

A HALF-CENTURY AGO TODAY I WAS PLAYING TENNIS WITH  
HUSTON SMITH & ARGUING POINTS....

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636  
Phone 508.775.8008  
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

....not tennis points, theological points. He had no use for fundamentalism, but liked me anyway in spite of my being (he thought) a fundamentalist. I had no use for modernism but liked him even though he was (I thought) a modernist. Not very long ago we were joshing each other about those days & times. Through the years, I've conceded a little to his side, & now he's conceded the main point on my side, which was & is that modernism was in essence atheist & even in general antireligious, its foundation in scientistic materialism leaving no ground, no room, for the religious dimension except as poetry (eg, Aubrey's "epistemological discontinuity in the poetic dimension," fighting for its life against "ontological continuity in the prosaic [scientific] dimension").

Since our ways parted from the U. of Chicago & from each other, he's spent his worktime in schools (M.I.T., U. of Syracuse, currently U. of Cal., Berkeley), I in church (pastoring, councils of churches, national church staff) & schools. He's best known for THE RELIGIONS OF MAN (latest ed., because of what he calls "inclusive gender," THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS [1991]).

This Thinksheet describes my old friend's present "space" (as he's detailed it in BEYOND THE POST-MODERN MIND [Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2nd ed. 1989] & his 1989 plenary address at the annual meeting of the the American Academy of Religion [as pub. in winter/90 JAAR]). The description is not simple exposition but personal reflection--what I see as particularly noteworthy in light (1) his intellectual-&-spiritual journey & (2) how Christian intellectuals today can best make their witness.

1 What was wrong about fundamentalism was that it was (& is) (1) anti-intellectual, (2) intellectualistic, & (3) negative in spirit because more reactive than proclamative....(1): In the eyes of its direct opponents (the modernist-minded in all fields) & much of the general public, it appealed to revelation & tradition in reason-despising ways. (2): It gave its mind over to highly in-house, special-pleading argumentation, using antique mental constructs resting on old evangelical biblical-expository assumptions--let's call it "talmudic" intellectualism of more-heat-than-light complexity more shameful to than honoring of the Christian mind. (3): Its spirit was sourly triumphalistic--not only antagonistic to, but disrespectful of, anything it dubbed "modernist."....But why all this woe? did the cause (modernism) justify these effects? Let's look at....

....what was right about fundamentalism. It was (1) religious, recognizing a reality supervening over quotidian, "flatland" life & claiming that this reality (a) is available to us on its own initiative, (b) invites our obedient response, (c) provides for our salvation from "sin, death, & the devil," & (d) threatens hell for the noncompliant....It was (2) faithful to America's great evangelical heritage in emphasizing Bible & conversion, the former even more than the latter (as "fundamentalist" connotes [Ger.] "Buchreligion," literalistic reliance on the sacred text & tradition, "evangelical" connoting rather more the experiential factor, "knowing God" more than reasoning from Scripture). (3) It was aggressively missionary, promoting its point of view vigorously enough to serve not only as a major religious, but also intellectual-cultural influence. And it was (4) realistically suspicious of "progress," that coverall for Enlightenment confidence in "man can" potential & perfectibility. I should add two more factors, in a separate category because ambiguous: It was (5) populist, caring about the common folk. And it was (6) communal, calling the people together for worship-study-fellowship not only in churches but also in larger spaces, including old campmeeting grounds.

All the above I confess & bear witness to from my own brief fundamentalist period (1934-7). (Abiding values? For one thing, a ravenous appetite for Scripture in the original languages, partly motored by belief in biblical inerrancy, a belief I was later to attack as the root of bibliolatry.)

2 Huston is now teaching-preaching that--both the modern & the post-modern

minds having failed--we've entered a new religious period. "I consider this an auspicious moment for the study of religion. The reason is the way science is conspiring with the wisdom traditions to restore the hierarchical universe--which is also the hierophanous universe--to its rightful place as the generic religious posit....For now, I focus on the way the winnowed wisdom of the human race, as impounded in the 'data banks' of the world's enduring sacred texts, has seen reality" (JAAR, p.665).

3 But "a new religious period" is just what I personally entered in 1934 when I became a fundamentalist--for the reasons I've detailed in §1, which here I can sharpen into two notes Huston mentions in the above quote: "sacred texts" (concentrated Bible-reading convinced me that, as Peter said to Jesus, "you have the word of life"); & science (though I was pres. of the highschool science club) seemed bankrupt, in spite & because of its technocratic claims, to provide the values-foundation for what had increasingly pressed themselves upon me as the essential human virtues in "the hierarchical [& "hierophanous"] universe." The storm of my conversion experience swept me up onto a promontory from which I could see in science limitations science itself took almost two more generations to arrive at. (I'm not claiming to have been brilliantly prescient: by the grace of God, converts with all IQ ranges were, between the world wars & during the Depression, becoming disenchanted with what-much-later-come-to-be-seen-as adolescent science [= "scientism," including Darwinism]). We converts to Protestant fundamentalism were of all socioeconomic levels, all degrees of advantage in what Bunyan's Christian called "the City of Destruction." But no matter how high on the hog we'd been living (& I was fairly high, for those tough times), suddenly upon conversion we became STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND.

4 Robt. Heinlein's title is of what I might call a second countercultural wave, the dropout "hippie" utopians who came along a generation later than my fundamentalist Protestant generation. We, however, were more dropins than dropouts. According to whatever lights we had, we tried by the grace of God to eschew "the world, the flesh, & the devil." But more of our energy went into rejoicing in & witnessing to redeeming grace, & participating in the **alternative community**, the local fundamentalist church & its wider associations (Bible conferences, campmeetings, & the like).

We had one eye each on each world. The counterculturalists of the second wave had both eyes on this world: thisworldly fundamentalists, you might call them. (I must confess that some in the first wave, though not I, were--unlike the old evangelicalisms in American history--almost exclusively otherworldly. These provided modernists-liberals with inauthentic support for their excessive this-worldliness. My liberal background tied my fundamentalist balloon to the earth: I never lost social concern.)

5 Then came the third countercultural wave, viz liberationism. The first wave was countercultural against both political utopianism (communisms & fascisms) & a society in economic collapse. The second wave was against a society in affluence but insensitive to "authentic" human values. This third wave was & is politically utopian, its eyes fixed on the goal of a fair shake for all "minorities"--call it, if you will, the fundamentalism of a level playing field.

6 A fourth countercultural wave is now upon us & is already represented by more than a score of significant books. I'll call it the new Christian alienism. It's liberal, incorporating the ethical-social sensitivities of the second & third waves; but it's communal self-definition is similar to that of the first wave. I'm now being told from the left what in the early 1930s I was being told from the right, viz that we (real) Christians are a minority not only in the world but also, and even especially, in the American society. We are (& here a number of book-titles jump into mind), aliens, strangers, pilgrims, citizens of Jesus' alternative community. It occurs to me (indeed, it occurs within me) that the fourth wave might learn something from the first wave as to how to live with & glorify God through the feeling of **outsiderhood**....HS, p.669: We should "give our students the opportunity to choose which world they want to live in--modern, postmodern, or religious....The university does not offer them the third of these options."