

INCULTURATION AND EVANGELIZATION IN THE NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXT

O No, I heard myself expostulate when faced with listening to my own proposed exposition on the topic of inculturation and evangelization in the North American context—O, no, I exclaimed—not another of those *towards* presentations as in “Towards an American Theology,” “Towards an American Church,” “Towards an American Spirituality.” The cynic in me has begun to echo Robert Schreiter’s summary judgment in his masterful overview of the inculturation literature: “A good deal of the literature about inculturation often does not end up actually dealing with it but simply issues a call for it to be done.”¹ It remains always *Towards* discourse!

To be sure, at present, we are a long way from any consensus about the appropriate starting point for a theology of faith and culture (do we begin with the gospel or with culture?), about the apt methodological approaches to inculturation (do we use models of dialogue and/or correlation, adaptation, praxis or semiology, singly or together?) or about how we go about defining and analyzing culture itself (in any complex culture but especially in modern, pluriform cultures no mean feat!). Perhaps, then, it should be seen as no accident that the major theological work on inculturation written by Aylward Shorter is, itself, entitled *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*.²

Definitional Issues

Let’s get definitional issues settled early on. The term, inculturation, became widespread in the 1970s through its usage in the documents of the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus and the appeal for inculturation in Jesuit General Pedro Arrupe’s letter to all Jesuits. Later both Arrupe and Jaime Cardinal Sin invoked inculturation at the 1979 Synod of Bishops. John Paul II gave papal approbation to this neologism in his response to that same synod, *Catechesi Tradendae*. The term has been in wide use ever since, even though it started really more as an evocative rhetorical rather than as a technical term and it is not even yet fully a technical theological term.

Clearly, inculturation opposes views of faith and culture in ecclesiology and missiology which, wittingly or not, opt for *imposition* or cultural imperialism. We have learned since Vatican Council II, as the church struggles, in Karl Rahner’s phrase, to become, for the first time, a truly catholic, i.e., a truly *world* church,

¹Robert Schreiter, “Faith and Cultures: Challenges to a World Church,” *Theological Studies* 50/4 (December 1990): 753.

²Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988).

respectful of a new polycentric cultural pluralism, that in earlier attempts at mission outreach, the gospel did not come merely innocent or pure to a new culture.

Earlier efforts at missiology naively assumed such innocence, forgetting, as Schreiter reminds us, that "the gospel never comes alone to a culture: it is always brought by someone who is part of some cultural form of Christianity."³ Thus, in recent years we have had to eschew older theological imperialisms such as the dichotomy *universal* (for that read, generally, male-centered and Eurocentric) vs. *particular* theology. We have come to learn that all theology (following in this Tip O'Neil's classic quip about all politics) is, in the first instance, local.⁴

A Hermeneutics of Suspicion

North Americans do not come, Johnny-come-lately, to a hermeneutics of suspicion about the conflation of Eurocentric with universal norms for theology. Before the Council, our greatest North American theologian, John Courtney Murray, exercised such a hermeneutics of suspicion in his magisterial rereading of the Leonine corpus of encyclicals on church-state and religious freedom. Murray could justify Leo XIII's reactions to European secular, positivist and laicist views of separation of church and state but interdict the extrapolation of them as universal to the American case. Gregory Baum has written about Canadian Catholics struggling in the 1930s against the papal stricture in *Quadragesimo Anno* condemning all Catholic support for any socialist parties. These Canadian Catholics knew better than their bishops that the social gospel inspired Canadian CCC socialist party escaped the condemnation against the German Democratic Socialist Party Pius XI actually had in mind but neglected to name by its particular name.⁵

Inculturation, not mere Adaptation

Inculturation also resists views of faith and culture premised on mere adaptation or translation (the dialogue between faith and culture, of course, is willy-nilly two ways). Despite frequent confusion between inculturation and *enculturation* (i.e., the socialization process of learning a new culture) or *acculturation* (the encounter between different cultures), the new term has certain advantages. It evokes incarnation yet includes a crucial ambiguity in the prefix *in* which can refer, simultaneously, both to *within* and *into*. As *into*, the prefix includes the necessary notion of transcendence and transformation. It juxtaposes an essential eschatological or prophetic element to mere incarnation. One reason the gospel transcends *all* cultures and can be identified fully with none is that it will trouble any culture we have known. No culture is worthy or equal to the gospel (not even the internal culture of the Roman Catholic Church!).

As *within*, the prefix supports expectations of already finding (prior to our bringing the gospel) Christ, grace, the spirit as a sort of *logos spermaticos* at work in the culture. Thus, as Peter Schineller reminds us in his handy introductory work,

³Schreiter, "Faith and Cultures," 745.

⁴For a view that all theology is somehow local theology cf. C. Geffre, G. Guitierrez and V. Elizondo, eds., *Different Theologies, Common Responsibility: Babel or Pentecost?* Concilium 171 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1984).

⁵Cf. Gregory Baum, *Catholics and Canadian Socialism* (New York: Paulist, 1981).

A Handbook of Inculturation, we need to counter the metaphor of a disciple-evangelist as a pearl merchant bringing to new markets the pearl of great price with another gospel image of the hunter for hidden treasure already buried, latent and implicit, in the culture.⁶ Inculturation, then, assumes the unadulterated preaching of the word of God and an expectation voiced by the early American Puritans that God would surely bring forth a new word of world significant revealing power in each new continent and culture.

Mere adaptation will not transform and regenerate a culture. Mere translation fails to expect original expressions of Christian life not imposed from without but brought forth from a culture's own living tradition. A further virtue in the term inculturation is the way it proposes viewing the relationship of faith and cultures as an ongoing process rather than a once-for-all encounter. There is a bringing of faith for the first time to a culture, its eventual maturation and enfleshment in these new cultural categories. But in the first world (both Europe and North America) there is also the very different phenomenon of a subsequent 'secularization' of original gospel categories—a forgetting of the Christian provenance of such cultural categories as, e.g., the service character of the professions or the commitment to a social welfare safety net for the needy, etc. The American sociologist Talcott Parsons liked to point to this cultural universalization which made secular and desacralized what began as particularist Christian motifs in Western culture.

A. A. Roest-Crollius can provide us now with a more adequate definition of inculturation:

Inculturation of the church is the integration of the Christian experience of a local church into the culture of its people, in such a way that this experience not only expresses itself in elements of this culture but becomes a force that animates, orients and innovates this culture so as to create a new unity and communion, not only within the culture in question but also as an enrichment of the church universal.⁷

If we remain probably pretty much doomed, for a time, to *towards* discourse, we can, perhaps move that *towards* forward beyond mere calls for inculturation in the North American context by focusing on some more specific questions about faith and culture in the North American context. I will bring three such questions to our discussion:

- (1) Why the strong preoccupation in North American theology with inculturation? Is it informed by a driving, genuinely pastoral, question?
- (2) Haven't we already deeply inculturated the faith in North America? If so, what is the debate really about?
- (3) Must inculturation in the North American context involve, primarily (or, perhaps, exclusively) a countercultural emphasis? Can modernity, as such, undergo inculturation?

⁶Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist, 1990) 26-27.

⁷A. A. Roest Crollius, "What is so New about Inculturation? A Concept and Its Interpretation," *Gregorianum* 59 (1978): 735.

I. THE NORTH AMERICAN PREOCCUPATION WITH INCULTURATION

This represents the third time in a decade that the CTSA has taken inculturation (with some focus on North America) as the thematic motif for its annual convention: 1981, 1986, 1990. In that same decade these following books, among others, appeared, addressing a specifically American Catholic theology: Charles Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics* (1982); John Coleman, *An American Strategic Theology* (1982); Joe Holland and Anne Barsanti, eds., *American and Catholic: the New Debate* (1988); David Hollenbach, *Justice, Peace and Human Rights: American Catholic Social Ethics in a Pluralistic Context* (1988); Dennis Mc Cann, *New Experiments in Democracy: The Challenge of American Catholicism* (1987); George Weigel, *Catholicism and the Renewal of American Democracy* (1989); Cassian Yeuhaus, ed., *The Catholic Church and American Culture* (1990). Why this strong preoccupation in American theology with inculturation? Perhaps this North American preoccupation is primarily a response to an invitation from on high. Perhaps, again, it is a response to an unexpected visitation from below. Perhaps it resonates with older American and American Catholic dreams. But what pastoral question, I ask, really motivates it?

An Invitation from on High

It is no secret that inculturation looms large as a theme of the magisterium since Vatican Council II. *Gaudium et Spes* shifted the older Catholic discussion of faith and reason (with mistaken classicist cultural assumptions that (1) reason was a unitary ahistorical and acultural "universal" reason, and (2) reason could adequately capture imagination, symbol, myth and the nonrational) to a new correlation between faith and culture. *Gaudium et Spes* stresses the plurality and empirical historicity of cultures and notes that the church is not tied to any culture. Rather the church can incarnate in many different cultures (in principle in all?) and become enriched by each of them. (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 53-63).

Inculturation in Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic social teaching may be one privileged *locus theologicus* for studying issues of faith and culture. On the near morrow of the end of the Council in 1967, Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* could announce: "Today the principal fact we must all recognize is that the social question has become worldwide." Already in this document Paul shows sensitivity to the range of cultural and structural differences in continents and cultures and proves himself far more reluctant than any of his predecessors (or successors?) to imply that there is one specific 'Catholic answer' to address social and economic problems worldwide.

By 1971, in *Octogesima Adveniens*, Paul VI could issue a broad mandate for inculturation: "In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition nor is it our mission. It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the gospel's unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment and directives for action from this social teaching."⁸

⁸*Octogesima Adveniens* 4.

Surely, the most deep-rooted invitation from on high for theologians to direct their attention to inculturation can be found in Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

The various strata of the human race are to be transformed. This means something more than the church preaching the gospel in ever-expanding geographical areas or to ever increasing numbers. It also means affecting the standards by which people make judgments, their prevailing values, their interests and thought patterns, the things that move them to action, and their models of human living. In so far as any or all of these are inconsistent with the Word of God and the plan of salvation they are to be in some sense turned upside down by the power of the gospel.

Here we hear the stress on the *into* prefix in inculturation, the gospel coming into a culture as rupture, eschatological judgment and transformer of values, standards, models of human living. Paul VI goes on to emphasize much more the *within* prefix:

It is necessary to evangelize and to permeate with the gospel human culture and cultures. This has to be done not superficially, as though one were adding a decoration or applying a coat of paint, but in depth—reaching into and out from the core and the roots of life. . . . The gospel and the process of evangelization can penetrate all cultures while being neither subordinate to any of them nor the monopoly of any.⁹

So, perhaps, we can say, then, that the preoccupation North American theology has with inculturation is a response to this magisterial invitation from on high to probe more deeply how we can become truly a world church, a communion in difference, a polycentric pluralist unity of local churches, each reflecting their own culture. Surely these issues represent much of the most important unfinished (or since torpedoed) agenda of Vatican II. The North American preoccupation with inculturation, on this view, would be our own way of entering the new reality of a polycentric, pluriform world church. Yet I need to make an editorial comment here. *But it is difficult to imagine what in American culture, as such, would drive such a quest since American culture, notoriously, does not recognize, celebrate and thematize itself as a mere part of a larger, polycentric, pluriform world order. Rather it stresses American exceptionalism—the nation set apart as a light to other lands.*

An Unexpected Visitation from Below

But the North American preoccupation with inculturation is no less an American response to the unexpected visitation from below, what Gustavo Gutierrez calls the "irruption of the poor into history." Clearly, attention to inculturation has led to a rich new moment in world theology. The new theologies of liberation and inculturation in Latin America, Asia and Africa seem to bring fresh words of gospel newness to our time, a rupture from banal, ordinary and technological time and empty space. Thus, a second motive for the North American preoccupation may lie in the hope that by imitating these fresh new theological voices, first world theology, itself, can regain its élan, act as midwife for original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought, enrich the church universal.

⁹*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 19-20, in Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1983) 201-202.

Older American Dreams

A third source for the North American preoccupation is more indigenous. Older American themes of the Redeemer Nation, the new experiment, the *novus ordo* and the new Adam led Protestant America to expect a new revealing power on the virgin continent. American Catholics transposed this Protestant expectation in two ways. First, from the time of the Americanists on, they hoped that the experience of American Catholics with voluntaryism, church-state separation, ecumenism and democracy might have something to teach the world church. Much of that earlier agenda was already achieved at Vatican II, although much still remains an unfinished agenda. The new Americanists see in the American bishops' consultative style in writing social pastorals a possible export item for the world church. Catholic neoconservatives still hope that what they call American democratic capitalism might inform worldwide Catholic social teaching. Many argue that the North American church will serve as a pilot church to deal with issues of patriarchy in Catholicism and see the new role of women in society as John XXIII did as one of the signs of the times. *Like so much in American culture, this agenda is frequently almost entirely procedural (important as procedures are) rather than substantive.*

A second American Catholic motif (found as early as Orestes Brownson and as late as George Weigel with variations in John Courtney Murray) stressed that American Catholics could save the nation because their ethos remains closer to the republican virtue on which our republican experiment depends. Other Americans have so relativized the American consensus and an earlier American implicit belief in natural law and civic virtue that only some "Catholic Moment" in American culture might renew our culture. This is the perennial American Catholic theme of Catholics as the most stalwart Americans. It has both liberal and more conservative variations but the theme is quite old in American Catholic history. The main sociological source giving impetus and energy to this theme was the outsider status of immigrant Catholicism. That status is no longer available to us since the older liberal Protestant center could not hold. *Absent this tension, it is difficult to see in contemporary American culture—where by almost any sociological indices Catholics are no longer outsiders—what might sustain the belief that Catholics are better carriers of the American ideal than any other group.*

Elsewhere, I have expressed some doubts about this metaphor of a so-called Catholic moment in American culture. With Martin Marty, I suspect that one religious family will never again attain the kind of cultural hegemony and culture-shaping power that mainline Protestantism once represented in the United States.¹⁰

My main question, however, about the future fruitfulness of a North American Catholic preoccupation with inculturation is the relative absence of a burning pastoral question to inform the quest. Such questions have turned liberation theology in Latin America or the concern for indigenization in India and Sri Lanka into a new vibrant drinking from their own wells. In Latin America, as Gustavo Gutierrez posits it, that pastoral question reads:

¹⁰Cf. my article, "A Catholic Moment in American Society," in *Listening* (Winter 1990): 5-29.

Is it possible to talk about a God who wants justice in a situation of poverty and oppression? How can the God of life be proclaimed to people who are suffering premature and unjust death? How is it possible to recognize the free gift of his love in a situation in which the innocent are suffering? What language can be found to tell those who are not seen as integral persons that they are sons and daughters of God? These are the questions asked by contemporary theology in Latin America and without doubt elsewhere in the world where there are similar or even more serious circumstances.¹¹

For the decolonized new nations of Africa and Asia, the legacy of colonialism, the recovery of national or tribal heritage and customs, the sense of being outsider voices in essentially Buddhist or Islamic or Hindu cultures, similarly, raise life-propelling questions and radical choices for church theologians. For them inculturation contains the invitation to discover, for the first time, a genuinely African or Asian Christ without Christendom, a Jesus who does not come from the West. The contrast pastoral experience, in both cases, presses the quest for new inculturation and inspires fervent rethinking of theology. One's very life, personhood or stake in a culture is at play. For the marginalized or internally colonized peoples in our own context—women, blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics—some of this same explosive potential in a contrast pastoral experience may be contained in the new turn to inculturation.

Without a clear contrast problematic to inform the North American discussion of inculturation, I fear the exercise in inculturated theology in our context might be either merely academic or, as Gregory Baum surmised when he addressed the CTSA several years ago on "The Social Context of American Catholic Theology" that "American Catholic theology has been generated out of an unreflected identification with the middle class." Baum feared that as merely liberal and aligned with American liberal philosophy, inculturated theology may actually disguise the real ills of American society and serve as an ideology, one more call for pluralism in a culture where that code word has come, frequently, to stand for repressive tolerance.¹² What might serve as pastoral questions to give direction to our quest for inculturation? Let me suggest purely hypothetically two. Note, I do not endorse these examples in themselves but use them as illustrations of a genuine pastoral question:

(1) In a very provocative article, the distinguished Protestant missiologist Leslie Newbegin asks, "Can the West be Converted?" Newbegin believes that modern Western culture, more than almost any other, has proved resistant to the gospel.¹³ Pursuing this question, rather than assuming that North American culture is already—however imperfectly or partially lapsed—a Christian culture (as the evangelicals frequently do), theologians would press the issue of a "second

¹¹Gustavo Guitierrez, "How can God be Discussed from the Perspective of Ayacucho?" in The Concilium Foundation, eds., *On the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) 107-108.

¹²Gregory Baum, "The Social Context of American Catholic Theology," in Gregory Baum, *Theology and Society* (New York: Paulist, 1987) 181.

¹³Leslie Newbegin, "Can the West be Converted?" in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11 (January 1987): 2-7.

evangelization," as it were *de novo*, not presupposing that we are already evangelized. We would recognize squarely that little of the Puritan covenant, little of the republican virtue of the Deist founding fathers, mere remnants of nineteenth century evangelical culture remain in America. How is a second evangelization possible in cultures which contain the veneer remnants of a first evangelization but in secular guise? How to keep the gospel language uncontaminated by near cognate but now radically secularized and reinterpreted (and thus only speciously cognate) older evangelical notions? With the same shock as the French in the early 1940s, how might we reimagine the church's presence to American culture if we too saw our situation as one of a *pays mission*? This first pastoral question would not seek sectarian withdrawal from the culture, as such, with concern for mere protection of Christian identity against cultural onslaught. Inculturation implies a mission to be within a culture as a leaven and to bring to it gospel values. It would demand a public Catholicism seeking new ways to achieve what the French *nouvelle theologie* called "presence and witness" and new strategic placement in culture-bearing groups. The pastoral shock that we are essentially a pagan, unevangelized culture and the challenge to a second evangelization might drive us to ask fruitful questions about inculturation in the North American context.

(2) A second, quite different, pastoral question is suggested by Brazilian theologian Marcello Azevedo in a thoughtful article, "Evangelization—Inculturation—Religious Life: Principles and Criteria." Azevedo insists that elements of modernity and its culture penetrate everywhere, even in third world countries:

There is no hope, either in the short or medium term, of turning back the process of modernization of our societies, whether it comes in the liberal or authoritarian molds of neocapitalist inspiration or in the very diverse socialist forms. . . . The technological invasion of instant communication conquers ever more geographic spaces and mental universes, as does no less the computer language and its multiple applications and consequences.

Faced with modernity, Azevedo contends:

There is no other path for evangelization than the inculturated process of a critical reading and a serious discernment of this modern contemporary culture starting from its own presuppositions. To claim that culture cannot be evangelized is to admit, for the first time in the history of Christianity the capitulation of the faith and of the Gospel in the face of a culture. This nullifies the salvific power of the mystery of Christ. To claim that the evangelizing response is to be found in the return to pre-modern forms and paradigms means to ignore or underestimate the dynamic and prospective nature of that culture of speedy transformations. To claim, eventually, that only by the countercultural alternative that this culture can be evangelized is to make a mutilated and, in the long term, indefensible reading of it.¹⁴

One way to read Vatican Council II is to see it as a long-delayed settling of accounts with modernity just as modernity itself was undergoing a new, trenchant attack which saw the modern technico-rational project yielding Max Weber's iron cage, leveling community, standardizing emotion and response, denuding civil

¹⁴Cf. Marcello de C. Azevedo, "Evangelization-Inculturation-Religious Life: Principles and Criteria," in *International Union of Superiors General Bulletin* 17 (1988): 26-41.

society, trapping all discourse and action in the twin logics of the market and the state with no room for free public spaces of genuinely public discourse. Should we not abandon modernity in a countercultural strategy?

Still, as David Tracy recently writes:

Considering the alternatives (including the alternatives of intellectual mystification and social and intellectual oppression against which the great middle-class revolutions honorably fought), an endangered democratic ethos, the classic middle-class virtues and the pluralism of our modern societies deserve defense. They deserve theological defense at a time—our time—when all those accomplishments of the modern, bourgeois revolutions are in danger of destruction by a technoeconomic realm out of control. This is especially the case in the church—our church—where even the genuine gains of modernity first released by Vatican II, after two centuries of Catholic resistance to modernity, are now stymied at every point by those whose views are not post-Enlightenment at all but, at best, pre-Enlightenment.¹⁵

In this second pastoral question the thrust toward inculturation in the first world—confronting both modernity and even postmodernity with its deconstructionist refusal to admit the reality of the subject— might look for resources for memory, hope and for resistance to a technological rationality out of control, forms of modern communication and organization which remove all differences, erode and subvert all communities, level all traditions.

Azevedo, who has written so eloquently about base communities in Brazil and the Brazilian church's option for the poor, fears that the church there may be unable to penetrate and evangelize the more modern, modernizing (and, yes, often brutalizing) sectors of society and the modern technological development project in Brazil. He wants an inculturation in the Brazilian church which touches all the layers of culture, including the hegemonic classes who make most of the political-economic decisions in that country. Azevedo's way of posing the question forces us in North America to ask squarely about the many layers and pluriformity of American culture. To which culture in America do we seek inculturation? Sociologists and historians detail for us one persuasive view of American culture: the culture of consumerism, market mobility, the deanchored self of expressive individualism, the culture which erodes communities of memory, denatures the public realm of discourse, the culture where technology has become the technological paradigm operating outside its own domain. But sociologists have also found a surprising amount of community to have persisted in American life, not only in small towns, but even at the very center of our metropolises (particularly among working class, minority and ethnically homogeneous areas). If we focus our concern with inculturation only in these latter groups, do we avoid Azevedo's concern that we give up entirely on the hegemonic culture as such? To be sure, there are some who argue that there are basic premises of modernity (modern contemporary culture in either its liberal-capitalist or socialist forms) so antithetical to the basic beliefs of the Christian faith that the inculturation of the Christian message into the modern world is very difficult and even, in some people's opinion, quite impossible. I would urge such people to read David Tracy's careful discernment model

¹⁵David Tracy, "On Naming the Present," in The Concilium Foundation, eds., *On the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, 73.

to find traces of hope, memory and resistance in modernity as such (some of whose premises deserve theological defense), in postmodernity (some of whose premises serve not only as a hermeneutics of suspicion but an invitation to new retrievals of the mystical tradition) and in the antimodernity of the fundamentalists and neo-conservatives. In this essay, "On Naming the Present," in *Concilium*, February 1990, Tracy challenges all of us who would simply write off modernity or choose purely countercultural strategies to think this response through anew. We can neither embrace fully nor reject any of the strata of modern Western culture: "All the more familiar western namings of the present have much to teach and much to warn themselves against."¹⁶

Something like one of these two pastoral questions, I submit, will be needed as a motor for continued and consequential concern for inculturation in the North American context. What I do not find at present clearly articulated in the literature of North American inculturation studies (except in some of feminist, black and Hispanic theology) is the kind of religious and pastoral impetus for an American theology to match that articulated by Gutierrez for Latin America or Alois Peiris in Asia. You may note that the two suggested pastoral questions differ strongly on the issue of whether in our context Catholicism must per se be countercultural.

II. HAVEN'T WE ALREADY DEEPLY INCULTURATED THE FAITH IN NORTH AMERICA? IF SO, WHAT IS THE DEBATE REALLY ABOUT?

After over three centuries in American soil, Catholic Americans now represent far and away America's largest denomination, three times as large as the next largest denomination, the Southern Baptists. Catholics are statistically overrepresented in politics (as members of the House of Representatives, in holding state governorships and so on) and in the highest reaches of corporate America. A 1986 *Fortune* magazine study revealed that more Catholics than any other group now head the nation's top corporations. American Catholics lead Protestants in indices of educational achievement, social status, economic wealth. No non-Catholic sociologist of religion would imagine that American Catholics are not fully inculturated in American society. Indeed, the Catholic combination of commanding size and favorable social location, and relatively strong inner religious discipline and church commitment (at least when compared to liberal Protestants) has led a number of cultural critics to postulate a "Catholic moment" in American culture or in the words of George Gallup—a new "Catholicization of American culture." The North American preoccupation with inculturation seems more puzzling when we consider that so much inculturation has already occurred. What might be the real issues behind this preoccupation?

We can garner a clue to resolve this dilemma of why such a fully inculturated church (at least in the sense of the prefix *within*) as American Catholicism remains preoccupied with the issue of inculturation from David O'Brien's recent historical study, *Public Catholicism*. As O'Brien sees it, in contemporary American Catholicism "the issue was no longer the compatibility of Catholicism and Amer-

¹⁶Ibid., 82.

icanism but of serious Christian discipleship and responsible American citizenship, evangelical faith and republican ideals and practice."¹⁷

O'Brien discerns three quite divergent contemporary American Catholic strategies for public Catholicism, each concerned with inculturation, each addressing different sectors of American society and culture, each rooted in the past history of American Catholicism. He names these three: republican Catholicism; immigrant Catholicism; and evangelical Catholicism.

It is a virtue of O'Brien's groundbreaking history that he shows that in each of these three alternative and not entirely compatible styles of public Catholicism there is attention to the dialectic between religion and culture. Each is a serious Catholic attempt at inculturation. Republican Catholicism, presupposing Catholic identity, ventures into the civic world of public policy debate bringing reformist proposals in line with Catholic moral visions of the common good. Immigrant Catholicism, comfortable with American interest-group politics, does not wait for moral consensus to press its legitimate demands. Evangelical Catholicism refuses to yield the biblical strands in past American culture to the secularists. If the evangelical style appeals to integrity and exposes the impersonal character of the state and unmasks the spiritual emptiness in American consumerism and careerism, it also tends to see the larger society as incurably corrupt. Compared to the other two forms of public Catholicism, immigrant Catholicism understands power and its uses: "Neither the evangelical emphasis on gospel fidelity nor the republican emphasis on civic mindedness faces the problem of power in a pluralistic society, nor does either have an evident strategy to bring about changes in policy."¹⁸

O'Brien gives us a name to identify the debates in American Catholicism about inculturation when he concludes his book with the argument that, after two centuries of organized existence, the American church has not evolved a coherent understanding of its public role and responsibilities. Nor given the ambiguity of American culture and the very different layers within it is it likely to. The new contrast situation for American Catholics is that we are no longer outsiders to the culture, at least three-fourths of us are not. We are torn between placing our hope on the new outsiders: Hispanics, Vietnamese, etc., and that they may achieve a cultural pluralism in America none of the earlier immigrants could or in trying to become, once again, outsiders to a culture no longer seen as so benign. The crucial difference between these three sometimes incompatible styles of public Catholicism is that they do not agree on our third question:

III. MUST INCULTURATION IN NORTH AMERICA BE COUNTERCULTURAL?

In some sense inculturation is a function of evangelization. If we follow Paul VI's paradigm by which inculturation means that the gospel affects the standards by which people make judgments, their prevailing values, their interests and thought-patterns, the things that move them to action and their models for human

¹⁷David O'Brien, *Public Catholicism* (New York: Macmillan, 1989) 241-42.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 248.

living, inculturation always involves countercultural moves. The gospel does not fit comfortably into any culture.

I understand the conclusion drawn by Avery Dulles in his carefully crafted essay, "Catholicism and American Culture; The Uneasy Dialogue," which appeared in *America* magazine this past January. Dulles sees a new mass culture, determined by technological advances and well described by the term, "consumerism," as profoundly modifying other layers and earlier strands of American culture. He argues that since "the greatest danger facing the church in our country today is that of excessive and indiscreet accommodation, Catholics will be well advised to cultivate a measured, prudent counterculturalism."¹⁹

I have, however, two *caveats* about the counterculture talk among North American inculturation theorists.

(1) It is important to remember that cultures are complex, multilayered symbolic repositories of diverse histories, memories and resistances. Cultures involve an argument about the meaning of events, foundational symbols, the particular valence of any cultural value in the cultural hierarchy of values. Any culture is an ambiguous text. Any living culture represents a lively argument about the goods and goals of the tradition. Cultures, as Clyde Kluckhohn used to argue, represent value hierarchies, sets where certain values subordinate (but do not entirely eclipse) alternative and corollary values. If, in some sense, that value hierarchy for the United States might include such items as equality, pluralism, individualistic freedom, and unanchored self, suspicion of authority and power surrounded and softened by a vague and sentimental patriotism, this does not mean that alternative values (e.g., solidarity, nonegalitarian grounding for status, etc.) are *simply* absent. Consolidating strengths and alleviating flaws in a culture entails attention to contrapuntal strands, countervailing forces, resistances to hegemonic culture—already present in the culture as more muted but not totally silenced voices.

Catholics or Christians do not have to create whole-cloth (nor are they likely to) these countervailing tendencies, resistances, memories in a culture. Take, for example, the culture of consumerism, deeply embedded in the American quest for material well-being, mythically rooted in the earliest image of the virgin continent as a wilderness to be turned into a garden of affluence, surcharged by Protestant Puritan beliefs that material well-being serves as sign of God's election. Consumerism, moreover, is closely linked to the structures of corporate capitalism in America.

Yet, from the very beginning, the same American culture has also contained the contrapuntal ideal of the simple life. From the Puritan ethic and its sumptuary laws, to Jefferson's ideal of republican simplicity, to the transcendental plain living of Thoreau and later Whitman, this alternative (yet clearly American cultural) ideal has refused to ever be fully tamed by a culture of consumerism.

After an eclipse during the gilded age, the quest for a simple life reemerged in the progressive era with the call to new practices to right the imbalance in consumerism: "discriminating consumption, uncluttered living, personal contentment, aesthetic simplicity in art and architecture, civic virtue, social service,

¹⁹Avery Dulles, "Catholicism and American Culture: The Uneasy Dialogue," in *America* 162/3 (27 January 1990): 59.

renewed contact with nature."²⁰ Both Teddy Roosevelt and John Muir shared William James' fears for an "overcivilized man." After another eclipse in the post-World War I era of prosperity, the ideal of simple living reemerged again with the early New Deal's vision of a cooperative commonwealth and the simple life embodied in the youth of the Civilian Conservation Corps.

In our own time, environmentalists and others tap into this persistent minority strand of American culture inimical to a consumerism run riot. As it turns out, sociological evidence exists to suggest that there is, in fact, a substantial popular tendency to endorse simplicity as a value (to act on it is quite another question!). Simplicity as a value in this country is endorsed by a majority of two-thirds of respondents. The people who claim they actually practice simplicity covers a third of the population.²¹

To evoke the epithet countercultural can mean an appeal for withdrawal from the culture into sectarian alternative communities or the vain attempt to create, whole-cloth, cultural resistance to hegemony. Even in choosing to be countercultural, I want to argue, Catholics must seek out already available strands within the culture. *The law of inculturation (that the gospel bring something new from within the culture itself) holds even for countercultural moves.*

I want to resist a suggestion in Dulles' excellent article that inculturation can be postponed to a later moment, after Catholics, "through their parishes, their families, prayer groups or basic ecclesial communities, find an environment in which they can interiorize their religious heritage. In this way they can prepare themselves to become agents in the evangelization of the secular culture."²² Dulles seems to me to fall here into the fallacy of placing church *communio* prior in time to *missio*. Yet the church exists, precisely, in its mission, for its mission to the world. Inculturation is not something we do, after we get our act together and our identity and integrity straight. At no moment can we, anyway, be first Catholic (what kind of Catholic? in what culture? related to what real questions?) and then American.

(2) As the recent history of Eastern Europe so amply shows, cultural elements, seemingly long buried and lost, remain submerged as memory traces to erupt forth at the opportune time. Remarking on the reemergence of buried elements in culture, Vaclav Havel notes that "society is a very mysterious animal with many faces and hidden potentialities, and that it is extremely shortsighted to believe that the face society happens to be presenting to you at a given moment is its only true

²⁰cf. David Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 278.

²¹For simplicity attitudes among Americans cf. Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity* (New York: Macmillan, 1982) 129-31. I treat the issue of contrapuntal elements in American culture against our cultural bias toward individualism, the technological paradigm and consumerism in my essay, "American Culture as a Challenge to Intellectual Life," which appears in Cassian Yuhaus, ed., *The Catholic Church and American Culture: Reciprocity and Challenge* (New York: Paulist, 1990).

²²Dulles, "Catholicism and American Culture," 59

face."²³ It is equally shortsighted and uncritical to identify a culture with its hegemonic current forms.

For this reason, I am less likely than others to simply conclude that older American patterns and ideals, now under siege, have totally lost all memory trace. Take, for example, the earlier American ideal—so well limned by Tocqueville—of the voluntary society (free public spaces which served as “free schools” of civic virtue). American commercial democracy withstood, for a long time, the imperialism of the market because of the buffer of a civil society. It resisted the imperialism of the state through the same mechanism.

American society has seen a successive colonization of civil society by the logic of the market and the logic of the state. No one would claim that the United States today is any longer the America Tocqueville described. Its voluntary associations have ceased to be the mainstay of a democracy constantly on the move but are now more a means of self-defense for various interests which, though certainly ethical, are still parochial in nature. Moreover, as Allan Wolfe argues, “an articulate notion of civil society never developed in the United States because in many ways America already was a civil society and so never needed to develop any theory about how it would work. The small town, the voluntary association, the spirit of the people—these aspects of how Americans viewed themselves contained such an emphasis on trust, friendship and community that people simply assumed they would always be there.”²⁴

Civil society, voluntarism, though under enormous threat, still survive. People lately have been rediscovering this third sector as an important ingredient of American cultural and structural renewal. It represents Habermas’ postulated public realm and Michael Walzer’s sphere of justice against the logic of the market and state. The present sociological state of civil society in America looks different from what it appeared to Tocqueville but it still survives, if not intact, not yet totally crippled. New voices, such as Alan Wolfe or Robert Bellah or the Lilly Foundation (even finding an echo in President Bush’s call for a thousand points of light), are working for the defense (both culturally and institutionally) of the third sector of civil society.²⁵

Catholic social teaching has many affinities with the classic notion of civil society. One of the great achievements of the two bishops’ pastorals of the 1980s (both mainly following O’Brien’s republican style of Catholicism) was their forthright insistence on reinstating the public realm, defending voluntarism, looking for other models than interest-group adjudication for American political discourse and public life. Was the bishops’ stance countercultural? Yes, in the sense of opposing powerful new forces eroding older values and institutions in American life. But it is a mistake to identify recent trends or hegemonic forces with American culture as such. Inasmuch as the bishops appealed, beyond confes-

²³Vaclav Havel, “History of a Public Enemy,” *The New York Review of Books* 37/9 (31 May 1990): 36.

²⁴Alan Wolfe, *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 77.

²⁵For evidence of continuing vitality of the third sector in the United States cf. Michael O’Neill, *The Third America* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1989).

sional warrant, to reasoned discourse and to a broader public they could actually reawaken in other Americans (recall the many letters by Protestant churches which came in the wake of the bishops' pastorals) what many claim to be the truer and deeper American values. This was the cultural power of their appeal.

I do not think, in North America, we are doomed to totally countercultural styles of discourse, action or styles. We can appeal to countervailing forces already available in the culture or for defense of deep-rooted cultural ideals and institutions now under threat. Each presumes powerful and benign elements within the culture at least consonant with the gospel countercultural thrust. Each tries to protect or revitalize elements from *within* the culture to bring forth a new and original Christian expression. To withdraw, even for a time, into exclusive concern with building up Catholic identity and integrity, later to foray into culture, strikes me as similar to the man in the parable who buried his talent rather than spending it abroad. It also forgets that any culture is as much memory and resistance as it is the empirical hegemony of the current ruling ethos.

We have come full circle and still remain within the realm of *towards* discourse. But is America in 1990 any the less both the field which contains, simultaneously, wheat and tares (yet we are not, totally, sure at present which is which) as well as the field with a buried treasure? The project of inculturation is never finished. It embraces diverse layers of culture. We are not the first generation to essay the project. Answering my three questions: (1) What pastoral contrast experience moves us to inculturation? (2) Why can we not agree on styles of inculturation and public Catholicism in America? and (3) Must inculturation be necessarily countercultural in our context? will, I hope, move the discussion further. But I suspect we will always be somewhat fated with *towards* language.

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