

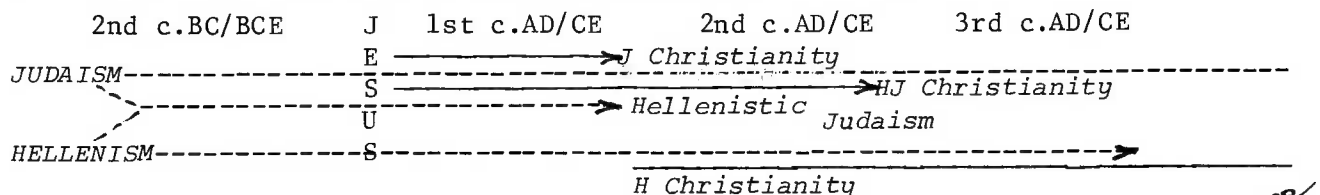
What shocked me into this Thinksheet was an outburst at Andover-Newton Theological Seminary a few days ago. Somebody glanced at the title of my #2101 and said "Populist theology" indeed!" Only this was shocking: Before reading that Thinksheet, the person had assumed (1) that I was using "populist" pejoratively and (2) that our Craigville Theological Colloquies--#2101 being a response to CIII--do something more than "populist" theology, viz produce theology itself.... This present Thinksheet (1) distinguishes between theology as given (by divine revelation & ecclesial tradition) and theology as gotten (by our own collective & individual sense-making in & beyond ecclesial institutions), and (2) defines what we are about in the Colloquies, viz using a radically democratic process of arriving at & expressing a common convictional mind on a theological theme we deem relevant to the current condition of the United Church of Christ as our communion is making up its own mind face-to-face with both the Lord and the world.

1. All the plants in my garden and all the ideas in my head have histories. Were I a professional gardener, I'd know my plants' histories, including the human manipulatings thereof (strains, hybridizations, et al): I'm a professional Christian thinker, so I know the histories of the ideas in my head (and, of course, of the words which are the aural form of the ideas). If I didn't have depth-knowledge of my plants, I'd be largely (as I am!) hit and miss about them; if I didn't know my theology (in the sense here defined), I'd have less idea of what I'm doing as a thinker because I'd have less idea of what my ideas are doing and can do.

2. The less a Christian--laic or cleric--understands sec.1 (above), the more such a person will imagine (1) that theology is gotten not given, or at least more gotten than given, and (2) that whatever theology any person/group comes up with is entitled to a dignity equal to the dignity of any other theology, since "everybody has a right to his (sic) own opinion." (Of course I believe that every human being is entitled to respect, but to extend that respect to everybody's ideas is nihilistic-sentimental nonsense.)

3. Yesterday (2Nov86) somebody wanted to read me a classic utterance and I asked for the source first. "Why?" "Because without cultural-historical context, I wouldn't know how to read the quotation." So the person said "Epictetus," and the quote included the expression "children of God"--vastly different in the mind of that Stoic slave than in the mind (eg) of the biblical authors!....So let's have a look at the cultural-historical roots of our Christian theology, which is as given (not gotten!) as our faith and our religion:

LEGENDA: (1) The dotted lines represent movements other than Christianity, whose three formative forms appear as solid lines. (2) Those three forms are the J-Type, Christianity as a nonHellenistic Jewish sect; the HJ-Type, Christianity as a development within Hellenistic Judaism; and the H-Type, Christianity developing not as synagogue of either the J or HJ type but as a "pagan" sodality ("pagan" in this historical context meaning nonJewish Hellenistic, and "Hellenistic" meaning not Greek, which would be "Hellenic," but Greek-Roman, including the influence of Eastern cults--esp. Egyptian, Syrian, & Persian-Iranian). (3) Arrowheads show the approximate time of cessation or radical waning.



4. NOTE on "cultural-historical" as used above: Modern hermeneutics is not content with the philological (medieval-&-Renaissance concern with words, language) + the historiographical (written records of "what happened") + the anepigraphic (archeological): we have tools--anthropology, sociology, psychology, sociopsychology--for asking and answering "In what life-situation, material-intellectual-spiritual, did what happened happen?" I became intensely aware of this as early as 1941, in Colwell's course "The Common Christian in Early Christian Times." Who, more or less exactly, were these individuals who found Jesus, as presented by the apostles, appealing and convincing and enthralling? What influence, if any, had Judaism had upon them? In what sense(s) were they in/out-siders to cultural & political power? What were their longings/fears/worries/hopes? How much attention did they have to give, if any, to the next meal & where to spend the night? How did they think Jesus/might/could/would help them now, in the earthy future, in the afterlife? What would Jesus-church do for (1) their family & (2) their society? And, moving from exegesis to exposition, where are we Christians today vis-a-vis these questions--as in "Sheed's Disease," which is being faithful to Jesus without finding him interesting, without letting him get much of our attention, not to mention communion--as in F.J. Sheed's CHRIST IN ECLIPSE (1978), a complaint against the modern Christian's distancing of Jesus by devotion to Jesus-effects....Cultural-historical awareness in Christian studies of Christian beginnings, the times of the giving & shaping of our faith and religion, is extremely rare for the simple reason that--parallel with Jewish mastery of Torah--it involves decades of mind-marination. IRONY: Most of such masters as I've known have given little attention to being heard--ie to self-promo--and have been little heard; so most of what I hear and read is, in contrast to what they might have contributed, thin, impoverished, ignorant, flabby, unexciting, dull & divergent from the Center. One of the reasons for this baneful condition is that, unlike Judaism and the guru traditions of the East, Christianity is a conversional religion continuing Hellenistic nouveau brashness--which is an instance of cultural-historical hermeneutics! Every religion has strengths & weaknesses; a weakness of Christianity is that it's never quite figured out what to do with its wise ones.

5. Authentic Christian theology is more lived than done and more done than thought. More a matter of character than of concept. More a matter of spirit than of mind. More even--if this be heresy, make the most of it!--a matter of body than of mind. What you do with your bod, the earth you walk on (halachah). Beautifully & powerfully expressed by a pastor in the 5Nov86 CHRISTIAN CENTURY: Mark Horst, "The Problem with Theological Pluralism." "We need to learn to view doctrines not as expressions of experience, nor as the immutable condensation of religious truth, but as rules by which believers pattern their lives. We need to see traditional teachings not as relics of premodern thought but as guidelines for the formation of Christian character." Referring to Paul Holmer's THE GRAMMAR OF FAITH (H&R/78): "Like the rules of grammar, doctrines are to be incorporated or 'absorbed' into the pattern of our lives. In this way they can come to shape our attitudes and our emotions as well as our thoughts and our practices." He complains against a merely intellectualistic theological pluralism. Theology is primarily not expressive (of privatistic, subjectivistic experience) but directive (so the need, for democracy, that groups "maintain doctrinal pluralism": Geo. Lindbeck, THE NATURE OF DOCTRINE, Westminster/84). Instead of experience judging doctrine, doctrine should shape experience.