

On Elliott Oring's Review of Dundes' Every Man His Way: A Comment

Although Elliott Oring in his review of Dundes' Every Man His Way [FF III (3): 91-94] has admitted that the world is "just not that simple," his attack on cultural relativism smacks of that arrogance and lack of tolerance which is all too prevalent in this country today, both in Middle America ("the female student born under a cornstalk" as he so superciliously labels it) and in the New Left (of which, by the way, I consider myself a part). Yes, we have at last come to the edge where we must make value judgements and moral decisions and where we must be prepared to act on these judgements and decisions, whatever the consequences. But the passion of righteous wrath tips one over quite easily into self-righteousness -- and this is where anthropology, with its ability to ferret out the reasons behind things, can help us to recall that none of us has cornered the market on virtue. It seems to me that in its package of knowledge of other cultures and cultural relativism, anthropology has given us possibly the greatest gift since the Christian development of the concept of the equal worth of all souls. There's been too much misery and bloodshed produced in the name of virtue for us to reject that gift now.

Finally, before I get awfully polemical myself, I would like to congratulate Mr. Oring on his fine review, which does us the unaccustomed service of discussing the philosophical (and even moral) implications of a book. More of the same might result in a truly alive public dialogue.

Toni Fratto
University of Pennsylvania

Two Fishermen will know each other from afar.

---A Russian proverb