

# Inculturation, Anthropology, and the Empirical Dimension of Evangelization

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Received: 18 November 2019; Accepted: 6 January 2020; Published: 23 February 2020

**Abstract:** Using anthropological and theological perspectives and secondary literature, this paper argues that the scientific study of culture by professional anthropologists and social scientists is an essential component in the Catholic Church's mission of evangelization through inculturation. Inculturation, the process of inserting the Christian message, requires scientific discernment to know which cultural traits are compatible or contrary to the Christian faith, requiring anthropological training and active collaboration between theologians and professional anthropologists. Evangelization has an incarnational and empirical dimension when inserting the Gospel in human cultures. A genuine evangelization of cultures must be firmly rooted in the empirical reality of local cultures. The philosophical and theological orientation of many inculturationists and missionaries may sufficiently address the metaphysical dimension of the Christian faith, but not its empirical aspect when preached and adapted to human behavior in society, which entails scientific ethnographic research and active dialogue among clerics, missionaries, and social scientists.

**Keywords:** Catholicism; culture; inculturation; evangelization; anthropology; ethnographic research; Christian faith; Vatican II; anthropology of religion

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## 1. Introduction

Inculturation is one of the most significant theological concepts of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) after the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), a universal council convened by Pope John XXIII in Rome from 1962 to 1965 to adapt the Church's life and teaching to modern times. The key Vatican II documents that urged Catholics to greater engagement with the world through inculturation are the Council documents *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World), *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), and *Ad Gentes* (Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church). *Gaudium et Spes* emphasized the inseparability between *inculturation* of faith and the evangelization of culture, while *Lumen Gentium* stressed the positive relationship between the Gospel and the good elements found in the latent religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples around the world (para. 17). *Ad Gentes* accentuated the connection between culture and evangelization (Doyle 2012, pp. 2–3).

Pope John Paul II, who popularized this theological term after Vatican II through his writings, broadly defined inculturation as “the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures” (*Redemptoris Missio*, para. 52–54). The RCC's International Theological Commission defines inculturation as the “the Church's efforts to make the message of Christ penetrate a given sociocultural milieu, calling on the latter to grow according to all its particular values, as long as these are compatible with the Gospel” (para. 11). John Paul II consistently and insistently emphasized the sovereign power of the gospel to move freely and autonomously in its transformation of culture in

the process of inculturation of faith” (Schreiter 2015). Church documents after Vatican II also consistently stressed the role of faith in the evangelization of human culture (*Gaudium et Spes* 1965, para. 54; *Redemptoris Missio*, para. 52–54) and exhorted Christians to defend the right of all to a culture, the promotion of an integral culture, and above all, the harmonization of culture and Christianity (International Theological Commission 1988, para. 3).

Despite Vatican II’s emphasis on the crucial role of culture in evangelization, clerics and missionaries, who are expected to be the leaders of this endeavor, lack of knowledge of the latest scientific research on culture and society from anthropology and the social sciences, both of which can advance the RCC’s mission on inculturation. A great “majority of missionaries, both Western and non-Western, are still largely uninformed by anthropological insights” (Whiteman 2003). Attempts to integrate theology and the social sciences, especially anthropology, and inculturation, remained in the infantile stage (Arbuckle 1986, 1990; Agrosino 1994), reflecting the ambivalent relationship between anthropology and the RCC’s mission for over a hundred years (cf. Hiebert 1978; Stipe 1980; Luzbetak 1985; Sutlive 1985; Van Oer Geest 1990; Burrige 1991; Priest 2001. Kenelm Burrige (1991) has documented the long history of this ambivalent ties. Whiteman (2003), specifically articulated the distrust between anthropologists and missionaries: If anthropologists have been suspicious of missionaries, missionaries in turn have been slow to show appreciation for the insights that anthropology has to offer them). But Hiebert (1978) explained that “the church can no longer avoid anthropological questions by closing its eyes to them. Not only do anthropological assumptions now pervade much of modern western thought, but also Christian missions, because of their international character, are raising many of the same questions” (p. 165). Thus, one may inquire: Is the scientific study of culture offered by anthropology and the social sciences a necessary or supplementary component of the RCC’s mission of inculturation and evangelization?

Although the RCC has become open to the contribution of anthropological sciences for its mission after Vatican II, several contemporary theologians remain indifferent to the scientific work of anthropologists and sociologists; theological language continues to lag behind current anthropological research:

When commenting on human culture, much contemporary theological language still adopts an uncritical and even naive classicist view despite the fact that social and cultural anthropologists and sociologists, whose subject of inquiry is human culture, have seriously reworked earlier inadequate understandings of the subject, based on their increased and cumulative empirical research (Arbuckle 1996, p. xii).

Despite frequent references to inculturation and its importance by ecclesiastical authorities and theologians, the situation has become worse. Few theologians are seriously taking up the challenge to enter into realistic dialogue with today’s cultures: “In general, the engagement with social sciences by ecclesiologists has been eclectic, sporadic, intermittent, and secondary to what they view as their primary task” (Ormerod 2005, p. 816).

Yet the preaching of the gospel has an incarnational dimension that requires a scientific study of human experience and cultural system to satisfactorily adapt the gospel message in local cultures. Inculturation requires an in-depth analysis of culture: affirming what is good and true and challenging and correcting what is evil and sinful using Christian standards. Moreover, it needs a discerning empirical mind. The Jesuit anthropologist Fr. Frank Lynch argued that not all unorthodox religious beliefs held by people in their local culture are condemned by the official Church. Some are unofficial and folk, which do not necessarily contradict the official teachings and are thus tolerated by the hierarchy (Lynch 1979). Syncretic Catholicism is condemned by the RCC, but legitimate folk Catholicism, in which certain folk elements are either encouraged or at least tolerated by the Church authorities and are allowed in the Catholic value system (Schumacher 1984, p. 251). In this regard, inculturation is indeed a complex work that entails a rigorous scientific training in the anthropological sciences and active collaboration with professional anthropologists and social scientists to achieve an accurate adaptation of the gospel in local cultures. Although some scholars have started to synthesize theology and anthropology and critically examine the interconnection between theology’s inculturation and anthropological study of culture (e.g., Arbuckle 1986; Agrosino

1994; Schreiter 2015), the literature that directly acknowledges the crucial role of scientific study on culture in the Church's goal of evangelization through inculturation is lacking in theological studies.

This paper has two modest aims and major parts. The first aim, which constitutes the first part of the paper, differentiates the RCC's treatment of culture and inculturation from anthropology's scientific study of culture, intending to find common ground. The second aim, which constitutes the second part of the paper, explains the indispensable role of scientific research on culture in the RCC's mission of evangelization through inculturation.

Using sociological and anthropological perspectives and secondary literature as the source of data, in this paper, I argue that the social sciences, particularly the anthropological sciences, are necessary tools for Catholic clerics and missionaries who are tasked to lead in the RCC's mission of Christianizing human cultures. I further argue that the Church's mission of evangelization has incarnational and empirical dimensions which cannot be adequately addressed by philosophy and theology, needing the scientific methodology and research of anthropology and the social sciences to establish the empirical foundation of evangelization through inculturation.

## 2. Anthropology and the RCC on Culture

Anthropology as a science of culture was founded in an atmosphere of Comtism, utilitarianism, agnostic biblical criticism, and the beginnings of comparative religion in the nineteenth century, an environment which was unfavorable to religion. Its immediate founders, Edward Tylor (1832–1917) and James Frazer (1854–1941), were firm believers in social evolution who saw religion as part of the evolutionary process which would eventually die away. With this atmosphere, the RCC developed a love-hate relationship with anthropology as a science of culture (Arbuckle 1986, p. 428).

But a century after with the convocation of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), this ambivalent relationship between anthropology and the RCC has changed into a more friendly connection with Church's teaching on evangelization of cultures. Vatican II redefined the relationship of the Church with the world. Its document *Missio Dei* ecclesial, for instance, has asked the RCC to interpret the signs of the times and to view salvation not only as a religious reality but also as social liberation and humanisation (Turkson 2015, p. 4). Thus, the RCC has become more open to anthropological studies to advance evangelization. The theology of inculturation has benefited from the insights of several anthropologists who have analyzed the role of religion within culture. Anthropologists Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas in particular are frequently cited as having informed the church's understanding of culture (Mannion 1990, p. 313).

After Vatican II, the RCC also became more receptive to the contributions of the social sciences because of the growing complexity of the current cultured where it is "more difficult to form a synthesis of the various disciplines of knowledge and the arts than it was in the past" (*Gaudium et Spes* 1965, para. 61):

[T]he culture of today possesses particular characteristics: sciences which are called exact greatly develop critical judgment; the more recent psychological studies more profoundly explain human activity; historical studies make it much easier to see things in their mutable and evolutionary aspects, customs and usages are becoming more and more uniform; industrialization, urbanization, and other causes which promote community living create a mass-culture from which are born new ways of thinking, acting and making use of leisure (*Gaudium et Spes* 1965, para. 54).

Vatican II documents often use the word "culture", especially in *Gaudium et Spes*, although it is not always immediately clear what particular meaning is being given to the word at a particular place in the texts (Arbuckle 1986, p. 428). In a general sense, the council defines it as "everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities...his knowledge and his labor, to bring the world itself under his control ... (*Gaudium et Spes* 1965, para. 53). In his early work, Truth and Tolerance (2003), Pope Benedict XVI, who, at the time of writing, was still a Cardinal-theologian, defined culture in a more theological sense "as the social form of expression, as it has grown up in history, of those experiences and evaluations that have left their mark on a community and have

shaped it". In this definition, he emphasizes the centrality of religion in cultures. To him, inculturation is a meeting of cultures, i.e., "a culture that is indifferent from the religious point of view interact with the Christian culture, so that two agents that were hitherto alien to each other meet and now engage in a synthesis together" (Ratzinger 2003, p. 33). To him, the Christian faith exists as a distinct culture as well as an independent agent: a social and cultural community called the People of God" that purifies any local culture.

Pope Paul VI, ten years after the Council ended, used the term culture with anthropological precision and sensitivity. Both popular culture and the religious climate had changed considerably after he published a landmark church document on culture and evangelization in 1975—*Evangelii Nuntiandi* (The Joy of the Gospel). Since then, the ecclesiastical definition of culture became open to anthropological meaning.

Although ecclesiastical definitions may fundamentally refer to the same reality, the RCC has no unified understanding of culture, just as anthropology and the social sciences conceive its meaning in various ways. For example, the anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn in 1952 discovered that there were 160 definitions published in English by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and others (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1957, 1963). For centuries the concept of culture has been the subject of vigorous controversy as anthropologists have never been able to agree on a single definition of culture. Despite the diversity of definitions, anthropologists' definitions can be generally categorized into three broad categories: classicist, modern, and postmodern (Green 2009). With this diversity in viewing culture, the anthropologist-theologian Gerald Arbuckle (1996) argued that the confusion surrounding the meaning of culture itself and the application of the concept to vastly different situations is the thorniest methodological problem in inculturation.

Differences in understanding culture by both the RCC and anthropology is not the only contentious issue that hinders the dialogue between theology and anthropology in inculturation. Theologians and professional anthropologists also fundamentally differ on how to deal with culture. Catholic theologians treat culture as a means to an end. They study culture to transform it completely into a Christian culture, while anthropologists treat the scientific study of culture as an end in itself without the intention to change it. Inculturationists view their work as primarily aimed at changing cultures, inspired by their religious vocation of "converting all for Christ" and to fulfill the RCC's mission of evangelization. But anthropologists do not view their work this way. As social scientists, they generally consider their scientific work on culture as part of their vocation to bring out the cultural diversity in the world and advance scientific knowledge.

Catholic clerics and theologians do not aim to only understand culture but to alter it according to the Christian norms, following the Church's demand of converting attitudes and amending customs where the Gospel establishes itself; that cultures must also be purified and restored in Christ (International Theological Commission 1988, para. 6). But anthropologists generally do not have some reformist agenda in studying culture. They only aim to understand and describe the various cultures of the world to generate new knowledge on social behaviour and cultural systems. Miller (2017) argued that the importance of anthropology as a discipline is the ability of anthropologists to study the world through ethnography and transmit that understanding back to global populations as education. But theologians and missionaries, inspired by their religious vocation of "converting all for Christ" and guided by the Church's reformist agenda, aim to find theological and pastoral strategies to evangelize human cultures through the process of inculturation. The primary concern of the social scientists is to accurately account and describe culture using the scientific method and to cross-cultural studies to understand the differences and similarities of cultural traits and systems around the world.

### 3. Evaluating the Church's Inculturation and Anthropologists' Research on Culture

About the time *Evangelii Nuntiandi* was published, the expression "inculturation" started to become popular among theologians. The word arose out of a deliberate effort by theologians to express the dialectical relationship that should exist between the gospel and cultures. Hence, it has

been defined as the dynamic, ongoing, reciprocal, and critical interaction between the gospel message and culture (Arbuckle 1986, p. 429):

The conditions of the society in which we live oblige all of us therefore to revise methods, to seek by every means to study how we can bring the Christian message to modern man. For it is only in the Christian message that modern man can find the answer to his questions and the energy for his commitment of human solidarity (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 1975, para.3).

Inculturation, contextualization, and evangelization are said to be synonymous terms. Inculturation is not an anthropological concept, but a theological one that is primarily used in the RCC. This is not found in anthropological, sociological and other social science literature. The closest term to it may be the anthropological terms enculturation and acculturation. In cultural anthropology, “enculturation” is the process by which an individual becomes part of culture, while acculturation is classically defined as “comprehending those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups” (Redfield et al. 1936). Inculturation is more than enculturation and acculturation.

The minute change of “enculturation” to “inculturation” implies a shift of meaning for the RCC. Enculturation in anthropology is a learning experience by which an individual is initiated and grows into his or her experience, while “inculturation” denotes the process by which the Church becomes inserted in a given culture (Roest-Crollius 1978, p. 275). In this case, the term “enculturation” is simply a scientific term to describe the initiation of an individual to a particular culture, while the term “inculturation” is a theological one, with a reformist tone of transforming human cultures into a Christian culture as taught by the RCC.

Acculturation in anthropology is also different from the RCC’s inculturation. Acculturation is a scientific term to denote a two-way process wherein the original cultural patterns of either or both groups are shared through human contact. When cultural norms, beliefs, and attitudes cluster around a specific domain, they are said to constitute a cultural model (D’Andrade and Strauss 1992; Garro 2000; Hruschka and Hadley 2008; Sperber 1996). When an individual’s cultural models become increasingly divergent from the shared cultural models of their previous social group and become increasingly similar to the cultural models held by members of the social group to which they have immigrated, acculturation is said to have occurred (Dressler 2006; Handwerker 2002; Hruschka 2009).

Redfield et al. (1936) classically defined acculturation as “comprehending those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups.” Acculturation is a social transmission of information as a result of first-hand contact between peoples (Broesch and Hadley 2012, p. 376).

Acculturation is clearly a descriptive term while inculturation is a prescriptive one. As a theological term, it prescribes a one-way process in which the Church penetrates a particular culture to Christianize it, retaining only those cultural patterns that are compatible to Christian norms, values, and beliefs. The RCC believes in its evangelizing mission to Christianize all human cultures, but its original cultural system cannot be reduced to a particular form of human culture.

Acculturation may be accidental, but inculturation occurs when a dominant culture attempts to make itself accessible to a subdominant one without losing its own particular character (Agrosino 1994). In other words, the church “is in a stage of welcoming in a profound way those elements that she encounters in every culture, to assimilate them and integrate them into Christianity, and to root the Christian way in different cultures” (Synod of Bishops 1987, p. 13).

The ultimate goal of inculturation as preaching the gospel is a holistic transformation of human cultures into a Christian culture, retaining only those cultural elements which are compatible to the gospel values:

[I]nculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this 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 the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation (Arrupe 1978).

Gleaned from the Church's teachings and theological literature on inculturation, the process of transforming human cultures into Christian ones is a very complex work that requires an empirical mind to be able to distinguish and separate cultural traits that are compatible and contradictory to the gospel values.

To understand a specific culture thoroughly and scientifically entails archaeological, anthropological, historical, and sociological studies. Dawson (1948) argued that the material and spiritual factors interpenetrate one another so completely in a culture that they form an inseparable unity, so that religion and life have become one (Dawson in Staudt 2009, p. 94). Starkloff (1994) warned that there are "webs of meaning" that constitute cultural systems and cautioned theologians of inculturation against isolating individuals from their own authentic environment. But there can be no inculturation unless evangelizers "adopt resolutely an attitude of exchange and of comprehension, in order to understand the cultural identity of peoples, ethnic groups, and the various sectors of modern society" (John 1983, para. 2). In this case, theologians and clerical inculturationists must dialogue with professional anthropologists in evangelizing culture. Arbuckle (1986) argued the following:

Anthropology specializes in the understanding of culture and cultures, especially today in uncovering the nature and power of cultural symbols that form the very heart of cultures and therefore of people's lives. In fact, contemporary theology will progress only to the degree that it seeks to comprehend culture. For this, theology needs the professional insights of anthropologists (p. 446).

The RCC's inculturation implies that Christianity introduced by Christian missionaries in a particular local culture increasingly and ultimately becomes the cultural model of the place, sidestepping the non-Christian cultural models in the local culture. This can imply syncretism as the first step. Although this term contains both negative and positive connotations depending on whether one takes a conservative or liberal stance, a number of theologians view it more positively, often approaching it from an anthropological rather than a theological perspective and viewing it as a necessary stage in the process of inculturation (Schniller 1992). It can become positive if the Christian elements prevail or dominate over other cultural and religious traits of a particular culture. It becomes negative and unacceptable to the RCC if the mingling results in the dilution or destruction of the Christian elements. Syncretism is condemned by the Catholic Church but folk Catholicism that combines official teachings with some cultural beliefs which are not harmful to the Christian faith, can be tolerated in the Church (Lynch 1979). Pope Benedict XVI, previously writing as Cardinal Ratzinger in his work "Truth and Tolerance", acknowledged that there are certain cultural elements in human culture which can be tolerated in the process of inculturating the Christian message in human cultures as long as they do not alter the Christian faith (Ratzinger 2003).

#### 4. The Empirical Dimension of Preaching and the Indispensability of Anthropological Research

Before Christ ascended into heaven, he left the following message which become the guiding principle of the RCC's evangelization: "Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28: 19). For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News to all strata of humanity and, through its influence, transforming humanity from within and making it new (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 1975, para. 18). The history of evangelization has not only been but continues to be a process of inserting the Christian message to human cultures. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World or *Gaudium et Spes* recognized that evangelization involves, "a living exchange [. . .] between the Church and the diverse cultures of people" (Omollo 2016).

Evangelization can lose much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed and if it does not use their language, signs, and symbols. In inculturation, the preacher must listen to the people and discover what it is that the faithful need



to hear. He has to contemplate the word as well as his people, “paying attention ‘to actual people, to using their language, their signs and symbols, to answering the questions they ask’” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 1975, para. 154). This implies scientific research to understand the empirical aspect of inculturation. Preaching the good news has an incarnational dimension that is inevitably linked to people’s behavior in human culture; accordingly, a scientific understanding of culture is an imperative to accurately insert the gospel message in society:

The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, is certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the kingdom that the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 1975, para. 20).

The incarnation symbolizes the metaphysical and empirical aspect of the Christian faith and preaching. In incarnation, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1: 1–18). This symbolizes the reality that the supernatural truth about God is enmeshed with the empirical reality of the world once this truth became flesh and preached in human culture. The metaphysical truth of the faith is beyond human experience and scientific investigation. But once this truth is taught and preached to people in human cultures, it assumes a behavioral character and becomes incarnated in human cultures. “The gospel become relevant and reliable when it is communicated to people through their culture. The Word was incarnated in a given cultural context. Therefore the gospel is received, experienced, affirmed, and proclaimed through a culture” (Scherer and Beavans eds. 1999).

In his doctoral thesis, *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer (2009) thinks that Christianity has a sociologically definable essence despite its supernatural origins. Taking up Ferdinand Toennies’ famous categories of community (*Gemeinschaft*) and association (*Gesellschaft*), he tried to understand how the church might enact itself in the context of a post-organic, associative modernity, and whether, furthermore, it had a sociologically definable feature (Roberts in Ford (ed) 2005, p. 376). Evangelization is adapting the Word to human and cultural experience, thus it entails anthropological and social science theories and research to accurately insert the gospel to people’s cultural behavior. Once the Christian message is incarnated in human experience through preaching, it enters into a dialogue with human culture and becomes intrinsically embedded into it. Culture is the arena or locus where the Christian faith is preached and received by people:

The synthesis between culture and faith is not only a cultural demand, but also a faith requirement. If, in fact, faith identifies itself with no culture and it is completely independent regarding all cultures, it is not less true, and it is precisely because of this, that faith is destined to inspire and permeate all cultures. Faith will not be fully possessed nor faithfully lived unless it becomes part of the culture (John 1982).

In this case, the empirical world of culture is an essential component in incarnating and preaching the Word of God to people and society. Thus, studying culture scientifically is an essential dimension of evangelization: Before inculturationists or missionaries incarnate the Christian faith in society, they need the scientific study of professional anthropologists to assist them in understanding the cultural system of the people they wish to Christianize: “[N]o matter what the origins of anthropology are or what anthropologists might feel about the supernatural, the Church must come to a love relationship with anthropology” (Arbuckle 1986, p. 428). The Church needs the help of specialists in the study of culture to meticulously adapt the gospel to people’s experience, and anthropologists are precisely those specialists who can assist the inculturationists. In *Evangelii Gaudium* and in many of his addresses, Pope Francis insinuates that evangelization requires the involvement of academics and scientists:

Proclaiming the Gospel message to different cultures also involves proclaiming it to professional, scientific and academic circles. This means an encounter between faith, reason

and the sciences with a view to developing new approaches and arguments on the issue of credibility, a creative apologetics which would encourage greater openness to the Gospel on the part of all (*Evangelii Gaudium* 2013, para. 132).

The Christian message contains both metaphysical and empirical dimensions. It contains the transcendental truth of divine salvation. Missionaries preach and adapt it to human culture and people's behavior in society. Thus, its message no longer remains in the religious realm once it is inculturated and received by people in the social order: the divine Christian message already becomes incarnated in human experience just as the Word was incarnated and become one with people. "[H]uman culture has necessarily a historical and social aspect and the word "culture" also often assumes a sociological and ethnological sense" (*Gaudium et Spes* 1965, para. 53).

Arbuckle (2010) debunked the revitalized fundamentalist view that the study of culture is unimportant for evangelization, that it is even a waste of time; all we need to do is preach the Good News, just as Jesus Christ did in his time. He characterized this indifference of many clerics and missionaries to use the cultural research of professional anthropologists as fundamentalism: an emotion-driven attitude of returning to the pre-Vatican attitude of rejecting the world and a simplistic solution to complex issues. He argued that studying culture and adapting the Christian message to human culture is a fundamental imperative of the Gospel itself. In fact, Jesus Christ was extremely sensitive in his preaching to the cultures of his day. As the master of inculturation, he knew that his message had to penetrate to the "very roots" of cultures (p. xx). As Omollo (2016) aptly explains:

Nonetheless it is to be clearly borne in mind that matter was created by God and even elevated by the incarnate *Logos*. However one cannot deny that the world is under the power of evil. Christ of culture underlines the fact that Christ did not come to condemn the world but to embrace and bless it along with its culture. Christ above culture underscores an approach which is synthetic. Christ is the Lord who is both of this world and of the other. He is both God and man. Christ and culture in paradox is an approach which is dualistic. It sees this earthly life as a groaning to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling (cf. 2 Cor 5:1–2) (p.114).

Anthropological, sociological, and any social science research on culture can be the "missing link" in the search for a more genuine inculturation of the Christian message in society. The recognition of the role of human knowledge and skill, including scientific knowledge of culture, is, in fact, recognized by theologians as one of the three solid theological assumption of a sub-field called missiological anthropology. Although the Church's mission of evangelization is primarily a spiritual activity—the work of the Holy spirit—nevertheless, it relies on the scientific work and planning of human inculturationists to achieve its spiritual goal in the empirical world (Luzbetac 1988).

The Christian message that missionaries preach consists of religious and moral prescriptions on how people and culture must act or behave in accordance to the gospel values. But these normative prescriptions need empirical support when applied to actual social practice to accurately achieve their goals. The anthropologist Wilfredo Arce (2001) argued that value or moral prescriptions (such as those in preaching) can have a great deal of validity. However, they are bound to be ambiguous when used in concrete situations. Prescriptions must be responsive to the empirical situation to be effective and applicable to people in social practice. Thus, inculturation needs the scientific study of cultures by professional anthropologists to correctly insert the Christian faith to people's behavior and cultural system.

Misunderstanding the dynamics of culture can result in a misapplication of the Christian message and haphazard inculturation. Thus, the missionaries who evangelized the Guarani in Paraguay, for instance, searched for a word of baptism to convey the meaning its Christian meaning. Due to lack of anthropological investigations, they found out later that the word they used for baptism meant "becoming Spanish". The missionaries could have avoided mistakes like this if they were properly trained in anthropological methods of research, and if they had an anthropological perspective to help them cope with and understand cultural differences (Whiteman 2003, p. 407). The genuine empirical foundation of evangelization and inculturation could not be based on mere



speculation, common-sense knowledge, and subjective appreciation of cultural traits, but on a sound and scientific assessment of cultural facts provided by professional anthropologists, sociologists, and other experts on culture.

## 5. Studying Culture as the First Essential Step in Inculturation

Preaching and inculturating the Christian message in a particular culture is similar to applying Catholic social doctrines to society in three major steps which can be summarized into three key words: see, judge, and act. Pope John XXIII described these steps as follows:

First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgment on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles (*Mater et Magistra* 1961, para. 235).

These steps can be applied, by analogy, in the process of inculturation. The first step (see) is observing and assessing the cultural situation as accurately as possible. The second stage (judge) is judging its cultural traits, whether they are compatible or contrary to the gospel values. The last stage (act) is adopting a specific plan of action or set of strategies to inculturate the Christian elements to the local culture.

Clearly, the first step in inculturating any religious teaching in a particular society is knowing the local culture itself as scientifically as possible so as not to err in the second and final stage. The RCC recognizes that preaching the Good News to people is not only about disseminating or communicating the religious teachings but also knowing and understanding where they are situated in social life: “[E]vangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man’s concrete life, both personal and social” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 1975, para. 29). Therefore, it requires knowing the “*sitz em leben*” or life setting of people who are supposed to receive the religious message. This implies anthropological training, ethnographic study, and exchanging of notes between professional anthropologists and Catholic missionaries and clerics to understand the cultural orientation of the recipient.

Discerning the compatibility of cultural traits with the gospel values entails skills and academic training in the social sciences. Culture is a complex system that require scientific theories and methodology to understand cultural traits according to their cultural contexts. That is why anthropologists, who are equipped with advanced scientific training in anthropological theories and methods, usually spend more time doing field work to intimately understand and describe in an ethnography the inner dynamics of a particular culture.

Clerics and missionaries, by academic training, do not have the advantage of having ethnographic expertise of professional anthropologists in studying culture, even if they live with the natives in the missions for longer periods and despite the fact that anthropology historically owed a considerable amount to the firsthand fieldwork and ethnographic research of early Christian missionaries for the foundation of the discipline (Whiteman 2003, pp. 398–99). Thus, inculturation implies an enhancement of social science training for inculturationists and intensifying their collaboration and dialogue with social scientists. Without this dialogue, clerics and missionaries will be ill-equipped in inculturating the Christian message in a solid empirical ground. Thus, many contemporary Catholic inculturationists are left behind in anthropological literature with an assumption that culture is a more or less a unified whole and that it is identified with nation-states or other political units rather than with self-identified ethnic communities (Agrosino 1994). Contemporary anthropologists have shown that intracultural variation is a salient characteristic of every culture (Barrett 1984, pp. 154–82), thus abandoning the classical view of culture.

## 6. The Interpretive Dimension of Culture and Inculturation

Many missionaries are largely uninformed by anthropological insights (Whiteman 2003). With their lack of cross-cultural understanding offered by anthropological research, they tend to miss the richness of other cultures, which is necessary to open and broaden one’s mind on cultural diversity. Some theologians have long recognized that they cannot operate effectively without anthropological

knowledge and recourse to the social sciences. In “practical” or “pastoral” theology, eclectic appropriations of insights and methodology often take place, and pragmatic syntheses are arranged that enhance instrumental insight into the ministerial task and the ongoing life of the church (Roberts 2001, p. 371).

Missionaries need a more in-depth understanding of the structure and dynamics of every culture provided by anthropology and social science research to understand the interpretive rather than merely the observational aspect of culture. Accordingly, Smith (1924), in an early article on culture and missionary work, argued that social anthropology should be recognized as an essential discipline in the training of missionaries. If mission work is to be effective, missionaries must understand people from their point of view, not just their own. In the case below, Whiteman (2003) vividly illustrates how the missionaries’ misunderstanding of a local cultural meaning due to a lack of anthropological research can lead to an incorrect adaptation of the Christian teaching:

The missionaries also searched for a word that they could use to convey the meaning of baptism. It was not easy, but they found a term they thought captured the essence of baptism for the Guarani. Anthropological investigation, hundreds of years later, discovered that the term used for baptism meant “becoming Spanish”. Missionaries could avoid mistakes like this if they were properly trained in anthropological methods of research, and if they had an anthropological perspective to help them cope with, and understand cultural differences (Whiteman 2003, p. 407).

This observation indicates that, without an insider’s point of view of a particular culture, or what Max Weber calls interpretive understanding, cultural assessment lead to a misunderstanding of a cultural trait, which can do more harm than good for inculturation. A theologically-sound adaptation of the gospel in culture must be based on facts rather on common sense knowledge or subjective interpretation of the missionary or inculturationist.

A lack of emic or interpretive understanding of culture can disable clerics and missionaries to truly inculturate Christianity in society:

Inculturationists, for instance, assume that people will automatically prefer “indigenous” to “foreign” expressions, but this distinction is no longer easy to maintain. Bishops in the United States, for example, have permission to schedule occasional Latin masses for the benefit of believers who feel that Catholicism is only valid when celebrated in Latin. Such people have never accepted the vernacular mass, even though it is easier to understand and relate to everyday life. Moreover, inculturationists assume that people in Africa or Asia will automatically reject the Roman forms, although experience suggests that those forms might seem more desirable because they are the “real thing” even when they are not totally comprehensible (Agrosino 1994).

Although missionaries can learn the meaning of cultural traits through observation of stereotypes or what Weber calls *aktuelles Verstehen* (observational understanding), this type observation is unreliable in knowing cultural meaning. Missionaries and inculturationists need to learn to apply a more scientific method of observation, one that Weber calls *erklärendes Verstehen* (interpretive understanding), a type of empirical assessment in which the observer asks why the actor is doing the cultural act (Leat 1972). In this method, the inculturationists put themselves into the shoes of the natives to learn thier motives and truly understand the meaning of their cultural behavior or trait. "The principle thesis of the sociology of knowledge is that there are modes of thought which cannot be adequately understood as long as their social origins are obscured." Thus, to gain an accurate understanding of social action needs an insider’s point of view to better understand the interactions within a group and the group’s purpose.

Finally, knowing the interpretive dimension of culture also implies an understanding of the social structure and social system of a local culture. Some theologians and inculturationists are contented only in adapting or substituting Christian rituals with the local ones, without a scientific and in-dept understanding of entire cultural system, erroneously inculturating the Christian elements in the local culture.

### 6.1. *The Necessity of Anthropological Research in Inculturation: The Case of the Guarani*

The Guarani Indians are a transnational indigenous people living in the south-central region of South America. Their traditional territory includes Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Bolivia. Today, over 80% of Paraguayans speak Guarani, about 50% speak Spanish, and, because more than half of Paraguayans are bilingual, some of each group speak both. Guarani usage is more heavily concentrated in rural areas, while bilingualism and Spanish monolingualism are more common in urban areas (De Mello 2014, p. 976).

The Guarani Indians have a sophisticated system of thought about the cosmos. For them, the Sun, the heavenly bodies, the cosmos, the world, and all the existent things inside it are seen as a whole; therefore, astronomy is contained within cosmology. The Guarani have a delicate belief system which cannot easily be perceived by missionaries without a sophisticated and intensive ethnographic research. The Guarani's view of the universe and cosmos is totally different from the European and Christian cosmology of the Jesuit missionaries:

A lack of a scientific understanding of the Guarani cosmology before inculturating the Christian faith to the natives can lead to haphazard inculturation. Whiteman (2003) made an interesting reflection on how the missionaries' misunderstanding of the cultural system of the Guarani Indians resulted in a negative unintended effect:

Paraguayans speak in Spanish but think in Guarani. Guarani is the language spoken by the indigenous people before the Spanish Conquest, and it is still alive and well today. I immediately asked, "In what language do Paraguayans worship and read the Bible?" The answer was "Spanish, not Guarani". In other words, Christianity is expressed through the medium of Spanish rather than in the heart language of Guarani. More recently I learned that when the Jesuits came to this area in the seventeenth century, they asked for the local name of the highest God in the Guarani cosmology and were given a name that they used for God instead of the Spanish "Dios". Only recently has an anthropologist researching the Guarani cosmology learned that the Guarani had a god that was higher than the god whose name they gave to the Jesuits, but that god was so high in the sky that no name was given to it. In other words, here was the "unknown god" (cf. Acts 17: 23), alive and well in the Guarani cosmology, but because the missionaries did not adequately research and understand the Guarani cosmology, the Christian God they introduced was put into a subordinate position to the unknown god of the Guarani (Whiteman 2003, pp. 406–7).

In her latest anthropological study on Guarani cosmology, De Mello (2014) explained its complexity, which can mislead outsiders and unscrupulous missionaries who lack scientific research skills and ethnographic knowledge:

The Guarani Indians see the universe as a composition of several cosmic planes or celestial strata that are arranged in a concentric shape, one atop the other. The sky that we see is a small part of this universe, composed of numberless skies ruled by different suns that we cannot see. The suns are creator deities that form and protect the worlds and the beings that inhabit them. The skies and the suns that exist beyond the land of Sun and Moon cannot be seen by humans but are in the central part of the universe, where the biggest sun lives. According to the Guarani, the origin of the cosmos occurred from the unfolding of the principal sun, *Nhanderu Tenonde*, that aggregates the whole cosmos with its thinking (De Mello 2014, pp. 976–78).

Thus, by adopting scientific observation of professional anthropologists or sociologists, the inculturationists can establish a reliable empirical foundation for evangelization, the first major stage in any genuine work of inculturation.

## 7. Summary and Conclusions

This paper has shown that both the RCC's inculturation and anthropology deal with human culture but differ in understanding and treating it. The Church sees culture as fertile ground in

preaching and something to be transformed to insert the supremacy of the Christian faith in society; anthropology primarily views culture as an object of scientific study to enhance people's understanding of human behavior and cultural diversity. Thus, the theological term inculturation is fundamentally different from anthropology's enculturation and acculturation. But this difference can have a nuanced complementarity if one sees the empirical study of culture by anthropologists as the first necessary step in inculturation. Inculturationists and missionaries cannot truly discern which cultural traits are compatible to or contrary to the gospel values in adapting the Christian faith in society without the scientific study of culture by professional anthropologists and other social scientists.

The Christian faith does not only have a metaphysical dimension but also a behavioral or empirical dimension once preached to people in a local culture and society. Inculturation requires a scientific study of culture, an interpretive understanding of cultural act and trait, as well an accurate assessment as to which cultural traits conform to or deviate from the Christian faith; this entails the need for scientific training in anthropological sciences and active collaboration with professional anthropologists and scientists who specialize in the study of culture. The philosophical and theological training of many Catholic missionaries and inculturationists may explain the transcendental dimension of the Christian faith in the process of evangelization; however, this training cannot adequately incarnate or adapt gospel message to human behavior and local culture without a scientific study and assessment of the cultural traits and cultural patterns of people who are expected to receive the Christian message, a first essential step in inculturation.

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