

The Message of Jesus Christ and Japanese Culture. Evangelization and Inculturation in the Japanese Context

The whole life of Jesus Christ turns around the message about the Kingdom of God. Therefore, evangelization is any form of activity to promote and strengthen the ideal of the Kingdom of God which Christ himself has preached and lived out during his life among us and of which he has become the prototype through his death and resurrection.

I. Jesus himself expressed his message from within his own cultural context; this led to its inculturation in the Jewish-Christian community, followed by successive inculturations in the Greek, Roman and Western world. In more recent times, we are seeing the beginnings of this inculturation process in the non-Western world. Evangelization then has very much to do with a dialogical encounter process of the message of Jesus Christ with the total cultural situation of man. This brings us right into the hub of the problem under discussion here: the message of Jesus Christ and Japanese culture — evangelization and inculturation in the Japanese context. In other words: the message has to re-unfold itself from within the background or the basic layers of the cultural context of Japan so that it produces a Japanese experience of Christian life. This experience finds its expression not only through some elements proper to the Japanese culture (this would

only be adaptation), but the message itself becomes a principle that animates, transforms and remodels the Japanese culture so that the result is a "new creation".¹ In that way, the Japanese people can become attracted to the message and the person of Jesus; they can gather together around his risen person, become community and express their faith in all its dimensions (life, theology, morality, liturgy, social relationships, etc.) from within their own culture. Japan becomes evangelized and the birth of a Church and a Christianity, that are truly Christian and Japanese, takes place.

We have to take into account two moments: the message of Jesus Christ and the basic layers or the background of Japanese culture.

II. The message of Jesus Christ focuses on God's saving plan with human kind: "The Kingdom of God is close at hand; repent and believe the good news" (Mk. 1:15). This Kingdom means that God is revealing himself as the liberator by fulfilling our hopes. God is Abba, the dear Father, who created this world and declared his unconditional love for us, sinners who need redemption. This love of God opposes all kind of evil, suffering and sin. The Kingdom means God's radical reliability and self-gift to us for whom he intends to grant a future, notwithstanding all experiences to the contrary. All this asks for a response that has been defined by Jesus as "repentance" or the turning of the whole human being to God. Jesus himself is the incarnation of the Kingdom; through his life, death and resurrection it breaks clearly through into this world: he becomes our redeemer, the "new man", the prototype of the Kingdom and our prototype.²

III. This message of Jesus has to re-unfold itself from within the Japanese culture. What are then the basic layers or the background of this culture? It goes without saying that the religious and ideological outlook of Japan are rooted in this background.

¹ *Studies in the International Apostolate of the Jesuits*, Washington, D.C., Vol. 7 (1978), n. 1, p. 1-2.

² Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus. An Experiment in Christology*, New York, The Seabury Press, 1977, p. 141-143; Patrick D'Souza, "Church and Mission in Relation to the Kingdom of God", *Toward a New Age in Mission*, Manila, Theological Conference Office, 1981, Book II, p. 31-38.

The Japanese have an encompassing view of the reality, so persistent that it can be found all throughout their history from its early beginnings up to now. This view brings along that, generally speaking, there are no basic alternatives to values. This can be illustrated by several examples.

— There is no splitting up of the reality into many logical categories or there is a refusal to accept strict dichotomies; consequently, strict rational thinking is spontaneously avoided.

— There is no ontological gulf dividing man and the *kami* (gods of Shinto) into fundamentally different categories; the *kami*-nature is inherent to us who are always potential *kami*; the same can be said of the Buddha-nature which is in all of us; it is always possible to become a Buddha, even a living Buddha in this life (*sokushinjobutsu*).

— There is thus no idea of an Absolute Reality strictly separated from humans or firmly fixed in an absolute transcendency; the Absolute Reality, though it has a slightly transcendent connotation, is basically in the midst of this world.

— The phenomenal world itself is a harmonious reality; human life fits into the large context of nature and does not need to divorce itself from its natural surroundings. People long to live in harmony with nature and they find their own experience to be natural and good. One is concerned mostly to isolate harmful effects from life. These harmful effects have created a feeling of frailty and fragility in the Japanese heart.

— There is also no essential dualism between good and evil; hence, the Japanese consciousness of sin lacks a certain depth.

— Harmony is promoted through a heavy stress on the group; the individual is part of the group and its rules determine individual life to a large extent. There is thus no sharp distinction between the individual-subject and the group-object. This results in a certain impersonalism.

The present day Japanese way of thinking has kept a rather strong continuity with the past notwithstanding some changes. It centers around realities embedded much more in the unconscious than in the explicit conscious level of life. From this living back-

ground, Japanese culture, and the religions included, has grown up and has been remolded and absorbed cultural and religious fertilizations coming from outside. Everything that enters Japan has to filter through this background sooner or later in order to become really Japanese.

IV. As mentioned above, evangelization can be considered as a dialogical encounter process of the message of Jesus Christ with the total Japanese culture that emerges from this background. This process ends up in inculturation.

We have been thinking too long that inculturation in the Western context is so providential that Western Christianity is the final form of the expression of the message of Christ. But it is certainly not possible to push the Japanese inculturation process by starting all over again from a so-called non-inculturated message. This kind of message has never existed since Jesus himself was a historical being and subject to his own culture. It is also not possible to wipe out naively everything of preceding inculturation processes that give witness to the tradition of the Church as the explicitation of the message from the apostles up to now. That is why inculturation goes, generally speaking, through several unavoidable but complementary stages such as cultural dissonance in the beginning, then sometimes through ambiguity and finally along the lines of cultural consonance.³

It goes without saying that the message has a critical function with regards Japanese culture. Without playing down presence of God's saving will in the Japanese religions, the message accepts and perfects whatever is good, rejects what is essentially wrong and heals what can be healed.

This brings us to the bridges and barriers between the message and Japan. Because a non-Christian does not come to God with empty hands, it is risky to speak radically about bridges and barriers as if there were an extremely clear distinction between both. In many cases bridges have a barrier-like character and barriers have to a certain extent also a bridge-like character.

We must consider now what the forgoing means in terms of bridges and barriers.

³ Desmond Crowe, "Consultation on Inculturation", *East Asian Pastoral Review*, Manila, Vol. 18 (1981), n. 2, p. 149.

V. Only some general lines can be drawn, that have to be understood in the context of what was said in relation to the Japanese encompassing view of the reality.

1. *God and man.* The Japanese view of the Ultimate Reality makes people vaguely aware that they are destined to become one with the Holy; they are supposed to grow more and more deeply into a pre-given ontological unity with the *kami*, the Buddha-nature, Heaven of Confucianism and the Teo of Taoism. They become and are the Ultimate Reality itself; they dissolve into the divine timelessness without leaving any trace. The result is the absorption or annihilation of man; what remains of his personal existence is a pious remembrance. The major characteristic here is immanence. The message of Jesus says that we are created entities. We are limited, subject to sin and in need of redemption which has come through Jesus Christ who has reconciled us with the Father. Through him we participate in God's own life. The Greek expression speaks here about *theosis* or the divinization of human beings. The development of Christian theology has lead to an exaggeration of God's transcendence in the past. The barrier between the Japanese view and the message is identity versus participation. The bridge is the divine reality within us. Barrier and bridge taken together is the reconciliation between immanence and transcendence.⁴

2. *Human growth and wholeness.* A human being is openness towards growth and wholeness, to what one is not yet. The Japanese have a keen feeling for frailty, brokenness and contingency, inherited from Buddhism. Jesus' message, when affirming our inclination to frailty and brokenness, can deepen out the rather shallow sin-consciousness of the Japanese and bring this together with our vocation to become God's children. In that way, we can become *true* human beings. By ourselves we are not able to become truly human because of our sinfulness and creaturely condition. Only the true sinless God can exist in the real sense of the word. It is Jesus Christ, *true* man and *true* God, who through his life, death and resurrection, brings fragile sinners

⁴ R. Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, New York, N.Y./Ramsey, N.J., 1978, p. 91-92.

back to their being *true* human beings. Real human growth and achieving wholeness is exemplified and realized in Him.⁵

3. *Bringing a vertical dimension.* Jesus Christ is not the kind of manifestation or *bosatsu* that appears temporarily, and after the accomplishment of his task, withdraws into the boundlessness of the Buddha-nature. He is the climax of God's manifestation in a historical person and remains with us through the further evolution of our lives and human history. The incarnation of God's life and Word in the historical Jesus of Nazareth also shows what can happen to God when he "empties" himself.⁶ He partakes in our joys and sufferings and goes through death and resurrection. He becomes our Saviour as the glorified Lord. God's own transcendental nature breaks through in the transcendental nature of Jesus the Lord as the son of God; it breaks through at the heart of this phenomenal world. The resurrected Lord Jesus breaks open the world's horizontal character, so typical for Japan, gives it also a vertical dimension and lifts it up towards its origin, the creator of God.

4. *Theocentric character of the message.* Through Jesus Christ we have access to God, our final goal. Jesus' message shows that God cannot be defined by anthropomorphism as in the case of Shinto where the *kami* are mostly super-human beings but basically human. It is not the human subject who determines who is God. God makes himself known through nature, events, persons and Jesus of Nazareth. God goes beyond us but is at the same time involved in our history. The too inner-worldly character of the Divine Ultimate in Japanese thought, seeing it too much as a pure function of the intra-mundane reality, has to be corrected. The same is valid for the former Western view of God as "dwelling above" all human joys and sufferings; also this view has to be adjusted.⁷ Japan's present-day shift from its ancient polytheism with its anthropomorphic gods to a certain

⁵ Yoshinobu Kumazawa, "Confessing Christ in the Context of Japanese Culture". *The Northeast Asia Journal of Theology*, Tokyo, March/September, 1979, nrs. 22/23, p. 12-14.

⁶ Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God*, London, SCM Press, 1951; Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness. Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, New York, Paulist Press, 1980, p. 155-162.

⁷ Jan Van Bragt, "Faith and Human Development", *The Japan Missionary Bulletin*, Tokyo, Vol. XXXI (1977), p. 408-409.

but still vague kind of monotheism should be regarded here as positive.

5. *Christian community and Christian individuals.* Conversion to the Kingdom of God in Christ brings about a unique relationship with God, who brings us anew together with our brothers and sisters. Christian togetherness, community and Church are not based on narrow tribalism or clannishness. Salvation in primitive religions — and this is still the case of Shinto and the famous “Japanese-ness” in general — is given on the basis of belonging to the “Sacred Group”. Here, the collectivity is the subject of religion and prevails over the individual so that the concept of “person” is not developed completely. In universal religions the subject is the individual who considers himself as having lost contact with the Holy. One escapes from the limited boundaries of the “Sacred Group” and creates new relationships with the others. In Christianity, the perception of creating relationships and forming community is very strong; it stresses human dignity, freedom and uniqueness and it equally emphasizes our being taken up into a greater whole. The message of Christ makes it clear that we have to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. It follows that it has a communitarian character. We are urged to balance our individuality by being together with others in the same faith, expressed from within our own cultural context.

VI. Lastly, we have to ask the question whether inculturation as the result of evangelization in the sense of a dialogical encounter process of the message of Jesus Christ with the Japanese culture, does not end up in syncretism. This depends on what we understand by syncretism itself. Using terms, notions, etc. of another culture and religion is not syncretistic as long as the original message is preserved. Destructive syncretism creeps in only when the basic realities of the message lose their full truth, for example, the total identification of the Buddha-nature with God. However, we should not be afraid of allowing assimilation of notions and practices so that growth and mutual fecundation becomes possible. Could it not be that the Japanese Christians themselves are playing an important role in the inculturation process in spontaneously combining their inborn sensitivity to the immanent character of the Ultimate Reality with a traditional too

transcendent God of Western Christianity? The re-unfolding of this basic notion of the message does not result in syncretism as such but in enrichment.

VII. *Conclusion*

Inculturation implies a two-way traffic. Because evangelization is an encounter process between the message and Japan, both are already influencing each other and will continue to do so; but the major emphasis is on the message itself. It is neither Japanese culture nor living Japanese who determine exclusively how inculturation takes place. Christianity should never rest content with being japanized the way Japan dictates. The major role is allotted to the message that acts as a criticizing, transforming and chrystalizing factor. Jesus did not enter this world to comply with its every aspect; otherwise his death and resurrection would have been ridiculous and meaningless. He came precisely to realize God's promises of salvation to humankind and as the redeemer of all human values.

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