

CULTURE OVERVIEW

Culture is a way of life. In a sense, all living things have culture. We speak of bacterial or plant cultures as the environment in which things grow. Animals also live in cultures—the cultures of ants and dolphins are well studied, for example.

Human life demands life in a group. Abandoned babies, who have grown up with animals or have been raised impersonally by a mentally deficient or psychotic parent, grow up without human skills and characteristics. They often cannot walk, talk, or be continent.

Culture develops as a group of human beings adjusts to a way of life. The geography, tradition, and technology of a human group, therefore, help to define a culture.

The term "culture" is used in many ways. In this discussion, culture is defined as "a set of traditions and rules that shape the feelings, thoughts and behavior of a group of people" (Light & Keller. [1982]. Sociology [3rd ed.]. [p. 59]. Knopf.). Among many characteristics, culture includes language, the way people dress, eat, sleep, meet, fight, make love, marry, and raise children.

Edward Tyler's 19th century definition classically depicts culture. He maintained, "Culture is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society." Culture gives identity to a society. Like individuals, societies have to survive, reproduce, secure their safety and develop distinctions.

For obvious reasons, there is always tension when two cultures meet. Conflict, assimilation, or accommodation may result. The conflict of cultures needs no explanation. America as a "melting pot" is an illustration of assimilation. The presence of the Amish and Hasidic Jews, who retain their own language and traditions contrary to the ways and mores of the general public, shows how two cultures can live in accommodation to one another.

Radical and youthful countercultures can be in conflict with the establishment and dominant culture. Communes can develop and sustain in a free society. Generally, in time, youthful cultures and individuals assimilate into the main culture.

Sociologists view religion as an attempt to find meaning in culture. Its beliefs, symbols, and practices suggest why people believe and act as they do. People of faith see religion as a transcendent reality, a second dimension of life. Religion brings not only significance, but also tension to believers in a secular society. They are, to various degrees according to their theologies, "in the world, but not of it."

IMPLICATIONS

1. Human curiosity demands the study of culture. Human problems need investigation for solutions.
2. The broad study of culture leads one to subcultures, the youth culture, and pop culture.
3. In no way can faith or religion be separated from culture—even in a modern, secular world.

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