

Paul Gottfried is professor of humanities at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania and editor-in-chief of This World.

Yes, Cultures Differ

A Book Review by Paul Gottfried

BANGLADESH: REFLECTIONS ON THE WATER

By James Novak

Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1993
256 pp., \$24.95

James Novak's study of Bangladesh, where he resided for three years as Resident Representative of the Asia Foundation, combines a number of merits. The book is written with poetic grace, particularly the sections describing the landscape and people, is factual without being dull, and ends with dispassionate judgments about a country that the author has come to know well. Remarkably enough, Novak went to Bangladesh and studied its economy and society after his older brother, Richard, a Catholic priest and missionary, had been stabbed to death there. Despite this introduction to the Muslim Bengalis inhabiting what used to be called East Pakistan, but what since 1973 has been the free republic of Bangladesh, Novak speaks with unvarnished affection about most of the subjects of his book. He stresses their dignity in the face of grinding poverty (and a per capita annual income of about \$500), their devotion to Muslim traditions without being swept into the oppressive features of Islamic fundamentalism, and the honored place of women in Bangladeshi households.

Though Novak is a deeply committed Catholic, he writes about Islam with enormous sympathy. (The "though" may be redundant; at least two other pious Catholics of my acquaintance, Anthony T. Sullivan and Thomas Molnar, do exactly the same.) He also hopes that Bangladeshi society can mobilize its own resources, cultural as well as material, to overcome its economic hardship. And Novak notes with satisfaction the fall from political power of the quasi-Marxist Awami League — the ruling coalition after independence which saddled Bangladesh with corruption and disastrous centralized planning.

Despite obvious good will, Novak does not try to prod Americans into investing in the country he has studied in such depth. He is honest in pointing out that "as a market it needs everything but has relatively little means of payment." (Indeed Novak resists even the impulse to propagandize on behalf of Bangladeshi tourism. He lets it be known that travel in Bangladesh is a learning experience that will probably require the renunciation of creature comforts.) Novak does not hide the vices of Bangladesh's political class: he shows it to be grasping, captive to "bureaucratic

xenophobia," and non-supportive of foreign investors once they have put money into a native enterprise. He described this political class as being typical of the rulers of a developing Third World country only twenty years removed from independence. If this ruling class does not change its character or habits in the next ten years, Novak observes, the results may be more ominous.

"A political and cultural pluralist, as opposed to a multiculturalist, Novak describes a Third World society without prescribing an American globalist remedy."

In any case, Novak does not look for progress in Bangladesh to come primarily from foreign sources and guidance. It is the indigenous population that he believes will sink or swim on the basis of what it does to and for itself. A political and cultural pluralist, as opposed to a multiculturalist, Novak describes a Third World society without prescribing an American globalist remedy. *The Wall Street Journal* will certainly not like this book which teaches humility, not ideological arrogance, in the face of cultural differences. ■