

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> October 2010

Dear Friends,

Receive warm Christian greetings from all of us here at the NEG Secretariat.

Those of you who were able to attend yesterday's Roundtable Discussion whose theme was *Christ and Culture* will agree with me that Rev Father Michael McCabe made an excellent job of the presentation and engagement with the Participants. I am sure you all join me in thanking him.

Although we are quite happy to share the blessings, we cannot, unfortunately, transport the vigour, enthusiasm, intelligence, compassion and humility with which Rev Fr McCabe made the presentation, nor can we adequately express the energy, renewal and revival that the ensuing discussion elicited.

Rev Father McCabe's well researched and articulated presentation is reproduced in its entirety here below. A few photos of the discussion are embedded into the presentation (without Rev Fr McCabe's permission!).

Sabbath blessings

Njeri Kang'ethe

---

## ***THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHRIST AND CULTURE***

*by Michael McCabe, SMA*

### ***1. Introduction***

The dialogue between Christ, or the Gospel of Christ, and culture is as old as Christianity itself. The fact that we have four Gospels instead of one shows us that from the beginning of Christian history, the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ was shaped by the



**Rev Fr McCabe explaining a point**

needs, aspirations and perspectives of different audiences and their cultures. In the first century of the Christian era, St Paul vigorously opposed the Judaizers who erroneously identified Christianity with their own ethnic conventions and cultural

practices, and wished to impose them on all non-Jewish converts to Christianity (cf. Acts 15: 1-30; 17: 22-28; Gal. 2: 1-4). For Paul, the message of Christ was not to be identified with a single culture. It was meant for all peoples and was capable of embracing all cultures.

Vindicated by Paul, the principle of openness to all cultures (inculturation) was applied generously in the Graeco-Roman cultural world. As it entered this world, Christian faith underwent *a gradual but radical transformation*: a transformation not only in its liturgical and sacramental life, in its structures and laws, but also in its doctrine, i.e., its understanding of the revelation given to it. The early Christians did not simply use Greek thought to express what they already knew; they discovered, through Greek religious and philosophical insights, what it was that had been revealed to them – and this discovery led to the doctrines of the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ.

## ***2. Examples of Liturgical Inculturation***

Apart from the so-called ‘hellenization’ of Christian doctrine, the *variety of liturgical traditions* in early Christian history is also evidence of the process of inculturation, and the development of the feast of Christmas is a very good instance of this process. The 25 December, the Winter Solstice, was a famous pagan feast: *the*



*feast of the “Invincible Sun”*. This feast officially promulgated by the Emperor Aurelian around the year 274 C.E. Among the gods worshipped by the Romans was the Sun. For them it was the source of heat and light and life depended on it. The people noticed that on the 25 December, the sun was at its weakest, but it didn’t die. Just at the point when it seemed about to snuff it, it began to grow strong again. And so it proved itself invincible. Hence, the choice of 25th December as the Feast of the Invincible Sun.

When Christianity became the official religion of the Empire in the fourth century, it did not seek to suppress this feast of the invincible Sun. Rather it took the structure of this feast, with its symbols, and gave it a new content, a new meaning by associating it with the birth of Christ. This is a good example of inculturation: instead of rejecting the cultural forms of the pagans, the Christians kept them, but invested them with a more profound meaning, derived from the Christ event.

Historians have pointed out affinities between the *Christian Feast of the Epiphany* and the Egyptian celebration of the birth of Aion, the God of time and eternity.

### ***3. Evangelization and Respect for Local Culture.***

The right of people to express the Gospel of Christ in terms of their own culture was affirmed more frequently than we might realise in the course of Church history. When Pope Gregory the Great sent the monk, Augustine (of Canterbury), to evangelize England towards the end of the sixth century, he admonished him not to destroy the customs of the people but rather to transform them gradually.<sup>1</sup>



**Participants listen keenly to Fr McCabe**

Again when Sts Cyril and Methodius founded the Slavic Churches in the ninth century, the local language and culture were respected. To come to more recent times, we have the outstanding examples of the Jesuit missionaries Mateo Ricci (1552 - 1610) in China and Roberto de Nobili in India (1577 - 1656), whose enlightened approach to the local cultures yielded promising results.

At its best, then, the Church envisaged the work of evangelisation, not as a transplantation of the Church from one place to another, but as a creative process respecting all aspects of local cultures compatible with the integrity of the received faith. Two concrete examples serve illustrate this positive attitude.

First a quotation from a famous Roman Instruction of 1659 from the newly established Congregation of the Propagation of the faith to missionaries setting out for China about how they should behave in their encounter with the Chinese.

Do not regard it as your task, and do not bring a pressure to bear on the peoples, to change their manners, customs, and uses, unless they are evidently contrary to religion and sound morals. What could be more absurd than to transport France, Spain, Italy, or some other European Country to China? Do

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Mission*, Penguin Books, London, 1964, pp. 68-69.

not introduce all that to them, but only the faith, which does not despise or destroy the manners and customs of any people,... but rather wishes to see them preserved unharmed.<sup>2</sup>

My second example comes from a key text of the Founder of the SMA, Melchior de Marion Bresillac. It appears in a position paper he wrote for Propaganda Fide in 1854 entitled “My Thoughts on the Missions.”

The same plant, under different climates, takes on diverse forms and appearances. The horticulture has to be always adapted to the temperature of the air and the nature of the soil. You must not expect the same taste in the fruits which the plant produces at different positions on the globe. Church of my God, you are that wondrous vine whose mysterious shoots must take root in all the places in the world.... Beware, reckless missionary, of reaching with unmeasured zeal for the French (or Portuguese) vine-grower's pruning knife. Beware, above all, of despising its fruits just because they do not seem as sweet as the ones you used to harvest in gentle Italy. You would soon make the vine sterile, and you would run the risk of despising the very work of the Holy Spirit himself.<sup>3</sup>

#### ***4. The Eclipse of the principle of Inculturation in Modern Missionary Era***

Unfortunately, in the modern missionary era (from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the last century) the instruction to respect culture was, to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare ‘more honoured in the breach than in the observance’. In theory and in practice evangelisation became synonymous with Westernization or Europeanization. As Karl

Rahner puts it:



**Wakuraya Wanjohi in deep thought**

[T]he modern history of the missions shows, with comparatively slight exceptions, that Christianity as a western export has not in practice made any impact on the advanced civilizations of the East or in the world of Islam. It has

---

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Stephen Neill, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> *Documents of Mission and Foundation*, Mediaspaul, Paris, 1986, p. 89.

made no impact because it was western Christianity and sought to establish itself as such in the rest of the world without the risk of a really new beginning, breaking with some of the continuities which had been taken for granted, as was shown in the various rites controversies, in the export of the Latin liturgical language into countries where Latin had never been an historical factor, in the way in which western Roman Law was exported as a matter of course in Canon Law, in the naïve way in which it was taken for granted that the bourgeois morality of the West could be imposed in every detail on people of alien cultures, in the rejection of religious experiences of other cultures, etc.<sup>4</sup>



**Imbibing from the fount of wisdom**

Western civilization.

The major reason for this cultural arrogance was the dominance of what Bernard Lonergan has called the classicist model of culture. In this model it was assumed that there was *only one culture* and that this culture had reached its maximum perfection in western “Christian” civilization. The rest of humanity was deemed to be cultured to the extent that it approximated the models or ideals of

Against this background, cultural diversity was considered a deviation from the norm, a threat to unity, and was therefore discouraged in the Church’s self-expression. Every effort was made to transport that one ideal culture to the whole world, even if this meant destroying genuine cultural traditions in the process.<sup>5</sup> Hence missionaries were seen as having the double task of civilizing as well as christianizing those to whom they were sent. These were two sides of the one coin.<sup>6</sup>

### ***5. Vatican II and the Acknowledgement of Cultural Diversity***

At Vatican II, the Church began, in principle at least, to distance itself from such a monolithic concept of culture in favour of **an anthropological or empirical understanding of culture as simply the entire way of life of a particular people**. This paved the way for

---

<sup>4</sup> *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1981, p. 86.

<sup>5</sup> A. Shorter, *Theology of Mission*, Mercier Press, Cork, 1972, p.51.

<sup>6</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1991, p. 306.

the recognition of cultural diversity as a value to be promoted in the Church rather than as an evil to be combated.

One of the declared aims of the Council was to open the Church to a dialogue with the men and women of our time as historical human beings, taking account of their socio-cultural, political and economic contexts, so as to present the Gospel to them as the good news of salvation. The social sciences had already established that men and women live in distinct social contexts which influence their worldviews, value systems and behavior, in other words, that they have different cultures.

The Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* defines culture in very broad terms as "all those things by which human beings refine and develop their various capacities of mind and body. It [culture] includes efforts to control the world by knowledge or by work, as well as ways of humanizing social life within the family or civic community through the progress of customs and institutions" (No.53). The same document then goes on to speak of a *plurality of cultures*:

Hence it follows that culture necessarily has historical and social overtones, and the word 'culture' often carries with it sociological and ethnological connotations; in this sense one can speak of a *plurality of cultures*. For different styles of living and different scales of values originate in different ways of using things, of working and self expression, of practicing religion and of behaviour, of establishing laws and juridical institutions, of developing science and the arts and of cultivating beauty. Thus the heritage of its institutions forms the patrimony proper to each human community (GS, no. 53).

Here *Gaudium et Spes* is highlighting the fact that each human community, with its specific history and geography, has its own inheritance of wisdom and its own way of fostering basic human values. Hence, even though it does not openly state so, *Gaudium et Spes* makes it abundantly clear that there can be no 'uncultured nations' and the monopoly exercised by the more aristocratic (classicist) meaning of culture has been broken for good.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gallagher, Michael P. *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture*, Paulist Press, New York, 2003, p. 39

This official *recognition of cultural diversity* had to be reckoned with in any serious consideration of evangelization. If evangelization addresses cultures that are empirically diverse, it necessarily follows that it will lead to culturally diverse ways of living the gospel.<sup>8</sup> No wonder, then, that after the Council the newly established local churches around the world, especially those of Africa and Asia, began to request far more scope and freedom from the Church's central authority for an effective inculturation of the gospel. This request came to a head at the 1974 Synod on Evangelization.

## **6. The 1974 Synod on Evangelization**

It was at this Synod that many of the African bishops spoke of the need for a genuine incarnation of the Gospel in African culture. However, even before this Synod, many African bishops expressed concern about the lack of recognition of African cultures in the planting of the Church on the continent and the negative consequences this has had for the practice of the faith by their faithful. The majority of Africans, they have said, found themselves caught between *two conflicting worldviews*: the Christian worldview and the worldview of the African traditional religions. Christianity had not really penetrated the African spirit so as to create a unified vision of life that would influence, for example, the moral, socio-political and economic choices of Africans. The 1974 Synod on Evangelization provided the African bishops with a good opportunity to make known to the rest of the Church their desire to promote the process of incarnating the gospel in Africa. In all their interventions at that Synod, they stressed the need for a Christianity which would really take African cultures into serious consideration.

Particularly striking was the intervention of Bishop Maanicus of the Central African Republic. He reminded the Assembly of the African bishops' dislike of the term "adaptation of the Church" because it did not go far enough. What the bishops are seeking, he insisted, was a *genuine incarnation of the gospel* and not a superficial or folkloristic adaptation.

We are not talking about adapting the Church and its laws to certain African customs. The folkloristic dances during religious ceremonies, the use of local instruments, the introduction of more adapted symbols are certainly means that cannot be neglected, but they touch only the external.

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A Shorter, "Inculturation: Win or Lose the Future?" in W. Von Holzen and S. Fagan (eds.), *Africa: The Kairos of a Synod*, Rome, 1994, p. 11.

Toward the end of the Synod, the African bishops made a declaration in which they opted for replacing the former ‘theology of adaptation’ with what they termed a ‘theology of incarnation.’

In his final address at the Synod, Paul VI, acknowledged the African bishops’ desire to find a better expression of the faith in accordance with the various social and cultural milieux of their churches to be not only legitimate, but, more importantly, in perfect accord with the urgent need for an authentic and effective evangelization. Paul VI was to take up the theme of culture again in his most famous letter, the Post-Synodal exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

### ***7. Evangelii Nuntiandi***

Written in 1975, one year after the Synod on Evangelization, the publication of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* coincided with the 10th anniversary of the closure of Vatican II. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* goes further than Vatican II in bringing mission right into the heart of the Church. It identifies evangelization as “the essential mission of the Church” (No. 14) and the source of her identity. It also asserts that the Church always remains in need of “being evangelized by constant conversion and renewal, in order to evangelize the world with credibility” (No. 15). This is the context in which Pope Paul presents a major statement on the meaning of evangelization and its essential relationship to culture.

Evangelization is defined in very broad terms as a “complex, rich and dynamic reality” which cannot be limited to preaching, catechetics and the administration of the sacraments alone (No. 17). It means “***bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity and through its influence transforming humanity from within***” (No. 18). EN, no. 19 makes it clear that the Good News can only transform these strata by first challenging and disturbing the our customary “criteria of judgement, ways of determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God”(No. 19). Evangelization, therefore, must challenge the cultural assumptions of people.

*Evangelii Nuntiandi* clearly implies that the common criteria employed in the diverse cultures of humankind are often in silent (if not open) conflict with the Gospel of Christ. If so, then evangelization has to include a new and ambitious goal, namely, the Christian transformation of culture. This also seems to be the viewpoint that Richard Niebuhr espoused in his famous



classic of 60 years ago, *Christ and Culture*. In this book Niebuhr summarizes Christian responses to culture around five paradigms or models. Two of these models (*Christ against culture* and *The Christ of culture*) are rather extreme and are seem quite incompatible with one another. The other three models (*Christ above culture*, *Christ and culture in paradox*, *Christ the transformer of culture*) are more moderate and have many points of contact with one another. Niebuhr's personal preference seems to have been for the latter model.

In speaking of the transformation of culture, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* makes three important points:

1. To transform cultures means going to the root values in human society and not be content with surface appearances.
2. The gospel is itself independent of cultures but the Reign of God that it proclaims has to be lived by people within their own cultural realities; hence the gospel is not incompatible with any culture, and is capable of entering a culture without becoming captive to it.
3. The "drama of our time" lies in the gap that has opened up between culture and the gospel. Healing this split is an essential dimension of evangelization today.<sup>9</sup>

Thus we find in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* a note of anxiety about the ambiguities of culture that was not present in the texts of Vatican II. Michael Paul Gallagher, an Irish Jesuit, points out that this represents a shift in the Catholic approach to culture from the optimistic openness of *Gaudium et Spes* to a more combative stance. By invoking the metaphor of 'drama,' *Evangelii Nuntiandi* goes well beyond Vatican II in recognizing an inevitable element of conflict in the process of confronting cultures with the vision of the gospel and, through the gospel, transforming them.<sup>10</sup>

However, it is important to point out that when Pope Paul VI refers to 'the rift between gospel and culture' in our time, he probably has in mind the *adverse effects of secularization* on the older churches of the Western world - churches that once boasted belonging to a 'Christian culture.' Today, in the Western world, a secular materialism, engendered by the ethos of the Enlightenment, has pushed religious belief to the fringes of society, reducing it to the private sphere, so that it hardly has any effect on the collective conscience of society.

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Gallagher, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Thus, there scarcely remains anything left today of what used to be referred to as “Christian culture.”

The situation in the churches of Africa and Asia is quite different because in these continents a “Christian culture” was not allowed to develop. The local cultures were not taken into serious consideration when evangelization began in those areas. Thus, in these Churches, there is a different type of rift: a rift between the Christianity that was planted and the unevangelized local cultures which continue to have tremendous influence on the social, moral and spiritual choices of the Christians in those parts of the world. African Bishops and theologians have spoken of this rift. The following quotes indicate some typical views:

“Christianity has barely touched the core of our lives.”

“No bridge has been built between the old and the new.”

“Tribal religions continue to live on within the Christian community.... like basalt rock covered by a thin veneer of Christian ideas and practices.”<sup>11</sup>

This split between Christian faith and traditional African cultures has been further complicated by the transportation into almost every part of Africa (especially by the media) of the secularized and materialistic Western culture with its attendant problems and negative influences. This was a concern strongly voiced at the recent African Synod which, in its *Final Message*, warned catholic families to be on their guard ‘against some virulent ideological poisons from abroad, claiming to be “modern culture”’ (No. 24) and to resist ‘all surreptitious attempts to destroy and undermine precious African values’ (No. 30). This situation, then, calls for a re-habilitation of the traditional values of African cultures and a thorough and painstaking incarnation of the Gospel of Christ in those cultures.

### ***Question for Reflection/Discussion***

How have you experienced the gap between Gospel and culture and in what concrete ways do you think this gap can be closed?

---

<sup>11</sup> All these quotes are taken from John Vijngaards, “New Ways for Mission” in *The Tablet*, Oct. 22, 1988, p. 1208. These quotes echo a familiar theme explored by the Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, in his famous novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*.

## Annex

### List of Participants

1. Mr Francis Osman Njuguna  
CISA  
Tel +254 0720 434 819  
Email: [osnjuguna@yahoo.com](mailto:osnjuguna@yahoo.com)
2. Prof Gerald J Wanjohi  
St Paul's Catholic University Chapel  
Tel +254 0717 012 207  
Email: [gwanjohi33@gmail.com](mailto:gwanjohi33@gmail.com)
3. Brother Josef  
The Taize' Community  
Tel +254 0717 454 185  
Email: [Josef@taize.fr](mailto:Josef@taize.fr)
4. Sister Loretta Brennan  
Tangaza College  
Tel +254 0733 247 117  
Email: [brennan\\_lm@hotmail.com](mailto:brennan_lm@hotmail.com)
5. Pastor Lucy Wambui Waweru  
Lavington United Church  
Tel +254 0721 499 143  
Email: [lucywaweru@yahoo.com](mailto:lucywaweru@yahoo.com)
6. Rev Father Michael McCabe  
Society of African Missionaries  
Tel +254 0714 841 174  
Email: [Michael\\_mccabe58@yahoo.com](mailto:Michael_mccabe58@yahoo.com)
7. Miss Njeri Kang'ethe  
PCEA St Andrews Church  
Tel +254 0722 744 654  
Email: [nkangethe55@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nkangethe55@yahoo.co.uk)
8. Rev Father Roger Tessier  
Missionaries of Africa  
Tel +254 020 2717009/0715 733 335  
Email: [rotessier@jambo.co.ke](mailto:rotessier@jambo.co.ke)
9. Elder Solomon Gacece  
PCEA St Andrews Church  
Tel +254 0722 286 900  
Email: [sgacece@yahoo.com](mailto:sgacece@yahoo.com) and [solgacece@aeafrika.org](mailto:solgacece@aeafrika.org)
10. Rev Father Theodor Wibbels  
Mill Hill Missionaries  
Tel +254 0728 230 979  
Email: [twigamfupi@gmail.com](mailto:twigamfupi@gmail.com)
11. Mrs G Wakuraya Wanjohi  
St Paul's Catholic University  
Tel +254 0720 970 197  
Email: [gwakuraya@gmail.com](mailto:gwakuraya@gmail.com)