

THEOLOGY IS GUIDANCE IN THINKING ABOUT GOD

OCCASION: Two evenings ago at our church's monthly adult-education "Soup"--the usual two hours of guided conversation beginning with a light supper (literally light: soup, crackers, cookies, nonalcoholic drinks) --we had a "Soup & Questions," the congregation open to asking any questions of three theologians (Gabriel Fackre, Herbert Davis, & Willis Elliott--all members of the congregation).

1 Everybody occasionally has fleeting thoughts about God, the Higher Power (in AA lingo), Transcendence (a high-flying word), "the Man Upstairs" (a low-flying phrase), Ultimate Reality (a philosophical term). Does that make everybody a theologian? No. Theology is orderly thinking about God. A theologian is somebody given to formal, constructive, even to some degree systematic (paradigmatic) thinking about God. Theologians are loremasters, experts (of varying quality & experience) in religion-lore, the lore of God, learned (thus, "lore") in what formerly was called divinity.

2 Therefore, the "laity" (the non-experts in whatever discipline/lifework is front & center) should listen up to the theologians. It's a strain! It's more natural, easier, for theologians (or, eg, plumbers) to talk among themselves, so it's to be expected that the laity won't know what's going on (or, worse, will misunderstand what's going on) if they happen to overhear theologians talking among themselves. It's another strain when, instead of talking among themselves, theologians face the laity--as we three did Sunday evening. We must learn to talk down to the laity.

3 Hold it right there! What's this up/down? In the church, the communion of saints, the Body of Christ, aren't theologians & laity on the same level? As Christians, of course: we're all on the same level "in Christ" (Gal.3.28). That's the liberating, democratic, revolutionary doctrine gradually working its way 'round the world from the impulse of God, who "humbled himself" to become one of us (the ultimate, a fortiori equality-model--Phil.2.5-8). But a parallel fact is that God gives us differing gifts with which to serve one another (1Cor.12; Ro.12.3-8; Eph.4.11; 1P.4.10-11). In relation to your particular gift, everybody else is inferior & should hold still why you lay it on him/her.

Illustration: After messing up, worse came to worst & I called a plumber. Deftly he repaired the damage I'd done & then fixed the problem. What did he say? "You're a clergyman. I don't go to church; but if I had trouble with God I might come to you for help. You got trouble with plumbing, you come to me." In effect he was saying When it comes to plumbing you're inferior & should admit it & get expert help. I quickly & vigorously agreed with him while trying to suppress my miffedness, my feeling of having been attacked/offended! I could have defended myself by saying "I usually can fix plumbing problems! But this one was over my head!" My statement would have been true, & petulant.

4 Besides being finite & sinful, we human beings are all inferior. In static societies, folks accept their inferiority as natural. In a dynamic-egalitarian society such as the USA now is, folks feel inferior & don't like it, are petulant about it, even rage about it as a violation of "equal rights." (In its silliest flatland form, this dogmatic egalitarianism resents the vertical ["hierarchical," "patriarchal"] dimension itself & must therefore be atheist, since deity can't be deity without being over, above, more than, superior; & gender equality invades divinity by suppressing the Bible's pronouns for God [all of which are masculine].)

5 Besides being occupationally inferior to all who are in other occupations (though no occupation is in itself superior to any other), any particular theologian is inferior to some other theologians present &/or past. My breeding included the practice of looking up to, & learning from, my "betters": it's bred into me to be more grateful for than jealous of theologians, religion thinkers, superior to me. At age 80 I'm no less eager than ever before to read them, hear them, praying that they'll better guide my thinking about God (& therefore all else). I look up to them, & up-looking is the direction in which (to speak metaphorically, analogically, the only way one can speak religiously) I can hope to see God: vertical thinking about my intellectual-spiritual social-location is of a piece with vertical thinking about deity, "hierarchy."

Those who lack this cultural-intellectual-spiritual vertical breeding are, naturally, atheists in the traditional sense, ie, rejectors of the heaven-Father of the Bible. God in their case may be either the solipsistic hierarchy created & maintained by their own ego, or (as an antiverticial abstraction) egalitarianism (eg, in radical feminism). Eitherwise, "guidance in thinking about God" (in this Thinksheet's title, my definition of theology-as-action) must begin with helping seekers bring out of the treasury of their funded experiencing "things new & old" (Mt.13.52) that have a **vertical feel** (eg, experiences of awe, ecstatic adoration [eg, "falling in love"], humiliation, defeat, guilt, shame). (Of course a person in denial of all this "shadow" within is no candidate for theological learning, for being guided in thinking about God. But in every congregation, some are ready, some few are eager.)

6 Wm.C.Placher (20 RELIGIOUS STUDIES NEWS Nov/98) reports on his Lilly-grant research into how theologians can "connect" with congregations (not just talk among themselves [which is what most books of theology are] & try to connect with fellow-intellectuals in other fields). We three were trying to do just that two evenings ago, disabusing our fellow-believers of the sterotype that theology is, to the public, (in Placher's words) "esoteric & irrelevant," the giving of allegedly "'right answers'" instead of inviting to shared reflection on the great questions, which (I said, referencing Rilke) remain questions because they must be lived & remain great because they are ultimate (about what matters most here & hereafter). "People aren't stupid, they are just ignorant. You can explain anything, as long as you remember, in the beginning, to explain everything."

7 One way a theologian may guide laity in thinking about God is to put in a lay group's hands a great, **user-friendly** paragraph by a great theologian, then help them experience the fun & joy of unpacking it. Try a Psalm, too; & a ¶ in Romans (which all three of us said was the book we could least do without; we agreed also on our favorite 20th-c. theologian [Barth]; & we got to tell our stories, because one of the questions was "How did you come to go to seminary?"). Then there's the congregation's Mission Statement, & the creeds recognized by the particular denomination (in Congregationalism [four denominations], we've just had the 350th anniversary of the Cambridge Platform)....Serendipity: My evening sermon, 50 years before our "Soup & Questions" evening, was on how theology can become user-friendly to the laity: "The Trustworthiness of the Christian Position: Theology and Christian Faith."

8 "What's the alternative?" as my father used to say. The alternative to thinking deep (as theology teaches us to worship God "with all our mind") & living deep (as more than mere culture-Christians) is to live shallow & not think at all. After listing all the oncoming improvements in television technology, Bill Tammeus (Kansas City Star, picked up into the 11.15.98 Cape Cod Times) asks "But what difference will that make if we burn time watching this still-vast wasteland's rubbish [ref. to the metaphor in Fred Friendly's retirement speech now long ago]?" Earlier in the article, after detailing current trash, the author has this pungent ¶ (which I read to close the "Soup & Questions" meeting): "The sobering reality is that commercial TV offers a reasonably accurate picture of who we are--a people mired in a culture of celebrity, afraid of life-affirming risk, leery of real creativity and willing to do almost anything to avoid hard questions about ultimate meaning [underlining, mine]." He then specifies the universal bottom-line motivation of TV, the supreme instrument of commodification, shriveling the human public down to consumerist mouths whose favorite junk food is "irresponsible, casual sex." "Cowering in living rooms, demanding to be anesthetized by cheap, tawdry entertainment, people who watch the drivel on commercial TV get what they deserve because they buy the products for which the medium creates demands." What a contrast between the dreck & drivel, the cultural pollution of commercial TV, & learning to "think about God," ie, to do theology....

9 ...especially when the "guidance in thinking about God" occurs in groups, build-what Robt.Putnam (in "Bowling Alone") has taught us to call "**social capital**," in this case becoming a community of the Christian mind, the Christian way of thinking/feeling/speaking (& therefore living)!