

### 3. Cultural Relativism and Ideological Peace

This is Locke's second published presentation for the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life. In it, Locke focuses on prospects for the implementation of cultural pluralism. The prospects for a peaceful culturally plural world rests on instituting three principles: cultural equivalence (warranted by the existence of cultural cognates or correlates); cultural reciprocity (negating beliefs of human superiority and inferiority because such beliefs are normally codeterminant with judgments of cultural worth); and limited cultural convertibility (accepting that there are limited degrees of commensurability and translatability of meanings and values between cultures). An enduring peace between nations requires the negation of authoritarian dogmatism and of universalism.

On Locke's account, cultural relativity negates uniformitarian dogmatism and bigotry, but given tenacious value loyalties, imperatives guided by cultural pluralism and based on the verifiable characteristics we all have in common are needed. Cultural constraints, constants, or cognates are here termed "universally human factors" (in previous articles, they were variously termed "functional constraints" or "constants").

Locke holds that metaphysical absolutism mis-

"Cultural Relativism and Ideological Peace," *Approaches to World Peace*, ed. Lyman Bryson, Louis Finfelstein, R. M. MacIver (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), pp. 609-618.

guidedly confuses unity and universality. The unity of peoples can exist without uniformity of cultural modalities. A naturalism that supposes the universality of human nature and entails a uniform code of conduct is thereby erroneous. To tender a decoding: The cultural distinctiveness of peoples is irrelevant to their standing as members of the human family. In addition, absolutist or fundamentalist ideas breed their opposite—sectarian disunity.

## Cultural Relativism and Ideological Peace

Now that a considerable body of opinion within the Conference has crystallized around the position of value pluralism and relativism, with special emphasis this year, it seems, on the principle and concept of "cultural relativity," it seems opportune to turn from the initial task of establishing and vindicating this point of view to the next logical step—and the more practical one, of discussing its possible implementation. Already several papers<sup>1</sup> in this year's symposium have addressed themselves to one or more aspects of this practical side of the problem, and it is a pleasant duty to acknowledge general indebtedness to them at the outset of this further attempt to discuss some of the practical implications of the concept of cultural relativism. Three such principles of practical application seem to derive so directly and logically from the core principle in question that they may warrantably be regarded as three *basic corollaries of cultural relativity*.

In proceeding to discuss them, extended argument for the general position offered earlier by papers presented to this and previous Conferences, including one of my own written for the Second Conference,<sup>2</sup> may be taken to justify the assumption that there is little need or obligation to retrace in detail the argument for the main position itself. Here it should suffice to point out, for immediate perspective particularly, the practical and important relevance of cultural relativity to the main issue of this year's discussion topic—the prospects and techniques of "an enduring peace."

There seems to be, in fact, a twofold bearing of the culture-relativity principle upon our chosen Conference problem. One can readily recognize, in the first place, without needing to assume any direct logical connection between cultural relativity and pacifism or any demonstrable correlation between attitudes of tolerance and a predisposition to peace, that the relativistic philosophy nips in the psychological bud the passion for arbitrary unity and conformity. This mind-set, we know only too well and sorrowfully, constitutes the intellectual base and ideological root of all those absolutistic dogmatisms that rationalize orthodoxy. In so doing, they fortify with convictions of finality and self-righteousness the countless crusades for conformity which provide the moral and intellectual sanc-

tions, not only for war but for most of our other irreconcilable culture conflicts. In this indirect but effective way, cultural relativism, as its influence spreads, may become an important force for ideological peace through disavowing and discouraging the chief intellectual sanctions for belligerent partisanship.

Relativism, it should be noted, contradicts value dogmatism and counteracts value bigotry without destroying the sense of active value loyalty. For scientific relativism, some interpretations notwithstanding, does not propagate indifference, scepticism, or cynicism about values. Thus, through remaining hospitable and receptive to values except as they are dogmatic and too arbitrarily held, relativism retains a usefulness which, if followed through consistently, enables it to become at the very least a scientifically impartial interpreter of human values, and sometimes even a referee and mediator among conflicting values. There is, then, this second and more positive role for relativism to exercise in the issues of ideological competition and conflict—one which can lead to an even more constructive usefulness in the interests of peace, so far as peace can be safeguarded intellectually. Cultural relativism, of course more fully and positively developed than at present, can become a very constructive philosophy by way of integrating values and value systems that might otherwise never react to one another, or, if they did, would do so only in opposition, rivalry, and conflict. We can very profitably examine, therefore, at this juncture of human affairs the constructive potentialities of the relativistic position as a possible ideological peacemaker, particularly in the relationships of group cultures and their otherwise antagonistic or incommensurable values.

Paradoxically enough, absolutism in all its varieties—religious, philosophical, political, and cultural—despite the insistent linking together of unity *and* universality, seems able, so far as historical evidence shows, to promote unity only at the cost of universality. For absolutism's way to unity is the way of orthodoxy, which involves authoritarian conformity and subordination. From such premises, dogmatism develops sooner or later, and thereafter, history shows us, come those inevitable schisms which disrupt the parent dogmatism and try to deny it in the name of a new orthodoxy. Relativism, with no arbitrary specifications of unity, no imperious demand for universality, nevertheless enjoins a beneficent neutrality between di-

vergent positions, and, in the case of the contacts of cultures, would in due course promote, step by step, from an initial stage of cultural tolerance, mutual respect, reciprocal exchange, some specific communities of agreement and, finally, with sufficient mutual understanding and confidence, commonality of purpose and action. If in its practical manifestations cultural relativism could promote such results or even attitudes conducive to them, it would be a most fruitful source of such progressive integrations as are so crucially needed in the world today.

Once we fully realize the divisive general effect of fundamentalist ideas and all their institutional incorporations, and understand that orthodox conformity inevitably breeds its opposite—*sectarian disunity*—we reach a position where we can recognize relativism as a safer and saner approach to the objectives of practical unity. What is achieved through relativistic rapprochement is, of course, somewhat different from the goal of the absolutists. It is a fluid and functional unity rather than a fixed and irrevocable one, and its vital norms are equivalence and reciprocity rather than identity or complete agreement. But when we consider the odds against a complete community of culture for mankind, and the unlikelihood of any all-inclusive orthodoxy of human values, one is prepared to accept or even to prefer an attainable concord of understanding and cooperation as over against an unattainable unanimity of institutional beliefs.

Ironically, the very social attribute which man has most in common—his loyalty to his culture and, one might just as well say his inevitable commitment to various culture groups—is the basis of his deepest misunderstandings and a source of his most tragic conflict with his fellow men. When we consider this, we can appreciate the deep-seated desire and the ever-recurrent but Utopian dream of the idealist that somehow a single faith, a common culture, an all-embracing institutional life and its confraternity should some day unite man by merging all these loyalties and culture values. But the day still seems distant, even with almost complete intercommunication within the world's practical grasp. What seems more attainable, realistically, is some reconstruction of the attitudes and rationalizations responsible for this conflict over our separate loyalties.

It is at this point that relativism has its great chance. It may be destined to have its day in the channeling of human progress—not,

however, as a mere philosophy or abstract theory of values, though it began as such, but as a new base and technique for our study and understanding of human cultures and as a new way of controlling through education our attitudes toward our various group cultures. Only, then, through having some objective and factual base in the sciences of man and society can cultural relativism implement itself for this task of reconstructing our basic social and cultural loyalties or of lifting them, through some basically new perspective, to a plane of enlarged mutual understanding. For such a task anthropology in the broadest sense must be the guide and adjutant, and the trend toward this new alliance of disciplines, so inevitable in view of the nature of the problem, is already becoming apparent in scholarship generally. As a concrete example we have an increasing segment of it in the deliberations of this Conference.

There never has been a new age without a new scholarship or, to put it more accurately, without a profound realignment of scholarship. And if our times are as cataclysmal as they seem to be, we should reasonably expect today fundamental changes of this sort in ideas and points of view. Through the aid of anthropology, whose aim is to see man objectively and impartially in all his variety, cultural relativism seems capable of opening doors to such new understandings and perspectives as are necessary for the new relationships of a world order and its difficult juxtapositions of many divergent cultures. Only on such a basis can scholarship hope to serve the social situations of the present time. To do so, however, it will be necessary for scholarship to free itself from the provincialisms and partisanships of many of its past traditions. Culture outlooks and philosophies rooted in fanatical religious orthodoxy, or in inflated cultural bias and partisanship, or in overweening national and racial chauvinism, have been outmoded and outflanked by the developments of the age, not to mention their basic theoretical invalidation, which is because they are all subjective and unscientific. All these provincialisms survive considerably, however, but more and more precariously as time goes on. Accordingly, there is crucial importance and scope for well-grounded, rigorously objective relativism.

On such a background, one can more readily see and state the possible uses of cultural relativism as a realistic instrument of social reorientation and cultural enlightenment. As corollaries of its main

view of culture, three working principles seem to be derivable for a more objective and scientific understanding of human cultures and for the more reasonable control of their interrelationships. They are:

1. The principle of *cultural equivalence*, under which we would more wisely press the search for functional similarities in our analyses and comparisons of human cultures; thus offsetting our traditional and excessive emphasis upon cultural difference. Such functional equivalences, which we might term "*culture-cognates*" or "*culture-correlates*," discovered underneath deceptive but superficial institutional divergence, would provide objective but soundly neutral common denominators for intercultural understanding and cooperation;

2. The principle of *cultural reciprocity*, which, by a general recognition of the reciprocal character of all contacts between cultures and of the fact that all modern cultures are highly composite ones, would invalidate the lump estimating of cultures in terms of generalized, *en bloc* assumptions of superiority and inferiority, substituting scientific, point-by-point comparisons with their correspondingly limited, specific, and objectively verifiable superiorities or inferiorities;

3. The principle of *limited cultural convertibility*, that, since culture elements, though widely interchangeable, are so separable, the institutional forms from their values and the values from their institutional forms, the organic selectivity and assimilative capacity of a borrowing culture becomes a limiting criterion for cultural exchange. Conversely, pressure acculturation and the mass transplanting of culture, the stock procedure of groups with traditions of culture "superiority" and dominance, are counterindicated as against both the interests of cultural efficiency and the natural trends of cultural selectivity.

Here, then, we seem to have three objectively grounded principles of culture relations that, if generally carried through, might correct some of our basic culture dogmatism and progressively cure many of our most intolerant and prejudicial culture attitudes and practices.

If they could come into general acceptance, cultural absolutism and its still prevalent presumptions would be basically discredited and perhaps effectively countered. Cultural difference, surely, would be purged of most of its invidiousness, and much cultural divergence would on deeper inspection turn out to be functionally similar. We would be more prone to recognize the legitimate jurisdictions of other cultures as well as to respect the organic integrity of the weaker cultures. Moreover, tolerance and the reciprocities of cultural plural-

ism within the larger, more complex bodies of culture would become much more matters of course than they are at present, and to the extent we were really influenced by the relativistic point of view, we would all wear our group labels and avow our culture loyalties less provocatively, not to mention the important factor of regarding our culture symbols with less irrationality. Particularly, and most important of all, the proprietary doctrine of culture would be outmoded, as both unreasonable and contrary to fact. Claims of cultural superiority or counter-judgments of cultural inferiority would be specific and carefully circumscribed and would be significant and allowable if substantiated by fair, objective comparison. For I take it, we would not disallow such judgmental valuations as might stem from an objectively scientific criterion of more effective or less effective adaptation. It was only in its initial form that the relativist viewpoint, in disestablishing dogmatic absolutism in cultural valuations, had to be iconoclastic almost to the point of value anarchism. Through functional comparison a much more constructive phase of cultural relativism seems to be developing, promising the discovery of some less arbitrary and more objective norms. Upon them, perhaps we can build sounder intercultural understanding and promote a more equitable collaboration between cultures. The primary fact to be noted is that, however speculative and uncertain a relativistic ethic of culture may be, cultural relativism itself stands on the very firm base of a now rather formidable body of established scientific facts, with the support of an increasing consensus of scientific opinion among the students of human culture.

Nevertheless, there is certainly no warrant for expecting rapid or revolutionary change in traditional human attitudes and viewpoints merely because of the preponderant weight of evidence back of a scientific theory or point of view. Relativism, like any other way of thinking, will have to make headway slowly against entrenched opposition, and gather considerably more reinforcements than it can now muster. We may expect no sudden recanting of our traditional cultural absolutisms and orthodoxies, no more than in the case of similar absolutist doctrines. The one practical hope in this regard seems to be the emergency character of the present world crisis, which may well be more coercive in effect than the logic of reason or the force of scientific facts. It is in the context of the grave practical



issues of the present world conflict that the more realistic and wider-horizoned views of human cultures which we have been discussing have their best prospects for a speedier than normal adoption and a more than academic vindication.

Certainly, without having the formal concepts to hand, hundreds of thousands to millions are today acutely aware, as they have never previously been, of the facts of cultural diversity, of the need for less cultural antagonism and conflict, of the desirability of some working agreements between differing creeds and cultures based on reciprocity, and of the probable futility of any world plan cut to the pattern of the old values and principles. Here, it seems, is the challenge and the chance. It is for that reason that one can so heartily concur in the suggestions of Professor Northrop's paper that a value analysis of our basic cultures in broadscale comparison is the philosophical, or rather the scholarly, task of the hour.

Specifically<sup>3</sup> Dr. Northrop calls for this as "philosophy's task with respect to the peace" and proposes:

(1) An analysis of the major cultures of the Western and Eastern worlds designating the basic theoretical assumptions from which the social institutions and practices that they value proceed. (2) The specification of a common single set of assumptions possessed of the greater generality which permits the largest possible number of the resultant diverse, traditional assumptions logically compatible to be retained and acted upon without conflict. (3) The reconstruction of all the traditional assumptions to the extent that this is necessary, in order to bring them more in accord with the nature of things as revealed by contemporary as well as traditional philosophical and scientific knowledge.

A cultural relativist will likely have some doubts and reservations over the practicability of such a synthesis as Professor Northrop's third point proposes, especially if a main objective is a unity and agreement based on an extensive "reconstruction of traditional cultural assumptions." In looking for cultural agreements on a world scale, we shall probably have to content ourselves with agreement of the common-denominator type and with "unity in diversity" discovered in the search for unities of a functional rather than a content character, and therefore of a pragmatic rather than an ideological sort. Indeed, cultural relativism and its approach suggest that man-

kind is not so much at odds over basic end values as over divergent institutional means and symbols irrationally identified with these basic ends. Although thus uncertain that our basic culture values would reduce so easily or submit as readily to ideological reconstructions as Professor Northrop considers requisite, indeed not regarding such value-content unity as vitally necessary, the relativist position would be in substantial agreement on the need for an objective comparative analysis on a world scale of our major culture values.

In this undertaking cultural relativism would have two important suggestions to make. First, that considerable clarification, with an attendant cultural sanity and harmony, would result from any wide-scale comparison set to discover whatever pragmatic similarities already pertain underneath a variety of divergent value symbols and their traditional rationalizations merely through making manifest such common denominators and basic equivalences. Second, it should be equally obvious that the chances for discovering vital agreements of this sort are infinitely greater on the basis of a functional analysis of our major culture values than through an analytical, merely descriptive one. The main question, however, is neither methodology nor anticipation of the result, but an immediate and collaborative undertaking of what is becoming obvious as one of the most urgent and promising tasks yet confronted by the scholarship of our generation in the field of human relations.

One can, of course, foresee, even in advance of such a search for value correlations, one inevitably oncoming content unity among our various cultures, a base denominator of modern science and technology. We can hardly conceive our modern world dispensing with this, whatever its other factionalisms. But even if destined to become the common possession of humanity, science and technology are relatively value neutral, and, since they can be fitted in to such different systems of end values, cannot be relied upon to become deeply influential as unifiers. Indeed, linked to present-day culture feuds and value intolerances, they can quite more easily serve to intensify the conflict as the geographical distance between cultures is shortened and their technological disparities are leveled off. It is, after all, our values and value systems that have divided us, apart from and in many cases over and above our material issues of rivalry

and conflict. If we are ever to have less conflict and more unity, it must come about in considerable part from some deep change in our value attitudes and our cultural allegiances. The increasing proximity of cultures in the modern world makes all the more necessary some corrective adjustment of their "psychological distance."

No single factor could serve this end more acceptably and effectively than a relativistic concept of culture, which, by first disestablishing the use of one's own culture as a contrast norm for other cultures, leads through the appreciation of the functional significance of other values in their respective cultures to the eventual discovery and recognition of certain functional common denominators. These culture constants or "culture cognates," as the case might be, would then furnish a base not only for mutual cultural tolerance and appreciation but eventually for effective cultural integration. If discoverable in any large number, they might well constitute a new base for a direct educational development of world-mindedness, a realistic scientific induction into world citizenship. Surely it would be a great gain if we could shift or even supplement our sentimental and moralistic efforts for world-mindedness to an objective educational and scientific basis. As stated by the writer in a previous Conference paper<sup>4</sup>:

For if once this broader relativistic approach could discover beneath the culture differentials of time and place such functional "universals" as actually may be there, these common-denominator values will stand out as pragmatically confirmed by common human experience. Either this observable generality or their comparatively established equivalence would give them status far beyond any "universals" merely asserted by orthodox dogmatisms.

Indeed by some such new and indirect substantiation, we may even be able to reestablish, on a less arbitrary foundation, some of the disestablished certainties among our culture values.

#### NOTES

1. The papers by F. S. C. Northrop, Charles W. Morris, Bingham Dai, Krishnalal Shridharani, and Clyde Kluckhohn. See *Approaches to World Peace*, ed. Lyman Bryson, L. Finfelstein, R. M. MacIver (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944).

2. "Pluralism and Intellectual Democracy," *Science, Philosophy and Religion*, Second Symposium, 1942, pp. 196-209.

3. "Philosophy and World Peace," *Approaches to World Peace*, ed. Lyman Bryson, L. Fintelstein, and R. M. MacIver, p. 651 f.

4. "Pluralism and Intellectual Democracy," *Science, Philosophy and Religion*, Second Symposium, 1942, p. 200.

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