

BOOK REVIEW

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Anthony J. GITTINS, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press / Michael Glazier, 2015). Pp. xxi + 252. Pb. \$ 24.95.

If you wish to know why and how *intercultural living is an act of faith*, this is *the book* you should start with. A. J. Gittins CSSp – who taught Theology and Anthropology at the Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, from 1984 to 2011 and, though emeritus, is still active as a resource person in the field – has placed before us a theoretically sound and thoroughly practical book! The author thinks of intercultural living as “a lifelong, faith-based process of conversion, emerging in recent decades as a requirement of members of intentional, international religious communities” (p. 30). Those who fail to live intercultural are choosing inevitable fragmentation or eventual death.

In his ‘Foreword’ (pp. ix-xi) Gerald A. Arbuckle introduces the author’s merit: A. J. Gittins has the down-to-earth, experience-based yet contemplation-born wisdom to tell us how to live intercultural. He tells us that although the book is written “for members of international communities of religious (women or men, lay or clerical), much of the book’s theoretical and practical insights can apply equally well to anyone committed to ministry involving relationships between people of different cultures” (p. ix; cf. p. xiv). He notes how effectively Gittins blends theory and practice and gives us *a handbook for intercultural living*. He stresses the author’s attention to mission and reminds us that there is no intercultural living without one’s being *in mission* (p. xi).

Gittins’s book unfolds in 12 well laid-out chapters, with an Introduction and 5 important Appendices (pp. 187-221). There is a very useful 10-page Bibliography. The brief Index is 3 pages. The endnotes extend to some 18 pages (pp. 222-239). The book is enriched with a number of diagrams and much information in boxes. Each chapter ends with some ‘Suggested Follow-up’. These features lend the book an additional user-friendliness.

In his ‘Introduction’ (pp. xiii-xxi), Gittins dwells on the challenge and opportunity in contemporary mission and ministry as well as on the scope of his book. He notes the theological import of the term ‘intercultural’ and its consequent relevance to anyone implicitly or explicitly motivated by faith in God (p. xiv). He also dwells briefly on four possible situations wherein intercultural living may be called for: (i) international clergy in vast dioceses; (ii) the expansion of a religious Congregation beyond its original monocultural ethos; (iii) individualism in established missionary communities; and (iv) pastoral (lay) ministers in multicultural dioceses. He avers that intercultural living demands of everyone today “a transformation” (p. xviii). His book promises to give *a series of practical approaches to intercultural living* (see p. xix).

Chapter 1 is entitled ‘Called to Conversion’ (pp. 1-14). Keeping in view the realistic background of the changing face of international religious communities (see esp. p. 2), and carefully distinguishing interculturality from internationality and multiculturalism (pp. 3-4), this chapter sets out 10 theses about the ‘theologically weighted’ expression ‘intercultural living’ (pp. 4-6). These theses are subsequently exemplified and clarified. Again, three guidelines are offered as an orienting framework: (i) that we are called *to build a home together*; (ii) that we are called *to discover the dignity of difference*; and (iii) that we are called *to rethink the way we think* (pp. 6-11). The author stresses the need of genuine

conversion, a process of ongoing personal transformation that takes place in profound relationship with other members of a community. This is a topic that “underpins everything in this book” (p. 11).

Chapter 2 dwells on the movement ‘From Monocultural to Intercultural’ (pp. 15-31). First, there is a clarification of the terms ‘monocultural’, ‘bicultural’, ‘cross-cultural’, ‘multicultural’, and ‘intercultural’. If ‘multicultural’ is more a sociological/anthropological term, ‘intercultural’ “carries specific overtones relating to God, faith, and practice” (p. 22). Intercultural communities – where every member is “directly affected by the presence of cultural others” (p. 23) – are decidedly committed to the common life and are motivated by shared religious convictions and common aims. Among their core characteristics, the following receive special attention: intentionality (a community project); individual commitment; mutual tolerance; a forum for expressing frustration; appropriate correction; attention to stress and burnout; and clarification of the common vision (pp. 24-29).

Chapter 3 is entitled ‘Culture, “The (Hu)man-made Part of the Environment”’ (pp. 32-45). In a sense, the title is self-explanatory; but what constitutes the human-made is helpfully explored under the headings of ‘material’, ‘symbolic’, ‘institutional’, and ‘moral’. The author identifies four other related dimensions of culture: this human-made part of the environment is (i) a form of social life; (ii) a meaning-making system; (iii) the social skin; and (iv) an enduring social reality. These will be the burden of subsequent chapters. Lest we should indulge in any form of cultural romanticism, Gittins notes that culture “identifies not only the greatest heights the human can reach but also the lowest depths to which a society ... can sink” (p. 35; cf. p. 152). Of great significance is what the author says about symbolic culture, particularly about orality, ritual, music, story, etc. Also significant are his words on how the four social institutions of politics, economics, kinship, and religion may become institutionalized or embedded (pp. 39-45).

Chapter 4 deals with ‘Culture: Life, Meaning, Skin, Reality’ (pp. 46-61). Since to be human is *to live in a culturally constructed world*, Gittins invites us to a cultural understanding of or sensitivity to cross-cultural experience. We have to learn to consider ourselves ‘outsiders’ in someone else’s world before we hope to form intercultural communities. For this, we have to have a significant cross-cultural experience, which helps us to pay attention to: (i) personal involvement in the life of others, (ii) clear insights into different kinds of behaviour, and (iii) the ability to distinguish between the actual and the ideal in relationships. In envisaging culture as a meaning-making system, we should give due weight to the criteria of *grammaticality*, *acceptability*, and *meaningfulness*. Here one slowly finds enough space for ‘rule-governed creativity’. Analogically, cultures are like our skin: they “need not be perfect and can tolerate wear and tear and trauma; but the integrity of the skin is as necessary for life as is the integrity of a culture” (p. 54). Just as cultures take a long time to develop, intercultural communities require time, through a process of socialization, to develop their own ethos/identity. Here, Gittins familiarizes us with the sociology of culture in order to clarify terms like ‘enculturation’, ‘acculturation’, ‘socialization’, ‘inculturation’, and ‘intercultural’. According to him, how the faith of each member is inculturated is of critical importance to the community as a whole.

Chapter 5 is on ‘Culture, Faith, and Intercultural Living’ (pp. 62-79). Gittins shows that faith cannot be detached from culture: “faith flourishes or atrophies in a cultural context, and culture provides the way of expressing faith” (p. 62). Faith can be incarnated and will flourish only in real, culture-bound people. This chapter is an exploration of how faith and culture coexist, the emphasis being largely on Christian spirituality. (Note the major features of Christian spirituality mentioned on pp. 76-77!) Among other things, Gittins here identifies

and explains four cultural variables we must attend to: (i) social location and social geography; (ii) embodiment or body tolerance; (iii) health, wellbeing, and sickness; (iv) time and space. Moreover, he rightly says: “Members of international and intercultural communities need to identify the common faith and metanarrative (Scripture and the incarnation) by which they live, be convinced that life does have a meaning, learn from the experience of others, and, while living firmly in the present, have a focus on *eschatological time* and the future as fulfillment of God’s promise” (p. 75). He is convinced that encounters with others are *encounters with previously unrecognized faces of God*; their purpose is “to glorify God precisely by continuing the mission of Jesus” (p. 76). The chapter ends with a brief reflection on the Lord Jesus and Oscar Romero as models of faith-in-action. Gittins affirms that what motivates and justifies intercultural living is “God’s mission and our joyful and wholehearted participation in it. To respond appropriately, we need a missional faith grounded in our context and lived culturally” (p. 78).

Chapter 6 dwells on ‘Social Profiles and Social Interaction’ (pp. 80-97). It has a twofold purpose: (i) to compare and contrast ‘social profiles’ as a means to identify distinguishing cultural features and shared social characteristics; (ii) to examine certain ‘safety valves’ that minimize tensions and other negativities in communities. This is an important chapter in the way it considers the following social profiles: egocentric, rights-based, personal, elaborated code, achieved status, novelty, competition, and limited good. Gittins then moves on to consider the high-context situation that a community represents. He emphasizes the spirit of inclusion and welcome, the slow building of community, openness to learning, and the importance of mechanisms that facilitate community-building. He reminds us that in every culture “there are elements of both grace and sin” (p. 95), that no culture ideally meets the Gospel demands, and that we should realistically shun all temptations to ethnocentrism. By humbly turning to the revelation in Christ and being disciplined in it, by trying hard to understand what makes others *‘tick’ culturally and spiritually*, by developing mutual trust, and by exploring avenues together, we learn to form intercultural communities.

Chapter 7 considers ‘Developing Intercultural Competence’ (pp. 98-114). Gittins proposes a ‘model for’ (as different from a ‘model of’) intercultural living. Here he carefully and critically builds on Milton J. Bennett’s model for intercultural competence, which (in the 1980s and later) proposed a six-stage progression from *ethnocentrism* to *ethnorelativism*. The three stages of ethnocentrism are denial, defence, and minimization. The three stages of ethnorelativism (i.e., experiencing one’s culture in the context of other cultures; culture-sensitiveness) are acceptance, adaptation, and integration. The challenges Gittins places before religious communities are (i) that of moving beyond acceptance and towards adaptation by a serious commitment to study, research, reflection and encounter; and (ii) that of moving into the stage of integration by developing reverential culture-sensitivity and authentic interpersonal relationships, together with a profound appreciation of the cultural genius of others.

In Chapter 8 we are invited to reflect on ‘Mission, Margins, and Intercultural Living’ (pp. 115-130). We learn here that our ultimate aim is not mere survival, but a deeper commitment to God’s mission in the world, particularly to those who are marginalized – those liminal people who have not been fully assimilated into the mainstream. Any community can have people suffering from alienation and loneliness. But marginality is not only a burden but also an opportunity. Think of Jesus’ self-imposed, serenely-embraced marginality (cf. Mt 25:35; see pp. 126-127)! Think of the self-chosen marginality that lets one live ‘in-beyond’, in line with Heb 13:14! This is a marginality that nurtures in one the capacity for continuous creativity. Then there is the possibility of liminal marginality – being on the threshold of

something better and greater, something that confers a new identity. It may be said that Jesus' entire life was marked by 'permanent liminality' (pp. 126-127, 176).

Gittins says that "while acknowledging the dreadful effects of imposed marginalization, it is particularly important missiologically to identify the potential benefits of positive marginalization, not only on the person who chooses it but also on the beneficiaries of that choice" (p. 124). Margins are not only fraught with problems, but also rich in possibilities. In a world of interdependence, we ought to be both givers and receivers. There is an immense challenge for religious people: to recognize and respond to *the missionary potential* of the marginalized (pp. 127-130; cf. p. 175)! Here Gittins stresses (i) the importance of identifying and respecting the diverse boundaries or margins that we are likely to face; and (ii) the necessity of serving an explicitly apostolic purpose in genuine solidarity with the marginalized. "True intimacy is intrinsic to true humanness; and margins are precisely the points of contact between individual persons" (p. 129). To cross over to and to erase the margins that separate/segregate people are necessary expressions of the Christian faith, compassion and solidarity. In this boundary-crossing missional outreach, mutual trust is crucial.

Chapter 9 deals with the 'Psychological Responses to Intercultural Living' (pp. 131-146) and Chapter 10 with the 'Cultural Responses to Intercultural Living' (pp. 147-161). These complementary chapters offer much material for the reader's reflection, some of which is schematically presented in simple but helpful diagrams. Gittins invites us to fight both cynicism and romanticism and to live realistically by faith (cf. Mk 10:27). The reason for our commitment to mission-conditioned intercultural living is that we are 'invited' and 'commissioned' to live what we know to be the right way, the very attitude of Christ Jesus (cf. Phil 2:1-5).

Further, we are invited to recognize *the dignity of difference*, for difference is God-intended and godly (see p. 149). We meet God in creation in general and in human beings in particular; "therefore, the better able we are to relate to creation and community, the more we may hope to encounter God. This is one of the implications and challenges of intercultural living" (p. 150). There looms before us an ever-present 'cultural flaw': our perverse propensity to divide, discriminate, oppose, and exclude (pp. 150-152); "the tendency to reconstruct by deconstructing" (p. 153); the inclination to compete rather than collaborate. On pp. 153-158 Gittins gives a very useful general cultural description of society against which we may measure our responses. He concludes this discussion with 'the Jesus solution' of 'removing the barrier' (cf. Gal 3:24-28). Christianity, which makes all into members of the household of God (Eph 2:19), "has the capacity to promote the dignity of difference and use diversity in order to build rather than to destroy people and society itself" (p. 161). Intercultural community members must, therefore, identify divisive forces and apply the healing solution of Jesus, the Peace between us (cf. Eph 2:11-14; 1 Cor 12:12-14).

Intercultural living is pointless and is downhill to dangerous institutionalization without 'a missional focus' (p. 164). To show why the baptised ought to have such a focus, Chapter 11 – which is about 'Community, *Communitas*, and Living Fully' (pp. 162-177) – provides an enlightening discussion on (i) the spontaneous community; (ii) the normative/institutionalized community; and (iii) the mechanical/moribund community. The *communitas* is a spontaneous community, akin to the original, charismatically endowed community, a community with a God-given task (p. 168). It is a fire-suffused, energetic, and dedicated communion of persons. This ideal community gradually becomes normative or institutionalized. Both these stages are necessary: "the *communitas* actually needs *institutionalization* if the community and its mission are to survive. But normative, or

institutionalized, community also needs to be inspired by periodic bursts of *communitas*-energy, lest it settle into a comfortable but uninspired routine” (p. 170) and consequent dissipation (cf. p. 176). To answer the question, ‘How much *communitas*-energy is needed to keep a community faithful and purposeful?’ Gittins offers the key of *the critical mass* of commitment. In this connection, his explanation on pp. 172-174 is important. Ultimately, the challenge of intercultural living is the challenge of being *radical disciples* of the ever-reliable Lord Jesus (pp. 176-177).

Chapter 12 is entitled ‘From Invitation to Radical Welcome’ (pp. 178-186). Here, using a grid suggested by Stephanie Spellers, Gittins offers a ‘model for’ an intercultural community’s *raison d’être*: from *invitation*, through *inclusion*, to *radical welcome*. His brief yet clear analysis of these stages (pp. 180-185) forms the conclusion of the book. The goal of a radically welcoming community cannot be achieved without a process of conversion, genuine openness, greater fidelity to its vocation and mission, and an attentive listening attitude to its members. A truly intercultural community is the result of genuine spiritual maturity in its members. The aspirations to form such a community “are ultimately and unequivocally an act of faith, sustained by hope and strengthened by love” (p. 186).

Living Mission Interculturally is indeed an excellent handbook in which precious insights from sociology and anthropology combine with sound practical theology. It is a gracious invitation to grapple with the fundamental theological significance of culture and intercultural living. I heartily recommend it to students, pastors, and scholars alike.

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