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Reflections on Indigenization

WILLIAM LASH

(The writer was Chairman of the Conference on Worship held at Bangalore in March 1955, under the aegis of the East Asian Theological Commission set up by the World Council of Churches.)

Is indigenization, a term none of us liked, something deliberately to be done? If so, what are the best methods of doing it? On the other hand, is it a process which goes on inevitably whether anybody does anything about it or not? These were the kind of questions which arose at a Conference on the Indigenization of Worship in Bangalore in March 1955. The Conference was held under the auspices of the World Council of Churches, and we had the *Faith and Order* Secretary of the World Council with us. From him we learnt that a Commission on Worship was proposed by the Faith and Order Conference at Edinburgh in 1937, set up in 1939, and produced 'Ways of Worship' in 1950. At Lund this was criticized as being one-sided. In consequence three Commissions were set up for Europe, America and East Asia. Our Conference was to consider one of the five questions set before the East Asia Commission, and such a Conference had already been held in Ceylon early in 1954.

It was as well that we met in such a context. It is only too easy with such a subject to become immersed in a local approach and be blind to the wider aspects, but all East Asia is considering indigenization. Our Christian brethren in Burma agree with us that it is a matter of urgency. Ceylon has anticipated us in tackling the question. The Philippines consider it necessary to tackle it; while Japan has its fears over it, perhaps because of dangers of syncretism. We soon realized also that whether or not the Commissions in Europe and America had the subject on their programme, they would certainly be faced with it, if the Church were a living organism and not a fossil.

The Theology of Indigenization

This last became apparent when we got down to discussing the theology of the subject. It soon was apparent that indigenization is an inevitable outcome of the Doctrine of the Incarnation. God became Man. He not simply became Man in general, but a man of the times and circumstances of Palestine of a certain century. Wherever the Church goes indigenization is a natural growth of the seed of the Word of God in each cultural soil in which it is planted. It is a process which begins as soon as the planting begins. It may be checked and hindered or deliberately encouraged, but it must go on or else the plant will wither.

Yet it is the same seed which is planted everywhere, universal, catholic. Everywhere what grows from it, however conditioned by local circumstances, must be recognizably the same. In conscious assistance to the process of indigenization it must never be forgotten that there is this irreducible minimum. The process must not be allowed to divide us from our brethren throughout the world, but to provide an enrichment to a common heritage.

The importance of the irreducible minimum came home to us in another way. We realized that the Gospel had been brought to India from countries where the seed had already been subject to an indigenization. It came with the trappings of another culture. This was stressed as being true of the Syrian traditions in Malabar as well as the later arrivals from Western cultures. Some of these trappings had so long been worn that they had acquired a local look and had themselves been indigenized. Others had hampered indigenization, and the process could be as much helped by the deliberate removal of hindrances to a natural growth as a deliberate fostering of such a growth.

We found that another challenge to the Church in this matter arose out of the Doctrine of the Incarnation. Christ is perfect Man as well as fully God. The Church therefore is in ideal the perfect expression of the society of men. In any country Christianity offers the means of the integration of the culture of that country. This challenge is especially formidable in a country such as India with its immense and diverse traditions of culture, not only within the Hindu pattern but beyond it as well.

Motives of Indigenization

From the experiments of De Nobili onwards there have been deliberate attempts at indigenization for evangelistic purposes, and the question arose whether or not such a purpose was legitimate, or was, as it were, an aberration, not belonging to the main historic process of the growth of the natural life of the Church in a new environment. Historically it would seem that such deliberate attempts with such a motive have not lasted long. On the other hand, a Church which has forgotten its missionary obligation is generally content with a routine of worship inherited from the past, while a Church which is quickened by evangelistic zeal becomes more aware of the culture of neighbours at its doors, and the process of indigenization is raised in response to the needs of those brought up in such a culture.

A factor which enters into the awakening of the Christian to his place in his country is the rising up of strong national feeling, such as has been experienced in India for several decades. Fellow citizens are quick to point out elements of foreignness, and the Christian Indian himself, and foreigners who sympathize with Indian national aspirations, are encouraged to find means of conforming Christian culture in the country to the rest of the surrounding culture. With this motive consciously active, or the deeper motive of a wish to see the incarnational principle carried into effect, or as a simple response to a personally felt call, individuals in the last few decades have attempted to live as fully as possible in the cultural tradition of the part of India best known to them, both for the purpose of rooting Christian tradition in that local tradition, and of making the Christian way of life more accessible to other Indians, by adopting at least externals which they can readily appreciate.