

OSCAR LEWIS, ANTHONY WALLACE,
AND THE SEMEN RELIGIONIS

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After extensive studies in Mexico City and San Juan, Puerto Rico, anthropologist Oscar Lewis came to the conclusion that there is a "culture of poverty" that is transmitted from one generation to the next. He wrote a summary of his findings in an article prepared for the *Scientific American* in 1966.¹

Lewis viewed this culture as a subculture of the western social order. Poverty comes in the first place because of maladjustments in the social-economic system. It is initially a strategy for survival in the midst of harsh circumstances. But it becomes a way of life passed on to the children, many of whom do not leave their way of life behind even when given the opportunity to do so.

Sociologists have paid more attention to the Lewis thesis than have anthropologists, and their attention has usually been negative. They have perceived Lewis as offering a ready excuse for the failure of many social programs to better the condition of the poor. They have felt that his arguments give aid and comfort to those who maintain that the poor are undeserving of help because they don't know how to translate temporary aid into long term gains. Sociologists by and large have tended to maintain that the poor are victims of circumstances. Provide them with sufficient opportunities and they will surely take advantage of these opportunities.

It should be pointed out, however, that in their zeal to criticize Lewis, many sociologists have jumped to the conclusion that according to Lewis, all poor people are caught in a culture of poverty.² Lewis actually maintained that only a minority of the poor have the "culture of poverty." Lewis wrote: "There are many poor people in the world . . . But not all of them by any means live in the culture of poverty."² Later Lewis says, "Among the 50 million U.S.

citizens now more or less officially certified as poor, I would guess that about 20 percent live in a culture of poverty."³ The suggestion that only a minority of the poor have developed a culture of the poor should have tempered some of Lewis' critics, for he has certainly localized the problem.

In addition the Lewis critics must explain why they have ignored the writings of Anthony Wallace, even though there are striking similarities between the diagnosis and treatment proposed by Wallace and that proposed by Lewis.

In an article written for the *American Anthropologist* already in 1956 Wallace describes societies worldwide which suffer first individual stress and later societal distortion as (usually) external forces break up the culture of a society.⁴ These forces break up the culture by demonstrating to the people that their traditional culture is no longer adequate to handle the new problems that are being forced upon them; perhaps by enemies, perhaps by climactic changes, perhaps by other factors. In this situation a prophetic-type leader emerges who has a vision of cultural changes that must take place if his society is to cope with the changes that crowd in upon it. This leader gains a following, adjusts his program according to need, and eventually leads his people to a new and more satisfying culture.

Anthropologists have generally accepted the Wallace thesis as a valid description of rapid culture change. Such rapid change is to be distinguished from the slower change that is going on continuously in all cultures. Margaret Mead documented similar rapid change with strong religious overtones in her book *New Lives for Old*.⁵ Homer Barnett developed a thorough theoretical explanation for the mechanics of change in *Innovation: The Basis of Cultural Change*.⁶

Although the Lewis thesis was largely rejected and the Wallace thesis was accepted, yet when one compares the views of Lewis and Wallace, one comes across some striking similarities. Lewis uses terms such as apathy, fatalism, helplessness, dependence, and inferiority to describe the feelings of those ensnared in the culture of poverty. Wallace, on the other hand, uses such terms as alcoholism, passivity, indolence, depression, and neurotic disorders to describe the behavior patterns of those involved in "the Period of Cultural Distortion."

Lewis speaks of forces in the western economic system that cause poor people to be poor. Wallace also outlines forces exterior to the

groups he has studied. At this point the Wallace description may appear more credible than that of Lewis, for Wallace writes, "Our file notes now contain references to several hundred religious revitalization movements, among both western and non-western peoples, on five continents."⁷ But the more extensive data base of Wallace does not invalidate the Lewis conclusion. Rather the conclusions of one scholar tend to reinforce the conclusions of the other.

The real difference between the two essays is that while Wallace spends most of his space describing the solution, Lewis spends most of his space describing the problem. An extensive description of the problem combined with only a rudimentary description of the solution has led many to the conclusion that Lewis has no real solution. But Lewis does suggest a solution, and his suggestions bear remarkable similarities to the Wallace solution.

Wallace stresses the religious nature of the resolution that many societies have found to the problems of cultural disintegration. While he recognizes that the solutions can be either "religious or secular",⁹ he nonetheless speaks of "several hundred religious revitalization movements".¹⁰ The terms that others have used to describe these movements also indicate their pervasive religious character. Wallace mentions such terms as cargo cults, religious revivals, messianic movements, sect formation, mass movements, and charismatic movements. The leader that initiates the movement is usually a religious leader, a dreamer of dreams and a visionary. He sometimes feels that God is talking with him directly. Wallace makes the point that hundreds of societies have achieved a more satisfying culture through religious innovation. Often this religious innovation does not have a Christian base or is a gross distortion of the Christian faith, but it is religious, nonetheless.

At this point also there is similarity between Lewis and Wallace. In describing the culture of poverty Lewis says, "There is hatred of the police, mistrust of government and of those in high positions and a cynicism that extends to the church."¹¹ In describing the solution to this culture, Lewis says, "Yet it would seem that any movement—be it religious, pacifist or revolutionary—that organizes and gives hope to the poor and effectively promotes a sense of solidarity with the larger groups must effectively destroy the psychological and social core of the culture of poverty."¹² Here Lewis comes close to the Wallace description of revitalization as being either "religious or secular."¹³ But Wallace goes a bit further when he suggests that religious movements have a secular element

and secular movements have religious trappings.

John Calvin taught that all people have a sense of deity (*sensus divinitatus*) which becomes for them the seed of religion (*semen religionis*). He expounds this teaching in Book I, chapter iii of the *Institutes*, while in chapter iv he tells how this seed is damaged so that the plant it produces is always distorted, unless God's grace steps in. Calvin sees evidence for such a sense of deity in the religiosity of all peoples everywhere, no matter how isolated and primitive their society might be. This religiosity of all societies is confirmed by contemporary anthropological studies.

The apostle Paul affirms the existence of such a sense of deity in Romans 1:19,20, and there may be another reference to God's general revelation in the minds of men in John 1:9. In Romans 2:14, 15 Paul treats the human conscience as contributing to this sense of deity which inspires in men a sense of right and wrong. "They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness." (Rom. 2:15a)

When Calvin's treatment of the conscience of natural men is joined to his statements on the sense of deity, a rudimentary apology (after the fashion of the ancient apologists) emerges.¹⁴ There is also in Calvin's writings a theory on the rise and perpetuation of animistic religions. They find their origin in the seed of religion that is sown by God in the entire human race. Because of man's finitude and perversity, this seed, left to itself, never produces healthy fruit. The fruit it produces is always distorted and grotesque. But there is always some fruit (false religion), which testifies to the fact that there was a seed.

Man by nature is proud and self-sufficient. He boasts of his own ingenuity and power. Yet proud man is willing to bow before wood, metal, and stone. The impulse that persuades him that this is appropriate must be very strong indeed. Calvin says:

Indeed, even idolatry is ample proof of this conception. We know how man does not willingly humble himself so as to place other creatures over himself. Since, then, he prefers to worship wood and stone rather than to be thought of as having no God, clearly this is a most vivid impression of a divine being . . . Man voluntarily sinks from his natural haughtiness to the very depths in order to honor God!¹⁵

Likewise the impulse that gives to all men a sense of right and wrong, so that even thieves have a code of ethics among themselves, indicates that God has given to all a conscience. The

human conscience differentiates human beings from animals, assures that all cultures develop a sense of right and wrong in human actions, and also leads to the idea of punishment for wrongdoers, as a pan-cultural phenomenon.

Cultural anthropologists recognize that at the center of all cultures there is a world view or a religion. Although there are some variations among the anthropologists regarding the precise content of this world view, and even over whether it ought to be called "world view" or "religion," there is general agreement that a society's view of the world, which includes both a cosmology and a system of values, lies at the center of its organizational structure.

Homer Barnett has demonstrated that most cultural change begins in the human mind. And Anthony Wallace has shown how religious change precedes and motivates cultural change.

What about changes which appear to spring from secular world views, such as communism? The reply given by Wallace is that although some movements appear to be thoroughly atheistic or non-religious, they nonetheless imitate religion to such an extent that they take on a pseudo-religious character:

The development of a Marxist gospel with elaborate exegesis, the embalming of Lenin, and the concern with conversion, confession, and moral purity (as defined by the movement) have the earmarks of religion. The Communist Revolution of 1917 in Russia was almost typical in structure of religious revitalization movements: there was a very sick society, prophets appealed to a revered authority (Marx), apocalyptic and Utopian fantasies were preached, and missionary fervor animated the leaders.¹⁶

Wallace concludes that no revitalization movement is totally free from religious influence.

Granted that this is so, will any religious or semi-religious movement suffice to revitalize and integrate a culture? Lewis seems to think so; Wallace agrees. Yet with Wallace there is an important proviso: the new religion serves to reorganize the culture until a new period of stress comes along. Concerning the newly organized culture, Wallace says, "Whether its culture will be viable for long beyond this point, however, will depend on whether its maze-way formulations lead to actions which maintain a low level of stress."¹⁷ Wallace sees religion not as flowing from ultimate reality, but as a human mechanism for coping with stress.

It is at this point, of course, that John Calvin and Anthony

Wallace part company. Calvin and his followers would wish to maintain that men find in religion a mechanism for reducing stress because man is by nature religious. Pangs of conscience and a sense of the supernatural are natural to man, for he was created with this feeling, just as animals were created with instincts that govern *their* behavior. But man's religious instinct is only partially fulfilled when he adopts a pseudo-religion instead of the real religion: Christianity. Man is like a child whose diet is lacking in iron or lead. He may seek to satisfy this void by eating dirt or paint. This is a palliative but not a cure. In time the poverty of the pseudo-religion one has adopted will become plain to him, and he will wish to change it for something else. The possibility of a continuous cycle of acceptance and rejection that envelopes an entire society thus emerges. As Augustine put it: "Thou has created us for Thyself, dear Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

How then are we to evaluate the many government programs that have been designed to help the poor in one way or other? These programs no doubt have value as a stop-gap measure. But we are deceiving ourselves if we think that government programs are going to eliminate poverty and the world view of poverty on a long term basis.

If there are strong religious overtones in rapid cultural change, the government (at least the United States government) will be unable to help, because the U.S. government has deliberately erected a high "wall of separation" between church and state, interpreted as total separation between the state and religion. The U.S. government is not supposed to promote a pseudo-religious solution, let alone a genuine religious solution.

The result is that where the need is the greatest, the American government and the various state governments, stand helpless. It is a situation that calls for private initiative, and the Christian Church is best equipped to seize this initiative. As the Church takes on this challenge, her primary focus ought not to be a stop-gap aid nor even long term developmental aid. If this were her primary focus, she might be competing with the government or other secular agencies.

The primary focus of church involvement ought rather to be the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Only this Gospel applied by the Holy Spirit will renew hearts, and thus renew lives from the inside out. A new religious perspective will provide the poor and those involved in cultural disintegration with a new sense

of dignity, a new sense of their calling in the world, new vigor with which to overcome self-defeating life styles, and new energy with which to take advantage of the opportunities that come their way.

NOTES

¹Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," *Scientific American*, CCXV, No. 4 (Oct. 1966), 19-25.

²Lewis, "The Culture", p. 21.

³Lewis, "The Culture", p. 24.

⁴Anthony Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 58 (April, 1956), 264-281.

⁵Margaret Mead, *New Lives for Old* (New York: Morrow, 1976).

⁶Homer Barnett, *Innovation: The Basis of Cultural Change* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1953).

⁷Wallace, "Revitalization," p. 264.

⁸Wallace, "Revitalization," p. 264.

⁹Wallace, "Revitalization," p. 270.

¹⁰Wallace, "Revitalization," p. 264.

¹¹Lewis, "The Culture," p. 22.

¹²Lewis, "The Culture," p. 23.

¹³Wallace, "Revitalization," p. 270.

¹⁴Cf. Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952) pp. 56-72.

¹⁵John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I, iii, 1.

¹⁶Wallace, "Revitalization," p. 277.

¹⁷Wallace, "Revitalization," p. 279.