INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTER AND CHRISTIANITY TODAY

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural encounter is something inevitable and crucial today. Its significance for religions depends on how religions conceive of intercultural translatability and the meaning of 'the other'. Concerning the former, there are three possibilities : different cultures can be seen as radically untranslatable, mutually translatable in terms of universal economic medium, or mutually translatable in terms of universal doctrinal message. Each brings its own consequences. Concerning the latter, the other may be viewed as the outer-other or the inner-other of which both require some kind of self-relativization on the part of religion. If Christianity is consistent with its 'logic of love', it would be governed by heteronomous reason in which the self lives from out

of itself, whereas its dwelling place is not the privileged centre.

Key Words:

•*Translatability* • *Universal Medium* • *Universal Message* • *Outer Other* • *Inner Other* • *Pretheoretical Disposition* • *The Logic of Love* • *Dismantled Self* • *Nomadic.*

Today, ever since intercultural encounter is inevitable, the acknowledgement of alterity or 'otherness' has become the foremost ethical claim. However, what might constitute an acknowledgement of alterity is not always clear, while the way the other is conceived of will determine the quality and the significance of intercultural encounter.

This article seeks to clarify the position and the significance of otherness, its consequences for the understanding of culture and finally the relevance of Christianity in intercultural encounter.

The "other"

'The other' has become the central value of postmodern culture. What is meant by 'the other', however, may vary. The other may be viewed as a basic constitutive element of our facticity or our pre-reflective life that has secretly shaped our existence (Heidegger). The other may be conceived of as the untranslatable and elusive subject in front of me, something that always prevents me from my own self-totalizing tendency (Levinas). The other can be anything different which is used as a negative foil that helps us affirm and assert ourselves; whatever we use as a contrasting backdrop against which our own culture or selves can come to the fore; a necessary element

in a binary opposition that makes things intelligible (Derrida). But the other is also those who are never really taken into account by the dominant discourse or grand narratives; in other words, the marginalized (Lyotard). Or perhaps 'the other' is those with whom we can get into fusion, by means of which our selves, our horizons and our worlds are extended (Gadamer, Ricoeur, Geertz). The other may also be the never-ending possibilities of redefining our selves, the surprise, the ungraspable or the 'unform' that undoes all the narrative form and the intelligibility of our selves (Ricoeur, Mark C. Taylor, J.D. Crossan). But the other is not always outer otherness, something external. It can also be internal, inner otherness. There are always others also within ourselves: those who have given birth and given name to us, who have shaped our modes of thinking and feeling, especially on the pre-reflective or pre-theoretical levels (Waldenfels).' But the others are also those who are different even within the same systems.

Thus, 'the other' exists almost at any level and any context. The other penetrates all our experiences. The truth is that in the context of the 'how' of our praxis , in the way we live our lives within the Lebenswelt , 'I' and 'the other' are always relational, mutually constituting each other, within the undifferentiated flux. This is the pre-reflective or the pre-theoretical 'primary otherness', so to say. But when it comes to the 'what' of 'the other', the content will depend on the discourse that is produced. The 'whatness' of the other is something produced, reflectively, by way of discourse. Whenever we draw a line there to make a distinction, the 'other' is invented and its content defined. This is what today is rightly called 'secondary otherness'; the other in our re-interpretation; the imagined or conceptualized other.

Yet the process is actually circular since the discourse is normally invented under the demand or the pressure of a particular situation; a response to a real or imagined pressure from the other. It is the other who compels us to speak and to create discourse. The paradox is that, while the

real other remains outside the discourse, in the sense that it never allows itself to be exhaustively conceptualized in our talk about 'the other', we -on the contrary- constantly make ourselves more and more intelligible thereby. In producing images of the other we indirectly articulate and interpret ourselves.

Culture and Interculturality

The term 'culture' has undergone semantic evolutions, refinements, abstractions, and reconcretizations of various kinds. At the end of the study, since anything may be taken as a cultural token, today there is a tendency of 'culturization' of everything. There are indeed peculiarities and differences on many levels and contexts among cultures; from haircutting, gift-giving, manners of eating, until group behavior or body movement. But the definite shapes they may take ultimately depend on the powers which manufacture them and on the interests they serve. Thus, what is considered genuinely 'Indonesian' according to the Dutch can be very different from that according to president Soekarno or Soeharto, for instance. This explains why concerning cultures assertions of their radical otherness can always be countered by the discoveries of their surprising commonalty. And in reality it is not always easy to distinguish the really original local elements of a culture from imports, influences, invasions, hegemony, etc. In Japanese culture for example, Chinese architecture, art, law, writing and administration of the 4th century have been mixed up with Indian Buddhism, with European thought and science of the 18th , and with the whole sale 'westernization' of the Meiji period.[2]

It is no more sufficient, even naïve, today to view 'culture' simply as performance of particular rules, patterns of behavior or 'habitus' , a set of characteristic products, stereotypical characters, etc. While these things are certainly important to provide a regularizing and normalizing frame for

the unpredictable and transitory character of a culture, they nonetheless do not explain the culture's more complex and ambiguous conditions of existence . Apart from its more or less stable organizational patterns, culture is in fact a plurality of possibilities, something which is constantly in the making, a matter of (cultural) image production. In this context culture is also an invention, manufacture, and partial implementation of the acclaimed 'cores', 'uniqueness' and 'differences'. Differences among cultures certainly exists , but on which levels do they become amenable to theory , do they represent particular pattern of emotion and cognition, or impose themselves on the description of experience ? There is never any guarantee for the certainty of the answer. Culture is as complex as experience. And experience is an interplay of belief, expectations, intricate ways of actions and arbitrariness of actual contexts. In short, as experience, culture is unpredictable and transitory. The formal image and theory of a particular culture in academic discourse are products of their latter-day institutionalization. The institutionalization, in turn, is usually a response to the call for assertions of identity and difference in time of conflict, under particular socio-political pressures, or in danger of disintegration , chaos, disorganization, etc. It is in such condition that a hypothetical, even fictitious, 'origin' is acquired. The confusedly perceived differences and the overlapping intercultural elements are then pushed into clarity (fictitious clarity), and institutionalized 'as if' they are expressions of some unique cultural 'cores'. In most cases, texts of particular cultures are self-description, yet they are usually provoked by voluntary or enforced observation of the other as well, and oftentimes even using the idioms belonging to the other. In Javanese context for example : Arabic words and writing, on the one hand are sort of' extreme otherness' for Javanese people; on the other, continue to be used for genuinely Javanese purposes. In many cultures there are indeed interchangeable processes of 'imitation' and 'isolation'(the attitude of Javanese toward Arab and Indian cultures; or the

attitude of Japanese toward Chinese and Western cultures, etc.). Perhaps culture is to be viewed better as loosely organized spaces for the negotiation of behavior, as well as for the embodiment of cognitive and affective orientations. And the structures resulted from this is semi-permanent and semi-transitory patterns.

Culture, translatability, and transcultural vehicle

The unique cultural dilemma today is that, on the one hand cultures are expanding in terms of their intercultural exchange, hence the diminishing of their boundaries; on the other, they seem also to be busy reclaiming and reasserting their peculiar characters and territory, even to the point of paranoia. The paradox has given rise to the issue of translatability, namely, whether or not 'the other' culture is ultimately translatable. Those who think of 'radical otherness', of the absolute impossibility of embracing the 'otherness' of the other (those in the line of Levinas or Derrida), would end up only in legitimizing asymmetrical forms of relationship, namely, either domination, hegemony, or servitude.

However, one can also imagine the possibility of mutual translation among different cultures in which there is a reciprocity. In history this type of mutual translation happened within networks of international law and commerce. Such reciprocity goes way back to the stage when the exchange of gifts was the primal form of intergroup communication. The basic function of exchange then was not the fulfillment of economic needs but the establishment of community through communication, mutuality, and reciprocity.[3] In this context translation was the categorical imperative of early cultures. It was the overcoming of autistic seclusion, of the prohibition of incest, of the constraint to form alliances outside the narrow clan, and to enter into larger networks of communication. Today, when these networks have finally become global, they seem to have lost

something of their primary charm. The modern situation is characterized by a strange kind of reciprocity : on the one hand western civilization is expanding all over the world; there is hardly any place left untouched by Coca-Cola or MacDonald. On the other hand, cultural fragments from all places and periods are brought into the musée imaginaire of western culture, which is rapidly growing into supermarket or Disneyland of postmodern curiosity. In pre- and early historical times, reciprocity and mutuality meant a process of growth and enrichment for all cultures involved; today it may mean loss and impoverishment. While Western culture is reduced to Halloween, pidgin English or Coca-Cola, native cultures are reduced to mere airport art.

Another possibility is that the different cultures are not just translated into each other but also into a third and overarching one which forms something like a common background. This presupposes a fundamental unity beyond all cultural diversities, a kind of universalism. There have been various forms of universalism in history. They can be sacred or secular, institutional or spiritual, hegemonic or subversive.[4] While most of them have been the target of postmodern criticism, and the regulative ideal of the universal has lost its magic, the primal universalism of Hellenism of the late antiquity still sounds interesting. There was a time when Hellenism was a medium rather than a message; in the late antiquity it provided a common language for local traditions and religions to express themselves in a voice much more eloquent, flexible and articulate than their own. At that time Greek was the language and culture of transmission and communication; it served, in other words, as transcultural vehicle. In this sense, Hellenism did not necessarily mean hellenization: it did not cover the variegated world of different peoples and cultures, religions and traditions, with a unified varnish of Greek culture. Hellenism, instead, provided them with a flexible medium of both cultural and religious expressions.[5] The culture of late antiquity owed at least as much to

indigenous influences as to the Greek heritage, and that the Greek universe of language, thought, mythology, and imagery became less an antithesis to local traditions than a new way of giving voice to them. This explains why from the Jewish and Christian points of view the differences between Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Syrian, Babylonian, and other religions disappeared. 'Hellenism' became a synonym for 'paganism'. It served as a common semiotic system and practice for all religions so that the borders between those different traditions tended to become more permeable than they had been within the original language barriers. The local identities were not altogether abolished; they, instead, were made transparent. This resulted in double membership : one in the native culture and one in a general culture. The general culture depends on and 'feeds' the local cultures.

The problem is, what is to be the best candidate for such transcultural vehicle today ? This , I think, is not simply a matter of language (such as English, for instance), although language is indeed the most operational. In the past, at least in some cases, religion has served as a promoter of intercultural translatability and counteracted the unbridgeable differences of culture. In some other cases, religion can also block the translatability. At the time when there is a conviction that different religions basically worship the same god, for example, what is needed is just the translation of this god into the language and the mind-frame of each religion or culture. Hence there is no need for conversion. However, conversion becomes necessary if there is one religion claiming knowledge of superior truth. With such claim this religion would not promote intercultural translatability.[6] If one religion is wrong and the other is right, there can be no question of translating the gods of the one into those of the other; what counts is conversion.

What can be expected from Christianity today

As far as it concerns the intercultural translatability, Christianity is ambiguous. From the very beginning, at the outset Christianity defined itself as a message rather than a medium. The disciples and apostles were agents of the Holy Spirit. What they promote is a unity which is not the compact material oneness in the sense of one language with invariable words, but rather a translinguistic unity of faith, the heart, and the spirit. The constellation then : no longer the plurality of men over against the oneness of God, but the plurality of the pagans over against the oneness of the Christian faith. Thus Augustine said : "if they want one language, may they come to the church; for even in the diversity of the material languages, there is one language in the faith of the heart."[7]

The idea of a mystic, pneumatic unity of faith in the very variety of the natural languages was the 'rock' on which the institution of mission was founded. The linguistic plurality created an atmosphere of linguistic relativity which facilitated the leap from scriptural to vernacular languages or cultures. If the story of Babel is a myth of diversification, the story of Jerusalem is a myth of universalization, as it is to be achieved through the languages and the course of history. In the latter ethnic and linguistic diversity was affirmed as a way to spiritual unity.

However, the truth is that in the course of history the divine quality of oneness and the pneumatic unity were then extended from the eternal realm of God to that of human institution : one God, one Christ, one Spirit, one pope, one church. It is when it becomes the main task of the church to restore the unity through mission, that the aggressive potential of institutional power starts getting conspicuous. It is on the institutional level that the diversity of culture, interpretation and context is not always in line with the ideal of unity; on the contrary, it has generated so much trouble, internal inconsistencies, and even scandals.

If there is still something we can expect from Christianity, it perhaps lies in its pre-theoretical facticity, in its basic pre-reflective disposition, that is, in its 'logic of love'.[8] Christian facticity is patterned after an existence which finds its inspiration and its goal in the other. Christians should be like grain of wheat which first dies and then is opened up so that true life can begin. Crucial to this metaphor is the vulnerability and exposure of the self to the point of death so that new life can begin. Christian self is the self which lives first and foremost from out of itself. This would mean that Christian's ultimate concern is characterized by the turn toward exteriorization. It begins when the walls which secure their comfortable dwelling start to be dismantled or deconstructed (*Abbau*) so that the claims of the other upon their lives can be seen and felt. Christians are then 'nomadic' insofar as the walls of their homes are temporary, flexible, more permeable. Their existence is the sort of existence which refuses to claim their own dwelling place as privileged place. From this follows that love's reason is not Kantian autonomous reason; it instead is the kind of reason which is so attuned to the other's need that it is by nature heteronomous. This is a reason which is governed by the modality of waiting and vigilance for the other, just as it is governed by a fundamental responsibility for the other. The other here can be both 'the outer other' as well as 'the inner other', since for Christians, even their own selves are permeable to the misterious energy of the Holy Spirit.

End Notes:

[1] A good exposition of Waldenfels' thought on otherness is an article by Chung-Chi Yu, "Between 'Homeworld' and 'Alienworld' : Waldenfels on interculturality"

[2] On the relativity of culture with the case of Japanese culture, see K.Ludwig Pfeiffer, " The Black Hole of Culture : Japan, Radical otherness, and the disappearance of Difference" in Sanford Budick et al (ed), *The Translatability of*

Cultures, Stanford, Cal : Stanford University Press, 1996, pp 186- 203

[3] See M.Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* , London, 1988

[4] For a lucid and intense study of various kinds of universalism see an article of Aleida Assmann, " The Curse and Blessing of Babel; or, Looking Back on Universalisms" in Sanford Budick et al (ed), op.cit

[5] Cfr. G.W.Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity,* Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1990, p 5

[6] See also Erik Voegelin *The Ecumenic Age, Order and History*, Baton Rouge Louisiana State University Press 1974

[7] Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos 271 :* "Volunt unam linguam, veniant ad ecclesiam; quia et in diversitate linguarium carnis, una est lingua in fide cordis"

[8] The idea of 'Love's Reason' here is inspired very much by the article of Norman Wirzba, "Love's Reason", in Merold Westphal, (ed) , *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought* , Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999, pp 246-64

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