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**ENTERING SOMEONE ELSE’S GARDEN:
Cross-Cultural Mission/Ministry**

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In today’s global village, people of different cultural (racial, religious, economic and political) backgrounds live and work together more and more. However, while individuals representing multicultural contexts are in fact “in the same room at the same time,” this does not mean that anyone is actually sharing their “world” with someone considered “other.” Peaceful co-existence and minimal cooperation for the sake of attaining a common goal--whether that is following agreed-upon traffic laws, shopping in a mall, sharing recreational facilities, or attending the same school--is one thing. However going beyond that to actually enter a mutually enriching and challenging relationship of understanding, acceptance and care--to the point of sharing worlds of meaning in the deepest sense--with a person of a culture different from one’s own is quite another. As we know, this is fairly challenging between people of common backgrounds, but it is even more rare and difficult between those of different “worlds.” In this article, I shall refer to this latter process as “crossing cultures,” and I will be using an image and narratives to explore the theological and ministerial dynamics of this process for those who choose this in the name of mission/ministry.¹

A few preliminary remarks are necessary. My reference to “culture” is intended to apply to and include the other elements mentioned earlier in parenthesis, that is race, religion, economics, and politics. In many contexts, racism is actually the primary barrier between people of different cultures (see Riebe-Estrella 1997). Religious experiences and expressions are mutually shaped by and shape one’s culture. And economic and political differences inter-culturally, as well as intra-culturally, are determining factors within this dynamic as well. Secondly, while I will be assuming the perspective of those who attempt to cross over into other cultures as a part of their Christian mission/ministry, these reflections will also be of interest to others who attempt this for other reasons as well. Thirdly, this process occurs in many

¹Throughout this article, I will use “mission/ministry” and “missionaries/ministers” to include people and situations under both categories, in whatever way one understands the difference.

different ways, to very different degrees, for very different reasons. Recognizing these variables, I will now proceed to describe the general movements in cross-cultural mission/ministry.

Introducing the image

Probably due to my farming background in Ohio and significant time spent with subsistence farmers in Papua New Guinea (as a missionary), an agricultural image has been very helpful for me in describing the process of crossing into the cultural world of the “other”, that is *entering into someone else’s garden*. Within a subsistence agricultural economy, the garden is the place upon which one absolutely depends for one’s livelihood and well-being. One realizes that life or death is dependent, first of all, on the “fruits of one’s own labors,” but at the same time, the forces of nature and other factors beyond one’s control also determine the ultimate outcome. Within the garden, one experiences on a day-to-day basis joy and sorrow, blessing and curse, life and death, good and evil. A person and community sometimes experience the presence and absence of God in the garden. Furthermore, in many cultures one’s status, identity and world of meaning are associated with the fruitfulness of one’s garden.

In every garden, a gardener or farmer cultivates those plants considered beneficial and eliminates those considered harmful. As we know, Jesus used this basic imagery of the seed and the weeds in several of his parables to talk about the realm of God. In his explanation (Lk 8:11-15) of the parable of the sower and the seed (Lk 8:5-8), Jesus describes the seed as the “word of God,” and in one of several scenarios, that seed is choked by the thorns. In the parable of the darnel (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43), the good seed (wheat) and the weeds (darnel) co-exist in the farmer’s field but they will be justly separated at harvest time. Finally Jesus reminds his listeners that the seed has the power to grow on its own to full fruition (Mk 4:26-29)

Theologically, I propose referring to the “seed” as “seeds of the Word,” building upon and expanding Justin Martyr’s use of the term “logos spermatikos” (“seed-bearing word”) for divine truth already implanted in classical Hellenistic philosophy to represent the presence of that truth in each cultural “garden.” The harmful elements are those elements of a culture (or philosophy) which choke the truth, love, and life of God, and which are contrary to the realm of God. While Justin Martyr stressed the *continuity* between the Christian faith and classical philosophy of his time, that is the presence of the “good seed,” his contemporary, Tertullian of Carthage, stressed the *discontinuity* between the two, that is the presence of the “weeds.” The contrasting perspectives of these two early Christian apologists point to an issue which continues to be central to the church’s understanding of itself and its mission, that is the relationship between gospel and culture.

Why are you entering someone’s garden?

Before jumping too quickly to the “how” of crossing cultures, it’s extremely important to begin with the “why.” While missionaries/ministers have had and continue to have a wide range of theological motivations, the perspective of this article reflects the idea of “mission-in-reverse” as developed and described by Claude Marie Barbour.

When ministry is seen as dialogical, it means that ministers become persons immersed in the world of others, like Jesus was in our world. It is *with* people, therefore, that the minister begins to ask questions; it is *with* people that basic human values are endorsed and challenged; and it is this context that shapes the way of announcing the good news and of denouncing sinful structures (Barbour 1984:305).

Rather than a theological model of mission which is susceptible to cultural imperialism and ethnocentrism, Barbour proposes a theology which “levels the playing field” between the minister/missionary and the community so that true mutuality in mission/ministry can take place. One then approaches the “other” with an initial attitude of discerning how God is already present and then eventually together *with* the people, after developing respectful and mutual relationships, to confront the “weeds” with the “good news.” Underlying this approach is a radical trust and belief in the power of God’s spirit at work in the lives and cultures of people--people who are different from oneself, who often may be poor and marginalized, who share one’s fundamental human dignity, rights, and responsibilities, and who are one’s sisters and brothers created in God’s image. Finally, one’s own Christian faith and experience of the “good news” is the primary motivation and source behind one’s commitment to and identity in mission/ministry, and at the same time this faith and “good news” is shared (through witness in word and deed) in a dialogical manner.

Intermingled and interrelated with our theological motivation (usually a mixture of several) are often a number of cultural, racial, religious, economic and political ones. Also more “personal issues” and a personal sense of one’s vocation contribute to the complex “total package” of reasons and attitudes which lead a missionary/minister to try to cross cultures. Of course, it’s very important to be as aware as possible of one’s motivations, attitudes, and theological foundations from the very beginning. Usually these presuppositions will be continually clarified, revised, and challenged in the process itself of attempting to cross into another culture. Part of this challenging opportunity will take the form of an explicit or implicit question from the members of the receiving community, such as, “What are you doing in my ‘garden’?” or “Why are you really here?”

How do you enter someone’s garden for the first time?

Assuming the above-mentioned primary motivation of “mission-in-reverse,” one begins the process of entering someone else’s “garden” by “taking off one’s shoes”--the well-known image of Max Warren (1963:10). As Moses removed his sandals before the “burning bush,” so a missionary/minister begins with a stance of respect before the presence of God in the people and their history, culture, and religion. The missionary/minister, as the “outsider,” learns from the people missioned/ministered to--allowing them to choose (or not!) to begin the process of teaching the missionary/minister about the new “garden” they have just entered. Of course, there is so much to learn about someone else’s “garden” and this is only the beginning step in developing a relationship of trust and respect. While the “outsider” is an “expert” in his/her own “garden,” one is less than a child in the new “garden.” Language learning brings this point home immediately and forcefully. One is certainly a student, testing one’s sense of and capacity for humility, dependency, patience, and humor.

Using the metaphor of “stranger” rather than “outsider” for the missionary, Anthony Gittins describes the importance of this vulnerable attitude in this way.

If a newcomer honestly presents herself or himself as a stranger, thus showing respect for the hosts and allowing them to take certain necessary initiatives, this facilitates the interaction, even though the price may be some uncertainty and powerlessness on the part of the stranger. But only by doing this will missionaries be able to indicate their openness, integrity, and willingness to engage in relationships (Gittins 1989:132).

Another aspect of this process is that the newcomer will make mistakes in this new world of meaning. After completing the first stage of language-learning in Papua New Guinea in 1975, I immediately spent two weeks in a village with my “guide” Benjamin Wokwanje, who had just graduated from secondary school. This was part of my introduction to the Yangoru-Boiken people (see Gesch 1985:11-26), with whom I would live and work as a seminarian for about twenty months. Of the many things I learned during that initiatory period, one incident is unforgettable. While Benjamin and I were spending the day doing male-designated work in the family garden, Benjamin’s mother and several other women were preparing a special meal in a “mumu”--bundles of food, steam-cooked for hours from the heat of hot rocks in a covered pit, lined with banana leaves. As the extended family gathered to share in the feast, a young unmarried man, who was seated on the opposite side of the circle, asked for his towel. Wanting to be helpful, I grabbed his towel and tossed it to him over the food. Immediately, all eyes turned toward me for some unbeknownst (to me) reason. Benjamin then explained to me that the women *now* would not be able to eat any of the food. In his culture, the powerful, life-producing “worlds” of men and women are separated by strict taboos. By tossing a man’s towel--a physical possession closely identified with the essence of its owner--*over* the food, it was considered part of the “men’s world” and dangerous to the “women’s world.” The women had to find food cooked in neighboring hamlets, rather than eat the food they had prepared.

I was so embarrassed and sorry for the consequences of my cultural blunder. I learned that good intentions are not enough and that mistakes are made when entering into someone else’s world. I learned about their hospitality and patience with an “outsider.” Benjamin and others did not berate me for this, but they made sure I understood what I had learned through it! Such a lesson should not leave the “newcomer” paralyzed with the fear of making further mistakes, but one is reminded both of one’s child-like knowledge and status in the new culture and therefore the need to be an attentive learner. Furthermore, learning appropriate external behavior must be accompanied by learning the underlying internal world of meaning.

While the above story points to a dynamic which is common for anyone seriously attempting to cross-over to another cultural world, a missionary/minister in this situation needs to be aware of the underlying theological issues and consequences. If one’s initial attitude is that the other culture is a “garden” of *only* “weeds”, there would not be much regard for or interest in the “cultural” understandings of sexual/food taboos and there would probably be some degree of antagonism toward other elements

considered more “religious.”² This of course is representative of the *tabula rasa* approach--wiping away everything of the new culture and/or religion--which was predominant during many periods in the history of Christian mission.

However, if a missionary/minister sees that same “garden” containing *only* “good seed”, an equally dangerous theological position is hovering on the horizon. Such a tendency can dilute the “cutting edge” power of the “good news” for every society--making culture instead of the gospel normative. In reaction to an earlier strict *tabula rasa* perspective, many missionaries/ministers naturally swung to the opposite extreme of an utopian, overly-romanticized view of culture. An appropriate theological stance falls in-between the two extremes--recognizing the presence of both the “good seed” and the “weeds” in every “garden.” Of course, this likewise applies to the theological perspective of the missionary/minister regarding his/her own culture. A one-sided view of one’s own “garden” as *only* “good seed” or *only* “weeds” will of course negatively impact one’s attitude and attempt in entering someone else’s “garden.”

What do you “do” in someone’s garden?

General Comments

After my return to Chicago from Papua New Guinea in 1977, I talked with Claude Marie Barbour about possibilities for “mission-in-reverse”-type work. She introduced me to Hattie Williams,³ a committed Christian African-American woman who was involved in many aspects of “sustaining life”--on both the personal and systemic levels--in her south side neighborhood. I’ll never forget one of the first things Hattie told me in a very caring and yet a very forceful way: “You are very welcome to work *with* us in the community, but remember that this is *our* community. We don’t want you to come in with *your* solutions to *our* situation.” Following this lead, I began my two-year period of collaborating with Hattie by allowing her and others to introduce me to their community. Eventually, Hattie asked me to begin getting involved in certain activities with some of the teenage men in the neighborhood. In response to my initial question of whether this was appropriate for a white man, rather than for the black men of the community, Hattie assured me that it was fine and that I could fulfill a real need in the neighborhood. Due to her standing in the community, Hattie’s introduction of me to several high school students was the beginning step. As time went on, my relationship with Hattie and others became mutually enriching and challenging in different ways--ministerially, spiritually, and personally.

As already insinuated earlier, we naturally tend to perceive, understand and judge someone else’s

²Many societies do not have a separate category for “religion/religious” within their more holistic world view. For example, most if not all of the 800 languages spoken in Papua New Guinea do not have a word for “religion.” Therefore, even such categories as “cultural” and “religious” reflect images and concepts from one’s own “garden” which may not be appropriate in someone else’s.

³Cf. “?????” in Section I of this volume.

“world” through the “lens” of our own. In returning to the garden imagery, I would for example initially consider a corn-like plant in a garden in Papua New Guinea the product of good seed, as it is in Ohio, but I would later find out that it is considered a weed there. Or I could initially consider a plant, which looks like a creeping violet, to be a weed since it would choke the life out of tomato plants in Ohio, whereas in Papua New Guinea its leaves serve important medicinal purposes. In reflecting theologically, Christians have made judgments regarding their own “gardens” regarding what are considered elements of the realm of God and those things contrary to it, that is the fruits of “good seed” and “weeds.” However, missionaries/ministers have to be cautious about making such identical associations too quickly in another culture. One would not walk into someone else’s garden and begin, on one’s own, to uproot everything that looked like a weed. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, some European missionaries immediately labeled the veneration of ancestors (in Asia) and certain natural phenomena (in the Americas and Africa) as “idol worship” and “superstition”--resulting in the complex and devastating “Rites Controversy” in China and India.

Therefore, missionaries/ministers are challenged to understand the world of the “other” from the perspective of the “other.” Furthermore, this understanding embraces both the head and the heart.

An outsider can know more about the history, cultural externals, and even language of an ethnic group than its members and still be alien to them because of a lack of empathy. Dialogue, a consequence of empathy, in the interaction in which people seek to give of themselves as they are and to receive and know the others in their particular otherness. Dialogue presumes that one is prepared to learn from others and their cultures and to let go of attachments that interfere with the growth in mutuality (Arbuckle 1995:329).

In order to examine the dynamics and complexities of the “being” and “doing” of a missionary/minister in someone else’s “garden,” I will now turn to my second experience in Papua New Guinea---three years (1980-1983) in Kaugia/Mui parish with the Abelam and Arapesh peoples (see Schroeder 1992:57-80). While I had many clear experiences of the “good seeds” from their “gardens”--such as, their shared communal care for the children, elderly and disabled--I have chosen three examples which illustrate the more challenging and ambiguous aspects of this endeavor.

Sorcery

A number of villagers told me that sorcery was one of the biggest evils in their life. From my reading, I thought I understood sorcery. However, I didn’t realize its complex and deep meaning until one of the church elders explained his dilemma to me. Next to the grave of his recently-deceased father the villagers had put a certain plant, which signified that his father’s death has not yet been “made right” by an act of sorcery against the one considered responsible for the death. He would bear the mark of shame until he had fulfilled his duty as a son to his deceased parent, his family, and other villagers. The belief in sorcery is deeply imbedded within the interrelated network of beliefs, behaviors, structures, and values of a particular world view. The cultural “explanation for death” is linked both with the value of reciprocity in maintaining right relationships with the dead as much as with the living and with the strong

metaphysical connection between body and spirit in that hair, food, and secretions can be used in ritual to touch one's spirit. (This latter point surfaced in the above discussion of the "towel incident.") While it seems that the ritual act of sorcery is not often actually performed, the sorcery dynamic is all-pervasive.

How did this particular church elder "feel" in this situation? I was challenged as an "outsider" in two ways. First of all, I struggled (and continue to struggle) to understand with both my head and heart the meaning of this phenomenon of sorcery, which is so foreign to my world view (see Gesch 1985:189-197; Schroeder 1992:107-110). Beyond that, I slowly had to discover my way as a missionary/minister to enter the conversation among the church elders and other villagers as they address the issue of sorcery in light of their Christian answers to basic human religious questions regarding evil, death, and "Who is my neighbor?"

Domestic Violence

One day, after I had been in Kaugia-Mui for over a year, I was driving not far from the parish center when I witnessed a man hitting his wife outside their home. I stopped the car, walked over to them, and he stopped striking her. After saying just a few words, I went back to the car and continued my trip. While we missionaries/ministers enter and live in someone else's "garden" as an "outsider" in a posture of respectful learning, some situations evoke an immediate response on our part to "interfere." In conscience, I could not drive by that scene of domestic violence without doing something.

In this situation, some "prophetic" voice and action against the "weeds" of domestic violence is just as necessary within my own United States "garden" as well as in that of the "other." While the "why" is clear, the "how" is more complex. In our own culture, in which we understand many of the interrelated issues, problems, and dynamics, we know how difficult it is to address such a behavior and attitude. How much more difficult is this when we are "outsiders"? In returning to our basic image, the villagers themselves have the necessary knowledge and the primary right, responsibility and power for "tending" to their own "garden." After I got back in the car and continued on my way, I don't know what happened between that man and woman. My challenge was to find the appropriate way (the "how") to present this concern to the community, which in this case could be members of the parish council, the larger parish and/or village community, and/or the particular individuals involved. The context for this interchange needs to be characterized by--to use the words of Arbuckle quoted earlier--empathy, dialogue and mutuality.

Male Initiation

When I arrived in Kaugia/Mui parish in 1980, there was a revival of their elaborate system⁴ of male initiation rituals, which had basically disappeared from the public sphere for about twenty-five

⁴In the past, the initiation system consisted of eight named stages over a thirty year period as a male moved from childhood to elderhood, with each stage possibly lasting six months. In the process of accommodating to a new situation, such as a formal school year, the length and sequence of these stages are changing as well.

years. At the suggestion of several veteran missionaries and with my own pastoral interest to better understand the meaning behind this revival, I devoted a lot of my attention to this. Of course at first, I had to earn the respect and trust of the local community before they would allow me to enter into their “sacred” space. Eventually, some of the villagers invited me to learn about the male initiation rituals by observing, listening, and conversing--similar to the anthropological methodology of participant observation. I began to learn the important role that the initiation rites played in preparing young people to be capable adults and in renewing the identity and strength of the entire village. The villagers used two particular images to explain their reasons for reviving the initiation rites---first of all, to restore proper order/relationships in the village which was being threatened by chaos (“the growth of the jungle/bush was overtaking the village”), and secondly, to maintain proper balance within their holistic world view with all the interconnected aspects of their cultural-religious life.

My learning came at a particular transitional and creative moment as the villagers were re-developing the initiation rituals to prepare for the drastically new “modern” world, which included the introduction Christian faith and values. Regarding this latter point, I would be a part of some these discussion in which the people were discerning how various cultural/religious elements are consistent or not with the realm of God, that is to sort out the “good seed” from the “weeds.” In one such discussion, the church elders described how certain artistic symbols within the initiation process pointed to one’s primary identity within the extended family and with God, the source of all life. At the same time, they said that the drinking of a particular ritual soup would be counter to Christian values. Certainly, the people understand their own world of meaning better than an “outsider” does, even after many years. At the same time, as a missionary I needed to find a way to appropriately contribute the voice of Christian tradition and my local church to this conversation. It is important to remember that this process represents the ongoing challenge which every generation of Christians of every culture/society needs to face over and over again.

Of course, individuals, communities, and local churches can be at various cultural, historical, and theological points in this wider discernment process on any particular issue. The situation of Kaugia/Mui parish offers an excellent illustration of this. The parishioners on the “Kaugia side” (Abelam people)--mostly second and third generation Christians, a few of whom had completed tertiary education--generally encouraged me, as the parish priest, to enter the initiation enclosure and to incorporate bible study as part of the knowledge to be handed on to the initiands. At exactly the same time in the same parish, the church elders across the ridge on the “Mui side” (Arapesh people)--mostly middle-aged and younger first generation Christians, of whom very few had completed six years of primary school, at the most--discouraged me from entering the initiation enclosures, since such an action would be interpreted as a church approval of everything associated with the initiation process. I followed the Kaugia and Mui advice in their respective contexts.

Cross-cultural Relationships

While an “outsider” continues to learn from many different people within the host society/culture,

it is very helpful to find “advanced” mentors--certain individuals who are able to reflect upon and articulate the meaning of their own culture (probably due to a significant experience of viewing it from another cultural perspective). Ambrose Gumbira was such a person for me during my days in Kaugia/Mui. Ambrose had left Kaugia parish to obtain a teacher’s certificate and then taught in various areas of Papua New Guinea. He had returned to Kaugia, shortly before my arrival, as the principal of the parish primary school “in order to contribute something back to his people.” As our mutual relationship developed, Ambrose helped me to gain a better “insider’s view” of his people’s “garden,” especially in regards to the issues surrounding the male initiation rituals. Such discussions sometimes turned into real moments of “theological reflection,” as Ambrose and I engaged in the dialogue of bridging the gospel and wider Christian tradition on the one side, and daily life and the world view of villagers on the other. In other words, we were representative of a broader inculturation process. The missiological effort would eventually branch out in two complementary directions. How can people of Kaugia-Mui parish celebrate and understand their traditional male initiation as Christians and members of the Roman Catholic Church? Secondly, how can people of Kaugia-Mui parish celebrate the process of Christian initiation in the Catholic tradition as Papua New Guineans? A more detailed description of this particular endeavor (see Schroeder 1992) is not necessary here. However, our examination of this case has surfaced several underlying factors in the attempt by a missionary/minister to cross cultures.

One additional point can be drawn from this example. While I treasured my cross-cultural relationship with Ambrose, I will never be an “insider.” A missionary/minister tries to cross over into the world of the “other,” but never becomes the “other.” On one particular evening when I was sitting with Ambrose, his wife (Aida) and several other members of his family around the household fire after a meal, I was struck by how much I felt “at home” with them--sharing stories of pain, concern, and laughter quite naturally. And then the conversation shifted to the issue of sorcery, which (as mentioned above) was so difficult for me to understand. At that moment, I felt like I was “sitting on the moon.” In other words, I was starkly reminded that I will always belong to another world. I’ll never forget that evening when I was confronted with the dilemma of being an “outsider,” but also I valued all the more the blessing of that relationship with Ambrose, with whom I had, in spite of limitations and difficulties, crossed cultures into another world of meaning and God’s presence and action.

What happens in your own garden?

Books written for people who are preparing to live for an extended period in another country--for example due to business, education, or service-oriented involvements--usually contain a section on “culture shock.” Such an orientation is certainly important for preparing individuals to survive and hopefully to thrive as they face the ambiguity, awkwardness, and discomfort associated with entering a new world. On the one hand, this is extremely important for missionaries/ministers who enter other cultures, especially since they normally intend to move beyond simple coexistence to a much deeper level (as highlighted above), which in turn will have a deeper impact on them in the process. On the other hand, focusing on “culture shock” normally stresses the negative impact of living in another culture.

However, truly crossing into and engaging oneself in another culture is an opportunity for positive human development through a process of transformation--transforming one's cultural, racial, religious, economic, and political world views. Changes occur in one's attitude toward the "other," one's perspective on the economic/political systems of the world today, one's image of God, and one's "answers" to the basic human/spiritual mysteries of life. In other words, one's horizons are extended.

Theologically speaking, we return to "mission in reverse," founded on the Christian belief that God's revelation occurs within a particular time and space, not only (but certainly in a very unique form) in Jesus Christ, but also within human history and experience--in this case the human experience and history of the "other." Edward Schillebeeckx affirms that there is "an echo of the Gospel" in the depths of human experience (cited in Healey and Sybertz 1996:33). In reflecting on his own transformative missionary experience among the Maasai in East Africa, Vincent Donovan described it as "Christianity Rediscovered" (1982).

Therefore, we are enriched and challenged by God's revelation during the process of engaging in a mutual cross-cultural relationship *with* people. Hopefully, the "good seed" within our own "garden" will be nourished and flourish in new ways, and the "weeds" within our own "garden" will be challenged and uprooted. Also, we may even introduce a new "hybrid"-- "drafting" a "shoot" from a good "fruit-bearing plant" from someone else's "garden." While we never become the "other," individuals who really are transformed by the "other" often become "hybrid" persons themselves. Furthermore, the boundaries of one's own "garden" are often enlarged and shifted.

For the past nine years, I've made an annual trip to spend about five days with the Lakota people of the Rose Bud and Pine Ridge reservations in South Dakota, as a co-facilitator for a group of students who participate in this "Traveling Seminar" usually as part of a ten-week course of "Training for Cross-Cultural Mission and Ministry" through Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Such an immersion or "seminar" is only possible due to a long-standing relationship of mutual trust and respect between Claude Marie Barbour and Eleanor Doidge with a number of Lakota people, who teach us about their "garden." Of course, the participants learn more about themselves--who they are as they enter another culture--than they do about the Lakota in such a short time. This also holds true for myself, as I am involved in the process of facilitating this group experience and reflection--which involves being attentive both to the individual issues and group dynamics for the students from Chicago as well as the powerful teachings and experiences of our Lakota teachers. I continue to be challenged to enter each time anew into that process of transformation, which is supported by the reflective, process-oriented, and rather intense nature of the experience. Also the dynamics and context which is shaped by the Lakota people, the Chicago group, and myself is different and unique, to some extent, every time.

The following questions represent some of the more recent affirmations and challenges that have surfaced for me during particular South Dakota trips. How do I move beyond "guilt for" to "solidarity with"? How can my prayer and life-style become more "other-centered" as expressed by the Lakota phrases, "Pray for the people" and "Suffer for the people"? How is God stretching my Christian understanding of "Who is my neighbor" through a memorable sweat lodge experience with men

representing the “four races” (red, black, white, and yellow)? How does the Lakota spirituality of “all my relatives,” which includes the living and dead, all living creatures and all of creation enrich and challenge my Christian response to racism, poverty and the ecological situation today? How is my understanding of maleness and femaleness reflected in my spirituality and daily living? Where is God leading me through my experiences with the Lakota to develop a more holistic and integrated Christian life?

Final Comment

Gerald Arbuckle (1995:330) describes the process of interaction between people of different cultures in terms of three stages: (1) fascination with and enjoyment of cultural differences, (2) disillusionment and tension due to the difficulties of communication and interaction, and (3) movement to overcome these difficulties to reach real dialogue and mutual interaction. I agree with Arbuckle’s observation that most people never get beyond the second stage. This article points to the dynamics underlying the challenge of entering this third stage, whereby peoples of different cultures can reach the point of dialoguing with each other regarding both the “seeds” and the “weeds” of each other’s “gardens.”

In good circular Lakota fashion, I will complete the circle by returning to the earlier quote of Claude Marie Barbour.

When ministry is seen as dialogical, it means that ministers become persons immersed in the world of others, like Jesus was in our world. It is *with* people, therefore, that the minister begins to ask questions; it is *with* people that basic human values are endorsed and challenged; and it is this context that shapes the way of announcing the good news and of denouncing sinful structures (1984:305).

As a final comment, a potentially more complete ideal and real picture of Christianity will emerge as peoples of different cultures share their expressions and experiences of the “good news.” Such an enriching and challenging image of the “realm of God” can enable us to listen to and participate more fully in God’s mission of justice, love, and compassion today.

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