

Foundations of a theology of interculturality

The new evangelization and the Church in Africa

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If the reasons for the new evangelization vary according to the regions of the world and the kind of relationship between faith and reason found there, the relationship between the different cultures within those regions can in turn cause it to differ. In the case of Africa and Europe, one should avoid the simple juxtaposition of the problems of the New Evangelization which would merely be a reflection of their multiculturalism. Here a succinct question arises about the historical reasons that link the two problems – the African one and the Western one – and about the theological foundation of the intercultural problem concerning the new evangelization.

It is important to explain what is meant today by the “apostasy of the West” and to shed light on the causes of the crisis of faith that involves all the Western countries. It will also be necessary to clarify, as far as possible, why people speak of sub-Saharan Africa as a subcontinent that seems to be slipping backwards, and why people speak in our Churches in Africa of syncretism, of ethnicism, of fratricidal wars between Christians – who belong to the same country, where 80 to 90 per cent of the population is baptized – of conflicts to gain access to power in the Church, of the sickness of the African religion in the epoch of modernity and post-modernity. The Congolese theologian Léonard Santédi highlighted this clearly, supporting Fr Maurice Pivot's view, in the January 2012 issue of *Esprit et vie*.

If the atheist-illuminist option ended by having a broader civilizing impact whose most significant cultural indicators are, on the one hand the pure and simple eradication of the Christian roots from the European Constitution, and on the other, the disappearance of the reference to God in social life. One notices a parallel trend in the particular Churches in Africa to erase the difference that exists between the history of salvation and general, universal history. This has resulted in the birth of the so-called “three ‘m’” theory (*militaire, marchand, missionnaire*) [soldier, merchant, missionary]. According to this theory, to free itself Africa should reject Western Imperialism at the socio-economic and political, as well as at the cultural and spiritual levels. Africa also must refuse to be permeated by Judaeo-Christian prophetism.

However, from the historical viewpoint, every particular African Church is the result of an evangelizing mission which essentially had nothing in common with the con-

quest and the monopolization of raw materials. Whereas the military man and merchant were involved in this imperialistic mission, the missionary bringing the Gospel was instead at the service of God's Good News, revealed in Jesus Christ as a Trinity of love, creating man in his image and likeness. Every Church, born in a remote corner of Africa, has become the place of a reawakening of that divine possibility, dormant in the depths of the African anthropological form which is emerging in this ethnic, social and cultural space. If the Church could come into being in so many geographical locations in Africa, it is because messengers of the Good News came to live with their African brothers and sisters and to proclaim Jesus Christ. Their goal had nothing in common with that of merchants or soldiers.

On the basis of an autonomous historiography, we must absolutely reroute our understanding of ourselves as the African Church. Given that the radical break between culture and religion, brought about by the Enlightenment, is making its effects felt at all levels, Africans must demonstrate their autonomy in

The history of the Slave Trade, of the slave route and, in particular of triangular commerce, includes a document, the *Code Noir* (1685), to which King Louis XIV, – the “Sun King” and a politician – was a signatory. This legal document states in art. 44: “the slave is a movable commodity”. However for the missionary who went there to proclaim the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, slaves were human beings created in the image and likeness of God who deserved the sacrifice of young apostolic lives to make known that in Jesus of Nazareth God loved humanity, the whole of humanity to the point of folly and that in Jesus Christ himself, a universal brother, humanity too was able to respond with equal folly. The history of salvation is extended in missionary history. While the soldier and the merchant did violence to Africa, stripped it and left it for dead, as on the way to Jericho, the Gospel missionary, a historical figure of the Good Samaritan, went there to care for it, to raise it and to reestablish it with its dignity and responsibility, on the road of a history to be built together, as a history worthy of God and worthy of the

to put into practice as a practical methodological structure of the New Evangelization: the Courtyard of the Gentiles and interculturality.

In particular, interculturality is hoped for by all the cultures that, focused on their most crucial part, the faith on which they are founded, accept, like Christianity, to come out of their temple – to emerge from themselves – in order to talk to the Gentiles in the courtyard which was reserved for them, in Judaism. Interculturality, to be authentic, thus implies the acceptance by all religions of the fact that, before any cultural and religious subject did so, God himself took the initiative of ending every form of exclusion. In his own Son, Jesus of Nazareth, who was put to death but rose on the third day, God broke down the “wall of separation” and killed hatred, so that only a new man would exist, through whom it is now given to all humanity to know God and to know itself. If God on the Cross revealed himself on the boundaries of culture and of humanity in the unique figure of this one new Man, he also reveals to every individual in his socio-cultural specificity that it is precisely this new man who is the matrix, the unique crucible of his creating act.

What can other cultures and religions contribute to this crossroads that makes every form of interculturality possible? We cannot say, we can only let it happen. We cannot live “the temple of the nations” (cf. Lk 24; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 56), as their keepers. They must take the time that faith tells us we have attained in Jesus Christ alone (cf. Gal 4:4). The missionary of the New Evangelization must be trained in interculturality. Since each and every “person with an upright heart”, starting from the depths of their culture and religion in order to be open to dialogue with other cultures may be able to understand and

receive the revelation of God in the precise place of the Cross, we find a distant, but in our opinion, reliable example in the figure of Mahatma Gandhi, whose Ashram included no Hindu figure of polytheism but only the figure of Christ who ascends in glory.

Therefore training people in interculturality, understood in this way, means telling them to live with the greatest respect for others, which consists in allowing them their time and freedom to understand, on their own, that it is God himself who initiates dialogue with all the cultures, breaking down every cultural wall of separation and exclusion.



Hand-painted wall hanging from an African Church dedicated to St Benedict

interpreting history to the point of being able to criticize the philosophical options that the diverse historical interpretations present. For many people the essential is played out at this level. The individual approaches to history, by the different historical trends necessarily give rise to conflicting interpretations and hence to history, that are legitimate.

Today the African member of the Church is called to exercise his or her proper responsibility first of all with regard to the truth that the interpretation of history imposes with a return to the sources. Authentic interculturality is only possible at an inter-historical level, also imposed from the view point or vigilance that should motivate it.

new man which in his turn the African has become.

The question of the New Evangelization is also that of evangelization in interculturality. It is the concrete historical testimony of the reality of the Church born and prophetically presented to the intercultural world, from the morning of Pentecost. This is even more urgent, because if she is to be credible the universal Church must stop giving the impression that she is Euro-centric, limiting herself to tolerating the other particular Churches. She must become truly intercultural.

Pope Benedict XVI, as a prophet of today's world, has pointed it out through a twofold – theological and pastoral – orientation which the Pontifical Council for Culture strives

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