

GEORGE R. HUNSBERGER

Building an Inculturation Alliance: Gospel and Cultures in Africa and North America

The challenge of inculturation lies at the heart of taking seriously the challenge of discerning a lived expression of the gospel that is both faithful to the biblical witness and authentic to the particular cultural and social circumstance.

The word *inculturation* has been offered as a better way to conceive this process than prior conceptions such as *indigenization* or *contextualization*. *Indigenization* has the tendency to treat the expression of the gospel as something formed elsewhere and transplanted into new terrain. *Contextualization* is easily co-opted as the work of the external agent who attempts to fit something into another's context. Much more can certainly be said about the advantages and disadvantages of each of these terms. But the point here is to note how the term *inculturation* intends to emphasize that a faithful expression of the gospel forms itself within the people of a culture, and within the culture of those people. And much as it is true that such people are indebted to others from elsewhere for bringing their own witness to this gospel, the agents who do the inculturating are the people themselves who inhabit the cultural and social frames within which an expression of the gospel is forming.

Inculturation takes seriously both the creative human processes by which cultural and social modes of life are formed in each particular place and the distinct divine action by which God's character and purposes are revealed. The word is formed by combining the meanings of two other words. One of those is *enculturation*, which indicates the way all of us from our earliest youth are brought up within the frames of meaning and interpretation of the world that have been constructed by the particular society of which we are a part. Those meanings, in turn, shape and guide the thought and action of the people who inhabit that culture. The other word is *incarnation*, which indicates the choice of the triune God to come into

our human flesh in the culturally particular form of a first-century Jewish male, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. All of the New Testament gives testimony that as the news of the incarnate God traveled from place to place and was told among people whose cultures were very different from that of Palestinian Jews, the Holy Spirit intended that in each place this gospel would be taken up into the local culture and language. There the gospel would be given a new and distinct local expression, and it would bring a liberating and healing transformation to each culture. This gospel was a message intended for all, not by instituting everywhere one single cultural pattern for believing and expressing it—thus depreciating all others as illegitimate for the task—but by a movement into and within every human culture. The Christian movement was birthed to be an endless array of particular expressions of the living presence of the crucified incarnate one.

So inculturation is legitimately and necessarily the responsibility of every church at every time and place. It is not hard to expect that churches such as one finds in Africa, living in a post-colonial, post-missionary region, will face squarely the matter of inculturation. The heritage of a faith that came mostly in Western forms leaves Africa Christians the continuing task to discern, in ever deeper ways, how God intends for them to express the gospel in faithfulness and authenticity in terms of their respective cultures. Their calling is to be an authentic church, which may be imagined in terms described once by Hans Hoekendijk, the Dutch missiologist of the mid-20th century. He said a church is authentic when (1) it has developed its own way of sharing its faith in Jesus with other people, (2) it is composing and singing its own songs, (3) it conducts its ecclesial life in a culturally appropriate, rather than exotic, manner, and (4) it manages to spawn a heresy or two!

What may not seem as obvious, and may even be surprising, is the fact that the churches in those parts of the world from which both colonialism and mission moved across the globe are faced with the same necessity of inculturation! The impressions left by numerous generations of missionary work would seem to imply that the churches of the West had long since finished their task of inculturation. In fact, for a long, long time, we in the West have thought of our civilization as a Christian one, understanding the fundamental values and aims of the social order to be essentially the same as those of the church. Whether we were ever right in assuming that, it has become evident in recent decades that we cannot bear that illusion any longer. The era of Christendom has passed, with only a few remainders lingering behind. In its place, we have become a civilization formed more by the age of Enlightenment, with its dependence on autonomous human reason and its confidence in social progress, than by the Bible. We are slowly awakening to the task that is freshly placed upon

us, to be engaged in the same “missionary encounter of the gospel with our culture” (as Lesslie Newbigin so often put it) that we have recognized to be the calling of churches elsewhere.¹

This brings me to my thesis: The challenge of inculturation is nurtured best in companionship among churches that take this challenge seriously in their own contexts. I am suggesting that we find ways to form inculturation alliances in the interest of mutual encouragement and accountability.

Christians come from different tribal cultural traditions, and different linguistic and religious worlds. They inhabit different ecclesial worlds formed by different streams and traditions in the world Christian movement. Further, each of the churches—whether taken as denominational systems or local congregations—lie at some distinct point along the path of inculturation, and those points vary from one to the next. Each inherits a different imprint from those who originally brought them the gospel, a different attitude in the response made by the initial believers in their community, and a unique set of responses by subsequent generations of both missionaries and believers. An alliance of common cause in the important work of inculturation is required!

In addition to that, I would like to speak on behalf of numerous colleagues in North America to invite an even broader alliance, and one that many may have never dared to imagine, even if you knew it was needed. I am part of a movement in North America that goes by the name The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN). We have been challenged by the loss of our prior place in American and Canadian life, and even more so by what we see when we take a closer look at ourselves. Seers among us have opened our eyes to the extent to which we have become overly accommodated to the rules and models and visions of modern Western culture. We have become little more than reflections of the culture in which we participate. We have become domesticated to the culture’s errands. We find ourselves in intricately woven patterns that cannot be called anything else but syncretism! We are in need of recovering a lost art: the ongoing engagement of the matter of inculturation, our “continuing conversion”² toward an expression of the gospel in life, word, and deed that is authentic to our culture but faithful to the gospel.

For us this has led to a collaborative effort that focuses on three things: (1) a cultural and social analysis of our North American setting; (2) theological reflection on the question, What is the gospel which addresses us in our setting? and (3) the renewal of the church and its missional identity in our setting. Hundreds of people from a wide spectrum of denominations and ministry vocations are working together in this network because of a commonly held belief that there is an integral relationship between these three—cultural analysis, theological reflection, and congregational

mission—and that none of them can be engaged adequately apart from the others. We believe that engaging them together is what makes our movement distinctively missiological. We seek to be seriously attentive to the character of our culture, receptive to the shaping force of the gospel, and willing to bear our missional identity as a gospel-shaped community.

I mentioned above the form in which Lesslie Newbigin has put the challenge to the churches of the West. What would be involved in a “missionary encounter of the gospel with our Western culture?” That way of putting it is picked up in the label of our network, “The Gospel and Our Culture,” a label borrowed from our companion movement in the United Kingdom. In that very cumbersome phrase—The Gospel and Our Culture—is the clue to the way we have come to understand our inculturation project. The key word in it is “our.” It indicates that we do not automatically assume that we who are the church are the gospel side of the encounter, as though the encounter is between us and everything else that is out there in the environment. When we say “our culture” we are affirming that the culture shared by the inhabitants of our society is ours as well. It is the web of meanings that shapes our perceptions of things, it is the symbolic world that tells us how things simply are, it is the moods and motivations that give shape to our actions. We live in solidarity with all others who share the same culture. But we recognize that our call to be believers in Christ means that when the gospel encounters our culture, it will do that first and foremost within us. The first movement in the encounter is the inner dialogue right inside each of us and right inside the Christian community. That is where a continuing conversion takes place, as the gospel increasingly takes up residence in expressions of life that are authentic to the culture but nonetheless altering and re-framing its perceptions and loyalties. By the inner dialogue, we are being made more and more into gospel-shaped communities.

If we know that we sit on the culture side of the encounter, we also are aware that at the same time we do sit on the gospel side as the community called into the service of the gospel to be a living demonstration of what the gospel looks like, and feels like, and tastes like. We are what Lesslie Newbigin calls the “hermeneutic of the gospel,” the interpretive lens through which people see what the good news is. The more the inner dialogue finds us being made over to be gospel-shaped, the more the outer dialogue makes vivid to our companions in the culture what it would be like for them to join us in this community of justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Clearly, the trajectory of the task of inculturation faced today in North America is not the same as the one Christians are probably envisioning for the various regions of Africa. While our inculturation must remain au-

thentic to our culture, the accent right now is on breaking the ties by which we have become absorbed into our culture. What is in question now is our faithfulness to the biblical witness to the gospel. We are too much at home in the modern scientific worldview and we are not foreign enough to “the American way.” For the African Church, the trajectory will likely be a very different one, perhaps opposite. For Africans the question may grow from a sense that the forms they have inherited from the West are too foreign, and not enough “at home” in their culture. While our North American accents of the moment might be very different, it is the same process in which we are engaged.

But seeing our companionship when our accents are so different may not be easy. I became aware of this several years ago when I was involved in the World Council of Churches study program on “Gospel and Cultures.” After several years of small group studies in many parts of the world, the responses from different nations and regions were gathered together to be brought into a single report. Twenty-five of us from around the world were asked to absorb and interpret the reports in order to prepare materials for the Salvador 1996 World Conference on Mission and Evangelism which was to take up the theme. In the conversations, something of the “Gospel and Western Culture” agenda I have described was raised as it surfaced in the reports from Western nations. I was surprised that particularly the Indian theologians in the group had a great problem with that way of engaging Western culture and registered their dissatisfaction. I was puzzled at the time, but later began to realize what was bothering them. They saw in the “Gospel and Western Culture” agenda a strong culture-critical accent. They were seeking to shed the imprint of Western theologies and root their theology more thoroughly within their own Indian culture. They were moving in a culture-affirming direction, and the proposals from some of us in the West sounded like a contradiction of that.

I believe we were much closer to each other’s concerns than it appeared. It was, I believe, the difference in our histories that brought us to a present moment in which faithful inculturation required different responses, and produced different accents. In India, the challenge was to root the faith more deeply within their culture, in the West, the challenge was to dislodge the roots that had become hopelessly tangled with the culture. If we understand inculturation as involving both authenticity in the culture and faithfulness to the gospel, then every church must seek to know its history and its character well enough to plot on which side of that its work of the moment must be. For all of us, both aspects must always be in view, but the accent of the moment will vary depending on how foreign or accommodated we are to our culture, how at home or irrelevant we are, how gospel-formed or domesticated we are.

In spite of these potential differences, or maybe because of them, what remains is the need for alliances between us that will provide mutual encouragement and accountability. D. T. Niles, the Sri Lankan Methodist minister and ecumenical leader in the mid part of the twentieth century, was once asked whether in the age of de-colonization the era of the missionary was over. Do we still need them? His answer was that every church everywhere is always in need of the missionary from the church in another place. Apart from that, each church left on its own will tend to falter in its responsibility to keep alive the inculturation issues at stake in its own place. It is in the world communion of churches that hold one another accountable to the generous call and claim of the gospel that our inculturation of the gospel will be authentic and faithful.

I am well aware that a call to mutual accountability does not start on an even playing field. The habit of the churches of the West to hold other churches accountable has not been balanced by a comparable willingness to be held accountable. At least for some of us, beginning to recover the lost art of inculturation establishes new ground. We know we cannot know our own culture for what it is apart from companions in other cultures who can help us see it. We cannot guarantee by ourselves that our ways of dislodging accommodations are really doing what we think they are doing, apart from confirmation from friends in other contexts.

I can certainly say that from our point of view in North America, the African inculturation project is crucial to ours! And I believe ours is important to the African project. They may in fact be two sides of the same coin. In light of the respective challenges and what binds North America and Africa together, this suggestion, this invitation, is made: that we walk together to cultivate an inculturation alliance in as many ways as we can.

Postscript: Several Fundamental Challenges in the North American Setting

1. The shift from the vendor conception of church to a missional notion of church.
2. The reversal in the way the Bible functions, from object being read to subject reading us.
3. The shift from gospel as acquisition to gospel as participation.

Notes

¹Newbigin's most sustained presentation of this challenge is found in *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

²See Darrell Guder's book, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) for a treatment of this theme.



George Hunsberger is professor of Missiology at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, and was the founding coordinator of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America. He is the author of *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*, and co-author of several books, including *Missional Church* and *Treasure in Clay Jars*.