

UNABSOLUTE TRUTHS

CLIFFORD GEERTZ

He liberated anthropology from just the facts. Now his own disciples are saying he didn't go far enough.

By David Berreby

SO THE QUESTION IS, WHAT DO YOU DO?" Clifford Geertz fidgets on the bright orange couch in his office at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J., twirling his horn rims in one hand and staring at the seashells dangling from a foot-high statue of a Dewi-Sri, a Balinese rice goddess, on the coffee table between us. He's reliving a dilemma he faced as a young anthropologist in the field, in a tiny village on Bali at the start of his career in 1957, when his landlord's toddler had a high fever, and Geertz had the only jeep.

"I wanted to take him to the only Western doctor on the island," Geertz says. "The villagers wanted to take him to the local 'curer.' If I take him to the curer, and he dies, I feel bad. If I take him to the doctor, and he dies, they think I killed him."

The 68-year-old Geertz (rhymes with "hurts"), one of America's most influential anthropologists, has been reflecting lately on this kind of cultural clash — the type of conflict that in the past four decades has gone from being a problem for young anthropologists to being a problem for everybody in a world of immigrants, refugees and the ubiquitous television, bringing news of other people and their strange, even repellent beliefs. Anthropologists, as students of culture, once tried to mediate among inconsistent world views, but now they're locked in their own factional battles. In Geertz's lifetime anthropologists have gone from producing books with titles like "How

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Natives Think" and "The Sexual Life of Savages" to less-assured-sounding works with titles like the one Geertz chose for a set of autobiographical lectures recently published by Harvard University Press: "After the Fact."

Among the multiple meanings he intended in the title is the suggestion that in the "post-structuralist, post-modernist, post-humanist age," as he puts it, there's no longer one prevailing standard for judging what the facts are — or, for that matter, what a "fact" is. "All those changes make anthropology much more difficult, but it's also much more interesting," he says. Besides, thanks to "the deprovincialization of the world," Geertz says, "we're going to be in each other's faces more." That means everyone, from middle-class Americans troubled about gay rights or abortion to Thai Buddhists irritated by the religious demands of their country's Muslims, has to confront the irreconcilable gap between "Us" and "Them" — in other words, what to do about people who can't see the plain truths that you do. "People are going to have to stand for a lot of things they don't like," Geertz says.

This is a very unfashionable view now, when the intellectual vogue is for hard certainties, from the "universal" values celebrated in William Bennett's "Book of Virtues" to the quest for definitive answers on human character in hormones, genes and evolution. Even within his field, Geertz lives in a kind of magisterial isolation. He has done more than any other anthropologist to turn the discipline away from thinking of itself as an objective science; many who believe there are absolute truths about human beings regard him as an anything-goes relativist. Yet to the academics who have embraced post-modernism, Geertz is an old-

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