

"WHAT YOU PUT IN DIRECTS YOU,
BUT WHAT YOU LEAVE OUT MAY WRECK YOU"

Craigville Theological Colloquy X.11

2623 16 July 93
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As I sat down to write some opening remarks on "Theological Standards for Ministry in the UCC" in a panel with Gabriel Fackre & Leslie Ziegler, I recalled, & dug out, a NEW CONVERSATIONS issue (Summer/85) on "Voices From the Future: The Class of '85." Editor Wm. McKinney asks (p.1) "Will they [seminarians being graduated that year] be able to provide the United Church of Christ with the kind of leadership it needs for the next century?" It would be useful, he thought, to discover "what's on the minds of...the newcomers who are just beginning their ordained ministries."

From five of our seminaries, ten seniors' papers on "their theological and experiential understanding of ministry" & on "the character of the church and its mission" were published in the issue, immediately followed (pp.57-67) by my commentary on the papers, concluding with what this Thinksheet reproduces.

Those ten seniors are now eight years out into their ministries. How I'd like to be with them for a "new conversation" comparing/contrasting then & now!

A Note On What's Missing

What you put in directs you, but what you leave out may wreck you. These new ex-seminarians have "the right stuff" and help me to be hopeful for the UCC and the wider church, the whole Church, in what they say. But—as the last section of a PhD thesis should be "Prospects for Future Research"—I must try to bless them with a few thoughts about what they've left out.

(1) Except for a clause here and there, they've left out the *biosphere*, the thin layer of life-support on our tiny planet. I pray that the Church will lead a paradigm shift from the human sphere (anthropocentrism) to the biosphere. It will mean the most

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1 The colloquy's practical aim is to be helpful to our denomination's church-&-ministry committees, which screen applicants for ordination/commissioning &, for those accepted "in care," guide toward ordination or commissioning (the latter, as "commissioned ministers"). The intellectual aim is to look at our church's founding documents vis-a-vis the colloquy theme, ask where we (especially the colloquy's participants) now are on the theme, & ask what "voices for the future" we should be on the theme both denominationally & ecumenically.

2 Note that the Thinksheet's title is my first sentence in the concluding "Note." One of the first things one should learn in hermeneutics is to match the question What's here & why? with the question What's *not* here & why *not*? The savvy hermeneut will be at least almost as interested in the second question as in the first.

Yes, no paper could put everything in. But surely everything should be there that the candidate for seminary graduation & ordination considers cognitively crucial for ministry. When I was an ordination screener for the Moravian Church, which pays all seminary expenses so is serious about candidacy, I was as interested in conversing with applicants about what they did not believe as about what they did, for the two elements of the conversation provided me plotting points for discovering what, in life & ministry, was most important to them, & what less, & what not at all.

3 Of course like everyone else, I'm under the limits of finitude & sin in my own notions of the order of importance in life & ministry. But I've had 53 years since ordination to mull & mumble over the matter, & all that time I've been an **inclusivist**, as you'd suspect from this Thinksheet's title. An **inclusivist** out of truth & love--not out of fear, like big fat Abu sitting next to me in a Cairo mosque, who replied, when I inquired as to whether he believed in the virgin birth of Jesus, "Of course! I'm not taking any chances."

4 Serendipitously, today, in reading my diary of $\frac{1}{2}$ c. ago today (as is my daily custom), I came across this confirmation of the fact that while I've a feisty mind, I've an irenica-inclusive spirit. My tennis partner at the U. of Chicago was trying to persuade me to break away from my evangelical relationships &, as he put it, "proclaim my peculiar heresies." Well, I didn't break away, but I was

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radical soul-mind revolution since the Enlightenment.

(2) Even more so, they've left out the *afterlife*, almost as though to mention it would be counterrevolutionary activity against the thisworldly concerns—the telereal, the psycho-real, the socioreal—that dominate their attention. Once, one essayist mentions Matthew 25, which explodes the myth that thisworldliness and otherworldliness are alternatives: it is the Bible's most dramatic passage on "social action" and on the afterlife judgment! The eschatological sanction as incentive to compassionate action. The works: promises/-threats, rewards/punishments. All our UCC foreparents used Matthew 25 with full force instead of half force, each world as incentive to the other. And "the growing churches of America" still do.

What happened was that what we called in the 1930s "the acids of modernity" eroded away first hell and then heaven, and the canonical statement became "You get your heaven and your hell right here." I shall point to only one effect, an effect noticeable in most of our essays in this article: pie in the sky when you die by and by became bread on the table here and now. This world became heated up with the energies and hopes of both worlds, and "causes" and "movements" became the essence of piety. For Herman Kahn (Hudson Institute) 18 years ago I traced this budding development in the consciousness of young Latin American priests. Herman, a genius for sniffing out the future, said

"Check it out; if those priests are shifting attention from afterlife to this life, the clergy will drift downward from the rich to the poor, and it'll be a new ballgame." My study confirmed his suspicion, and we call the new ballgame "liberation theology," which yields so easily to intellectual-critical constructs (such as Marxism) that are wholly thisworldly. There is yet no full-bodied, two-worldly critical sociotheology. The now old one-worldly theologies, both "liberal" and "liberationist," are and must remain weak: the former slips off into humanism, the latter into Marxism. No wonder the UCC is weak and shriveling: it is a dupe of both. But not to be discouraged, neophytes! The UCC is also open, and far more malleable than most denominations. If we let the Spirit lead our minds into self-critical consciousness, we may free ourselves from the fictive myths that now rule over us.

(3) Our essayists leave out, make no use of, half of the New Testament's *sanctions* (incentives, motivators to piety and both private and public morality). One of them, the eschatological sanction, I separated out, because of its polymorphous importance, to become #2 in this list of left-outs. Just to list a few more of the left-out sanctions: the sapiential (wisdom/folly), the spiritistic (purity/obscenity—holiness; worship/blasphemy; charismatic experience). As one would expect, much-used sanctions in these essays are the social sanctions and the autonomous sanction (reflexive consequences, humans being their own worst ene-

mies and best friends).

To this old clergyman who's read the Bible daily in the original languages for a half century, the most glaring sanctional weakness of these essays is their failure to use Scripture with full force and range. That will come to those who daily expose themselves, heart and mind, to the Bible; that they may be free in the Bible, knowing it . . . free with the Bible, using it in life and ministry . . . and free from the Bible, transcending it, on the model of Jesus in the Spirit, with the "more light" that leads toward a more human church and a more humane world.

(4) Finally, our essayists say little or nothing about growing in love for God through devotional discipline, intellectual exploration (e.g., traditional and emergent models of sense-making and of discovery), personal witnessing and public evangelism (verbal missions), metaphysical and moral modesty (the mystery of good and evil, the difficulty of distinguishing between the sinful and the tragic), what used to be called "polemical theology" (attacking for the Faith, instead of only defending the Faith, i.e., "apologetical theology"), freedom through obedience, personal virtues/-vices, joy and its roots (love, gratitude, work, play, humor).

Did I expect them to do everything? No, but in their small space each did what seemed most important in self-presentation toward ordination. Having that in mind, I have tried not to go easy on them, or be too hard.

ejected when my heresies were discovered, an ejection automatically converting me from an ecumenical evangelical to an evangelical ecumenical. To my confronter, the diary entry reports, "I tried to explain my position: TO DENY A RELIGIOUS AFFIRMATION must mean:

"1 That the denier sees it as so wholly false that he [now I'd be inclusive also about language] must speak out against it. The poetical nature of a religious confession makes this situation seldom necessary.

"2 That the affirmation is seriously and ethically held as a tenet of conduct, so that its effect is to mislead Christians: if a doctrine is not so held [ie, does not have this baleful effect], the community [in the very life of its members] witnesses to its [the doctrine's] relative unimportance; and

"3 That the denial will not give the affirmers a distorted perspective on the **entire** affirmation [ie, beliefs and convictions] of the denier. No one who thinks can be bounded by a creed, but he [sic] need not and must not throw out the baby with the bath."

We are called equally to truth & to peace, both to build up the church in love (Ro.14.19 1Cor.14.3 2Cor.12.19 Eph.4.16), open to "'more light' that leads toward a more human church and a more humane world."