

Deep Inculturation

*Global Voices on Christian Faith
and Indigenous Genius*

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INTRODUCTION

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“What is so new about inculturation?”

Four decades ago, the question appeared on the cover of the series *Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures* published by the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. The title of the issue’s lead article by the Dutch Jesuit scholar Arij Roest Crollius, it engages certain queries as to whether inculturation was legitimately innovative in view of comparable concepts from the social sciences. Clarifying its usage in missiology, Crollius describes inculturation in a sequence of three interdependent moments.¹ In the initial stage, Christian missionaries and members of the local culture “assimilate elements of each other’s cultures.” Not much is offered in terms of the character and dynamics of this cultural assimilation, but the process is identified as “acculturation,”² a cognate term appropriated from cultural anthropology. Clearly, acculturation is understood here to be a first step to the deeper, more substantive assimilation that is presumed to characterize inculturation. This then leads to the next stage: as

¹ Arij Roest Crollius, SJ, “What Is So New about Inculturation?: A Concept and Its Implications,” *Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures*, vol. 5 (Rome: Centre “Cultures and Religion”: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1984), 1–18.

² In view of the terminological confusion surrounding inculturation, acculturation, and related terms, identifying the often fine distinctions between them is illuminating. For this, see Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 3–13, and, in relation to liturgy, Anscar Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation: Sacramentals, Religiosity, and Catechesis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 13–54.

the numbers of those who join the church incrementally increase, a corresponding shift in agency occurs; the evangelized members of the local culture, now described as the “young Church,” move from a stance of passive adaption to the wider home culture, to become the active, principal agents of transformation for that culture. The final stage, “the moment of active reorientation of the local culture,” is the evident outcome of the triadic process.

By Crollius’ own definition, “‘Inculturation’ is here meant as an expression of the process by which the Church becomes inserted in a given culture.”³ No doubt, this reflects a traditional missiological perspective where inculturation is understood as a strategy employed by missionaries—presumably, from the West—to evangelize local or non-Christian cultures. While reflecting the optimistic, dialogical stance toward local culture as evinced in conciliar documents—namely *Gaudium et Spes* and *Ad Gentes*, and further expressed in a continuum of papal documents thereafter such as *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975), *Catechesi tradendae* (1979), and *Redemptoris missio* (1993)—it is instructive to point out how this is specifically configured in the second moment of Crollius’ schema. The decentering of agency in favor of the local culture refers to a process-of-becoming on the part of its members—their eventual assumption of the role of lead agent in the missionary strategy of Church insertion. Said differently, the young Church itself eventually takes on the missionary task so that the evangelizing mission is, tactically, effectuated by the members of the selfsame culture; this is the locus and extent of the cultural assimilation.

The foregoing tactical approach to inculturation suggests that agency is not organically situated in the identity of the local culture, it is an acquired asset, earned when its members assimilate the evangelizing message that foreign missionaries had inserted into their culture. Consequently, their contribution to the presumed two-way assimilation is to become the local counterparts of the foreign missionaries, taking on their mandate, and delivering the gospel message to their own kind, in their own homeland. They are recognized then as agents, not necessarily of their own cultural identity and Indigenous genius, but

³ Crollius, *Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures*, 6.

of the missionary strategy. As Crollius concludes, the transformation predominantly takes place on one side of the equation, the side of the local culture; essentially, it loses control of its own cultural narrative.

It is noteworthy that a second essay in the *Inculturation* series, “Inculturation and the Specificity of Christian Faith” by the Rwandan Jesuit philosopher Théoneste Nkeramihigo, offers an alternative critical assessment of inculturation based on the historical contingencies that shape the local culture’s encounter with the default Western expression of Christian culture. He interrogates two false, de-historicizing presumptions: (1) Cultures that have been marked by Western contact and influence have maintained their integrity, and (2) Christianity can be divorced from Western culture within which it had been, for centuries, contexted and marked.⁴

In a clear-eyed synthesis, Nkeramihigo asserts,

What is really at stake in the phenomenon of inculturation is the identity search of a people, to whom it has become clear that this identity cannot be found either in the importation of a foreign culture (acculturation), or in the restoration of its past (tribalism, nationalism). Rather, it is to be sought in the acceptance of the present conflict resulting from two heterogeneous past situations whose meeting constitutes the beginning of a new phase of its history, seen in an attitude of reconciliation in hope of two traditions which are presently clashing.⁵

While expressing an appreciative awareness of the perspective of the local culture, he keeps in check, on one hand, the cultural “importation” of acculturation—essentially a critique of Crollius’ unidirectional “insertion” model—and on the other hand, the romanticizing tendencies on the part of the local culture.

⁴ Théoneste Nkeramihigo argues, “Whether we want it or not, if Christianity is the historical event of the incarnation of God in Jesus, by reason of the law of incarnation and its historical Destiny, it is bound to the West and it has been presented to us within this framework.” See “Inculturation and the Specificity of Christian Faith,” *Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures*, 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

In Nkeramihigo's thesis, the interaction between Western Christian culture and local culture is not so much a site of consensus as a site of contention. It is within the givenness of this conflict that both cultures move to a new reality, a new creation. He argues that it is Christianity—"the singular specificity of the man Jesus of Nazareth who has a universal destiny by reason of his power to break all other specificities"—that lays down a bridge toward reconciliation:

I believe that the inculturation of Christianity in non-Western parts of the world depends on the capacity of this very Christianity to start and open up a history which calls peoples, in search of their identity, to get out of their situation of distressing and anxious ambivalence of uncontrolled conflict of cultures for future reconciliation of all peoples of God.⁶

As I understand Nkeramihigo's hermeneutics of reconciliation, it is the incarnation of Jesus—in the paradoxical both/and of being culture-specific and culture-transcending—that brings Western Christian culture and local culture from a state of conflict to a place of dialogue. In this creative dialectic, a more genuine inculturation becomes a promise and a possibility.

That said, Nkeramihigo's vision of the latent potential of conflict for a reconciled Christian cultural reality does not quite address the collective stigmata from the sentence of colonial history and its aftermath, which cannot be ignored if the local culture is to gain a renewed sense of identity and agency, and become a true dialogue partner in inculturation. It does serve as a kind of prolegomenon to an inclusive understanding of inculturation that is based on mutuality. At this relatively nascent stage in the development of the concept of inculturation, Nkeramihigo's perspective, as against Crollius', is the more viable response to the question "What is so new about inculturation?"

In 1999, fifteen years after *Inculturation*, another relevant collection of papers was published. Titled *Popular Catholicism in a World Church: Seven Case Studies in Inculturation*, it sets out to examine the *status quaestionis* in

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

the evolving concept of inculturation, clearly postulating a new starting point for theological inquiry that recognizes the epistemological privilege of local culture.

Today, there is a growing awareness that the majority of the world's Roman Catholics are no longer located in the global North. Christianity's center of gravity has shifted dramatically during the second half of the twentieth century. . . . The Catholic thing, historically shaped and colored by popular cultures, is thriving in Latin America, in Asia, and in Africa. The "world church" that is emerging is stunningly diversified.⁷

Judiciously, the book draws attention to the experience of European colonization, a collective trauma that threads across the histories of a significant number of countries in the Global South—"Foreign domination, enslavement, and processes of cultural *uprooting* [emphasis mine] are part of their historical inheritance." The ghostlife of Eurocentrism continues to haunt local cultures in multiform ways, often compounded by geopolitical and sociopolitical issues that perpetuate various inequalities. On account of this cruel context, the book identifies popular Catholicism as the *locus theologicus* for understanding and doing inculturation. This represents a significant turn since it examines the phenomenon of inculturation as it takes place on the other side, the side traditionally seen as the context of the beneficiaries, not the principal agents, of inculturation. Covering Chile, Peru, St. Lucia, Ghana, Tanzania, South India, and Hong Kong, the case studies follow the mediations of the pastoral cycle, employing historical, anthropological, and sociological research tools as prior steps to theological reflection.

Ultimately, the anthology lives up to its main title *Popular Catholicism*; it presents thick descriptions of the rituals of popular piety in a variety of forms. Lamentably, however, its explanatory title, *Seven Case Studies in Inculturation*, proves to be an overpromise. In each of the case studies, the phenomenon of inculturation is pushed off to the

⁷ Thomas Bamat and Jean-Paul Wiest, eds., *Popular Catholicism in a World Church: Seven Case Studies in Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 1.

far side of the stage, relegating it to a mere addendum to the research foci and conclusions. Moreover, it falls short of offering a renewed understanding of inculturation. As expressly stated, “‘Inculturation’ was more elusive. Despite having agreed to our working definition, we were drawn into employing some of the other meanings it has acquired in ecclesial parlance since it was coined in the 1970s.”⁸ Notwithstanding its earnest intentions, an awareness of the need to shift the center of gravity from the domain of the professional standard-bearers of mission to the local cultures of the World Church, the project remains hamstrung to inculturation in the top-down sense inherited from an older missiology. One step forward, two steps back.

A comprehensive review of published research works in the area is beyond the purview of this essay but from this brief but purposeful re-visiting of inculturation as an evolving concept,⁹ we ourselves can ask anew the question, “What is so new about inculturation?”

A Deep Re-Rooting

Deep Inculturation: Global Voices on Christian Faith and Indigenous Genius represents a renewed polyphony for speaking about inculturation based on the immersive research work of seven scholars of diverse cultural backgrounds, each paying regardful consideration to contextual, inductive, creative, and dialogical approaches.

- **Contextual.** A contextual approach cannot be principally dependent on abstract, ivory-tower categories and traditional epistemologies disconnected from the organic, shifting realities of culture, social location, historical contingencies, and collective human experience. It is necessarily rooted in lived faith where local cultures are essential *loci theologici*, sites of religious-theological discovery and insight.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹ For an earlier essay dealing with related questions on differing perspectives on inculturation, see Andrew Byrne, “Some Ins and Outs of Inculturation,” *Annales theologici* 4 (1990): 109–49.

- **Inductive.** Necessarily affiliated with contextual theologies, inculturation is “a path, a *poesis*, and a performance”;¹⁰ as such, it is a critical reflection *in via*. Interdisciplinary engagement allows for a range of perspectives to be brought together in a creative dialectic, which contributes to the inductive, forward movement of the hermeneutical flow.
- **Creative.** Beyond *logos*-based sources, local, grassroots, and Indigenous art, dance, music, ritual, oral narratives, and other nontextual cultural expressions are constitutive of the fusion of horizons that inform the scholarly quest for meaning. It is expedient to expand the view of what may be considered as acceptable references for theological wisdom, paying close attention to how local faith expressions are often a pilgrimage of touch, sight, sound, taste, scent, and movement.¹¹
- **Dialogical.** The question of mutuality in inculturation —“How does the dynamic confluence between Christian faith and local culture evince mutual enrichment, critique, assimilation, and transformation?”—is an important heuristic touchstone for assessing whether a pathway to inculturation, in some shape or form, has been actualized. If the gospel message is presumed to kindle a transformative “incarnation” in the culture (as proposed by Arrupe, John Paul II, Shorter, Chupungco, among others), what, dialogically, are the essential features of the contribution of the local culture to

¹⁰ Contextual theology as described by Robert J. Schreiter. He adds, “It is a path upon which a community embarks as a kind of journey or pilgrimage, evoking the image of the pilgrim people of God presented in the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.” See Foreword to *Doing Theology as if People Mattered: Encounters in Contextual Theology*, ed. Deborah Ross and Eduardo Fernández (New York: Herder & Herder, 2019), x.

¹¹ Local, grassroots faith expressions lie “in the intersection of the artistic, the cultural, and the theological,” thus often subverting textual, doctrinal expectations. This is expressed, for instance, in the Filipino popular devotion to the Black Nazarene, a material-tactile pilgrimage innervated by a laity-based *comunidades*. Antonio D. Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation: Grace on the Edge of Genius* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 9–10, 163–71.

the enrichment and transformation of Christian faith? While there are no simple answers, relevant ecclesial and theological insights have served as a forelight for the ongoing discussion.

In the 1985 encyclical *Slavorum Apostoli* (“The Apostles to the Slavs”), St. Pope John Paul II defines inculturation as “the incarnation of the Gospel in native cultures and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church.”¹² While a mutual interchange is proposed here, it’s noteworthy that the contribution of each dialogue partner differs qualitatively. “Incarnation,” a theological term that bears profound salvific-transformative import, is applied to the sharing of the gospel message, while “introduction,” a neutral, unnuanced term, is designated for the bestowal of the local culture. The definition is unequivocal about cultural interaction, but the descriptive reference to a mutual transformation is limited to a bare allusion.

Ten years later, in his 1995 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, John Paul II expresses what is evidently a deepening ecclesial confidence in the mutual engagement between gospel culture and local culture. In profoundly meaningful phraseology, he proposes a compelling vision of inculturation that affirms a preferential option for African cultures:

By respecting, preserving and fostering the particular values and riches of your people’s cultural heritage, you will be in a position to lead them to a better understanding of the mystery of Christ, which is also to be lived in the noble, concrete and daily experiences of African life. There is no question of adulterating the word of God, or of emptying the Cross of its power (cf. *1 Cor* 1:17), but rather of bringing Christ into the very centre of African life and of lifting up all African life

¹² Thus, in speaking about the legacy of Saints Cyril and Methodius who preached the gospel to the Slavs, St. Pope John Paul II adds, “By *incarnating* [emphasis mine] the Gospel in the native culture of the peoples which they were evangelizing, Saints Cyril and Methodius were especially meritorious for the formation and development of that same culture, or rather of many cultures.” *Slavorum Apostoli*, encyclical (1985), section 6.21. www.vatican.va.

to Christ. Thus not only is Christianity relevant to Africa, but Christ, in the members of his Body, is himself African.¹³

Expressing what is at stake in an inculturation that is truly mutual, John Paul II effectively sends an inclusive, culture-affirming message of signal impact: the introduction of the local culture to Christian life may also be, by God's grace, an "incarnation." For African life to be placed on a lampstand as incarnational throws a liberative, salvific light on African identity, which, having been subjected to unrelenting colonial domination, oppression, and erasure—in Cameroonian liberation theologian Engelbert Mveng's diagnosis, Africa suffers from "anthropological poverty,"¹⁴ the collective trauma having reached an ontological level—holds additional claim to be celebrated as a coequal bearer of *imago Dei*. Upholding "anthropological dignity," Africa takes its rightful seat at the table of genuine inculturation.

The esteemed African theologian Laurenti Magesa echoes the cultural and theological inclusiveness that *Ecclesia in Africa* so eloquently expresses. In *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, he describes "the shape of the encounter" between missionary Christianity and African culture in terms that reiterate mutuality as the cornerstone of an authentic process of inculturation:

The revelation of God in the Christian scriptures meets the God who is already present in the values of the culture and in the history of a people. The two bond together, transforming and fulfilling each other in the process. And in the same process, people's perceptions and self-understanding on one hand, and of God in their midst on the other, are changed.¹⁵

¹³ St. Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, post-synodal apostolic exhortation (1995), section 127, www.vatican.va.

¹⁴ For fuller treatment, see Engelbert Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World," *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994). In relation to inculturation, I examine "anthropological poverty" and Mveng's theological-aesthetic contribution in chapter 1 of Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation*, 21–75.

¹⁵ Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 143.

The description offers an assured, incarnational understanding of local culture, affirming that it is a *topos* where God's grace also finds a home. Thus, in the process of inculturation, a transformative experience takes place on both sides of the equation: the side of the local culture and the side of Christian culture. From a fuller consideration of the subject as it is problematized in *Anatomy of Inculturation* and Magesa's wider scholarship, this does not suggest a cultural romanticism that sidesteps critical analyses of local culture; rather, it emphasizes the urgency of a hermeneutics of appreciation,¹⁶ precisely because local cultures have been historically othered and diminished.

The theologically reasonable, optimistic approach to culture seen in both Magesa and John Paul II dovetails with what Stephen B. Bevans describes as the "anthropological model" of contextual theology, which is grounded on the notion that culture is a locus for divine revelation.¹⁷ At variance with an understanding of revelation as an external additive, a "supracultural" reality, the anthropological model proposes that revelation is deeply and organically rooted in the very complexity of culture. From within, local culture is good, very good.

In view of the cultural "uprooting" that ensued from a Eurocentric missionary history, a renewed, relevant pathway for inculturation is a "re-rooting"¹⁸ to the fertile humus of the local culture, whose members are the rightful principal agents of deep inculturation. Thus, "what is so new about inculturation," quite ironically, is not so much a breaking of new ground; it is a cultural *ressourcement*. This is the premise and vision of this anthology.

¹⁶ Filipino theologian José M. de Mesa, when discussing inculturation in the Philippine postcolonial context, proposes a comparable trajectory: "What is sorely needed is a hermeneutics of appreciation which methodologically highlights the positive in the culture." See de Mesa, *Why Theology Is Never Far from Home* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2003), 120.

¹⁷ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 56–59.

¹⁸ To my knowledge, José M. de Mesa was the first to use the descriptive term "re-rooting" in the theological sense, specifically as applied to the development of an inculturated Filipino theology. See de Mesa, *In Solidarity with Culture: Studies in Theological Re-rooting* (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1987).

A Rotating Prism: Global Facets of Inculturation

The prism, an illustrative symbol that I have used on not a few occasions,¹⁹ applies yet again here to indicate that the seven chapters of *Deep Inculturation* represent variegated hues of a common, unifying rubric. Each of the seven contributing authors, engaging the interdiscipline pertinent to their respective scholarly areas, rotates the hermeneutical prism so that diverse facets in the phenomenon of inculturation are refracted, revealed, and brought into sharper relief.

In the opening chapter “A Liturgy That Heals: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Mexican American Ritual,” Christopher Tirres explores a Catholic Good Friday ritual called the *Pésame*, as it is performed at the San Fernando Cathedral in his hometown of San Antonio, Texas. At the heart of the *Pésame* is a liturgical dance dramatizing the bereavement of Mary of Nazareth. This opens up into a moving participative experience when a family in the pews, crossing the border that separates the sphere of performance from real life, is invited to console Jesus’ grieving mother. Drawing from liberationist, pragmatist, aesthetic, and theological frames of reference, Tirres examines an unexplored discursive layer in the ritual, an ethical dimension that gives rise to an “aesthetics of the moral imagination,” which bears profound resonances in the lives of its participants. In this deftly executed interdisciplinary drill-down, Tirres argues for a critical balance between a theoretical-hermeneutical examination and “the actual qualities and force of a given ritual” as described from experience—the consideration of which, as evinced by his study, breaks open an abundance of meaning. Ultimately, the essay sheds light on the phenomenon of inculturation as it occurs in a particular social context, a Mexican American community “dancing” in the interstices of culture, religion, and history.

The succeeding chapter “Dancing, Eating, Worshiping: Inculturated ‘Third Space’ in Rarámuri Celebrations” by Mexican scholar Ángel F. Méndez Montoya, traipses a similar pathway, this time widening the aperture to an examination of Holy Week liturgy as it is mutually

¹⁹ For example, as used in Sison, *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation*, 18–19.

implicated with Indigenous devotional practices, dance, and foodways. Méndez invites us to be his virtual co-sojourners as he travels to the Mexican village of Samachique, southwest of Chihuahua, to immerse in the *Semana Santa* festivities and rituals of the Indigenous Rarámuri peoples, who, within the rich and vibrant matrix of their cultural heritage, are at home in the both/and of an embodied human existence and a cosmic, eco-spiritual imaginary. A central focus of Méndez' project is what he identifies as the inculturation of a "Third Space" that births from the theo-poetics of the Rarámuri's own creative genius. Here, life-giving currents converge into a hybridized incarnation of the very paschal mystery, affirming both the integrity of the Rarámuri's cultural identity and the prophetic-liberating Christian gospel, while disarming the colonial specters that bedevil their sociopolitical milieu.

In "Contemporary Inculturational Performing Arts in the Indonesian Christian Church," Marzanna Poplawska brings to bear her deep, long-standing engagement with Catholic and Protestant communities in the Indonesian islands of Java, North Sumatra, and Flores to examine the dynamic interchange between Indigenous and European cultural elements inflected in local sacred music and their related expressions in dance. "Inculturational" is the descriptive term she proposes, an appellation that meaningfully connotes the kinetic, ongoing character of inculturation as a profoundly communitarian phenomenon. With astonishing clarity and a meticulous attention to nuances of ethnomusicology and cultural aesthetics, Poplawska authenticates how such an inculturational harmonizing represents the flourishing of Indigenous cultural identity, agency, and genius.

Carmel Pilcher's contribution, "Ceremonial Genius: Australia's First Peoples and Liturgical Inculturation," takes seriously the relativizing view of history to map the ongoing processes and modalities of inculturation in her native Australia. Her historical survey, based on primary sources rarely explored outside an Australian context, exemplifies a diligent and detailed accumulation of information, from the pioneering efforts of an earlier generation of Catholic missionaries, moving to the participation of Aboriginals and Islanders in the refracted light of the Second Vatican Council, and the incremental inclusion of

“ethnic genius” to liturgical ceremony and ritual. While drawing from the established methodological synthesis of liturgical inculturation proposed by noted Filipino liturgist Anscar Chupungco, Pilcher does not stop at a mere application of method; she issues a critique of the same for presupposing the primacy of the Roman Rite over Indigenous ritual expressions, which, she argues, limits the potential for true cultural dialogue. Constructively, she proposes the alternative notion of “interculturalism”²⁰—proffered by Ojibwe Canadian Eva Solomon, CSJ, whose lifework is dedicated to First Nations spirituality and liturgy—as the relevant, historically urgent form of mutual engagement for Australia’s Catholic Aboriginal people.

Is inculturation—as against “acculturation”—realizable in the unfreedom of terror? “Silent Inculturation: Japan’s Hidden Christians and the Criterion of the Cross,” my own contribution to this anthology, re-traces the long-drawn *via dolorosa* of Japan’s *Kakure Kirishitan* or “Hidden Christians,” who heroically defied and outlived the great persecution of the Tokugawa shogunate (1630–1867) as they found astonishing ways of preserving their Christian faith under the shadow of public humiliation, torture, and martyrdom. In the crucible of suppression and suffering, *Kakure* faith birthed religious iconography,

²⁰ The term “interculturalism,” as Aylward Shorter notes, was coined by Bishop Joseph Blomjous in 1980 for the purpose of safeguarding the mutual character of Christian mission, which had been traditionally based on an “insertion” model. See Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 13–14. While Solomon proposes “interculturalism” as an alternative to inculturation, noted Vietnamese American theologian Peter Phan does not construe these concepts as mutually exclusive: “The gospel, though not to be identified with any culture, is never independent of culture. It always comes already enfleshed in a particular culture. Consequently, inculturation is necessarily *interculturalism* [emphasis mine] and must abide by the laws and dynamics of intercultural dialogue.” Phan underscores that the concept of inculturation also encompasses the theology behind the phenomenon, e.g., as governed by the paschal mystery; interculturalism refers more to the process of cultural dialogue. See Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 6–9. Representing distinct yet related “language-games,” the option for inculturation and/or interculturalism, as exemplified by Phan’s work, is a matter of emphasis.

prayers, liturgies, even a sacred text, from fragmentary recollections of missionary catechism and biblical narratives interwoven with influences from their Japanese Buddhist-Shinto heritage. What is the appropriate lens and criterion for ascertaining the phenomenon of inculturation among the *Kakure Kirishitan*, who, in their very bodies and memories, bear the stigmata of the crucified Nazarene? Through an inductive journey, the emergent response—"the criterion of the cross"—challenges misplaced, rigid notions of doctrinal and liturgical conformity, and argues for the critical importance of "context" in comprehending the irreducible synthesis of inculturation and lived faith experience.

Ferdinand Ikenna Okorie's essay, "God, Canaan, Egypt, and the Stories of Migration in Intercultural Perspective," also takes the historical assignment seriously but from the decidedly longer view of biblical history. Adhering to the methodological rigor of biblical exegesis, he examines the phenomenon of migration in ancient Egypt, with a special focus on the experience of the Israelite forebears in Genesis, and that of the remnant of Judah during the exilic period as chronicled in Jeremiah. A "hermeneutic of contextual expressions of religious value" illumines Okorie's exegetical project, opening for him a window to the abiding presence of the deity in the very existential realities of border crossing. As evidenced in the phenomenon of migration, then and now—to wit, the Jewish migrant experience in ancient Elephantine, to the plight of present-day Latino/a migrants at the Mexico-US border—religious meaning finds inculturated expressions, the creative crossings of cultures embodied in material objects and symbols, and the rituals that surround them.

In the final chapter, "Pedagogy of Hospitality: Transforming Missionary Onslaught into Mutual Transformation and Enrichment," Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator critically examines Christian missionary history in his home continent of Africa, with an incisive analysis of the process by which the "evangelical hubris" of the European missionaries, in the service of colonial hegemony, translated into relentless abuse and subjugation of African culture and identity. A fallout of such a brazen assertion of Eurocentric superiority is the

false-naming of African Indigenous religions as deficient, detestable, demonic. Proving resilient in the face of the missionary onslaught, however, African religions were not supplanted by missionary Christianity; on the contrary, they formed a “cultural substratum” that engendered multiple identity–belonging, thus becoming a locus for re-rooting inculturation. Judiciously interweaving a variety of cultural and theological sources, Orobator affirms Africa’s Indigenous genius in the “humanizing values” of hospitality, *Ubuntu*, and palaver, generatively advancing the development of a deep inculturation that may be described as—to borrow from Orobator’s creatively original book on inculturation—a “Theology Brewed in an African Pot.”²¹

Perhaps it is reasonable for me to extend Orobator’s vibrant metaphor to say that, bar none, each of our contributing authors endeavors, modestly but meaningfully, to reverse the hermeneutical flow as we explore inculturation as it is “brewed in the pot of Indigenous genius”:

- In the poetic, healing movements of liturgical dance performed by a Mexican American community in Texas, or the sacred rhythms of faith-footwork-foodways of the Indigenous Rarámuri communities in Mexico’s remote, mountainous regions.
- In the symphonic blending of Indigenous and Christian “inculturational” music in Catholic and Protestant churches in Indonesia, or the continuing pilgrimage of Australia’s First Peoples to interweave their story and symbols in Catholic liturgy.
- In the heroic faith of Japan’s Hidden Christians who birthed astonishing, culture-affirming devotional expressions under the shadow of death and untold suffering; in the experience of the migrants of biblical history in Egypt and their contemporary analogues, who, en route and in flux, found the deity in the fluidity of intercultural exchange; or in the

²¹ Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

transformative contributions of African cultures to Christian faith practice, re-rooted in cultural values that run counterflow to the exclusion and condescension of a calcified missionary Christianity.

To say it again, the hope of this collection is for us to represent a renewed polyphony for speaking about inculturation based on a reasoned, appreciative valuation of local culture. Local culture is also a gift of God, a pearl of great value.

Pope Francis, in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), advocates for such a valuation when he reaffirms the creative agency of the members of local culture. Standing on the truth of their authentic identity as “people of God,” they are the lead artisans in the creative and self-creating process of inculturation:

The different peoples among whom the Gospel has been inculturated are active collective subjects or agents of evangelization. This is because each people is the creator of their own culture and the protagonist of their own history. . . . Each portion of the people of God, by translating the gift of God into its own life and *in accordance with its own genius*, bears witness to the faith it has received and enriches it with new and eloquent expressions.²²

Deep inculturation. In the spirit of synodality, this is our path, *poesis*, and praxis.

²² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, apostolic exhortation (2013), section 122, www.vatican.va (emphasis mine).