

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN FAITH-CULTURE ENCOUNTER

Vincent Kundukulam*

St. Joseph Pontifical Seminary, Mangalapuzha

Abstract

This article explores the complex interaction between Christian faith and diverse cultures, focusing on two main challenges: the fear of losing Christian identity and the impact of deformative cultural-religious unconscious biases. It maintains that identity is not diminished but enriched through dialogue, drawing on Trinitarian and incarnational models. The text also emphasises the need to purify collective prejudices to promote genuine engagement. Ultimately, it suggests that faith and culture can mutually strengthen each other – helping Christianity to remain a vibrant tradition while addressing contemporary agnosticism through anthropological sensitivity and reciprocity.

Key Words: Faith-culture dialogue, Christian identity, Syncretism, Collective unconscious, Inculturation, Religious agnosticism, Mutual enrichment

Introduction

The encounter of Christianity with other cultures has never been devoid of problems. The issues regarding the encounter of gospel with cultures had begun along with the spread of the Good News in the

* Dr. Vincent Kundukulam is a Theology Professor at the Pontifical Institute Aluva, serving as President from June 2012 to 2015. His specialisations include Hindutva, Theology of Religions, and Postmodernity. He has authored and edited fifteen books and written about 100 scholarly articles in French, English, and Malayalam. He has collaborated with commissions at the Kerala Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India. He was President of the Kerala Theological Association (KTA) from 2016 to 2019 and of the Indian Theological Association (ITA) from 2018 to 2022. He sits on editorial boards of academic journals and is a columnist for Light of Truth. He actively advocates for justice and inter-religious harmony in Kerala. Currently, he is Vice-Rector at St. Joseph Pontifical Seminary, Mangalapuzha, Aluva. Email: kundu1962@gmail.com

Hellenistic countries. The apostles resolved the well-known question of circumcision by deciding not to impose such a ritual on gentiles. The basis for their decision was the revelation received by St. Peter who said, 'God shows no partiality in giving his salvific gifts to anyone, provided they live in fear of God and lead a righteous life (Acts 10, 34-36). If God bothers more about the internal disposition of man than the outward expressions, who are then we to insist upon unessential factors for the mediation of grace, was the attitude of Peter (Act 11, 17).

In our times, the problems arising from the co-existence of Christianity with other cultures are not the same as in the past, but the basic questions are same. Where do we draw the line of separation between what is Christian and what is not Christian in the faith-culture encounter? How can the faith-culture conversation be fruitful for the Church and world? What are the possible areas of collaboration between Christianity and culture? Underneath of these questions, the basic issue is same: how to safeguard the essence of gospel in faith-culture interaction? how can we integrate the seeds of the Word hidden in cultures into Christianity without the danger of syncretism?

These issues regarding the co-existence of religion and faith become more complex and severe due to the fact that both of them are 'fishing in the same pond'. Given culture and religion are the two dominant social institutions involved in building up society, there is a chance that their interests and *modus operandi* collide one another. The adjacent linkage between them would be clear if we examined what they signify in theology. St. Thomas Aquinas defines faith as follows: "To believe is an act of mind ascending to divine truth by virtue of the command of the will as this is moved by God through grace; in this way the act stands under the control of the free will and is directed towards God"¹. Theologically speaking, "culture is that complex secondary environment built upon the original material of creation done, consciously or out of instinct, but always in obedience to the cultural mandate"².

As stated in the above-given theological definitions, both the act of faith and the act of building up culture are products of human and divine interaction. In the act of faith, humans ascend to God by God's

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1-11, Q. 2. Art. 9.

² M.P. Maggay & W.A. Dyrness, Culture and Society, *Global Dictionary of Theology*, W.A. Dyrness & Veli-Matti Karkkainen (eds.), (USA: Intervarsity Fellowship, 2008), 217.

grace, and in the act of making culture, humans work upon the good that God has already invested in creation. This inevitable interplay between faith and culture is an enriching arena of research for all those who are committed to the mission of theologising. The objective of this paper is nothing but to expose two basic issues involved in Faith-Culture conversation and to propose certain means for mutual collaboration between Christianity and culture.

1. Cultural Impregnation and Identity Safeguarding

One of the issues disturbing the process of dialogue between Christian faith and cultures is the fear of losing Christian unicity. This fear is quite understandable because when Christianity is in conversation with the discrete identities of different groups, the latter shall crisscross with the then existing expressions of Christian mysteries. When the local identities raise a serious challenge to the ways of faith-living, those who are passionately attached to the external rituals and traditions of the Church may feel they are losing the ground in Christianity.

In fact, the reason for this fear is a false understanding of what identity is and how it is preserved. The synonyms given by the *Routledge Encyclopaedia* for the word *identity* are distinctiveness, uniqueness, essence, character, etc. Such meanings point to the fact that if all persons or things are identical, we cannot distinguish one from another. Identity is the relation that each thing has to itself and to nothing else.³ It is true that one of the factors that constitutes identity is what makes something different from the other.

But there is also another important component to the concept of identity. It appears well in the etymological meaning of the French equivalent *l'identité* which means 'sameness of essential in diverse instances'⁴. Here, the emphasis is more on the sameness of basic principles than on the differentiating elements. Identity consists both in sharing of the common essence and in differing from others in the externals. This perception is very close to that of the Eastern mind, according to which human identity consists of two factors: individuation and commonality. God has created a person with the same essence as the co-humans and, at the same time, with traits proper to each one's original context. Accordingly, the uniqueness of

³ Timothy Williamson, 'Identity', *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Edward Craig (ed.), (London: Routledge, 1998), 676.

⁴ Thomas Thakidipuram, 'Identity', *An Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, vol. 1, J. J. Puthenpurackal (ed.), (Bangalore: ATC, 2010), 649.

a person has to be defined both in relation to and in contrast to others. The identity crisis shall decrease if we focus more on the similarity in essentials than on the difference in externals.

Another factor that generates fear about losing identity is the false notion that identity has a uniform structure. Believers accustomed to a monolithic way of understanding reality feel threatened when they are asked to integrate a different way of expressing truth. The remedy is nothing but to get trained to experience the differentiated aspects of truth. Amartya Sen, in his work, *Identity and Violence* explains that the cultural identity of a person is multi-faceted⁵. For instance, the same person can be a British citizen, of French origin, a non-vegetarian, a Buddhist, a mathematician, an asthmatic and so on and so forth. Hence, in the pluralistic world, a person can be fairly understood only through an integral approach. Letting one dimension of these features take over others shall definitely lead to reductionism.

Those who examine closely the history of the Church shall realize that whenever Christians met with new cultures, they changed their old patterns of living faith. In this venture, the vision that helped them to keep a healthy balance between permanence and mutation was their belief in the Trinity. The One God is a communion of three persons. While each person in Trinity has specific roles in the mystery of redemption, all the three together assume their responsibilities in mutual love and charity.⁶ Another model before Church was the mystery of incarnation. Religiously and culturally, Jesus was a Jew, but those features did not obstruct him from sharing the 'human commonalities' with other religious cultures. He kept his godliness while being fully humane. To live in communion with faith in a multiplicity of cultures is like the conductor coordinating an orchestra comprised of various instruments and singers⁷.

The fear of losing identity would have been valid if the Church followed bluntly other cultural rites in the sense that they were performed in their traditions. But the Church never copies other cultures with their original meanings. She receives and modifies them through a Christian lens. What matters is not so much what cultural materials you use but how do you do with them. Christian identity is

⁵ *Ibid.*, 651-652.

⁶ S. M. Michael, *Christianity and Cultures*, (Pune: 1SPCK, Ishvani Kendra, 2015), 35-36.

⁷ Dermot A. Lane, *Religion and Culture in Dialogue*. (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1993), 31-32.

more a matter of *how* than *what*. As Herve Carrier says, the Church is not an undifferentiated system but a living organism composed of *varied* (my addition) members, all contributing to the unity and enrichment of the entire body. Identicalness is not opposed to particularities; authentic identity consists in living the diversity as essential to the catholicity of Church ⁸.

2. Beware of the Deformative Religious-Cultural Unconscious

Unexpected outbreaks of violence between groups, castes and religions used to surprise us often. We shall then ask: Why did it happen? Why now? How can a big mob altogether take weapons? There are instances in India and abroad. The Hindu-Muslim riots of 1990 in Hyderabad, the Hindu-Muslim conflicts of 2002 in Gujarat, the Hindu-Christian Violence of 2008 at Kandhamal in Orissa and lately the Meitei-Kukki confrontations of 2023 in Manipur, all point towards the backroom settings of unforeseen excessive violence.

Bryan N. Massingale, who researches the background reasons for communal clashes, says that cultural stereotypes play a leading role in defining human behaviour. Analysing the series of killings executed by police officers in America against certain blacks in 2012,⁹ he states that the police guards who committed those massacres were not fully aware of the seriousness of the crime. It seems that the collective racial stigma attached to dark skin has been instinctively controlling their actions. Since many decades, the American psyche has been associating dark skin with immorality, stupidity and danger.

Massingale's findings are important regarding the faith-culture encounter because if the Christian collective unconscious is constituted of negative perceptions about the beliefs, symbols, gods and values of other religions, a healthy interaction with them would be really difficult. It has often happened in history and is still happening in the life of Church. Some of the Western missionaries looked down on the religious traditions in colonies. Instead of understanding the myths and symbols that are used by the indigenous people, they took them literally. They saw the statue of Ganapati and asked, How can God has elephant's head? Is cow a god? Showing reverence to sun, serpent, river and so on was seen as pantheism. Such

⁸ Herve Carrier, *Evangelizing the culture of modernity*, (New York: Orbis, 1993), 76-77.

⁹ Bryan N. Massingale, "Conscious Formation and the Challenge of Unconscious Racial Bias", in *Conscience and Catholicism*, David. E. DeCosse & Kristin E. Heyer (eds.), (Bangalore: TPI, 2016), 54-59.

'brandings' arise from collective unconscious presumptions. Michel Foucault calls it *epistemic unconscious*¹⁰. What he means is that our systems of knowledge are governed by rules that operate beneath the consciousness of individual subjects.

However, there was a drastic change in the Western attitude towards evangelisation after the Council. But the missionaries from the once colonized countries continue to commit the same mistakes. I have heard fathers, sisters and laymen working among the tribals say that we are teaching them good manners. Let us see an example. Our fellow missionaries used to organize race for the tribals to instil in them a competitive spirit. Surprisingly, it seems that all children stop running if one among them falls down on the track. And when the organizers tell them about the chance, they missed to win the race, they ask in response: How can we run leaving our brother alone? See, how do we miss to identify the gospel values already hidden in the tribal culture? And the funny thing is that these missionaries themselves shall later teach them about the need to be a good Samaritan to all those who are in need.

To judge some cultures as inferior and some others as superior is not scientific. Those social customs which seem to be irrational today need not be negative as such because they might have done a meaningful service at a different time in history. Cultural forms must be assessed in terms of the functions they perform in their given context. Unless the collective unconscious of those who engage in faith-culture dialogue is cleansed of the venomous potentials constructed against each other, their efforts would be counterproductive.

Having seen the two issues related to the faith-culture encounter namely - the fear of losing the alterity and the deformative cultural and religious unconscious - we shall now try to indicate two areas where culture and faith can mutually collaborate for the betterment of society.

3. Culture-Faith Bonding to Make Christian Life Authentic

In the early days, the word *cultura*, the Latin equivalent for *culture*, was used with two meanings: the human care and tending shown to the animals and the behaviour of educated individuals, who

¹⁰ Gary Gutting, "Sartre, Foucault and Derrida", in: *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*, Nicholas Bunin & E. P. Tsui-James, (eds.), (USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) 866-867.

possessed refined knowledge in art and literature. Later, there developed a social distinction between the educated class with high culture and the illiterate class with popular culture.

In the course of time, due to various changes that happened in the world the rise and fall of different kingdoms, belief-systems and ideologies; progress in science, medicine and technology; the growth of social and human sciences; eruption of pluralism, globalization and marketization, etc. - the concept of culture underwent a thorough metamorphosis. The dualistic perspective of culture as high and low got changed. The culture of every group was accepted as distinct and self-contained in itself. At present, culture has grown into an umbrella discipline, which coordinates varied branches of knowledge with diverse methods and approaches.

For a workable definition of culture, we depend on the studies of Kathryn Tanner and Terry Eagleton. According to them, culture basically stands for the totality of beliefs, behaviors, knowledge, sanctions, values, and goals that mark the entire way of life. It is naturally manifold, and when there are sub-classes in a society, they arrive at a consensus on the essential common elements without endangering the specificity of diverse groups.¹¹ It equips humans with refined feelings, agreeable manners, a sound sense of justice, open-mindedness, and readiness to sacrifice one's life for others. Like the soul, it animates social life. To borrow the expression of Alasdair McIntyre, culture has proved itself to be a *living tradition*¹². Living tradition is the one that has a laudable record of success in reconstructing itself by integrating diverse schools of thought. It can empathetically deal with challenges arising from all corners without losing the basics.

Culture, which has an efficient operative pedagogy to safeguard unity among diversity, stability in the midst of evolution, and rootedness while being transcendent, can help Christian faith in resolving issues arising from cultural interaction. With the dawn of postmodern thought, institutional religions are under serious threat of extinction. People don't believe any more in discourses and universal claims. They want concrete experiences and actions. Due to the influence of pragmatism, the youngsters are not concerned about

¹¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 25-28

¹² Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1984) 220-224; Alasdair McIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame : Notre Dame Presse, 1990) 12.

dogmatic certainties. Anything that gives them success, profit, and satisfaction is true for them. It is at this juncture that interaction with culture would be helpful for the Church.

One of the reasons that distance the popular class from the Church is the impression that faith is an ascent to a certain number of encapsulated doctrines regarding God and man. When people cease to trust in grand narratives, it is natural that they also lose faith in Christianity, which is a religious master-narrative. Another reason for believers moving away from Christianity is the gap existing in the Church between theory and praxis. In our contemporary time, truth is seen more as something to be experienced than to be proved logically. Christian faith, in order to be effective, has to be verifiable in the concrete life of the faithful.¹³

The world expects from Christians the same gestures of Christ. They want the Church to remain a space where the poor are being looked after, where forgiveness constructs solidarity and where love takes over hatred. It is in this sense Pope Benedict XVI stated in *Porta Fidei* that witness is the most effective way of evangelization today (6-7). Culture shall help the Church to remain as a *living tradition*, to negotiate with the non-essentials without compromising the essentials, and thus to become a meaningful life-style.

4. Faith-Culture Reciprocity, an Anti-dote to Agnostic Culture

In the book *The Idea of Culture*, Terry Eagleton speaks about a double refusal contained in the notion of culture. They are: refusal of organic determinism, and rejection of autonomy of spirit. By the absence of organic determinism, he means that there is a *within nature* in culture which exceeds and undoes it. Culture possesses an interior drive to embrace new ideas and approaches against its tendency to preserve the *status quo*. By denial of self-sovereignty, he designates the rootedness of even the most advanced culture in nature. Culture restricts man to become fully independent from the environment. Human beings are not mere products of their environs, but neither are the environs pure stuff for human fashioning. As culture celebrates the self, it also disciplines the self. Culture is not only what we live by; it is also what we live for.¹⁴

¹³ C. Geffre, Les enjeux actuels de l'herméneutique chrétienne, *Revue de l'ICP*, no: 55, 1995, 133.

¹⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, (USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 4-6.

This longing of culture for self-overcoming and self-retainment conforms to the very nature of the Christian faith. Like culture, faith also has the capacity for cultural assimilation. Throughout history, the Gospel could transform cultures because the word of God decayed in culture. As Christ the Word embraced a particular culture during his abode on earth, the Gospel got incarnated in all cultures where it was announced. Similarly, Christian faith has shown the capacity to save cultures from decaying. This is because faith is not merely a cultural product; it possesses divine facts transcending culture.

Reciprocity between faith and culture in the act of integration and transcendence is emphasized by the dogmatic constitution *Gaudium et spes*: 'There are many links between the message of salvation and culture. God has spoken to humanity according to the culture of each age. Although Church assimilated the resources of different cultures, she never exclusively tied to one single culture. Church wants to purify, elevate and restore the spiritual endowments of every age and nation in Christ' (GS 58). St. John Paul II, establishing the Pontifical Council for Culture in Rome in 1982, repeated the dual functions of faith-culture encounter. To him, a faith which does not become culture is a faith that has not been fully received or fully lived out. The synthesis between culture and faith is not just a demand of culture but of faith too.¹⁵

Unbelief in the form of religious indifference has become a *culture* today. Agnostics, like atheists, don't reject God as such but they claim to live life without God. In this case, as Herve Carrier rightly observes, any attempt to insert specific religious values into societal life would be regarded as proselytism.¹⁶ Hence there must be a new approach to proclaim the Good News to the agnostics. At this juncture, the potential of faith and culture to combine healthily their tends for integration and transcendence would be helpful for the advocates of Christianity.

In fact, the faith dimension is not entirely dead in the agnostics. It is only asleep or covered over by varied interests like money, comfort and pleasure. In order to awaken the yearning for transcendence concealed in agnostics we need an anthropological approach rather than a theological one. What Paul Tillich said is right: The spiritual anguish that is inconspicuously expressed in the form of religious

¹⁵ *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28 June, 1982, 1-8.

¹⁶ Herve Carrier, *Evangelizing the Culture of Modernity*, 134.

indifference could be grasped only by those who have undergone the shock of transitoriness¹⁷. Only those who have experienced the tragic finitude of human existence shall get the vibe of the Ultimate. It presupposes long patience. One who sows may not be able to reap the fruit. We have to labour hard and wait for the time foreseen by the Spirit.

However, one thing is certain: even the agnostics have a sense of the sacred, a commitment to certain absolute values. To detect this masked and subjective craving for the Transcendent we must have empathy, and the capacity to discern the hopes expressed in the form of anguish.¹⁸ In this regard, we can trust in the power of culture and faith, which through the tends of self-transcendence and self-constraint balance the stability and continuity of human civilizations.

Conclusion

Every effort we take to get Christian faith enriched in the local cultures involves a dying and rising process – the dying of old cultural forms and the rising of new cultural forms. It is like the life-cycle of plants. As the plant grows ahead, the old leaves fall down and the new ones appear. If the fallen leaves gave visibility to the plant yesterday, the new leaves assure its life today. Neither the new leaves nor the old ones have to boast about or be regretted. The new leaves made it possible with the help of manure supplied by the fallen leaves. Similarly, the outgone leaves still contribute to the plant's life by dying in the soil. Jesus' teaching is imperative for any faith-culture encounter: "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12, 24).

¹⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol.1*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965) 61-62

¹⁸ Herve Carrier, *Evangelizing the Culture of Modernity*, 143-148.