

# (WHAT) SHOULD THE CHILDREN'S CHILDREN ECHO?

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

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## THE CATECHISM ISSUE

Of the calendar year that dies tomorrow, two of the dozen religion-events I'd highlight were (1) the Eng. publication of the new RCC catechism (from the original Fr.) &, diametrically, (2) the flap over the Nov/93 WCC/USA "Re-Imagining Conference." The former makes clear what the faithful & their chn. & their chn.'s chn. are to "echo" (transliteration from the Gk. "catECHism," a noun whose full meaning is the result of, as verbal product from, oral teaching [oral/aural/rote/oral]). The latter, in my opinion, deprives the chn.'s chn. of hearing anything recognizable as biblical-canonical Christian teaching (Lat., "doctrine").

After this Thinksheet's title's first word you have the prior question: Should the children **memorize** anything so thoroughly that it "re-sounds" (the first meaning of the verb "κατηχ- *katech<sup>n</sup>-*") within them & can easily be accessed for recitation? The subsequent question is: Of the Faith, if anything deserves such memorization, what is it?

OCCASION: In the United Church of Christ, should we have a catechism? My answer is Yes--if understood in the light of this Thinksheet. A taskgroup on "Confessing Christ" is at work on this issue.

1 "Faith comes from what is **heard**, and what is **heard** comes through the word of Christ" (Ro.10.17 NRSV; "from **hearing** the message, and the message comes through preaching Christ" [TEV]). Augustine--converted while reading a book which he says an inner voice told him to *tolle lege* ("Take up & read.")--is only a seeming exception: even from before he was born he heard the Word being spoken by his mother....Is the situation so different now? I think not. Television & computers cancel each other: billions of hours now are spent staring at monitors, but 65% of Americans get all their news from the other screen.

2 Gutenberg made a profounder difference in moving civilization from oral to oral-written (i.e., from ear to ear-eye); & the far earlier invention of writing made an even greater difference: once something's written & preserved, the writing serves as a **perpetual check** on the accuracy of memory & the honesty of reporters & the authority of speakers-writers claiming to be truthful traditioners of the heritage....The force of this fact will strike you if you think of the parlor game "Gossip." A whispered message, passed from one person to another around the room, is laughably garbled when spoken by the last hearer, even given everybody's intention to repeat-recite exactly what was heard. But suppose the message spoken into the first ear was itself deformed? That would eliminate even the slight chance that the last person would get the message straight. (Garbage in, garbage out.) The children's children have no chance to echo clearly a message they've heard only in a revisionist form....E.g., in school districts considering the recitation of Ps.23 as "school prayer," some feminists are objecting: it does say "*he* leads me," doesn't it? And can you imagine trying to get a community to agree on an inclusive-language version of Ps.23?

3 Those who learned to echo before they learned to think are better echoers. This argues for (1) chn. being in public worship even though "they don't know what's going on," & (2) memorizing the religious essentials before they "understand"--for in addition to its ability to carry meaning, a sound-pattern has meaning in itself (as here, 1 Jan 95, the youngest child in "The Family Circle" shows). Besides (as Pascal said in a number of ways), the heart accesses the mysteries directly, as well as indirectly through the mind. I add that a child's total access through the mysteries to the Mystery may not be inferior to that of an adult whose heart is mind-impeded. A parallel: As an adult, you can better echo languages you learned before you could think (i.e., before you reached "the age of reason," even though that's younger than we used to think).



4 PROBLEM: Most of the current mainline-church members cannot echo: they did not (to quote ¶2, above) "memorize anything so thoroughly that it 're-sounds'

within them & can easily be accessed for recitation." Lacking that early spiritual formation, they entertain in their interior soundchamber a cacophony, & must--unless they live in inner chaos, as millions do--sort out such sounds as they choose to use in their own personal mental formation. In religion, in comparison with their ancestors, they are barbarians (& are either embarrassed by their ignorance or sophisticatedly arrogant about their modern-rational mind).

The arrogant religion-barbarians are against echoing, which they call "parroting," so their chn.'s chn. will echo nothing of our spiritual heritage. The primary reason the mainline churches are dying is silence: the chn. & the chn.'s chn., not having **heard**, are not in the mainline churches. (Wise ones have had various ways of saying that civilization, any civilization, is only one generation away from regression to barbarism.) That, to use this Thinksheet's subtitle, is "the catechism issue." Life by memorization, or death by amnesia.

5 The door through which one enters the temple will be one's primary perspective on the temple. If a disproportionate number enter by any one door, the corporate understanding of what the temple is about will be skewed in favor of that door. Another possibility of skewed perspective is hieratic: the temple's priesthood has come mainly through one door & prefers those who come through that door. E.g., the national leadership of the United Church of Christ favors the door marked "Liberation: The Struggle for Justice and Peace." So national-office publications--Book of Worship, New Century Hymnal, educational materials, etc.--will have this slant-spin-tilt-warp-skew. All the worshipers who've come in through other doors feel left out, alienated, increasingly angry: the second most important reason for the decline of mainline churches.

6 All the above is prolegomenal to some notes on catechisms **past** that may help as we consider the catechism issue now in the UCC.

(1) Early Christian catechesis was a bridge into the church (i.e., was oral-aural-oral preparation for believer's baptism, originally by immersion) &, secondarily--automatically, a bulwark against the world (including the identification of unworthy, heretical, apostate members)--Schaff.II.256. The bridge is by echoing (to use my angle in this Thinksheet); the bulwark is to identify & silence sounds dissonant to the canonical echoing. These two functions are either vigorous or lethargic together. At the present time, both echoing (teaching the chn. to re-sound the faith) & heresy-hunting are weak in the UCC: the former considered brainwashing, & the latter intolerant. To produce a catechism for the UCC, a whole set of liberal taboos would have to be violated. Must, I think, be violated. If & when produced, the catechism must swim upstream against heretics who, given the UCC ethos, cannot be ejected (excommunicated, ostracized, or grandfathered & eliminated by attrition). Consider these two comics in a paper today (2 Jan 95), both satirizing liberal degeneracy & thus giving hope:

CALVIN & HOBBS,  
Bill Watterson



EEK & MEK,  
Howie Schneider



(2) Early Christian catechesis included **the Lord's Prayer** & the commitment to say it daily (thrice, in the Didache; in some communities, five times--whence Muslim prayers five times daily). (On '94's last day, "Nova" aired a language program in which the L.P. was said in A-S [Anglo-Saxon], Middle English [Chaucerian], & Modern English.) Each Christian family/group/church is free to determine the precise words to have the chn. echo: the NT is not fussy about that.

(3) Early Christian catechesis always combined ortho-doxo (right thinking) with ortho-praxy (right living): performance was not to subvert profession. In instructing catechumens, the catechists gave as much attention to ethics as to doctrine--unlike later catechisms, which were heavier on doctrine.

(4) Newt Gingrich's Congress begins tomorrow (4 Jan 95) & he wants everybody to study what amounts to the American catechism, viz., the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, & the Federalist Papers. Comparable in the UCC are the Basis of Union & the UCC Constitution & By-Laws (esp. the Preamble), in which all members, laity as well as clergy, should be catechized. Here now is a third function of catechesis; adding it, we get this total: a bridge of entrance through baptism (or, in the case of those preconfessionally baptized, confirmation); a basis for continuous self-identification (a) as Christians, (b) as UCC Christians, (c) as the UCC within the whole Church, & (d) as the UCC in "the world," the nonChurch community; & a bulwark providing both boundaries & defense against alien, life-threatening ideas & agents both outside & inside the church (congregations, judicatories, & agencies).

(5) The bridge function always has been primary. Catechesis is "the work of the church in admitting converts from heathenism or Judaism" (I.317, Smith & Cheetham, A DICTIONARY OF CHRISTIAN ANTIQUITIES, 1875). But if this preparation for membership is of **low quality**, as it's been in our latitudinarian church in our permissive-narcissistic society, so will be continuing education on the "basis" & gospel-&-church protection ("bulwark"). If the bridge is weak & the basis shaky, how can the bulwark be strong (how maintain high standards for membership, & exercise tough love vis-a-vis members with wandering minds-or-morals?). In such a denomination & society as ours, intellectual-spiritual conformity for entrance, & ecclesiastical discipline for miscreants, seems like tyranny. But to the extent that a church (congregational or other level) is unwilling to exercise this "tyrannical" authority, to that extent it's pointless to have a catechism. The decision to *live* a catechism should be taken prior to *writing* one. But as that's not going to happen in our UCC, the writing of any catechism will have, in addition to an educational, a political motive, viz., to persuade a church that's lightened up to **tighten up**. Since so to persuade is the central motive of the "Confessing Christ" movement in the UCC, the catechism issue is an essential task.

(6) In the immediately above, what do I mean by "intellectual-spiritual conformity"? Not mere intellectual assent to propositions, but humble **submission** to "Christ's way of thinking" (Phil.2.5, my tr.) as bodied forth in our church's *raison d'etre* as expressed in our founding documents. Active submission, i.e., agreement, where one is so minded; elsewhere passive submission, i.e., (a) agreement to study points of disagreement, & (b) the promise, on items of intellectual nonagreement, not to promote one's dissident ideas within the church. GOAL: To violate neither one's own intellectual integrity nor the church's "mind."

Two peskinesses here: (a) The very idea of obedience-submission is offensive to the modernly minded, esp. to radical feminism, which identifies all verticality with patriarchy; & (b) The Enlightenment's primacy of reason continues to oppress "educated" Americans, who suspect, if they do not outrightly disdain, the transrational (all that's beyond reason, which includes almost all of what religion's concerned with)....Contrast the **balance** & **fullness** of what I call the triangle-shield of Christian obedience (you may start at any angle & move in either direction, as in the medieval triangle-shield of the Trinity): *Lex vivendi est lex orandi est lex credendi* (The law of living is the law of praying is the law of believing.). Like it or not, Christian thinking, as Christian praying & Christian behavior, is under "law," i.e., obedience. (Ro.8.1-17 contrast thinking in the Spirit, i.e., Christianly, with other thinking.)

In homiletics class 58 years ago, I had to master a sermon titled "Obedience +

the Organ of Spiritual Knowledge." I'd not looked at it again till reaching this point in this Thinksheet, yet I went right to it in my library: pp.300-7, F.W.Robertson, SERMONS PREACHED AT BRIGHTON (Harper & Bros., 1873). But through the years I've thought of it often, the sermon's title bearing the sermon's message (as does its text, Jn.7.17). So I reread it. The deepest-widest knowledge we need comes not by "relying on a cultivated understanding" but on "trained affections, and habits of obedience." Jesus, wanting us to avoid both credulity & skepticism, "said not that a clear intellect will give you a right heart, but that a right heart and a pure life will clarify the intellect" (note the triangle, incidentally the strongest two-dimensional figure). Worldly knowledge is experimentally discovered (the point of Bacon's NOVUM ORGANUM), spiritual knowledge is given the obedient (cp. 1Cor.2.14-15) by the only possible "organ(um)," viz., spiritual obedience.

The wisdom of this was understood by the great catechists before & since Augustine. *Credo, ut intelligam* can be read as either purpose ("I believe so that I may understand," as love can be understood only from the inside, after commitment) or as result ("I understand because I believe"). The maxim of Clement, till A.D.202 head of the catechetical school of Alexandria, puts it negatively (Schaff.II.780): "Unless you believe, you will not understand." (The Schaff fn. has Is.7.9 LXX, which Gk. I'll translate as "If you won't believe, you won't get it.") Trust-faith-belief is symbiotic with knowing-understanding. Less than an hour ago on the phone a nonChristian said to me "If you were a devout Muslim or Buddhist for one year, you would understand that Christianity is not true." This shows both the truth & the limits of "understanding" as subjectivity, which needs continuous conversation with the relative objectivities of history & the humanities (especially philosophy, especially the logics) & the sciences. (The media use "know," "understand," only of what comes from those relative objectivities, esp. natural science.) The effect of this, & of our public schools, is to deny knowledge-from-obedience the status of knowledge: God can be believed in, but not known....Am I preaching obscurantism? Of course not. But I am saying that where a catechumen has trouble believing, the process requires the humility of suspending disbelief within the full cognitive/re-cognitive ping-pong game of belief/disbelief/suspension of disbelief/suspension of belief/doubt/suspension of doubt. Consider the difference between "I can't believe that [ & am proud of my disbelief]" & "I'd like to believe that but I don't, at least not yet." The former is not a worthy candidate for catechesis/membership. Modernism, including radical feminism, lets the former determine the contents of catechism, i.e. the Faith.

The catechetical premise is revelation: God speaks through the canonical-classical Faith, which the catechumen is to believe (Lat, "CREED"); it defines what's CREditable (worthy of belief) &, though implausible outside of the paradigm of the Faith, CREdible (believable). When the creeds are taken, as in the UCC, only as "a testimony rather than a test of faith," the virtue of tolerance rots into the vice of creedal indifference, anarchic cacophony replacing faithful echoing of the Faith. Taught to stand for nothing except tolerance, the chn. stand for (put up with) anything. We have words for this: relativism, privatism, solipsism, pluralism. And there are words for what happens to the church: dissension, decline, death. The subtitle of this Thinksheet is, for the church, a matter of life & death.

(7) Ecclesial policing of catechumens' & members' morals is even tougher than policing their belief, but just as important. Our earliest noncanonical Christian catechism, the Didache (somewhere in the 2nd  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the 1st c.), puts the former first (from the Jewish "Two Ways," expounded in Barnabas as light/darkness & in the Did. as life/death). (For catechesis in the NT, notice Ro.1.18, 1Cor.14.19, Gal.6.6, L.1.4, Ac.18.25 & 21.25, Heb.5.12.)

(8) A few more early Christian catechisms: (a) **Cyril of Jerusalem** (d.386): "So your soul won't perish from ignorance, we comprise the whole doctrine of the Faith in a few lines" to be memorized. (b) **Gregory of Nyssa** (d.394): "The method of recovery must be adapted to the form of the disease," so different catechetical strokes for different folks; "frame your argument in accordance with the error." (c) **Augustine** (d.430): the sacred history of the world (creation to resurrection) + the Gospels as the law of Christ....The early creeds (Old Roman Symbol, Apostles' Creed) are deposits from catechesis & then were expanded into the ecumenical creeds.