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[ajct@sistenugu.com](mailto:ajct@sistenugu.com)

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# TWO

## THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL ON CULTURE AND FAITH

Luke Emehiele IJEZIE

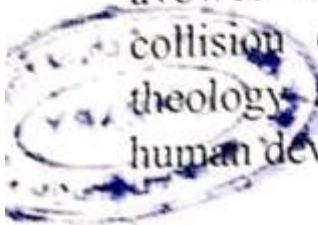


### 1. Introduction

Many contemporary challenges to the Christian religion are in the area of the relationship between faith and culture. The tension heightens whenever the zeal for the faith encourages an undue dichotomy between the religious life and the cultural life. Some contemporary religious movements, inspired by some biblical passages, tend to undermine the cultural life in the way they preach and practice the faith. This syndrome cuts across many belief groups, including Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims. As a matter of fact, the cultural life is not an additional extra to human life. It is, rather, the very way of being human. So, for any form of religious life to be authentically human it has to be properly cultural. Thus, when the Church talks of culture, she is actually talking of that which makes human life authentically human. But because culture is a human creation, it suffers the fate of every human creation, its imperfection. This makes it subject to change and reformation.

The problem arises when people become so used to specific ways of thinking and living that they begin to resist change even when the times and structures can no longer support the prevalent *modus vivendi*. This is a problem in many parts of the world today and, particularly, in many parts of Africa where the force of tradition is still very strong. Most of the time it is a conflict between faith and traditional culture, and sometimes the enthusiastic adherents of the faith and the

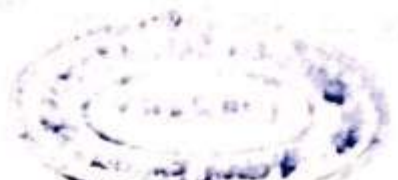




avowed champions of the traditional culture enter into collision course. This remains a challenge not only to theology and evangelization but also to other aspects of human development, intellectual, social, economic, political.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has continued to express her evangelizing mission as an engagement with human culture, and this she does by her commitment to the gospel values that promise total liberation and total transformation of the individual and community. This involves getting deeply committed with human life in its various cultural contexts. As the Christian faith calls for commitment to cultural development at all levels, it demands total conversion which poses a critical challenge to every current of thought, mindset or practice that is inimical to the integral development of the human person. Whenever any human convention becomes an agent of dehumanization rather than of human transformation, it comes into conflict with the humanizing values represented by the Christian faith.

The present essay takes a close look at the salient points of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the relationship between culture and faith with a view to addressing some contemporary challenges to this relationship. The essay begins with a brief explanation of the term culture and its biblical dimensions and then goes on with the examination of the relationship between culture and faith in the relevant documents of Vatican II Council. The essay further examines some of the contemporary challenges to faith and cultural life.



## 2. Explaining the Term Culture

The term culture is a very complex one but there is no need to enter into that complexity in this brief essay. In the Vatican II Document, *Gaudium et Spes*, culture is defined simply as “the cultivation of the goods and values of nature.”<sup>1</sup> This definition is comprehensive enough to accommodate all that will be said in the essay. It understands culture generally as all that human beings do to nature. In other words, every human creative contribution to nature goes under the name of culture. In this definition, the Vatican Document must have applied the word “cultivation” with the intention of highlighting the root meaning of “culture” which actually comes from the Latin word *cultus* meaning “cultivation”. Culture is possible because of the human rational nature. This means that only human beings can create a culture. It is characteristic of human beings to always devise specific ways of responding to life and nature wherever they find themselves. Since people are diversely gifted and nature presents itself in diverse forms, it becomes understandable that the human tinkering with nature will produce diverse results. Thus, there is a multiplicity of cultures all reflecting the diverse rational ways human beings respond to nature in specific situations.

## 3. Biblical Perspective on Culture

The biblical understanding of culture throws a lot of light on the Vatican II position on culture and faith. The Bible does not contain an elaborate discourse on human culture, but its perspective on culture can be pieced together from the analysis of some biblical texts. For instance, one can notice how the account of creation in Genesis 1-3 makes an intrinsic

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<sup>1</sup> Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 53.

link between the creation of the human being (Adam) and the further cultural development of the created world. The original human vocation is expressed in the narrative as a cultural vocation. As scholars have often pointed out with different accents, there are two accounts of creation, the first account in Gen 1:1-2:4a and the second account in 2:4b-3:24. The cultural idea is briefly expressed in the first account but becomes elaborately developed in the second account.

In the first account (Gen 1:1-2:4a), God already entrusts the governance of the created world to human beings. The text of Gen 1:26 makes it clear that human beings are created for a specific purpose, to take over the governance of the whole created universe. The Hebrew verb used to express this is *rādāh* which means “to rule”.<sup>2</sup> The Creator, as it were, hands over to human beings the continued creative activity in the world, which is actually the cultural development of the created world. To be able to accomplish this assignment, the human being is created in the image (*selem*) and likeness (*demut*) of Elohim (God).<sup>3</sup> The use of the two terms, image and likeness, is an idiomatic way of saying that human beings in their totality are made to resemble the divine beings. This resemblance qualifies humans to take over the mantle of

<sup>2</sup> The verb is used 22 times in the Old Testament, and in all these it refers always to human rule as distinguished from divine dominion. See William White, “*rādāh*,” *TWOT* 2, 833.

<sup>3</sup> There has been much scholarly discussion on the meanings of these two terms, image (*selem*) and likeness (*demut*). According to Gerhard von Rad (*Genesis. A Commentary* [OTL; London: SCM Press, 1972] 57-58.), *selem* means an image in the sense of a duplicate, an actual plastic work, an idol, while *demut* denotes “likeness” in the sense of the abstract idea of appearance, similarity, analogy, and sometimes, a copy. Von Rad (*Genesis*, 58) further argues that these terms express also the corporeal resemblance of the human being to the divine being and not just the intellectual or spiritual resemblance, as often thought.

governance and recreation.<sup>4</sup> This divine mandate is further clarified in 1:28: "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue (*kibš*) it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on the earth.'" The verb *kbš* (to subdue) expresses the sense of effective control and subjection.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the earth together with all its contents is to be brought under complete human governance. According to Blenkinsopp, this means "replicating on earth the order established by God in the cosmos as a whole."<sup>6</sup> Responsible cosmic leadership involves constant transformation and development of the earth and its resources.

In the second account in Gen 2:4b-3:24, the vocation of humanity is directly linked to the cultivation of the earth (Gen 2:15). "YHWH God took the man (Adam) and settled him in the garden of Eden to till (*ābad*) it and to watch over (*shāmar*) it." The Hebrew verb *ābad* is used in this context in the sense of "tilling" or "working".<sup>7</sup> Another sense of the word is "to cultivate", and this opens it up, in one way or the other, to the ideas of cultural development and cultic service (*cultus*). The narrator in this way exposes his understanding of the special role of the human being as one who works the land, as one who cultivates the created world. The human vocation is intrinsically linked to the proper health of the

<sup>4</sup> See Luke E. Ijezie, "Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-2:4 as a Model of Political Governance," *African Journal of Contextual Theology* 2 (2010) 36-38.

<sup>5</sup> See also Ijezie, "Creation Account," 37-38; cf. Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, "Genesis 1,28 and the Divine Imperatives for Sustainable Ecology," *BN* 153 (2012) 3-17.

<sup>6</sup> J. Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch. An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) 62.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Carpenter, "'bd", *NIDOTTE* 2, 304.

land. This is linguistically expressed in the pun on the Hebrew name *adam*. The *Adam* (human being) is taken from *adamah* (soil). As Carol A. Newsom puts it, “to call the creature *adam* is to recognize its solidarity with Earth.”<sup>8</sup> It is the need to put the land in proper condition that calls for the presence of the human being. The human vocation to develop and care for the earth, thus, derives its natural logic from the radical kinship between humanity and the earth.

The biblical perspective is that the human being (Adam) comes from the earth (*adamah*) and is destined to return to the earth. The human being is, therefore, not a stranger on earth. The earth is the natural home. The cultural development of the world is a *sine qua non* for human happiness and secure existence.

#### 4. Vatican II on Faith and Culture

The Vatican document, *Gaudium et Spes*, basing itself on the biblical perspective, understands culture in terms of the cultivation of nature, with further explanation that the word culture embraces “all those things which go to the refining and developing of man’s diverse mental and physical endowments.”<sup>9</sup> This carries with it a host of sociological and ethnological connotations, making it possible to speak of culture on diverse levels.<sup>10</sup>

Vatican II looks at culture from different perspectives, but the main attention in this essay is on its position on the

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<sup>8</sup> Carol A. Newsom, “Common Ground: An Ecological Reading of Genesis 2-3,” in *The Earth Story in Genesis* (eds. Norman C. Habel & Shirley Wurst; The Earth Bible 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 63.

<sup>9</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 53.

relationship between culture and faith. This is presented in the Council's document from four broad perspectives:

- i. Through culture, human beings accomplish the divine mandate to subdue the earth and perfect the work of creation.<sup>11</sup> This expressed commitment to the work of creation inevitably raises the question whether this mandate conflicts with the idea of the Christian life as a pilgrimage to the heavenly city with all its demands to focus on the things that are above. The answer is given in the next point on the role of culture.
- ii. Through culture and its progress in the arts and the sciences, human beings come into greater understanding of the truth, goodness and beauty, and this inclines them to deeper communion with God as they grow in wisdom through wonder and contemplation.<sup>12</sup> What this means in effect is that human beings can discover God through culture and can climb up to him through commitment to cultural development. Since culture inspires growth in wisdom, it inclines the human mind to higher values. "As a consequence the human spirit, freed from the bondage of material things, can be more easily drawn to the worship and contemplation of the creator."<sup>13</sup> Here, while the Vatican document encourages the commitment to material progress, it also exposes the limits of mere material and empirical attachment. It warns of the danger of regarding the scientific methods of investigation, limited as they are, as the supreme norm for arriving at the truth as well as the

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<sup>11</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 57.

<sup>13</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 57.

danger of excessive confidence in scientific progress that can lead human beings to think that they can do all by themselves and so abandon the search for higher values.<sup>14</sup> The divine presence in human culture is further clarified in the next point.

- iii. Through human culture, God revealed himself progressively, using the culture proper to each age and this culminated in the incarnation of his only Son; and in the same way, the Church in her preaching of the good news uses the forms proper to each culture in her communication and liturgical rites, showing that the Church is not sent to any particular culture or people but sent to all peoples and cultures.<sup>15</sup> The first aspect of this declaration is that every culture is a vehicle for divine self-revelation which is progressive, meaning that no particular culture or epoch carries the full divine revelation. The second aspect is that the Church's use of the forms and artefacts proper to each culture is an recognition of the fact that every culture is an authentic channel of divine revelation. This, however, does not imply that any culture is sufficient in itself, hence the need for evangelization of cultures.
- iv. The good news of Christ renews and transforms every culture, making it to blossom from within and becoming capable of contributing to humanity's interior freedom.<sup>16</sup> This point is further elaborated in the Papal Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI, which defines the Church's mission as that of

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<sup>14</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 57.

<sup>15</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 58.

“bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new.”<sup>17</sup> The Document explicates further what it means by strata of humanity, as not only preaching the gospel in wider geographical areas or to a greater number of people, “but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation.”<sup>18</sup> These words of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, clearly sum up the Church's mission as a mission of cultural transformation.

One of the salient points mentioned in this position of Vatican II is that the Church is open to every culture as it is not tied to any particular culture. One may wonder whether this really reflects the reality on the ground. There is no doubt that the Church's life and teaching carry with them the baggage of particular cultures. While this cannot be denied, the challenge posed by the Vatican II document is that the Church has to scrutinize its inherited traditions in every age and culture to free her from all those particularistic issues that tend to hold other peoples and cultures in bondage rather than liberating them. This explains why the Council took a particular interest in the Italian word “aggiornamento” which actually means “bringing up to date”, that is opening up the

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<sup>17</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18. See also Jude C. Ike, “Following Jesus the Good Shepherd: Reminiscences,” in *Priests of the Third Millennium. Reconciling All Things in Christ* (eds. David A. Ihenacho et al.; Owerri: Bidard 287 Priests, 2012) 35-47.

<sup>18</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 19.

Church to the cultural realities of every new epoch. These words of Pope John Paul II express it all: “a faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived.”<sup>19</sup>

## 5. Vatican II's Teaching on Faith and Culture: Some Contemporary Challenges

The position of Vatican II on culture and faith brought the Church into close collaboration with the secular world, and both have benefitted immensely from this rapprochement. However, some challenges remain, and most of these have been sharpened by the prevailing trends in modern culture.

### 5.1 Intercultural Dialogue in an Increasing Secularistic World

The Council document places much value on human culture and its progress through the sciences with the optimism that through cultural development the truth becomes better understood. However, this optimism has been seriously challenged by the increasing wave of secularism and what is often seen as atheistic and anti-religious culture. This has almost inclined some to question the intrinsic value of culture. This trend motivated Pope John Paul II to establish the Pontifical Council for Culture on 20 May 1982. Later in 1993, the Holy Father merged the pontifical Council for Culture with the Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Non-Believers, earlier created by Pope VI in 1965. This new dicastery promotes intercultural dialogue on diverse levels and also promotes studies on the causes of religious indifference in contemporary culture.

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<sup>19</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Address to the Italian National Congress of the Ecclesial Movement for Cultural Commitment*, 16 January 1982; cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 28 June 1982, p. 7.

Since 1982 the spate of secularism and anti-religiosity has been on the increase on the global level with paradoxical increase of religious fanaticism and terrorism in some circles. Most worrisome has been the growing ascendancy of a global culture that is indifferent to mainline religious traditions. While globalization continues to shift traditional cultural boundaries, the postmodern culture keeps relativizing inherited cultural traditions. Most postmodernist theorists argue that there are no objective truths or theories since all are different inherited ways of looking at reality. Many institutional structures are consequently being discredited and some gradually dismantled.

As free-thinkers abound, contrasting ideologies and thought processes fill the air, and some of these are imposed with extra-political force or imparted through influential media outreach. While this cultural current may be defended in some circles as an index of human freedom, it has also created an environment of cultural disorientation with many of the younger generation walking through life rootless and ruthless, and some faithless and confused. In the prevailing situation, the choice is either to continue to launch an all-out battle against what is perceived as a "culture of death" or to device new ways of being in the modern world. For many, the best way out is to enter into dialogue with the contemporary culture. To insist on the inherited ways of doing things or on a single cultural way of being human in the postmodern world cannot but be self-defeating. Intercultural dialogue together with cross-cultural learning is a great challenge.

## 5.2 Inculturation Theology

What may rank as the most significant outgrowth of the Vatican II position on faith and culture is the theology of inculturation. It is a theology and a praxis that engages the local culture, using its elements to express the Christian faith and also allowing the faith to renew the culture from within. Inculturation is meant to influence all aspects of the Christian thought and life. Since faith is a human response to God's word, the response has to be influenced by the local culture. This is what inculturation is all about. Thus inculturation has to inform the way the faith is conceptualized, the way the faith is communicated and the way the faith is lived out. All these are the challenges which inculturation poses to the local church.

The term inculturation has become a household name among many African churchmen and women. Many agree on the need for inculturation, but when it comes to what inculturation means in practical terms, the story changes. It is then that one realizes that while all use the same word they understand different things. Some see inculturation as substituting inherited Church practices with customs of African traditional religion. Some others see inculturation as introducing African cultural practices into different aspects of the liturgy and merging them with the already existing ones in the inherited liturgy. As Charles Ebelebe critically puts it, the impression is that it is "a sprinkling here and there of African color into the inherited Western European Christian mix."<sup>20</sup> The consequence is that nothing of the inherited European system is really removed, resulting in a type of

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<sup>20</sup> Charles A. Ebelebe, *Africa and the New Face of Mission. A Critical Assessment of the Legacy of the Irish Spiritans among the Igbo of Southern Nigeria* (Lanham, Maryland: Univ. Press, 2009).

eclecticism or syncretism that only prolongs the duration of the liturgical assembly without any coherent theology. Many trumpeted efforts at liturgical inculturation are on this level. One of the causes is the lack of attention to the theology underlying both the inherited liturgical practice and the new one from the local culture. Two questions that beg for answers in this regard are: What is the essence of this particular liturgical practice? How does this local cultural element relate to the essence of the given liturgical practice? Inculturation is not merely an effort in cultural revival but a serious theological enterprise aimed at making the faith relevant to the people in their local culture.

One of the greatest constraints to inculturation is the lack of enthusiasm for it. There is no gainsaying the fact that many young Africans are not really interested in inculturation. Many are not yet convinced of its relevance. Some see inculturation as a retrogressive movement championed by people who are perceived to be either anti-progressive or suffering from nostalgia for the past. This negative response is mostly caused by the attitude of some inculturation advocates who tend to see culture only in terms of the ancestral traditional culture of yesteryears. There are some also who see inculturation as the enthronement of the old traditional religious practices without a critical consideration of how they relate with the Christian religion and theology. Such approaches to inculturation are often followed with reactionary criticisms of the modern life styles which are interpreted as cultural impositions from the West, as if Africans are not free of adopting or even capable of developing a modern life-style. For many young and progressive minds, such one-dimensional approach to inculturation fails to convince as it holds little promise for

Africa in a fast changing and highly competitive and super-technological world.

On this front, the Cameroonian theologian, Jean-Marc Éla sees liberation theology as more relevant to the daily struggles of African in a complex and oppressive world, and criticizes an inculturation theology that is overly focused on cultural identity and anthropological issues.<sup>21</sup> According to Éla, “The very focus of our reflection must be the African world where a great wind of liberation is blowing. We have to confront an Africa who wants to be<sup>22</sup> freed from all forms of alienation. It is to that Africa that we must try to say the name of Jesus Christ. That is possible, in my opinion, only if the Church is truly the sacrament of justice and liberation.”<sup>23</sup> While Éla does not reject inculturation entirely, he proposes an inculturation theology that takes seriously the daily struggles of the African person.<sup>24</sup>

Éla’s position highlights the tension between liberation and the inculturation in contemporary theological debate in Africa. While Oliver Onwubiko sees liberation theology as a type of inculturation theology, Elochukwu Uzukwu agrees

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<sup>21</sup> This is seen in most of his works, such as: J.-M. Éla, *African Cry* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis 1986); ID, *My Faith as an African* (New York: Orbis, 1995); ID, “Identité proper d’une théologie africaine,” in *Theologie et choc des cultures* (ed. C. Geffre; Paris: 1984) 36-44.

<sup>22</sup> Oliver A. Onwubiko, *Theory and Practice of Inculturation [An African Perspective]*. Christian Mission & Culture in Africa, Vol. II (Enugu, 1992) 126-142.

<sup>23</sup> J.-M. Éla, “The Church—Sacrament of Liberation”, in *The African Synod. Documents, Reflections, Perspectives* (edited by M. Browne, Africa Faith & Justice Network) (Maryknoll, New York 1996) 134.

<sup>24</sup> See Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 170. See also Francis A. Oborji, *Trends in African Theology Since Vatican II. A Missiological Orientation* (Rome: 1998) 161-162.

entirely with Éla on the need to direct inculturation on the path of liberation.<sup>25</sup> According to Uzukwu, "Éla is therefore correct in drawing attention to the naivety of inculturation theology that ignores the violence and political roguery of the post-colonial Mafiosi.... He is right to call on the Churches to go beyond folkloric inculturation, to challenge the root causes of suffering, and to face the reality of change in the continent."<sup>26</sup> Uzukwu criticizes any inculturation theology that takes consolation in cultural exhibitions and entertainment music when issues of justice are neglected. He cautions, "Theology should not be content with liturgical sedation, talking drums that deaden the senses, and ignore the oppressive heavy hands laid on the people, as the Negro Spirituals with the African American slaves."<sup>27</sup>

The great challenge before inculturation theology today is to take the current situation of the people seriously. For inculturation to appeal to a majority of modern African minds, it has to operate with a clear appreciation of the dynamic nature of culture while also projecting those traditional elements that define the essence of the local culture. The inculturation effort has also to take into consideration the issues of social mobility and changed political configurations. It is difficult to insist on the reinstatement of a cultural practice that can hardly fit into a contemporary religious community that is no longer structured along traditional cultural patterns. In many Nigerian cities, one finds Christian communities that are

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<sup>25</sup> Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness. Appropriating Faith and Culture in West African Style* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012) 33-34.

<sup>26</sup> Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness*, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness*, 33.

highly multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic but living together in peace for many years. Sometimes, the insistence on the traditional cultural patterns of one of the groups, in the pretext of inculturation, ends up polarizing the community members along ethnic lines and consequently destroying the harmony of the Christian community. In such a setting, inculturation has to be done on the level of the new culture that has been commonly developed through the many years of living together in the same environment. Culture develops wherever human beings live and interact together. This requires a lot of research and creativity.

Every effort at inculturation must be the fruit of research and theological creativity. The aim is to radicalize the Christian faith in such a way that it truly uplifts the human person and the community within the given environment. It is good to emphasize the point that both culture and inculturation are fruits of the human attempts at survival in a given environment. Inculturation is not an effort in cultural revivalism or a competition among local cultures. An inculturation effort that ends up disfiguring the community and bringing bad feeling is definitely anti-human and anti-community just as it is anti-Christian. Positive inculturation effort is one that takes into consideration the actual situation of the community and engages the Christian faith on that level. When inculturation becomes an ideological struggle to enforce a particular cultural identity it then becomes a political movement with vested interests and no longer an evangelical tool for conversion and integral human development.

## 6. Conclusion

This essay has examined the Vatican II position on the relationship between culture and the Christian faith with particular attention on the contemporary implications of that position. The question of culture continues to challenge theology and Christian living in the present world and the Church is ever confronted with new ways of responding to the changing faces of human culture. The Church in Africa needs creative ways of responding to the challenges of modern culture. This she can do by freeing herself from undue attachment to inherited traditions whether on the religious or cultural level.