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"OBEDIENCE THE ORGAN OF" TYRANNY & "SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE"

1 My Buddhist students at the U. of Hawaii, in trying to grasp the essence of biblical (Jewish & Christian) religion, had the greatest difficulty with the plain fact that the Bible's spiritual substructure is authority-command-obedience, on which is built a military-masculine **command culture**: basic Buddhism is a discovery culture. Unlike basic Buddhism, the Bible has a deity, a highly conflicted-challenged deity because of his absolute claim to sovereignty as King-Lord-Father; no surprise, then, that the biblical Story is a pile-up of one challenge after another to his authority, till Jesus the resurrected Lord, given "all authority" (Mt.28.18), turns over his command ("I give you a new commandment," Jn.13.34) to his Father, "so that God may be all in all" (1Cor.15.28). Radical, militant monotheism, **com**manding but not **de**manding obedience, for to demand obedience would violate....

2 ....**love**, the Story's motive & motif, severely qualifying-limiting the military metaphor. Dante & Milton were right: the ultimate-intimate world-Story is of an *ordo amoris*, the ordering & re-ordering of "all things" by love, (in Dante's words) "the Love that moves the worlds." Military cause to suffer: the Prince of Peace accepts suffering as an unavoidable element of his messianic mission. In both Testaments, Holy Love is Suffering-Judging-Saving Love.

3 Our gospel, the gospel of grace-love as the fundamental principle of living & organizing (*ordo amoris*), is always in danger of subversion by some degree of institutional compulsion-coercion (*ordo necessitatis*--"necessary" in two senses: (1) structural demands without which no institution can survive; (2) personnel discipline without which the body falls into a chaos of misfitting parts (Latin, "membra"--members).

4 The Church/churches carry the gospel, but sometimes the gospel must get off & walk. When institutional Christianity becomes too rigid on left or right or both, a **reform** movement calls believers to repristinize their gospel faith. (The pattern is human, universal.) Whether a movement stays within the institution or leaves (of its own will or under pressure), it will frequently have a beneficent effect on its parent (e.g., the Counter-Reformation was a counter-reform to the Reform-ation),

5 Vatican II was a Roman Catholic reform movement within that church in response to Jn.XXIII's vision, some movements within that church, and some developments in disciplines bearing on the thought-work-life of that church & all churches (esp. in biblical studies, social psychology, & political science), as well as the changing world situation. The documents of that Council, & subsequent encyclicals, are (in general) models of thought responsible to past, present, & future (not just for Roman Catholics, but for all Christians: Orthodoxy & Protestantism have produced no comparable body of teaching).

6 In the spectrum of Christian institutional life from tyranny (squeezing out freedom) to chaos (irresponsible to the need for order), my church (the UCC) is near the chaos end (though the national office, in its linguistic & thematic controls, is close to tyranny). Orthodoxy is, in its hierarchy, close to tyranny: all American bishops wanted their foreign archbishop replaced, but the patriarch refused. The Roman Church magisterium, admirable as it is for faithfulness to the Great Tradition, has, with papal encyclicals, a defining power I admire (as "necessary" definition) & fear (as excessive discipline, suppressing debate & acting with what seems to me tyrannous discipline).

7 Obedience to the Roman See, as an absolute command-demand, is (as the first half of this Thinksheet's title asserts), an **organ of tyranny** & the evils attendant upon tyranny. In WHAT WENT WRONG WITH VATICAN II: THE CATHOLIC CRISIS EXPLAINED (Sophia Institute Press/99), Ralph M. McInerny (acc. to Alicia Mosier review, p61 of the Jan/99 FIRST THINGS) sees the crisis as "not of arguments but of authority....[He] sees *Humanae Vitae*, the 1968 encyclical on contraception, as the flashpoint of the crisis." In the reviewer's words, "the current crisis can be

resolved only in obedience to the Church's wisdom." To me, shocking! Instead of being "wisdom," that encyclical against all non-"natural" (read, non-rhythm) contraception strikes me as folly, insanity, evil, the world's chief obstacle to desperately needed (for humanity & the biosphere) contraception--a false "ordo necessitatis" fighting the divine "ordo amoris." In our ignorance & with our biases, we are all always in danger of doing the devil's work in the name of the Lord. On the principle of "mutual affirmation & admonition," I affirm so much of "Rome" that it pains me deeply to have to disagree deeply on contraception & to say so.

8 On the 2nd of this mo. 148 years ago in Trinity Chapel, Brighton (Eng.), Fred. W. Robertson preached the sermon whose title forms the base of this Thinksheet's title: "Obedience the Organ of Spiritual Knowledge." (Those of my readers who've long memories will recall that this isn't the 1st time I've adverted to this 1 of the 150 "world's greatest sermons" which I had to read in Homiletics I 62 years ago.) I quote from my 126-year-old copy of Bro. R.'s SERMONS (Harper & Bros.)....Are you irritated by my sounding like an antiquarian? It should be a relief from the presentarians you spend most of your reading time on.. ..Bro. R. assumes his hearers know "obedience" means active submission--which leaves him to explain what he means by "organ" & "spiritual knowledge."

9 "Organ" he takes from the founding work of modern science, Francis Bacon's NOVUM ORGANON (published 1620, the year of the Mayflower, that founding event of what the Great Seal of the U.S. calls "Novum Ordo Saeculorum"), which began the conversion of the West from deductive to inductive thinking, which ascends to axioms of successively greater generality & came to be called, simply, "the scientific method." P305: "In every department of knowledge there is an appointed 'organ,' or instrument for discovery of its specific truth, and for appropriating its specific blessings. In the world of sense, the empirical intellect: in that world the Baconian philosopher is supreme. His Novum Organon is experience....But in the spiritual world, the "organ" of the scientific man--sensible experience--is powerless....Obedience and self-surrender is the sole organ by which we gain a kowledge of that which cannot be seen nor felt....Just as copying perpetually a master-painter's works we get at last an instinctive and infallible power of recognizing his touch, so by copying and doing God's will we recognize what is His: we know of the teaching whether it be of God, or whether it be an arbitrary invention of a human self." (The sermon's text is Jn.7.17.)

10 We've no full sermons of R.'s, only "recollections" he jotted down after preaching if anybody (maybe somebody who wasn't at worship on that occasion) asked him what he said. So he apologizes that the "recollections," not being intended for publication, lack "finish." But the solid structures & muscular, fresh thought communicate well indeed, better than almost all sermons polished for publication....In this sermon, R. drives home multilaterally his conviction that act precedes thought & feeling (a view not developed in the academy till a century later, beginning with the James-Lange Theory). It is, he says, the way of Christ because it is the way God has designed for us in creation & redemption. And the divine "beauty" of it is that it excludes no one from spiritual knowledge, the cognitive fundament for living. P306: "The humblest and the weakest may know more of God, more of evil and of good, by a single act charity, or a prayer of self-surrender, than all the sages can teach: ay, or all the theologians can dogmatize upon." This way he contrasts with (p300) credulity & skepticism. "The disciples of credulity...rely on authority. Foremost among these, and the only self-consistent ones, are the adherents of the Church of Rome; and...all who receive their opinions because their sect, their church, or their documents assert them, not because they are true eternally in themselves." (A pro-labor Anglican minister, he supported the revolutionary ideas of 1848 & died [at 37!] five years later, partly from exhaustion in the battle for economic justice.)

11 DILEMMA: Christianity's cultural base is (§1, above) a "command culture" disseminated not by coercion (of body or mind) but by persuasion: an authoritarian church expresses the former & violates the latter. Christian history persuades me against identifying with "the mind of Christ" the mind of any institution.