MISSIOLOGY, INCULTURATION & PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

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I. INTRODUCTION

Until Vatican II the Catholic Church gave little sustained or critical attention to the interrelationship between mission, culture and theology. Mission was understood as something that mainly-European missionaries did by way of transporting the Gospel to ‘pagans’ and ‘infidels’ across the seas. Culture was predominantly understood as synonymous with European civilisation – thereby justifying, in its wake, European colonisation. Theology was concerned with reflection on the universal truths of Christian faith developed in the European academies. Even if this represents something of a caricature, we can nonetheless recognise how mission, culture and theology were largely interpreted in universal-classicist terms\(^2\) seen through Eurocentric eyes.

Well prior to Vatican II, events such as two World Wars, the influence of communist and fascist ideologies, and the rise of post-colonial independence movements in Asia, Africa and Oceania challenged the once-assumed European supremacy. There was also a new religious awakening, notably in Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism, which raised new questions in relation to assumed Christian superiority. The experience of the Shoah and emergence of Indigenous voices were two further significant realities demanding the church re-examine its missionary endeavours, ways of doing theology, and its understanding of cultures. Such re-examination was/is also supported at the academic level with the rise of postmodern critiques questioning the validity of any universalist claims to truth.\(^3\)

\(^2\) This is what Michael Muonwe, following Bernard Lonergan, calls the ‘normative-classicist’ understanding of culture. M. Muonwe, *Dialectics of Faith-Culture Integration: Inculturation or Syncretism* (Bloomington, IL, Xlibris, 2014), 23.

II. **VATICAN II AND POST-CONCILIAR DEVELOPMENTS**

1. **Vatican II**

With Vatican II, the church began the process of re-examining its mission in the modern world which, in turn, required a more pastorally-sensitive theology and a more anthropological-empirical understanding of cultures. While the results were inevitably mixed, the Council makes a significant move to speak in the “language of anthropologists and cultural sociologists”\(^4\). For example, when speaking of the church’s mission, emphasis is given to the importance of local churches, diverse cultures, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, liturgical adaptation, and integral human promotion. Rather than being a one-way process, missionary activity is described in terms of witness, solidarity, mutual encounter and enrichment.\(^5\) This represents a significant pastoral and theological shift from a conquest model of mission to one of reciprocity in which missionaries “learn of the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations”\(^6\).

Recognition of the importance of local churches and cultures\(^7\) also opens the door to a more engaged and practical way of doing theology beginning with human experience rather than abstract principles. Such an approach demands new engagement with the modern world including an appreciation of the diversity of human cultures. The final major document of the Council

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\(^4\) H. CARRIER, cit. MUONWE, *Dialectics of Faith-Culture*, 60.


\(^6\) *Ibid.*, n. 11.

provides an entire chapter on “The Proper Development of Culture”⁸. Despite some ambiguity, the chapter shows clear recognition that culture is significant for all human beings. Moreover, it is stated, given the “plurality of cultures”⁹, the church is not bound to any particular form of human culture.¹⁰

Even though Vatican II does not employ the term ‘inculturation’,¹¹ and still speaks of mission in terms of evangelization and implanting the church,¹² other language highlights a more dialectical relationship between faith and culture. Since the Gospel cannot be identified with any one culture, and the “seeds of the Word” are present in non-Christian traditions,¹³ there is genuine openness to the cultural critique of Christian faith – as well as the faith-critique of all cultures. Consequently, it is not enough to ‘adapt’ the Gospel to diverse cultural situations; rather, one must enter into an ongoing dialogue between faith and cultures while being aware that both continue to evolve.¹⁴ The conciliar documents point to a new realisation, namely, that Christian faith is always mediated by cultural forms which, in turn, need to be enlightened through practical, theological reflection. This is developed in post-conciliar teachings, writings and practices.

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⁸ VATICAN II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today, Gaudium et Spes, 7th December, 1965, nn. 53-62. Hereafter GS.
⁹ Ibid., n. 7.
¹⁰ Ibid., n. 42, 58.
¹¹ The term is first used in a Vatican document by JOHN PAUL II in his apostolic exhortation on catechesis, Catechesi Tradendae, 1979.
¹² AG, n. 6.
¹³ Ibid., n. 11.
¹⁴ All these affirmations are rooted in the Council’s incarnational theology. See OBORJI, Concepts of Mission, 19.
2. Post-Conciliar Teachings

Pope Paul VI’s 1975 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*,\(^{15}\) provides sustained reflection on the complex interaction between Gospel, church and culture. The document has been called the “magna carta” of modern missiology.\(^{16}\) While its central notion of the “evangelization of cultures” may seem to emphasise a one-directional approach to mission, in reality the document redefines “evangelization in all its richness, complexity and dynamism”\(^{17}\) that includes proclamation, witness and profound dialogue with cultures, as well as the work of justice, peace and liberation.\(^{18}\) The approach, therefore, is richly open to practical theology by “always taking the person as one’s starting point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God”\(^{19}\). Even the understanding of evangelization is centred on Jesus’ own ministry for the reign of God rather than the church itself. There is extensive reflection on the role of local churches and popular piety in the church’s evangelising mission.

The importance of the local context for mission is further underlined in Pope John Paul II’s 1990 encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*.\(^{20}\) The document outlines three distinct types of mission: (1) ‘mission ad gentes’ for those who have not heard the Gospel; (2) ‘pastoral care’ for established communities of faith; (3) ‘re-evangelization’ or ‘new evangelization’ for those who have lost

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\(^{17}\) EN, n. 17.

\(^{18}\) This is the first official Vatican document to use the word ‘liberation’ in reference to salvation. See BEVANS – SCHROEDER, *Constants in Context*, 306.

\(^{19}\) EN, n. 20.

contact with their Christian roots.\textsuperscript{21} There is the call for new methods and expressions of evangelization directed to ‘particular groups’ and ‘cultural sectors’. Consequently, the lived experiences of the urban poor, youth, immigrants, refugees, women and children as well as the all-encompassing fields of communications, peace, development, minority rights, environment, liberation of peoples, scientific research and international relations are given theological focus. The document also highlights the importance of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.\textsuperscript{22} Again, the role of local churches and base-Christian-communities is duly acknowledged.

Pope Francis’ 2013 \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}\textsuperscript{23} represents the most recent papal reflection on the church’s call to mission. As an apostolic exhortation, its aim is not to present new teachings but to inspire renewed commitment in a spirit of dialogue between the Gospel and the contemporary world. The document specifically takes up the issue of inculturation, acknowledging that: “cultural diversity is not a threat to Christian unity”; the faith of the church needs to be “expressed in legitimate forms appropriate for each culture”; and Christian faith cannot have a single (European) culture dictating how that faith is to be lived and expressed.\textsuperscript{24} The Pope directly confronts injustices of the capitalistic economic system, excessive individualism, indifference and relativism while highlighting the plight of the homeless, the addicted, refugees, Indigenous peoples, the elderly, migrants, victims of trafficking and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid}, n. 33.
\item \textsuperscript{22} This issue continues to be at the forefront of official Vatican concerns. Note, for example, Joint document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples, \textit{Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel: 19\textsuperscript{th} May 1991}; and Declaration from the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, \textit{Dominus Iesus}: 6\textsuperscript{th} August 2000.
\item \textsuperscript{23} POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation, \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}, 24\textsuperscript{th} November 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid}, nn. 117-118.
\end{itemize}
new forms of slavery. In line with a charter for practical theology, he challenges theologians to be “in dialogue with other sciences and human experiences”. The church also needs to collaborate with believers and non-believers as with all political, social, religious and cultural spheres.

This overview of the Catholic Church’s teaching on its life and mission throughout the past half-century occurs in a critical phase of human and ecclesial history. The forces of globalisation, secularisation, new fundamentalisms and climatic change provide further background to an understanding of this crisis to which the Vatican documents also allude. However, as should be clear, the official church’s missiology has changed in large measure due to its deeper appreciation of cultural issues along with its need to immerse its theology in the real lives of people both within and beyond the church. Perhaps more than any other, the call of Vatican II for all Christians to share “the joys, hopes, griefs and anxieties” of all people, especially the poor and oppressed, has become a touchstone for redirecting its missionary and theological endeavours. This does not supplant earlier goals and strategies of Catholic mission – whether conversion, church planting, adaptation or proclamation of Jesus Christ – but situates these within a broader horizon of missionary praxis and understanding. This will become further evident with reference to missiological writings and missionary praxis in Nigeria and Australia.

Ibid, nn. 52-66.
Ibid, n. 133.
Ibid, nn. 238-258.
GS, n. 1.
Gerard Hall & Michael Muonwe: Missiology, Inculturation & Practical Theology
III. CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

1. Missiology

Missiology as an academic discipline reflecting on the church’s goals and strategies arose in the late nineteenth century. At first, since mission was not seen as an intrinsic part of the church, missiology was also understood as a discipline that serves the church’s external dimension and extension. As Bosch rightly notes, “where mission was defined virtually and exclusively in terms of saving souls or of church extension, missiology could only be the science of and for the missionary... an expendable extra”. It was only recently, in the middle of the last century, that the church began to understand that it is missionary by its very nature and that its mission is Trinitarian – making present to the world the love of God the Father, the salvific mission of God the Son, and the transformative action of the Holy Spirit. Thus, instead of seeing missiology as an appendage to theology, missiology begins to be treated as an essential aspect of theology without which theology loses its raison d’être. Subsequently, missiology has received increasing attention as an important discipline in seminaries and university theological faculties.

The monumental work of Bevans and Schroeder seeks to capture the “unchanging constants” amidst the “changing contexts” in missionary understanding and praxis from the church’s beginnings. They also provide

29 In terms of Catholic missiology, it is only in 1910 that Joseph Schmidlin becomes the first appointed Chair of Catholic Missiology (University of Münster). See BEVANS – SCHROEDER, Constants in Context, 221.
31 Ibid. 493-494.
32 BEVANS – SCHROEDER, Constants in Context, 221. For another excellent historical overview of changing approaches to Christian mission, see BOSCH, Transforming Mission, 181-345.
three missionary models to highlight Christian missionary renewal since the late twentieth century.\textsuperscript{33} Each model has credentials in the Catholic Church’s official documents as in the writings of theologians. The first locates the source of mission in the radical communion of the triune God present throughout creation and in all the world’s traditions, as well as in the church.\textsuperscript{34} The second focuses on the mission of Jesus as liberating service of God’s reign in the world, thereby calling Christians to work for justice, peace and reconciliation.\textsuperscript{35} The third gives ongoing prominence to the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the ‘permanent priority of mission’.\textsuperscript{36}

While each model is capable of incorporating a renewed understanding of mission in which inculturation is a prominent feature, Bevans and Schroeder suggest a synthesis of models called “mission as prophetic dialogue”.\textsuperscript{37} Here, mission is described according to the two poles: \textit{prophecy} embodied in a “contrast community” born of the triune God, committed to God’s reign in the world, and speaking one’s faith in the truth of Jesus Christ and the Gospel; \textit{dialogue} listens, learns and enters into people’s lives with sensitivity and respect. The prophetic dialogue approach to mission makes liturgy, prayer and contemplation central, gives prominence to working for justice, peace and the integrity of creation, and highlights the importance of inculturation born of deep dialogue with people’s lives and traditions.

Attention to the importance of dialogue in missionary praxis and theology is captured in the writings of Asian theologians who speak of the

\textsuperscript{33} \textsc{Bevans – Schroeder}, \textit{Constants in Context}, 283-284.
\textsuperscript{34} \textsc{Ibid.}, 286-304. The approach has strong foundations in Vatican II’s \textit{Ad Gentes}.
\textsuperscript{35} \textsc{Ibid.}, 305-322. The approach has strong foundations in Paul VI’s \textit{Evangelii Nuntiandi}.
\textsuperscript{36} \textsc{Ibid.}, 323-347. The approach has strong foundations in John Paul II’s \textit{Redemptoris Missio}.
\textsuperscript{9} \textsc{Gerard Hall & Michael Muonwe: Missiology, Inculturation & Practical Theology}
need for “triple dialogue” with the poor, their cultures and religions.38 Neither prophetic nor triple dialogue retreats from the missionary call to proclaim the Gospel; yet, both emphasise the importance of witness, solidarity, dialogue, engagement and reconciliation as essential features of the church’s evangelising mission. They also focus on new contexts of Catholic mission in today’s multi-cultural, multi-religious, globalised and increasingly polarised world. It is also a world in which the role of women, rights of minorities and Indigenous peoples, profound secularisation of the once-Christian north, amazing success of Pentecostal churches in ‘Catholic countries’ of the south, and the many ideological conflicts within and between nations, cultures and religions challenge the church to re-examine its internal and external modus operandi.

Accordingly, contemporary Catholic missiology gives increased attention to the great variety of local contexts in which the church is called to live out its mission—whether in Africa, Asia, Oceania, South America, North America, Europe or Australasia. The contexts of missionary praxis and theologising are vastly different not only in relation to diverse cultures, but also in terms of whether the church is rich or poor, in a majority or minority situation, and whether it is persecuted or promoted by wider socio-political and religious realities. Consequently, missiology in our twenty-first century learns from the insights and methods of “contextual theology”39 which highlights the distinctive situations, cultures, voices and challenges confronting humanity and church across the globe. However, emphasis on local contexts does not

38 The “triple dialogue” is endorsed by the Confederation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. See P.C. PHAN, In Our Own Tongues, 20-31.
eradicate the need for critical dialogue among the various local ways of being a missionary church and doing missionary theology.40

2. Missiology and Inculturation

Theology of inculturation experienced rapid development following Vatican II’s reconceptualization of the church’s nature and mission. Taking the early church as its model, post-Vatican II ecclesiology posits a different understanding of the relationship between the local and universal church. Rather than see the local church as a branch of the universal church, it is now recognised as the full realisation of the (universal) church in a particular context. Alternatively, the universal church is seen as a communion of local churches.41 The approach contradicts pre-conciliar logic which assumed the more central and uniform the church’s operation is, the more authentic and faithful to its mission it becomes.42 With the focus now on making the church truly local through inculturation,43 there is also emphasis on the importance of dialogue. This is a vision of the local church as “a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated . . . a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions – in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it makes its own”44.

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40 This need for dialogue among contextual theologies and theologians is the subject of S.B. BEVANS, An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009). The book also provides many excellent examples of contextual and practical missionary theologies.


42 This ecclesiology is most evident in Vatican I and 1917 Code of Canon Law.

43 Ibid., 159.

Inculturation is not an option but an imperative of any missionary commitment. Such theology emerges from the Incarnation whereby God became one of us (cf. Jn 1:14). Jesus was a Jew, a Nazarene. In him, “God became this man in this people”\(^{45}\). Just like every other Jewish male of his time, he was circumcised (Lk 2:21). As a child, he was vulnerable and dependent on his parents. Living in the Jewish cultural milieu of first-century Palestine, he learnt Aramaic and was schooled in the Torah. Jesus’ identity was shaped through inculturation into the Jewish culture of first-century Palestine. As an agent of cultural change, he also contributed to the development of this culture. He was abreast with the realities of his day, mingled with the poor, the rejected, and the downtrodden.\(^ {46}\)

The church today understands its mission in relation to the *missio Dei* and a continuation of Jesus’ mission for God’s reign in the world. Thus, missiology is incarnational in nature, reflecting on how God’s mission is accomplished in the world through human instrumentality within specific cultural contexts. However, missiology neither begins nor ends with abstract reflection, but arises from and leads to action or practical involvement so becoming “a ‘service station’ along the way”\(^ {47}\). Missiology understands how cultural realities affect both the understanding and praxis of mission. Van Engen stresses this point: “The intimate connection of reflection with action is absolutely essential for missiology. At the same time, if our missiological action does not itself transform our reflection, we may have held great ideas,


\(^{46}\) MUONWE, *Dialectics of Faith-Culture*, 140-141.

but they are irrelevant or useless, sometimes destructive or counterproductive”48.

Mission is not intended to call people out of the world to avoid being soiled by the dangers within it. To do so would denigrate Christ’s incarnation and his own missionary praxis. Rather, mission entails being involved in the world, with the values and truth of the Gospel, in spite of risks and tensions. It seeks ways by which the church can become more actively involved in the realisation of God’s mission in the world. Missionaries need to study people’s cultures in specific places and times to determine how best the values of the Gospel can interact with them. This is also to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit and God’s Word are already present among people in their respective cultural contexts before the arrival of the missionary.49 Mission, therefore, is not a one-way movement of faith’s insertion into culture, but the mutual exchange and dialogue between faith and culture. This involves “a threefold dynamic of affirming and cherishing, of refusing or questioning, and of moving on to new and transformed possibilities for both”50. In this sense, inculturation is a theological tool for applying the incarnational principle both in reflection on and the praxis of mission. Missiology itself becomes “an intersubjective reality in which missiologists, missionaries, and the people among whom they labour are partners”51.


49 AG, nn. 4, 11.


Missiologist Peter Phan states that inculturation is the Catholic Church’s “most urgent and controversial issue in mission”.52 On the basis of the Catholic principle of ‘subsidiarity’ – in addition to ‘catholicity’ and ‘collegiality’ – some non-European bishops and theologians call for a radical decentralisation of the Latin rite in favour of multiple, new Catholic rites which would favour genuine inculturation.53 Other missiologists, while not advocating separate patriarchates, emphasise the need for a much more thorough collegiality in which the universal church, as a communion of local churches, is able to respond more effectively to local cultural, religious and socio-political realities in which local churches are called to live out their mission. There continues to be a significant move from seeing mission as cultural ‘adaptation’ to one of full-blooded ‘inculturation’, even if there remains much debate about how this is to be negotiated.

3. Practical Theology and Missiology

As will now be evident, contemporary missiology is praxis-focused. According to Bevans, “missiology is practical theology – aimed at understanding and embodying mission as Trinitarian praxis”54. Since Schleiermacher, practical theology has made advances in large measure due to its critical engagement with the empirical and social sciences. Included in this, with particular relevance for missiology, is a more profound understanding of culture and its import on church, theology and mission.55

52 PHAN, In Our Own Tongues, xii.
55 See, for example, G.A. ARBUCKLE, Culture, Inculturation and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010); see also G.A. ARBUCKLE, Catholic Identity and Identities: Refounding Ministries in Chaotic Times
Practical theology is both reflectively and operationally practical. Reflective practicality allows the theologian to reflect on how theological ideas and contemporary theories relate to concrete situations, concerns and ways of life of people in different societies and faith-communities. It also involves interpreting theologically the living conditions of the modern person, seeing how theology can affect these situations and how they, in turn, influence theological reflection. In concrete or operational practicality, theologians consider themselves not just part of the reflective community, but also part of a witnessing community of faith. They are not distant thinkers but involved faith-community members. Their communal-faith lives sharpen their theological instincts and offer raw materials for bridging theologically distant ideas and concrete life situations. Practical theologians are thus not just professionals who dwell on theories, ideas, traditions, assessing their logicality and fitness to a set of theological propositions. Instead, they engage in self-examination of their own lives in community, recognising how their faith communities and personal lives interact, how this relates to social and political situations in society, and the theological consequences of such relations. In this case, clergy, academics, faith community, and wider society help to shape theological practice.  

However we define contemporary missionary theology and praxis, the two emphases on prophecy and dialogue are instructive. We need to embrace “prophetic dialogue” as a foundational category for developing a practical missionary theology. If we see the two voices of prophecy (Christ against...
culture) and dialogue (Christ for culture) in dialectical relationship, we recognise that ‘proclamation’ cannot be effective without ‘witness’ and ‘solidarity’. In David Bosch’s words, the proclamation of Jesus Christ must always be done in the way of “bold humility” – as the meeting of persons on common pilgrimage. Terry Veling notes the vocation of the practical theologian is to respond to “the call of God in which we come to realise that our purpose for ‘being in the world’ is to respond to the purposes of God”. This means that practical theology has a missionary dimension without which, as Bosch argues, it “becomes myopic”.

The practical missionary theologian is called to be a witness to the Word in the world. This requires attentiveness to the Word of God in the Scriptures; equally, we must “understand the aspirations, the yearnings and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live”. The task of interpreting God’s Word for this people in this place and time – surely the goal of all practical missionary theology – is then a work of proclamation, witness and solidarity arising from a deep listening to the Scriptures and profound attentiveness to the ‘signs of the times’ in order to speak authentically of justice, peace, salvation and God’s purposes for our world.

58 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 489.
60 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 496.
61 GS, n. 4.
IV. CASE STUDIES

1. Nigeria

a) Mission as Europeanisation (1857-1970)

Many theologians and commentators on the massive European missionary work in many parts of Africa, especially in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, are unanimous in their assessment of it as Eurocentric. Karl Rahner likened it to the activity "of an export firm, exporting to the whole world a European religion along other elements of this supposedly superior culture and civilization, and not really attempting to change the commodity"\textsuperscript{62}. One of the reasons behind this was the classicist mentality whereby European culture was seen as the norm and paradigm for all. Besides, the surge in missionary activity at the time was partly influenced by the theological understanding of catholicity which implied greater homogeneity, geographical spread, centrality of doctrine and authority.\textsuperscript{63} Again, theologies developed out of the exigencies of the Western culture were masqueraded as authentically universal both in formulation and application.\textsuperscript{64}

African cultures were often perceived as suffused by evil spirits and demons, and thus unfit for the transmission of the Christian message. This was the case with missionary activity in Igbo society in southeast Nigeria where early ex-patriate missionaries saw their mission field as a war front in the battle “against the forces of paganism, which endangers the soul”\textsuperscript{65}. One missionary at the time writes thus concerning Igbo society and the need for

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\item \textsuperscript{63} J. O’GRADY, \textit{The Roman Catholic Church: Its origin and Nature}, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1997), 124.
\end{itemize}
missionaries: “May many come willingly to labour in pulling down the strongholds of Satan’s kingdom, for the whole of the Ibo district is his citadel”\textsuperscript{66}. A Catholic missionary, warning his nephew concerning the dangers of coming to Africa, emphasised the need for him to be “thoroughly penetrated with the thought that the \textit{Dark Continent} is a cursed land, almost entirely in the power of the devil”\textsuperscript{67}. Within the same period, Bishop Shanahan, another missionary to Igbo society, saw Europe as “the chosen Continent, the chosen nation of God”\textsuperscript{68}.

Many missionaries envisioned their primary aim as the defeat of the evil forces they claimed were intrinsic to people’s culture. Even though missionaries helped to end some inhuman practices, like human sacrifice and the killing of twins, few of them, it seems, considered committed dialogue a missiological principle. Rather, they thought, giving such overture might lead to corruption of Christian faith and compromise with the ‘pagan’ environment. Traditional religion that formed part of the culture was judged to be inferior to Christianity, devilish, and without any genuine theology.\textsuperscript{69} This mentality was also seen among the first indigenous clergy who worked under the supervision of Western missionaries. Little wonder that Samuel Crowther (first African Anglican Bishop in Nigeria) wrote about the people of southeast Nigeria thus: “Many a heart burns to see the day when the Gospel of liberty to the captives of Satan shall be proclaimed on the banks of the Niger”\textsuperscript{70}.

\textsuperscript{66} S. CROWTHER – J. C. TAYLOR, \textit{The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger} (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1869), 325.
\textsuperscript{67} Holy Ghost Fathers Archives, Paris, 191/A/5. Emphasis mine.
The controlling Christological image was not that of a loving benevolent father, a good shepherd who cared for his sheep and could lay down his life for them, but that of Christ the conqueror king and mighty ruler who had come to unleash deadening blows on the people’s cultural past. Hendrik Kraemer, writing for the International Protestant Council in 1938, expressed his conviction that Christianity’s adoption of such attitude to other cultures was best suited for evangelization. According to him, an ideal “missionary is a revolutionary and he has to be so, for to preach and plant Christianity means to make a frontal attack on the beliefs, customs, the apprehensions of life and the world . . . on the social structure and the basis of the society”.

This approach to mission resembled European colonisation policy in Africa, where the colonizers saw little or no value in the host culture, thus imposing Western policies on a people with completely different ways of looking at reality and the world. But it is no surprise for both were products of the same culture and time. In certain instances, both came together or in quick succession. According to Adiele Afigbo, a renowned Nigerian historian, though the missionaries and the colonial powers disagreed in certain areas, “members of both groups regarded and respected their opposite members as co-knights in a crusade against ignorance, barbarism and Satan. They also recognised that they had both come to Africa in the service of their nation and race.” Thus, in 1878, a missionary John Buck working in Onitsha, southeast Nigeria, wrote to Bishop Crowther in-charge of the area, persuading him on

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19 Gerard Hall & Michael Muonwe: Missiology, Inculturation & Practical Theology
the importance of using colonial military force for their missionary campaign. In his own words: “One loud threat or a severe flogging from our Queen’s Representative may likely give us peace and rest, at least for some time”\textsuperscript{75}. When Onitsha was eventually bombarded a year later by the British colonial government, the missionaries were informed ahead of time so they could be relocated.\textsuperscript{76}

We can see from the above that little consideration was given to the fact that God had been present to all men and women and had been revealing himself to them through different ways that reached its fulfilment in the person of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{77} Nevertheless, in the later part of 1970s, after the Nigerian-Biafran civil war, when Indigenous priests gradually began to take over from the ex-patriate missionaries, things began to change. One doubts whether the changes as can be seen today are appreciable enough to say that the Nigerian church is already inculturated.

\textit{b) Indigenization or Inculturation? (1970-2015)}

The Nigerian church now has its own Indigenous clergy who manage its affairs. The church’s understanding of evangelization has also witnessed a significant shift because the clergy are products of the culture which they are called to evangelize. As insiders, they know the culture much better than expatriate missionaries, the majority of whom showed little interest in learning the local cultural dynamics. Even if not always the case, local clergy are more privileged to respond to the deep yearning of the people and their culture. Besides, the period when Indigenous vocation began to boom was after the Vatican Council II, with all its determination for reform in the area of church-

\textsuperscript{75} C.M.S. C/A3/04 (a), John Buck to Crowder, 23 December 1878.  
\textsuperscript{76} E. ILOGU, \textit{Christianity and Ibo Culture} (London: Brill, 1974), 78. For another instance of such use of military force, see A. Okwu, \textit{Igbo Culture and the Christian Missions 1857-1957} (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 121.  
\textsuperscript{77} See G. O’COLLINS, \textit{Theology and Revelation} (Cork, UK: Mercier, 1968), 37.
culture, church-world relationship as well as relationship between Christianity and people of other faiths. The teaching of the Council with its basic ecclesiological switch from a juridic-pyramid to a pastoral-communion approach is a strong asset to the Nigerian church. Nigerian missionaries now work in Europe, America and Australia thus harkening the call of the Council for effective collaboration among local churches, “by which they exchange spiritual treasures, apostolic workers and temporary means”\(^7^8\).

The local church now appreciates that its people had the sense of the sacred and believed in the existence of God prior to the coming of Christianity to its shores.\(^7^9\) Thus, in the seminaries, courses on traditional religion and culture are taught in order to acquaint the seminarians with the knowledge of these and how to appreciate them better. Unfortunately, in the pastoral field, such study is not matched by concrete action. But this is expected since the way the knowledge is imparted gives no real indication that it is not mere theoretical knowledge but one directed towards dialogue or praxis.\(^8^0\) Hence, culture still plays a veneer role with regard to the faith.

Some pastors, bishops and priests alike are more bent on maintaining doctrinal and liturgical uniformity than actually making the faith answer the real questions posed by the people and their environment. They subscribe to the model of church unity that emphasise uniformity rather than legitimate diversity. This poses a great danger to inculturation. The uniformity they advocate for is nothing but strict adherence to theological, liturgical and pastoral formulas developed and foisted on Nigerians by the West. Pedro Arrupe has argued that “the most profound unity” in the church can only be

\(^7^8\) VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 21\(^{st}\) November 1964, no. 13.
\(^7^9\) See JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, p. 42.
achieved through “real pluralism”\textsuperscript{81}. This shows that the reception of Vatican II is still low among the people. To insist on uniformity goes against the Council’s statement that the church “is not tied exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, to one particular way of life, or to any set of customs, ancient or modern.”\textsuperscript{82}

No doubt, many Nigerian Christians see Christianity as not addressing their deep yearnings. That is why the phenomenon of double religious belonging and syncretism has continued to be a concern for the Nigerian church. Many frequent the church much the same way they frequent the shrines of the traditional religions. They combine the two to make sure no probable solution to their problem is missed.\textsuperscript{83} One can therefore assert that the Nigerian church is merely indigenized, not yet truly inculturated.

2. Australia

a) Mission as Europeanisation (1888-1970)

The impact of European colonisation on the Indigenous people of Australia (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) has been profoundly negative.\textsuperscript{84} As in Africa and elsewhere, European culture and Christian faith were imposed on Indigenous peoples without regard for their cultural beliefs and practices. The situation was compounded in Australia due to the nineteenth century doctrine of \textit{terra nullius} (literally, nobody’s land) so that, even today, there is still no treaty between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Added to this were the pernicious policies known as “White

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{GS} GS, n. 58.
\bibitem{PERKINS} See, for example, R. Perkins – M. Langton (eds.), \textit{First Australians: An Illustrated History} (Carlton, Vic.: SBS/Miegunyah Press, 2008).
\end{thebibliography}
Australia” 85 and “Assimilation” 86 of all non-white Australians which existed from Federation in 1901 until the 1970s. In practice, these policies resulted in the “Stolen Generations” 87 which was the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families to non-Aboriginal homes and missions (run by Christian churches) where their cultural heritage was denied.

For the most part, Catholic missionaries shared the negative view of Indigenous cultures held by the vast majority of Europeans in colonised lands. As a result, early missionary endeavours with Aboriginal people were definitely flawed and not unusually met in failure. However, in contrast to prevailing views in the wider society, missionaries also defended Indigenous people against the worst expressions of racism. John Harris, who has catalogued the negative impact of Christian mission on Aboriginal cultures for the past two hundred years, credits missionaries for their adamant belief in the essential humanity of Indigenous people. In his judgment, “it is unfair to criticise these missionaries for being negative towards Aboriginal culture, while outside the missions Aboriginal people were being shot, tortured and sexually exploited by those who would deny them their very humanity” 88. Australia’s inaugural Catholic Archbishop, the English Benedictine John Bede Polding, who began the first Catholic mission to Aborigines in 1843, links the failure of mission to the manner of European ‘occupation by force’ along with murders, ill-treatment and the absence of any regard for Aboriginal rights. In contrast, he states, “we Catholics know assuredly how false this is: we know that one soul

of theirs is, like one of our own, of more worth than the whole material world.\textsuperscript{89} There are similar voices among missionaries in other Christian denominations.

All this needs to be set against the reality of the general failure of both European colonisation and Christian mission to enter into any kind of significant dialogue with the cultural and spiritual depths of Indigenous Australians. This has been partly inevitable in view of the different cultural ways of being-in-the-world. Anthropologist Tony Swain captures the disparity between world-horizons by stating that European consciousness is temporal, whereas Aboriginal consciousness is spatial.\textsuperscript{90} While the dialogue between Christian and Aboriginal spiritualities has now begun, it is primarily dialogue among and within Aboriginal Christians themselves, among whom are notable Aboriginal Catholic women. It is also a dialogue that is taking place in the context of increasing secular emphasis on political and land rights, the call for ‘first Australians’ to be recognised in the Australian Constitution, and the ongoing failure of successive governments to deal with issues of Indigenous health, education, deaths-in-custody and life-expectancy. Undergirding all this is the national drive for genuine reconciliation between Indigenous and other Australians in view of the tragic failures of the past and the enormous challenges that confront people, church and nation.


The major challenge in relation to Indigenous mission and culture is the provision of appropriate formation for Indigenous ministers to lead their own people to engage with the Gospel from their own cultural perspectives. This is

\textsuperscript{89} “Pastoral letter of the Archbishop and Bishops of the Province”, cit. P O’FARRELL, 

\textsuperscript{90} T. SWAIN, \textit{A Place for Strangers} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2-6.
not simply a case of establishing institutes that are more user-friendly to local Indigenous customs and beliefs, but requires a radical rethinking of ways that Indigenous people are most open to learning through story, ritual, song, traditional languages and other cultural practices. European education models are notoriously inadequate for these purposes. For this reason, Anglican and Methodist churches established Nungalinya College in Northern Australia (Darwin) in 1973; other churches, including the Catholic church, have since become partners in this initiative which now has connections to other regional colleges throughout Australia.91

Such initiatives led to the development of “Rainbow Spirit Theology”92 which is a notable attempt of Indigenous elders to integrate the traditions of Aboriginal cultures with those of Christianity. The now famous speech of Pope John Paul II to Indigenous Australians at Alice Springs in 1986 gave further impetus to Indigenous inculturation of the Gospel. Recognising how Aboriginal people lived for tens of thousands of years prior to European settlement, the Pope specifically acknowledges how Aboriginal “‘Dreaming’ . . . is your only way of touching the mystery of God’s Spirit in you and in creation”93. To those who criticise Rainbow Spirit Theology as syncretistic, the Pope’s words point to the necessity and authenticity of deep dialogue with Indigenous cultures. Moreover, such a process needs to be two-way. Part of the wound of Indigenous Australians is the perception of many non-Indigenous that they have nothing to learn from Indigenous traditions. In reality, Indigenous

92 RAINBOW SPIRIT ELDERS, Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal Theology (Blackburn,Vic.: HarperCollinsReligious, 1997).
experience of the sacred through deep connection with the land/country is a profound spirituality which challenges the typical neglect of the environment and creation in so much Christian theology.94

Beyond issues of inculturation, practical theology needs to be attentive to social, economic and political issues which continue to impose suffering and violence on so many Indigenous Australians. In his Alice Springs address, John Paul II also spoke of establishing “a new society for Aboriginal people”95 with particular focus on land rights, self-determination, health, education and reconciliation. This is clearly the prophetic dimension of the Gospel directed towards all Australians. It also lends itself to the development of practical theologies of resistance and hope emerging in critical dialogue with Australian governmental and ecclesial policies and practices. This requires collaboration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices and expertise – not just in theology, but also in the social sciences and related disciplines such as cultural anthropology, health sciences and constitutional law. Since 2003, annual conferences of the Association of Practical Theology in Oceania are indicative of such a process in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and practitioners are collaborating in the interests of developing a practical missionary theology with particular focus on Indigenous issues.96

There is nonetheless a long path to travel before most Indigenous Australian Christians have an integral sense of belonging to what inevitably remains a very European society and church. The Catholic church, perhaps on account of its requirement of compulsory celibacy, has the additional challenge

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95 Address of John Paul II, 262.
26 Gerard Hall & Michael Muonwe: Missiology, Inculturation & Practical Theology
to promote ordained Indigenous ministers – noting there are no Indigenous priests or seminarians, although there is a significant number of Indigenous deacons and women religious sisters. Nonetheless, there are many examples of vibrant Indigenous Catholic ministries in which elders play a key role. Some of these are in more remote parts of Australia where Indigenous cultures often have greater continuity with their places of origin.97 Others are in urban centres or country areas where issues such as health, employment and education and social cohesion are significant concerns.98 Above all, the dynamics of Catholic mission, similar to that of other churches and often in cooperation with them, focus on the development of strategies that promote justice and self-determination for Indigenous Australians. Integral to this is the work of dialogue and reconciliation with all Australians, a work hardly yet begun.

V. Conclusion

Clearly, Catholic missiology has undergone quite radical change in the past half century. This is due to the church’s more holistic and complex understanding of its mission begun at Vatican II and continued in subsequent teachings. This could only occur in context of a more profound understanding of cultures – specifically, the movement from the universalist-classicist to an anthropological-empirical approach to culture. Once this move is made, theology is challenged to engage with the social sciences evident in the work

97 Two such examples from Darwin and Arnhem Land in Australia’s Northern Territory, one Catholic the other Anglican, are provided in ERLANDSON – SANDEUR, Exploring Indigenous Christianity, 131-140.

98 Most Australian Catholic Dioceses have specific Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Island Apostolic Ministry Teams, e.g. Aboriginal Ministry in the Catholic Diocese of Lismore: http://www.lismorediocese.org/index.php?page=Aboriginal_Ministry
of contextual and practical theologians. In missiological terms, the focus moves from mission as church-extension to mission as promoting God’s purposes for the world in diverse ways and situations. Such mission respects the dignity of persons and cultures, gives priority to works of justice, peace, reconciliation, and is committed to inculturating the Gospel. On the basis of the Catholic Church’s missionary endeavours in Nigeria and Australia, the shift towards this renewed, practical missionary theology is still a work in progress.

It is also true that Catholic practical theology has much to learn from the church’s renewed understanding and praxis of mission which gives priority to the reign of God in the world. Not only can we define missiology as practical theology, but we need to see all practical theology as inherently mission-focused. For this reason, “prophetic dialogue” is both a helpful description of a contemporary approach to mission as well as a foundational category for the understanding of all practical theology.99 Equally, we may understand mission and practical theology as “participation in trinitarian practice”100. Clearly, all major elements of mission – witness-proclamation, liturgy-prayer-contemplation, justice-peace-integrity of creation, ecumenism-interreligious-secular dialogue, inculturation, reconciliation – are also major concerns of contemporary practical theologians. Whereas missiology provides practical theology with its raison d’être, practical theology provides missiology with appropriate tools for understanding and transforming Catholic-Christian practice. Although formally distinct disciplines, missiology and practical theology need each other if they are to be effective instruments of God’s purposes for the world.

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99 HALL, Prophetic Dialogue.
100 BEVANS, Missiology as Practical Theology, pp. 256-257 [268].
28 Gerard Hall & Michael Muonwe: Missiology, Inculturation & Practical Theology
Note: An edited version of this article by Gerard Hall & Michael Muonwe, entitled “Towards Integrative Christian Theology and Experience: Missiology, Inculturation and Practical Theology” is published as a chapter in Claire Woolfteich & Annemie Dillen (eds.), Catholic Approaches in Practical Theology: International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2016), 49-70.