

INCULTURATION OR SYNCRETISM: NEW WINE IN NEW WINESKIN

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Abstract

Artikel ini bermaksud mendalami persoalan inkulturasi dan sinkretisme. Apakah inkulturasi dapat berhasil tanpa sinkretisme? Berangkat dari studi kasus *Sendratari Natal* yang sempat memicu perdebatan sengit di Bali, penulis berpendapat bahwa sinkretisme mengacu pada persoalan yang sama dengan inkulturasi. Apa yang kita pandang sebagai sinkretisme di masa lalu, kini kita pahami sebagai inkulturasi. Karena itu, dibutuhkan pemahaman yang lebih positif tentang sinkretisme, yakni sebagai proses pemurnian dan pertobatan yang berkesinambungan. Dalam alur pemikiran ini, sinkretisme menjadi nama lain inkulturasi, yakni proses integratif dalam mengungkapkan Injil dalam kebudayaan tertentu.

Keywords: inculturation, syncretism, identity, mission, religion, culture

The aim of this essay is to answer the question: can inculturation succeed without syncretism? Drawing on a case study on the Christmas *Sendratari* performed at the Holy Trinity Parish, Tuka-Bali, I intend to show that syncretism and inculturation actually refer to the same matter. What we regard as syncretism in the past is what we describe as inculturation today. Thus, I argue, a more positive understanding of syncretism is needed to develop a fruitful framework for inculturation.

1. The Christmas *Sendratari* in Bali

The only document which noted the first contact between Balinese Religion and Christianity was an invitation letter written on palm-leaf manuscript (*lontar*) by the King of Klungkung representing Kings of Bali. This letter was addressed to the Portuguese in Malacca in 1635, requesting for a good commercial relation and eagerly welcoming their priests as well. But, there was no further information about it.

The Dutch administration actually restricted, or even prohibited, Christian missionaries to spread the Gospel in Bali. Some Protestant missionaries, however, managed to get permission. Unfortunately, on June 8, 1881, Nicodemus I Gusti Karangasem, the first Balinese convert, killed Y. de Vroom, one of the two missionaries from Utrecht Zending Association. Nicodemus could not stand the situation that his community had expelled him. His community declared him morally “dead” because of his becoming a Christian.¹

Nicodemus’ case is an example of how difficult for a Balinese to become Christian since the very beginning. Initially, Christian converts were excommunicated from their villages. In many villages, regulations were written against those who were unfaithful to Balinese religion. They were declared “dead.”² They were prohibited to bury their dead in village cemeteries and in all other available lands. They did not get water for their rice fields and had to endure the hatred of the members of their village (*krama desa*). As a result, many of them returned to Balinese Hinduism and others did not dare to go to church.

The murder signalled the start of a series of problems in the relationships between Balinese Hindus and Balinese Christians, which have extended to the present time. Knowing that there were many conversions from time to time, the Hindus, for their part, regarded Christianity as a threat. Every Balinese who embraces Christianity is regarded as a betrayer. Moreover, Balinese Hinduism and all of its temples are strictly related to the spirits of the ancestors. Thus, being a Christian is regarded as betraying the spirits of the ancestors. In view of this concept, it is not easy for a Balinese to be a Christian. Wayan Mastra explains as follows: “In worshipping Jesus, who does not belong to their clan, he is considered to be worshipping the spirit of another clan. So the Hindu Balinese consider Christians to be people who leave their own ancestors and worship the spirit of another ancestor.”³

Undeniably, the disdainful attitude of missionaries in the past toward Balinese religion and their temple offerings added to the problem as well. Lack of space will not allow me to describe this in detail. Here, I just mention the last case that happened at Christmas 1999.

A local television program named “*Sendratari Kelahiran Ida Sang Hyang Yesus*”, a Balinese traditional dance and drama about the birth of

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- 1 Raymundus I Made Sudhiarsa, “The Balinese Religion and Christianity Encounter,” *Verbum SVD*, 1992, 48-49.
 - 2 Cf. M. Cavarrubias, *Island of Bali*, London-New York: KPI, 1987, 397.
 - 3 Wayan Mastra, “Christology in the Context of Life and Religions of Balinese,” in Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds., *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, Bangalore: Brilliant Printers, 1983, 242.

Jesus, was recorded on December 19, 1999 at the Catholic Church in Tuka, a village in Badung Regency, and was broadcasted on December 25, 1999.⁴ The following days, all media in Bali gave responses to that program. A very bitter protest and anger came from Hindu organisations and institutions.

Their main response, as reported in *Bali Post* on December 29, 1999, is that Balinese culture belongs to the Hindus alone. In other words, for them, culture is their religion and vice versa. For them, it is impossible to separate religion from culture.

Although not all the Hindu leaders had the same opinion regarding the matter, most of Bali Hindu religious leaders claimed that 'Bali is Hindu and Hindu is Bali.' Since religion and social life are intimately blended in Bali, some traditional Hindu leaders stated: "The relation between religion and culture in Bali is analogous to the relation between a tree and its leaves, flowers and fruits. Religion is the trunk of the Balinese society while culture is the leaves, flowers and fruits of the tree. Whoever does not care for the tree has no right to share its leaves, flowers and fruits."⁵

For the Catholic Church authorities the issue of syncretism arises and is supported by non-Balinese Catholics, whose domicile is in Bali. In several meetings held by the Catholic authorities in attempting to respond to the Hindus and Bali Government, there were two positions held within the Church. The Balinese priests supported inculturation and emphasized the right to claim Balinese culture. But the Bishop, who is a non-Balinese, and most non-Balinese priests pointed out that in that case there was syncretism in its negative meaning.⁶ It became obvious when several priests abandoned the Balinese language in the mass on the following time. Instead of looking for solution in doing inculturation, the Church authorities banned the use of any elements of Balinese culture.

Soon, there were two problems that arose from this case. *First*, on the part of the Balinese Hindus, who claim that what we regard as

4 On the same day, Rajawali Citra Televisi Indonesia, a private-owned national television station, broadcasted the Christmas mass at Kungsawah Parish in Jakarta. The mass is in Betawi culture. Betawi Muslims, who claim that Betawi culture belongs to them, protested this program.

5 Pancratius Mariatma, "Interreligious Dialogue in Bali", in Leonardo N. Mercado and James J. Knight, eds., *Mission and Dialogue. Theory and Practise*, Manila: Divine Word Publication, 1989, 101.

6 In a meeting on March 12, 2000, at the Holy Spirit Seminary, Tuka-Bali, discussing our response to the government and Hindus institution, Dr. Robert Reverger, who is a non-Balinese and the Head of Charismatic Catholic Movement of the Denpasar Diocese, described that the inculturation had already been mixed with the elements of Hindu gods, spirits and evils. The position of the Church authorities at that time was very similar to that assuming inculturation as syncretism.

inculturation is stealing their culture and assume it is used by the Catholics as a strategy for catching 'the fish,' that is the Hindus. *Second*, on the part of the Church authorities, who deem what we call inculturation is really syncretism in its negative meaning. To answer these problems, I will now explore what really is the meaning of inculturation and syncretism.

2. Inculturation and Syncretism

This part tries to give a very general view of the Church understanding of inculturation and syncretism by examining the meaning of the term and how the Church uses them in theological discourses.

2.1. Inculturation

2.1.1. The Term

The term "inculturation" is a neologism, which is very difficult to find in English dictionaries or scientific literature. This term was introduced for the first time by J. Masson, SJ in *Nouvelle Revue Theologique* no. 84 (1960) and was popularised in the mid-1970s, mostly by Jesuit writers.⁷

Chupungco, in *Worship: Beyond Inculturation* (1994), proves that inculturation is a new term for an old idea, namely the ongoing dialogue between the Gospel and cultures. Peter Schineller describes the term combines the theological significance of incarnation with anthropological concepts of enculturation and acculturation to create something new. Enculturation refers to the process of learning about a new cultural tradition through, for example, the process of socialization into that new culture. It is the process by which an individual becomes inserted into his or her culture. Inculturation is not the same as enculturation because in the case of inculturation the Christian does not come empty-handed, but has a specific tradition to bring to the new situation.

Acculturation refers to contact or encounter between two cultures and the changes that result. Acculturation differs from inculturation, because the Church or the Christian tradition is not in our view simply another culture, but has its own special nature and mission. And the process of inculturation calls not only for contact but also for insertion.⁸

7 Hervé Carrier claims that the term was already used in the 1930s. See Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*, Maryknoll-NY: Orbis Books, 1989, 69, 405.

8 Peter Schineller, SJ, *A Handbook on Inculturation*, New York: Paulist Press, 1990, 22.

Gideon Goosen, in *Australian Theologies* (2000), assumes that the background to the concept of inculturation is found in the Catholic, rather than Protestant circle. But he does not mention what kind of background. Describing this background, Luzbetak talks about the paradigm shift in missiology from accommodation approach to contextualization one. The meaning of accommodation perhaps similar to what Alyward Shorter refers to as 'adaptation'.⁹

2.1.2. The Meaning of Inculturation

Several definitions of the term "inculturation" are available. The shortest and best one, I have come across, is by Fr. Kolvenbach, the present Superior General of the Jesuits, who states that: "inculturation is the existential dialogue between a living people and the living gospel." Peter Schineller spells out the implications of this dialogue when he defines inculturation as "referring to the current way of living and sharing one's Christian faith in a particular culture or context."¹⁰ The emphasis here is on the dynamic and creative nature of the inculturation process.

Former Superior General of the Jesuits, Pedro Arrupe, has somewhat the same emphasis when he defines inculturation as:

The incarnation of the Christian life and 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, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation.¹¹

There are four important points emerge from these definitions:

- 1) Inculturation is not limited to the initial insertion of the Christian message into a non-Christian culture, but refers also to the entire developing process that continues after initial contact.
- 2) As a living reality, faith exists only within a cultural embodiment. This means that when we speak of inculturation, this is inseparable from a dialogue between two cultures (interculturalization).
- 3) The process of inculturation is not just adaptation to a culture. It means that the Gospel that is planted within that culture enlightens it; as the culture enlightens the Gospel.
- 4) Inculturation, while maintaining a deep and continuing identity, also

⁹ Alyward Shorter, "Inculturation Not Adaptation: Time to Change Terminology," *Worship* 60, 1986.

¹⁰ Peter Schineller, *op.cit.*, 12.

¹¹ Pedro Arrupe, "Letter on Inculturation," in J. Aixala, SJ *Jesuit, ed., Apostolates Today*, Anand, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1981, 173.

calls for real change in the receiving culture and in the way the Gospel is lived and expressed. It involves not just a new way of expressing the Gospel, but a new way of being.

With similar sense to these points, Luzbetak explains that in the past (the initial insertion) the missionaries had tendency to pick up the “neutral” and “naturally good” – or what Amaladoss call as “secular”- aspects of the culture.¹² But by the Vatican II, the Church views cultures as already containing the germ of Jesus’ message, reminding us of λογωισπρμᾶτικῶι of the early Fathers of the Church. The Church is therefore missioned not so much to introduce Christ to non-Christians as if He were a total stranger, but rather to help the non-Christian find Him already present and active in the non-Christian heart (Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22; *Lumen Gentium* no. 16; *Ad Gentes*, no.15; *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2; *Dignitatis Humanae*, no.6).

In choosing only the “secular” aspects of the culture, the tendency of missionaries in the past was to avoid any clash for them in syncretism. This continues to the present day in Bali. In the case study of the Christmas *Sendratari* in Bali, the problem is not that we fail to see Jesus’ presence in the Balinese culture, but rather, the culture that the Gospel is encountering is itself the expression of a particular religious tradition, that is Hindu, so that inculturation includes within itself an interreligious encounter. Failure to understand the implication of this last dimension leads one to look for the secular element in the culture as the only proper object of inculturation. This would be to misunderstand the Balinese Catholic, who takes the whole of the living culture seriously, as being guilty of syncretism. And this is what the Church authority in Bali takes.

2.2. Syncretism

2.2.1. The Term Syncretism

The case of the Christmas *Sendratari* shows us that there is a certain fear of syncretism, not only on the part of the Church authorities but on the part of Hindu leaders as well. Where does the word syncretism come from? What does it mean? And why do people worry about it?

Actually the word “syncretism” is a transliteration of the Greek word συνκρηῖθισμος probably coined by Πλυτᾶρχ to describe the political alliance of feuding Cretan communities in the face of a common external enemy.¹³

12 Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD, *op.cit.*, 73; Michael Amaladoss, SJ, “Culture and Dialogue,” *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LXXIV/294, April 1985, 170.

13 Cf. Michael Pye, “Syncretism” in Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds., *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, London: SCM Press, 1983, 559.

In the social sciences, syncretism refers to the formation of new identities out of cultural elements that are at hand, usually from more than one culture. Only in relatively recent times has the word been employed negatively and polemically to indicate an “inadmissible mixture of religious beliefs or practices.”¹⁴

So, as the etymology of the word suggests, in the area of religious identity syncretism has to do with the mixing of elements of two religious systems to the point where at least one, if not both, of the systems loses basic structure and identity. And then we can understand why the Church authorities recognise it negatively, because it provokes fear for losing the identity and integrity of the Church. Answering the question of identity will be the theme of the other part of this essay that we will see later. Before that, we have to explore the problem with the word syncretism, especially from the Church understanding.

2.2.2. The Meaning of Syncretism

Syncretism in the Church is very often seen in its negative connotation. This is why there is the issue of how to overcome this one-sided usage of the word, as Goosen described.¹⁵ Rather than abandoning the word, he suggests revitalising it with a positive meaning in order to create the criteria for evaluating inculturation. He begins by distinguishing three senses for the word syncretism.

First, a positive meaning, which has the same meaning as inculturation, that is, the expression of a Christian belief in the cultural idiom of the people in a way that is compatible with Christianity. *Second*, the negative meaning, that is, when it refers to imported beliefs or practices that are judged as incompatible with Christian faith. *Third*, the neutral meaning, that is, when the facts of fusion of beliefs or practises are reported, but with a bracketing of judgment as to whether this fusion is compatible or not with Christianity.

There is still a problem here. How can we change the meaning of any word whose meaning has become entrenched in a society? In reality, we often turn to new words rather than attempt to redefine or rehabilitate the old ones with a new theology. The word “priest”, for instance, has a synonymous meaning with the cultic understanding of that role. Rather than try to change the meaning of the word to give more emphasis to the pastoral, proclamatory and leadership roles of the priest, in

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 560.

¹⁵ Gideon Goosen, “Syncretism and the Development of Doctrine,” *Colloquium* 32/2, 2000, 137-142.

many places the word “pastor” or “minister” is now used. This is more a linguistic than theological problem.

The other suggestion came from Luzbetak with his anthropological perspective. He states that any synthesis of religious beliefs and practices is syncretistic. Thus, in this term, Christianity itself can be said to be a syncretistic religion, an amalgam composed of Judaism, new ideas taught by Jesus and his followers, and the many later cultural accretions and theological developments and recombinations of beliefs and practices that have occurred over the centuries.

As Goosen emphasises the positive meaning of the word, Luzbetak stresses the common practise of syncretism in religion. Both of them agree that syncretism is unavoidable process in religious change and growth, thus in Christianity as well. According to Goosen, the positive meaning of the word can influence the development of doctrine. While for Luzbetak, the ‘positive consciousness’ should create the positive attitude toward syncretism.

Back to the Christmas *Sendratari* case, the blame of doing syncretism from the Church authorities has caused the withdrawal all the process of inculturation that has been in Bali. This is a very painful decision for the Balinese Catholic. They have been banned for using their own culture; moreover, the Church itself accuses them of doing syncretism. This should not happen if the Church authorities had a better and more positive understanding toward syncretism. Furthermore, this negative understanding affects all process of inculturation in Bali. So, the next part tries to show the relation between inculturation and syncretism.

3. Inculturation and Syncretism as an Integrative Process

One of our understandings toward inculturation is that it is not limited to the initial insertion of the Christian message into a non-Christian culture (what we call accommodation or adaptation), but refers also to the entire developing process that continues after initial contact. This understanding is very important in order to give a horizon for syncretism. How this inculturative horizon can develop the possibility for syncretism?

We have seen very briefly how Gideon Goosen develops the positive meaning of syncretism and its difficulty. I propose here a missiological anthropology perspective from Luzbetak as the other alternative. He says that inasmuch as it is a synthesis, syncretism is a terminal process, but it is not necessarily terminal and may be an intermediate stage or process. But he adds that in missiological term syncretism is a combination of beliefs and practices that are “theologically untenable” (similar to what Gideon described as negative meaning). Then, he underlines three basic

problems associated with theologically untenable amalgams: (1) as far as their content is concerned, they are untenable, for they are forms of Christopaganism; (2) as a process, they are largely unavoidable and subliminal inasmuch as they reflect psychological “laws” associated with all cultural change; (3) they often reflect important, and sometimes central values of a society that demand respect.¹⁶

Instead of proposing a positive meaning of syncretism, here Luzbetak keeps the word with its negative connotation as “theologically untenable amalgam”. But then he sees syncretism as an integrative process rather than a terminal process. Syncretism is an “in-between” stage; that is to say, the culture under consideration is in a state of imbalance. The theologically untenable amalgam is still, so to speak, en route to the Good News.

From Luzbetak’s point of view I develop my own idea that I call as an inculturative perspective in viewing syncretism. It is true when Gideon said that syncretism as both the process and the end-product. But in reality very often we, especially Church authorities, regard it as an end-product or terminal process. In the light of inculturation as an integrative and on going process, we see syncretism as a process of purification (conversion). Here I can add the slogan: “a system free-Church is an eschatological hope, not a reality.” Such inculturative perspective calls for a positive attitude also because syncretism often indicates human needs and demands responses to true human values, such as a tribe’s appreciation of its traditions and ancestors. Finally, such perspective develops our idea of syncretism as a bridge and an accelerator in the acculturative process from unchristian to Christian ways and beliefs.

In other words, we can say, as a process, inculturation gives a horizon to understand the broader sense of syncretism. Even syncretism itself refers to the same thing as inculturation does, namely, as an integrative process. Shortly, there is no inculturation without syncretism. Syncretism gives a concrete form of inculturation itself. Only syncretism becomes a process of inculturation unless it stops as a terminal process. Here, I would like to add that syncretism and inculturation refer to the very core of the Church identity as “*Ecclesia semper reformanda*” (the church always develops).

Having said that “*Ecclesia semper reformanda*” is the identity of the Church, we enter to the very broad and bitter discussion on the problem of identity. Syncretism deepens our consciousness about the nature of the Church and the limitation of Christian identity. So, the following part gives us a picture of such limitation and how syncretism helps us to develop the Church’s identity.

16 Luzbetak, *op.cit.*, 360-361.

4. Limitation Imposed on Evangelization by Christianity's Western Identity

Identity is something that gives form to something or to a person, so that it can be distinguished from other thing. In human relation, others construct identity on a person in order to understand or to put him/her in their frame of thought. Identity, therefore, is more a problem of others rather than ours. On the contrary, people need identity in order to protect them from chaos. In this term, identity maintains the sense of certainty and security. In relation to the Church, what makes the Church distinguishable from others?

Karl Rahner describes the second epoch of three major epochs in Church history as the epoch of Gentile or non-Jews¹⁷ The result of this epoch was a Gentile form of Christianity, one that did not demand circumcision for its followers and that engaged in dialogue with Greek and Roman Philosophy. According to Rahner, this is the basic form of Christianity that has lasted for almost two thousand years, until the Second Vatican Council. Western European Christianity, stemming from Greco-Roman thought patterns, has been the predominant form of Christianity. When the missionaries travelled to the American or to Africa, this form of Christianity travelled with them.

There is a recognition of the Church's identity adhere to western culture, specifically western identity. This recognition is very helpful in order to understand the context of syncretism. As I mentioned earlier, syncretism has to do with the mixing of elements of two religious systems to the point where at least one, if not both, of the systems loses basic structure and identity. It provokes fear of losing identity and integrity of the Church. In the past what we regard as the Church identity is the Church doctrine and dogmas as what we recognise today. In the period of classicist theology, dogma and doctrine became so absolute and univocal so that there was no development or growth of doctrine possible. Every single development of doctrine was regarded as syncretism. That is why Goosen describes the development of doctrine as similar to syncretism.¹⁸

Yet what we recognise as a "taboo" in the past has changed dramatically over the last thirty years. Some past beliefs were that Catholics possessed absolute truth; no salvation outside the Church; an identification of Christianity and European culture; a despising of indigenous cul-

17 See Karl Rahner, "A Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," *Theological Investigation* 20, New York: Crossroad, 1981, 77-89.

18 Goosen, *op.cit.* 147.

ture; a belief that grace operated only through Catholic Church. In contrast to these; the appreciation of the influence of anthropology on theology; the doctrine that no culture and no human situation devoid of God's grace; that truth to be found in all religions (*Nostra Aetate* no. 2); there is salvation outside the Church; that the Christian Church is entering a period of the truly universal Church (in taking culture seriously, inculturation; the WCC has affirmed that 'no culture is closer to God than another'); all religious language is symbolic are given much recognition nowadays.

Through the approach to the development of doctrine, we find that the Christian identity (in doctrine and dogmas) is always insufficient and therefore changeable. Perhaps as many assume, the real issue is to challenge the power of those who are the gatekeeper of doctrine and practices.¹⁹ At least, these phenomena show us a certain limitation of the Christian identity.

The other thing is the recognition of all religious language as a symbol. Here I owe to Roger Haight, who defines: "A symbol is anything, or person of history which mediates or makes present to human consciousness God in this way or that way."²⁰ Religious language, as described in the doctrine and dogmas of the Church, constitutes by religious symbols struggling with trying to put into human words that are ineffable. It is the nature of symbols as in the formulation of doctrine, to be polysemous and polyvalent, which allows for a certain elasticity in the boundaries of a given religious symbol. Religious symbols have awakened the consciousness on many different levels of various groups. Symbols allow for a plurality of interpretations. At the same time, there are limits to the meanings and values that any symbol can bear. It is the role of the *Magisterium* to say when the boundaries have been overstepped. The classical explanation of the procession in the Trinity is one example that there are more ways of saying things theologically. Gideon Goosen comes into conclusion that syncretism helps us to highlight other dimension of the doctrine or practice or whether existing symbols can be stretched.²¹

John May compares some cultures whose meaning of their ritual changes although the actual ritual continues with Christianity where the meanings are watched over by authorities (the Bible in the case of Protestants and the CDF for Catholics) who protect the purity and truth of the teachings. For May, syncretism opens up the possibility of alternative truth,

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 141.

²⁰ Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology*, New York: Paulist, 1999, 131.

²¹ Goosen, *op.cit.*, 146.

and becomes a threat to central convictions.²² Goosen adds not only alternative truths, but also the possibility of other ways of expressing the same truth²³ in which I agree with this.

A certain limit of the Christian identity emerges when we regard the language of doctrine and dogmas as univocal and describing the reality as it is. But if we receive that the language is symbolic, it means we can accept there are various ways of interpretations. We affirm that openness to interpretations also implies that symbols are vulnerable to corruption. It is the reason we confirm the same truth, but express it in various ways. I am more comfortable with Goosen's definition of inculturation as "expressing the Gospel in a given culture." In the case of the Christmas *Sendratari*, what the Balinese Catholics did was the alternative way of expressing the Catholic truth using the Balinese culture.

The problem remains when we recognise the culture we are encountering claimed belong to Hindus. Before I had my suggestion creating a new culture as the solution. "The new wine has to be put into a new wineskin." My position came from Chomsky's theory of productivity. He distinguishes two kinds of productivity: "rule governed productivity" and "rule changing productivity". Rule governed productivity is using the old pattern for a new meaning (like what May mentioned above). While rule changing productivity is creating a new pattern for a new meaning. It is of course not a cheap solution, and impressing to avoid the problem. Therefore, on the following part we will try to explore this problem in order to have a mutual understanding for the future.

5. Culture and Religion

In the case of the Christmas *Sendratari*, the problem arises among the Hindus who claim Balinese culture belongs to them. For Hindus, Hindu and Balinese culture is inseparable. This is one of the "blocking stones"²⁴ for doing inculturation in Bali, since the Church sees the difference between the two although there is a tight relationship between culture and religion.

There is a question here, whether the Christian faith (gospel) itself is free of culture or whether there is a core that comes pure and clean which

22 John May, "Syncretism or Synthesis? An Anticipatory Sketch of Religious Change in the Pacific," *South-Pacific Journal of Mission Studies* 1.4, February 1991, 10.

23 Goosen, *op.cit.*, 146.

24 The translation of Balinese phrase "penanjung batu" which means: having taken the spirits of the ancestors with you when you leave to become Christian, it is as if a stone is placed in front of the door of the house so that you may not re-enter.

has to find a home in a given culture. The Vatican II documents speak of the “essential contents of the message” that the Church proclaims. These have an eternal character and they are applicable in any culture and given situation. These make a contrast to what are called “secondary elements”. In difference to the former, the latter may be dropped without in any way doing harm to the “Christian message”. However, the question that arises of course is how one separates the essential from the secondary.

I come strictly to Luzbetak’s distinction of the three levels of culture. (1) The surface level of *forms* – the symbols as such apart from their meaning, the “shape” of cultural norms; (2) the middle level of *functions* – the meanings of symbols, the logic, purposefulness and other relationships underlying and connecting the forms; (3) the deepest level of culture – namely the *psychology* of a society, the basic assumptions, values, and drives, that is, the starting-points in reasoning, reacting, and motivating.

On the surface level, it answers the question “*who, what, when, where, what kind, and how.*” The second level of culture is the society’s answers to the immediate *why*. We arrive at our answer by asking such questions as, what are the reasons, usage, presuppositions, prerequisites, needs, associations, repercussions, logical connections, and the like of the particular form? And the third level is question why of the second level what it is.²⁵

Religion is in the deepest level of the culture. Basically it has both meaning and a prophetic function, answering the question “why?” in terms of origins and goals of life and structuring relationships and behaviour with reference to this answer. It is the deepest because it operates at the levels of the ultimate. Religion is at the root of culture, animating it, while being structured by it. While its role of animating makes it a prophetic element in the life of the community, it is always in danger of being domesticated by the day-to-day business of living. But the prophetic element always bounces back in the form of holy people and radical movements for renewal.

In its relation to culture, according to Pieris, there are two levels in religion that can be distinguished. At a “cosmic” level, religion is simply the counterpart of culture. This is the level of tribal and popular religion. Even at this level it plays a double role. On the one hand, it supports and justifies the current worldview and the structures based on it. On the other hand it keeps challenging, in the name of this norm, any serious deviations that may emerge in the course of ordinary day-to-day living.

25 Luzbetak, *op.cit.*, 74-78.

Religion can do this because, through its points of reference in the origin and the end of the community, it acquires, as I have indicated, an ultimate character, beyond the vicissitudes of its current cultural manifestation. The myths and the rituals are the carriers of this function.

The great religions acquire a further “metacosmic” dimension, attributed to a special revelation or illumination. Ultimate reality is perceived as transcendent and becomes absolute, in relation to the world and culture, which are seen to be relative. Of course religions cannot remain “metacosmic” if they have to play their proper role with regard to culture. So they keep a cosmic dimension by integrating in themselves elements from popular religion, giving them a new meaning. These elements may belong to the culture from which they have emerged or to the culture into which they are inculturated. People, who belong nominally to metacosmic religion, may continue to remain at a cosmic level. Even the absolutes of metacosmic religion can express themselves only in the symbols and language of a particular culture. We have to hold on to this absolute-in-the-relative character of religious symbol for any meaningful talk on religion, culture and dialogue. One is often tempted to move from an experience of the absolute to absolutizing the experience.²⁶

It is with great religions that we discover fully the relationship and the differences between religion and culture. They are like the soul and the body. There is a level in which religion points beyond humankind and the world and demands the commitment of faith. But it becomes relevant to life only insofar as it is incarnated in a culture. A given religion can find self-expression in many cultures. Many religions can express themselves in terms of a single culture. From the encounter between religion and culture are born a worldview that provides a background, a system of value that guides choices, an ethos that sets the emotional tone and an ideology that orients action.

In the light of this understanding of the relation between religion and culture we can come across with the Hindus problem. Though culture is closely related to religion, it does not mean both are inseparable. Putu Setia, a senior Balinese Hindus Columnists, is very clear to point out: “Religion is in the other area, but could be joined with customs and culture, but it does not mean inseparable. Hindu in Nusantara (Indonesia) would be greater if it has been able to insert in every customs and culture.”²⁷

26 Cf. Aloysius Pieris, “Mission of the Local Church in Relation to Other Major Religious Traditions: The Non-Semitic Religions in Asia,” in Mary Motte and Joseph R. Lang, eds., *Mission in Dialogue*, New York, 1982, 426-441.

27 “Agama ada di wilayah lain, tetapi bisa dipadukan dengan adat dan budaya itu, namun bukannya tak bisa dipilah-pilah. Hindu di Nusantara akan menjadi besar kalau dia sudah bisa dipadukan dengan berbagai adat dan berbagai budaya.” *Bali Post*, March 17, 2000.

Made Titieb, the principal of Institute of Hindu Dharma Indonesia, described that Hindu is a religion of *tirtha* (Holy Water). "It has developed along the rivers in Nusantara. Hindu religion is not a great "current river" but a calm one, not to destroy the culture it encounters but to help grow and to fertilize. That is why we can speak about Balinese Hindu that is very different from Hindu in India."²⁸

Similar to that, I can say that the Christian in Bali also has a concern to maintain and to develop Balinese culture; neither as a strategy to catch the Hindus nor mixing Hindus religion with Catholic, but as the full expression as a Balinese. The Christian inculturation is one way of being a Balinese, and recognition that Christ presents in every culture.

We have to develop together religion for its prophetic role in culture with the spirit of fairness, dialogue and mutual understanding. For many Christians, inculturation does make sense since inculturation is in itself an integrative process towards purification and conversion. Through inculturation we create a common ground for interfaith dialogue.

6. Conclusion

The difficulties of doing inculturation very often come from the Church authorities with what they regard as syncretism. The Church's understanding of the word is very negative. But in Church history, the Church has in the past regarded the positive meaning of the word because Christianity itself is syncretistic. Why it has replaced this positive process with the negative connotation is in my view, because of the "power" issue. This however is a different topic and for another day. As this essay comes to conclusion, I contend that the positive understanding should create the positive attitude toward syncretism. This becomes the paradigm or the framework for doing inculturation. Syncretism has to be the on-going process for purification and conversion. In so doing, it is another word for inculturation, i.e. an integrative process in expressing the Gospel in a given culture. Using the case of the Christmas *Sendratari* in Bali, inculturation also opens up new possibilities of dialoguing the culture with other faiths.

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28 On the meeting of Interreligious Communication Forum of Bali province in Kintamani Bali, January 26-28, 2000.

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