INCULTURATION IN ECCLESIA IN ASIA
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0. INTRODUCTION

Ecclesia in Asia (EA) consists of seven chapters besides the Introduction and the Conclusion. After speaking of The Asian Context, Jesus the Saviour: A Gift to Asia and of The Holy Spirit: Lord and Giver of Life in the first three chapters, EA begins to discuss the theme of inculturation in chapter four Jesus the Saviour: Proclaiming the Gift. In all EA speaks eighteen times of ‘inculturation’, ‘inculturated theology’, ‘inculturated forms of expressing the faith’ and ‘inculturating the faith’; sixteen of them occur in chapter four, one in chapter five (Communion and Dialogue for Mission) and the last in chapter six (The Service of Human Promotion). In EA’s scheme of things then Proclaiming Jesus Christ in Asia appears to be the appropriate context in which inculturation has to find its place. We have to remember however that for EA proclamation is part of the evangelizing mission of the Church. At the end of chapter four EA quotes the synod’s somewhat comprehensive understanding of evangelization as having “various aspects and elements: witness, dialogue, proclamation, catechesis, conversion, baptism, insertion into the ecclesial community, the implantation of the Church, inculturation and integral human promotion. Some of these elements proceed together, while some others are successive steps or phases of the entire process of evangelization”. (.23; p. 71) However right at the beginning of EA Pope John Paul II quoting his own Tertio Millennio Adveniente says the following about evangelization: “If the Church in Asia is to fulfil its providential destiny, evangelization as the joyful, patient and progressive preaching of the saving Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ must be your absolute priority.” Chapter Four begins with the subtitle “The Primacy of Proclamation” and is best summarized in its own words: "There can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord." It draws confirmation for this stand from the Second Vatican Council and the Magisterium. In this context it cites Pope Paul VI that "there is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed."

The first mention of inculturation in EA is found in the discussion on "a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery", This sets the tone for EA's approach to and understanding of inculturation which is pedagogical-proclamatory, not philosophical, much less theological. For it goes on immediately after the above quoted sentence to refer to the difficulties in proclaiming Jesus as the only Saviour that the Asian Bishops brought up at the Synod. It then proceeds to state that "the effort to share the gift of faith in Jesus as the only Saviour [is] fraught with philosophical, cultural and theological difficulties, especially in light of the beliefs of Asia's great religions, deeply intertwined with cultural values and specific world views" (my emphasis). The difficulty, it is said, is further "compounded by the fact that Jesus is often perceived as foreign to Asia" and attributes this to the fact that “It was inevitable that the proclamation of the Gospel by Western missionaries would be influenced by the cultures from which they came".
However in the face of this "unavoidable fact in the history of evangelization", there is consolation to be found in Saint Paul "who engaged in dialogue with the philosophical, cultural and religious values of his listeners (cf. Acts 14:13-17; 17:22-31)" and "the Ecumenical Councils of the Church which formulated doctrines binding on the Church" and which "had to use the linguistic, philosophical and cultural sources available to them" at the time. Though EA is quite aware that the "faith which the Church offers, cannot be confined within the limits of understanding and expression of any single human culture, for it transcends these limits and indeed challenges all cultures to rise to new heights of understanding and expression", all the same it goes on to assert (what seems to me to be a hermeneutical non-sequitur) that "these resources become a shared possession of the whole Church, capable of expressing her Christological doctrine in an appropriate and universal way". The hermeneutic questions are: Can there be an appropriate and universal way of expressing anything? Is it at all possible to employ the linguistic, philosophical and cultural values/sources of one tradition in an appropriate and universal way in other cultures? Can such cultural values/sources from one tradition ever be the basis of proclamation in other cultures?

This is all the more surprising because EA’s approach to inculturation far from being hermeneutical and phenomenological prefers to tread a pedagogical path. Consequently it suggests a pedagogical solution to the problems posed by the Asian bishops. It believes that the "presentation of Jesus Christ as the only Saviour needs to follow a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery". One could begin, it suggests, by presenting Jesus Christ, for example, "as the fulfilment of the yearning expressed in the mythologies and folklore of the Asian peoples". And for the proclamation of Jesus Christ "narrative methods" as also the story of Jesus Christ are said to be "akin to Asian cultural forms". But, and this is a big but, what "must always be presupposed and expressed in presenting Jesus" are the "ontological notions involved" though these "can be complemented by more relational, historical and even cosmic perspectives". In the evocative pedagogy that is proposed use should be made of "stories, parables and symbols so characteristic of Asian methodology in teaching".

EA recalls that "the Synod Fathers stressed many times the need to evangelize in a way that appeals to the sensibilities of Asian peoples, and they suggested images of Jesus which would be intelligible to Asian minds and cultures and, at the same time, faithful to sacred Scripture and Tradition". The hope is that what will eventually emerge are "new and surprising ways in which the face of Jesus might be presented in Asia". The Synod Fathers "pointed out that such an inculturation of the faith on their continent involves rediscovering the Asian countenance of Jesus and identifying ways in which the cultures of Asia can grasp the universal significance of the mystery of Jesus and his Church". This then is the pedagogical context in which EA proposes, its scheme of inculturation. Following upon the awareness of the Synod Fathers "of the pressing need of the local Churches in Asia to present the mystery of Christ to their peoples according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking", the challenge of inculturation has to be met in order to proclaim Jesus Christ as the unique saviour in Asia.

Though EA stresses that the "Gospel and evangelization are certainly not identical with culture", strangely enough it gives the impression that the Church has truths that are not dependent on any culture. At any rate the Church by transmitting ‘truths and values’
"renews cultures from within". Though she is also able to take positive elements from the cultures, EA appears to understand the Church as an entity that is culturally free and therefore is able to speak in a language that is culturally neutral. To a great extent then it is on the sand of this hermeneutical fallacy that EA's pedagogical understanding of inculturation has been constructed.

In evangelizing cultures, 'evangelizers' too have to take this obligatory path of discerning "positive elements already found in cultures… making it part of a people's cultural heritage". When cultures are thus refined and renewed in the light of the Gospel, [they too] can become true expressions of the one Christian faith". This, it seems to me, constitutes EA's understanding of inculturation. For it is through such a process that the Church fulfills her mission. "Through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission." An inculturated Church then is one in which cultures recognize her because [probably] they discover themselves in the Asian face of Jesus.

It was repeatedly asserted at the Synod "that the Holy Spirit is the prime agent of the inculturation of the Christian faith in Asia". Apparently we have here another aspect of inculturation which has to do, not so much with "taking positive elements already found in cultures" but with the action of the Holy Spirit "who makes possible a fruitful dialogue with the cultural and religious values of different peoples, among whom he is present in some measure, giving men and women with a sincere heart the strength to overcome evil and the deceit of the Evil One, and indeed offering everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery to a manner known to God".

After stating that Pastors have "to guide this dialogue with discernment" a line is suddenly added stating that "experts in sacred and secular disciplines have important roles to play in the process of inculturation". Immediately following this we have a reminder of an important aspect of inculturation that "the process must involve the entire People of God". Though it is stated the "Synod expressed encouragement to theologians in their delicate work of developing an inculturated theology, especially in the area of Christology" this is quickly qualified by the note that "this theologizing is to be carried out with courage, in faithfulness to the Scriptures and to the Church's Tradition, in sincere adherence to the Magisterium and with an awareness of pastoral realities".

Here two new aspects of inculturation have been added: the experts and the people of God. Involved in the project of inculturation we have the Holy Spirit as the prime agent of inculturation; in her footsteps have to follow the Magisterium, the experts and the people of God.

Finally: “The test of true inculturation is whether people become more committed to their Christian faith because they perceive it more clearly with the eyes of their own culture”. The other test of inculturation is whether other traditions begin to perceive our proclamation “more clearly with the eyes of their own culture” does not seem to be a concern of EA.

The Synod Fathers identified “theological reflection, liturgy, the formation of priests and religious, catechesis and spirituality” as the key areas of inculturation. Importance is given to Liturgy, “the source and summit of all Christian life and mission” and the formation of evangelizers upon whom “the future of the process in large part depends” are discussed.

Liturgy “is a decisive means of evangelization, especially in Asia, where the followers of
different religions are so drawn to worship, religious festivals and popular devotions”. The “more recently established Churches need to ensure that the liturgy becomes an ever greater source of nourishment for their peoples through a wise and effective use of elements drawn from the local cultures”. At this stage a very significant assertion follows: “Yet liturgical inculturation requires more than a focus upon traditional cultural values, symbols and rituals. There is also a need to take account of the shifts in consciousness and attitudes caused by the emerging secularist and consumer cultures which are affecting the Asian sense of worship. Nor can the specific needs of the poor, migrants, refugees, youth and women be overlooked in any genuine liturgical inculturation in Asia.”

There are a number of points we should pay attention to. (1) We must ensure that liturgy becomes an increasingly rich source of nourishment. (2) It must take account of the shifts in consciousness and attitudes because of the secularist and consumerist cultures affecting Asia. (3) It must not overlook specific needs of the poor, etc.

In connection with the liturgy EA refers to the Synod Fathers’ stress on “the importance of the biblical word in passing on the message of salvation to the peoples of Asia, where the transmitted word is so important in preserving and communicating religious experience.” In this connection “the Synod Fathers urged that it [= the biblical word] be made the basis for all missionary proclamation, catechesis, preaching and styles of spirituality”. EA also suggests that pastorally oriented courses “be incorporated into formation programmes for the clergy, for consecrated persons and for the laity”. It should be made known among believers of other religious traditions.

Referring to the formation of evangelizers on whom the future of the inculturation process depends, EA readily grants that formerly “formation often followed the style, methods and programmes imported from the West” but finds “the efforts made in recent times to adapt the formation of evangelizers to the cultural contexts of Asia” positive. In addition to biblical and patristic studies “seminarians should acquire a detailed and firm grasp of the Church’s theological and philosophical patrimony… they will then benefit from contact with Asian philosophical and religious traditions”. Seminary professors are encouraged “to seek a profound understanding of the elements of spirituality and prayer akin to the Asian soul, and to involve themselves more deeply in the Asia peoples’ search for a fuller life”. Similarly the formation of the religious must see to it that their spirituality and lifestyle is “sensitive to the religious and cultural heritage of the people among whom they live and whom they serve”. Finally, “since inculturation of the Gospel involves the entire People of God it is they “who are called to transform society...by infusing the ‘mind of Christ’ into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the secular world in which they live. A wider inculturation of the Gospel at every level of society in Asia will depend greatly on the appropriate formation which the local Churches succeed in giving to the laity”.

Towards the end of this chapter (IV) EA quotes the synod’s somewhat comprehensive understanding of evangelization “as a reality that is both rich and dynamic. It has various aspects and elements: witness, dialogue, proclamation, catechesis, conversion, baptism, insertion into the ecclesial community, the implantation of the Church, inculturation and integral human promotion. Some of these elements proceed together, while some others are successive steps or phases of the entire process of evangelization”.
ECCLESIA IN ASIA’S TEACHING ON INCULTURATION

If we organize EA’s statements on inculturation we shall find that they are basically of four kinds referring to the essence, the agents, the effects and the history of inculturation.

1.1 The Essence of Inculturation

Inculturation is one of the many elements of the larger process of evangelization. EA works out a list of these elements: witness, dialogue, proclamation, catechesis, conversion, baptism, insertion into the ecclesial community, the implantation of the Church, inculturation and integral human promotion. However EA makes it clear that some of these elements proceed together while others are steps or phases of the entire process of evangelization. Obviously EA’s enumeration of the elements of evangelization does not purport to enumerate all of them nor in the order of importance. It simply wishes to make sure that evangelization is a complex process and cannot and may not be reduced to any one of them. But some are more intimately related to evangelization than others. Thus, for instance, EA asserts that “evangelization and inculturation are naturally and intimately related to each other” (n.21; p.60). There are reasons for this. The sole and ultimate purpose of inculturation is evangelization. However inculturation can take place only when “the complete truth of Jesus Christ” (n.23; p.71) is proclaimed. Because according to EA, "There can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord." (n.19; p.53) In this context EA cites Pope Paul VI to state the meaning of explicit proclamation, namely, that "there is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed." Admittedly this is indeed a complex affair. “The Gospel and evangelization are certainly not identical with culture; they are independent of it.” EA insists that “the faith which the Church offers as a gift to her Asians sons and daughters cannot be confined within the limits of understanding and expression of any single culture, for it transcends these limits” but this is true of all faith and not to be understood as a special quality of Christian faith alone! Certainly the Gospel cannot be identified with any one culture but the Gospel that we have is undeniably a product of the historical process. The Gospel has come to us as shaped specifically by the semitic, greek and roman cultures and not by the Asian cultures. Can we have a historically conditioned Gospel that is independent of every culture? Hermeneutically speaking this would be an impossibility. Is there anything that is independent of culture? If human existence is historical, that is, historically conditioned, can there be anything that is independent of culture? However EA is aware that “the Kingdom of God comes to people who are profoundly linked to a culture, and [that] the building of the Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing elements from human cultures.” (n.21:60-61) Again these statements are not fully intelligible. It is clear of course that the people receiving the Gospel belong to a specific culture but then aren’t the people proclaiming the Gospel also “profoundly linked to a culture”? How do they transcend the borders (barriers?) of their culture? The question does not occur to EA!

1.2 Inculturation as a Pedagogy for Evangelization

The focus of EA’s way of looking at proclamation is on how to make the Gospel intelligible to the Asian cultures. EA’s understanding of inculturation then is clearly
pedagogical. We have the Good News! How can we make it intelligible to the cultures of Asia? The approach of the Church in general and of EA in particular to culture is devastatingly superficial because it does not take the cultures of Asia seriously. To take a culture seriously is to take into account that Asian cultures have their own traditions of the Good News and that therefore they are not and cannot be mere objects of evangelization but partners in evangelization.

But our Good News is superior to the Good News of other cultures. And so we have to find ways of assuring them “that their hopes, expectations, anxieties and sufferings are not only embraced by Jesus, but become the very point at which the gift of faith and the power of the Spirit enter the innermost core of their lives”. (n.21;p.63) Our understanding of inculturation cannot be anything more than pedagogical, a tool for the proclamation of our Good News, but certainly not an ontological happening of the meeting of cultures.

On the pedagogical canvas then the inculturation of the faith “involves rediscovering the Asian countenance of Jesus and identifying ways in which the cultures of Asia can grasp the universal saving significance of the mystery of Jesus and his Church”. (n.20;p.60) Only on such a canvas do the pictures of Giovanni da Montecorvino, Matteo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili make sense, for their efforts (however praiseworthy for their far-sightedness) were all concentrated on the pedagogical, not on the intercultural and interreligious aspect of the process of inculturation.

Unfortunately the Synod Fathers too have fallen into the pedagogical trap. They too think of inculturation as a pedagogical tool for presenting “the mystery of Christ to their peoples according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking. They pointed out that such an inculturation of the faith on their continent involves rediscovering the Asian countenance of Jesus and identifying ways in which the cultures of Asia can grasp the universal saving significance of the mystery of Jesus and his Church”(n.20;p.60-61) Among the different Asian faces of Jesus that appeal “to the sensibilities of Asian peoples”(n.20;p.59) the Synod Fathers suggest: “Jesus Christ as the Teacher of Wisdom, the Healer, the Liberator, the Spiritual Guide, the enlightened One, the Compassionate Friend of the Poor, the Good Samaritan, the Good Shepherd, the Obedient One…the Incarnate Wisdom of God.”(Ibid.) The Synod Fathers scale the height of naïveté when they assert: “In the midst of so much suffering among Asian peoples, he [= Jesus] might best be proclaimed as the Saviour who can provide meaning to those undergoing unexplainable pain and suffering’.”(Ibid. My italics.) If they have found the best way of proclaiming Jesus what then is hindering them from going ahead with this magic formula, and, we ask, what is hindering the suffering masses of Asia from finding meaning in Jesus the Saviour?

The stress on liturgical inculturation is of a piece with EA’s pedagogical approach to inculturation. In and through the liturgy the Church proclaims her belief in the trinitarian mystery which is responsible for the Son becoming incarnate in Jesus. Hence it is true that “liturgical inculturation requires more than a focus upon traditional cultural values, symbols and rituals. There is also a need to take account of the shifts in consciousness and attitudes caused by the emerging secularist and consumer cultures which are affecting the Asian sense of worship and prayer. Nor can the specific needs of the poor, migrants, refugees, youth and women be overlooked in any genuine liturgical inculturation in Asia”(n.22;pp.64-65). If inculturation were understood interculturally, as
we shall explain below, then liturgical inculturation would indeed be an efficient way of proclamation. But also not much hope can be set in the pedagogical mode.

EA fondly hopes that if the Church in Asia were to tread the path of inculturation she would become “a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission”. (n.21;p.61) And: “The test of true inculturation is whether people become more committed to their Christian faith because they perceive it more clearly with the eyes of their own culture.” (n.22;p.64) But what about the more important test of true inculturation, whether peoples of different faiths understand each other better?

Arguably, the concerns of EA derive from a pedagogical perspective that is at the service of the major objectives of evangelization and proclamation. That is the reason why EA insists that the effects of inculturation must show “compatibility with the Gospel”, “communion with the faith of the universal Church”, and “full compliance with the Church's Tradition” - all this “with a view to strengthening people's faith”. (n.22;p.64) In addition: “Theological work must always be guided by respect for the sensibilities of Christians, so that by a gradual growth into inculturated forms of expressing the faith people are neither confused nor scandalized.” (n.22;p.64)

That EA’s inculturation perspective is pedagogical is also reinforced by the way it views the agents of inculturation. There can not be much doubt about the fact that inculturation for EA consists in experts, theologians, laity and local church working out “inculturated forms” of expressing the faith. Though it is once asserted that the prime agent of inculturation is the Holy Spirit, the gesture is more like doffing the hat but not entering the church. The Holy Spirit, it is piously asserted, will lead us into the whole truth, make possible a fruitful dialogue with the cultural and religious values of different peoples, and ensure that the dialogue unfolds in truth, honesty, humility and respect, etc.(n.21, p.62) But nothing of this hope is operative in all the admonitions and moralizing that appear in connection with EA’s remarks on inculturation. For all practical purposes experts, theologians, laity and local church are the agents of inculturation. This is further confirmed by the fact that all of them have to be “trained for inculturation”. If one wishes to have more confirmation, one needs to read this sentence: “In many countries, Catholic schools [that] play an important role in evangelization, inculturating the faith, teaching the ways of openness and respect, and fostering interreligious understanding.”(n.37;p.107)

Lastly, though I am not in a position to pass judgement on EA’s remark that “the liturgy of the Oriental Churches has for the most part been successfully inculturated through centuries of interaction with the surrounding culture” and that their traditions and rites are “born of a deep inculturation of the faith in the soil of many Asian countries”(n.27;p.83), it seems to me that hardly any church passes EA’s test of inculturation mentioned in n.22 p.64.

II. THE PROCESS OF INCULTURATION

Whether it is theological reflection, liturgy, formation of priests and religious, catechesis or spirituality (n.21. p.63) inculturation in the eyes of EA is a matter of a new pedagogy. EA must be lauded for putting its cards on the table when it states: “The presentation of Jesus Christ as the only Saviour needs to follow a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery...In initial proclamation, for example, ‘the presentation of Jesus Christ could come as the fulfilment of the yearnings expressed in the mythologies and folklore of the Asian peoples’.”(n.20;pp.57-58; italics
Why is such an approach flawed from the very beginning? The reason is simple: EA does not respect cultural dynamics, namely, the dynamics that are operative in the encounter of cultures. This is the original sin of EA’s teaching on inculturation. For EA inculturation is a pedagogical device through which it makes its teaching that “Jesus Christ is the only Saviour” epistemologically intelligible and pedagogically palatable.

2.1 The Dynamics of Intercultural Encounter

The meeting of cultures is independent on our wanting or not wanting it. It is no more possible that we can shelter ourselves for such an encounter. Earlier societies were so rigid and structures so maintained that cultures could be like oil and water. Today the market forces are such that the meeting of cultures is inevitable. We may try to avoid contact with a culture but that will not help. Cultures come to us in the form of computers (and which society can refuse to work with them in today’s world of competing industries?), Coca-Cola (even such rigidly secluded societies like Russia and China have welcomed them), jeans (we are told that even women in purdah in the Middle-East have taken to them), micro-wave ovens, washing machines, (India’s increasing tribes from the middle class are catching on), cars (from the most expensive models are to be seen on our streets these days), and the ubiquitous family altar before which that all political, social, linguistic gather to listen to a kind of new revelation, namely, the television set. With consumer goods come consumer advertisements which today act like mission statements about the respective status and class.

That is not all! Churches, Mosques, Temples – all are making use of the media to spread their message in ways that were unimaginable a short while ago. All have state of the art equipments for their services. Their Scriptures and other writings are easily available. Yesterday’s Times of India (July 29th, 2001) reported about the Holy Qu’ran being authentically translated into Hebrew by a group in Egypt! The Holy Bible is made available along with the Bhagavadgita in our hotels. Tomorrow (July 31st, 2001) Dada Vasvani is holding a public lecture in Pune on “Why not try God?” at the B.J. Medical College Grounds to which all and sundry are invited. Our feasts are not celebrated in the seclusion of our home but on our streets, in our stalls and malls and in public places. The loud-speakers set up by different religious traditions are either calling us to prayer or reminding us of the time to pray or are giving witness that someone is now offering prayers!

We are all being affected by each other’s customs and beliefs, feasts and celebrations. We are coming to know a little more about each other’s feasts. Yes, we are even celebrating, to some extent at least, each other’s feasts like Christmas, Divali, Onam, and common celebrations like birthdays, Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, etc.

There is also today the aggressive phenomenon of fundamentalism and its progeny intolerance. We are beginning to experience increasing violence connected with our religions, our feasts and our doctrines. Cultural phenomena (like pop-music and dance and dress) are attracting fans from almost all traditions and there is a hue and cry about cultures being contaminated.

Whether we like it or not, cultures are forcing themselves on us. That is why Christians have taken to studying the Scriptures and traditions of other religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Sikhism and the tribal religions). They are practising Vipassana, Yoga, Zen. People from almost all religious traditions are visiting Yoga and
Vipassana courses. And last but not least, shrines of different traditions are drawing believers from diverse religious traditions and becoming centres of ecumenical mass encounters.

To speak only of Indian Christians, we can see that Christianity, for example, in Kottayam is different from Christianity in Kolkotta or Kashmir, it is different in Bombay compared with Benalgaon, different in Pune compared with Pattalgaon, different in cities in contrast with the villages. Gone are the times when uniformity in externals and internals was the hallmark of the Roman Catholics (even the Roman is being employed less and less these days!).

What is the significance of all this?

2.2 The Phenomenon of Interculturation

All this draws our attention to the phenomenon of interculturation. That is to say, cultures are interacting with one another all the time, independent of our wanting or not wanting it. Tibet tried remaining secluded so that its culture would not be contaminated by foreigners but they were forced to give up while Bhutan still adamantly believes that preventing all foreigners from entering the country will prevent foreign cultural influences from entering the country. Today, if a nation wants to survive, it cannot cease being a part of the international community, for better or for worse.

We have to recognize the fact of plurality of cultures. We cannot wish them away nor can we ignore them anymore. Cultures are affecting each other mutually on the ontological level. They cannot stop interacting. Social, political and above all, economic structures are so closely interrelated that culture cannot withdraw and keep itself apart from them.

2.3 The Phenomenon of Inculturation

Closely linked with interculturation is the phenomenon of inculturation. When cultures affect and are affected by each other interculturally, they begin to inculturate, that is, they start adjusting to each other. The effect of the Hindu traditions on Christians has been such that the latter have rather spontaneously taken over from the former names for themselves and for their institutions, changes have come about in the liturgy that clearly indicate their Hindu provenance, music and prayers have undergone change in a similar direction. That is to say, interculturation brings about inculturation, introduces changes that act as interfaces between the encountering traditions. To a great extent such changes are not planned or well thought out. They take place gradually, almost imperceptibly, in the course of time.

This is not special about India or Asia but is a characteristic of all cultural encounters. Islam is different in the Middle East (I suspect, even in the different Middle East countries there are great differences) from Islam in India, Indonesia, Europe and the U.S.A. The encountering cultures interact and in the interacting process undergo change and bring about change in the other culture that is interacting with it.

2.4 Positive and Negative Effects of Inculturation

From the above discussion it should be obvious that the changes that inculturation introduces are not necessarily positive. Cultures tend to take over whatever affects without much reflection. This is not always a good thing. EA is guilty of simplification when it states: “In the process of encountering the world’s different cultures, the Church not only transmits her truths and values and renews cultures from within, but she also takes from the various cultures the positive elements already found in them.” (n.21:p.61)

This is indeed very far from what actually takes place. Cultures take over to others and
take over from their dehumanizing elements too. The virus in our culture affects the other culture and vice versa, the virus of the other culture affects our culture too.

It is here that the last and most important step in the process of inculturation has to be actualized: namely, discernment. This is really the essence of inculturation. EA is right here in stating that “liturgical inculturation requires more than a focus upon traditional cultural values, symbols and rituals. There is also a need to take account of the shifts in consciousness and attitudes caused by the emerging secularist and consumer cultures which are affecting the Asian sense of worship and prayer. Nor can the specific needs of the poor, migrants, refugees, youth and women be overlooked in any genuine liturgical inculturation in Asia”. (n.22;pp.64-65) Not everything from the other cultures that affects us is for our good; and not everything with which we affect other cultures is for their good. Without discernment we tend to follow the line of least resistance.

Let us illustrate the point with some examples. The American Jesuit Edward F. Beckett says that slave-holding came to be in course of time part of the social landscape in the United States. The American Church took over from the “surrounding culture” the practice of slave-holding without much qualms of conscience. Indeed some of them went so far as to justify the practice Different religious orders owned slaves before the American civil war; the Jesuits, Vincentians, Sulpicians, Ursulines, Carmelites, Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Loretto, Religious of the Sacred Heart, Visitation Sisters and Dominicans. At the end of his study Becket pronounces the following judgments:

Although the Society of Jesus was not the only religious community to own slaves, it was the most visible and prosperous. Jesuit ministry to the slaves was marked by a paternalism that, at best, somewhat tempered slavery's harsh regime. At worst, it was tainted by all that was evil in American slaveholding. For the most part, the Jesuits treated their slave much as did the other American Catholic slaveholders. While individual Jesuits may have developed close ministerial ties to blacks, there was no concerted effort on the part of the Society of Jesus as a whole to respond to the needs of black Catholics in America, free or slave. In fact, apart from inconsistently applying minimal standards of justice in their treatment of their slaves, the Jesuits acquiesced in the peculiar institution of American slavery. No Jesuit voiced public opposition to slavery. There were, however nineteenth-century Jesuits who spoke in favour of slavery and against abolition. While the abolitionist movement often allied itself with the worst form of anti-Catholic nativism, the failure of any North American Jesuits to protest in principle against slavery is difficult to reconcile with the example of Claver and Sandoval in South America.

Financial expediency and an uncritical acceptance of American cultural attitudes towards slavery and Catholic moral doctrine were factors influencing the Maryland Jesuits and rationalizing their practice of slaveholding. The example of the Maryland Quakers, who recognized the unchristian nature of slavery and manumitted their slaves in the 1870s at great personal expense, was ignored, envied, or condemned, but never imitated. The failure of the Corporation of Roman Catholic Clergymen's policy of gradual emancipation represents one of the great lost opportunities of American Catholicism. The sale of the slaves by the Maryland Jesuits represents the nadir of Jesuit mission and ministry among the
slaves. In the final analysis, despite persistent anti-Catholic harassment, the Maryland Jesuits were all too comfortable in the dominant slaveholding culture of America. In their uncritical acceptance and practice of slavery, they can be accused of harming the very souls they sought to help.

This is a frightening example of how easily we can be blind to the blind-spots of our cultures. It is only when we encounter a counter-culture, a culture that has values that are opposed to ours that we become aware of the difference in our value-systems. It is here that we have to be open to the action of the Holy Spirit who will guide us in finding out which values are liberating and which enslaving.

If we are shocked by this then a more glaring example of inculturation: the practice of the caste-system among some Christian groups in India. This practice has percolated to all levels: laity, priests, nuns and bishops. The tragedy is that we do not seem to see its evil-side; that is why for many there is no hope of change in this matter. The Christian Dalits have no chance of better treatment either from the Hindu side or the Christian side.

Many Dalit groups thought that they would escape the burden of untouchability if they left Hinduism and joined other religions. Such a desire for an improvement in their social status, rather than economic benefits, has been at the root of many mass conversion movements in India. But they have discovered by experience that any difference in status has been only marginal, both within their religious group and in wider society. This is true of Dalits who became Christians. According to a study in South India, they seem to have made less progress both economically and politically than the Hindu Dalits in the area. They speak of a two-fold oppression: in Society and in the Church. In areas where people of other castes too have become Christian, as in South India, the caste system with all its discriminations has been carried on into the Church. The Dalits have not been able to profit by the educational and job opportunities offered by the institutions of the Church either because of their poverty or because of a lack of representative power at levels of decision making.

After a survey studying the conditions of the Dalit Catholics in Tamil Nadu, Antoniraj points to the many discriminations that still continue in some place: separate chapels, separate places in the churches and cemeteries, discrimination with regard to the roles that the Dalits can play in the celebration of the liturgy, exclusion of the Dalit streets from the processional routes during festivals, refusal to accept their financial contributions during festivals so that they may not claim equal participation, etc.

Isn't it surprising that we are all the time talking of inculturating the liturgy, formation, theology, aspects of our life-style etc. but as far as I see few are talking of inculturation where the practice of the caste-system is concerned! Wouldn't this be a splendid example of inculturation if we were to discern its anti-human, anti-Christian bias and got rid of it? Wouldn't it be an excellent example of evangelization? See what the Indian Bishops stated at their meeting in Tiruchirapalli in 1982.

We state categorically that caste, with its consequent effects of discrimination and 'caste mentality' has no place in Christianity. It is in fact, a denial of Christianity
because it is inhuman. It violates the God-given dignity and equality of the human person. God created man in his own image. Thus human dignity and equality of the human person God created man in his own image. Thus human dignity and respect are due to every person and any denial of this is a sin against God and man. It is an outright denial of the Fatherhood of God which in practice, renders meaningless the brotherhood of man.

The following is an example not so much of inculturation as of how to prepare for discernment that is an important aspect of the inculturation process. Speaking generally, the version of Christianity that has spread far and wide is steeped in the world of historical consciousness. On the other hand, the Hindu traditions that we encounter today have to a great extent their roots in an a-historical world. Obviously both sides have to remain faithful to the fundamental direction of their traditions: the historical and the a-historical. But because of the symbiotic encounter (of interculturation) we are becoming aware of their specificities. We are realizing, for example, their one-sidedness. The historical world-view has been overstressing the historical and neglecting the a-historical or transhistorical dimension of reality; and the a-historical world has been overstressing the transhistorical and neglecting the historical dimension of reality. Correcting the one-sidedness will bring them not only closer to each other but open the way to understanding the 'otherness' of the other.

When we take specific examples like Avatara and Incarnation, mission has the goal of identifying one's own specific understanding, dialogue aims at understanding the truth of the other tradition, interculturation has the task of examining how Avatara and Incarnation can retain their identity and still relate to each other; and inculturation investigates how the Avatara-belief is being affected by the historical dimension and, how the Incarnation-belief is being affected by the a-historical Samsaric dimension.

From the inculturation viewpoint Hindus will have the task of reinterpreting the Avatara-belief in today's world of history. What does it mean and how is it relevant? They will have to show how its non-historical perspective has an important role to play in the search for wholeness; at the same time they will have to take into account today's consciousness of history and examine how it could possibly relate to it.

Similarly from the inculturation viewpoint Christians will have the task of reinterpreting the Incarnation-belief in today's context. What does it mean and how is it relevant? They will have to show how its predominantly historical perspective is important in today's world; at the same time they will have to ask themselves how their perspective could possibly make sense in or relate to a nonhistorical perspective. From the interculturation viewpoint, both Hindus and Christians will have to focus on the meaning, possibility, and modes of divine immanence in the world.

Mission, dialogue and interculturation-and-inculturation are, to use an analogy, like the centripetal and the centrifugal forces that make possible the orbital movement of interculturation-and-inculturation. All three are indispensable, irreducible and unique. What is more they all go together. None is genuine without the other two. Mission, dialogue and interculturation-and-inculturation are a prelude to the discovery of the harmony of religions. Religion, as we have discussed above, is intimately linked with Reality and vice versa. To be realistic is to be religious and to be religious is to be realistic. Hence to discover the harmony of religions is to discover the harmony of
Reality. One of the most insightful statements of EA is the following: (n.6; p.15), "This 'being Asian' is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. In this framework of complementarity and harmony, the Church can communicate the Gospel in a way which is faithful both to her own Tradition and to the Asian soul."

We have to remember that we are here dealing with the beliefs, not the doctrines, of the Avatara and Incarnation experience. When therefore we speak of cosmic immanence of the Avatara or historical presence of the Incarnation we are really giving witness to what we believe and what belief does to us. At most we can here guess what transformation such beliefs can bring about. We can, for instance, guess that an authentic experience of Avatara makes one perceive the world as a sacrament, as the Body of Krishna/Vishnu and that an authentic experience of Incarnation makes one see God's presence in certain historical events. All this of course we can merely guess. Hence what is given below is more in the line of a direction, rather than of content.

(1) Belief in an Avatara is belief in a Cosmotheos, "God in the world" and is as valid a religious belief as is the belief in the Incarnation which is belief in an Anthropotheos, "God becoming a human being". Interculturation tells us that Avatara is to be taken as seriously as Incarnation and that the Cosmotheos cannot be reduced to the Anthropotheos or vice versa.

(2) Avatara and Incarnation are different ways of experiencing Divine presence. Avatara stresses cosmic immanence and Incarnation highlights historical presence.

(3) The Cosmotheos is a specific experience of the World in God and the Anthropotheos a specific experience of the Human in God. In spite of their being specifically different experiences of the Divine they are interrelated.

The phenomenon of interculturation makes us aware that the specific identity of an Avatara consists in the fact that it stresses Divine immanence in the world and that the specific identity of the Incarnation consists in the fact that it stresses historical presence of the Divine.

On the other hand, belief in the Avatara neglects the historical presence of the Divine and belief in the Incarnation neglects Divine immanence.

That is to say, in the Cosmotheos we have to discover its historical dimension, however peripheral it might be, and in the Anthropotheos we have to discover the a-historical dimension, however peripheral it might be.

Without inculturation Avatara and Incarnation remain like oil and water. Through the process of interculturation we discover the relatedness of Avatara and Incarnation. They both have to do with Divine Presence being different experiences of the same Mystery. To discover relatedness is to discover, not invent a bridge that unites two different worlds; it is to discover a two-way communication road.

It should be clear by now that Dialogue and Inculturation cannot in the last analysis be based on human wisdom or endeavour alone. Human wisdom and endeavour can make efforts, as our examples show, to prepare the ground for the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding. But we do not know whence this Spirit of truth comes and whither she blows!

3. WHAT IS INCULTURATION?
Inculturation is the process of discernment by which we are led by the Spirit to separate in the changes wrought by interculturation the chaff of pseudo-values from the wheat of genuine values. Interculturation brings about changes in all cultures. There is a certain contagion in cultures that gets transmitted in the process of interculturation: not all the things that are transmitted are good and not all are bad. But the blind-spots of cultures are so powerful that they are not in a position to see this. That is why EA is very right when it asserts “that the Holy Spirit is the prime agent of the inculturation of the Christian faith in Asia”. (n.21; pp.61-62) It is she alone who can make us aware of the blind-spots and the blind-perceptions of our cultures.

In such an ontological understanding of inculturation where is the place for evangelization and proclamation? Evangelization and proclamation are built on the presupposition that they are assimilated by their hearers through the phenomenon of understanding. This however is a complex happening. Understanding something or someone from one’s own world of meaning is obviously quite a different thing from understanding someone or something from another world of meaning. EA is innocent about such complexity and simply takes for granted that if we use “stories, parables and symbols so characteristic of Asian methodology in teaching” (n.20; p.58) and such like modes of communication understanding of what and who is proclaimed will take place. This is far from the actual state of affairs. We tend to understand others from our world of meaning and therefore we basically misunderstand others. The problem is this: how do we understand the others in the way they understand themselves and the other way round, how can the others understand me as I understand myself and as I want to be understood? If we shift this to the level of cultures the problem deepens. If the neighbouring traditions cannot understand our proclamation the way we want it to be understood, then there is no point in proclaiming it.

In order to understand others as they want to be understood we have to be acquainted with their world of meaning. The same is to be said of the others; if they are to understand us they have to be acquainted with our world of meaning. EA seems to simplify matters when it talks about “presenting Jesus Christ as the only Saviour”. If people are to understand our Good News then, speaking homologously, we have first to understand their Good News. Whatever is said about “the need for the explicit proclamation of the Gospel in its fulness” applies equally to the explicit proclamation of the Gita in its fulness, for example. The insistence on proclaiming the Gita “is prompted not by sectarian impulse nor the spirit of proselytism nor any sense of superiority” (n.20; p.54). To bear witness to Krishna is the supreme service which the Hindus “can offer to the peoples of the world, for it responds to their profound longing for the Absolute, and it unveils the truths and values which will ensure their integral human development” (n.20; p.54-55). The various cultures, when refined and renewed in the light of the Gita, can become true expressions of the one Hindu faith. (n.21; p.61) In this way we could go on applying whatever EA says about the Good News of Jesus Christ to, for example, the Good News of Krishna.

What the above discussion should highlight is this: Proclamation presupposes reciprocity, otherwise the other side will not listen to our proclamation, much less understand it. When traditions stop listening to one another, it will be the end of authentic religion. Now reciprocity is what the roman documents in general and Ecclesia in Asia in particular are singularly lacking in.
4. **PROCLAMATION AND CULTURAL SENSITIVITY**

In our understanding of the inculturation process proclamation takes place among partners: we proclaim and they listen and try to understand. They proclaim and we listen and try to understand. It is in such a process that questioning, correction and complementarity have their place. This is in no way a kind of relativism but a relativity of the *expressions* of our revelations. Revelation itself remains absolute and eternal but its reception by finite subjects who are historically conditioned is bound to be relative. Furthermore the expression is not the experience. Hence the distinctions between the absolute revelation, its reception in finite and historically conditioned subjects and its culturally bound expressions are of vital importance.

Roman documents are notorious for their cultural insensitivity. In spite of their statements about the historical constraints and limitations of cultures, they seem to believe that the faith in Jesus Christ the unique saviour is above all cultures, forgetting that it is not faith in itself that is being communicated but faith through its expressions and that faith-expressions are all culturally and historically conditioned. All generalizations and universalizations are precisely that: generalizations and universalizations and they are bedevilled by reductionism and extrapolation.

Furthermore though faith may be above cultures, faith is always experienced from within a definite perspective, a specific world-view. Consequently faith-expressions are all affected by their respective world-views. Roman documents do not seem to realize that their statements are thoroughly soaked in the waters of the historical world-view, which like any world-view is legitimate but again like any world-view has its limitations. To believe that the experience and the expression of truth as are found in the historical world-view are the only way of looking at truth is to be blissfully ignorant of the nature of language, especially religious language. The consequences are the absolutizations and universalizations that recent roman documents are replete with. Uniqueness is a characteristic that is part of the historical world-view; in a non-historical, or a-historical world-view it simply does not make sense.

Finally what an effective proclamation needs is cultural sensitivity. To pretend that one’s faith transcends culture is to be ignorant of the dynamics of culture. Such ignorance gives birth to cultural insensitivity; this marks the end of all proclamation.