

Incarnating the Good News in the Multilingual and Multicultural Context of Vietnam

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Abstract

One assumes that in a country like Vietnam that there would have been a strong push towards a national identity as expressed in the use of one language. This paper proves otherwise; like many countries in Southeast Asia, Vietnam is a multicultural and multilingual nation. Missionaries among Vietnamese communities have to take this reality into consideration, if they are serious about pursuing inculturation. This paper deals with the mission context in Vietnam, focusing on the role of language. It juxtaposes the dominant national culture and language while privileging the reality of the ethnic peoples and their struggle to preserve what is left of their cultural domain identity, and spirituality.

Introduction

Language has played a vital role in the entire history of the Church's mission work. The Bible has been translated into different languages, for instance, and missionaries are required to learn the local tongue in order to seamlessly permeate, engage with, and immerse themselves in different cultures. As Franz Josef Eilers puts it, communicating the Gospel in a people's language is an important need for the Christian Churches. It allows them to dialogue with and between cultures, thus making the Gospel more widely known.

Louis Luzbetak, meanwhile, has pointed out the need for the effective translation of texts and the construction of local theologies within the local culture. To be inculturated, the Church needs to rebirth herself in the culture of the local people where she would discover her Catholic identity. That is why communicating via the people's language provides a strategic entry point for inculturation.

By incarnating the Gospel in the culture and language of the ethnic communities, the clergy plays a prophetic role in laying the groundwork for better respect and appreciation among people and their culture. It is with this same concern and background that I enthusiastically pursued a study on incarnating Christian faith in the multicultural and multilingual context in Vietnam, given my own experiences in Vietnam.

This study is hinge on the mission context of Vietnam, with the discussions focused on the role of language within such a mission context. It looks into a dominant national culture and languages that confronts ethnic peoples and their struggle to preserve what is left of their cultural domain, identity, and spirituality. In particular, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What languages of communication should be learned by one who intends to be a missionary in Vietnam?
2. How are these languages connected with the rest of Southeast Asia?
3. What missiological discourses affirm and challenge the role languages play in the task of evangelization?
4. How then do we incarnate the Christian faith in the multicultural and multilingual context of Vietnam?

In answering these questions, this paper undertakes an anthropological study of the origins and evolution of languages, particularly of the Austronesian family of Asia-Ocenia and Madagascar. The study is framed by theories from Peter Bellwood and Wilhelm Solheim, among many other sources.

The study looks into the Jiaray and Banar ethnic tribes living in the central mountains of Vietnam, popularly known as the Tay Nguyen area bordering the secular provinces of Kontum and Jiaray. It is situated north of Sai Gon (now Ho Chi Minh), and south of Ha Noi (Hanoi). The place is located at the heart of Kon Ka Kinh National Park, an enormous tract of forested land and mountains, which has been officially declared an ASEAN Heritage National Park.

During the South Vietnamese regime which ended in 1975, the provinces formed one political unit called Kontum. For the purposes of this paper, the entire area of study will be referred to as the Diocese of Kontum. The diocese is home to thousands of indigenous peoples (IP), the most numerous of whom are the Jiaray and Banar, and with whom I had a wonderful immersion opportunity.

It is with these IP that the Redemptorists have been engaged in mission since 1969. Thus, this study also examines the Redemptorists mission methodology among them, both to learn best practices and understand the limits of missionary engagement. Faced with similar situations and

challenges in the Asia-Oceania region, we then hope to be able to adapt and respond in a more effective way.

This paper takes an anthropological approach in studying human relationships and meanings that make up human culture in which God is present. As Stephen Bevans puts it, the anthropological model “focuses on the validity of the human as the place of divine revelation and as a source for theology that is equal to the other two sources of scripture and tradition.”

This theological reflection follows the “See-Discern-Act” formula situated as it is within an Asian landscape, which requires an attitude of openness to dialogue and respect.