

Introduction

WHEN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY WAS still very much classicist Bernard Lonergan (1904–1984) made the case that the odyssey of the Christian gospel allows for transcultural communication and pluralism of expressions. He suggested correctly that the contemporary world is becoming increasingly diverse and that if the church is to remain relevant in contemporary society that the church needs to devise new methods of communicating the Christian message. He also suggested correctly that, since classical culture has become passé, meeting the needs of a world church that is increasingly becoming diverse means that Catholic theology, particularly its assumptions about culture, needs to be transposed and rethought in light of the new findings in anthropology and the social sciences. Only those who wrongly assume that the church is a pure spirit incorrectly assume that it does not exist in cultural forms.¹ Lonergan’s forward-thinking program of how to transpose and communicate effectively the gospel message in different cultural situations is scattered throughout his works but specifically itemized in the last of his eight functional specialties he dubbed *communications*.² What Lonergan calls *communication* is more commonly referred to as inculturation—the call for shift in perspective arising from the growing sense on the part of the Christian churches of Latin America, Africa, and Asia “that the theologies being inherited from the older churches of the North Atlantic community did not fit well into these quite different cultural circumstances.”³ While theoretically inculturation has been embraced by the newly emerging churches of Latin America, Africa, and Asia and has indeed become the theology of a world cultural church, the practice of inculturation is still dogged by methodological problems and “conceptual logjams.”⁴ This study is a modest attempt to break through the method-

1. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians*, 47.
2. See the last chapter of Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.
3. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 1.
4. See Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians*, xx.

INTRODUCTION

ological problems and conceptual logjams that have hindered the practice of inculturation. Since “the thorniest methodological problem in inculturation is the confusion surrounding the meaning of culture,”⁵ this study suggests that a semiotic approach to culture (along the lines delineated by C. S. Peirce and Clifford Geertz in anthropology and Lonergan in theology) provides the best meaningful way for conceptualizing and understanding the practice of inculturation, particularly African theology of inculturation. The semiotic system that Peirce, Geertz, and Lonergan provide is the much needed antidote to the naïve realism that conceives cultures or identities in classicist categories that are rigid, homogeneous, eternally fixed, inflexible, and stable.

The word *church*, as used in this book, is always in reference to the Christian church. In places where the word is not used in its generic sense to refer to Christianity in general it is used to refer specifically to the Roman Catholic communion. Context always determines which “church” is referenced. Reference to “Africa” is almost always to Africa south of the Sahara (sub-Saharan Africa), unless context dictates otherwise.

Although the ideas and research material for this book were years in the making, everything came to maturation and parturition during my fellowship year at the Lonergan Center at Boston College in 2013. Chapter 1 examines the Church’s role in African public life and offers reasons to validate the suggestion that was made long ago that much of Africa is inconceivable without Christianity. Using the “shade-tree” theology of the Cameroonian theologian Jean-Marc Ela (1936–2008), the chapter shows why the history of Christianity in Africa is a mixed bag. To help realize the new praxis of meaning that the contemporary situation demands, the chapter concludes by putting Ela in dialogue with the semiotic work of the Russian literary critic and semiotician, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) in order to transcendently ground Ela’s key insight that the two foci of liberation and inculturation be held in dynamic tension. Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony, his umbrella term for different interacting voices in discourse, and his helpful suggestion that we move from a monoglossic situation to heteroglossic one provides a good theoretical model for the kind of theology of inculturation that can serve the world church.

Chapter 2 recognizes that a key problem in contemporary society is the breakdown of traditional identities and boundaries resulting from some postmodern attempts to define other people’s identities in one single

5. Ibid.

INTRODUCTION

narrative. Taking seriously the insights of the American philosopher and gender theorist, Judith Butler (b. 1956) that we pay careful attention to the frames we use to describe the other because some frames may be loaded with violence and also that some frames we use are meant to preclude certain kinds of questions and justify a certain kind of position, the chapter attempts a critical assessment of the frames that have been used to depict the story of Africa. The chapter is more or less an attempt to recast the African story from a semiotic perspective and by so doing clarifying what makes Africa similar and different from others in the present global configuration. In writing this chapter I was encouraged by the narrative experience of Greenland, a tiny country of about fifty-six thousand people that voted to loosen its ties with Denmark in 2008 in spite of its limited resources. With great delight its premier commented that at long last Greenlanders could tell their own story to the world.⁶ This chapter is guided by that kind of philosophical supposition and more. As for its implications for a theology of inculturation, the success of African Independent (or Initiated) Churches (AICs) is offered as a good example of the failure of metanarratives or grand narratives to provide an answer to how Christianity should and/or ought to be practiced in the continent.

Chapters 3 and 4 were the fruits of research I conducted at Harvard University during my fellowship year at Boston College in 2013. Chapter 3 examines what contributions theoretical linguists can make to the study of culture. Beginning with Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and his close ally Benjamin Whorf (1897–1941), to George Lakoff who rehabilitated the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis by showing how language is about meaning-making and how people are influenced by the metaphors they use in language, the chapter carefully examines contributions of the structuralist and interpretive traditions of anthropology, showing how their findings depict the language of a people as mediating their culture. The chapter also shows that language confers a distinctive identity on a people, gives them a sense of belonging, and avails them of resources for managing information and handling innovation. This provides us a matrix for developing a theory of culture that is consistent with semiotics. The chapter concludes by showing the implications of the metapragmatic ideas of theoretical linguists, particularly those deriving from Bakhtin-Volosinov that view discourse as poly-vocal and connect dialogicality with power, for a theology of inculturation.

6. *Ibid.*, 64–65.

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 4 anticipates chapter 5 on many levels. The chapter lays the groundwork for the task of critical exigence (clarification of terms and concepts that have hitherto been confusedly used in the work of inculturation) of chapter 5 by attempting a cultural hermeneutic with a view to getting at the empirical meaning of culture. The principal focus of the chapter is the American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), who was a major influence in the new “cultural turn.” Geertz’s findings are like an antidote to the foundationalist ahistorical and essentialist assumptions about human nature that have characterized the study of culture prior to the new “cultural turn.” The chapter shows how Geertz’s “thick description” regarding how signs are used in social context and his understanding of culture as a complex web of meanings and values which make a people’s way of life worth living helps our quest to see how cultures have both their similarities and differences and how these similarities and differences help societies, nations, and states organize their ideas about politics and religion. As for a theology of inculturation, Geertz helps us realize that what is needed is a new way of thinking that is responsive to the particularities of a people’s way of being human.

Chapter 5 denounces ideological stalemates by bringing together the semiotic ideas of C. S. Peirce (1839–1914) and Clifford Geertz and showing how their ideas converge with those of Bernard Lonergan in theology. Using their ideas as antidote to the counterpositions that developed out of the Anglo-American stream of thought, the chapter offers a clarification of the meaning of inculturation that is consistent with a semiotic approach. The chapter shows why such terms as adaptation, accommodation, interculturalization, indigenization, contextualization, acculturation, etc., are inadequate and insufficient terms for the dynamic dialectical relationship that ought to exist between church, gospel, and culture. In suggesting that the complex matter of inculturation can best be sorted out semiotically, the chapter suggests that the science of semiotics is to the program of inculturation what Lonergan’s functional specialty *systematics* is to theology—they seek increase in understanding regarding what church doctrines could possibly mean.

Chapter 6 was written at Boston College and was presented as a fellowship seminar paper to the fellows and graduate students at Boston College. Their critique and feedback was very valuable in getting the chapter to its finished form. The chapter captures the difficulties to be encountered in the practice of inculturation. One of the main difficulties being that classicism is so entrenched that it is easy to pass off some culturally derived principles

INTRODUCTION

as biblical and universally applicable even without knowing it. It is for this reason that the chapter argues that the church cannot do without inculturation because without it the church is unrecognizable and unsustainable. The chapter compares the task of inculturation to constructing a ship where half measures are not enough—one has to go all the way and implement a successful comprehensive strategy. To this end, the chapter offers ten habits (deriving from the semiotics of Peirce and Geertz and complemented by the theological insights of Lonergan) as an aid in the practice of inculturation. The ten habits are conceived as precepts or imperatives inherent in the notion of catholicity in that they suggest that catholicity is not identified with uniformity but with reconciled diversity.

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