

UNDERSTANDING THROUGH RELIGION

The March-April issue of The Catholic Mind reprinted an address entitled "Culture and Religious Values" by Luther H. Evans, former Director General of Unesco. Excerpts from the address follow.

In an endeavor to understand the cultural values of the Orient and the Occident, to bring to light their origins and foundations, to discern their full significance for the people of those two great zones, the religious factor is bound to crop up at every step. The metaphysical beliefs held by the men of today may have grown away from the ancestral faith; the values to which these men still hold, the standards with which they comply, spontaneously and often unconsciously, in their individual and community lives, still bear the mark of their origin, and that origin is often to be sought in religious teachings.

These fundamental messages are not reflected solely in sacred writings, nor do they give rise solely to rites and beliefs. The day-to-day moral conduct of peoples is impregnated with them. Intellectual systems often rest on this fund of belief. Through the centuries, it has been illustrated in literature and the arts. Legal systems, too, bear its mark. Daily life, even when it is largely secularized, still offers to the observer a reflection of religious origin.

This central place occupied by the religious factor cannot, therefore, be overlooked in any attempt to arrive at a real understanding of the values of all the peoples of the Orient and the Occident. Perception of the true significance of these values is impossible without reference to the whole of their history and content.

Just as there is a religious factor in many of the expressions of culture, so a human and cultural value may be discerned in every religious celebration. It was for this reason that the advisory committee on Unesco's major project decided to include religious factors within the scope of the research and studies undertaken by Unesco for the purposes of improved mutual appreciation of Eastern and Western cultures. In a more objective understanding of the religious ideas which inspire their acts and find expression in their culture, it saw a means of drawing peoples closer together.

It is not, of course, for Unesco to venture on to the field of relations between different religions or churches. Its competence is confined to the sphere of education, science and culture, and its mission does not go beyond that which the governments of its member states agree to entrust it.

Regard for that freedom which is essential to cultural life also causes it to refrain from any intervention in respect of the religious content of a culture. Unesco cannot do more than examine certain questions, encourage comparisons and exchanges, suggest solutions to universally recognized problems, and draw attention to human rights.

Within these limits it is, however, possible—and I am seeing to it that this is done—to accord to the religious factor the role it should play in the development of mutual appreciation of Eastern and Western cultural values. To begin with, in analyzing and presenting the values of each culture, due prominence should be given to the religious elements which might explain their formation and permanence. There can, indeed, be no real—that is to say, objective—knowledge of cultural values, for the people of other cultures, without a proper appreciation of all their aspects.

And what is true in regard to a knowledge of those values is even more so in regard to an understanding of them and particularly in regard to that sympathetic appreciation which Unesco desires to encourage. Again, fellowships will be granted for the study of cultural regions. Discussions will be promoted, such for instance as those which took place in Tokyo, from the historical standpoint, on "Religion and Thought in the Orient and the Occident." Member states are asked to prepare reading material on their own particular culture. If we think of adult education or of youth activities, several of the undertakings which receive Unesco's support have been launched on the responsibility of denominational groups and are designed to afford people belonging to different religions an opportunity for better mutual understanding.

An outstanding feature of these activities is that the cultures, and the exchanges to which they give rise, are not only analyzed from outside but are also interpreted, presented and compared by the people actually belonging to these different traditions.

By programs of this kind, Unesco proposes to help the public in Eastern and Western countries to understand better the meaning of the cultural values of these two parts of the world. It is of course essential to enable the public in Western countries to form an accurate idea of the wealth and depth of the spiritual traditions of the Orient. But it is no less important to bring the Eastern countries to realize that Western civilization is not confined to the production of machinery and the raising of material standards of living. It also includes preserving the noblest inspirations of man.