

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST LOOKS AT THE AMERICAN CHURCH

by

Ralph D. Winter

Fuller Forum

San Francisco & Seattle

I'm sure you have heard that Fuller Theological Seminary has theologians, and now with the School of Psychology's recently accredited Ph. D. program in psychology, you no doubt assume that Fuller has psychologists. The newest school, just five years old now, is the School of World Mission and Institute of Church Growth, and you may not have realized that the dominating academic discipline in this school is anthropology. This is not as strange as it seems since the task of missions is to transmit the Christian faith across cultural barriers. Thus the study of differing cultures--which is a principal task of anthropology--is the academic calling of most of us on the faculty of World Missions.

So that you'll know the context from which I speak, let me say just a word about this newest one of Fuller's three semi-autonomous schools. This third school isn't very large--we'll have only six full-time professors by the fall of 1970--but it is by far the largest center of advanced studies of the Christian World Mission anywhere in the world, Catholic or Protestant. We are not bragging--we're complaining. We have to produce all our own textbooks, in effect. There needs to be far more work of this type--when you realize how large an operation overseas missions really are. Thirty scholarly books, however, have issued from this school in the past five years, and they are now appearing at about ten a year. One reason for this is that our students are almost all

career missionaries or experienced overseas national leaders. These people are not beginning a career but are stopping off in mid-career for advanced studies. They teach us! Every one of them brings data we don't have. This is studied, interpreted, added to knowledge gained in classes here and then written up and published for the benefit of other workers. Thus far we have had 268 students, from 70 countries, and 53 different Christian communions. They are now back on their job as the key agents of what amounts to a potent, world-wide network, concentrating on the growth of the Christian church in every country of the world.

THE MYSTERY OF "CULTURE"

"Every country," of course, includes the U.S. although I must at the outset confess that in our work we concentrate mostly on the growth of the church in non-Western countries. If for no other reason, merely by being invited to a Fuller Forum, and having to give a talk on this subject, we are having to face the U.S. now and then at least. In order to speak on the subject "An Anthropologist Looks at the American Church," I should perhaps point out that there are various kinds of anthropologists, and some of them don't look at churches. There are anthropologists who look at bones, there are anthropologists who run around measuring people's heads and calculating a "cephalic index." There are anthropologists who specialize in linguistics. There are various fields of anthropology, but one of the most popular fields, and the one that we have specialized on, is cultural anthropology. Cultural anthropologists are not interested in bones, they are interested in culture. Culture? What's that? We do not speak here of cultures

of germs on a saucer developing strains of bacteria. The development of human cultures cannot be seen through a microscope. Culture, as we speak of it consists of invisible patterns of human habits and relationships--the function and structure of groups which until recently we have not really been carefully analysing and studying. A cultural anthropologist, therefore, sees culture as a thing. Not as a dead thing, but as a changing, flexible or developing thing, and a tremendously powerful thing. It is not like a cloud of smoke that overwhelms people or asphyxiates them but it is an unseen force which controls 95 percent of everything we do or say or think. It is a force which like the water in which a fish swims is totally unnoticed. The average person will never notice what culture is until he moves outside of his own culture. My younger brother did a dissertation on the culture shock of American professors teaching in foreign countries. That's how you find out what your culture is--when you get into another situation. Well, now, the American Church until recently has not faced squarely this matter of diversity of culture within its midst, and so in terms of the anthropologist and his preeminent concern, it seems to me that our topic here today must revolve around the phenomenon of culture and sub-culture and the diversity of culture within American society. Certainly when I look at the American Church I first of all notice the differences in culture and wonder how the church can see these differences, and I wonder how best we might tackle and deal with these differences.

THE ENIGMA OF CULTURAL PLURALISM

Let me refer to the foreign field for a second. We have a girl

studying with us now who is about 39 or 40, and who has battered against all kind of obstacles first as a woman, then because of having a caste Hindu background. She is still in the good graces of the Lutheran Church of Andhra Pradesh in India. But wait until her book is published! Her thesis is that there should be a new design, a special design, a particular, specific design of a church for those people of caste Hindu background. Now this is a delicate subject so that is why I am introducing it with a foreign illustration. As soon as you say that someone should design, or even allow to emerge a different kind of a church for people with Caste Hindu backgrounds, somebody always raises a red flag and says "Now wait a minute, this is segregation." Well this is the question. The anthropologist tends to feel that Americans have been living in a kind of a mythological Valhalla in which, according to the American theme of the melting pot, we have tried to do away with all cultural differences and racial differences and it has only been recently that we have discovered that we are not going to succeed. That there are two commonly known solutions to this problem. The one is the "all-American" solution which is to forge right straight ahead in the old-fashioned integrationist perspective and somehow to do away with all distinctions. Do away with all subcultures and if possible, all races.

One of our friends in Pasadena was circulating a petition recently to get people to back the mandatory bussing proposals in Pasadena and when he came to my office to ask for my signature, I was asking him why he was interested in this petition being signed, and this man is a very liberal minded, good hearted and devoted Christian person. I finally got out of him this statement: "Look I'm not trying to emphasize the

differences in American society, I'm trying to eliminate them. I'm not really so concerned about the Blacks in Pasadena; what I want them to do is become Americans. I want to get rid of this Black culture. I want to do away with it and the sooner the better." I could see that there was a slightly different point of view on my part simply because I'm an anthropologist, perhaps in part because I worked overseas, and in part because I spent ten years in Guatemala defending the Indians against a somewhat tyrannical assimilation policy on the part of the Spanish-speaking people in that country.

Now this is, of course, a problem which I am not going to solve today but let me sketch the opposite extreme. Granted that the older American solution is to do away with all differences, cultural and even racial. The opposite extreme is to demand total independence of the several human races, and on racial grounds. This is apparently the policy in South Africa. The idea is to keep each people separate. Apartheid (though I'm sure that this isn't a fully fair simplification of that program) would seem to some observers to be precisely the belief that man was created to be separate and to stay separate. This is obviously the opposite extreme from the integrationist. Now between these two extremes there seems to me to be a different solution which is that of the Bible.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THE BIBLE

The Apostle Paul bumped into the racial and cultural differences between the Greeks and the Jews; he was in many ways bicultural himself. To some extent he was a Jew by family, and a Greek by town. He spoke Greek as well as a form of Hebrew; he was a circumcized Jew but also a

Roman citizen. There were, however, Jewish Christians who in all devotion to Christ and in all sincerity utterly disagreed with Paul. I remember in Sunday School days hearing about the men who followed after the Apostle and tried to trip up the work he had done. They were called Judaizers. They told his converts he was not requiring them to be Jewish enough. He did tell those Greek converts that their liberty in Christ allowed them not to have to dance the jig of the Jewish culture. For one thing, they didn't have to be circumcised. That is the most crucial element in the Judaizer scheme, but there were hundreds of other Jewish things that they didn't have to do. In a word, they didn't have to be Jewish to be acceptable to God. Yet while this was Paul's theme song, not even the Jewish Christians understood him. This I didn't learn in Sunday School. When I got to seminary I found out that the Judaizers were actually sincere Jewish Christians. They were following after Paul in their Jewishness and saying "Well, Paul, you are letting these people to be heathen. They are not following the same ritual calendar that we are following" and so on and so on. And so Paul came out with a classic statement, "Look," he said, "in Jesus Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek nor Celt nor Scythian." Now, you'll note that I am saying Celt instead of barbarian, since the word the Greeks used for the Galatians, or the Galatoi, is a derivative of the word Gaul, and these Galatians were actually a Celtic meteor that was imbedded in the middle of Asia Minor. According to Jerome, as late as the fourth century, they spoke two languages, one a Celtic tongue. (This may help explain how Christianity got to Ireland so surprisingly early, but that would be a tangent!) They spoke Greek and they spoke also their own Celtic tongue which would

be akin to Gaelic in Ireland today. Thus Paul affirmed "These Galatians can still be Galatians and be acceptable to God. They don't have to become Jews, no matter what the Jews say."

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THE REFORMATION

The most beautiful statement of that extreme, typically Jewish, position of assimilation is Shoenfield's recent book Those Incredible Christians (meaning you can't believe the Christians. The publisher dreamed up the title, I'm sure.) It is a skillful analysis by a Jewish rabbi of the way in which Paul perverted the Jewish faith, made it Greek--this is Shoenfield's perspective about the whole thing. Now there have been other Shoenfields among the Christians. There were some Roman Shoenfields later on who went up into the Teutonic area of Northern Europe. They told the Germans "If you are really going to be Christian you are going to have to be Roman and speak Latin." They made the whole Germanic territory into a Roman Christian province and this stuck for 1,000 years. But there came a day when those Germanic peoples said, "Look we ought to be able to speak German and be Christians," and Luther translated the Bible into German. That was after he went to Rome and found out how they hated the Germans down in Rome. This ugly experience may have affected his perspective a little. He may have gone down a Roman Catholic, but he came back a German Christian. They called him a "tedesco"--that was a word which was a derisive term like "wop" or "Jap" in our language. As a "tedesco," he couldn't even speak Latin with the right accent, so they snickered at him. He went home offended, humiliated, angered and he started a national church for the Germans. He threw the Roman missionaries out. His new church developed its own autonomy. Then

it eventually put back a good deal of the structure that was Roman, as far as Diocese and Bishops and so on were concerned--although for fifty years they held off from even this.

Now the Reformation has happened all over again, all over the world. It is happening in this country. It happens wherever some national group finally flexes its muscles and says "Look we are going to be ourselves and we are confident that we will be acceptable to God the way we are." In India today, the great crisis in mission strategy is the question which this woman I mentioned is writing up: Whether the Hindus are going to be able to be culturally Hindu and still be acceptable to God, or do they have to become Harijan--the respectable term by which Gandhi referred to the Untouchables. That is, do the Caste Hindus have to go and be baptised in the Harijan Church and take over the Harijan culture, which means, for example, eating meat. This woman told how she vomited and vomited after she was forced to eat meat at the time she became a Christian and how many years it took her to be able to hold it down. Now she has decided, following extensive Biblical and theological training, that you don't have to eat meat to be a Christian. Now, we might say "Well look here meat is a good food." But why not let them decide? After 1,000 years if they want to eat meat, let them eat meat. It seems to me for a certain period they ought to be able to decide for themselves in these matters. Well, the question of whether or not we are really going to be able to allow or create subcultural churches is obviously a very vital question.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THE U.S. TODAY

In Los Angeles, which I know better than Seattle, Presbyterians with all their good-hearted liberal perspective have very simply stifled the initiative of the Spanish churches. One reason is because those Spanish churches can send all their elders and pastors to Presbytery and never be able to vote anything through. Our Founding Fathers in this country developed a system of government which in those days, at least, allowed even a small State to have an equal vote in the Senate with a large state. Those States have now lost all of their cultural cast and our Senate no longer reflects subcultures of the United States as it once did. From an anthropologist's point of view, the Senate should be readjusted now so as to represent the minority cultures of our country, no longer the States of the Union, because the States are now by and large mixed as far as subcultures are concerned. School Boards, too, ought not to wait until the Black population can get 51% of the vote before it can get a single Black member on the Board. The Blacks ought to be allotted a member simply because of the subcultural identity and legitimacy of their group.

You say "Well this is going to be hard to work out." Okay, but I am not really talking about secular society, I am talking about the church. Will Christian denominations ever allow self-determination within their structure that will really give a voice to the various minorities? Will they? They aren't now. They are just straight forward, old fashioned American believers in a simplistic type of democracy which merely requires a 51% vote, and I know of nothing more asinine than a 51% vote in a General Assembly of my church to carry some important issue across which 49% of the people are very much opposed to. This is not maturity, or pluralistic sophistication! There are issues that do not have to be determined by

51% of the people, and we have got to come to a different point of view about simplistic democracy.

DIVERSITY AND SYMPHONY

Well now, coming back to the two extremes. Either to integrate everybody and to smooth out all of the differences, or to maintain every ethnic group separately without any communication is hopeless. these are obviously nonfunctional extremes. There is an interdependence, I feel, which would be far better. For example, in a symphony orchestra, you have a place for the piccolo, for the oboe, for the clarinet. They each have a line in that score which belongs to them. It is their part to play and it isn't a matter of how many players there are of their kind. But now imagine a symphony orchestra being broken up and scattered across the earth, and then much later somehow redeemed; little by little and as each new instrument comes back into this orchestra, it brings a particular skill with it. Instead of saying to the piccolo when he comes in "Now look we are violins here, you throw that instrument down and play ours." We would say "No. Yours is the instrument we want. We need your particular note, your emphasis, your perspective, your way of life must be different in order to be most helpful. Just one more violin being played by a former piccolo player is not what we want!" The more instruments we get, the better the sound of this whole thing, the more nearly we can fulfill the intentions of the original musical score written by the living God. Now we are, let's face it, very diversified across the earth. In America, we don't even begin to realize the diversification of the human species. We can't quite figure out those Pygmies; they are very short

people. Or those status who make the world's best basketball players, living right alongside of the Pygmies in a mutually helpful symbiosis as the anthropologists put it, in which each really depends upon the other. How unfortunate to miss the possibilities of symbiosis, or symphony as I have called it, and to suppose that you have to melt everybody down or else just give up. As Daniel Moynihan put it, we are "Beyond the melting pot," and the church had better face this fact too.

Now the real difficulty is not on a denominational level. It would be perfectly possible, though I don't know whether it is going to happen or not, for the minorities of my church to have a real voice whether or not they carry 51% of the vote. To some extent, of course, this is already happening not by rule but by working around the rules. But what about the congregation? Should congregations be culturally mixed? I know you'll ask me and I might as well anticipate the questions. It depends on how large they are, of course. A small congregation is one case, the large church another. A student at Fuller who is an Assemblies of God student, was telling me that in their church there are quite a few college people now and they would like to bring their friends but their minister isn't a college graduate and it is increasingly difficult for them to expand on that level of society as long as their church is run by people of another level. So I told him "Why don't you start a church just for college graduates, for college people?" "Oh," he said, "I never thought of that." One of the immediate problems is that church people in this country are really quite out of it when it comes to knowing how to start a church. They get all confused about the difference between a church organization and a church building. You can tramp all over Southern California and perhaps not find a single man who can tell

you precisely and concretely how to start a Presbyterian Church. It is almost a lost art. You wouldn't think it was so complicated, when outside of the U.S., it is embarrassing to note, there is a whole new denomination every day being born somewhere in the world, while during the same period in the U.S. a few tired old denominations have been figuring out how to reduce their number! Denominational proliferation is a run-away movement in the world, much more prominent than merger. How many different churches do you think there are in Africa? I don't mean local churches, but denominations? There are over 6,000 by the latest count, 350 of them planted by foreigners, while almost 6,000 are home grown in Africa. These African Independent Churches, as they are called, are so radically different from each other that it is utterly ridiculous to speak, for instance, of a single Black culture. In other words, human diversity is increasing not decreasing in the Christian Church. It is increasing overseas, and it will no doubt continue to increase in the United States.

IS DIVERSITY PERMANENT?

One reason we believe this is the blunt fact that after all these years the English haven't gotten rid of the Welsh, the Northern Scottish nor the Irish. The French haven't gotten rid of the Britons nor the Basques. The Spanish get 64% of their taxes from the Basque industrial area, while only 5% of their tax money goes back to that area (so one Jesuit priest told me). This is the basis of a little bit of unpleasantness in the northern part of Spain. The Basques say that four provinces in Spain plus three in France ought to be one. By their "new math," four plus three equals one. You probably read

this in Time Magazine a few weeks ago. Do you think the Basques and the other European minorities will gain greater autonomy? Do you think this is the will of God? These are the questions that affect the church because the parallel problem exists within the church, and I believe will be solved first within the church. Yet for a Basque person on the Spanish side to utter in public the phrase "4 plus 3 equals 1" would be tantamount to committing suicide. That's how delicate these issues are.

Of course ethnic differences are not all the church must cope with. There is, of course, the problem of age interdependence. We already have stratification in the church according to age and according to sex. That list of things that Paul mentioned (Jew, Greek, barbarian, etc.) includes male and female, as a matter of fact. Neither are these differences supposed to disappear, even in the long run, although I suppose the feminists are working on it! We are also stratified according to business. Your group here today is quite a stratified group, not only by sex but by way of life to some great extent. In urban society men no longer live where they reside, and the church must pursue people beyond the limits of the so-called residential congregation. Meanwhile our churches are growing bigger but not more diversified and decentralized. A big city church will have the same structure as a village church used to have. A Congregational Church in Pasadena may have the same basic committee structure as was devised for a little village church back in New England 200 years ago. Yet, it has 2,400 members and can't effectively operate that way. Any one who runs a business knows that as the business gets bigger, you don't just get fatter, you diversify and in the business world this kind of diversification is not a lost art. But it is an undiscovered art in

the tradition of the church and I think anthropologists could help at this point as well.

Our age stratification, called the "generation gap," is becoming increasingly difficult. It is one of those built-in teachers of diversity that God has handed us and we cannot escape it. We might say that everybody in the world should speak one language. I think that it would be a great error to suggest it. It would be the same kind of an error to say that only one company should make automobiles for this country, but even if we would say that, we cannot wish away the different ages. The nuclear family in the anthropological phrase, the mother, father, and the children are almost inevitably a diverse group. You have got sex-diversity in the parents, right there. You have got age-diversity between the parents and the children, and then I've got four daughters that are only two years apart. There are fantastic individual differences between those daughters. My second daughter is by no means comparable to my first daughter. You just cannot make the same family plans to please both daughters. This diversity somehow is irresistible. What is God trying to teach us?

CONCLUSION-OR ABRUPT STOP?

The Christian anthropologist would say, let's not suffer diversity, let's profit from it. Let's be happy about it. Let's not consider it a nuisance. Let's rejoice in it. Let's rejoice in the diversity of all the different flowers. Let's rejoice in the diversity of all the different kinds of people. Now I am not really talking about race. I don't think races are half as important as differences in culture. As far as I am concerned the race a man has is almost irrelevant in determining the kind of cultural contribution he is going to make.

Most American Negroes for instance are not anywhere near African enough to give us the kind of flavor we need from Africa. On the other hand, they could give an American flavor to Africa that no African can give. We need this diversity and, incidentally, it is no longer true that we send missionaries just to give. We are sending missionaries now to get. Did it ever occur to you that we are not merely the custodians of all Christian truth and we just send it abroad in packages for lucky people to open up and rejoice in? We are merely the violin section. We cannot pull this off without clarinets and trombones and tubas and piccoloes and oboes and all the rest, and this is what we have to come to recognize: our church, our American church, our lily white church, whatever kind of a church it is, whether it is Japanese or Spanish or whatever, is not sufficient in itself. A creative interdependence is a dimension which we must add to what we've got. Now I don't know how this all sounds but at least this is where I must stop for your reactions.

REACTIONS

1. What about the statement about the flavor we need from Africa, in reference to the Negro? I would like to suggest that perhaps we have too much of that.

(Dr. Winter) What makes you say that?

(Q continued) Well, I think that the minority groups need to shoulder a little responsibility. If we take them as a group, some of the Blacks are in the forefront of all the polite versions of the civil disobedience that are presently causing grief.

Well, in the first place, I don't think this disturbance is from Africa, because the American Blacks are hardly African except racially. There is, I think, a valuable distinctive part of their tradition which is still African, but I don't think it is prominent. Secondly, I don't

think the problem they are causing us is of-their-making 100% by any means. My basic perspective is that if our governmental system had maintained its original insight, which it had when the Senate was first developed, these people would have had a legitimate means of self-expression. But we Whites have been like the man who wanted me to sign the petition. We want to get rid of these people rather than to ask them to contribute to us. Now it is characteristic of most tribes and cultures, our own included, that we don't really think we need anybody else's influence; but I would suggest that what we don't think we need is perhaps very important to us. In fact, let's face it, we Americans have raided and borrowed and bought and gotten cultural riches from every part of the earth and profited immensely from it. The very diversity of the elements coming to America has provided a richness, a creativity and an insight that we could not ever otherwise have had, so that now is no time for us to be squelching an element of determined variety in our own population. Now, obviously, these are disturbing elements. I am not happy about the violence, or the immediate character of the disturbance but I feel that it is a much larger problem that I don't feel will be solved by simple police action.

2. What do you suggest we do about the generation gap? Do you think the young people should have separate churches?

Yes, I think so. I think we've already come very close to this in our church young people's activities. In their separate meetings they almost act as if there is no other church. But remember that I don't believe, as I tried to say, in totally independent churches. I think it's ridiculous for young people to go on meeting by

themselves all the time and never come to a larger meeting where the interdependence of the various ages can be manifested. In other words, I actually object to the degree of segregation age-wise in our American churches. I think it is a terrible thing. We need both segregation and integration. A young person who comes to Christ, for example, has got to accept the diversity of age groups as part of his Christian call. He has got to lay down on the altar his own personal preferences and inclinations at the crucial point of his relation to the older people. He's got to be able to say that he will follow Christ and that he will love older people. It is not enough for older people to love younger people, younger people--as part of their Christian calling--are going to have to love older people; but under our present structure there is no organized possibility for this. In effect, we abandon the young people to their own thing and by institutional forms wall them off from any feedback to us except as it comes up in the form of disturbances. At that point we decry their response. There is no built-in interdependence in our structures, and I think this is the unfortunate thing. By separate churches I don't mean the kind of isolation we've got now. As with all other sub-cultures (such as business men), we need "modal" separation within a basic integration.

3. How do we integrate and how much can we get from this new breed of cat that has come at us, Hippies and so forth? How do we get those people into the stream of our society?

Let me say this. I would not be in favor of getting rid of their particular emphasis. You see, there is a very simple primitive process of eliminating differences which I don't think is Christian. I think the Hippie has something to contribute to us, and most of all if he can maintain some kind of social experiment which will provide the relative separation that will allow the creativity of his culture. I will give you an example.

Billy Graham went to London and he won thousands of people to Christ, among others, a couple of thousand Mods and Rockers. Now there are two tribes right there. I don't know what has happened to those converts. But as a foreign missionary I know what I would have done, I would have not tried to put those Mods in the local church. I would have said, let's guide the development of local church government among these Mods, let's have a Roker's church, too. Let's allow these people to use their own musical instruments, their own way of talking and their own insight, and let them go where they want to go, in Christ. Overseas this is what we have finally to say to the Hindu. This is what we have to say to all 700 different tribes in Africa. They will eventually come out who knows where, but to simply say to the Masai tribespeople that you are going to have to pay \$5.00 every time that we catch you not wearing trousers, like the present Tanzanian government is saying, is not the solution to the Masai problem and I think the same thing is true of the Hippies. If we try to get rid of them, they will be merely a disturbance. Why can't we recognize the possibility of self-determination for some of them? The thing that gripes us about the hippies is that they don't have the franchise of a different colored face to go with it. If they were some green color from some other country, we would be perfectly happy about them being themselves, but because they are white we somehow just can't allow them to be different. Yet our own white backgrounds are utterly diverse. You take all of the quarreling little savage tribes of Northern Europe, which the first Christian missionaries bumped into, man, they slaughtered each other at the drop of a hat--they couldn't adjust to each other's differences.

Take the Germans and the French, they've had their troubles in recent years and so we have this built-in attitude called xenophobia. That is a fancy word of the anthropologist. It means a fear of strangers. Our first inclination is get rid of him, like the man who wanted me to sign the petition. Let's get rid of this black culture. It's a problem to us, and we think when there will be just good white Americans then we can all be happy. Now this concentration on uniformity as a solution to human problems is typically World Council. Perhaps this is a bad note to end on, but to an anthropologist it sounds a little bit ridiculous for the World Council to come out of Uppsala with a statement that if we can just eliminate the differences in culture and language we will reduce human problems. You can see the fallacy here when you stop and think that murder in the United States of America takes place 64% of the time within the same family where there is no difference in language or culture or race. How come? If the same language, the same race, the same culture, will eliminate bloodshed, why do we have 64% of our murders within the same family? So, I don't think that kind of uniformity is the solution for unity. Diversity and unity have got to be held in tension. Now let's see, there are two pairs of words that must be distinguished: unity is not uniformity and diversity is not disunity. Diversity must not imply disunity and unity must not imply uniformity. We have got to have them both at once, diversity and unity. This is how God intended man to be, and it is how He intended the church to be.