

Ведран Голијанин

Мисија и култура: Теологија инкултурације и њено место у православном мисионарском богословљу

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[Vedran Golijanin

Mission and Culture: Theology of Inculturation and its Place in Orthodox Mission Theology

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Review by Dr Vladimir Kolarić

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The book *Mission and Culture: Theology of Inculturation and its Place in Orthodox Mission Theology* explores the question of Christianity's inculturation, a phenom-

enon of great significance for the understanding of the Church and its mission in the world, as well as the nature of culture itself.

The identity of the Church is defined primarily by revelation and incarnation, whereby God intervenes in the created world for its transformation and salvation, with humans playing a crucial and unique role as the only free and creative beings. In Christian belief, Christ was incarnated in the human body while remaining eternal God, and this was revealed to mankind by God so that they in turn can share it with others by human means of communication, which is culture.

This process of communication represents the second most important feature of the Church's identity, primarily in the form of Liturgy as a living communication between humanity and the divine, as well as with other people, and the broader creation. It is also evident in the community of believers, and, finally, in the form of mission activities intended to bear wit-

ness to the truth for the salvation of all individuals and peoples.

At the outset of the book, Vedran Golijanin identifies certain prejudices against the idea of mission and culture which exist in Orthodox theology, mentality, and tradition, thus explaining the need for this study. By addressing the fact that mission is predominantly understood in the light of Roman Catholic and Protestant teaching and practice, the author introduces us to broader historical and doctrinal reasons for such understandings, finding in the Gospels, tradition, and Orthodox theology compelling arguments for recognising missionary work as a vital aspect of the Church. Culture, as an area of rational human creativity, clearly finds validation in Christ's incarnation in the human body in a specific space and time, in the fact that human beings are created in the image of God, which permits them to participate in God's creativity and freedom, and in their theologically based and experientially confirmed role in God's economy (God's activity in the created world). Neglecting mission and culture would entail the neglect and potential rejection of man as a free and creative being. It would also mean disregarding the significance of creation, and aligning more with dualist and nihilist teachings than with Christian theology, rooted in revelation, tradition, and the collective experience of the Church.

Just as God has always communicated with specific individuals who lived in specific historical and cultural contexts, and just as He was incarnated in a specific human body, in the same way God communicates with each one of us as a specific and unique person, living in a specific cultural, symbolical, and linguistic context.

The apostolic proclamation of the 'good news' never sought to eradicate existing cultural, linguistic, and social structures; on the contrary, it aimed for their adaptation and transformation in the light of the new reality which has been proclaimed. This reality is therefore accepted consciously and freely, rather than being enforced through violence or manipulation. The Church did not extinguish existing cultural identities but integrated them into the unity of its body as diverse voices which bear witness to the richness and freedom inherent in God's world. Thus they are specific reflections of the fullness of life in the Kingdom of God, which we can hardly conceive of within the narrow constraints of a sinful life. Indeed, the role of culture is to help us transform the patterns and mechanisms of the fallen world in order to facilitate the journey towards God-given freedom.

Since the beginning, the revelation has been mediated by the forms of the existing cultures, but it has also transformed these cultures and enabled specific communities to bear witness to the truth of revelation in their particular ways. Inculturation is not just a passive and operative utilization of cultural forms for the sake of communication, i.e., symbolical mediation of certain teachings; it is also a transformation of culture as a unique and definitive human capacity, as well as being an effort to adapt the truth of faith and revelation to the existential experience and needs of specific individuals and communities. We should not expect from them the obedience and accommodation to certain abstract systems of ideas but the ability to have a living communication with the one personal God.

While analysing historically experienced forms of the relationship between 'the Gospel, i.e., revealed divine truth, and the culture, i.e., man's creative nature and its products' (11), or, more specifically, imposition, translation, adaptation, indigenization, contextualization, and incarnation, Vedran Golijanin prefers inculturation as the most effective missionary method, i.e., way of bearing witness to God's revelation for specific individuals and communities.

Since it preserves freedom and trusts the creative ability of human beings, as well as the meaningful foundation of their communities, inculturation 'enables the constitution of a truly local Church, with all its cultural peculiarities by which it celebrates God with other sister Churches, but in its own unique way. Inculturation has the potential to bring Christianity into a creative relationship with the new culture, primarily because it demands a serious approach to the cultural factors such as religion, art, and philosophy' (25).

The author pays special attention to the problem of identification of Christian revelation with certain cultural models and traditions, which does not lead only to self-enclosure, sectarian mentality, and potential ethnophyletism, but also prevents a true mission, thus transforming the spread of God's 'good news' to other nations into just another method of colonization (which, historically, happened quite often), and, in the case of already Christianised communities, into a method of political oppression or ideological indoctrination.

This aspect is especially important in our time, which is characterised by the freedom of religion on both domestic and

international stages, meaning that mission is obliged to be tolerant of cultural diversity, freedom of arbitrary and not just traditionally based religious identity, and the secular nature of many modern societies and cultures. Golijanin emphasises those features that make inculturation a necessary process, including the facts of cultural diversity that demands inculturation, the necessity of cultural flexibility in missionary work, the cultural conditioning of the Churches, and the continuous nature of the process of inculturation itself. The author also emphasises several theological presuppositions of inculturation, such as the universal translatability of Christian faith, the personal character of the incarnated Christ who 'in specific ways enters into a living relationship with a given cultural tradition' (37), the relationship between inculturation and incarnation based on the justification of the created world and creativity in the act of Christ's bodily birth, dynamic and ambivalent relationship between universal and local aspects of the Church, and the affirmation of the positive elements of each individual culture and cultures in general.

After the chapters dedicated to theological presuppositions of inculturation and Orthodox missiology, a historical review of inculturation and its modern reiterations, and Christian understandings of culture, religion, and symbolic forms, the author analyzes the necessity of re-Christianization, i.e., rethinking and intensifying of authentic and effective Christian mission in the modern world, offering one possible blueprint for the model of Orthodox inculturation.

This model is based primarily on Christ's incarnation as a 'pinnacle of God's

mission in the world,' which 'represents the affirmation of human nature,' including culture as its 'extension.' The second important aspect of an Orthodox inculturation presumes the 'commission of the Church' to 'establish new Churches all across the world, in accordance with Orthodox ecclesiology that emphasises the fullness of every local Eucharistic community' (250). Since the greatest obstacle to Orthodox inculturation is 'negative traditionalism and cultural rigidity,' we must understand that 'in one Church there may exist other cultural models besides the Byzantine model,' which might be achieved by 'transplanting the essence of Byzantine religious culture (...) on which other people may then build their own ecclesial religiosity' (251).

According to the author's view of a correct model of inculturation, a missionary's obligation 'is not to change the cultural identity of a newly baptised community but to enable it to gradually face its cultural tradition and, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, produce a Christian culture.' Orthodoxy must overcome a dominant conviction that the 'once accomplished synthesis of the Gospel and Byzantine culture should be imposed as normative on other cultures,' since 'the avoidance of an active dialogue between the Church and local culture might produce a real identity crisis among converts, as witnessed in many historical examples' (251).

In the final chapter, the author analyzes the 'cultural situation of the modern Church' to find the best ways in which 'it may still ennoble and sanctify man's symbolic forms' with the aim of constructing a Christian culture — a task never completely achievable.

Among many features of the modern world that represent challenges for the Christian mission, Vedran Golijanin emphasises atheism and individual religiosity, globalization, the secular distinction between Christianity and culture, post-modernism with its idea of the relativity of the truth, and the crisis of symbols, which has as both its cause and consequence 'the alienation from the worship as a central aggregation of the most important and most sacred symbols' (289).

As possible solutions, i.e., the ways of reinculturation, the author singles out the necessity of self-criticism, overcoming the gap between Christianity and science (i.e., the re-Christianization of science), and overcoming the alienation of Christianity and the arts, paying special attention to the example of film. The author basically proposes that the Church has to take a step forward and accept scientific knowledge and artistic creativity as specifically human and God-given abilities, and also to accept their power to witness the truth of faith by visibly expressing invisible realities; however, there should not be any subjugation or adaptation of the revealed truths to epistemological, ethical, and esthetic criteria that are actually based on those truths.

While living in the world and culture, and not in some alienated vacuum, self-isolation, and exclusivism that contradict the authentically communal and universally salvific nature of Christianity, the faithful have always striven for the incarnation of the truths of their faith in the cultural forms of their age and community. Golijanin is certain that the Church — as a Body of Christ and eschatological community inside history, and not as the re-

ligion, i.e., a system of ideas and patterns that may represent and reproduce various experiences and beliefs about world and humanity — is in a ‘ceaseless struggle to realise Christian culture, or, as Ivan Ilyin would say, an unending search for Christian culture’ (316).

No historical epoch has achieved ‘a real transformation and enlightenment’ of culture and society, which might allow us to consider them truly Christian. Thus, ‘the modern inculturation should not be understood as reverting to the old ways, i.e., to some ideal cultural and religious system, because something like that, as Berdyaev insists, never existed,’ meaning that the Church’s task is to ‘analyze the current cultural situation and think of the strategy for the continuation of the struggle for Christian culture’. The author calls for optimism regarding this struggle because, according to Paul Tillich, ‘the culture is already religious, but it has forgotten its religious nature or intentionally ignores it’ (316). In this sense, the Church should not view the culture from the position of a ‘critic from a parallel cultural universe’; instead, we need the ‘Church’s honest entrance into the world, an honest entrance into the culture and life of modern humanity, because only in this way will the Church be able to have its people and the people will have their Church’ (317). Only in this way can the Church heal the world instead of assuming the position of superior and alienated critic of all those on the outside, while simultaneously possessing the secret knowledge about the cure and the cure itself. True inculturation is the responsibility of Christians in the world, which means that they cannot retreat from the fight for the meaning — a

meaning that is more than necessary, but which should not be imposed in violent or manipulative ways or indifferently rejected, since everyone is fed up with that. Accepting inculturation as a necessary part of its mission and identity would demonstrate the Church’s honest care for itself, for ‘those inside and outside’; therefore, ‘it is up to the Church to accept this product of Christian love and thus rejuvenate the forgotten missionary optimism from the first centuries of its existence’ (324).

The book *Mission and Culture: Theology of Inculturation and its Place in Orthodox Mission Theology* represents a thorough and argument-based study of an issue which is not sufficiently and systematically studied in modern Serbian theology or Orthodox theology in general. It is almost completely unexplored in cultural theory and affiliated disciplines, despite its great importance for the understanding of the origin, development, and implications of its basic notions. Even though he is not a cultural theorist, the author is careful to base his understanding of this notion on relevant and adequate sources, especially on the ideas of Clifford Geertz about dynamically transferred and inherited symbolic forms, and those of Richard Niebuhr about culture that may be seen as the realm of necessity and as nature. Besides its serious theoretical foundation, the goal of this study is to stimulate further work on inculturation by the Church and its educational and missionary institutions, as well as by all the faithful, and also to offer a practical foundation for the development of a systematically planned missionary practice (which is currently lacking).

In addition to the main text, the book

contains a rather extensive list of sources and literature in several languages and from many disciplines which are necessary for the understanding of this complex and interdisciplinary research. The book consists of 345 pages and was peer-reviewed by Ljubivoje Stojanović and Darko Đogo. It is based on a doctoral dissertation written at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in the University of Belgrade, and the author is a university lecturer at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the University of East Sarajevo. ■

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Εύη Βουλγαράκη-Πισίνα

Πειθώ και Επιβολή. Βαβύλας εναντίον Απόλλωνα: Ένα παράδειγμα θρησκευτικής σύγκρουσης κατά την Ύστερη Αρχαιότητα
Athens: Μαΐστρος, 2022

276 pages, with bibliography

[Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina

Persuasion and Coercion. Babyllas versus Apollo: An example of religious conflict in Late Antiquity

Athens: Maistros, 2022]

Review by Dr Dionysios Skliris

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The book examines Late Antiquity as a period of transition in which a great variety of cultures, religions and attitudes could interact with one another, coercion and persuasion being two alternative modes of coexistence in the context of the Greco-Roman ecumene. The toolkit of the book is drawn from the disciplines of Religious Studies and Missiology with an emphasis on interreligious and interconfessional dialogue. The author discusses the introduction of the notion of 'Late Antiquity' by Peter Brown, as well as Averil Cameron's remark that a separate study of Byzantium in its diachronic character is also essential in order to understand the changes and shifts that have taken place within it. Different approaches by specialists to the question of whether there has been a 'Christianization' of Hellenism or a 'Hellenisation' of Byzantium are also discussed, with the author insisting on the idea of mutual interaction, rather than prevalence or dominance.