

A STUDY OF ASIAN INCULTURATION: CASE STUDY OF ALOYSIUS PIERIS' BASIC HUMAN COMMUNITIES

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The primary purpose of this essay is to explore the theory and praxis of Asian inculturation resulting from Aloysius Pieris' living experience in the Basic Human Communities (BHCs). This research will indicate that Asian inculturation is a symbiotic relationship involving syncretic processes between the Christian faith and the religio-cultural context. The understanding of inculturation can contribute toward gaining an awareness of who Jesus is, and of what Asian local churches are in the context of Asia. In addition, the symbiotic relationship will suggest how the Christian faith can flourish within Asian culture and how Asian culture challenges the Christian faith through mutual self-mediation with a religio-cultural context.¹

More specifically, I will examine Aloysius Pieris and his experience of the BHCs to discover the symbiotic relationship between faith and culture – as a way of Asian inculturation. Considered as one of the most important thinker in Asia,² Pieris, a Sri Lankan Jesuit, is a founding contributor to the first generation of Asian liberation theology, and through his works *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (1988), *Love Meets Wisdom* (1988), and *Fire and Water* (1996) has inspired many Asian and third world theologians.

This paper is organized as follows. After an introduction, I will explore the definitions of terms related to inculturation theory and praxis: culture, syncretism, inculturation. Subsequently

¹ Though I use the terms “culture”, “context”, and “religio-cultural context” together, I prefer “religio-cultural context” to “culture” because of the inseparable characteristics of religion and culture in Asia. I do not mean that “culture” is interchangeable with “faith”; rather, faith has to be considered to understand culture in Asia.

² Michael Barnes, “Review of *An Asian Theology of Liberation*,” *The Month* 22 (1989): 233.

I will use the case study of the BHCs for an exploration of an Asian inculturation theory and praxis. Pieris' reflection on the Asian context and experience of the BHCs will indicate both how to understand inculturation, and how to inculturate in an Asian context. Finally I will utilize Peter Schineller's three pole of inculturation - the situation, the Christian message, and the agent of inculturation gospel - to explore a method for Asian inculturation.³

I. Working Definitions and Methodology

Here I attempt to define the terms related to inculturation as laid out by some of the best known writers on *culture*, *syncretism* and *inculturation*. Clifford Geertz and Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo will provide an in-depth view of *culture* helps in understanding the role of culture in inculturation. I will proceed to explain *syncretism* following Carl Starkloff's positive and stimulating position. For the term *inculturation*, I will reflect on Pieris' idea of symbiosis and notion of inculturation, along with Pedro Arrupe and Aylward Shorter's theories. With respect to methodology, I will briefly discuss the mutual self-mediation of Bernard Lonergan.

A. Culture

Although there are many definitions for culture, I will follow Geertz and Azevedo's definitions for the purpose of this paper. Geertz and Azevedo's well-known understandings of culture are compatible with Asian inculturation for two reasons. First, their definitions well explain the importance of symbol and tradition, which are significant characteristics of Asian culture and religions. Second, they try to understand culture as a reality. Like the genetic code of living creature, cultural codes are a reality in the world, whether in recognizable forms, or transmitted as a set of subconscious meanings and values.

³ See Peter Schilleler, "The How of Inculturation?" *A Handbook of Inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990).

Geertz's notion of culture is one of classic statements. He states:

“[Culture] denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”⁴

In the light of an anthropological perspective, this notion is important for understanding the significance of meanings and values in the task of inculturation. For instance, when Christianity made its way into Korea, there was no appropriate term for the Christian God. The early missionaries translated God into the Korean term *Hananim* or *Hanunim*, which is a combined Heaven with a respectful suffix. In the context of Korea, Heaven has a symbolic meaning of divinity outside of physical reality. Empirically then, culture can be understood as a set of meanings and values that are expressed in symbols and symbolic forms.⁵ Thus, according to Geertz's notion, culture informs, provides, and transforms a way of life and the meaning and value of that life. Depending on symbolic expression or social practice, a society's cultural code dissolves into cultural systems such as religion, ideology, common sense, art, and so on.

While Geertz's notion of culture discusses the importance of meanings embodied in symbols and symbolic forms, Azevedo offers a more comprehensive understanding of culture which involves both symbol and concrete social practices.⁶ On the basis of Geertz's notion of culture, he further develops it to include concrete social practice as a further dimension of culture. Azevedo notes:

The set of meanings, values and patterns which underlie the perceptible phenomena of a concrete society, whether they are recognizable on the level of social practice (acts, ways

⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

⁵ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 11.

⁶ Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo, “Inculturation and the Challenges of Modernity,” *Inculturation: Working papers on Living Faith and Cultures*, ed. Arij A. Roest Crolius, no 1 (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University for Centre “Culture and Religions,” 1982), 9.

of proceeding, tools, techniques, costumes and habits, forms and traditions), or whether they are the carriers of signs, symbols, meanings and representations, conceptions and feelings that consciously or unconsciously pass from generation to generation and are kept as they are or transformed by people as the expression of their human reality. Culture, therefore, is the deepest code to reveal a human, social group and to make it understandable.⁷

Azevedo understands that culture not only denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meaning, but also has the potential to transform culture itself. Human society makes the set of meanings, values and patterns understandable at both conscious and unconscious levels. So, culture – as the deepest code – generates its own colors and transforms its own self when need be.

In addition, through conscious or unconscious expression, culture can be understood more clearly in terms of cultural systems. Starkloff defines a cultural system along the same lines as Geertz, stating that it “is historically constructed and subject to historically defined standards of judgment.”⁸ The strength of Geertz’s approach came from his sophisticated weaving of culture with cultural systems by using “thick description.” The theory explains that analyzing human behavior explains not just the behavior, but its context as well, such that the behavior becomes meaningful to an outsider. It is necessary to know that there are many dimensions to understanding cultural symbols that have many meanings and values. By using the thick description, Geertz develops the idea of cultural systems as the interaction of different components of culture which shape a collective identity.

Therefore, Geertz and Azevedo’s definitions of culture help to explore Asian inculturation, as culture in this context symbolically and phenomenologically refers to the distinctive pattern of meanings, values, norms, and transformations which occur in human societies.

⁷ Azevedo, “Inculturation and the Challenges of Modernity,” 10.

⁸ Carl Starkloff, “Inculturation and Cultural Systems,” *Theological Studies* 55(1994): 72.

B. Syncretism

Syncretism has become a polemical term against the Christian faith since the 17th century, although the term originated with neutral meaning in its Crete beginnings. Christianity has bluntly resisted the term to preserve its uniqueness or particularity among the many religions and philosophies existing in the world. However, the transition of meaning for syncretism occurred through the development of local theologies after Vatican II. As a result of the council, some thinkers made an effort to discuss syncretism in the light of the process of inculturation, as part of a task relating to a particular cultural context. For them, the term is regarded in a more positive and desirable light.

There are strong arguments surrounding syncretism in theological schools. Some stress the purity of the gospel, the Christian identity, and the threat from other religions. Others, against a western-centered understanding of the gospel, seek the ground for a creative and dynamic syncretism. Hendrik Kraemer provides an example of the negative position on syncretism, arguing that Christo-centric Christianity is not compatible with syncretism because there is no salvation without Jesus Christ, who is a unique representation of God's revelation as disclosed in the Bible.⁹ This position still carries weight in the dominant exclusivist understanding of the Christian faith, which hardly considers the religio-cultural context of Asia.

By contrast, Starkloff mentions three more sympathetic writers on syncretism: M.M. Thomas, Leonardo Boff, and Wolfhart Pannenberg.¹⁰ Acknowledging the negative connotations surrounding the term, Thomas wants to define a neutral and positive understanding of "Christ-

⁹ Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in the Non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938), 308.

¹⁰ Carl Starkloff, "The Problem of Syncretism in the Search for Inculturation," *Mission* 1 (1994): 84-6.

centered syncretism” for the development of interreligious dialogue.¹¹ Boff understands that power is a key issue in syncretism; he realizes that “the value of syncretism depends on the viewpoint of the observer, but our understanding of syncretism has always come from those who have been afraid of it: the defenders of theological and institutional knowledge.”¹² If one is situated on a lower level, Boff confirms, “syncretism is seen as a normal and natural process.”¹³ Pannenberg examines the history of how Christianity came to dominate the Hellenistic worldview and argues that Christianity has syncretic character as expressed through its assimilative and integrative power.

From an Asian view, it is necessary to understand syncretism more positively. It is true, as Starkloff further points out, that “syncretism is a natural historical occurrence that in our time it has become a point of departure both in the quest for interreligious dialogue and for what Christians now call ‘inculturation.’”¹⁴ Thus, considering the need for interreligious dialogue and for the understanding of the incarnation of Jesus, it is time to understand the term syncretism in a more positive and desirable light. Starkloff states that syncretism is:

1) the mixing of religious forms through borrowing and blending, perhaps consciously, perhaps unconsciously; 2) a mixing that also includes other currents flowing from ideologies, culture, and from empirical social science; 3) both a process, describing what is happening or was happening, and a result, describing what presently exists (we might use the terminology of ‘diachronic’ and ‘synchronic’ description here) 4) an experience at the origin of a religion or as a later threat to it; 5) a problem of symmetry and asymmetry; that is, one asks whether the religions involved are mutually contributing to the process, or whether one of them is dominating the other. (This element involves the very important problem of power.) Finally, 6) syncretism may be defined either functionalistically or conflictively. As a function, syncretism seeks to overcome ethnic and cultural contradictions and thus render

¹¹ M.M Thomas, “The Absoluteness of Jesus Christ and Christ-Centered Syncretism,” *Ecumenical Review* 37, (1985): 387.

¹² Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charisma & Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 89.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Starkloff, “Problem of Syncretism,” 75.

religion into a service to society. As a contradiction, it takes on a Marxist coloring and is seen as a mask for the conflicts within society involving various interests and serving as an instrument of oppression. In this light, an apparent religious harmony creates only the illusion of unity.¹⁵

Starkloff's approach has a positive perspective, embracing many dimensions to understand syncretism. Either functionalistically or conflictively, syncretism occurs through the interacting of different components of culture when confronting other religions naturally. While I wonder about his conclusion that religious harmony has only the illusion of unity, he makes me think of the living experience of Pieris' symbiosis as an alternative achievement of syncretic processes in a more harmonious way in an Asian context.

It is almost a scarlet letter, the letter *A* in red, that brands you if you are a syncretist in my Korean religious context – and as far as I know, this environment is not limited to my denomination. The same thing occurs in Catholicism. Raimon Panikkar, Anthony DeMello, and Tissya Balasuriya are among Asian theologians who were warned by Rome to keep silent when they sought an Asian syncretic process in theology and living. In spite of the scarlet letter, if we again consider the quest for interreligious dialogue and Christian identity amid religious diversity and conflicts, Starkloff's definition is significant. In this view, we understand the syncretic process which occurs throughout Christian history as a natural occurrence, as well as confront the request for a more positive understanding.

C. Inculturation

As a utopian concept manifested in the mystery of incarnation, the notion of inculturation is still developing its meaning and interpretation; some prefer the term contextualization to the

¹⁵ Ibid., 78-9.

term inculturation.¹⁶ It is worthwhile to recognize the aim of inculturation, that is “the creation of a new unity and communication, not only within the culture in question but also as an enrichment of the Church universal.”¹⁷ Starkloff argues that this aim is a chance to not only reveal the kernel of the gospel, but also to enrich the Christian faith toward becoming a more universal Christianity. The Christian faith and culture are mutually involved in creating a new pattern of God people’s life. Here, I hold that inculturation is a symbiotic relationship between the Christian faith and the Asian religio-cultural context, which work in dialogical ways towards achieving liberation and salvation.

A main process of inculturation is dynamic dialogue. Starkloff mentions that inculturation always involves a conversation between two partners – the gospel and the culture.¹⁸ Ary Roest Crolius asks, “[w]hat is so new about inculturation?” He answers that inculturation is “the more vivid awareness of the dialogical character of the relation between Church and cultures.”¹⁹ Thus, dialogue offers “a mutual communication of diverse meanings.” It manifests the diverse meanings as well as their communicability, and reveals “the universality of these meanings beyond the confines of a particular culture.”²⁰ Dialogue plays an important role in inculturation, especially when dialogue can manifest a new set of meanings and values from the gospel into a given context.

While dialogue serves as a process for inculturation, symbiosis connects the Christian faith with an Asian context in a lively way. Symbiosis originates from the Middle Way, a way

¹⁶ I prefer to use the term inculturation to emphasize the incarnation of Jesus Christ in the religious diversity. As a minority religion in Asia, Christianity should ask how to understand both who Jesus is and what the kernel of his teaching is, as these points relate to religio-cultural diversity. Hence, though I agree with the term contextualization, I am inclined to using the term inculturation instead.

¹⁷ Crolius, “What is so New about Inculturation,” 53.

¹⁸ Carl Starkloff, “Inculturation and Cultural Systems,” *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 69.

¹⁹ Crolius, “What is so New About Inculturation,” 53.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

which integrates both sides of reality – for instance day and night, true and false, light and darkness. While the Middle Way is criticized by Westerners for its ambiguity and cyclical nature, symbiosis can provide a complimentary dualistic understanding of reality. Pieris learns the need for symbiosis when developing mutual dialogue in religions which have a soteriological system that provoke their own religious identity. He states that:

[Symbiosis is] a cultivated form of reciprocal preexistence whereby each idiom sharpens its identity in conversation with the other. For their mutual exposure reveals the authentic character of each in such a way that it is possible to recognize that which is not genuine in either of them.²¹

If people consider other religions as equal to their own, symbiosis as a cultivated form contributes to building harmonious communities among different religions. The symbiosis of religions creates a model where many religions equated. Such a model encourages people to live peacefully and harmoniously.

For Pieris, the method accretism is used to move hybrid cultures towards a soteriological orientation. He notes that “*homo religious* learns to align locally determined cosmic concern (food, harvest, rain and sunshine, floods and drought, health and sickness, life and death, marriage and politics) with the soteriological orientation of his or her life toward a metacosmic Beyond.”²² Each religion, challenged by another religion’s unique approach to the liberationist aspirations of the poor, discovers and re-names itself in its specificity in response to the other approaches.²³ Praxis for liberation not only challenge religions to verify the responsibility of their truth to their context but also transforms their context through mutual interaction. Hence, from an Asian context, inculturation is a symbiotic relationship between the Christian faith and

²¹ Pieris, *Fire & Water*, 184.

²² Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 99.

²³ Pieris, *Fire & Water*, 161.

its Asian context, moving towards liberation and salvation through a mutually transforming interaction within the culture.

Then, what does the uniqueness of Christian faith mean? The literary meaning of symbiosis is living, or life, together. The uniqueness of Christianity gradually should be revealed through living together. Symbiosis invites people to mutually expose and recognize each other's subjectivity; thus they experience the distinctive value in not discriminating the differences between each other. Moreover, people can transcend the limits of their particular understanding of God's revelation. A close look at the symbiotic relationship demonstrates a different priority for Christian life – that being Jesus Christ, who is the symbolic form or paradigm of Christian faith in responsibility.

Pieris' notion of inculturation shows an example of symbiotic relationships between the Christian faith and its Asian context. According to Pieris, inculturation is a term that has gradually replaced Pope John XXIII's catchy term *aggiornamento*. It was a sermon to reeducate the church in the languages and idioms of the people and a sermon to the church to return to its Pentecostal origins.²⁴ Admitting the Pentecostal origins of the church, Pieris believes that "authentic inculturation will take place and the church *in* Asia will indeed become the church *of* Asia. Inculturation, therefore, cannot separate from liberation."²⁵ Pieris' understanding of inculturation makes it clear that local churches should place high emphasis on eliminating the suffering of the poor. Through the process of inculturation, the church should be revealed as Good News, which has the power of liberation. He believes that

Inculturation is the costly faith-response by which the church – as a community that claims to be the voice of Spirit – recognizes this voice in the Asian [body of] Christ, the vast suffering peoples of Asia, wherever it is heard today, and responds to it in obedience

²⁴ See Pieris, *Fire & Water*, 127-8.

²⁵ Pieris, *Asian Theology of Liberation*, xiii.

so that the church may become Good News to them as Jesus was, in the freedom of the Spirit.²⁶

Pieris confirms that inculturation is not cheaper grace but the costly faith that requires the responsibility of the faith in engaging with the poor in the voice of the Spirit. The power of the Holy Spirit proclaims the costly faith and makes the churches respond to their Asian context.

Therefore, my working definition of inculturation for the paper will follow both Starkloff's syncretic process and Pieris' symbiosis in order to respond to the Asian-Christian context that requires interreligious dialogue and a Christian identity. In other words, a symbiotic relationship is formed by syncretic processes, through mutual self-mediation between the Christian faith and the Asian religio-cultural context of liberation in a mutually enhancing relationship.

D. Mutual Self-mediation

I will use an understanding of Lonergan's theological method to further explore Asian inculturation. Lonergan understands theology as the mediator between religious communities and their cultural context, and thus the task of theology is mediation "between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion within that matrix."²⁷ Mutual self-mediation provides a predictable method for exploring Asian inculturation. Robert Doran and John Dadosky develop Lonergan's insight about mediation into the method of mutual self-mediation. According to Doran, the mediation of theology is one of mutual self-mediation. He argues that "the mediation of religion and culture that theology performs is not simply a self-mediation of Christian constitutive meaning, a mediation that moves from the data on revelation through their

²⁶ Pieris, *Fire & Water*, 129.

²⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996), xi.

on going consequences in history to the contemporary faith of the church.”²⁸ The method moves theological perspective from the traditional loci to the contextual loci through synthesis. John Dadosky connects the method of mutual self-mediation with syncretism when religion and culture encounter each other, and suggests that the church develops friendships using this method.²⁹ Thus, when exploring Asian inculturation, mutual self-mediation is an appropriate method because it mediates between Christian faith and Asian culture. The Christian faith should be respectful of and open to Asian culture in a positive way – Christianity has a chance to be enriched through Asian culture.

III. The Case Study of Aloysius Pieris’ Basic Human Communities

I will examine the Basic Human Communities as a case study for Asian inculturation. This study requires the theological context of Asian theology which provides the foundations for BHCs. BHCs arise in the midst of religio-cultural diversity among the poor, and give an opportunity to consider how the Christian faith should be relevant to that context. As well, the BHCs provide a model of Asian inculturation with a priority of praxis in faith and symbiosis.

A. Efforts toward Developing Asian Inculturation

Asian contextual theology has two kinds of important references: liberation, hermeneutic, and extratextual hermeneutics.³⁰ As Deane W. Ferm states, there is no adequate way to give

²⁸ Robert Doran, “Reflection on Method in Systematic Theology,” *Loneragan Workshop Journal*, 17 (2002): 45.

²⁹ See John Dadosky, “‘Walking in the Beauty of the Spirit’: A Phenomenological and Theological Case Study of a Navajo Blessingway Ceremony,” *Mission* VI (1999): 2, 199-222; Dadosky, “The Church and the Other: Mediation and Friendship in Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Ecclesiology,” *PACIFICA* 18 (October 2005): 302-335.

³⁰ R.A. Sugirtharajah, “Introduction,” *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 2.

even a postcard summary of the developments in recent Asia theology that have led to the emergence of liberation theology.³¹ Asian Report describes that:

For the most part, Asian theologians accept what is value in the general advances made by liberation theology concerning committed Christians as the subjects doing theology, commitments as the first act of theology, social analysis as an indicator of the signs of the times, the process of doing theology by action-reflection-action, the medium of expressing theology through the art, and the spirituality of commitment to integral human liberation.³²

Acknowledging the limitations of classical theology, it is liberation theology that provides a radically renewed method for third world theology, though it is thoroughly Western. As a theology that is not new, but a new theological method, liberation theology seems for Pieris and Asian theologians to be the correct method of doing theology.³³ Although liberation theology has laid much of the theological basis for Pieris, he points out that this theology must be supplemented with insights and practices taken from Asian religious resources and perspectives.

Along with liberation theology, Asian theologians have worked out a hermeneutic approach which takes into account Asia's religio-cultural values and its multiple sacred text traditions. It is the attempt to integrate faith and culture on a new path for doing theology. R.A. Sugirtharajah, who studies Asian hermeneutics, holds that

The extratextual hermeneutics that is slowly emerging as a distinctive Asian contribution to theological methodology seeks to transcend the textual, historical, and religious boundaries of Christian tradition and cultivate a deeper contact with the mysterious ways

³¹ Deane W. Ferm, *Third World Liberation Theologies: An Introductory Survey* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 77.

³² K.C Abraham, ed., "Asian Report," *Third World Theologies: Commonalities & Divergences* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 19.

³³ Pieris holds five reasons for why he regards liberation theology as the correct method of doing theology. First, the features of the methodology are contained in Jon Sobrino's lucid comparison of European and Latin American theologies. Second, there is the primacy of praxis over theory. Third, this way is the way of the cross, the basis of all knowledge. Fourth, it is "liberational theology" which demands an asceticism of renunciation and a voluntary poverty that rejects acquisitiveness. Finally, the encounter of God with humanity is seen as the obligation to use all human potentialities to anticipate the kingdom. See, Pieris, *Asian Theology of Liberation*, 82-83.

in which people of all religious persuasions have defined and appropriated humanity and divinity.³⁴

The Asian sacred texts challenge the privileged status of the Christian text, and the supposed superiority of the Christian story, while traditional theologians both in Asia and the West suspect the application of extratextual hermeneutics to a new Asian theology. But, this application provides a chance to enrich the Christian faith in many ways, since Asian religious wisdom offers a deeper understanding of God and of the universal love of God. He continues that “there is a move now to go beyond the earlier monotextual approach, which puts so much emphasis on the canonical Christian texts, and to use literary and nonliterary resources that are common to all the peoples of Asia.”³⁵ Within this consideration, the extratextual approach that both challenges and enriches the Christian faith moulds the Asian contextual theologies significantly.

Consequently, Pieris’ theology and Asian theology are the results of reflection on Asian realities in both the socio-economic and religio-cultural dimensions. For the former, Asian theologians explore the liberation theology and they begin to respect the role of religio-cultural influence to Christianity for the latter. In this regard, Asian theologians have gradually realized the significance in their method of doing theology, as compared with the method of classical theology. Asian theology works toward a method for inculturation that tries to approach and to respond to Asian realities in an appropriate and relevant way with the Christian faith.

B. The Basic Human Communities

In July of 1989, Pieris constructed the BHCs where members of Christian and non-Christian denominations – Buddhists, Hindus, and Marxists – strive together for the liberation of life.

³⁴ Sugirtharajah, “Introduction,” 3.

³⁵ Ibid.

The Basic Human Communities is not a group that has come together for interreligious dialogue.... The origin, the development, and the culmination of the activities of a BHC is, ideally, the total liberation.... It is within the process of this ongoing liberative praxis that each member of the BHC discovers the uniqueness of his or her religion.³⁶

Through an ongoing liberative praxis in the BHCs, Pieris believes that each religion, including Christianity, should discover its own uniqueness. Thus this awareness of other religions makes it possible for encounters and dialogues each other. He believes that the truth each religion has will be revealed by living together.

Pieris experienced the total poverty and detachment taught by the Buddhist tradition. He then rediscovered and accepted God in a new dimension, before coming back to the reality of Asia. He recognizes the reality of Asia, which is an interrelation of inseparable social, cultural, and religious contexts, which lead him to construct a new theology relevant to an Asian context in terms of inculturation. For Pieris, theology is the discovery that “a Christian participation in and a christic explication of all that happens at the deepest zone of concrete ethos where religiousness and poverty, each in its liberative dimension, coalesce to forge a common front against mammon.”³⁷ Pieris critically reflects on Asian realities, bound with the metaphor image of mammon, and proceeds to suggest that the Christian faith should include liberation praxis through participation and christic explication to the context.

Consequently, Christians should participate in their religio-cultural context. The first task of living together with other religions is the developing the spirit of symbiosis. As mentioned above, symbiosis states that by reflecting on one’s faith from within the context of the other’s faith, one can rediscover the uniqueness of their own faith and be able to transcend the limits of their own particular understanding. Thus, the result of symbiotically living with non-

³⁶ Pieris, *Fire & Water*, 158.

³⁷ Pieris, *Asian Theology of Liberation*, 88.

Christians reveals the uniqueness of the Christian faith and the Asian churches. This is an incarnation of Jesus, who becomes the Way and Life of life.

C. The Praxis Model for Asian Inculturation

Bevans suggests six models of contextual theology: the translation, anthropological, praxis, synthetic, transcendental, and countercultural models. He notes that “there is no one completely adequate way of doing theology.”³⁸ He continues saying, “one may choose a particular model in a particular context, but one must also be aware that other models may be equally valid in other contexts.”³⁹ When considering which of these models is the best, Bevans answers: “[i]t depends on the context.”⁴⁰ The appropriate and relevant model for an Asian inculturation is the praxis model supplemented by the anthropological model.

The praxis model complimented by the anthropological model is compatible with the BHCs and Pieris' theology. In doing theology and living as a Christian in the BHCs, Pieris has embedded theopraxis in much of his theology: “theology is an unfolding theopraxis.”⁴¹ He maintains that “by theopraxis I mean a God-experience (which is at once a human concern) of God’s people living beyond the church, and among whom the church is called to lose itself in baptismal immersion or total participation.”⁴² For him, God-experience of God People’s living is primary. Then, the church should reveal the truth, and should be humble as Jesus was when he was baptized on the banks of the river of Jordan. He recognizes that for Asian theology, “the perfection to be achieved is the style of achieving it! The obvious corollary is that the Asian

³⁸ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 33.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 140.

⁴¹ Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Book, 1988), 41.

⁴² Ibid.

method of doing theology is itself Asian theology. Theopraxis is already the formulation of theology.”⁴³ Thus, Pieris puts a high value on theopraxis for his own theology and for Asian liberation theology. This theory is compatible with the praxis model of Bevans.

The praxis model of contextual theology, according to Bevans, focuses on “the identity of Christians within a context particularly as that context is understood in terms of social change.”⁴⁴ Because Asian context calls for radical social change and creative pastoral action in harmony with religions and cultures, the praxis model might be appropriate for understanding the BHCs and Pieris’ theology, which seeks the symbiotic relationship between the Christian faith and its Asian context. In addition, the anthropological model supplements the weakness of the praxis model, which is criticized for its close connection with Marxism. The anthropological model provides a perspective foreseeing culture as basically good and trustworthy, which is equal to the Christian tradition.⁴⁵ Although Bevans critiques the weakness of the model for its cultural romanticism, the model takes the idea of context seriously, and provides a fresh perspective on Christianity. The anthropological model as well is resonant with symbiosis.

IV. Explorations of an Inculturation – The How of Inculturation

Observing the case study of the BHCs, I might say that an Asian inculturation involves dynamic dialogue and a symbiotic relationship between the Christian faith and the Asian religious-cultural context, moving towards liberation from suffering. By integrating theory and praxis, this chapter will examine the BHCs in defining ‘the how of inculturation’ by using the three poles of inculturation. In the first pole, situation and culture will be analyzed and linked with two

⁴³ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁴ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 70.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 61.

religiosities. In the second pole I will seek an Asian face of Jesus in relation to the gospel message. For the third pole of Asian inculturation, I will reflect on Pieris' assertion that the Christian churches in Asia have not yet really become churches of Asia. Finally, I will explore the theological challenges and contributions involved in an Asian context, and vice versa.

A. The Situation of the BHCs

Asia is the home of all of the great religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity – as well as Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, and lesser religions.⁴⁶ With few exceptions, Christians comprise a small minority in Asian countries. Alongside the many religions, it is the overwhelming poverty in Asia that should seriously be taken into consideration for this study; poverty that is intensified by colonial and neo-colonial exploitation. As well, the military dictatorship and corruption of the leader group increase the causes of the poverty. Asians realize that nation-building and economic growth create a new form of colonialism, which has been achieved at the expense of the Asian poor and their environment. These two hybrid characters of Asia – religious diversity and poverty – are the context for an Asian inculturation.

There are two religiosities that provide the meeting place for the syncretic process. One significant Asian religious ethos is to not divide culture and religiosity. This does not mean that faith is culture. Pieris observes that “culture and religion are overlapping facets of one indivisible soteriology which is at once a view of life and a path of deliverance; it is both a philosophy which is basically a religious vision, and a religion which is a philosophy of life.”⁴⁷ Pieris distinguishes these two types of religiosity which blend with the spirituality of the poor.

⁴⁶ David J. Hesselgrave & Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989), 70.

⁴⁷ Pieris, “Western Models of Inculturation?” 117.

Cosmic religiosity is the type or religiosity found in Asia, Africa and Oceania. A meaning of the term “cosmic” emerged within the EATWOT in 1979 when the primal religions (also called tribal, clannic, or “animistic”), together with the popular forms of the major religions (such as folk Buddhism and popular Hinduism), began to be called by that name.⁴⁸ The focus of cosmic religion is a this-world spirituality that reveres nature and its power, since this world is a sacred locus of religious experience. These cosmic religions view natural forces, such as fire, water, quakes and rain, as the effects of invisible causes which people call upon by using names like “gods,” “deities” or spirits of past human beings – ancestors; these forces are used to evoke feelings of fear, awe, and reverence in human beings.⁴⁹ Hence, cosmic religion is more down-to-earth, and closer to human reality since it gives more room for women to affirm themselves. For example, the role of various female shamans is highly regarded as a spiritual resource for women who are oppressed in various ways. The focus of this type of religiosity is this-world, including the world of the departed, insofar as this world is a sacred locus of religious experience.

On the other hand, a transcendental or a “metacosmic” reality is the ultimate salvific goal in the major world religions, both in the gnostic religions and in agapeic religions.⁵⁰ Pieris explains that Asia’s metacosmic religiosity which points to “a Transphenomenal Reality immanently operative in the Cosmos and soteriologically available within the human person either through agape (redeeming love) or through gnosis (redeeming knowledge).”⁵¹ These metacosmic religiosities usually spread by sending their roots into the cosmic religiosity of a given culture, which explains the cosmic or popular base of all metacosmic religions. Thus,

⁴⁸ Pieris, “Cosmic and Metacosmic Religiosity,” 60.

⁴⁹ Aloysius Pieris, “Toward an Asian Theology of Liberation: Some Religio-cultural Guidelines,” *Dialogue* VI: 32.

⁵⁰ Pieris, “Cosmic and Metacosmic Religiosity,” 60.

⁵¹ Pieris, “Western Models of Inculturation?” 117.

metacosmic soteriologies are not found in abstract form, but contextualized within the worldview of the cosmic religion of a given culture.

When Christianity moves into Asia, it is contextualized within the worldview of cosmic religion. A syncretic process occurs here when the cosmic religions meet with metacosmic religions. Like the relationship between a helicopter and a landing pad, these two religiosities interact complementarily.⁵² The integral and complementary relationship between cosmic and metacosmic religiosity is that one religiosity completes “the other in such a way as to form a bidimensional soteriology which maintains a healthy tension between the cosmic Now and the metacosmic Beyond.”⁵³ In this regard, the syncretic process occurs in the confrontation between the cosmic religiosity and the metacosmic religiosity. As mentioned above, culture and religions are inseparable in Asia, and two kinds of religiostic phenomena are useful to understanding the syncretic process in inculturation.

B. The Gospel Message in Asian Context

Let us consider Pieris’ question: Riding on the waves of colonialism, the Euro-ecclesiastical Christ swept to power in Latin America as he did a little later among the non-Islamicized tribes of Africa and continues to do so in Oceania. Why, then, did he fail to capture Asia, except in a few well-defined areas?⁵⁴ This question is related to the second pole of inculturation, in terms of the kernel of gospel within the situation. This pole is more closely related to the experience of the past – recorded in scripture, preserved, and defended in tradition

⁵² Pieris explains the meeting of two religiosities by using “the helicopter theory,” which is based on four historical observations. First, the metacosmic religions are like helicopters, while the cosmic religions serve them as natural landing pads. Second, it seems to be “First come, first served.” Third, once a helicopter has landed, another cannot land on the same pad. Fourth, the possibility of a helicopter being forced off of its landing pad is not to be ruled out. See, Pieris, *Fire & Water*, 66-7.

⁵³ Pieris, “Western Models of Inculturation,” 117.

⁵⁴ Pieris, *Fire & Water*, 55-6.

– according to Bevans.⁵⁵ However, inculturation is not towards the past. The past experience should be reinterpreted and adjusted into a new context by means of mutual self-mediation. As a result, Asian context demands a new understanding of Jesus, and the meaning of the gospel is relevant to its context.

I will discuss Pieris' inculturation of the mass, which touches on both the understanding of gospel and the churches in Asia. Pieris efforts toward true inculturation for Asia result in an 'inculturation of the Mass,' called "Indian Mass." Here are his eight lessons:

- 1, Inculturation should not amount to torturing anybody.
- 2, the liturgical renewal is a "change of life" and not a "change of rite."
- 3, the Eucharist serves only as a *sign*, as the *starting point* of inculturation.
- 4, inculturation begins with the Liturgy of Life, i.e., our living out the Paschal Mystery in our personal and apostolic struggle to anticipate the Reign of God within us and among us.
- 5, Liturgy of Life and the Liturgy of the Word go hand in hand.
- 6, It is something that happens *unconsciously* and spontaneously *in the course of our struggle to bring in God's Reign* in our local context.
- 7, each church forging its local ecclesial identity.
- 8, the local church becomes proclamation in its life and action before non-Christian world.⁵⁶

Pieris believes that inculturation is happening not through compelling or enforcing individuals, but through harmonious means – by renewal, and a change of life. He goes on to argue that the Liturgy of Life is the core of inculturation because the mass is the Christ-experience of the local community, which must first embody the Christian proclamation in life and in the world. The Liturgy of Life, starting with the memory of Jesus in the Eucharist, leads Christians to anticipate the Reign of God. Moreover, he believes that for the Eucharist to be authentic, inculturation must follow on an inculturation of life. The inculturation of life follows from the commitment in the life of the community, whose composition includes the poor, before the non-Christian world.

⁵⁵ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 7.

⁵⁶ See Aloysius Pieris, "Inculturation: Some Critical Reflections," *Vidyajyoti: Journal of Theological Reflection*, vol. LVII No.11 (Nov 1993): 643-644. *Italics* are Pieris'.

We know that the Word of God became human flesh that lived within a cultural context. The subject matter of inculturation is the incarnation of Jesus Christ, a subject upon which Aylward Shorter has made some good arguments. According to Shorter, the notion of incarnation needs to be enlarged to include the whole Christian mystery.⁵⁷ To describe Asian Jesus, Pieris begins with Asian history and the revelatory story of the Word. Consider that “[t]he Scriptural History and our History are together the Revelatory Word. In other word, the Liturgy of Life (our involvement in the history of our times in our locality) and the Liturgy of the Word (as exemplified in the history of Israel) cannot be separated.”⁵⁸ If Asian history is the revelatory history of God, the revelation of Asian Jesus in the BHCs is a symbiotic symbol and a source of liberative power from suffering – even though the image might contradict the European-ecclesiastical image.

Pieris discusses the Asian Christ as a sign of contradiction, saying he belongs not to the churches *of* Asia, but belongs to the churches *in* Asia.

The Christ of the official church is not only European but also ecclesiastical, i.e., a clumsy body that hides its head, which is Jesus. But the non-European Christ of the Asian elite suffers from the other extreme of not being ecclesial; it is a head minus the body, a Jesus truncated from the total Christ.⁵⁹

In contrast to European and ecclesiastical versions of Jesus, Pieris continues by saying, “the Asian Christ (as recognized, announced, and served in the basic human communities) – at times called the non-Christian Christ – is the true body, even if it has not yet named its head.”⁶⁰ Thus, the kernel of gospel can be appropriated through healing, teaching, and proclamation, within the symbiotic living conditions of the BHCs.

⁵⁷ Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 81.

⁵⁸ Pieris, “Inculturation: Some Critical Reflections,” 649.

⁵⁹ Pieris, *Fire & Water*, 75.

⁶⁰ Pieris, *Fire & Water*, 75.

Jesus is a model for living and working with the poor, the sick, and the marginalized in the New Testament; moreover, it is the kenosis of Jesus Christ is a significant feature. When Asian bishops received the *Lineamenta* from the Vatican in Rome, in 1997, giving the proposed agenda for the Synod, the bishops of Japan rejected of the agenda. The first concern they had was the relationship between Asia's religions and the Christian proclamation of Jesus Christ as the only savior. Their argument was that "... the church, learning from the kenosis of Jesus Christ, should be humble and open its heart to other religions to deepen its understanding of the Mystery of Christ."⁶¹ With this point of view of Jesus Christ, the Asian Jesus can be recognized as the symbiotic Christ – the Liturgy of Word and the Liturgy of Life – who is not only inseparable from the Reign of God, but also humble kenosis of the Mystery of Christ.

C. The Agent of Inculturation – Asian Church

The third pole of inculturation is the agent of inculturation, or minister of the gospel. What should the agent of inculturation be for the Asian church? With an awareness of the Asian church and how much it is influenced by the Western church with less consideration to her own context, Edward Schillebeeckx aptly describes the situation of Asian church, stating that "for over four centuries the theology of Asian church, in its formulation, content and expression, has been the local theology of the particular Western Church."⁶² While there are local churches in Asia, they are branches of the Western churches. This speaks to the self-reflection needed to reconstruct the Asian church since "the Asian Church, for the moment, has no theology of its

⁶¹ Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops. "Official Response of the Japanese Church to the LINEAMENTA." <http://www.cbcj.catholic.jp/eng/edoc/linea.htm> (accessed on June 22, 2007)

⁶² Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), ix.

own, though the cultures that host it teem with them.”⁶³ If the theology of Asia does not mediate its Asian context, it should distort the true gospel of Jesus and meaning of churches so that the Christian faith is held separate from the Asian context.

After reflecting on Asian realities and Christian theology, Pieris claims that the Asian church should be baptized in the Jordan of Asian Religion and the Calvary of Asian Poverty for the formulation of Asian theology. A theological analysis of double baptism is a significant part of Asian churches. Being baptized in the Jordan of Asia religiosity and on the cross of Asian poverty are the necessary steps to becoming a local church of Asia, and to constructing a contextual theology. Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan is a baptism into Asian religiosity and Jesus’ baptism in the Calvary is a baptism into Asian poverty. It is an act of humility before John and an act of solidarity with the poor. Thus, Pieris’ double baptism is a consequence of the church’s reaction to the Asia context.

Pieris’ understanding of double baptism implies a new image of being an Asian church. The humble and prophet communities discover the uniqueness of the Christian identity, and demand social change because of social injustice. Peter Phan expects the emergence of genuine Christian communities as a new decisive phenomenon for Christianity in Asia. This community that will decide the future of the Asian church embraces an Asian way of thinking, praying, living, and communicating their own Christ-experience to others.⁶⁴ Consequently, the BHCs would be a good example for Asian churches. Pieris seeks to ground the Asian church in the liberative praxis of the BHCs:

⁶³ Aloysius Pieris, “Towards an Asian Theology of Liberation: Some Religio-Cultural Guidelines,” *Asia’s Struggle for Full Humanity*, ed., Virginia Fabella (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1980), 89.

⁶⁴ Peter C. Phan, “Speaking in Many Tongues: Why the Church Must Be More Catholic,” *Commonweal* (Jan 12, 2007): 19.

A church inculturated in Asia is indeed a church liberated from Mammon, and is therefore, necessarily composed of the Poor: Poor by option and Poor by circumstance. In other words inculturation is the ecclesiaological revolution already initiated by *basic "human" communities...*"⁶⁵

It is possible to say that the Asian way of inculturation depends on the basic "human" communities because of the ongoing liberative praxis that provides the opportunity to discover the uniqueness of Christianity. Thus, Pieris is correct in saying:

My religious identity is not something I seek and find through academic discussion; it is something that the other religionists impart to me. It is the process of naming and recognizing both sin and liberation as experienced and acted upon by us in a BHCs that we acquire for one another our respective religious uniqueness.⁶⁶

Christian faith is limited when it is verified only at the ministry level (the first Magesterium) and the academic level (the second Magesterium). Christian faith should reveal its truth through the poor (the third Magesterium). It is possible to say that the BHCs is a model of Asian local churches analogically, where Christians can begin the proclaiming the incarnation of Jesus. For Pieris, the BHCs, which are the cells of the Church, is the starting point of inculturation.

To conclude this chapter, an Asian way of inculturation can be summarized in the following four statements: 1) without the Liturgy of the Word, there is no Liturgy of Life; 2) without the Liturgy of Life, no authentically local ecclesial community; 3) without an authentically local ecclesial community, no proclamation; 4) and without the acquisition of a proclamational character, there cannot be any inculturation.⁶⁷ These four steps embrace traditional theological loci (the Bible and tradition) with contextual *loci* (social change and context). Thus, inculturation of Asia goes with symbiotic relationship between Christian faith and culture, a faith which should proclaim Jesus Christ who is the Life and the Way.

⁶⁵ Pieris, "Western Models of Inculturation," 122.

⁶⁶ Pieris, *Fire & Water*, 158.

⁶⁷ Pieris, "Inculturation: Some Critical Reflections," 650.

V. Concluding Remarks: Challenges and Contributions

Using a methodology of mutual self-mediation, inculturation suggests both embracing and challenging the relationship between the Christian faith and Asian culture. Challenging Christianity versus Asian culture is done through embracing faith and living as the other side of the coin. There are still a lot of strengths in Christianity, such as the hope for the future, sanctify of life, a dynamic history, easy accessibility, and good organization and administration. Christianity also has drawbacks, such as ties with Western culture and colonialism. With these points in mind, I will examine how Christianity challenges and enriches Asian culture, and vice versa.

I came to this project with some bias. My reflection on Asian churches, especially in Korea, had led me to consider the relationship between the religio-cultural context of Asia, and how to reveal Christian faith among religions. Asian churches, both Catholic and Protestant, are still strongly influenced by Rome and western-centered theology and faith. On the other hand, I gradually have recognized a fact that I am an Asian as well as a Christian. The more I seek the Christian faith, the more I realize that I am nourished and educated by Asian culture. I recognize that both Christian faith and culture seem to conflict sometimes, but they are more complimentary to each other. Lastly, when I think of Jesus Christ in my faith and through theology, he comes to me firstly as the Way and the Life, before the only Truth. I know that this understanding of Jesus is not my own but that of many Asian Christians. Thus, exploring Asian inculturation is an opportunity to inquire into Asian identity in the Christian faith, and Asian churches, and Jesus, which are relevant in understanding the Asian context.

I tentatively conclude that Pieris' experience and theology of the symbiotic living with the poor deserves attention for Asian inculturation both theory and praxis. I discussed an

exploration of Asian inculturation observed through the Basic Human Communities. I approached this task from three directions: by defining the meaning of inculturation, by examining the BHCs as example for Asian inculturation, and by evaluating the BHCs using Shineller's three poles of inculturation in order to understand Asian inculturation in both theory and praxis. To wrap up the paper, I know that inculturation is an ongoing and never-ending process involving open-ended study. After studying Asian culture we need to return to Christianity with a new perspective – through reading the Bible and proclaiming the Good News with the new insights that Asian culture provides.

Biographical Note

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the theory and praxis of Asian Christian inculturation through Aloysius Pieris' lived experience of the "Basic Human Communities" (BHCs). Pieris, a Sri Lankan Jesuit, is a founding contributor to the first generation of Asian liberation theology, and through his works *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (1988), *Love Meets Wisdom* (1988), and *Fire and Water* (1996) has inspired many Asian and third world theologians. With doctorates in both Christian theology and Buddhism, Pieris has spent his whole life promoting dialogue between Buddhists and Christians, while building an Asian Christian theology on the basis of his Buddhist and contextual experience. Yet Pieris started the BHCs not for the primary purpose of inter-religious dialogue. Rather, through living together, members of different religions can discover the true beauty and uniqueness of their religion as well as that of others.

To interpret the theory and praxis of Pieris BHCs, and demonstrate its relevance for Christian inculturation in a religiously diverse context, I will apply Carl Starkloff's understanding of inculturation, which allows us to understand the vivid, dialogical character of the relationship between the Christian faith and the religions and cultures of Asia. The method will create a virtual locus where Christianity and Asian religions meet, and therefore the possibility to explore a distinct Asian Christian ecumenism.

Accordingly, this paper will show how Pieris' theological vision and experience of the BHCs indicate that Asian inculturation is a symbiotic relationship involving a syncretic process between the Christian faith and the Asian religio-cultural context. A symbiotic understanding of inculturation helps raise awareness of the role of local churches and of the Christian faith in the religiously pluralistic context of Asia. Moreover, a symbiotic relationship among the religions suggests how the Christian faith could flourish within the Asian context, but also how Asian culture challenges the Christian faith through its milieu of mutual self-mediation among all the religions. In conclusion, Pieris integrative and evocative view of the Christian faith provides a prime example of Christian ecumenism in a pluralistic context.

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