

Do Missionaries Destroy Cultures?

Don Richardson

James Michener's austere Abner Hale, a missionary in the novel (and movie) *Hawaii*, has become the archetype of an odious bigot. In the book, Hale shouts hellfire sermons against the "vile abominations" of the pagan Hawaiians. He even forbids Hawaiian midwives to help a missionary mother at the birth of "a Christian baby." As a result, the mother dies. Hale forbids Hawaiians to help his wife with housework lest his children learn the "heathen Hawaiian language;" his wife works herself into an early grave. And when Buddhist Chinese settle in the islands, Michener has Hale barging into their temples to smash their idols.

It makes an interesting plot, but, unfortunately, "Abner Hale" came to be synonymous with "missionary" for many North Americans—and missionaries have been carrying him on their backs ever since. Anthropologist Alan Tippet of the Fuller Seminary School of World Mission once researched hundreds of early missionary sermons stored in the Honolulu archives. None of them had the ranting style Michener suggests as typical of that time.

It will serve us all to examine the actual record rather than to circulate distorted stereotypes. There have indeed been occasions when missionaries were responsible for needless destruction of culture. When Fray Diego de Landa, a Catholic missionary accompanying Spanish forces in the New World, discovered extensive Maya libraries, he knew what to do. He burned them all, an event, he said, the Maya "regretted to an amazing degree, and which caused them much affliction." The books, in his opinion, were all of "superstition and lies of the devil." And so, in 1562, the poetry, history, literature, mathematics, and astronomy of an entire civilization went up in smoke. Only three documents survived de Landa's misguided zeal.

Magnificent totem poles once towered in Indian villages along Canada's Pacific coast. By 1900 virtually all such native art had been chopped down, either by missionaries who mistook them for idols, or by converts zealously carrying out the directives of missionaries.

These incidents and many more show that we missionaries have sometimes acted in a culture-destroying manner. Whether through misinterpreting the Great Commission, pride, culture shock, or simple inability to comprehend the values of others, we have needlessly opposed customs we



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among the Sawi tribe of Irian Jaya in 1962. Author of *Peace Child*, *Lords of the Earth*, and *Eternity in Their Hearts*, Richardson is now Minister-at-Large for WORLD TEAM (formerly RBMU). He speaks frequently at missions conferences and Perspectives Study Program classes.

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did not understand. Some, had we understood them, might have served as communication keys for the gospel!

Critics seem to suggest that if only missionaries stay home, primitive people will be left undisturbed to live out the myth of Rousseau's "noble savage." In fact, David Livingstone was preceded by Arab slave traders; Amy Carmichael by victimizers who dragged boys and girls to the terrors of child prostitution in the temples. At times, evil forces like these have destroyed entire peoples. In North America, not only California's Yahi but also the Hurons—and possibly 20 other Indian tribes—were pushed into extinction by land-hungry settlers. On one occasion, pioneers sent gifts to a tribe, wagonloads of blankets known to be infected with smallpox.

Only 200,000 Indians remain in Brazil from an original population estimated at four million. More than one tribe per year has disappeared in the past 75 years. People may assume that the missing tribes have been absorbed into society, but this is not the case. Thousands have been brutally poisoned, machine-gunned, or dynamited from low-flying aircraft. Thousands more have succumbed to a slower, more agonizing death—death by *apathy*. Indian men have even been known to cause their wives to miscarry. As encroachment caused their cultures to disintegrate, they have refused to bring children into a world they no longer understand.

Similar tragedies are unfolding throughout the world. Concern is widespread today for endangered animal species, and justly so, but hundreds of our own human species are in even greater danger. It may be a conservative figure to put the loss at five or six linguistically distinct tribes per year.

The "enlightened" policy of "leave them alone" clearly isn't working. What then, can halt the march of tribal cultures toward extinction? Land grants and secular welfare programs may help on a physical level, but the greatest danger to tribal people is one that such programs cannot touch. The greatest danger is the breakdown of the aboriginal's sense of "right" relationship with the supernatural. Every aboriginal culture acknowledges the supernatural and has

strict procedures for "staying right" with it. When arrogant outsiders ridicule a tribe's beliefs—or shatter its mechanisms for staying right—severe disorientation sets in. Believing they are cursed for abandoning the old ways, tribespeople become morose and apathetic. Believing they are doomed to die as a people, they act out a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Materialistic social workers and scientists can't help these people. The tribespeople can sense even an unspoken denial of the supernatural, and it causes them to grow further depressed. Who then can best serve such people as spiritual ombudsmen? None other than the ones popular myth has maligned as their number one enemy—the Bible-guided, Christ-honoring missionary.

Two Case Histories

1. According to Robert Bell of the Unevangelized Fields Mission, less than a generation ago Brazil's Wai Wai tribe had been reduced to its last sixty members. This was due largely to foreign diseases and the Wai Wai custom of sacrificing babies to demons in attempts to prevent these diseases. Then a handful of UFM missionaries identified themselves with the tribe, learned their language, gave it an alphabet, translated the Word of God, taught Wai Wai to read, and brought modern medical care.

Far from denying the supernatural world, the missionaries showed the Wai Wai that a God of love reigned supreme over it and had prepared a way for them to "stay right," on a deeper level than they had ever dreamed. The Wai Wai now had a rational, even delightful, basis for *not* sacrificing babies to demons. The tribe began to grow, and today is fast becoming one of Brazil's more stable tribes. Wai Wai Christians are now teaching other dwindling groups of Indians how to cope with the 20th century through faith in Jesus Christ.

2. In 1796, near Stockbridge, in what is now Massachusetts, early American missionary John Sargent and his associates established a community to preserve Indian rights, preparing them for survival among encroaching Europeans. Before ethnocentrism was named a social evil, and before the birth of



anthropology as a science, Sargent and his helpers tilled the soil side by side with their Indian friends. Practicing what anthropologists now call “directed change,” they also shared their Christian faith and the Indians received it as their own.

We risk our lives to get to them first because we believe we are more sympathetic agents of change than profit-hungry commercialists.

That faith, and the love of their spiritual paracletes, sustained the tribe through more than a century of suffering. Greedy settlers soon decided that the land was too good for “mere Indians” and evicted them. After an unsuccessful protest, Sargent obtained guarantees of land further west. A few years later the community was uprooted again by other settlers. And again. Fifteen times they were forced to move. Each time the missionaries moved with them, wresting concessions for new land and holding the community together. At last the community settled in Michigan where it was allowed to rest, and it survives to this day.

In both cases, the missionaries introduced culture change, but it was not arbitrary nor was it imposed by force. The missionaries brought only changes required for New Testament ethics and for the survival of the people. Often the two requirements overlap.

Once an interviewer chided me, perhaps facetiously, for persuading the Sawi tribe in Indonesia to renounce cannibalism. “What’s wrong with cannibalism?” he asked. “The Sawi practiced it for thousands of years. Why should they give it up now?”

“Can a people who practice cannibalism survive in the world today?” I asked in reply. “No, they cannot. The Sawi are now citizens of the Republic of Indonesia. The Indonesian Republic does not permit its citizens to eat other people. Therefore, part of my task was to give the Sawi a rational basis for *voluntarily* renouncing cannibalism before the guns of the police decided the issue.”

The Sawi are among perhaps 400 black-skinned Melanesian tribes just emerging from the Stone Age in Irian Jaya. Some years

ago, the Netherlands ceded Irian Jaya, then called New Guinea, to Indonesia. Now over 100,000 Indonesians have migrated to Irian Jaya. Will the tribal people be prepared to cope with their more enterprising migrant neighbors? Or will they become extinct?

Scattered throughout Irian Jaya, more than 250 evangelical missionaries (all too few) are ministering the gospel to both races. Knowledgeable in Indonesian as well as in many of Irian’s 400 tribal languages, they are helping members of clashing cultures to understand each other. With the sympathetic help of the Indonesian government, the missionaries are optimistic that major culture shock may be averted. Already, through faith in Christ, tens of thousands of Irianese have begun a smooth transition into the 20th century. Surely ethnic crises of this magnitude are too sensitive to be left to the dubious mercy of purely commercial interests. Missionaries, whose hearts overflow with the love of Christ, are the key.



Are missionaries cultural imperialists? You decide.

Consider one journalist's charges against missionaries. When Hamish McDonald visited Irian Jaya to cover the effects of a severe earthquake in June 1976, he turned his attention instead to what he thought he observed in the relationship between tribespeople and missionaries. The resulting article appeared in the Washington Post on August 3, 1976:

JAYAPURA, Irian Jaya: Fundamentalist Christian missionaries are provoking hostile and occasionally murderous reactions from primitive tribespeople in mountain areas south of here. In the most savage of recent incidents, about eighteen months ago, 13 local assistants of a mission were killed and eaten as soon as the European missionary went away on leave.

The missionaries are also coming under attack by anthropologists and other observers for attempting the almost total destruction of local cultures in the areas they evangelize. This is seen as the basic cause of recent violent outbreaks, and is contrasted with the more adaptive policies of Roman Catholic and mainstream Protestant missionary groups.

The fundamentalists are working in the remote Jayawijaya mountains where they are now carrying the brunt of relief work following recent severe earthquakes believed to have killed as many as a thousand people.

They belong to five missionary groups: the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Unevangelized Fields Mission, the Regions Beyond Missionary Union, The Evangelical Alliance Mission, and the Asia-Pacific Christian Mission banded together in an organization called The Missionary Alliance. They are joined by a technical missionary group, the Missionary Aviation Fellowship, an efficient air service with 15 light aircraft and a helicopter essential in a territory where the longest paved road is the 25-mile drive from Jayapura, the provincial capital, to the airport. They are well backed by Congregationalist, Baptist, and nondenominational Bible groups in North America, Europe, and Australia, although most members and funds come from the United States.

Sometimes rejecting the label "fundamentalist," they describe themselves as "orthodox"

or "faith" Christians. Their central characteristic is belief in the literal truth of the Bible.

In recent years they have set up several missions in the Jayawijaya mountains, an unmapped and little-known area that had its first outside contact only about twenty years ago. The Melanesian people there learned the use of metal only recently. They live on sweet potatoes, sugar cane, and bananas, supplemented by pork and occasional small marsupials or birds that they hunt with bows and arrows.

Their only domestic animals are their pigs, which they regard as having souls. When I asked an anthropologist there why they ate such close friends, he said: "It doesn't matter. They eat people, too."

The men wear only the *koteka*, a penis gourd, and the women small tufts of grass fore and aft. Divided by rugged terrain and language from even close neighbors, they feud periodically in set-piece confrontations.

Although their culture recognizes personal and family property, they are remarkable for their willingness to share. Tobacco is their only vice, imported from the coast somehow in the forgotten past. Cowrie shells are the only currency resembling money.

Their culture and traditional religion express the most basic human concepts. They and the other nine hundred thousand people in Irian Jaya produce dazzling works of art in traditional carvings and handicrafts.

Typically, a newly arrived missionary builds his house by itself, next to a grass airstrip. One told me: "The first thing is to move in and live with the people. You must prove that you want to help them, by giving them food, medicine and shelter, teaching them, and learning their language. Often it takes two to four years to learn the language. I guess what you are looking for is the cultural key, the key that unlocks the culture and opens the way for the gospel."

But many missionaries appear to regard the gospel as totally incompatible with the traditional culture, in which they see no deep value. One missionary from the Papua New Guinea border region referred to the old men who stayed aloof from his mission as "having no interest in spiritual things." The first action of a missionary who stayed awhile in Valley X recently was to hand out shirts to tribesmen. At



Nalca Mission, women have been persuaded to lengthen their grass skirts to knee length, apparently to satisfy missionary modesty.

Smoking tobacco is condemned and forbidden as sinful. Until recently, the mission air service searched baggage and refused to fly anyone found carrying tobacco or alcohol.

In 1968 two Western missionaries were killed on the south slope of the Jayawijaya range. Three months ago an American missionary was virtually chased out of the Fa-Malinkele Valley because of his manner.

The incident of cannibalism occurred at a mission called Nipsan, where the Dutch missionary had been using local Irianese assistants from the longer evangelized area near Wamena, further west. When the missionary went on leave, the tribespeople turned on 15 assistants, killing and eating 13. Two escaped to the jungle. An Indonesian army unit later entered but dropped the case because of the baffling problems of law involved.

The Dutch missionary subsequently made a fund-raising tour of Europe and North America to buy a helicopter from which he proposed to conduct aerial evangelization through a loudspeaker. But the first time this was tried, a month ago, volleys of arrows reportedly greeted the airborne preacher.

The fundamentalists are compared unfavorably with the Roman Catholic missionaries who operate on the southern side of Irian Jaya under a territorial division initiated by the Dutch and maintained by the Indonesians after the 1963 transfer of administration.

"The difference between them is quite simple," said one source at Jayapura. "The Protestants try to destroy the culture. The Catholics try to preserve it."

At a mission called Jaosakor near the southern coast, the Catholics recently consecrated a church largely designed by the local people and incorporating traditional Asmat carvings around the walls. Bishop Alphonse Sowada, of the Nebraska-centered Crosier Fathers, carried out the ceremony in Episcopal robes accompanied by local leaders in full regalia of paint, tooth necklaces, and nose-bones. The method of dedication was to scatter lime, made from fired seashells, from bamboo containers over walls, floors, and altars in the way the

Asmat people inaugurate their own communal buildings.

Nearly all Catholic missionaries in Irian Jaya are required to hold degrees in anthropology before beginning their calling. Many have published articles and writings on the local peoples. "The basis of our approach is that we believe God is already working through the existing culture, which follows from the belief that God created all things and is present in all of them," one priest said.

On September 21, 1976, I sent a letter to the Post. It never appeared in the "letters to the editor" column, nor, to my knowledge, was it used to offer any sort of counterbalance to Hamish McDonald's assertions of what he thought he observed in Irian Jaya. It has, however, been included as a chapter in John H. Bodley's widely-used anthropology textbook, Tribal Peoples and Development Issues: A Global Overview (Mayfield Publishing, Mountain View, CA, 1988, pp 116-21) Here, slightly condensed, is my open letter:

Dear Sirs:

A few weeks ago journalist Hamish McDonald arrived in Irian Jaya to report on the earthquake which recently devastated a mountainous region here. At least that's what he told the missionaries whose help he needed to reach the area.

The earthquake was of particular interest because it struck the habitat of a number of the earth's last remaining Stone Age tribes, some of whom still practice cannibalism. Triggering literally thousands of landslides, the upheaval wiped out fifteen tribal villages, killed more than a thousand people, and left fifteen thousand survivors with only fifteen percent of their gardens. The missionaries McDonald approached were busy staging an urgent food airlift. Still, they graciously offered him space on one of their overloaded mercy flights from Jayapura into the interior.

The world might never have known that these tribes exist, nor would relief agencies have been informed of their plight, had not a dozen or more evangelical Protestant missionaries explored their uncharted mountainous habitat during the past fifteen years. At risk to their own lives, the evangelicals succeeded in



befriending several thousand of these highly suspicious, unpredictable tribesmen. Meticulously, they learned and analyzed unwritten tribal languages, a task so agonizing that less motivated persons would have had no time for it. They also carved out the four airstrips which now make relief operations possible and, as a sidelight, enabled McDonald to carry out his assignment on location.

The missionary aircraft taxied to a halt on one of these airstrips. McDonald leaped out and began snapping pictures....

There are reasons why the missionaries had to go into isolated areas like Irian Jaya as soon as they could. History has taught them that even the most isolated minority cultures must eventually be overwhelmed by the commercial and political expansion of majority peoples. Naive academics in ivy-covered towers may protest that the world's remaining primitive cultures should be left undisturbed, but farmers, lumbermen, land speculators, miners, hunters, military leaders, road builders, art collectors, tourists, and drug peddlers aren't listening.

They are going in anyway. Often to destroy. Cheat. Exploit. Victimize. Corrupt. Taking, and giving little other than diseases for which primitives have no immunity or medicine.

This is why, since the turn of the century, more than ninety tribes have become extinct in Brazil alone. Many other Latin American, African, and Asian countries show a similar high extinction rate for their primitive minorities. A grim toll of five or six tribes per year is probably a conservative worldwide estimate.

We missionaries don't want the same fate to befall these magnificent tribes in Irian Jaya. We risk our lives to get to them first because we believe we are more sympathetic agents of change than profit-hungry commercialists. Like our predecessor John Sargent, who in 1796 launched a program which saved the Mohican tribe from extinction in North America, and like our colleagues in Brazil who just one generation ago saved the Wai Wai from a similar fate, we believe we know how to precondition tribes in Irian Jaya for survival in the modern world. The question, "Should anyone go in?" is obsolete because obviously someone *will*.

It has been replaced by a more practical question: "Will the most sympathetic persons get there first?" To make the shock of coming out of the Stone Age as easy as possible. To see that tribals gain new ideals to replace those they must lose in order to survive. To teach them the national language so they can defend themselves in disputes with "civilizados." And yet produce literature in their own language so it will not be forgotten. To teach them the value of money, so that unscrupulous traders cannot easily cheat them. And better yet, set some of them up in business so that commerce in their areas will not fall entirely into the hands of outsiders. To care for them when epidemics sweep through or when earthquakes strike. And better yet, train some of them as nurses and doctors to carry on when we are gone. We go as ombudsmen who help clashing cultures understand each other.

We missionaries are advocates not only of spiritual truth, but also of physical survival. And we have enjoyed astonishing success in Irian Jaya and elsewhere. Among the Ekari, Damal, Dani, Ndugwa, and other tribes, more than one hundred thousand Stone Agers welcomed our gospel as the fulfillment of something their respective cultures had anticipated for hundreds of years. The Ekari called it *aji*. To the Damal, it was *hai*. To the Dani, *nabelan-kabelan*, an immortal message which one day would restrain tribal war and ease human suffering.

The result: cultural fulfillment of the deepest possible kind. And it opened the door to faith in Jesus Christ for tens of thousands.

Along with our successes, there have been setbacks. Nearly two years ago one of our colleagues from a European mission, Gerrit Kujt, left some coastal helpers in charge of a new outpost while he returned to Holland. In his absence, a few of the coastals began to molest the surrounding tribespeople for private reasons. Thirteen coastals were killed in retaliation.

Sympathize. Sometimes it is not easy to find responsible helpers willing to venture with us into these wild areas. At times you have to trust someone; you have no choice.

Earlier, in 1968, two of our buddies, Phil Masters and Stan Dale, died together while



probing a new area of the Yali tribe. But then Kusaho, a Yali elder, rebuked the young men who had killed them, saying: "Neither of these men ever harmed any of us, nor did they even resist while you killed them. Surely they came in peace and you have made a terrible mistake. If ever any more of this kind of men come into our valley, we must welcome them."

And so a door of acceptance opened through the wounds of our friends. It was a costly victory. Stan's and Phil's widows were each left with five small children to raise alone. Yet neither widow blamed anyone for the death of her husband, and one of them still serves with us in Irian Jaya today.

Ours is a great work, and a very difficult one. It is not subsidized by any government, and can succeed only as it has sympathetic support from churches, private individuals, and the public in general. That is where correspondent McDonald could have helped.

Instead McDonald now transferred to a Mission Aviation Fellowship helicopter loaded with sweet potatoes contributed by Christians from the Dani tribe and rice from Indonesian government stores. Pilot Jeff Heritage thought McDonald seemed surprisingly uninterested in the many tribal hamlets stranded like islands in the midst of uncrossable landslides, their inhabitants on the edge of starvation. After only a few hours in the interior, he returned to the coast and wrote his report.

Wielding the cliché "fundamentalist" with obvious intent to stigmatize and nettle us, McDonald launched a scathing yet baseless attack which appeared as a major article in the *Washington Post* and was relayed by wire service to hundreds of newspapers around the world. Citing the loss of Gerrit Kuijt's 13 helpers and the murder of Phil and Stan eight years ago, he made the absurd accusation that we are "provoking hostile and occasionally murderous reactions from primitive tribesmen." He continued: "The missionaries are also coming under attack by anthropologists and other observers for attempting the almost total destruction of cultures...."

Who are the anthropologists and other observers? Within our ranks we have a number of men who hold degrees in anthropology,

and they have not warned us of any such attack by members of their discipline. We have cooperated with a number of anthropologists in Irian Jaya over the past 20 years and have had good mutual understanding with them.

Perhaps McDonald is referring to the three remaining members of a German scientific team he met on one of his helicopter stops in the interior. Some of them, reportedly, have been critical toward us, not on the basis of wide knowledge of our work, but because of anti-missionary sentiments they brought with them to Irian Jaya.

Their problem is that they hold to an old school of anthropology, still current in some areas, which favors isolating primitive tribes from all change in zoo-like reserves. A new school, now rising in America, has at last recognized the futility of this approach, and advocates instead that primitive tribes be exposed to survival-related "directed change," in order that they may learn to cope with encroachment, now seen as inevitable.

Directed change is exactly what evangelical missionary John Sargent practiced back in 1796 and what we are practicing now. In fact, missionaries are virtually the only persons who do. Anthropologists don't remain with tribesmen long enough. And humanists aren't sufficiently motivated. But if, indeed, we are under attack, a careful reporter should have asked us for our defense, if any. McDonald did not do this, though he had opportunity. What evidence does he present for his charge that we are "attempting the almost total destruction of local cultures in Irian Jaya?"

He writes: "The first action of a missionary... in Valley X recently was to hand out shirts to the tribesmen." The tribesmen concerned had just lost most of their homes in the earthquake. Indonesian officials had provided shirts to help them stay warm at night in their crude temporary shelters at mile-high elevations. No one wanted a rash of pneumonia cases complicating the relief operation. Johnny Benzel, the missionary, cooperated with the government directive by handing out the shirts.

Nowhere have we ever provided Indonesian or Western-style clothing until demand for it arose among the tribal people them-



selves. This usually took from seven to fifteen years. Tribal church elders preached in the open or under grass-roofed shelters, wearing their penis gourds, and no one thought anything of it. Even today the vast majority of men still wear gourds and women wear grass skirts.

It is the Indonesian government, not missionaries, which tries to shame tribals into exchanging gourds and grass skirts for shorts and dresses under *Operation Koteka*. But they do it for understandable reasons. They want the tribesmen to become part of Indonesian society as soon as possible, find employment, etc.

At Nalca, McDonald snapped a photo of a native with a ball-point pen stuck through the pierced septum of his nose. This photo appeared in some newspapers with the ludicrous caption: "Ball-point pen replaces nosebone; fundamentalist preachers destroy culture." A native forages a used ball-point pen out of Johnny Benzel's wastepaper basket, sticks it through his nose, and presto! Johnny is accused of destroying culture. Very tricky, McDonald.

McDonald slams Johnny again: "At Nalca mission, women have been persuaded to lengthen their grass skirts to knee-length...." What actually happens is that families of the Dani tribe follow missionaries to places like Nalca, and over a period of years the Nalca women begin to imitate the style of their Dani counterparts, which happens to be the longer skirts.

Do we, then, approve of everything in the local cultures? No, we do not, just as no one in our own Western culture automatically approves of everything in it.

We are out to destroy cannibalism, but so also is the Indonesian government. The difference is, we use moral persuasion, and if we fail, the government will eventually use physical force. Our task is to give the tribals a rational basis for giving it up voluntarily before the guns of the police decide the issue with traumatic effect.

We also want to stop the intertribal warfare that has gone on for centuries. In view of all they have to go through in the next 50 years, it is imperative that the tribes stop killing and wounding each other *now*. Often we are able

to stop the fighting by emphasizing little-used peace-making mechanisms within the cultures themselves. Or we simply provide the third-person presence which enables antagonists to see their problems in a new light.

We are against witchcraft, suspicion of which is a major cause of war. Killing by witchcraft is contrary, not only to Christian concepts of goodness, but also to those of the humanists, isn't it?

We are against sexual promiscuity, and not for religious reasons only. In 1903, Chinese traders seeking bird-of-paradise plumes landed on the south coast of Irian Jaya. They introduced a venereal disease called lymphogranuloma venereum among the one hundred thousand members of the Merind tribes. Since group sex was widely accepted, the disease spread like wildfire. It wiped out 90,000 lives in ten years. Had missionaries introduced a different sexual ethic before the Chinese traders arrived, unnumbered lives could have been spared.

McDonald attempts to antagonize us still further by comparing our methods unfavorably with "the more adaptive policies of Roman Catholic and mainstream Protestant groups."

Only one mainstream Protestant mission works in interior Irian Jaya, and they have experienced the same problems McDonald uses as grounds to incriminate us. For example, that mission's director was seriously wounded with three arrows eight years ago, and eight of his carriers were killed while trekking through a wild area. Such incidents are merely an occupational hazard and should not be used to levy blame.

As far as I know, Roman Catholic missionaries have not been wounded or slain by tribals in Irian Jaya. This is due, not to "more adaptive policies," but to the fact that they limit their work mainly to areas already well-controlled by the government. But this is no shame to them as they have counted their martyrs across the border in Papua New Guinea.

If McDonald had taken time to visit Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant areas of operation and compare them, he would have found the degree of culture change at least as great if not greater in the



Roman Catholic areas. For example, in all Roman Catholic areas primitives are expected to give up their tribal names and take Latin names, like Pius or Constantius, whereas in evangelical Protestant areas they still use their Irianese names, like Isai or Yana. But here again, if it is survival-related directed change, it cannot be faulted on anthropological grounds.

McDonald continues, “Nearly all Roman Catholic missionaries in Irian Jaya are required to hold degrees in anthropology.” Actually, the percentage of Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant missionaries holding degrees in anthropology is approximately equal, and when it comes to prowess in learning tribal dialects, the evangelicals excel by far. The majority of Roman Catholic priests teach in Indonesian even where it is not understood.

McDonald describes the lime-scattering dedication of a new Catholic church at Jaosakor. Surely if this is the limit of their cultural penetration, our Catholic friends must be far from satisfied. Cultural penetration, to be effective, must go far deeper than mere externals like scattering lime. Not until you come to grips with internal concepts in the category of the Ekari tribe’s *aji* or the Dani

tribe’s *nabelan-kabelan* are you getting close to the heart of a people. As one of our members said to McDonald, “What we are looking for is the cultural key....” McDonald quoted his words, yet failed totally to appreciate them.

Another point of McDonald’s article calls for refutation: Gerrit Kuijt raised funds for a helicopter for general service to all tribal peoples in Irian Jaya, not for “aerial evangelism.” In fact, it was this helicopter which was on hand just in time to help in the earthquake relief operation and which bore McDonald on his reporting mission. Thank you, Gerrit, for your foresight. The rest of us are not unappreciative like McDonald.

McDonald, your article was erroneous, inept, and irresponsible. You have made a perfect nuisance of yourself. You and the *Washington Post* owe us a printed apology.

Sincerely,
Don Richardson

Do missionaries destroy cultures? It’s true that we destroy certain things in cultures, just as doctors sometimes must destroy certain things in a human body if a patient is to live. But as we grow in experience and God-given wisdom, we must not—and will not—destroy cultures themselves.

Study Questions

1. What variations on McDonald’s criticisms have you read or heard? Do you think these criticisms of missionaries are justified or not? Why?
2. Does Richardson adequately answer McDonald’s criticisms? What would you add to or subtract from Richardson’s response?
3. Do you see any better policy than that of directed change in tribal societies? Why or why not?

ORIGINAL SOURCE: THANKS TO THE WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

World Evangelical Alliance website: <https://worldea.org/>

Article: http://www.worldevangelicals.org/resources/rfiles/res3_423_link_1342019205.pdf

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