

UNREBUILT BRIDGES

I am appalled, even frightenend, when I encounter the mentality perfectly expressed in the small print above this Thinksheet's title. This direct use of the divine sanction prescinds reason & thus precludes dialog toward truth.

1 Paul confesses that he was guilty of the blind arrogance this mentality easily engenders: it freed him to kill Christians with a good conscience (Acts 22.4, 26.10), just as right now Muslims in southern Sudan are doing.

2 Two current instances of this dogmatic blindness:

On the right, Dick Neuhaus (Oct/96 FIRST THINGS 88) well says "Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we lay aside reason in search of reasons." (Yesterday I got a letter from an atheist claiming that surrendering belief in God results in one's being "unshakled"--then unwittingly proceeds to evidence how shackled he's become to his atheism.) But Neuhaus, in confronting an animal liberationist, fails to acknowledge that the search for reasons characterizes all human commitment, even to a scientific theory. Then (86) he unwittingly illustrates his own closedmindedness vis-a-vis abortion (commenting on ABORTION: A READER) by this: "I'm sorry, but it does make you wonder whether these people are really so dumb or whether they believe that others are so dumb. The Pilgrim Press (United Church of Christ) has brought out a big thick book" claiming balance but actually "little more than a bundle of pro-abortion tracts....a deeply dishonest book. Unless, of course, the publisher and editor really are that dumb." I know the editor personally as a careful & competent abortion scholar who does not deserve Neuhaus' arrogant insult based on the fact that where the editor sees (as he says) "moral complexity," Neuhaus see none. For N.'s mentality here, see the small print above this Thinksheet's title.

On the left, almost daily I run into the blind arrogance of dogmatic egalitarianism. An ARIZONA REPUBLIC columnist is viciously hounded, her university professorship in law & ethics threatened, her car attacked, because in a column she opposed same-sex marriages (Jan/97 AFA JOURNAL 17). A former student confronted the univ. administration: He said "I was the best teacher he had but...I should be fired." Marianne Moody Jennings discovered that the dogma that "life-styles" are equal is so powerful in the gay community and its heterosexual defenders that on same-sex marriage, "no questions are allowed and debate is silenced": to try to discuss the subject is "like trying to have a deep discussion with Barney the dinosaur." Over her children as they slept "I mourned for a world that once respected others' values. I grieved for a world that was once tolerant of opposing views....What ridicule and punishment will...[my chn.] endure because of their values?" My slumbering chn. still, as I had been, "oblivious to the unopposed forces that have curbed the freedom of speech and religion I once thought were inviolate." But she refuses to recant: "It's been a long time since I've surrendered to playground bullies."

3 The social dimension of this mentality's blind arrogance is intolerance. Neuhaus demeans the intelligence of those who disagree with him on abortion, or even consider the subject debatable: Ms. Jennings' persecutors are so enraged as to demand that she be sacked from her paper & her professorship....God save us, God save America, from this mentality. What's needed is a recovery program for those drunk on their overconfidence, whatever they're overconfident of, & whether their extremism is right or left.

4 We can thank God that the intolerant forces tend to cancel each other. E.g., Neuhaus & the same-sexers are intolerant of each other. Also, that in our society & in our democracy, countervailing forces emerge against extremisms--as, soon after said issue of FIRST THINGS, heavyweights Peter Berger & Robert Borg (among others) dropped off the FT board on the ground that this monthly had come so close to advocating revolution against "the Washington regime" (alleged to be under the control of the Supreme Court, centrally on the subject of abortion). (Government itself can be intolerant. During the infamous McCarthy era, a congressional committee, by threatening my employer, tried to get me sacked; & groundlessly used the IRS to persecute

me. The countervailing forces here included Joe [Welch] against Joe [McCarthy]--the former to the latter, "Have you no decency?")

5 In §2, I touched on single-issue fanatics (as, e.g., many of the FIRST THINGS authors vis-a-vis abortion, though for these intellectuals abortion is the central, rather than the single, issue: single-issue politics is not intellectual) & on sexual-preference egalitarianism.... Before mentioning some other egalitarianisms, I want to point to the vulnerability of this form's adjective. Pederasts have a sexual preference for children, but--unlike homosexuals--cannot use the claim of bio-innateness (i.e., "born that way") to argue for sociopolitical freedom equal to that of heterosexuals. Yesterday, a 36-year-old woman was "sent up river" (a NY-to-SingSing expression) for 22 years for having a consensual relation with a 14-year-old man (i.e., sexually mature male). All societies put some restrictions on sexual behavior. The sexual activity one prefers (say, adultery or homosexuality) may not be a sexual activity one's society permits. Heterosexual marriage is the only sexual activity all societies permit, & in this sense is the only sex fully "normal." Less than fully normal sex cannot claim to be equal to fully normal sex. The shaky basis of the same-sex marriage claim is the belief that homosexuality is normal & therefore equal to opposite-sex marriage: an unsustainable claim.

6 On its negative side, **ideology** is disciplined sustained inattention to reality. In this light, let's look at two more egalitarianisms:

(1) Multicultural egalitarianism claims that all cultures & subcultures are equal. Curricula at all levels of American education have been perverted by this good-hearted nonsense. Black English (now gussied up as "ebonics") is, structurally & functionally, inferior to white English (even more recently, "ivronics"), & (says Mary McGrory) black chn. should see "My Fair Lady" to understand why. But even to speak of any superiority/inferiority freaks out the antiverticalists: they will not face the over/under realities.

(2) Gender egalitarianism claims that human females & males are equal (rather than, as I've long put it, "mutually superior"). This antivertical ("antihierarchical," "antipatriarchal," "antiandrocentric") ideology now blights in the church everything it touches, rewriting literature (creeds, hymns, even Bible) & redesigning the deity. While it does not have a future in the church, it does have a powerful baleful present. The realities of human nature & of divine revelation will defeat it in the church, but it will have a future as "a new religion" (#2769).

7 No, I haven't forgotten the **bridges** in this Thinksheet's title. The medieval synthesis, with its network of bridges, broke down, the bridges collapsing. We need now to rebuild (1) the bridge between science & theology & (2) the bridge between the science-&-theology complex & the churches. (The childhood picture in my head is the network of bridges among the islands just before the American Niagara Falls.)

(1) "The bridge between critical biblical scholarship and dogmatic theology, which [Johannes] Weiss and [Albert] Schweitzer so effectively shattered, has not been rebuilt.... The challenge for Biblical Theology still remains at least to point a way by which the bridge... can be built."--629 in Brevard S. Childs' BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible (Fortress/93), currently the best bridge-building effort, or rather prolegomenon to such. (Childs' perspective is [416] "the canonical [full-Bible-based] approach apart from [uncritical] fundamentalism on the right and [hypercritical, historical-critical] liberalism on the left." For decades, also my perspective.)

(NB: The "science" of which I speak in this §'s opening ¶ is biblical science, though the statement applies equally to all other areas of knowledge accumulation by use of the scientific method.)

(2) The bridge between the science-&-theology complex and the churches. Here we face a problem of sequence: the building of the 2nd bridge requires the prior building of the 1st bridge. A root problem here is that church leaders in their theological training did not, & do not, experience bridge #1 (biblical & theological studies being taught on, at it were, separate islands), yet the churches need to have their leaders help them build bridge #2. Result? Biblical scholars, instead of building bridge #1 with theologians, build a **false bridge** between biblical science & the churches--bypassing the churches' leaders (chiefly, pastors). The most egregious current instance of this bypass is the Jesus Seminar, of more destructive than helpful influence in the churches.