

900  
P. B.  
Area studies

### INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

One way of trying to see what is involved in the development of intercultural understanding is to try to put the question in empirical terms - i.e., what actually happens when someone alien to a culture achieves at least a working understanding of it.

In actual experience (and this only sets aside for a moment the development of understanding when actual experience of a culture is not possible) understanding develops through individual contacts with members of another culture. Such contacts rather quickly show that "understanding" between the alien and members of the culture is only partial - that there are certain areas in which cultural differences restrict or even impede "understanding."

In actual experience the alien has to identify and evaluate these differences and the extent to which they are operative in his contacts.

In my experience these differences are conveniently classified under three headings - tradition, thought, and outlook - i.e., roughly, past, present, and future, or memory, mentality, and expectations of the future.

As CBF pointed out, factors under these three headings are of course interrelated and operate on each other. The central point, of course, is in the present. Tradition here is not objective history, but, rather, what is keenly enough remembered to affect the thought and behavior of the individual. Much the same is true of outlook, which, in turn, affects the thinking of the individual in the present.

If in actual experience an alien finds his way to the understanding of another culture by identifying and appreciating differences under these three headings, I suggest that this experience may be an empirical starting point for what has to be done in providing the means to intercultural understanding on a larger scale. (The actual experience is, in a sense, a microcosm which has within it indications of the directions which macrocosmic description should take to be really pertinent.)

This approach to intercultural understanding I have designated as the "lay approach," in the sense that it begins virtually without assumptions as to what the other culture is. It seems to me that the other approaches to intercultural understanding are all more or less characterized by initial assumptions - e.g., that this discipline or that is a good key, that inter-disciplinary study isolates the salient factors, or that the "national character approach" projects onto a culture assumptions about its structure and dynamics which, while valid elsewhere, may or may not fit.

If I am right in thinking this "lay approach" a good starting point (as it seems to be in actual experience), I am wondering if it is



not equally good as a starting point in giving direction and purpose to efforts toward intercultural understanding that can't be based on actual experience - e.g., the "explanation" of a culture for those who cannot have actual contact with it.

Just after we discussed this matter, I happened on a very pertinent example of pretty much what I was trying to describe (see attached interview with David and Elizabeth Rodnick).

JM:MS  
Attachment

1/5/51