INCULTURATION AND CULTURAL SYSTEMS
(Part 1)

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THE RECENTLY coined term "inculturation"[1] is susceptible to oversimplification, misinterpretation, and eventually to being consigned to the dustbin of faded "buzz words." But the theological and historical problem represented by the word is much too critical to permit this to happen. Many others have already dealt with the problem. The present article hopes to deepen our understanding of it by highlighting the complex "webs of meaning" that make up cultural systems,[2] and thus cautioning theologians of inculturation against isolating individuals from their own authentic environments.[3]

In order to deepen the study, I propose to treat it, first, in light of the meaning of culture, and secondly, from the theological dimension that makes the very word "inculturation" unique as opposed to similar terminology drawn from the social sciences. Primarily, our source for the understanding of culture and cultures will be Clifford Geertz, and in particular his essays on cultural systems. This phenomenological

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[1] The term "inculturation" is taken from the Foreword to one of the most fundamental works in English on the subject of inculturation, *Studies in the International Apostolate of Jesuits* (Washington: Jesuit Missions, June, 1978); see esp. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., "Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation" (ibid. 1–9). Further important bibliographical materials are the following: Marcello Azevedo, S.J., "What is Inculturation?" *CRC Dossiers* (Ottawa: Canadian Religious Conference, March 25, 1985) Document nos. 401–60; David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991); Louis Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988); J. Peter Schineller, S.J., *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist, 1990); Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988); Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985); see also the various volumes in the series Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Culture, ed. Ary A. Roest Crollius, S.J. (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1982–). A work in French which is valuable for the North American context is Achiel Peelman, *L'Inculturation: L'Eglise et les cultures* (Ottawa: Desclée/Novalis, 1988).

[2] Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 3–30, at 5.

[3] Nonetheless, attention is due to the caution of Wilfred Cantwell Smith that interreligious dialogue must always attend to the *persons* involved rather than absolutizing the "systems"; see his "Comparative Religion: Whither and Why?" in Joseph Kitagawa and Mircea Eliade, eds., *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1973) 31–58, at 5.

exercise will be followed by a theological exploration of how the Christian gospel might touch, permeate, and be "incarnated" in such systems, so that they in turn give the gospel historical "form."

An important corollary to the study of inculturation, which cannot be dealt with in detail here, is the theory and praxis of interreligious dialogue. The tension between the two, ever since the publication of the Vatican II decrees on missions and on non-Christian religions, has called forth numerous commentaries. Writings which most directly address the tension are H. R. Schlette's *Towards a Theology of Religions,* and, more explicitly, R. Panikkar's *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* and Hans Küng's *Christianity and the World Religions.*[4] These theologians do not explicitly address inculturation in any detail, but it is clear that they understand the problem of proselytism to be a serious one, and for that reason, especially in the case of Panikkar and Küng, discourage it among the "world religions." The possibility of a certain "Hindu Christianity" lies within Panikkar's thought, while Küng might be said to be practicing a "pluralist" version of "evangelization," suggesting how Jesus Christ might both challenge and strengthen Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Analogous questions are now appearing, among Africans especially, in relation to traditional tribal religions. If religion truly has the weight of a cultural system, this question demands priority of attention in missiological discussions.

This article generally presupposes a context in which Christianity has already been introduced and has an active or at least nominal presence, although I have often found myself relating to independent religions in the persons of native spiritual leaders. In the light of this context, I am convinced that Christian aboriginal persons and perhaps whole communities suffer from a certain "internalized repression" relating to their traditions, with which they have not been permitted to deal adequately.[5] I would not hesitate to suggest that this type of study can be beneficial to members of "mainstream" communities as well, where cultures tend to be highly amalgamated and unspecified, often leaving little for their members beyond "pop culture," in the sense of a culture that is ephemeral and dictated by fads.

[4] Heinz Robert Schlette, *Towards a Theology of Religions, Quaestiones Disputatae* 14 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966); Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981); Hans Küng et al., *Christianity and the World Religions: Patterns of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism,* trans. Peter Heinegg (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1986).

[5] For this idea I am indebted to a former student, Dr. Emmanuel Tehindrazanirevelo of Madagascar.

THE BASIC TERMINOLOGY

Without traversing all the ground already covered by earlier writers on inculturation, I shall clarify my use of the term in its basic sense, leaving readers to pursue further implications in the literature I have cited in footnote 1 above.

In the mid-1970s, Pedro Arrupe, then general superior of the Society of Jesus, set out to implement the decrees of the Jesuits' Thirty-Second General Congregation of 1974–1975. Of special concern here is Decree 5, entitled "The Work of Inculturation of the Faith and Promotion of Christian Life."[6] The decree contains only two paragraphs, but, according to the editors of the Arrupe letter in *Studies*, it "could well be the sleeper" of the whole congregation.[7] The decree says little to clarify the meaning of inculturation, but attributes to the Society of Jesus "a long and venerable missionary tradition of promoting inculturation."[8] The decree recommends that the general obtain "expert assistance" and write a letter of instruction on the topic, in order "to clarify for all of Ours the true meaning and theological understanding of the task and process of inculturation as well as its importance for the apostolic mission of the Society today."[9] The recommendation was an important one, since the term "inculturation" was (and still often is) quite vague and diversely interpreted.[10]

Accordingly, Arrupe undertook a thorough inquiry among Jesuits around the world who were engaged in reflection on the relationships between faith and culture. Using Vatican IIs "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et spes*), and the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi,* as well as the Bishops' synod of 1977, Arrupe pointed out that he was understanding "culture" as these documents defined it, and made no further elaboration.[11] The basic thrust of the decree is that humans have both a duty and a right to develop their cultures. In *Evangelii nuntiandi,* Pope Paul VI does not use the word "inculturation," but discusses the idea of "evangeli-

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[6] *Documents of the Thirty-First and Thirty-Second General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977) 439–40; henceforth cited as *Documents.*

[7] Pedro Arrupe, "Letter on Inculturation" 6.

[8] *Documents* 439.   [9] Ibid. 440.

[10] A. Shorter (*Toward a Theology* 10) traces the term to J. Masson, S.J., who used it in "L'Eglise ouverte sur le monde," *Nouvelle Revue Théolgique* 84 (1962) 1032–43, at 1038.

[11] Pedro Arrupe, "Letter on Inculturation" 1. *Gaudium et spes* says, "The word 'culture' in its general sense indicates all those factors by which [man] refines and unfolds his manifold spiritual and bodily qualities. It means his effort to bring the world itself under his control by his knowledge and his labor" (Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* [New York: Guild, 1966] 259).

zation of cultures" and calls for "linguistic adaptation," understood not as semantic or literary but as anthropological and cultural.[12] It is thus a welcome definition that was advanced by Arrupe in his letter. Arrupe defines inculturation as

the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular local cultural context, in such a way that the experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation), but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies a culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about "a new creation."[13]

The letter thus takes on the form of an exhortation on the mandate to "evangelize cultures." The present article is concerned with the greater specification of both the theory and praxis indicated in Arrupe's groundbreaking essay.

The introduction of the term "inculturation" into theological discourse can be compared to the proverbial stone cast into a pond: it has sent ripples throughout the Christian world. This has happened with such rapidity that inculturation is still often misunderstood in popular conversation, and at times in pastoral workshops and classes. However, I resist attempting to clarify the term further. A summary of existing works on inculturation indicates that it always involves a conversation between two partners—the universal gospel or fundamental "good news" and the cultural uniqueness of each context in which that message is heard. Such a description of the term leads us into a discussion of Geertz's four cultural systems (although there could be others) as a process of "thick description"[14] that can shed light on the ongoing conversation about inculturation.

<div align="center">WHY "CULTURAL SYSTEMS"?</div>

An understanding of inculturation as a systematic process may be grasped by the Christian from the simple theological assertion "The Word became flesh, and pitched his tent among us," bearing in mind the profound reality conveyed by that symbol of pitching a tent among a pilgrim people. But what does this symbolism say anthropologically or sociologically? Without dwelling in great detail on the body of literature on the sociology of knowledge, one can appreciate the significance of Karl Mannheim's assertion: "The principle thesis of the soci-

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[12] See Pope Paul VI, "Evangelization in the Modern World," *The Pope Speaks* 21 (Spring–Winter, 1976) no. 63.

[13] Arrupe, "Letter on Inculturation" 2.

[14] Geertz, "Thick Description," in *Interpretation* 30.

ology of knowledge is that there are modes of thought which cannot be adequately understood as long as their social origins are obscured."[15] So strongly is this the case, wrote Mannheim, that we should not say that a single individual thinks, but rather that he or she participates in thinking further what others have already thought.[16]

One of the most important, and certainly most cited, of the contributions of Clifford Geertz to cultural interpretation has been his description of all important dimensions of human experience (not simply thinking) as situated within cultural systems. Discussing religion, he wrote: "More bluntly, whatever God may or may not be, . . . religion is a social institution, worship a social activity, and faith a social force . . . [to trace a pattern of changes in this area] is to write a social history of the imagination."[17] Writing in the mid-1960s, Geertz discussed a certain shift from the idea of thought as an inner mental state to a concern with thought as the utilization by individuals in society of public, historically created vehicles of reasoning, perception, feeling and understanding. These he summed up as "symbols, in the fullest sense of the term."[18] Referring simply to religion, Geertz wrote,

The focus is now neither on subjective life as such nor on outward behavior as such, but on the socially available "systems of significance"—beliefs, rites, meaningful objects—in terms of which subjective life is ordered and outward behavior guided.[19]

Writing about "collectively created patterns of meaning" and "conceptions embodied in symbols and clusters of symbols,"[20] Geertz can be seen as paraphrasing his own definition of culture, one that now appears repeatedly in the writings of others on the relationship between faith and culture. We find this famous definition in one of his better-known articles:

[Culture is] an 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.[21]

In another famous essay, Geertz takes a phenomenological approach in the fullest sense of that complex word: not merely careful descrip-

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[15] Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge,* trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1936) 2.

[16] Ibid. 3.

[17] Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1973) 19.

[18] Ibid. 95.   [19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid. 95–96.

[21] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Interpretation* 89.

tion, but *interpretive* description that nonetheless refrains from ("brackets") ontological explanations or ethical judgment. Relying on the work of Gilbert Ryle, Geertz employs the term "thick description."[22] To describe human activity thickly, we must especially understand that "socially established code" in which it occurs. The basic concept of culture here is "semiotic": a context of symbols by which social events, behaviors, institutions or processes can be intelligently (that is, "thickly") described.[23]

With the admonition that all cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete, Geertz describes his own "program":

> To look at the symbolic dimension of social action—art, religion, ideology, science, law, morality, common sense—is not to turn away from the existential dilemmas of life for some empyrean realm of de-emotionalized forms; it is to plunge into the midst of them. The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what [men] have said.[24]

The significance of this approach can be emphasized by a brief examination of Marcello Azevedo's twofold critique of Geertz's definition of culture. The problem, writes Azevedo, is first that the definition threatens to fall into a type of "functionalist conceptualization."[25] The second "drawback" is that Geertz's understanding of symbol fails to attend to the "meaning" behind symbols—the "cognitive" order behind the phenomenological order—a corrective that Azevedo would see as helping to explain how two societies might use the same symbol differently.[26]

While it is not my intention to defend every point that Geertz makes, one might imagine him answering, "Exactly so!" The whole method of description in itself leaves the quest for deeper meanings to other disciplines, although at least one article of his, which examines the

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[22] Geertz, "Thick Description," in *Interpretation* 6.
[23] Ibid. 14.   [24] Ibid. 30.
[25] Marcello De Carvalho Azevedo, S.J., *Inculturation and the Challenges of Modernity* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1982) 8.
[26] Azevedo's own definition would seem to be so similar to Geertz's as to render his objection exceedingly subtle: ". . . 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 of proceeding, tools, techniques, costumes [sic] 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" (ibid. 10).

response of young Hindu intellectuals to a basically Muslim symbol system, is a study in exactly this matter of a culture's passage from one understanding of symbols to another.[27]

Yet Azevedo's critique of Geertz points to the role of theology in the cultural-system methodology. That is, one must ask the question: Does the committed stance of Christian theology distort the cultural-system method beyond recognition? I would suggest that such is the case if (in Lonerganian language) it confuses its operations of foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications with those of research, interpretation, history, and dialectic.[28] That is, the effort to transcend bias through Geertz's method calls theology to do the necessary process of "understanding." Geertz, who has described himself as a "nonbeliever,"[29] argues the point well:

Whatever role divine intervention may or may not play in the creation of faith—and it is not the business of the scientist to pronounce upon such matters one way or the other—it is, primarily at least, out of the context of concrete acts of religious observance that religious conviction emerges on the human plane.[30]

Thus, the role of theology, especially missiology (ideally as done by indigenous theologians) is to enter into the functions of foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications. Theology then partakes of Geertz's "context of concrete observance" and the constant labor of purifying religious conviction, not simply by *using* the descriptive methodology but by allowing itself to *become part* of the object of future scientific description.

GEERTZ'S FOUR CULTURAL SYSTEMS

What does Geertz actually mean by "cultural system"? As we learn from his discussion of common sense, a cultural system is historically constructed and subject to historically defined standards of judgment. "It can be questioned, disputed, affirmed, developed, formalized, contemplated, even taught, and it can vary dramatically from one people to the next."[31]

No human phenomenon can escape some determination as part of a cultural system. The Church, for all its claims to catholicity, partakes

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[27] Geertz, " 'Internal Conversion' in Contemporary Bali," in *Interpretation* 171–89.

[28] See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., *Method in Theology,* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) chaps. 5–14.

[29] Geertz, *Islam Observed* 99.

[30] Geertz, "Religion," in *Interpretation* 112.

[31] Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System," in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) 73–93, at 76.

of the characteristics of a cultural system or subsystem, beginning as a Jewish phenomenon, then achieving an act of transcendence from that system, only to enter into other determinations—the Greco-Roman, then the Frankish and Anglo-Saxon, all of which have deeply influenced its development. Theology, exercising its role as mediator between faith and culture, must examine and critique the development, and formulate principles for the ongoing dialogue of "the faith" with other cultures that are now superceding Europe and "the West" as contexts for Christianity. Theology is thus susceptible to its own version of "Mannheim's paradox." Mannheim wrestled with the question of emancipating knowledge from social determinations, and he wound up admitting that "interest" always somehow determines all viewpoints, including ideological critique itself.[32] We shall examine this point presently, but it is important for theologians to acknowledge that the effort to interpret the faith universally must always include the decision whether a certain aspect of the faith commitment is so "catholic" as to be proposed for universal acceptance by all cultures.

While we are studying Geertz's treatment of cultural systems separately, we must emphasize that all such systems partake of the social interweaving of knowledge and experience. There cannot be in any society, nor in aboriginal societies in particular, any compartmentalization of cultural aspects, even though each serves a different "function" and helps to "map" different paths for the work of inculturation.

Ideology

Geertz has nicely avoided giving a precise definition of ideology, partly, it seems, because he sees the irony that ideology itself has become "thoroughly ideologized."[33] Geertz seeks to advance the concept beyond Mannheim, who developed the well-known distinction between *ideology* (the interest-bound thinking of ruling groups that obscures the real condition of society) and *utopia* (the interest of oppressed groups in destroying and transforming a given condition of society, which leaves them incapable of correctly diagnosing an existing condition of society).[34] Geertz rather seeks "a genuinely nonevaluative conception of ideology" by applying his fundamental system of analysis, so that ideology too is "an ordered system of cultural symbols." He thus hopes to escape the paradox by perfecting a conceptual

[32] Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* 47–48.
[33] Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," in *Interpretation* 193–229, at 193. This is a version of "Mannheim's Paradox."
[34] Cf. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* 40.

apparatus "capable of dealing more adroitly with meaning."[35] In this light, my own hope is that the employment of the idea of cultural systems may help establish more solid foundations for a dialogue between faith and culture.

In approaching ideology as a symbol system, Geertz accepts the terminology of "interest theory" and "strain theory." For the former, ideology is a mask and a weapon, "seen against the background of a universal struggle for advantage." The latter sees ideology as a symptom and a remedy, "against the background of a chronic effort to correct sociopsychological disequilibrium."[36] In the one, people pursue power; in the other, they flee anxiety. In any case, all social classes are involved in ideology as "a patterned reaction to the patterned strains of a social role," and ideology thus provides a "symbolic outlet" for emotional disturbances generated by social disequilibrium.[37]

But Geertz, seeing through the problem of setting up conflicting theories, is not content to remain with the interest-strain advocates, whom he sees as passing directly from source analysis to consequence analysis, without seriously examining them as "systems of interacting symbols, as patterns of interworking meanings."[38] Thus, the concern should be, not about variances of truth in any context (thus placing an evaluative burden on social sciences), but rather about the symbols constructed in order to grasp the truth.[39] In this light, prescinding from the argument about "value-free" science here, we ask about the value of ideology-as-symbol for a theology of inculturation; that is, ideology symbolizes a cultural strain as well as a social and political one. When we turn to the relation to Christian faith (which is, of course, our essential foundation for the ethical evaluation of culture), and the role of theology as mediator between faith and culture, this point becomes paramount for the dialogue between cultures seeking "a new symbolic framework."[40]

Religion

Inculturation, once again, must be active throughout the entire network of cultural systems, contrary to a frequent assumption in ordinary conversations that inculturation is primarily a liturgical phe-

[35] Geertz, "Ideology," in *Interpretation* 196.
[36] Ibid. 201.   [37] Ibid. 204.
[38] Ibid. 207.   [39] Ibid. 212.
[40] Ibid. 221. For examples of cultures mediating their search for new ideologies and meanings through religious symbols, see Carl F. Starkloff, "Religious Renewal in Native North America: The Contemporary Call to Mission," *Missiology* 12/1 (January, 1985) 81–101; "New Tribal Religious Movements in North America: A Contemporary Theological Horizon," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 2 (1986) 157–71.

nomenon. Worship, however, *is* ideally symbolic of all that the Church hopes to be within cultural systems. As Geertz has written, "Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific, if most often, implicit, metaphysics, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other."[41]

An examination of Geertz's discussion of religion as a cultural system requires that we cite his well-known definition of religion. Religion is:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [men] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.[42]

It is a classically phenomenological definition, "bracketing" any arguments for or against a transcendent reality, and emphasizing that religious systems do seem to focus on the very immanent and pragmatic dimensions of life, however much they may be rooted in the invisible order.

It would indeed be a naive sort of ideological thinking to maintain that any historical form of religion, including Christianity, for all its transcendent appeal to universality, can be free from cultural conditioning. Any effort to discuss the inculturation of a universal world view must concentrate on those aspects of the "good news" that bear upon the destiny of all cultures. The context of human religious experience described by Geertz can serve as a pattern to guide a process through religious cultural systems. Especially paradigmatic for this process is Geertz's argument that "sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos."[43] In the patterns of every culture can be found the sources of information shared by a community, which provide programs of social and psychological dynamics that shape public behavior. Geertz distinguishes between two types of models here: models *of* and models *for,* the former functioning to interpret an existing reality, the latter serving to impart meaning to a people's reality.[44] It is this latter model that Geertz employs to describe religion. That is, the search for meaning explains the deeply affective dimension of Geertz's definition. He employs one of the most dramatic examples of this, the vision quest of the Plains Indians, which is characterized by "endurance, courage, independence, perseverance, and passionate willfulness . . . the same

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[41] Geertz, "Religion," in *Interpretation* 90.
[42] Ibid.   [43] Ibid. 89.
[44] Ibid. 93.

flamboyant virtues by which [the Indian] attempts to live."[45] For the purposes of this article, the example is as poignant as it is appropriate; one of the reproaches directed at Christian missionary effort is that it domesticated (or "disenchanted") all the power of native spiritual tradition by condemning such practices.

Not all the blame can be laid at the feet of Christian missions; much of it belongs to the rapid and in this case brutal pace of cultural change effected through imperialistic means. Geertz illustrates this problem by distinguishing between moods and motivations. Moods in themselves have no direction; they are simply variations of intensity ("scalar" qualities) and often in mutual conflict within the person. Motivations have a sense of direction and purpose ("vectorial" qualities). This is another way of expressing the traditional Christian ethical position that moods in themselves are neither moral nor immoral, but become one or the other through the ends to which they are directed. Therefore, "cultural invasion," a term made famous by Paulo Freire,[46] attacks not only moods but motivations, by destroying the cultural system that orders them. The principle of inculturation represents the lofty and elusive ideal that Christian mission should graciously offer new motivations in such a way that the moods that invigorate a culture need not be lost.

This observation, which anticipates the theological position of this essay, illustrates the third element in Geertz's definition: the formulation of conceptions of a general order of existence. It is order that the definition is concerned with, as it cites Suzanne Langer's remark that, whatever adaptation human beings may be able to make, they cannot deal with chaos.[47] They depend upon symbols and symbol systems with a dependence that is decisive for their "creatural viability"; the inability of a person to cope with experiences creates grave anxiety, especially "at the limits of [his] analytical capacities, at the limits of [his] powers of endurance, and at the limits of [his] moral insight."[48] In other words, chaos threatens when motivations or purpose are dissolving; persons or cultures lose their means of interpreting, their means of dealing with suffering, and their means of dealing with moral evil.

Religion, then, clothes general-order conceptions with an aura of factuality: it assists persons or cultures to arrive at some conviction of fundamental order. The belief dimension of religion provides a basic

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[45] Ibid. 94–95.
[46] Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seabury, 1968) 150–52.
[47] Geertz, "Religion," in *Interpretation* 99.
[48] Ibid. 100.

authority that transcends the individual self, whether that authority be found in the Bible, Church, or traditional tribal imagery. Belief in some sort of divine intervention emerges out of the context of concrete acts of religious observance. Such "cultural performances" serve as models *of* what people believe, as well as models *for* carrying out these convictions. They serve to channel authority both by inducing the right moods and by providing motivation, thus expressing an ethos and defining an image of cosmic order, or world view.[49]

Geertz sees ritual as moving back and forth between the religious perspective and the common-sense perspective, thus making moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. As we shall see more fully later, the "proximate acts" of common sense are rendered important and given "power" by means of religious symbolism. Geertz uses the example of totemism here as an illustration: individuals may refer to themselves by the name of a totem animal in order to indicate their clan, which is legitimized by the power of the totem.[50] This is a common-sense belief with a religious valorization.

The importance of religion, in this view, is that it serves as a source of distinctive conceptions of the world, self, and the relations between them. From these cultural functions, says Geertz, flow religion's social and psychological functions. In summary:

The anthropological study of religion is therefore a two-stage operation: first, an analysis of the system of meaning embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and second, the relating of these symbols to sociostructural and psychological processes.[51]

The work of theology, in its turn, as mediating between faith and culture, becomes the process of enabling cultural structures or systems to embody authoritative elements of Christian faith.

Common Sense

To explain how common sense is a cultural system, Geertz uses Wittgenstein's comparison of language to a city which is divided into suburbs of modern science and technology and the "old city" of traditional language. This terminology is intended, not to evoke a facile distinction between "primitive" and "modern," but in order to reach into a little-explored dimension of culture: common sense. Common sense, in Geertz's usage, is a "relatively organized body of considered

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[49] Ibid. 109–18. [50] Ibid. 121.
[51] Ibid. 125.

thought," and not simply "what anyone in his right mind knows."[52] One must therefore redraw an erased distinction between the mere matter-of-fact apprehension of reality and "down-to-earth, colloquial wisdom, judgments or assessments of it."[53] Again, common sense fits a somewhat loosely integrated definition of cultural system, becoming a central category for cultural interpretation.

As an illustration of his point, Geertz turns to a "mystical" example (one that still touches much of missiology): the belief in witchcraft as a common-sense way of challenging conventional explanations of life. The common sense of a tribal community employs a symbol system to interpret and cope with occurrences that point to absurdity in human life. E.g., why does one develop an infection when one has taken all the precautions? This desire for interpretation, says Geertz, manifests in its own way far more wisdom than does the rationalist thinking that attributes an "irrational" event to merely natural causes or chance occurrences.[54] Common sense is not merely a matter of doing what any sane person does, but much more of *interpreting* why certain things happen to be as they are and deciding how to deal with them.

Geertz employs a second example, that of hermaphroditism, or intersexuality, again arguing that so-called "primitive" societies may well deal with the phenomena, in a genuine common-sense way, better than most modern societies. Moderns take intersexuality to be simply an aberration and then demand that the intersexual play the role of a "normal" man or woman throughout their lives; in short, they are to practice repression. Tribal societies develop interpretations and customs for dealing with the situation. Some may elevate intersexuals to an especially lofty position; other cultures may isolate the persons and attribute their state to some sort of divine intervention. In either case, the tribal praxis serves Geertz as an example of common sense, while the behavior of modern society fails to achieve any considered conventional wisdom.[55] Thus, common-sense wisdom is "shamelessly and unapologetically ad hoc"; it appears most typically in proverbs, as an accessible wisdom open to all, "the general property of at least . . . all solid citizens."[56] As a structured system, it enhances knowledge of how culture is joined and put together.

Given the intention to contextualize theology within cultural systems, a brief comparison may be drawn here between Geertz's description of common sense and that of Bernard Lonergan. Both authors are

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[52] Geertz, "Common Sense," in *Local Knowledge* 73–93, at 75.
[53] Ibid. 76.   [54] Ibid. 78.
[55] Ibid. 82.   [56] Ibid. 90–91.

in substantial agreement about the role of common sense; Lonergan calls it "a specialization of intelligence in the particular and concrete."[57] However, Geertz seems to introduce a nuance into Lonergan's assertion that common sense never aspires to universally valid knowledge, namely by noting that the tradition of proverbs does seem to indicate general truths for a given society. While the proverb is not a scientific axiom, and does not employ technical jargon, it does recognize certain "experts" in societies (e.g. elders), and it does express relationships between phenomena. As Lonergan himself wrote, it is like the sciences in being an accumulation of related insights.[58]

Lonergan may have fallen into a certain evolutionist snare here, in arguing that "common sense knows, but it does not know what it knows nor how it knows nor how to correct and complement its own inadequacies."[59] In any case, the argument should be applied to individual common sense *as such,* rather than to all the knowing of a cultural group. All societies (and individuals within them) are to some degree capable of appealing to new information and experience as ways of altering conventional wisdom. This point takes on vital importance if an unbridgeable chasm is not to be dug between common sense and technical language, thus barring theology from the process of inculturation within the everyday life of a society.

Yet Lonergan's understanding of common sense maintains a close relationship to Geertz's more field-oriented interpretation. In *Insight,* Lonergan asserts how vital it is to understand the working of even static social structures by inquiring from many persons in many walks of life, in order to discover any functional unities that bind elements together, to discover "an intelligible pattern of relationships that we have named the good of order."[60] To do this, intelligence tries to devise general solutions and rules, so that whatever "general bias" may affect the common-sense dimension of culture, all cultures have some capacity to ask, to reflect, to reach an answer that at once satisfies the intelligence and speaks to the heart.[61] Lonergan's value to the mediating work of inculturation, as we shall see, lies in his insistence that human knowing must pass from uncritical to critical culture.

Art

While understanding quite clearly the problem of theorizing about art, Geertz insists on the importance of analyzing it, arguing that even

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[57] Lonergan, *Insight: A Study in Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1963) 175.

[58] Ibid. 179.

[59] Ibid. 216.

[60] Ibid. 211.

[61] Ibid. 236.

the most "primitive" cultures carry on some form of analysis of imagery. He is concerned with ways to incorporate art within the texture of a particular pattern of life. Art may serve many functions in a society, "but the central connection between art and collective life does not lie on such an instrumental plane, it lies on a semiotic one."[62] Both the work of a Matisse and of a Yoruba artist, rather than celebrating social structure or forwarding useful doctrines, more fundamentally "materialize a way of experiencing, bring a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects, where [men] can look at it."[63] There are thus deeper meanings, including religious meaning, in art, but Geertz is basically concerned here with how art illustrates tendencies in a society, how people group themselves within relationships to one another.[64]

Cultural matters, therefore, interwork to produce artistic sensibility: "A theory of art is thus at the same time a theory of culture, not an autonomous enterprise. And if it is a semiotic theory of art it must trace the life of signs in a society."[65] The artist works with signs having a place in semiotic systems that extend beyond his or her craft. That is, art and the "sense of beauty itself" belong to a society's cultural artifacts. Consequently, a semiotic study of culture must be, not a formal science like logic or mathematics, but a social one like history or anthropology. Such a study must be concerned with "the social history of the imagination . . . with the construction and deconstruction of symbolic systems as individuals and groups of individuals try to make some sense of the profusion of things that happen to them."[66]

The treatment of theology as the medium of inculturation will relate to the "social-discipline" aspect of it. While Geertz espouses no particular belief and thus no theology, his phenomenology of art includes a religious dimension, a power to deepen human awareness of the spiritual dimensions of existence in individuals and in societies. He does not go so far as to state the inseparability of art and religion; indeed, he cites the more "secularized" interpretation expressed by one renaissance preacher: that one does not adore a painting, but learns from the painted narrative *what* to adore.[67] Yet, he refuses to accompany this secularization simplistically, but leaves the work of art itself to be, not a "Sunday-school" illustration, but a common experience of religion as part of a culture's symbolic structure.

Gerardus Van der Leeuw, whose role as a phenomenologist is not

[62] Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System," in *Local Knowledge* 94–120, at 97.
[63] Ibid. 99.   [64] Ibid. 106.
[65] Ibid. 109.   [66] Ibid. 118–19.
[67] Ibid. 104.

always easily distinguished from his theological role, is nonetheless helpful in arguing the same primeval synthesis between religion and art: "In the structure of the primitive mind, the ends of practical religion, economics, and esthetics are always bound to one another. They are bound by religion in the widest sense of the word, through the holiness of power."[68] Thus the point of departure of religion is always the point of departure for poetry.[69] Van der Leeuw defends this relationship by asking, for example, whether art is an expression of the holy, or the movement of the holy itself.[70] If this latter is true (as Van der Leeuw holds), it binds "moderns" and "primitives" together in a common quest; all seek a unity between religion and art that was self-evident to primitive people.[71]

Geertz's discussion of cultural systems, then, has illustrated an interweaving of them all. Consequently, the work of a theology of inculturation must finally be not to compartmentalize but to integrate. There is need, however, to appreciate the fact that all cultural systems have, in themselves, an autonomous but nonarticulated theology, and all have socially integrating functions in society. This means that theology must examine the systems in themselves so as to chart a course in which "the good news" might influence all dimensions of society.

(to be continued)

[68] G. Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art,* trans. David E. Green (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963) 126.

[69] "Primitive" must be taken here not as isolating certain societies, but as a dimension in all societies. This dimension is less masked in cultures that remain closer to their origins. I shall cite examples of the inseparability of art and religion in Part 2 of this article.

[70] Ibid. 251.　　　　　　　　　　　[71] Ibid. 266.