

by the Jesuits in their missionary efforts,<sup>2</sup> and not without remarkable success, in terms of Jesuit goals.

Despite the popularity of these applications of cultural anthropology, it would seem that fundamentally none of them is satisfactory. In the first place, the knowledge of cultural anthropology is no panacea in the development of a mission program. Merely knowing how people function within their culture does not provide the answers to how certain aspects of this functioning can be changed. This does not mean that cultural anthropology cannot be highly instructive to the missionary in introducing modifications in the beliefs and practices of a people, but a mere descriptive view of a people's culture is not enough. Moreover, the methods by which the data of cultural anthropology may be effectively applied to a practical problem are not inherent within the facts of cultural study. There is much more involved—and this we shall try to explain below.

The view that the indigenous religious system, regardless of its nature, orientation, or practices, can provide a kind of "Old Testament experience" for the people is the result of a superficial understanding of either the Old Testament or the local religion. There are, of course, many similarities between religious practices recorded in the Old Testament and the so-called animistic features of primitive religions, such as ordeals, sacrifices, seers, mediums, scapegoats, taboo, etc., but there are more important matters which make the fuller religious revelation of the Old Testament unique: (1) mono-

<sup>2</sup> Peter Duignan, "Early Jesuit Missionaries: A Suggestion for further Study," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (August 1958), pp. 725-32.

theism, in contrast with henotheism (i.e. one exclusive God in place of merely one high god), (2) the relationship of moral behavior to religious holiness (i.e. the moral content of taboo), and (3) the initiative of God in loving and redeeming mankind. These three factors (and there are a number of others) set off the theology of the Old Testament from the concepts of animistic religions in such a way as to provide fundamental and basic differences, which can never be reconciled by pointing out superficial similarities and then trying to build a New Testament structure on an indigenous foundation.

### Jesuit Syncretism

The Jesuit system of accommodation did not begin with the Counter Reformation, which brought the Jesuit movement into being. It actually had its start in the year 601 when Pope Gregory VII wrote to the priests attempting at that time to convert the heathen Britons:

We must refrain from destroying the temples of the idols. It is necessary only to destroy the idols, and to sprinkle holy water in these same temples, to build ourselves altars and place holy relics therein. If the construction of these temples is solid, good, and useful, they will pass from the cult of demons to the service of the true God; because it will come to pass that the nation, seeing the continued existence of its old places of devotion, will be disposed, by a sort of habit, to go there to adore the true God.

It is said that the men of this nation are accustomed to sacrificing oxen. It is necessary that this custom be converted into a Christian rite. On the day of the dedication of the temples thus changed into churches, and similarly for the festivals of the

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saints, whose relics will be placed there, you should allow them, as in the past, to build structures of foliage around these same churches. They shall bring to the churches their animals and kill them, no longer as offerings to the devil, but for Christian banquets in name and honor of God, to whom, after satiating themselves, they will give thanks. Only thus, by preserving for men some of the worldly joys, will you lead them more easily to relish the joys of the spirit.<sup>3</sup>

In the Jesuit development of this principle (and not without opposition from many quarters of the Roman church, especially from the Franciscans and Dominicans) the technique was to assume "a thousand masks," "being all things to all men" and with "holy cunning" to accept the limitations imposed by the local situation. One must not, however, be too severe in one's criticisms of the Jesuit position, for fundamentally they recognized the fact of cultural relativism, namely, that the same practices in different cultures had quite different meanings and values. They rejected the Platonic concept of "idealistic ethics" and endorsed the Aristotelean view of Nichomachean ethics, based on a sense of cultural diversity and practical application.

Moreover, the Jesuit practices were an understandable reaction to the wanton disregard for the indigenous culture, so often practiced by other Roman Catholic orders. (For example, in Mexico the Franciscans by 1531 had pulled down 500 temples, broken 20,000 idols, burned countless manuscripts, and smashed thousands of priceless objects of art.)

Perhaps the greatest irony of the conflict between Jesuit and non-Jesuit efforts on

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

the part of the Roman Catholic missionaries has been the fact that both incorporated such a high degree of syncretism, whether consciously (as in the case of the Jesuits) or as forced by circumstances, that in the end the "converts" became related to a different set of practices, but with very little fundamental change in basic beliefs. What actually happened in so many cases was that Jesuits did not carry through with a total plan for adjustment, and non-Jesuits found that the shortest road to the goals established by the church necessitated adjustments, not dictated by theory, but imposed by force of circumstances.

For example, the early Franciscans destroyed the imposing temple in the ancient religious capital of Mitla, Oaxaca, Mexico. With the stones from the pagan structure they built a church in the valley, but the people continued to worship amid the ruins on the hilltop. At last, the missionaries adjusted to the pressures of the situation, had the church pulled down, and rebuilt it on the site of the original Zapotec shrine. Of course, if the purpose of any missionary undertaking is to bring the people into the jurisdiction of the church, then a syncretistic approach is both efficient and expedient. However, if the purpose is to bring the people into a new orientation to life through a new relationship to God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, then a system of syncretism tends to cancel out any gains and the distinctiveness of Christianity becomes almost totally lost. (In Orura, Bolivia, for example, during the fiesta of the Day of Temptation, not only do the devil dancers utterly fail to depict any Christian themes or motifs (despite their perfunctory blessing by ecclesiastical authorities), but the very concept of the day is perverted, for this day, which is supposed to commemorate

Christ's resistance to the wiles of the Devil, is reinterpreted by many people as a time during which people may yield to temptation without incurring penalties.

### The Basis of Communication

If, however, as we have suggested, the legitimate role of cultural anthropology is not to be found in reconstructing a base for Christianity in pagan practices or easing the transition by syncretistic adaptations, what then is it? I would like to suggest that basically the study of anthropology provides a means of effective communication. In and of itself cultural anthropology does not provide the answers to how, when, and why certain approaches should be made. But it can and should resolve some of the major problems of communication which are inherent in any missionary undertaking. The implications of such a proposition are naturally very extensive, but in their simplest forms we may say that the knowledge of cultural anthropology, as it applies to the cultures involved in any missionary task (i.e. the cultures of the missionary and the people to be reached—the so-called source and target cultures), provides an orientation as to (1) the relevance of the symbols by which the Good News is communicated and (2) the means by which these symbols may be communicated in a context which is meaningful to the people of the target culture.<sup>4</sup>

We seem to have no difficulty in understanding the phrase "born, not of blood"

<sup>4</sup> It would be a mistake to assume that all the communicative symbols employed by missionaries are words (they actually include much more, e.g. gestures, acts of kindness, art forms, music, etc.), but for the sake of our limited analysis we shall restrict ourselves to verbal forms for they are indicative of the basic problems encountered in other areas of symbol utilization.

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(John 1:13) as being some reference to lineage, for we often speak of "royal blood," "a true blue-blood," and "the blood line." However, in many cultures the word "blood" has no such implications. In Apache, for example, such a phrase would be relatively meaningless, but if someone tried to attach meaning to the utterance the only significance it could have would be that a child was born without any blood in his veins or that the mother in question did not bleed at childbirth. A study of cultural anthropology can provide a missionary with a basis for recognizing the differences in the two symbolic systems, and to know that in Apache for example, the English word "blood" in this type of context must be equated with "family" or "clan."

In one area in West Africa missionaries have for years used a word for "spirit" which has quite a different meaning from the Biblical expression. In this region the word actually means "soul stuff," the basic substance which gives life to all animate existence. God Himself is regarded as possessing such a substance, and it is variously distributed throughout the universe, and quantitatively allocated in various degrees on different levels of existence, so that insects have very little, animals have more (depending upon their strength), and man most of all (with corresponding degrees of such power reflecting levels within the socio-economic structure). When in this language missionaries declare that God (whom they designate as Allah) is "soul-stuff," they are expressing nothing more or less than pantheism, and it is not without reason that these Islamicized peoples seem unimpressed, if not downright shocked, by such a heretical message.

Of course, a study of cultural anthropology will not guarantee that a message communicated to any group of people will

be accepted. Far from it! Cultural anthropology only helps to guarantee that when the message is communicated, the people are more likely to understand. And it is this very fact of understanding it which may result in the people's rejecting it! But this is much better than to have them appear to accept it, when they really do not understand its significance. Once, however, the missionary has a thorough understanding of the cultural relevance of the symbols which he must employ in order to communicate, it is very much more likely that he can at least speak with meaning to the people, thus establishing the first and indispensable level for any missionary undertaking.

**Basis for Cultural Relevance**

Any proclamation of the Good News must, however, advance far beyond a mere recognition of the proper equivalence of word symbols. It must be so oriented that the total impact may be evident to the hearers. This means that the gospel should not be presented as one of the accoutrements of Western civilization, as a watered-down compromise with indigenous beliefs, or as merely another and more powerful technique for doing business with the supernatural. (There is no legitimate place for encouraging the view of "this Jesus-God, he strong god too.")

If the communication of the Christian message is to be culturally meaningful, in terms of the total lives of the people, certain features are essential: (1) It must use meaningful indigenous symbols wherever any concepts are crucial and (2) the implications of the message must be explained in concrete terms which are culturally applicable within a given society.

Because of the inadequacy of indigenous symbols, missionaries have often felt that they could best introduce borrowed words.

This may be quite all right for terms for camel, phylacteries, Pharisees, and dragon, for the proper understanding of these terms is not crucial; but in the case of a word for spirit or God, such borrowings are almost fatal. Certainly much of the effectiveness of the preaching of the gospel to the Navajos through the years has been hampered by the use of the English term God, which actually resembles in sound the Navajo term for juniper bush. In Apache, on the other hand, missionaries have employed an indigenous term meaning "by whom life comes into being," in other words the Creator, but also the Sustainer of life. This expression is culturally meaningful and has served, together with other well-chosen expressions, as part of the basis for effective communication.

Communication does not, however, consist merely of strings of utterances, meaningful as they may be within the language in question. Such words must be related to life, or they are nothing more than catechisms to be memorized (as a passport to heaven) rather than as programs for living. One must tackle real issues and in a thoroughly Christian manner. What, for example, is one to do with ritual drunkenness which occurs as a manifestation of many religious celebrations among primitive peoples? It is certainly not adequate to denounce such practices as being "naughty-naughty" or to apply to them the often unthought-out tenets of Protestant Puritanism. Such drunkenness must be treated for what it is, namely, a false kind of religious ecstasy,<sup>5</sup> a sincere but misguided attempt to find communion with God. But in its place the missionary must be able to

<sup>5</sup> Eugene A. Nida, "Drunkenness in Indigenous Religious Rites," PRACTICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb., 1959).

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TEACHING WITH A SYMBOL MEANS

demonstrate real communion, which lifts men above the drab experiences of the secular humdrum and gives them the thrill of being the children of God.

An emphasis upon moral righteousness may lead the missionary to denounce excessive "bride payment." This should not be done, however, on the basis that there is anything morally wrong in the concept of such transactions, for in their proper application they can do much to stabilize marriage and to consolidate clan relationships. However, in their selfish excesses such bride payments deprive many people of their moral rights, they tend to commercialize the sacred institution of marriage, and they often thwart the expression of genuine love. The proclamation of the Christian way of life must involve one in just such problems, not as a despiser of all indigenous institutions, but as one who sees in all human forms the potentiality of corruption. In other words, one must take seriously "the theology of man," including a realistic evaluation of man's egocentric orientation.

Such an attempt at a realistic view of life will not prevent serious misinterpretations by the sending constituency as to a missionary's message or motivations. For example, he may feel his mission is not justified in refusing to grant communion to sincere believers who are polygamists and who have a high sense of moral responsibility toward obligations incurred before learning of the gospel, or to those living together in common-law arrangements which may not be resolvable because of arbitrary laws about divorce. His judgment may be based on the fact that though such refusal may preserve the sanctity of the church, it prevents the spiritual growth of men and women for whom also Christ died. In other words the spotlessness of the church may not

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be so important as the spiritual nurture of human souls, who are admittedly bound for heaven because they believe in Jesus Christ but who are kept out of the fellowship of the church.

### Stimulus to Radical Decisions

A study of cultural anthropology makes it possible for one to see life through the eyes of those who participate in it. Hence, the proclamation must challenge men and women where they are. The Good News for poor workers in the slum *barrios* of Lima, Peru, must not be a translation of some sermon framed for a small-town congregation in America's Bible Belt (which this writer once heard delivered). In Congo the message must deal with such matters as *gaza* rites (involving cliterectomy), equal opportunities for girls, the rightful place of education, the correct employment of natural resources, such as land and game (which are being mercilessly exploited), righteous dealings between employers and employees (including everything from joining trade unions to paying decent wages to mission help), plain ordinary honesty, respect for leadership, abuse of power, etc. But all of these themes, which arise out of the Good News as revealed in Jesus Christ, must be related to the crucial issues of each man's life.

If the gospel is to be presented with utter abandon to the claims of God upon men, it will mean that many persons who might go along with a neutral, syncretistic, a "white-man-he-knows-better" presentation of the Christian message, will reject culturally relevant proclamations. They are too hard to take — even as they were rejected by so many who listened to the Master Himself. This means, therefore, that a knowledge of cultural anthropology and the application of these data to the proclamation of the gospel may actually

result in fewer responses to the Good News (at least at first). But the point is this: the relevant witness to the revelation of God in Christ will force upon men and women the necessity of making vital decisions. Such a declaration of the full claims of God upon men (for not only their souls but their lives) will make possible an ultimate acceptance of the message which will mean more than ad-

herence to a set of ritualistic observances. It will be nothing less than a rebirth by the power of God, who alone can take this witness to the truth and communicate it to the life and heart of people.

↳ The application of cultural anthropology thus becomes the effective instrument by which men may be pressed (by the Spirit of God) to make radical decisions about life's fundamental crises. //

K. A. Busia

## Africa in Transition— Before European Color

*In this issue and the two following, we present leading African sociologists on three important issues. In this first part the author discusses some of the African point of view. The description is of African people before they were influenced by Christianity, but much of it is by no means lost personally testifies. The parts which follow are "Colonialism" and "Africa and Technical Civil-*

### Metaphysics of Primitive Africa

In discussing the African conception of a supreme being as a creator, it must be pointed out that though ideas may vary from tribe to tribe, all believe that this supreme being is charged with power and that this power can be both beneficent and dangerous. They also believe in lesser deities who are also charged with power. These deities may be associated with hills, trees, rivers, and even with animals and other things in nature. But they all derive their power from the supreme being and they need to be propitiated by men. They take notice of men's actions, they desire human at-

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Professor K. A. Busia was, until recently, Professor of Sociology at the University College of Ghana. He holds a doctorate in anthropology from Oxford and is author of several studies on the Ashanti. His article "Ancestor Worship" appeared in Vol. 6, No. 1 (Jan. - Feb., 1959) of PRACTICAL ANTHROPOLOGY. The present series of articles is reprinted, by permission, from *Project Papers No. 10* of the Department of Church and Society of the World Council of Churches.

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