
The origin of this volume by Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil was a paper presented at a seminar-workshop on culture at Dimapur, Nagaland, India. The original well-received presentation has been expanded through an added introduction, extensive footnotes, an abundance of relevant quotations, and a concluding appendix. The main body of the original paper (widely published in various journals: e.g. Colloquia Manilana 3/1995, 43-59) provides the key themes for the book's eighteen focused chapters.

The author emphasizes the pivotal role that culture plays in all areas of human life and society. However, in several areas including religion and Church circles, the realities of culture "have not received the attention they deserve" (13). Today, "after an initial thrust forward, Inculturation seems to be caught in stagnant waters" (25); "we remain where we were two decades ago" (26). "Discussion has hardly begun..."
on Inculturation from within [the Church]” (35).

Although the materials were “originally prepared in a tribal context” in India (7), they are helpful for those who are committed to understanding and addressing “cross-cultural relationships, conflicts, [and] inculturation” (note the book’s sub-title). The insights emerge from concrete life situations and reflect practical wisdom in approaching emerging cultural questions. Menampampil holds that “a ‘cultural analysis’ of society and a reflection on its findings would be most timely today” (15).

The seventh chapter which focuses on “Cultural Awareness” presents some of the author’s central insights; it forms the basis for several subsequent chapters. The “culturally aware” person is able to identify the configurations of his own culture, to recognize the unformulated axioms in his native culture, to accept another’s meaning scheme even when it differs totally from one’s own, to develop “cultural self-awareness,” and to acquire some measure of competence in one’s own culture (28-30). This growth in “cultural self-awareness is extremely important if any work of Inculturation is to be undertaken” (29). This is not an easy journey and the author asserts that “blindness in this area is shocking” (29).

Yet, the author remains a realist in his assessment of the challenge. “We need not be pessimistic, it is true. We cannot afford to be over-optimistic either” (72). Recognizing the limitation of one’s vision (individually and also collectively as Church) will enable forward progress. Although there are communal tensions the world over and some may predict the “Clash of Civilizations” (Samuel P. Huntington of Harvard), the author writes “with the firm conviction” that there is a “way out of the labyrinth” (73).

To make a “definite choice” to “heal collective memories, to build bridges and establish happy and collaborative relationships” (73) is the challenge facing the Church — particularly in her task of communal reconciliation and inculturation. Asserting that “Inculturation is an
on-going process” (78) may sound like a platitude or truism, but if this involves a deeper commitment to the task at hand, then the phrase reflects a mature acceptance of The Challenge of Cultures (title of book).

Addressing changing culture, promoting faith and justice, fostering interfaith dialogue — evangelization itself — is always a dynamic, on-going never-fully-achieved process that demands a costly commitment. Thomas Menamparampil has provided a modest, practical impetus for a renewed dedication to evangelization in our contemporary, complex, changing world of cultures, conflicts, and genuine inculturation.

Reviewed by James H. Kroeger, M.M.


In recent years the faith-culture relationship has become a subject of great importance both within theology and the Church. In this book Michael Paul Gallagher, an Irish Jesuit who worked in the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture (1990-1995) and now teaches at the Gregorian University in Rome, presents a diversity of perspectives on this contemporary question.

Gallagher has a gift for clarity of presentation, manifesting his considerable scholarship and yet communicating on a popular level. He writes with a clear sense of mission, not only providing information, but also seeking to effect transformation. He notes that the “aim of this book is to provide a double theology — of nonpanic and of liberation — for believers faced with their surrounding cultures” (vi). He investigates contemporary realities, wondering with Lonergan if the