

BY VIRGINIA STEM OWENS*

The Proper Study of Mankind

I spent two years of my childhood on a military base in the Philippines. Such communities are, by their very nature, encapsulated within the life of the indigenous population. Yet now and again some shadowy authority decided that we should have some contact with the strangers we sojourned among. I remember for instance that the boys from a nearby parochial school once came to play our school's basketball team. We stood around the rain-glistening ball court, absorbed not in the game but in these lean, dark aliens calling to one another in unknown tongues. We understood only the laughter, and it made us shy and touchy. A boy would dash past, our eyes would inadvertently catch, and veer quickly away again. Then his brown face would jerk back with insolent defiance, he would toss the heavy black hair off his forehead and race on. I recall that as one of the most frustrating days of my life.

Much more frustrating than the trips to the resort area of Baguio, vacations filled with a panoply of the diverse peoples of the Philippines—the Igorots, the Negritos, the Bontoks. Women of the mountain tribes squatted on the edges of the bus stations selling green bananas, their faces totally indifferent to any personal contact with their customers other than conveying either through pidgin English or sign language the price of their goods. They and the tall upright men standing on one leg around the fringes of the crowd, gazing impassively over the heads of the tourists, were like strange, exotic birds to us—fascinating, fantastical, but not frustrating. As soon as the bus pulled away, both groups went on with their insulated lives. We were equally unnecessary to one another.

Except that my twelve-year-old mind could not quite accept it so simply. Having learned in Sunday School of the infinite value to God of each individual, I fretted to fit them into some understandable category. They were not simply exotic birds; they were people like I was. Only not like I was.

My family sometimes visited a couple of lady missionaries who lived in an apartment in downtown Manila, just as though it had been Omaha or Dallas. Perhaps they knew some secret inroad that led to these people's hidden existence, some way of slipping past the indifferent or implacable stares into that elusive element called humanity that I had been taught all people everywhere share.

Was it as hard, I wondered many years later, for Paul to make that leap out of his own Jewishness into the alien culture of the gentiles? When he became all things to all men in order that some might be gathered to the gospel, was it as hard for him to eat pork as it would have been for my

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family to eat the half-hatched eggs sold in the marketplace in Angeles? Was it as difficult for him, the educated, analytical Pharisee, to form intimate relationships with pagan idolators as it would be for me to function faithfully in the Manhattan Playboy Club? I can shape the questions into words now, but they first began to form, anxious and inarticulate, on that invaded schoolyard basketball court.

I know now that culture is the name we give diverse patterns of human behavior. The difference in the way the Igorot banana vendor and myself perceive the passing of time, the function of clothing, our places in our family, are what make us strange and unreal to one another. And irritating as it may be, it is an inescapable fact that no human being can live a cultureless life. Paul's example was not in transcending cultures but in immersing himself in them. The contingency of cultures—the fact that they all change and that none of them seems to last forever—all this does nothing to lessen the reality that there is no such thing as random patternless human behavior. We all conform to some manner of life that we consider "normal".

The creature so glibly called "modern man", by which we usually mean Americans and not Arabs or aborigines, would like to think that he is able to transcend his own culture simply because he is aware of it, just as he once thought that becoming aware of psychological disease would cure it. The notion that we are limited by anything—patriarchalism, matriarchalism, tribal ties, food prejudices, sexual taboos—embarrasses us who like to think of ourselves as above all that. Yet the world so far stubbornly resists the excising of cultures.

Culture is the natural milieu of the human; it is the agar-agar in which we grow. It chooses and cooks our food, molds our houses, cuts our clothes, teaches us whatever is necessary to survive in our environment, whether that be tracking a deer or operating a computer terminal. And spiritualize it as we may, the Christian faith obstinately retains its scandalous umbilical link to time and space and therefore to cultures. Even God chose to operate within the first century Jewish cultural context, to have his son brought up a Torah-believing, synagogue-going, even tax-paying Jew. And while the culture that nourished him through what would have been the first half of his natural life was also one of the forces that saw to his early demise, he did not work towards eliminating it. Instead, he went about his business, which was, one way and another, calling people to live in that insupportable paradox: time *and* eternity.

H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture* explains the Christian dilemma this way: "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female; but in relation to other men a multitude of relative value considerations arise."¹ As he affirms earlier, "The one who offends 'one of these little ones' is not equal in value for the 'little one' with its benefactor."² Only God can stand outside history to judge it absolutely. The rest of us are caught in the cage of time and space. All the works of culture, including human justice and art, come from the relative value considerations that are conditioned by our peculiar location in history.

Yet even those who accept the principle that cultural values are only

relative cannot escape the urge to absolutize certain values. Margaret Mead, for example, in her autobiography, *Blackberry Winter*,³ describes her reactions to a tribe in New Guinea who were at best careless and at worst murderously brutal with their children. Although she continued to live among these people, recording their activities with all the detached accuracy she had given to gentler tribes, she was so personally grieved by their behavior towards children that this became her primary criterion for judging the depravity or wholesomeness of a culture.

Theology and anthropology have between them honed into questions these fears and frustrations that beset us when confronted with alien cultures. We may be a twelve year old playing a Tagalog-speaking basketball team or a sailor on shore leave taking pictures of the natives or a commuter catching a glimpse of a migrant worker's face through a cracked school bus window. In such moments we question ourselves: Am I simply a cultural bigot? Do dirt and diet make that much difference? What is the common denominator of humanity anyway? Is there something here that, my own cultural biases aside, is either profoundly hostile or hospitable to humanity? And we also question the gospel: Was it meant only for us and those of the western world who have a background of Judaeo-Christian understandings? How can we know when we are calling people to Christ and when we are merely calling them to be like ourselves? What in scripture is only a part of first century culture and what applies in all times and places?

Our answer too often has been to sink into desultory discussions of comparative religions, illustrated by the same Time-Life series of books or films on *The Great Religions of Mankind* that are used in the public schools. It is at this point, where Christianity is reduced to just another category alongside Buddhism and Islam that Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity" begins to make sense for many of us. If it is true, as social scientists assure us, that all religions are merely ways of man's relating himself to the universe and finding his place in it, what becomes of our claims for the uniqueness of Christianity? If there are important psychic truths and clear apprehensions of God in other religions, how were they come by? If Christians, as members of the "global village", are to join in those dull, defused dialogues not only with Marxists but also with Buddhists, Hindus, and Moslems, to what can they appeal other than their stubborn insistence upon the superior holiness of their scriptures as compared to the Vedas or the Koran? And closer to home, what answer will they give for the hope that is in them when their own children announce their conversion to the latest domestic or imported cult?

In one of the best books ever written on this nettlesome subject, *The Everlasting Man*, G. K. Chesterton, the Roman Catholic apologist, writes:

. . . that while the best judge of Christianity is a Christian, the next best judge would be something more like a Confucian. The worst judge of all is the man now most ready with his judgments; the ill-educated Christian turning gradually into the ill-tempered agnostic, entangled in the end of a feud of which he never understood the beginning, blighted with a sort of hereditary boredom with he knows not what, and already weary of hearing what he had never heard.⁴

The church has passed through several stages in its relation to people of bizarre backgrounds: shock and horror, warfare, dogged determination to re-make them in our own image, exploitation, guilt, fear and currently a sort of smug syncretism that is in some ways an expiation for the guilt of the past and in others only a useful tool for implementing world-order. Indeed, Margaret Mead herself has been one of the chief proponents of the latter view. In her 1966 address to the World Conference on Church and Society in Geneva, she said, "In particular, we need the support of the churches for the application of all existing knowledge to the cause of world order, international law and world-wide institutions."⁵ Of course, that was over ten years ago. Today one hardly need point out that we are certainly no nearer global harmony despite the good intentions of various religious bodies. As for world-wide institutions, we are beginning to question their beneficence.

For ironically it is those very world-wide institutions that are making of anthropology a science whose days are numbered. So-called primitive cultures recede daily before the onslaught of industrialization; they are bulldozed into a premature grave in order to make room for the corporations of the "civilized" world.

When Margaret Mead set out on her first field work with Melanesians prior to World War II, she realized even then that she was racing the clock against the extermination of centuries-old human cultures. And when she wrote in the late sixties of her return visits to these same villages, it was to describe their transition into the contemporary world of taxes, banks, public schools, and parliaments. Technological society is a juggernaut moving irresistibly around the globe, leaving in its wake the flattened and impoverished cultures of countless tribes and villages. "Only two possibilities are left to the individual," insists Jacques Ellul:

either he remains what he was, in which case he becomes more and more unadapted, neurotic, and inefficient, loses his possibilities of subsistence, and is at last tossed on the social rubbish heap, whatever his talents may be; or he adapts himself to the new sociological organism, which becomes his world, and he becomes unable to live except in a mass society.⁶

One recognizes this immediately as a description of what has already happened on the American Indian reservations.

Just as the Christian church is learning how to appreciate rather than eradicate different cultures, they have begun to fade and disappear. How many decades will it be till there is only one more or less monolithic industrial culture encompassing all the people of the earth? And what are the implications of that historical shift? Already we look at the *National Geographic* photographs of the Tasaday tribe in the Philippines, possibly the last group of people on earth to have had no previous contact with "modern man," and it is like looking at a shimmering soap bubble hanging for a breath in the air before it bursts. Perhaps we are just beginning to learn ways of communicating the gospel to such strange folk when, before our very eyes, they disappear and melt into homogeneous humanity. What is our proper response to this turn of events? A sigh of relief that we all now understand life in the same terms? A shrug at the

inevitability of the process? A wistful nostalgia assuaged by old re-runs of Tarzan movies and a meal at an "ethnic" restaurant?

It is only at the point where cultures are passing away (and although they have *always* passed away sooner or later, never before have they done so with such thoroughness and speed or so self-consciously) that we become aware of the value of diversity. It is only by contrast with other cultures that we can know and understand our own as merely relative. What is to keep us, in the not distant future, from deifying our own human patterns? The Romans, the last people to have come so close to establishing a standardized civilization, seemed to have been bedeviled by this same temptation. They ended by making their emperor a god. In I Peter 4:10 the apostle exhorts his hearers to be good stewards of what translates literally as "God's multi-colored grace." Is that grace to fade to a monochrome under our stewardship?

Of course, although we are hurtling toward that state of affairs faster than anyone cares to contemplate, we are yet in the transition stage. There still remain huge populations who are indentifiably "other." Yet the amazing thing is that, no matter how impoverished a people's culture at first seems, there is always some custom, some story fragment, that can serve as fertile soil in which the gospel can grow. But it takes careful study, close attention, and a skillful imagination to do the transplanting.

Perhaps it would be easier than we imagine, even a refreshing relief, to turn from our western introspection and study for a while the vanishing variegated peoples of the earth, to force ourselves to feel out the shared spiritual hungers of all people and to find the words that feed those hungers.

¹ New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951, p. 273.

² Ibid.

³ Margaret Mead, *Blackberry Winter: A Memoir*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1972.

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1925 (1955), p. 13.

⁵ Margaret Mead, *A Way of Seeing*. New York: McCall Publishing Co., 1966, p. 23.

⁶ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*. New York: Vintage Books, 1964, p. 334.