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Where Angels Fear To Tread: Too Many Asians

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epistemological difficulties. Very common is the conception that since the rightness or wrongness of a moral judgment cannot be proven by empirical method, it cannot be proven at all. Such "value judgments" are classed as opinion or sentiment, beyond rational proof or discussion. People who believe most intensely in the dignity of the individual for example, will become either uncomfortable or impatient when asked on what rational basis this belief rests. One such sincere and intelligent person summed it up: "Don't ask me to prove it; I can't; I just feel it in my gut." And some who are familiar with the variations in culture and cultural values over the world feel that much of what natural law theory describes as rooted in human nature is really rooted only in the customs and values of the West; without denying that it exists, they ask to what extent we can *know* human nature.

JOHN J. CARROLL

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

TOO MANY ASIANS. By John Robbins. New York, Doubleday and Company, 1959. 214 p.

Subtitle: "A disturbing account of the current population explosion in India, China, Japan and other Asian countries, and how it threatens the future."

Mr. Robbins is a journalist, the recipient of an Ogden Reid fellowship awarded each year to selected journalists for travel and research abroad. That is, Mr. Robbins is not a demographer and it is risky for one who writes on the slippery subject of population not to be acquainted with advanced demographic thinking. In part the book reports matters of fact and its reporting, though commonplace, is not bad. In part it expresses opinions and fashions generalizations which in all cases must be read critically and in many cases will evoke sharp disagreement. It is never safe to frame generalizations about Asia; nor about Southeast Asia; nor even about any single country in the region, unless one is unconcerned about blurring profound differences. Descriptions fitting the slums and congestion of part of Bombay do not fit other parts of Asia: the region is remarkable not only for its rather densely populated sections but also for vast areas thinly inhabited.

Again, writing of Bali, Robbins esteems it "the Utopia of Asia" and regrets that its "magnificent state of ecological balance is now in danger" because of the disturbing influence of "missionaries and salesmen." By those who view the role intended for man on earth

as above that of the herds which have lived so long—in splendid ecological balance—upon the highlands of Africa, the disturbance may be looked upon as perhaps the most promising thing which has happened to the Balinese in many a dull and stupefying century.

It is within the special field of demography that Robbins' blunders are likely to be gross. He assumes naively—as so many seem to do—that it is possible to lower the rate of increase of population by aiming directly at reducing the birth rate. Refined demographic study has revealed the birth rate to be itself the effect of a complex set of deeply rooted social causes and that it is quite futile to aim at altering it by headlong measures of contraception. It will change in response to changes in the set of the subtle social influences which shape it.

Robbins also mistakenly ascribes to the Catholic Church opposition to the *idea* of birth control. The Catholic Church—the Mother of celibates—is no more opposed to the idea of birth control than it is to the idea of death. But it does exercise its duty of passing judgment upon the morality of the means by which either is brought about.

MICHAEL MCPHELIN

RUGGED REFORMER

BOLD ENCOUNTER. A novel based on the life of Saint John of the Cross. By Father Peter-Thomas Rohrbach, O.C.D. Milwaukee: Bruce, 1960. 224pp. \$3.75.

The subtitle tells us this book is a "novel", but the historical footnote assures us that the principal scenes represent factual history. Indeed, the life of this Carmelite mystic needs little fictitious addition to make it appealing to youth. John of Yepes joined the Carmelites at a time when these monks enjoyed certain relaxations of the Primitive Rule. It was not long before John's idealism and the tug of divine grace made him long for a more prayerful, a more rigorous life. St. Teresa of Avila convinced him to start among the monks, as she had among the Carmelite nuns, an order of Discalced Carmelites living the Primitive Rule of Carmel. The hardships that followed upon this foundation, the persecutions John suffered at the hands of his religious brethren, his imprisonment and scourging, his miraculous escape, the political intrigues that threatened to destroy the new foundation—these and many other scenes form a narrative that holds one's attention to the end. And Father Rohrbach weaves them into a powerful unity.