rome, 10-13 Nov., 2004.

¹¹ The term "culture" refers to the way of life of the people: their social symbols and rituals; art, language, and literature etc. Culture includes also the systems of life of a society. (cf. M. Amaladoss, "The Challenges of Mission Today," in *Trends in Mission*, 1991, p.366; M. Amaladoss, "Culture and Dialogue," *International Review of Mission*, LXXIV/294, (1985) pp.170-171; A. Yannoulatos, "Culture and Gospel", *International Review of Mission*, LXXIV/294, (1985) p.185.).

the early missionaries judged it fit to stamp out the “savage culture” of the Africans and to replace it with the western culture. Because the white missionaries could not understand the African cultures, they simply dismissed them as primitive, pagan and uncivilized. Like their political counterparts - the colonizers, many missionaries viewed Africans as barbaric, uncivilized, and objects to be conquered. Many of the things which Africans held dear were dismissed as primitive and pagan. Based on this erroneous assumption, the missionaries saw their role as that of evangelizing and civilizing the Africans,¹² i.e., to convert the natives from savage culture to the civilized ways of the West.¹³ Because the early missionaries misinterpreted the African worldview, they could not penetrate it.¹⁴ Operating on a false assumption that the African mind was a spiritual and cultural *tabula rasa*, the missionaries sought to inscribe a new culture, a new spirituality.¹⁵ European cultural mind-set and system were imposed. African traditional symbols were not allowed for use in the Church. Rather, foreign elements and symbols were imposed.¹⁶ Consequently, becoming a

¹² A. Nasimiyu-Wasike, “Is Mutuality Possible? An African Response,” *Missiology* 29/1 (2001) p.46; L. N. Mbefo, *The Reshaping of African Traditions*, Enugu: Snaap, 1988, p.45.

¹³ C. Njoku, “The Missionary Factor in African Christianity, 1884-1914,” in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu, Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005, 228; J. S. Mutiso-Mbinda, “Liberation and Mission in Africa,” *African Journal of Theology*, 8/2 (1979), p.47.

¹⁴ A. Nasimiyu-Wasike, “Is Mutuality Possible? An African Response,” *Missiology* 29/1 (2001) p.46.

¹⁵ T. M. Hinga, “Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa,” in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Culture in Africa*, ed. M. A. Oduyoye, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001, 187.

¹⁶ E. B. Udoh, *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa*, New Jersey: Prince Town University Press, 1983; A. A. Azuogu, *Biblical Exegesis and inculturation in Africa in the Third Millenium*, Enugu: Snaap Press, 2000, p.115; See J. M. Ford, *My Enemy is my Guest: Jesus*

Christian means that the converts had to alienate themselves from their own cultures, social milieus and religious traditions.¹⁷ The African converts were not allowed to adopt African names as baptismal names. African names were considered unworthy of Christian faith. In the long run, African Christians themselves came to adopt the same mentality and rejected their traditional names as pagan.¹⁸ W. Saayman remarks that the way "the colonial culture and the Christian message were introduced in Africa affected the African perception of themselves."¹⁹ Owing to the way Africa was evangelized, Christianity did not quite take a deep root in the humus of the African soil.²⁰ It was, in the words of Tim Cantrell, "a breadth without depth".

It is a fact that today Christianity is shifting southward and becoming increasingly non-Western. Today, Africa is considered the fastest growing Church in the world. But while the Western Church has rapidly declined, many of the churches planted in the mission fields remain unestablished in the faith. Although many Africans profess the Christian faith, many quickly revert to their traditional faith and worldview in times of existential need and crisis, as in misfortune, illness and death. This happens because the Gospel has not penetrated deeply enough to transform their

and Violence in Luke, New York: Orbis Books, 1984. N. Mbogu, *Christology and Religious Pluralism*, Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006, pp.369-373; G. Ekwuru, *The Pangs of an African Culture in Travail*, Abuja: Totan Publishers Limited, 1999, p.45.

¹⁷ Amaladoss, "Challenges of Mission", p.359.

¹⁸ B. Bujo, *African Theology In Its Social Context*, Nairobi: The Pauline Pub., 1992, p.43.

¹⁹ W. Saayman, *Christian Mission in Africa*, Pretoria-South Africa: University of Pretoria, 1991, p.32.

²⁰ Mageza, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, p.139.

world-view.²¹ But a Christian message, which does not take into account the African culture and world-view, risks being seen as a “guest”.²² Owing to the way in which Africa was evangelized, Africans are caught up in the conflict of culture - a conflict between the European/Christian culture and the African culture, a struggle between their Christianity and their Africanness. It must be underlined that the objective of the Church is to evangelize, not to civilize. And if it civilizes, it is for the sake of evangelization. The instruction to missionaries, issued in 1695, by the Roman Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, reads:

Do not regard it as your task, and do not bring any pressure to bear upon the people, to change their manners, customs and uses, unless they are evidently contrary to religion and sound morals... There is no stronger cause for alienation and hate than an attack on local customs, especially when these go back to venerable antiquity. This is more especially the case when an attempt is made to introduce the customs of another people in place of those which have been abolished.²³

Ad Exteros points out that the fundamental failure of the European missionaries who went to evangelize China in the 16th and 17th centuries was that they presented a Christianity that was coloured with the European culture and civilization.

²¹ Tim Cantrell, “Launching Church-Strengthening Movements in Africa,” *African Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 24/1 (2005), pp.82-84

²² Cf. J. Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1994, p. 430.

²³ Cf. *Collectanea S. Congregationis De Propaganda Fide*, vol 1, 1907, p.42, Trans. From Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, Hermondsworth: Penguin, 1964, p.179; quoted by E. Hillman, “Missionary Approaches to African Cultures Today”, *AFFER* 22/6 (1980) p.351.

Such a "Europeanized Christianity" was seen by the natives as no more than "Europeanism" and was, therefore, seen as a threat to the Chinese culture. It must be stated clearly that Christianity is not tied to any culture. The "seed of the Gospel" can grow in every cultural soil and can produce good fruits, depending on how it is sown. It is on this basis that *Ad Exteros* advised missionaries to admire and commend what is good in other cultures. A careful distinction, however, has to be made between cultural traditions which are good and those which are not; and cultural values which are not contradictory to the Christian message must be retained. This assessment of the situation highlights the great task of evangelization in today's Church.

4. The African Theologian and the Challenge of Inculturation

Justin Ukpong defines inculturation in Africa as "translating the Christian message in terms of African concepts."²⁴ Engelbert Mveng's definition is more embracing. On the one hand, inculturation, for Mveng, means "evangelizing the African culture in such a way as to enable it to be integrated into the eternal Christian heritage..." On the other hand, inculturation would mean "Africanizing of Christianity to the point where it becomes a constituent of the spiritual and cultural inheritance of Africa."²⁵ In the second sense, inculturation is a kind of *indigenization*, that is, making Christianity native in a way that the context or culture of the people is taken into account.²⁶

²⁴ J. Ukpong, "Theological Literature from Africa," *Concilium*, 199 (5/1988), p.67; Justin Ukpong, *Concilium*, 199 (5/1988), p.68.

²⁵ E. Mveng, "African Liberation Theology," *Concilium*, 199 (5/1988), p.18.

²⁶ P. K. Sarpong, "Evangelization and Inculturation," *WAJES* 2/1 (1990), p.3.

The question one must answer in this enterprise is if the African could be authentically African and at the same time authentically Christian. The challenge which faces the missionary is how to preserve the “pure faith” and at the same time root the Gospel in the culture of the people. Similarly, one of the major tasks confronting the African theologian is how to recover, establish and preserve the African identity within Christendom. The African theologian must reject any approach to evangelization which ignores the African religious and cultural heritage.

In the 1950s and 1960s, African theologians began making efforts towards an Africanization of the Church. The Africanization of the Church is an effort to re-assess Christianity from the African perspective and to deep the Christian faith and message into the African cultural roots.²⁷ Africanization represents the beginning of a new theological trend toward a search for an authentically relevant African perspective on the Christian faith.²⁸ The task of African theologians consists in re-expressing the original Christian message, using African tools, idioms, symbols and languages.²⁹ African theology loses its flavour if it cannot address the peculiar needs and questions of the African. A Christian message that is divorced from the concreteness of everyday life loses much of its force and impact on the people.³⁰ John Paul II maintains that “a faith which does not

²⁷ E. Martey, *African Theology, Inculturation and Liberation*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994, p.64.

²⁸ Martey, *African Theology*, p.65.

²⁹ J. S. Ukpong, *African Theologies Now: A Profile*, Eldoret Kenya: Gaba Pub., 1984, p.30, quoted by Martey, *African Theology*, p.68.

³⁰ Martey, *African Theology*, p.79.

become culture is a faith not fully received..."³¹ In fact, the Church is commissioned to preach the gospel across the borders of cultures. In doing this, it has to see that this communication is done in a way that preserves the essential core of the Gospel. At the same time, the Christian message has to be transmitted in a way that it gives meaningful answer to the basic needs of the people.

Peter K. Sarpong maintains that "evangelization loses much of its force if it neglects the cultures of those to whom it is addressed. The Church can hardly lay claim to universality unless it is at home in each and every culture."³² Evangelization must take account of the concrete situations of the lives of the people. For the African theology to have a real impact on the people, it has to address the existential context of the people and participate in their concrete existence, their struggle for a just society and the search for a better future.³³ In a continent in which poverty menaces a greater percentage of the population, African theology must be a voice of the voiceless and the marginalized of the society and strive for their liberation. In proclaiming the Gospel to the people, the missionary must first "identify the concrete situation of the lives of the people. If the context of the people is taken into consideration, then, the Christian message will exert more fruitful impact in their lives. It is only then that the Gospel and the teaching of the Church will begin to give meaning and hope to their lives. Precisely

³¹ John Paul II, Address to the Congress of the "Movimento Ecclesiale di Impegno Culturale," January 16, 1982, *La Traccia*, no.1 (1982) 55-57, quoted by F. E. George, in *A Church For All Peoples*, E. LaVerdiere (Ed), Minnesota: A Liturgical Press, 1993, pp.58-59.

³² P. S. Sarpong, "Evangelization and Inculturation," *WAJES* 2/1 (1990), p.1.

³³ Z. Nthamburi, "African Theology of Liberation (II)," *AFER* 22/2 (1980), p.282.

because the Gospel has not been deep-rooted in the African culture, many African Christians live in two worlds: the world of Christianity which they have “put on”, as it were, from the outside, and their inner ‘African’ world where they are more at home.³⁴

History attests that at the beginning of the Christian era, the Gospel message quickly took root in North Africa and the Church flourished there. The number of bishops and Fathers of the Church of North African extraction, and the famous Catechetical School of Alexandria and her famous scholars testify to this. But, with the era of Islam, Christianity in North Africa was almost entirely wiped out, because Christianity did not quite take root in the culture of the people. There is need then to ask: to what extent has Christianity penetrated the culture of the African people today?³⁵ Today, there is the repeated accusation that Christianity is a foreign religion. Today, African churches are still ruled by foreign ideologies and categories. This fact, as N. Mbogu says, creates in her a fragility at institutional, theological, cultural and juridical levels. These events of history are a school where Africa must learn from their own errors that led to the demise of the churches of North and Central Africa.³⁶ The African theologians and missionaries cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past by failing to deepen the faith in the African culture. There is need to decolonize the African Church by giving it an African character both in doctrine and mentality. Africa must reshape

³⁴C. McGarry, “The Lineamenta For The African Synod: Christological and Ecclesiological Perspectives,” *AFER* 33/6 (1991) pp.332-333.

³⁵N. I. Mbogu, *The Church In Africa on The Eve Of The First African Synod*, *AFER* 33/6 (1991). P.302.

³⁶Mbogu, “The Church in Africa”, p.303.

her pastoral ministries to serve the spiritual needs of her growing believers.³⁷ This can only be when the Christian faith is rooted in the culture of the people.

The Christian faith can only be well received by the people if it is presented in the language they understand;³⁸ if it comes to them in the heart of their own specific culture.³⁹ Incarnating the Gospel does not only enrich the local Christian community, but also the universal Church.⁴⁰ God's communication with humans has been active in all of history, taking different forms in each age and culture but always communicating the same saving grace. Therefore, according to Leonardo Boff, Christianity preserves itself universally as long as it is capable of speaking all languages, incarnating itself in all cultures.⁴¹ The Gospel becomes more regenerative and transformative when it penetrates the culture of the people. African theology must take into account the Africans to whom the faith is addressed. It must advocate the right of African Christians to ponder Christianity and its truth in their own terms.⁴² Theology cannot remain abstract; it must have reference to the "context" of the life situation of the people.⁴³ A theology which is truly African is one which

³⁷ Mbogu, "The Church in Africa", p.309.

³⁸ A. Rogers, "Inculturation and Human Promotion," in M. Saturnino (ed.), *Rooting Faith in Asia, Source Book for Inculturation*, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2005, pp.273-274.

³⁹ McGarry, "The Lineamenta", pp.333-334.

⁴⁰ L. J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*, New York: Orbis Books, 1988, 88.

⁴¹ L. Boff, *Church, Charism and Power*, London: SCM Press, 1985, p.91. Cf. also *Ad Gentes*, 9; *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

⁴² N. Mustete, "The History of Theology in Africa: From Polemics to Critical Irenics", In *African Theology En Route*, p.27, quoted by E. Ikenga-Metuh, "Theological Basis for Christianizing African Forms of Worship of God: Case Study of the Igbo," *The Nigerian Journal of Theology*, vol 1 (1985), p.72.

⁴³ Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, p.437.

is rooted in the African culture;⁴⁴ a theology which enables Africans “to feel at home in their new faith.”⁴⁵

Inculturation makes room for diversity. Inculturation allows that the qualities of each national family, illumined by the light of the gospel, are taken up into a catholic unity.⁴⁶ So, an African can practise his Christianity within his culture without watering down the catholicity of the Church.⁴⁷ The Church has to allow sufficient breathing space for local expression. The unity of the Church is not watered down by allowing the local churches to be local and to express the faith according to their context. Peter Schineller maintains that the unity of the Church is built through the complementarity of the local churches.⁴⁸ Boff rightly said that catholicity “is not primarily a geographical concept, that is, the Church present everywhere in the world; nor is it a statistical concept, that is, a more numerous Church. It is not a historical concept, that is, a Church that preserves its historical continuity. Catholicity lies in the unity of its faith in God’ the father who sent the Son, with the power of the Holy Spirit, to save all people; it is a faith that is mediated through the Church, the universal sacrament of salvation. Boff maintains that the catholicity of the Church is the power to be incarnated, without losing its identity, in the most diverse cultures. To be catholic is not to simply expand the ecclesiastical system but to live and witness to the same faith

⁴⁴ Cf. E. Ezeogu, “The Jewish Response to Hellenism: A Lesson in Inculturation,” in *Journal of Inculturation Theology*, vol 2 (1994), p.153.

⁴⁵ See Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism*, p21, 23.

⁴⁶ P. Schineller, “Inculturation as the Pilgrimage to Catholicity,” *Concilium* 204 (1989) p.104.

⁴⁷ cf. Boff, *Church, Charism and Power*, London: SCM Press, 1985, pp.97-98.

⁴⁸ P. Schineller, *Concilium* 204 (1989) p.100-101.

in Jesus Christ, Saviour and liberator, within every culture.⁴⁹ The Incarnation becomes a paradigm for the inculturation of the Christian faith and teaching. Jesus was born a Jew, grew up a Jew among Jews, shared fully in every aspect of the cultural life of his people and couched his Good News in all the elements of that culture. Eugene Hillman therefore writes:

The action of God in history is the paradigm of the Church's action. What God has done through Jesus Christ once and for all in the historic-cultural terms of a particular people the Church must do among all the tribes and tongues and peoples and nations, who, with their varied experiences and myriad cultures, constitute the whole of humanity in its socio-temporal extension.⁵⁰

In order to offer all humans the mystery of salvation, the Church needs to plant the seed of the Gospel within the social and cultural conditions of the people among whom she dwells. (*Ad Gentes*10).⁵¹ It follows, as Boff proposes, that "the Church would not be catholic if it were not African, Chinese, European, Latin American. The African Church must not wait to be affirmed from 'outside', it must affirm itself and stamp its identity in the Church. The African can only have something to offer to the universal Church only if it operates from its own cultural background, and not one dictated by a "Europeanized mentality" which sees the world only from one perspective, the Western, outside which everything non-western is treated with suspicion. In the *Redemptoris Missio* Pope John Paul II writes:

⁴⁹ L. Boff, *Church, Charism and Power*, pp.97-98.

⁵⁰ E. Hillman, "Missionary Approaches to African Cultures Today", *AFFER* 22/6 (1980) p.343.

⁵¹ L. Boff, *Church, Charism and Power*, p.98.

From now on the Church opens her door and becomes the house which all may enter, and in which all feel at home, while keeping their own culture and traditions, provided these are not contrary to the Gospel.⁵²

This can only be when the Church is open to all cultures and open to dialogue with the cultures and religions of the different peoples constituting the human family. The first concrete gate to openness to the culture of a people is the language.

The target of missionary communication is to transmit the essentials of the Christian faith in forms which are meaningful to its hearers. Language is one of the vehicles of evangelization. To evangelize the people, there is need to know their language, vocabulary and phraseology. In *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI says that “evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness” if it does “not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not make use of their language, their signs and their symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.”⁵³ The Christian faith and teaching stand on a shaky base if it is not expressed in the language and culture of the people.⁵⁴ That is why every missionary should be able to speak the language of the people readily and competently.

⁵² John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Vatican City, December 7, 1990, no. 24.

⁵³ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n.63.

⁵⁴ E. LaVerdiere, *A Church For All Peoples, Missionary Issues in a World Church*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993, p.57; cf. Synod of Bishops Special Assembly for Africa, *Lineamenta Text and Questions, The Church in Africa And Her Evangelization Mission Towards the Year 2000*, *AFER* 33/1&2 (1991), p6.

Another important premise to planting the seed of the Scriptures in the culture of the people is the translation of Scripture into the local languages of the people. Unless the written word of God is incarnated in the linguistic flesh of the "receptor people," the saving experience is not likely to be adequately transmitted.⁵⁵

Objectively, however, the major reason for the Church's hesitation to open up to African cultures is the fear of syncretism. This is discussed below.

5. Fear of Syncretism

There is hardly any religion that has not adapted some values from its host culture or from other religions. The OT history attests that when Israel settled down in Palestine it borrowed and modified for its own social and religious purposes a number of values from its surrounding neighbours. L. Magesa remarks that "the most venerable Israelite institutions, such as the Temple and the king's court during the time of David and Solomon, are of Egyptian inspiration. The customs of their Canaanite neighbours provided some of the raw material for the concept of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. Moreover, the Mosaic Law is in many ways similar in form to the Assyrian, Babylonian, Sumerian and Hittite Law Codes, all of which predate it. When Israel settled down (between 1250 and 1130 B.C.E.), it came into contact with the religions and cultures of their neighbours. Some of these elements were incorporated into Israel's socio-religious tradition. What is significant is that despite these massive borrowings, the Israelites did not gulp-in these

⁵⁵ A. R. Tippett, "Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity."

foreign elements without re-evaluating and re-interpreting them in the light of Yahwism.⁵⁶

Similarly when the apostolic Church crossed the border from the Hebrew to the Hellenistic world, a number of religious and philosophical concepts like the popular divine titles *Kurios*, *Soter* and *Son of God*, or the stoic idea of the *Logos* as the rational principle of the cosmic structure, were borrowed. These instances reveal the extent to which the early Church was open to the culture of the Graeco-Roman world on whose soil most of the Church's missionary efforts took place. The early Church was aware that its mandate was to evangelize all nations in their distinctive cultural affiliations. The early Christians realized that its mission was not to impose one culture - the Jewish culture - on converts from other cultures, but to preach the love of God to all nations. This is reflected in the decision taken by the Jerusalem Council with regard to the evangelization of the Gentiles (Acts 15:19). The Church decided to allow Gentile converts to become Christians without imposing circumcision on them or without asking them to follow all the Jewish dietary laws. While some Christian Jews saw this as a watering down of the faith, a loss of the Jewish roots of Christianity, some other Christians welcome it as a true adaptation or rooting of the Gospel into the Gentile culture. Peter Rottländer notes that Christianity as it is, is already inculturated, first into the Jewish, then into the Hellenistic European-Western civilization.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, p.89.

⁵⁷ P. Rottländer, "One world: Opportunity or Threat for the Global Church?" *Concilium* 204 (1989), p.113.

The on-going evangelization of nations is part of the inculturation of the Gospel among the nations of the earth. One major obstacle to the inculturation of the faith in other cultures is the Graeco-European cultural grip on Christianity. In most quarters, the Graeco-European cultural system seems to impose itself as "The Christian Culture." The Church must be careful not to clothe itself with one cultural gab – the European culture, or to colour its teaching with only one cultural expression – the European category. If this is done, the Church risks watering down its universal character. There is the fear (even when it is not explicitly expressed) that the inculturation of the faith in other cultures might loosen the Graeco-European grip on Christianity. Often there is so much emphasis on official centralism. Such an official centralism which is a defensive protection of unity poses a danger to diversity of expression.⁵⁸ The Church must have to open up to all cultures and allow itself to be enriched by the rich cultural values of other cultures. There is need to allow for a local expression of the faith. When this is taken on board, another problem could be the danger of over-inculturation.

6. Danger of Over-Inculturation

The immediate foregoing paragraph has expressed one of the fears which many have about too much interaction between the Gospel and culture, that is, the danger of syncretism. Such a fear centres on the possibility that one could mix Christianity and culture in a way that does not enhance but compromise and falsify Christianity.

The African culture contains many elements that are compatible with the Christian teaching and practice. Such values can be carefully selected and adapted by the Church

⁵⁸Johann-Baptist Metz, "Unity and Diversity," *Concilium* 204 (1989), p.82.

since they provide a fertile base on which the seed of the Gospel can be planted. There are, however, certain cultural elements that are totally disagreeable to the basic thrust of the Gospel. The missionary should be careful not to embrace elements of the heathen culture which are incompatible with the Gospel message. It becomes particularly counterproductive when the Christian faith is mixed up with every kind of element of the indigenous culture in the name of inculturation. Today some ministers are drawn to embracing practically any cultural element of the indigenous religious value in the name of inculturation. Such a mix-up can confuse the weak and draw many Christians back to idolatry. Before the elements of the indigenous culture and religion are adapted they must first critically be passed through the screen of Christianity. If this screening is not done, Christianity may be watered down in the process. In *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II stresses the two principles that must guide the inculturation process: 1) the element of culture that is being adapted into the faith must be compatible with the gospel; and 2) communion with the universal Church must be maintained.⁵⁹ The next paragraph discusses a very sensitive but difficult context for proper inculturation, the Liturgy.

7. Africanization of the Liturgy

In the Nigerian Church, for instance, there seems to be a spate of activities to make the local Church move beyond simply promoting orthodox doctrine and approved liturgical discipline. The Bishops' seminar on Inculturation (Jos, 1988) is a sign of the determination of the Nigerian Church in this regard. However, since then, modest effort which have been made by the Church to develop a Nigerian liturgical rite has

⁵⁹ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 10.

not been implemented. Rather, the Church in Nigeria has continued to practise is legalistic liturgical order, "imported and unadapted to the culture and world-view of the people.

Among the churches of Africa, the Zairean Church has taken the lead in developing a liturgical rite that is well adapted to the people's culture and world-view. The Zairean rite, a modified rite of Eucharistic celebration, incorporates many elements of the Zairean culture into the Mass: processions, dances, musical instruments, forms of prayer, vestments, and so on. This, indeed, is a step in the right direction. This liturgical rite has evolved over time, and has been approved by Rome for limited use. The African Church needs to develop the liturgy that is well adapted to the African cultural context; a liturgical rite that makes Catholic worship more meaningful to African concerns.

Apart from the sacrament of the Eucharistic, one other area where inculturation is urgently needed is the sacrament of matrimony. The Nigerian Church, for instance, is working out a marriage rite which unifies the traditional wedding and the Church wedding ceremonies as a unified act. This is necessary because both the traditional and the Church marriage rites convey the same meaning; and both are not incompatible. In the African context, marriage is not seen as the result of a single contractual exchange of consent. It is an evolutionary process, involving many stages or steps. The Church can get involved in this process, especially at the stage where the final consent is exchanged. In the course of this process, an intensive catechesis concerning the sacramentality and indissolubility of marriage should be given by the Church's minister to the couple.⁶⁰ This is a way

⁶⁰ J. Osci-Bonsu, "Christianity and Culture," *WAJES* 3 (1991) p.63.

of inculturating the marriage ceremony. Secondly and secondarily, the fusion of both rites helps to save costs. On account of the heavy financial costs which each of the rites involves, many couples who have barely completed the traditional wedding, sometimes are short of finances to go on with the Church wedding. That is why today there are many traditionally validly married couples whose marriages have not been formally solemnized in the Church, which some refer to as “white wedding”. For one thing, once the traditional marriage rite is completed the couple is traditionally considered to be lawfully married by the contracting families and the traditional society. The local churches in African should, therefore, consider merging the two rites – the traditional and Christian rites of marriage.⁶¹

8. Conclusion

The Gospel does not destroy what is good in particular cultures, but rather preserves it. In its evangelizing mission, the Church needs to put into consideration the cultural situation of the mission land. This is important because grace does not destroy, but builds on nature and on culture. Every culture is a fertile ground on which the seed of the Gospel can be planted, and every culture has something to contribute to the growth of the Church’s mission in the world. There is need, therefore, for a continuous dialogue between the Christian faith and the African culture and religion. According to Bauer, such an interaction between the Gospel and African culture and religion can provide “building stones” for a proper African Theology.”⁶² The gospel cannot

⁶¹ N. I. Ndiokwere, *The African Church, Today and Tomorrow*, vol 2, Enugu: Snaap Press, 1994, pp.137-138; cf. also, J. Osei-Bonsu, “Christianity and Culture,” *WAJES* 3 (1991) p.64.

⁶² J. Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, p.436.

speaking authentically a relevant word if it is not inculturated. However, the Church has to ensure that before any element of the indigenous culture is adapted such a cultural element must first critically be passed through the screen of Christianity. If this screening is not done Christianity may be watered down or destroyed in this process.