

Rumbles in the Roman Rumpus Room right now, August '86

"I'm glad I won but I'm sorry you had to lose" said the generous-spirited 23-year-old who trounced McEnroe yesterday (27Aug). I'm glad the two oppressions this Thinksheet deals with are not in my Protestant world (where we already have more than enough), but I'm sad they're in my fellow-Christian Catholic world....Here, I'm not trying to analyze the Vatican's efforts to suppress (Cath. U. of Am.) Chas. Curran & (Jesuit data-gatherer) Terrance Sweeney. Rather, I'm concerned to comment on what this authority clashing may help us see-and-do better--us Christians, us Americans, us humans.

1. "Authority" has two dimensions, both of them constitutive, natural & essential to our humanity. (1) Authority "out-of-being" (Greek, "eksousia"; cf. Latin "esse" in contrast to "bene/plene esse"), from within. Having no external authority, "Jesus spoke with authority" ("eksousia" in M.1.22 & Synoptic parallels); a group example I'm close to (because of Loree) is Hospice, whose increasing authority-influence derives from its intelligent-compassionate care for the dying & their loved ones. The nuances of the Greek here can enrich Biblical (Jewish & Christian) thinking; see pp.560-75 TDNT.II, Kittel. (2) Authority over (Greek "dynamis") is the meaning the Eng. word more often brings to mind: exterior power, heteronomous rather than autonomous (both in contrast to Tillich's "theonomy," God's ruling both from within and over). Not to put too fine a point on the distinction or on the Greek words (p.563): "It is not always possible to separate between authority and power, between eksousia and dynamis."

2. This Thinksheet's title clues you into how I'm using the basic distinction in sec.1. Social psychology has now well developed the analysis of the power factor in "community" in comparison and contrast with the power factor in "institution"--the former roughly "from within" the whole network of the community's interrelations of persons and subcommunities; the latter roughly "over" via a codification of rights/responsibilities + processes protecting the codification ("codex juris") against violation (in other words, legal sanctions).

3. In terms of the sec.2 distinction, Curran is arguing on the basis of changing realities in community (specifically the Am. Catholic community), and Rome is counterarguing on the basis of allegedly unchanging realities in the institution of the Roman hierarchy as magisterium (teaching authority-and-power). Curran's judo is in evidencing the changingness of the unchanging magisterium (eg, on civil rights & rhythm contraception)--parallel with the late-Scholastic undermining, SIC ET NON, of the Fathers. Another parallel (Ken Woodward's "Meet the Press" last Sunday, which I had to miss because I was preaching): The Vatican sent a public confronter against Curran, as it had sent Eck against Luther. Communities are social growths, institutions are social constructs; ergo, you've got a leg up when you can argue for the former against the latter, for you can attack the latter's fictive (maybe also fictional) elements. Infallibility-changelessness is a stabilizing illusion: how maintain stability while foregoing the illusion? Here I feel with Rome, for I had to suffer through this question vis-a-vis the paper pope, the Bible. And I've no doubt Rome will grow from its Curran experience (Boff, too!).

4. Sweeney's resignation from the Jesuits is more complex. Rome clamped down on Curran for his unorthodox teachings on (broadest sense) sex: institution (hierarchy) v. individual. But Sweeney's argument is an intrahierarchical judo (L.A.TIMES & syndicated): "My superiors...were asking me to suppress information that I'd gathered on the attitudes of well over 100 members of the hierarchy....Certain persons in authority were trying to silence a large number of other persons in authority....two models of authority," (1) "as institution" and (2) "Jesus' relationship with his disciples and the people who came to him...love, truth, compassion."