

Gerald A. Arbuckle: *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians. A Postmodern Critique*. Foreword by Anthony Gittins, CSSp. Collegeville, Minnesota: A Michael Glazier Book, Liturgical Press, 2010. 200 p. ISBN 789-08146-5458-3.

Since the end of the Second Vatican Council, the new theological term “inculturation” imposed itself very rapidly as the central concept in Catholic missiology to express the in-depth encounter between the Gospel and the culture (way of life) of those who have received and welcomed it. This encounter is not a single contact but an ongoing process. The process reveals how the Gospel can transform a given culture from within and how any culture can contribute to a deeper understanding of Jesus’ liberating message. In the post-modern global context, the inculturation process continues to face new and often unexpected challenges. We are living in a new global context marked by radical cultural and religious plurality in which individuals and communities are constantly reconstructing their identities in confrontation or communion with the “other.” Therefore it is practically impossible to reflect on the inculturation process without taking into consideration the anthropological notions of “enculturation” (conscious or unconscious initiation in one’s own culture) and “acculturation” (ongoing confrontations between different cultures). The Church itself has become multicultural now that the vast majority of her members find themselves outside the Western hemisphere. Cultural pluralism is perceived by many as a divine blessing and as a truly theological reality. It reflects the beauty of the world created by God and it accentuates the dramatic character of Christian existence. But at the same time, others, especially those who think that pluralism unavoidably leads to relativism, perceive cultural pluralism as a curse. These different perceptions of cultural pluralism indicate the urgency of further reflections on the possibilities and limits of the inculturation process. I am of the opinion that this can best be done by connecting inculturation with liberation theologies, contextual reflections on the relationship between faith and reason, interreligious dialogue, and a new awareness of the importance of spirituality and mysticism. (See Achiel Peelman: *Les nouveaux défis de l’inculturation*. Lumen Vitae/Novalis, 2007). But this also presupposes new investigations into the dynamic reality of “culture” itself.

The well-known Australian theologian and Marist Father, Gerard Arbuckle, is deeply aware of the complexity of this situation. In his introduction, he writes: “This book particularly focuses on clarifying the meaning of culture because an accurate

understanding of the concept is crucial to effective inculturation.” (xx) As a cultural anthropologist, he believes that the thorniest methodological problem in inculturation is the confusion surrounding the meaning of culture itself and the application of the concept to vastly different situations: to “global culture,” “youth culture,” “pop culture,” “culture of poverty,” “culture of violence” and so on. His efforts to clarify the situation have been highly appreciated by the American Vietnamese theologian Peter Phan who affirms on the back cover of the book: “Combining his immense learning in anthropology and theology with his deep concern for the Christian faith Arbuckle [...] forces us to rethink entirely the relation between faith and culture in our postmodern age. This is a landmark book, and the future of Christianity and Christian mission may well depend on how its proposals are taken seriously and put into practice.” Let us therefore examine some of the main proposals presented in this outstanding study.

In Chapter 1, the author offers an overview of modern and postmodern definitions of culture starting with the famous one offered by Edward Tylor in his 1871 book, *Primitive Culture*. Culture means that “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” This definition forms the basis of a multitude of modern anthropological reflections on the constraining quality and the functional dimension of culture. What is the impact of culture on the individual? How can individuals become the “acting subjects” of their own culture? These questions are often disputed by the post-modern critic of culture but they will form the background of the following chapters where the author presents several aspects of culture and concludes each of these presentations with a short reflection on their theological implications. Here are a few examples.

Chapter 2 defines cultures as “webs of symbols and myths.” The person is a “symbolic” being. Symbols and myths affect all dimensions of human existence: who we are, what we believe, what we do, how we hope, and how we relate to others. This has implications for the effective communication and appropriation of the Christian faith, the development of contextual presentations of the Christ mystery (cf. Asian, African, Latino-American, Native American images of Christ), and the adaptation of the liturgy to local cultural contexts.

Chapter 3 draws the attention to cultures as “power reservoirs” (Michel Foucault) and the classification of cultures according to what is clean and unclean with the development of different cultural models (Mary Douglas). Here we deal with the organization of collective life and the impact of “professional” powers (cf. the medical, juridical, clerical professions) on society building. We are reminded that the Church is not a pure spirit. Like all other institutions she is affected by issues of power, politics or prestige and by the balance between institutional, charismatic and prophetic types of ministry.

Chapter 4 deals with cultures as stigmatizing patterns of social exclusion: social, political or economic situations which have become really “dehumanizing”. The author also reflects on the phenomenon of global poverty and on what we mean by a “culture of poverty.” Here we are reminded of the development of liberation theolo-

gies around the world, adapting the social doctrine of the Catholic Church to local contexts and reflect on the prophetic dimension of Christianity in light of Jesus' own "preferential option for the poor."

Chapter 5 reminds us that the human being is a "narrative being" (a story teller). Some authors such as Paul Ricoeur reflect on the links between ancient myths and contemporary narratives. Others confront the post-modern drama of the deconstruction and reconstruction of human identities. We encounter a multitude of narratives: nationalists, minority, refounding, marketplace narratives and so on. In this context we may be invited to reflect more on the link between the "story" of Jesus and the variety of these human situations. We may explore the power and the meaning of Jesus' parables for today.

Chapter 6 presents cultures as processes of ritualizing life. Ritual is a form of narrative-in-action. Some rituals have been created to "order" human life (to relieve anxieties, to constrain human behavior, to define boundaries and so on.) Others have a more "transformative" purpose: to transform society into *communitas*. Here we are invited to reflect once again on the meaningful presence of the Church at crucial moments of human life by its own rituals and sacraments.

Arbuckle concludes this interesting book by some further reflections on the foundational truths of the Christian faith involved in the inculturation process and on the obstacles to inculturation with some references to Robert Schreiter and Stephen Bevans, two authorities in the field of missiology and contextual theology. He seems well aware of the fact that most missionaries in the field have little or no access to the different cultural theories presented in his book. This is the main reason why he ended most chapters with some concrete pastoral considerations. He notes that "Vatican II laid the foundations for the reemergence of a more flexible, apostolic relationship between the Gospel and cultures, the type of openness that had characterized the missionary life of the early church." (177) He concludes in a somewhat pessimistic fashion that the greatest obstacle to inculturation is to be found in the Church itself: in the continuing centralized control by Rome over many aspects involved in the inculturation process. In theory, Rome is open to the theological and cultural implications of inculturation, but this seems not to be the case in practice, given some contemporary "restoration" tendencies and fears of real changes. Note however that this book was written before the arrival of Pope Francis on the Roman scene. Maybe, there is a real future for the inculturation process after all.

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