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# Inculturation Comes Home: Lessons from the Worldwide Church

**In this article, Nigel Rooms looks at our new post-Christian missionary era in UK in the light of his own experience abroad. He offers a definition of inculturation based on that experience and the literature generated in the worldwide church. After exploring some of inculturation's limits and the issues it raises, he makes some practical suggestions concerning the implications of inculturation for evangelism and theological training.**

## Introduction: Mission abroad and at home

The thinking that led to this article began in my personal journey, being rooted in my own life and experience and emerging from it. I worked in Tanzania from 1994 to 2001 in an adult education and clergy training role. I now have a similar, but somewhat different task, in an English diocese. In the years since returning it has been fascinating to view my 'home' country and church with the eyes of a mission partner who is at least, in part, somewhat '*Mswahili*', (thinking and being like an East African).

When I left the UK we were not half way through the Decade of Evangelism and when I returned it was all over. Not much had changed. And yet, even if the decline in church attendance had not been reversed, what was noticeable was that the word 'mission' was now clearly on the church's agenda in a way that it had not been before. A clergyman I knew was appointed an Archdeacon and declared himself to be a 'missionary'. Ministry Division's selection criteria for ordination now include mission and evangelism. Perhaps more significantly the *Church Mission Society* has turned its focus recently to mission in Britain, believing that its expertise in cross-cultural missionary work can be transferred to the new missionary paradigm at 'home'. The momentum for mission seemed to increase and in 2004 the *Mission-shaped Church* report must have been the most talked about Church of England document for many years.

The assumption of this article is then that we are in a new missionary era in the UK. If this is the case the church clearly needs to grapple with what is required if we are to be 'missionary' in the fullest sense of the word. This is a massive exercise and one that cannot be undertaken fully in an article of this nature.

However, I intend to engage with one particular area of missiological thinking – the question of inculturation. I believe understanding inculturation (and its implications) is highly relevant for our current situation.<sup>1</sup> I propose therefore to review some of the literature and attempt a definition of inculturation as well as exploring one of the more serious questions that practising inculturation entails: the existence of a ‘core’ gospel. After this work is complete I suggest some implications of inculturation for our practice.

### **Inculturation: The term’s context**

A good starting point for thinking about inculturation is to ask the question ‘how has Christianity expanded throughout the centuries?’ It is a question that Andrew Walls claims to reconsider following the lead of Kenneth Latourette earlier last century. Walls compares the expansion of Christianity and Islam and makes the suggestive claim that Christianity’s story is one of advance and regression in comparison to the steady geographical progression of Islam:

When it comes to sustaining congregations of the faithful, Christianity does not appear to possess the same resilience as Islam. It decays and withers in its very heartlands, in the areas where it appears to have had the profoundest cultural effects. Crossing cultural boundaries, it then takes root anew on the margins of those areas, and beyond. Islamic expansion is progressive; Christian expansion is serial.<sup>2</sup>

Walls claims this is because Christianity has no culturally fixed element, like the Qu’ran, being based as it is on the *person* of Jesus of Christ. So where the Word ceases to be made flesh within a community then ‘that community is likely to lose not just its effectiveness, but its powers of resistance.’ It is the ‘sustained, unceasing penetration of the host culture’ that maintains the faith within that culture.<sup>3</sup> The interaction of Christian faith and culture then is the raw material for our study of inculturation.

‘Inculturation’ is a theological word coined in the last forty years by missiologists working in the field of faith and culture. The analogy of the battery is helpful, describing how inculturation happens in the interaction between the two ‘poles’ of faith and culture – like the positive and negative terminals of a battery. What can look like very different entities (which are often kept apart) come together to produce energy and creativity.

Roman Catholic theologians have generally used the term ‘inculturation’ from just before, and then during and after the Second Vatican Council.<sup>4</sup> Protestants, on the other hand tend not to use ‘inculturation’ so much, preferring the word ‘contextualisation’. This is employed to broaden the meaning of the second pole of culture to anything

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1 This is increasingly recognised in the UK although inculturation is not always clearly understood. For an example see Paul Bayes, *Mission-shaped Church: Missionary Values, Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church*, Evangelism 67, Grove, Cambridge 2004, p 19.

2 Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-cultural Process in Christian History*, Orbis, Maryknoll 2002, p 13.

3 Walls, *The Cross-cultural Process*, p 13.

4 Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1988, p 10. See also the article by Ary A. Roest Crolius ‘What is so new about inculturation? A concept and its implications’, *Gregorianum* 59 (1978) pp 721f which offers more background and discussion of the history of the term.

that has to do with the context in which Christian faith is set.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the nomenclature, it is clear that missionary thinking is rightly concerned with the interaction between Christian faith and the culture and context that it finds itself in.

### **Inculturation: What is it?**

How then can 'inculturation' be defined? One helpful approach is to start from a sociological perspective and understand the term as a theological concept that inserts itself between the sociological terms enculturation and acculturation.<sup>6</sup>

*Enculturation* is socialisation, a process that can be observed in children who are brought up within a culture to observe and obey its cultural and social norms. The subject finds himself or herself as *of* the culture when the process is complete.

*Acculturation* is the process of two cultures meeting, through which meeting both cultures are changed. However, the process is often governed by power relations where the more powerful culture determines the path of cultural change. Cultural change though will always be the outcome of acculturation.

I believe it is possible to transpose these sociological terms of enculturation and acculturation into the discourse of theology using the words incarnation and conversion as analogies. Incarnation refers to the taking up of human life by the eternal Word as described in John's Gospel with regard to Jesus of Nazareth (John 1.14).<sup>7</sup> Incarnation, in this analogical sense, is then the enculturation of the Word, the gospel or the Christian faith within a culture such that it becomes *of* it and identified with it. The process of enculturation is not, however the end of the Christian story. Jesus was crucified as a result of his very incarnation and raised from death to transform both humanity and human culture. Thus there is an acculturation implied by the prior enculturation whereby the host culture is not only indwelt by Christian faith but critiqued, changed, even transformed by it.

Many authors are agreed on this double-movement within inculturation as a theological concept.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most helpful and often quoted summary is that of Walls in which he proposes the 'indigenising' principle of incarnation and the 'pilgrim' principle of transformation and change.<sup>9</sup>

Thus inculturation is a process that can be discovered in the creative tension between culture and faith, enculturation and acculturation, incarnation and conversion. It exists as a dynamic, not static process in this continuum. This implies that it is on-going and necessarily incomplete, part of what it means to live between the 'now' and 'not yet.'

5 Also noted in *Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context*, CHP, London 2004, p 90.

6 Shorter, *Toward a Theology*, pp 5-7 and also Crolius, *Gregoranium*, 1978, pp 723-724.

7 This is sometimes referred to as 'embodiment' to distinguish the uniqueness of God's action in the Incarnation.

8 See, for example, Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel: An inculturation handbook for the pastoral worker*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1990, pp 18-20; Andrew Kirk,

*What is Mission?: Theological Explorations*, DLT, London 1999, p 93 and Robert J. Schreiter, 'Inculturation of faith or identification with culture' in James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, eds, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 3: Faith and Culture*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1999, p 74.

9 Andrew F. Walls, 'The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture' in James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, eds, *New Directions 3*, pp 17-28.

## The limits of inculturation

This understanding enables boundaries to be formed around inculturation that are related to the boundaries formed by the orthodox creeds. The question of syncretism is never far away when inculturation is discussed and boundaries are clearly needed.<sup>10</sup> These function like the boundaries of a football pitch – drawn to give enough space for proper play, but not so much that the game is not focussed and therefore unplayable.<sup>11</sup>

Often authentic inculturation will create an exciting ‘newness’ that is recognisably Christian while using and transforming elements of the foundational culture in a creative manner. The most oft-quoted example is of course Donovan’s work amongst the Masai.<sup>12</sup> This, despite being nearly forty years old now and superseded to a great extent by current practice in East Africa, is still used as the classic example of inculturation work by Western writers.<sup>13</sup> Other more suggestive examples do exist in the literature such as an indigenous church attempting to deal with wizardry in Zimbabwe<sup>14</sup> and Juan Sepúlveda who discusses Pentecostal inculturation in Chile.<sup>15</sup>

The outcome of inculturation is a ‘rooted novelty’ which has identifiable continuity and discontinuity with the old realities. It effects change which is new, but rooted *both* in the culture and in the gospel. I believe there may be a suggestive connection here with what is meant by ‘emerging’ when we discuss the emerging Church today.<sup>16</sup>

This is all very well as far as it goes, but a major question remains which interestingly was not explored at all in the *Mission-shaped Church* report: What exactly is the gospel or faith that is to be inculturated?

## Is there a ‘core’ gospel?

The Christian faith has been, and still is, practised as a missionary faith with a universal claim. But can its universality be isolated? Is there a ‘core’ gospel? If so, what is it? If there is no universal faith can there be authentic inculturation? These are key questions in the current postmodern context of the West where the claim is that there is no longer any objective, overarching metanarrative.

Kirk<sup>17</sup> suggests that the practice of the Christian church has assumed a ‘core’ gospel and that discussion of difficulties such as syncretism would be meaningless without having a core element. This is a reasonable and common presupposition,

10 For instance see *Mission-shaped Church*, p 91.

11 It is difficult to offer specific criteria for any attempt at inculturation but there are general guidelines that can be offered. See, for example, Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1985, p 118.

12 Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*, SCM, London 1978.

13 It is used in this exact fashion in *Mission-shaped Church*, p 92f and, in my experience, by clergy and others who have wanted to think about faith and culture.

14 M. L. Daneel ‘Exorcism as a means of combating wizardry: liberation or slavery?’ *Missionalia* 18, pp 220-47.

15 Juan Sepúlveda, ‘Indigenous Pentecostalism and the Chilean Experience’ in A. H. Anderson and W. J. Hollenweger (eds), *Pentecostals After A Century: Global Perspectives on a Movement in Transition*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1999, pp 111-134.

16 An idea generated in conversation with Steve Hollinghurst of the Church Army.

17 Kirk, *What is Mission*, p 82f.

but an explication of the content of this gospel is needed. Some Christian leaders and groups simply assume rather loosely that a gospel exists without defining it. Others are absolutely clear as to the content of the gospel without thinking how much that content may be influenced by culture, both now and through the ages.

In the literature there is no clear answer as to the content of the 'core.' Donovan is familiar for using the idea of the 'naked' gospel, but he retains the use of bread and wine (extremely foreign elements in Masai culture as they are products of a settled existence) within his 'nakedness'. Another Roman Catholic, Arbuckle, conflates gospel, Kingdom of heaven and the word of God under the metaphor of a seed being sown in the soil of culture, but then adds to it the tradition or the 'doctrine, teaching and practice of the Church' of which the Scriptures are only a part. He notes however that for many Protestants the gospel means the Scriptures.<sup>18</sup> It's a sharp question; what is the gospel (for this place, this church, this community at this time)? And one that we would do well to dwell on without coming up with slick answers.<sup>19</sup>

### No core without culture: Walls and Bediako

What is required here is a universal factor that will enable the global integrity (or catholicity<sup>20</sup>) of the Christian faith to be maintained while dealing with every aspect of localness. In almost all the literature there is agreement that the relevant image is not of a 'gospel' kernel that can be isolated from a cultural husk, to use a metaphor from early evangelical literature. The gospel does not exist apart from a cultural domain – just as a heart cannot beat without a body or a fish cannot breathe without water. A helpful approach, which affirms this position on gospel and culture, is taken by Andrew Walls and Kwame Bediako.

Walls begins by asking again a question of Church history – whether people who called themselves Christians in different epochs of the Christian church have any essential continuity.<sup>21</sup> He concludes that despite the vast differences in outward forms there is a discernible essential continuity:

continuity of thought about the final significance of Jesus, continuity of a certain consciousness about history, continuity in the use of the Scriptures, of bread and wine, of water.<sup>22</sup>

Bediako claims that Walls' position here can teach us that the Christian religion is 'culturally infinitely translatable'.<sup>23</sup> Translatability can then be read for universality such that the Christian faith has a 'fundamental relevance and accessibility to persons in any culture'. This is a suggestive approach as it has used empirical historical data based on the global missiological project of Christianity to discern

18 Arbuckle, *Earthing*, pp 2-4.

19 Interestingly even at *New Wine 2004* Mike Breen was calling for the gospel to be what amounted to *Christus Victor* (as opposed to the traditional substitutionary model) for the emerging generation.

20 cf. Robert Schreiter's book *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1997.

21 Walls, 'The Gospel as....', pp 17-21.

22 Walls, 'The Gospel as....', p 21. This idea is developed by Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder as they offer six missiological constants out of which they develop a novel and exciting theology of mission – see their *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Orbis, Maryknoll 2004.

23 Kwame Bediako, 'Translatability and the Cultural Incarnations of the Faith' in James, A. Scherer and Stephen B Bevans, eds, *New Directions*, p 146f.

commonality. It means that there is essentially no place on earth or in the 'dark heart' of some British housing estate<sup>24</sup> (or leafy suburb for that matter) that Christianity cannot take root. I sometimes wonder what would happen if we took this seriously as a tenet of our faith which informs our practice.

Bediako's approach here turns upside-down the usual movement in inculturation of the insertion of faith into culture to develop an indigenous manifestation of the Christian faith. Translatability, for Walls and Bediako is assumed to be an integral part of the gospel and the Christian faith.

This position on the gospel 'pole' (of the battery, to use that analogy again) is helpful because it holds together both the global and the local. It steps away from the idea in some authors of the insertion of faith into a culture (e.g. the image of the seed and earth) and is emerging from the missiological success of Christianity in the non-Western world of Africa. It seems to me it also offers a way of doing mission that is 'non-imperialistic' or non-colonising. This may be important for many Western young people who seem able to spot any kind of colonisation from some distance. Mission, then is a 'two-way street,' the evangelist can be simultaneously evangelised by the act of mission – just as Peter was transformed when he encountered Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11: 18).

In concluding this section it is worth quoting Lamin Sanneh (a like-minded missiologist and collaborator with both Walls and Bediako):

Thus if we ask the question about the essence of Christianity, whatever the final answer, we would be forced to reckon with what the fresh medium reveals to us in feedback. ... This locates the message in the specific and particular encounter with cultural self-understanding.<sup>25</sup>

Thus while the essence or message of the faith may not have an existence separate from culture, nevertheless there is a recognisable continuity or 'rootedness.' The alternative would be to encourage an inappropriate relativism.

Here then is a risky mission. Can we go on believing that what will emerge from our efforts will be both authentic and new – a contribution to the kaleidoscopic nature of Christianity through the ages – and in the age to come?

## The implications of inculturation

We now focus more closely on these questions of faith and culture in the 'post-modern' West and their implications.<sup>26</sup> Here the church as an institution often remains in a backward looking mode to a time when (to use Niebuhr's typology) it was much more 'of' the culture. Western culture however, is in a process of rapid change involving both globalisation and fragmentation (or 'glocalisation'), much

24 Nick Davies, *Dark Heart: The Shocking Truth about Hidden Britain*, Vintage, London 1997 has plenty of examples.

25 Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message – The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1989, p 53.

26 The term 'post-modern' is used deliberately here and is preferred over using 'post modern'. The difference is described by John Drane in *Cultural Change and Biblical*

*Faith*, Paternoster, Carlisle 2000 pp 11 & 94, following David Lyon, in that 'post-modern' refers to the popular practical culture of the people. It is a sociological 'post-modernity' which is 'a search for ways of doing things that are after modernism' rather than an ideological shift. 'Postmodern' refers to an ideological and philosophical worldview that denies metanarratives.

of it with little or no interest in the institutional church. Retreat into fundamentalism is one option for some Christians, while many Christians of all types are deeply influenced and uncritically shaped by the values of the context they find themselves in. John Drane paints a very depressing picture:

Could it be that, by its uncritical embracing of the culture of modernity, not only did the church accept some notions that were actually Christian heresies, but it also embraced the methods of modernity to such an extent that, at least in the West, Christians are actually incapable of imagining how to contextualise the gospel in a different cultural frame of reference?<sup>27</sup>

Inculturation then is a 'life and death matter' and a key element of any missiological enterprise.<sup>28</sup> It offers a theological 'space' for holding to a position over the relationship of gospel and culture which neither totally relativises the gospel nor denigrates culture. It has implications for a whole range of issues including evangelism, spiritual formation, theological education, lifestyle and political action.

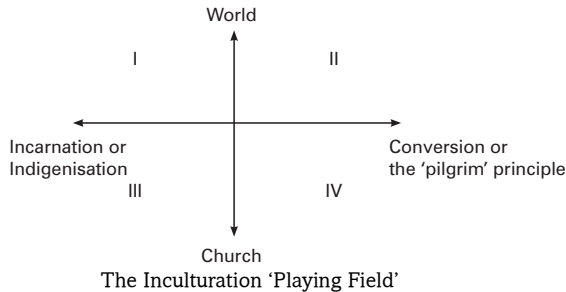
There are three areas I would like to offer some thoughts on, but these are by no means exhaustive: a method of personal reflection on inculturation, evangelism and theological education.

### A grid for picturing the inculturation 'playing field'

Firstly I offer a way of picturing what I have been saying about inculturation and the space which it offers to us to do faith and culture work. What follows allows the reader to begin the process of interacting for themselves with the material.

We have noted that inculturation happens in the tension between incarnation and conversion/transformation, or between Walls' 'indigenising' and 'pilgrim' principles. One's emphasis within this can be plotted on a horizontal axis. In addition, the purpose of mission and ministry could be said to be focussed in a tension between blessing the world or sustaining (or growing) the church. An example of this is the centripetal/centrifugal tension present throughout the Old and into the New Testament: is Israel for the blessing of the nations or sustaining national life centred on the temple?<sup>29</sup> Again, one's emphasis here can be plotted, this time on a vertical axis.

Thus the following grid emerges:<sup>30</sup>



27 John Drane, *Cultural Change*, p 95.

28 Anthony J. Gittins, *Life and Death Matters: The Practice of Inculturation in Africa*, Nettetal, Steyler Verlag 2000.

29 George Lings, a researcher and missiologist at the Church Army would further characterise

this tension as between the 'go' of the early church and the 'come' of Christendom.

30 George Lings has offered a similar grid (at NEAC4, 20/09/03) with which to understand emerging forms of church.



It would be tempting to label the four quadrants of the grid but this would be to limit its potential use as a tool. I will suggest several ways to use the grid. Just now it may be worth taking a moment to play with the axes and plot your own current position (or movement around the grid in recent years). Simply decide where your position is on the two continuums, mark both the points on the two axes and then draw a line between them. This will give you a triangle in a particular quadrant (unless you are a typical Anglican and have gone for the exact middle!).

Now see if you recognise yourself in my description of the quadrants:

Quadrant I focuses on incarnation in the world. Here there is optimism about the goodness of humanity and much co-operation and partnership with 'secular' agencies. The institutional church is of little importance in this quadrant, in fact it may even be seen as a hindrance. However a temptation might be to under-emphasise the spirituality and needs of individuals, because of a desire to include and bless everyone. A friend of mine, after finishing theological college where he had interacted with liberation theology, committed himself and his family with some others to 'be there' in one difficult part of a large city for twenty-five years or 'as long as it took'. Over half way through that time now, there is just beginning to be some fruit, but it is usually one step forward and two back.

In Quadrant II the prophetic voice is naturally recovered in what is likely to be a radical approach beyond the church walls to the world. The question may be, "Can the voice be heard if there is little or no identification with the people?". Perhaps the Church struggles with this quadrant the most – even more so maybe for Anglicans as the established Church. Some city centre ministries, industrial chaplaincies and occasionally Bishops enter this quadrant to speak truth to money, power and vested interest.

Quadrant III may be where we have come from in UK churches (and perhaps still are in many, particularly rural, contexts). It is the traditionalist, 'establishment', even Christendom approach where there are thin or non-existent boundaries between church and community. The institutional church is understood here as somehow vital to the well-being of the community. However, if Christian faith is indistinguishable from culture then we are left with all the problems of the age of 'Christendom'. In such an era there was little internal critique of the 'Church' as the carrier or agent of the faith, because it was too closely identified with the culture. Discernment in these situations may be the greatest gift – knowing when to bless and affirm and when to challenge.

Quadrant IV is perhaps the traditional evangelical position. The priority of mission is the growth of the church which occurs by the conversion and transformation of God's people. Only once this occurs will society as a whole be affected. Some have claimed the growth of Methodism and revivalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an example of this. It may be however that this vision is built on a sacred/secular world view which does not take the world seriously enough. Some of the 'saved' churches in Rwanda were implicated in the 1994 genocide precisely because they had withdrawn from political engagement before the killing began and therefore had no voice which could be heard when it did.

A useful further exercise with the grid may be to plot one's own journey or a church's journey around the grid and reflect on the reasons for any movement. Differences between a leader's grid and the church's may also be revealing. For myself, having lived in another culture I am convinced that the first move is almost always the incarnational one. After all, to put it crudely, Jesus was born before he died! It seems to me that many leaders try to reverse this movement – trying to convert and/or be prophetic before earning the right to do so.

Another way of using the grid would be consciously to balance mission initiatives in a parish. They could be plotted on the grid, the gaps spotted and plans made to see what else might be done.

## Evangelism

John Drane has used the McDonaldization thesis of George Ritzer to critique the British church, but more interestingly he moves on from this to ask 'who is it that we are trying to reach?'<sup>31</sup> In this he is deliberately drawing on 'missionary' thinking which has had to take a conscious decision to approach a 'people group', who have a distinctly separate and definable culture (which is of course dynamic), with the gospel. This is something which has a long tradition in missionary history as we have noted. The difference in today's world in the West is that such a people group is not necessarily isolatable geographically in a set of villages and towns or even as a distinct tribe.

Drane has seven different people groups and I suspect these are not exhaustive: the desperate poor; the hedonists; the corporate achievers; the traditionalists; the secularists; the spiritual searchers and the apathetic.<sup>32</sup> Some of these groups are geographically based and the church as it is may be best placed to reach them (e.g. traditionalists). Others, however, are based entirely on networks or work organisations (e.g. corporate achievers) who will never be available at the same time once a week at any one place anywhere in the world. The hedonists are usually together at highly inconvenient times such as 4am!

What is required, Drane claims, is a mission strategy for each of these groups. If inculturation is important it will require – amongst people in all these categories – both real identification and a transformational movement or conversion from within. An incarnational approach will be costly before any 'conversion' can be attempted and we need to be realistic as to what might be possible. Again we are tempted to jump in, not taking the time to learn the 'language' of the people group.

The other obvious implication of Drane's typology is that any one strategy may only be suitable for two or three at the very most of the people groups. The 'iron cage' of McDonaldization or 'one size fits all' will no longer work: 'there will be no one simple and universally applicable way in which we can reshape our churches to face the challenges of changing culture'.<sup>33</sup>

The *Alpha Course*, the most far-reaching recent evangelistic initiative has already been critiqued from within and without its evangelical constituency with

31 John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, DLT, London 2000, p 55.

33 Drane, *McDonaldization*, p 59.

32 I would want to add at least one other – those seeking fulfilment through sport and/or fitness.

reference to, among other things, the McDonaldization thesis.<sup>34</sup> In my own research on the course,<sup>35</sup> examining its delivery in three different cultural contexts, what concerns me most with *Alpha* in relation to the question of inculturation and Drane's idea of people groups above is the way in which the 'content' of the course is fixed. While I believe we can learn much from the enculturation of the method of delivery of the course, which does all it can to meet participants where they are (e.g. through branding, use of group dynamics etc.), there is no 'feedback' from the context of the hearers to the content.<sup>36</sup> The 'gospel' in *Alpha*, while adaptable to a given cultural context (e.g. prison, youth), is a given or fixed 'kernel,' protected by copyright.

If we follow Vincent Donovan and George Lings<sup>37</sup> and move from the 'come' of Christendom to the 'go' of a missionary church it will require much more than initiatives such as *Alpha*. The hard work of inculturation must go on not only in the many different groups of recipients of mission, but also in ourselves and the message that we hold dear.

### Theological education for cross-cultural ministry

Another implication of the issue of inculturation is for education for ministry in the UK which by definition is now becoming 'missionary' ministry. The literature cited earlier on inculturation remains largely theoretical. Often in this kind of work practical interventions to encourage inculturation are generated by using a 'from theory to practice' methodology which perhaps inevitably tends to lead to a 'top-down' imposition.<sup>38</sup>

Of course there are 'bottom-up' approaches to inculturation that can be cited. Many of these are based in liberation theology, what Stephen Bevans describes as the 'praxis model' of contextual theology.<sup>39</sup> Base Communities of Christians engaging in praxis-based theological reflection in Latin America are one practical outworking of this approach.<sup>40</sup> In the UK the organisation called 'New Way of Being Church' started by Peter Price, now Bishop of Bath and Wells, follows this approach.<sup>41</sup>

34 Stephen Brian, *The Alpha Course: An analysis of its claim to offer and educational course on the meaning of life*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Surrey, Guildford, 2003. See also Pete Ward, 'Alpha – the McDonaldisation of religion?' *Anvil* 15 (1998), pp 279-286.

35 *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 2.2 (2005) pp 129-141

36 At its best the discussion group after the talk is allowed to roam anywhere – even into 'heretical' territory (in my research this was however very rare). However, no conclusions are drawn which may change the content of the 'gospel' on offer through *Alpha*.

37 See Lings' work at [www.encountersontheedge.org.uk](http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk)

38 See Laurenti Magesa, 'The present and future of inculturation in Eastern Africa' in Peter Turkson and Frans Wijzen (eds)

*Inculturation: abide by the otherness of Africa and the African*, Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H., Kampen, the Netherlands 1993, pp 57-71 for a critique of the imposition of liturgical inculturation in an African context. Arubuckle (*Earthing*) is the writer with the most practical approach, but he is still using a 'theory to practice' methodology.

39 Stephen B. Bevans *Models of Contextual Theology*, Orbis, Maryknoll 1994, p 63.

40 For a discussion and critique of the methods of Liberation theologies see Gerald O West *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a dialogical reading of the Bible*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1999, pp 26-38.

41 Go to [www.newway.org.uk](http://www.newway.org.uk) for access to their material which is quoted in *Mission-shaped Church* pp 47-49.

It is also worth noting the claim that the worldwide Pentecostal/ charismatic movement is a 'naturally indigenising' force from the grass-roots.<sup>42</sup> This movement is not a consciously or critically centred movement, rather it arises from the central Pentecostal *experience* of God that occurs in a particular context, but which may result in the genuine newness and transformation which constitutes inculturation.<sup>43</sup>

There is therefore a real tension between the theory and practice of inculturation, its ideal in the literature and the practical reality on the ground. How can this tension be resolved or even dissolved?

One approach to a resolution of the tension between theory and practice in the interaction of faith and culture would be to search for an appropriate pedagogy for inculturation.<sup>44</sup> In a recent review of ten years of missiological research these published throughout the world I could find only one that examined the education and culture issue.<sup>45</sup>

We have been used, since the publication of *Faith in the City* and its companion *Faith in the Countryside*, to differentiate between urban and rural contexts and their concomitant theologies – although recent calls have been made in *Anvil* to renew this vision as it perhaps has begun to fade.<sup>46</sup> Most clergy are exposed to some kind of contextual theology during their ordination training, possibly through a placement in either a rural or urban context depending on preference or background. The question arising from the discussion of inculturation is whether the underlying cultural assumptions of the students are tested deeply enough in these placements. It would be interesting to research the question, as I do not currently have an answer.

In the recent report on the subject of mission in theological education from Churches Together in Britain and Ireland there is this emphasis on the importance of placement:

The period students spend in unfamiliar environments is vital for mission orientation and understanding. Students may spend significant amounts of time in places where they have no cultural references and no real links and, therefore, have to deal with feelings of marginalization, unfamiliarity and alienation.<sup>47</sup>

If mission from the beginning of the *Missio Dei* is fundamentally about crossing boundaries then the degree to which our ministers and evangelists are able to step out of their own cultural boundaries will be the degree to which they are engaged with the local culture wherever they are ultimately placed.

This entails leaving one's own culture for a while in order to return to it with new eyes. I have observed this process both in the West and in Africa. My friend

42 Harvey Cox has documented the way in which Pentecostalism is 'Russian in Russia, Chilean in Chile and African in Africa' - *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century*, Cassell, London 1996.

43 For examples of this 'newness' see examples cited in notes 14 and 15 above.

44 This is the overall focus of my current research.

45 *The International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol 27, No. 3, July 2003, offers 925 doctoral dissertations completed between

1992 and 2001. Only one is indexed under 'Education and Culture'.

46 The whole of *Anvil* Vol 20 No2 (2003) was devoted to urban contextual theology and Howard Worsley made a particular plea for its revival pp 117-127.

47 Mission Theological Advisory Group, *Presence and Prophecy: A Heart for Mission in Theological Education*, CHP/CTBI, London 2002, p 58. Interestingly the title of the report also contains the two ends of the spectrum of inculturation: presence/incarnation and prophecy/conversion.

cited earlier (when describing Quadrant I) was exposed to liberation theology in a placement in Central America before returning to that long-term commitment. In Tanzania, clergy travelled to study in a multi-tribal college and returned with a new vision for the riches of their own particular tribe and language. There is also a fascinating account of the same phenomenon by Judith Lingenfelter who describes how she was unable to successfully teach in an inner-city American school after a suburban one, but after going to teach at an entirely exotic location in the Philippines she understood what her original problem was: she lacked the necessary cross-cultural engagement skills while assuming her teacher training would apply anywhere.<sup>48</sup> An Anglo-Catholic priest conducts weekly Mass in the concourse to his local ASDA store. Why? Because he spent time in Papua New Guinea when a theological student and this changed his entire outlook.<sup>49</sup>

It seems to me that little regard is taken for the cross-cultural nature of ministry and mission in Britain. Clergy are expected to move from one context to another, but without the tools to deal with what might be an entirely alien place. The assumption is made that Britain is somehow mono-cultural or that (at the most) a cursory investigation of local culture may be useful before getting on with the job in much the same way as anywhere else. An outcome may well be that the 'local' church becomes more eclectic but mono-cultural as the leadership gathers in its own kind.

Very few dioceses offer any kind of induction into the new context and culture. This fails to acknowledge that there is a deskilling that goes along with such cultural change that can be painful and emotionally draining. This reality is often not recognised in training or in the support structures. I don't know of any diocese which conducts formal exit interviews which might uncover an inability or unwillingness to engage with the culture as a reason for leaving but I have no doubt that this is a real problem.

Mission partners are regularly given six months leave to return to the 'home' culture and while this may not be entirely appropriate, what safeguards are built in for any (or indeed all) who are working in domestic 'missionary' situations?

## **Conclusion: A missionary church for all tribes**

If we are in a new missionary era, my plea in this small beginning is that we draw on all the missiological resources of the worldwide church to engage the rapidly changing cultural world in which God has placed us in Britain today. Nowhere is beyond the reach of the infinitely translatable gospel. But really believing this will require us to embrace a variety of radical approaches in all areas of our mission and ministry and to bless their differences. We need to use the whole of the inculturation pitch (if we stick to that picture). The emerging churches may look very different in one context compared to another and we should be slow to accuse any of syncretism. If *panta ta ethne* – all tribes – (Gen. 12:3 and Rev. 15:4) really are to be represented in heaven then let's be ready for that day.

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48 Judith E. Lingenfelter and Sherwood G Lingenfelter, *Teaching Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Teaching and Learning*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2003, pp 15-17.

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49 See George Lings, Encounters on the Edge No 16, *Mass Planting – Anglo Catholic Church plants*. The Sheffield Centre, Sheffield [no date given]