Cultural adaptation as an internal requirement of faith

I

Reflection on the adaptation of the Christian message to various cultures usually takes place in the concrete meeting of the evangelizer with individuals and groups that have a different outlook from his own, and therefore have difficulty in understanding him. The effort to make oneself understood in a given community, and the necessity of justifying a new way of talking, unknown to the original community which lives in an historical Christianity, produce partial or even general theories on the adaptation of the Gospel to another area, which is opening up to Christianity, at a particular moment in history.[1]

The present study on the adaptation of the proclamation of the Gospel to Chinese civilization, writen by a scholar in systematic theology who does not know China, must needs take a completely different approach.

The author is not qualified to suggest concrete proposals, useful for a dialogue with Chinese society. Nevertheless, he hopes to be able to make a useful contribution for this purpose. In evaluating the various procedures of adaptation, pragmatic measures are open to the suspicion of seeking premises on which to base conclusions predetermined by the practical requirement of obtaining pastoral results, or by instinctive reluctance to adopt points of view not connatural to the thinker. It is, therefore, a legitimate goal to describe the problems

of cultural adaptation, not only as a requirement of evangelization or as a sign of esteem for various civilizations, but from the point of view of *Christian life* itself, which aims both at *renewing* the various cultures while keeping their specific character, and at *renewing itself*, by assimilating the contributions offered by various civilizations.[2]

Such a description presupposes, of course, the horizon of faith, in which man not only puts himself wholly and freely in God's hands,[3] but also accepts ecclesial preaching, and recognizes in it the teaching of Jesus Christ, as it is prolonged with the help of the Holy Spirit up to our day.[4]

If the theological description of cultural adaptation presupposes the truth of the Gospel message, it also recognizes that human speech can never exhaust the entire wealth of the word of God. This means that the proclamation of the church can never express the whole truth, and can never tell the truth in such a definitive way that it is not possible to perfect and complete indefinitely what has been said.[5]

The theological explanation of adaptation likewise presupposes that in the human pursuit of the meaning of existence the Spirit of God is always present, leading creatures to salvation; but sin also operates, as a result of which man tends to assert himself as the standard of good and evil.[6] This applies also to various cultures,[7] and to the diverse religions with which they are endowed.[8] The theologian expects a priori that traces of grace and marks of sin will be found in every civilization.

---

[2] This point of view was already suggested by Mons. P. POUPARD, *Évangélisation et nouvelles cultures*, Nouvelle Revue Théologique 99 (1977) 532-549.

[3] *Dei Verbum*, n. 5.

[4] *Ibid.*, n. 8.

[5] Cf. the document of the International Theological Commission which is entitled *The Unity of the Faith and Theological Plurality*. La Documentation catholique 55 (1973) 459-460, especially nn. 1.4.10-12. Nevertheless, the statement of Vatican II should be kept in mind: « the Church is always advancing towards the plenitude of divine truth », *Dei Verbum*, n. 8.

[6] *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 11, 37.

[7] For the notion of « culture », cf. J. SZASZKIEWICZ, *Filosofia della Cultura* (Rome, 1974): for a discussion of the theology of culture, cf. L. J. LUZBETAK, *The Church and the Cultures* (Techny, Ill., 1963) and A. A. ROEST CROLLIUS, *Inculturation and the Meaning of Culture*, Gregorianum 61 (1980) 253-274.

[8] P. ROSSANO, *La Chiesa e le Religioni, Via, Verità e Vita* 17 (1969) 13-29; especially on pp. 25-26 the author summarizes the various Catholic

---

Therefore, the methodological stance of the theologian with regard to the adaptation of the Gospel message to various cultures must be an application of the programme outlined by Vatican II: the church examines, interprets and judges in the light of the Gospel, and relates various non-Christian cultures to their divine source.[9] This « judgment », however, does not imply an attitude of immobility on the part of Christianity. On the contrary, it is precisely in this way that the limitedness of the present proclamation of the Gospel can be overcome.

II

The possibility, or rather, the necessity of the adaptation of the Christian message to the various cultures, is from the point of view of the Christian faith, indisputable.

We assume as an unquestionable theological principle not only that the doctrinal content of Christian faith can be made intelligible in various cultures but also that it finds further development in them. The Christian message, in fact, is addressed to all peoples and all cultures: otherwise it would not be a universal and definitive message of salvation.[10] The universal and definitive destination of the Gospel implies that it can be assimilated by every culture and in every phase of the various cultures.

This has not always been admitted with equal clarity by Christians.[11] Thinkers of antiquity and of the Middle Ages, deeply aware of the unity of human nature, conceived only

---

concepts of the value of non-Christian religions; we share the opinion expressed by K. RAHNER, *Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions*, Theological Investigations 5 (1966) 115-134, and also that expressed by H. R. SCHLETTE, *Towards a Theology of Religions* (New York, 1966).

[9] *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 4, 11.

[10] The ultimate foundation of this conviction is not the idea of one, obligatory universal truth (as is posited by C. WACKENHEIM, *Le pari catholique* [Paris, 1980], pp. 105 and 164), but the acceptance of an event which has universal validity (cf. T. NKERAMIHIGO, *A propos de l'inculturation du christianisme*, Telema 3 [1977] 19-26).

[11] For the position normally held in the past, cf. the documentation collected by H. FUCHS in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 2 (1954) 350-462 and 5 (1962) 390-398; for the position generally held at the present time, cf. J. HESSEN, *Griechische oder Biblische Theologie?* (Munich, 21962), pp. 150-156; T. NKERAMIHIGO, *op. cit.*, n. 10, p. 23.

one possible culture, namely that of the Mediterranean world. At least in theory, a human group extraneous to this culture was considered « barbarian », deprived of the development necessary for a spiritual life. After the discovery of the very ancient Asian and American cultures, this cultural solipsism, which had always been mitigated by practical common sense, became untenable on the theoretical plane as well. Now, if there exist alternatives to European culture, the societies that have produced them are entitled to hear the proclamation of the Gospel in their own « language ». Speech is understood here not only as a system of communication, but as a cognitive, axiological and existential context, in which the « good news » becomes connaturally assimilable for them.

The Mediterranean culture (Semitic, Hellenistic, but also Western) does not as a result lose its privileged role in evangelization. Since the word of God was communicated to humanity and was first developed in this culture (« salvation comes from the Jews »), every proclamation starts from that form in which the sages of Israel, the apostles, the Fathers and Doctors of the church formulated their normative preaching, and every interpretation must be justified by a comparison with the original one. But the « Mediterranean » formulation is not self-sufficient, because it grounds, but does not exclude and is not a substitute for, further formulations and developments in other cultural contexts.

The last Council, moreover, explicitly stressed the salvific potential of the « philosophy » and « wisdom », « customs, outlook on life and social order », « genius and dispositions », « particular traditions » and « individual patrimony » characteristic of various peoples and various cultures.[12] It prescribes that missionary activity itself must « be combined with an attempt to make contact with the particular way of thinking and acting » of various nations.[13]

Thus, faced by a culture that is not yet known thoroughly, and in which no empirically discernible opening to Christianity can be found, the believer can presume a priori that he will be able to account for the hope that lives in him, not by making a superficial translation of the various formulas, but by pre-

---

[12] *Ad Gentes*, n. 22.
[13] *Ibid.*, n. 16.

senting his own faith as a development of the certainties of that culture, and as an answer to its aspirations.

It is not equally clear by what means this adaptation can be carried out. The great missionaries often proceeded intuitively, almost instinctively; it was hardly possible to discuss whether their teaching interpreted the traditional doctrine faithfully, whether their way of celebrating the rites was legitimate, or whether the orientation they gave to the spirituality of recent churches did not distort the Gospel ideal. The history of the missions knows many controversies, which have become painful and traumatic precisely because of the lack of formal, methodical criteria.

There are two dogmatic considerations which lead to a theory of the cultural adaptation of the Christian message. The first one, a priori, starts from analysis of the nature of the Christian message itself. The other one, a posteriori, proceeds from consideration of the history of Christian dogma, as far as it is recognized as valid by the self-understanding of the church. On the basis of these convergent considerations, Christian message.

III

1. The first step of cultural adaptation is akin to translation. When a believer wishes to explain the message in which he finds the ultimate meaning of his existence to a person coming from another cultural ambit, he must express in a different language arguments that are already familiar to him. The Jews of Alexandria, for example, found themselves in this situation, when they began to compose the Septuagint version, or the citizens of the Roman Empire when they wished to introduce the Germans, who did not know the terminology of imperial ceremonies, to an understanding of the doxologies in honor of Christ, which were derived from acclamations of the emperors.

Apparently, the problem is only lexicographical. One looks for a phonetic sign, with which to replace the sign used hitherto. Actually, one rarely finds perfectly equivalent words

in the various languages, especially when one desires to designate ultrasensitive realities. In the first place, it can be noted that apparently corresponding words have different affective resonances: e.g. in Greek it can still be said that God is « despotes », but in our languages it cannot at all be said that He is a « despot »; in a patriarchal civilization the statement that God is my father brings forth a sense of veneration, confidence and inclination to obedience, whereas in a civilization in which the structures of the family are in crisis, the same statement brings forth a negative reaction. The intellectual content of words also changes, because the concepts existing in one civilization do not always have corresponding concepts in the others. Concepts presuppose, in fact, given collective experiences, and at least an initial reflection on these experiences. For example, in a rural civilization the statement that God is my shepherd is a very eloquent one, while an industrial civilization does not find in the same words an analogical set of characteristics applicable to the Absolute.[14]

Anyone who speaks in a new language changes, even involuntarily, the content of his discourse together with the terminology. For example, when the Septuagint translated a group of Hebrew words with the term « hamartia », without realizing it they defined more precisely, reinforced and sharpened the sense of the evil into which one falls when one transgresses a divine precept; by choosing the not very often used word « agape » to designate a certain group of feelings of sympathy and benevolence, they laid the foundation for a theology of charity; and by translating the Hebrew « bara » with the Greek « ktizo » they gave a vague and indistinct perception far more fixed contours. Anyone who considers this change inadmissible, must renounce translating his thoughts into another language, such as the 16th-century missionaries did who intro-

duced the word « deus » as a proper name to indicate their God to Asian peoples.[15]

2. It might be thought that these conclusions, drawn from historical experience, contradict the a priori assertion that the cultural adaptation of the Christian message is possible and necessary. In fact, the translation would be a betrayal or an absurdity, if it was meant to be merely the replacement of one word with another, of one concept with another. But the content to be communicated to others consists neither only in concepts, nor only in affirmations formulated conceptually. Our faith implies affirmations which have a substance, even apart from their mental formulation, the latter being understood as the linking or separation of concepts.[16]

Daily life is based on certainties which we hold firmly, even before giving them flesh through assertions formulated reflectively and composed of concepts. A child grasps, through the perception of concrete facts, the truth that his mother loves him, without linking the concept « my mother » with the concept « to love » in explicit thought. Similar virtually accepted judgments also exist in one who, through accepting the various events of the history of salvation as true, accepts ecclesial teaching as the word of God, and therefore as true. The person who puts his trust in Christ who showed himself alive to the disciples, affirms the resurrection, even if he does not possess a thought out concept of « resurrection ». He can also express faith in the resurrection through a series of sentences, saying, for example, that Christ is dead but does not remain dead, since now he lives definitively, in the identity of the existence constructed through the life, death and glorification brought about by the Father.

Thus, certainty can be accepted and transmitted not only through the identification of one concept with another, but by perceiving intuitively the similarity of a group of concepts or images with another comparable structure.

This explanation does not cause the intellectual concept of religious certainties to vanish. He who adheres to God as his

---

[14] These changes are not reducible only to external facts (e.g. that the children do not recognize good fathers or pastors), but are rooted in the change of one's experience of the self and of one's proper relationship with God: cf. M. Van Caster, *La sécularisation interpretée dans une perspective chrétienne*, Lumen Vitae 23 (1968) 445-463; T. Neff, *Représentation de Dieu et structure psychique*, Lumen Vitae 32 (1977) 277-300; A. Vannesse, *Langage religieux et relation à la Mère*, Lumen Vitae 32 (1977) 301-311.

[15] G. Schurhammer, *Das kirchliche Sprachproblem in der japanischen Jesuitenmission des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1928), pp. 25-42.
[16] Z. Alszeghy, M. Flick, *Lo sviluppo del dogma cattolico* (Brescia, ²1969), pp. 42-47.

« shepherd », he who wishes to live in union with Christ who offers him his Spirit, has persuasions which are not only empty figures, but mean something definable but not yet defined. On the other hand, an intellectually developed person cannot live an intense life of faith for a long time without formulating his religious persuasions conceptually, and a community cannot develop its experience of faith without delimiting what its own doxology says from what it does not say, or emphatically excludes. It is enough to admit that intellectual certainty, at least for a very short initial period, can exist in a preconceptual phase which contains virtually, or in germ, the further necessary conceptual development.

Cultural adaptation begins by expressing the persuasions of faith, received in assertions derived from concepts familiar to the culture of origin, in assertions thought out in concepts familiar to the culture for which the proclamation is intended.

3. Examples of such « transcription » exist in a time of transition: e.g. when the Nicene Fathers (325) expressed their Christological faith with the help of the concept « homoousios », which is not found in the Bible and which is difficult for a Semite to understand.

But the transition is not always as conscious and justified by reflection as in the case of the introduction of the term « homoousios » into the creeds. Very often it is an unconscious transposition. We are thinking, for example, of the function of the concept « soul » in the discussion of man's eschatological hope. The term « psyche » or « pneuma » is kept, which is identified with the Hebrew ones « nephes » or « ruah », but unconsciously they are given a meaning not contained lexicographically in the original texts, even if demanded by the full meaning of the texts themselves: that is, that of a simple and immortal spiritual substance. In many cases, the initiative comes from a spontaneous impulse, which will only later be seen as legitimate on the plane of reflection and method.

Thus, these adaptations of the message of salvation to the conceptual system of a new culture are carried out most successfully by those who, on the one hand, live the faith intensely in its existential totality, and, on the other hand, are

imbued with the culture into which Christianity is penetrating, not only because they have learned partial elements of it, but as a result of a certain innate congeniality. For this reason, the protagonists of this conceptual acclimatization of Christianity are mostly the first generations of persons of a high intellectual level who grew up from childhood in the fervor of Christian life, such as, for example, the teachers of the Alexandrian school in the 1st and 2nd centuries, who considered Greek philosophy to be the educator of humanity with regard to the meeting with Christ, and the Saxon monks (such as the author of the epic Heliand) who, at the beginning of the 9th century, expressed the Christian ideal in the forms of the German tradition.

4. The two examples mentioned (homoousios and the soul) show how complex is the *judgment of value* concerning the transconceptualization of the revealed message.

The reincarnation of the doctrine of the faith in new concepts brings about *relative* progress, since it makes the truth of the Gospel more assimilable in a new cultural context. It does not for this reason signify *absolute* progress, that is, it is not as sure that the new mental forms are more in conformity with the reality to which revelation refers. Absolute progress is not excluded, as some students of positive theology seem to suppose by regarding with suspicion every new form of thought introduced in theology. It is not at all certain, in fact, that the conceptual forms in which revelation penetrated into the human spirit, are objectively more perfect; God the revealer adapts himself to the capacities, which are perhaps not very high, of those chosen as spokesmen of divine self-communication. But neither is it certain that transconceptualization always implies absolute progress, as it may seem to quite a few Western theologians who analyse a history of the dogmas which contributed to Western culture, and who consider this culture more advanced than the preceding ones. Certainly, the use of the term *homoousios*, or the explicit reflection on the natural immortality of the human soul, corresponds to metaphysical requirements. But all this may also concentrate attention on a secondary aspect of the revealed doctrine itself. It is not clear, in fact, whether the accentuation of categories worked out

through the analysis of « things », that is, of physical substances, in Christology and in anthropology, is more in conformity with the didactic intention of God the revealer than the personalistic ones worked out from consideration of a dialogic meeting.[17] The only statement we can make with certainty is that the multiplication of faithful transconceptualizations (even if not necessarily deeper on the speculative plane) causes the understanding of the faith to progress also in the absolute sense, since their converging plurality is a help to better understanding of a content which, in itself, surpasses any finite intelligence, and therefore can never be exhaustively captured in any conceptual formula.

5. The cultural adaptation which we have described, starting from the analogy of the translation of a text, is not limited exclusively to the transconceptualization of the message. The communication of a doctrine implies, in addition to interpretation of static categories such as concepts, the explanation of dynamic schemata through which the mind passes from one acquired certainty to the acquisition of others.

Now, the various cultures prefer various systems so as to progress in the understanding of reality. A man who has not much experience on the intellectual plane, uses chiefly the « *linear* » model, since he explains the structure of reality by narrating how it was constituted as man's mind proceeded in getting to know it. Primitive cultures, therefore, describe the world system mostly by recourse to the narration of myths. Various ancient cultures preferred the « *circular* » model, which approached the solution of a problem by gathering similar certainties, and arranging them in such a way that the solution of the question on which the research was centered became clear from their analogy and from their opposition. The speaker passes from one point of view to another contrary one, shifts the question a little, repeats the same dialectical operation again, and proceeding in this way gradually makes the object intelligible, that is, illuminated by a series of observations antithetically arranged. The thought of a man formed in Western logic mainly presupposes the « *pyramidal* » structure of truths: at the top of the pyramid there is a universal truth, the base is constituted by the concrete applications of this truth. Reasoning descends from the principle to the particular conclusions, or reaches a general law, rising from observation of concrete facts.[18]

It is possible to get another person to accept a line of reasoning by transferring it to a mental schema familiar to him. For example, when St. Thomas, a thinker imbued with the logical « pyramidal deductive » schema, explains a text of St. Paul, conceived in the Semitic « circular » schema, he reduces the Pauline meditation to a reasoning that can be appreciated by medieval logic (e.g. the explanation of *Rom* 5, 12), or to a series of prescriptions, in keeping with the jurisprudence of his time (e.g. the comment on 1 *Cor* 7,1).[19]

Certain understanding of the faith (which is not only the aim of theology but also a requisite of a life of faith that has developed) calls not only for comprehension of the meaning of the individual sentences of the revealed subject matter and of the individual assertions of the theological treatise, but also for perception of the connection, as a result of which the message constitutes a mental structure of progressive communication. Cultural adaptation tries, therefore, to discover an order among the various parts of the inspired discourses of the Bible, among the dogmatic assertions with regard to moral standards, among the linked propositions of the explanation of the faith. This order is, on the one hand, objectively based in the economy of salvation and, on the other hand, subjectively compatible with the thinking habit of a given society.

IV

1. In order not to be guilty of abstractionism, the preceding remarks must be completed.

Evangelization, it is true, implies the communication of ideas, or rather of lines of reasoning, on the part of the Christian, and an understanding of these noetic elements by the one invited to become a disciple of Christ. But this it not enough

17 B. LANGEMEYER, *Das dialogische Denken und seine Bedeutung für die Theologie*, Catholica 17 (1963) 308-318.

18 H. LEISEGANG, *Denkformen*, (Berlin, 21951).
19 THOMAS AQUINAS, *Super Ep. ad Rom. Lect.*, cap. 1, lect. 3 (Marietti, 1953, n. 406); *Super I Ep. ad Cor. Lect.*, cap. 7, lect. 1 (*ed. cit.*, n. 312).

for the proclamation to be accepted as true. The acceptance of the Gospel does not merely superimpose new certainties on the certainties with which the neophyte had lived up to then. The new doctrine refers in part to the same realities concerning which the one listening to the proclamation already had persuasions inherited from his original culture. If the two interpretations of the same reality were to remain water-tight compartments, the believer would be condemned to a permanently split personality. Moreover, acceptance of the new image of the world cannot be unconditional as long as the old image, whose connection with the former is not yet clarified, is still considered valid. The very understanding of the Gospel and even more the giving of one's consent to it, presupposes, therefore, that the new certainties should penetrate into the fabric of the previous conception of the world, and *strengthen, or modify, or even eliminate the views previously held.*

This holds good, principally, for anthropology.[20] Recent theology has shown convincingly that one's entire attitude with regard to God implies an image of man. If I worship God, I recognize that I am contingent; if I thank Him or pray to Him, I discover that I am in need of his help; if I ask for his forgiveness, I confess I am a sinner. But anyone who listens to God's word has, inevitably, already conceived an image of himself. To be converted means revising the previous image in the light of the new one given to him by faith; it means introducing the latter as an improvement, correction or modification of the former.

2. This example already shows how a Western person's adaptation of the evangelical proclamation to various cultures *benefits* both sides, assuming, of course, faith in the doctrinal content of the Gospel.

The meeting with the Gospel enriches the culture in which this happens. In the first place, the doctrinal intuitions, common to both contexts, receive a new, higher foundation in revelation. Then there are truths, hitherto considered as marginal ones in the native culture, which are developed, since, in the context of the Gospel message, some aspects of

20 W. PHILIPP, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Summe der Anthropologie* (Heidelberg, [2]1966), pp. 142-150.

the divine mystery are perceived as premises or as conclusions connected with the truth already known to the culture which accepts Christianity. Finally, the clashes which spring from differences between the receiving culture and Christian dogmas draw attention to the unfounded nature of certain opinions, accepted by the native culture in an uncritical way, because of wrong reasoning. Thus the native culture, freed from these parasitical distortions, rediscovers its identity to a greater extent. It cannot be denied, for example, that Aristotelianism, as it was known by Andronicus of Rhodes, was surpassed by Christian Aristotelianism, systematically developed by St. Thomas Aquinas.[21]

It must also be recognized, however, that the transmitting community gains from the cultural adaptation of the Christian message, not just because it renders a service to the diffusion message, not just because it renders a service to the diffusion of the Gospel, but because it finds as well an opportunity to enrich and develop the Christian message. Precisely the contact with new cultures facilitates a greater penetration into the doctrine transmitted, causing new points of view to be adopted, and stressing some truths which make it possible better to understand the economy of salvation. For example, the doctrine of creation has become far more significant since it was seen in the context of the principle of causality. The assertion that created reality is composed of a determining principle and a determinable principle (act and potency) or the affirmation that man's non-material principle, being simple, is incorruptible, are so wedded to Christian anthropology that the vast majority of believers could not express their view concerning man's nature without having recourse to some popular form of psychosomatic hylomorphism; nor are they able to conceive the eschatological perdurance of the human person without resorting to the non-biblical argument of the immortality of the soul, and without taking into account its spiritual tenets.

But the understanding of the faith also progresses because prior adaptations, made to historical cultures, are eliminated by subsequent findings. Thus it is discovered, in fact, that one possible way of explaining the Gospel is not the only one, and its validity must not be identified, therefore, with

21 F. VAN STEENBERGHEN, *Aristotle in the West: The Origins of Latin Aristotelism* (Louvain, 1955), pp. 183-188.

that of evangelical truth itself. In this way the doctrine of the faith is released from historically contingent confinement to the civilization of a particular ethnic group. This development, which we might call one « of purification », has been clearly appreciated in connection with the various theories successively adopted by the human sciences. For example, it has rightly been said that the discovery of the compatibility of faith in creation with the evolutionist system would be a benefit, even if evolutionism were not true, because it would show that the *way* in which the world was produced from nothing is not properly the object of revelation. The same appreciation must also be extended to the pluralism emerging in the various contemporary cultures. For example, in Western civilization about the middle of this century, in the context of the great optimism regarding technical and social development, it seemed fitting to stress that Christianity considers it man's vocation to promote the human person not only from the religious standpoint, but in all respects, stressing his progress not only in being, but also in having. This adaptation reached its height in the conciliar Constitution « Gaudium et Spes », and in the encyclical « Populorum Progressio ». Now, the reluctance of various African Christian communities to accept a highly technological appreciation of earthly welfare, without questioning the validity of the conciliar adaptation, shows that it is possible to be good Christians even when placing greater stress on the superiority both of being over having, and of the spiritual over the material, thus returning to a point of view that was also accepted in Europe in past centuries.

3. In order to determine whether an opinion, rooted in the native culture, can be reconciled with an evangelical truth or not, it is often necessary to find a « middle term », with the help of which the relationship between the two assertions becomes apparent. This is one example of the spontaneous and unthinking applications of the mental technique codified by the dialectics of *syllogisms*.[22]

For example, in the Hellenistic environment into which Christianity was introduced, the « cyclical » conception of history was quite widespread. It contemplated an endless

---

[22] *Op. cit.*, in note 16, pp. 34-42.

repetition of the same sequence of phases in the transformation of the universe. This theory, though it had a certain accordance with the Qoheleth prologue, was rejected by Christianity, because it conflicted with the conception of the « day of the Lord » which was to mark the end of human events, and even more with the uniqueness of the coming of Christ, who decidedly changed history « once and for all ». In this reflection, the « middle term » introduced without explicit reflection, was the concept of the « unrepeatable and definitive event ». Such an event breaks the indefinite concatenation of cosmic cycles. Now, the revelation of the last judgment and of the incarnation affirms the existence of such events. Therefore, divine revelation is incompatible with the cyclical conception of history, which must be replaced with the linear one.

The polemical introduction of linear historiology is an example of an « adaptation of rejection », carried out by means of formal reasoning. There also exist adaptations of reception in the same way. For example, the Bible promises the remission of sin to those who love God with their whole heart. But who loves with his whole heart? The particular affective sensibility of the peoples of Western and Northern Europe, converted to Christianity at the beginning of the Middle Ages (Celts and Germans), answered this question by stressing the importance of motivation. The person for whom love consists not in the desire to acquire for himself an object he likes, but in the commitment to serve the one he loves, is the one who loves with his whole heart. Thus, with the concept of « pure love » as « terminus medius », a native persuasion was adopted which caused the Christian doctrine on justification to center on a very important point.

There are cases, however, in which a certainty admitted in a non-Christian culture is judged by believers without being compared, directly or through a third term, with a given assertion guaranteed by the word of God. Among the examples quoted previously, such is the doctrine on the freedom of God's creative act. As was mentioned, a considerable trend of Hellenistic philosophy maintained that God creates under the irresistible impetus of an inclination of his own nature. Adherents of the Christian faith, comparing the message of the Bible with Hellenistic culture, rejected this opinion, even

though it is not easy to indicate which specific revealed doc-
trine directly calls for the absolute freedom of creation.

In these cases, of which there are a great many, it is not
two assertions (one transmitted by culture, the other by faith)
that are compared, but an assertion and a structure, which is
a global image of reality conceived on the basis of many
particular assertions which are derived from revelation.[23]

The human mind, in fact, does not keep the information
received on a given subject as isolated data, but collects it,
structures it into a unit, and combines it into an image. When a
new statement about the same subject is met with, the credi-
bility of the new information can be judged by comparing it with
the objective image formed previously, even if the preceding
knowledge does not tell one anything in this connection. Anyone
who has read a great deal about Venice, and comes across the
statement that bears and lions roam around the solitary travel-
ler in the heart of Venice, knows that this statement cannot
be true, even though he has no particular information about
fauna on the Adriatic coast of Italy, because the insertion can-
not match with the global image of the environment, constructed
by means of his studies on city life.

In the same way the believer, too, on the basis of listen-
ing to God's word, constructs for himself an image of the way
in which God operates human salvation through Christ in his
Church. The validity of this image may greatly surpass other
global conceptions. From the objective point of view, in fact,
God is faithful to himself, and does not disavow himself even
in the slightest details: in him, « there is no variation or shadow
due to change ».[24] From the subjective point of view, the light
of faith helps the believer not only to accept the single sentences
of the word of God as true, but also to have a certain under-
standing of the object itself, to which the act of faith refers
specifically. The grace of faith does not, it is true, let one
see the supernatural reality as it is in itself, but it helps one
neither to misunderstand it nor to distort it. Help in con-
structing an image of the order of salvation which is faithful to
reality, is particularly important, since this global understand-
ing of the faith is not the work of individual intelligences, but

---

[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 58-79.
[24] *James* 1:17.

of the community of faith. Generations of believers, endowed
with various graces and formed by various experiences, con-
stantly advance as a community towards the fullness of divine
truth.[25]

In the light of this conception, we can understand many
cultural adaptations of Christianity which took place in the
past. Let us think, for example, of the meeting between
the Christian faith and the religiosity of pre-Columbian Mexico.
The monstrous figures of the bloodthirsty divinities disappeared
at once, because they were in clear contrast with the figure
of the Father which is seen in the face of Christ. Other
particulars, however, such as, the acute perception of death
as inevitable and as, under certain conditions, a source of
transcendent life were seen to be transposable in to the context
of the Christian religion. The ultrarealistic crucifixes, put in
the midst of an environment which reflects the splendor of
eschatological glory, differ infinitely from a scene of an Aztec
human sacrifice, yet keep some elements of it in a transformed
and sublimated way.

V

1. Hitherto our reflections have referred to the adaptation
of the Christian message, considered as a *doctrine*, to a native
culture, considered mainly as a set of *opinions*. All this ap-
parently has little to do with that aspect of cultural adapta-
tion which arouses most attention: the introduction of Chris-
tian *rites* and *morals* into a non-Christian civilization, and the
preservation of *practices* of worship and ethical *behavior*,
proper to non-Christian cultures, by those converted to Chris-
tianity.

It is significant that the first steps that the apostolic com-
munity took to determine its relationship with the synagogue
did not refer to doctrinal questions, even fundamental ones,
such as the theology of the Trinity but to a problem of
operational order: must neophytes not belonging to the Jewish
people observe Mosaic law? The church, as it spread in
the Hellenistic world, introduced religious usages there (e.g.
most of the sacramental rites, the weekly celebration of

---

[25] *Dei Verbum,* n. 8.

Sunday, etc.) and customs considered as morally good, in fact obligatory (indissoluble monogamous marriage, abstinence from the exercise of trades connected even remotely with idolatry, etc.). It is equally well-known that Christianity, assimilating Greco-Roman customs, « baptized » them, that is, gave them a new meaning and, in fact, revised them according to the new Christian sensitivity (we are thinking, for example, of wedding rites and, with regard to later times, of imperial dignities introduced into Christianity).

2. It must be pointed out in the first place that the solution of these and similar questions directly concerning the operational order depends in the final analysis on the *truth* (as the case may be, the non-truth) of *theoretical assertions*. For example, the necessity of the observance of Mosaic law must be judged and was judged according to the question: does salvation come only from Christ's redemption, or also from the Old Testament economy? The answer to the question whether the Eucharist should be celebrated precisely with bread and wine, or whether these substances can be replaced with the staple food and the common drink of the respective communities, depends on the solution to the theoretical problem, namely, what was Christ's intention in the institution of the Eucharist. Therefore, operational cultural adaptation of behavior always implies and presupposes an interpretation of the theoretical adaptation of doctrines.

3. However, the problems of operational adaptation can rarely be reduced exclusively to theoretical questions. There are not many actions which can immediately be declared either entirely good or in conflict with moral values. In practical adaptation, moreover, there is a preliminary question to be solved, that is, the problem of the *interpretation of the practices*: what is the assertion implicitly affirmed as a result of which a practice becomes a postulate (or a negation) of an evangelical truth?

In fact, a way of behaving usually already has a certain generic meaning in itself; but this can at least be specified, since, in the life of a community, the way of behaving (the action, the gesture) becomes a cipher, a conventional sign, to express a determined content. Even an individual, in fact, can attribute to a way of behaving a special meaning, which of course is not immediately understandable to others. To cite an example which worried St. Paul,[26] to feed on meat which unknown to a person has been sacrificed to idols, is an indifferent matter in itself. If, in a given civilization, eating sacrificed meat means associating oneself with the sacrifice, then this act becomes contrary to Christ's law, either because of the intention of the one who eats, or because of the scandal it represents for those who witness his act and interpret it according to its significance in that civilization.

Therefore, the problem of the adaptation of actions and ways of behaving also includes the preliminary question concerning what a certain action means in a given culture and situation.

4. There are many customs which in the native cultures already have a meaning that can perfectly be integrated in the structure of Christian faith: it is a question of natural values, which, in the order of grace, are to be presupposed and not destroyed. We are thinking, for example, of the various forms of adherence to the unity of the family, the clan or the nation, and of the practices of concentrating on values which cannot be directly subjected to sensible experience. In the whole of pre-Christian Europe there existed rites which expressed, on the occasion of the various phases of the solar cycle, the desire to participate in the irradiation of a transcendent principle of values; the church tolerated some of these as folklore customs (e.g. fires St. John's Night) and even introduced some into its liturgy, conferring a specific Christian meaning on them: the feast of Christmas as the birth of the « sol invictus », Christ; the Candlemas procession, referred to Christ, « a light to enlighten the peoples »; the blessing of new fire during the liturgy on Holy Saturday, etc.

There are forms of behavior which are unacceptable to the believer, because they contradict the Christian sense of human life and of the relationship between God and man: for example, the magic arts, sacred prostitution, and human sacrifice, even if it is symbolized indirectly.

In the vast majority of cases it is extremely difficult pre-

---

[26] *Romans*, ch. 14-15; *1 Cor.*, ch. 8.

cisely to define the meaning that the surrounding civilization gives to an action, nor can it be foreseen with certainty to what extent the Christian explanation will succeed in replacing the original meaning of an action, and making it acceptable to faith.[27] Such is, for example, the question debated at present concerning whether a local African church may « baptize » the use of the banquet which celebrates the solidarity of the living and dead members of the tribe, by using it as a testimony of the communion of saints. Will this use not inevitably imply erroneous conceptions in the respective tribe, e.g. the exclusivistic function of the tie of blood, and the need of material food on the part of the dead? In similar cases, all abstract criteria fail, and the ecclesial community gropes for its way, so to speak, by trying gradually to eliminate the positive or negative excesses of the adaptation.

A similar difficulty is met with when it is necessary to decide whether it is opportune or not to keep certain customs which have become traditional in old Christian cultures but which have a different spontaneous meaning, or an opposite emotional coefficient, in the native cultures. It is known how many difficulties arose in ancient times when it was observed that in some particular churches certain ritual gestures (insalivation, the kiss, anointing the feet of the sick, etc.) caused surprise and repugnance. At present far more radical questions are raised; for example, people wonder to what extent institutional celibacy can become an intelligible testimony in some native civilizations. In these cases, too, it is necessary to determine, mostly intuitively, what value should prevail: the unity of symbolism and discipline in the universal church, or the expressive efficacy of a custom in the local church.

---

27 D. S. AMALORPAVADASS, *Indigenous Expressions in Cathedrals* in *Indian Journal of Theology* 24 (1975) 26-40; part of this article was republished under the title *Indigenization and the Liturgy of the Church* in *International Review of Mission* 65 (1966) 164-167. Cf. also the various collected studies in *Liturgy and Cultural Religious Traditions*, *Concilium* 122 (1977); particularly interesting is the article by K. RICHTER (pp. 78-82) which demonstrates that the problems emerging from the need to adapt « spatially » to other cultures are similar to those arising from the need to adapt « temporally » as the Church attempts to penetrate the new industrial phase which has developed in Western civilization.

VI

When considering adaptation to Chinese culture, there spring spontaneously to the theologian's memory the figures of the great missionaries of the 16th and 17th centuries (Valignano, Ricci, Schall and their collaborators), who attempted new approaches to evangelization in the second Christian millennium, by returning to the greater openness of the early centuries when the Church faced the non-Christian world.

How do our reflections contribute to the prolonged and heated discussion surrounding the figures of these bold missionaries?

1. In the first place it must be stressed that adaptation is not a static fact, definitively realized once and for all. Adaptation, precisely because it refers to evangelization, deals with the phenomenon of human language, and as such, cannot be understood as an instantaneous event. As an aspect of communication between persons, it is a transition, a movement, an evolution.

Now, adaptation must be considered in the context of two processes, which move in two opposite directions.

The *first process* is the progressive communication of a message.[28] At a time when it was assumed that concepts, mental activities and symbolism were the same for the whole of mankind, it was considered possible immediately to transmit intelligible assertions among representatives of the most distant cultures. Now we are more aware of the « historical » nature of our communications, that is, of the fact that suitable and common mental forms are necessary in order to communicate and that for the production and use of these formulas a certain duration is necessary. In this sense, we succeed more in admiring the patience of God, who for millennia prepared a people capable of listening to the gospel of salvation. So even in the proclamation of the gospel, the evangelizer must not only follow the logical order, but also adapt himself to the psychological order. Beginning from what is immediately intelligible, one should go on to those

---

28 Z. ALSZEGHY, M. FLICK, *L'evangelizzazione come comunicazione*, *Documenta missionalia* 9 (1975) 49-76.

elements that need noetic mediation. If we call « adaptation » both the technique of approaching a topic by means of elements known, or in any case intelligible, to the culture which the evangelizer is addressing, and the tendency to postpone to a second phase the communication of elements which require knowledge of other premises in order to be understood and admitted, then adaptation is merely a requirement of the dynamism characteristic of reasoning. In this context, we are ready to agree with the missionaries who, three centuries ago, hid the crucifix among flowers. They could not stress this sign of the weakness of the one in whom catechumens were to put all their trust, until the moment when the neophytes, were able to understand and believe that the power of God is manifested and operates in the helplessness of the Redeemer.

Adaptation understood in this way is most intense at the beginning of evangelization, and is destined to disappear gradually, to the extent that the faith of those who listen matures.

The *second process* in the context of which adaptation can be considered involves the ever more adequate assimilation of the message received into the living fabric of the experiences, convictions and affections of a human group, and the ever more adequate expression of the group's ability to formulate doxology and to give testimony. If we call « adaptation » this internal assimilation, through which Christianity becomes congenial to a civilization,[29] the process stands in a relationship of mutual causality with the very life of faith: one element conditions and calls for the other, since there is no personal or community life which is not unfolded in forms connatural to the individual and the group, and does not create for itself connatural forms.

Adaptation understood in this way will be minimum at the beginning of evangelization, and will increase in proportion as the life of faith increases, in the quantitative and qualitative sense, in groups belonging to the respective civilization.

The two forms of adaptation proceed from different noetic principles. The first one, that of weakness, which « cannot bear

---

[29] Cf. the description of « inculturation » given by A. A. ROEST CROL-LIUS, *What is So New about Inculturation? A Concept and its Implications*, Gregorianum 59 (1978) 721-738; particularly helpful is the excellent definition on p. 735.

now » the adequate expression of what Christ has to say to man,[30] proceeds from the reflection of reason. One knows the message, knows the culture to which it wishes to transmit the message, and looks for the right means of communication. The second adaptation, that of maturity, in which « out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks »,[31] is the fruit of the « sense of faith », understood as a quality of the person inserted in Christ. The risen Saviour communicates his Spirit to his disciples, as a result of which they become capable of a spontaneous and global perception of the originality of the revealed datum. Of course, it is a question neither of a new revelation nor of the experimental discovery of new supernatural realities that have not been revealed; this « sense of faith » does not even replace the rational motives through which the human mind can realize that a given assertion is somehow contained in revelation. Therefore, the second adaptation becomes more and more possible as the community, in the light of grace, penetrates more intellectually and appreciates more affectively the meaning of the doctrine which it had already accepted as true. Understanding and relishing it more intensely, it succeeds in formulating the doctrine with the expressive means of its own culture.

2. This reflection enables one to avoid a misunderstanding which is widespread, that is, to consider the first adaptation as a missionary task and the second one as a theological task in mature Christian countries.

This is an error which doubly contradicts the facts.

In the first place, intensity, joy and lucidity of faith are mostly gifts belonging to young communities, while those who « by this time ought to be teachers », often need « some one to teach them again the first principles of God's word », since they have « become dull of hearing ».[32]

In the second place, even communities in possession of a long Christian tradition need a continuous « adaptation of learning ». Especially in the present phase of history, the situation of human groups is in fact continually changing. Living standards, social relations, and the image of the world taught by

---

[30] *John* 16:12.
[31] *Matthew* 12:34.
[32] *Hebrews* 5:11-12.

science, are in transition. Even the values that instinctively attract people are different, and the evils they spontaneously fear vary. Language itself changes, to such an extent that the way the preceding generation spoke is no longer understood and certainly no longer appreciated. In this continual, deep transformation, all persons and all communities that live by faith must always keep asking themselves how to integrate into the changing reality the Gospel message which they have inherited. The environment in which the Christian community lives today is nearly everywhere an atheistic environment, and the culture which Christians breathe is a product of this environment. Faith is not a peaceful possession, but a continual « fight ».[33] It is a daily task to determine to which elements it is possible to appeal in a given culture so as to insert into it the « word of life », which has been given to renew the world.

For these reasons, adaptation is not just a task of missionaries, but is an inescapable dimension of the whole of Christian life: an internal requirement of the faith.

<div align="right">Z. ALSZEGHY S. I.</div>

SOMMARIO

La teologia dell'ultimo secolo ha notevolmente approfondito la riflessione sull'evoluzione del dogma, per cui il « deposito di fede », ricevuto una volta per sempre, viene ripensato nelle forme di pensiero, proprie alle varie fasi della storia culturale, e in funzione alla soluzione dei problemi emergenti dalla vita della comunità dei credenti. Da qualche decennio anche in teologia morale è oggetto di maggiore attenzione la storicità delle esigenze operative che sono determinate dal vangelo e dalle tendenze interiori della grazia, ma sono condizionate anche dai modelli di comportamento ricevuti dalle varie società in cui i credenti vivono. Apparentemente è un problema diverso quello sollevato dalla prassi missionaria e dalla riflessione missiologica che domanda, come il cristianesimo possa o anche debba adattarsi alla mentalità di individui o gruppi che, appartenenti a civiltà non-cristiane, hanno difficoltà di inserire organicamente nel loro mondo intellettuale e operativo, il messaggio cristiano segnato dal suo passaggio attraverso la civiltà mediterranea e occidentale.

---

[33] *1 Timothy* 6:12.

L'articolo ripensa questi tre processi come diversi aspetti di un'unica espansione, per cui la vita di fede si sviluppa attraverso il tempo e nello spazio, e rileva le varie vie per cui l'adesione alla parola di Dio si sviluppa, ossia si adatta.

In questa prospettiva, l'adattamento non apparirà più come una concessione fatta da colui che possiede a colui che non possiede ancora, ma piuttosto come una esigenza interna della stessa vita cristiana. Infatti, l'incontro tra il vangelo e le varie civiltà (succedentisi nel tempo e coesistenti nello spazio) danno occasione ad una più adeguata comprensione tanto delle cose quanto delle parole trasmesseci, per cui la chiesa tende incessantemente alla pienezza della verità divina.