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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. They and Novak all find examples in Islamic society of the social deference and family loyalties that have eroded in modern America. None of them stresses the possible correlation between Muslim culture and the political turmoil and related economic problems present in most if not all Muslim countries. To his credit, Novak is not uncritical of the material effects of an established Islamic religion, but he plainly does not view that as a decisive retarding factor for

economic growth in Bangladesh. He believes 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 put the 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.

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. ■

Limiting Growth: Unheeded Prophecies

A Retrospective Double Review by Mark Wegierski

POPULATION VERSUS LIBERTY

By Jack Parsons

London: Pemberton Books, 1971

417 pages, \$19.00

POPULATION FALLACIES

By Jack Parsons

London: Elek/Pemberton, 1977

286 pages, \$19.00

Although these books were written roughly two decades ago, they contain interesting insights, and continue to seem quite fresh and breezy. Professor Jack Parsons, who is now happily retired in Wales, had a successful career in engineering before studying philosophy and politics at Keele as a Mature State Scholar. After getting his degree in 1955, he did research for London University and the National Coal Board. At the time of his first book he was a lecturer in Social Sciences at Brunel University. He also did a documentary about the effect on a small village of the closing of a mine, and was a long-time officer of the Conservation Society. At the time of the second book, he was a Senior Lecturer in Population Studies, and Deputy Director of the David Owen Centre for Population Growth Studies at University College, Cardiff.

Population Versus Liberty contains a fairly extensive bibliography (pp. 380-392), two appendices (pp. 393-395), a Name Index (pp. 397-403), a Subject Index (pp. 404-417), as well as numerous charts and tables, all these listed on pages ix-xii.

In the preface, Parsons succinctly states his thesis:

The three basic points

1. *The population explosion started over three centuries ago.*
2. *It presents a world problem and embraces Europe and the United Kingdom, both directly*

and indirectly.

3. *It cannot possibly go on much longer because the Earth is finite.*

The three basic questions

1. *When will population be controlled?*
2. *By what means will it be controlled?*
3. *How much suffering will be involved in the control process? (p. xx)*

He then explicitly makes the connection between population control and liberty, the central point of his book:

Population control is essential for the preservation of all that we hold most dear, including individual liberty, and I hope the facts and arguments put forward here add up to a satisfactory intellectual and moral basis for its acceptance by libertarians. In the final analysis there can be no question whether we have population control but only when and by what means (p. xxii).

In Part One, "Freedom from Ignorance," Parsons asserts the legitimacy of demographic endeavor, but also states in Chapter 1, "A Cautionary Note", that "population can by no means be entrusted solely to the hands of demographers" (p. 6), as it is a pressing global issue. In Chapter 2, "The Arithmetic of Growth," Parsons strongly argues for the overwhelming power of the sexual and reproductive instinct, and that population growth, if unimpeded, would be geometric in pattern, citing the disturbing statistic that a four-child family would theoretically lead to 245,000 billion people by the 46th generation. Even a rate of 2.02 children per family (one-one-hundredth above replacement rate) originating in only *one* human family would eventually lead to stupendous growth. He then takes the reader into the actual population history of the