

An old bromide has it that No generalization holds water, including this one. This thinksheet grows out of reading Macmillan's prospectus on THE ENCLCLOPED-IA OF RELIGION last night (15Apr86, Tax Day) and writing this morning on the papal visit to a synagogue service last Sunday.

1. If apes and/or dolphins generalize, would we know it? I think so, for their generalizations would become visible to the human eye within the limits of those animal's anatomy and of our eyes. Of course animals other than man communicate intraspecifically and even to an amazing-amusing extent with us, but minds transcending time and space they apparently do not have. They have instinctual societies, but they cannot create a shared culture of knowledge and beliefs transcending both the individual and space-time. So Jn. Donne could say of us, "No man is an island" and mean it more diversely and profoundly than it could be said of any other species....Now, generalizing, with all its glories and perils, is one dimension of this self-and-society-and-humanity-and-world transcendence. This thinksheet is about one strand of that dimension, viz., generalizing on religion.
2. I remember conversations with Luth. theologian Joe Sittler, who boldly generalized on God--eg: "God is interested in a lot of things besides religion. God is the Lord and Creator of all life, and there are manifestations of the holy in its celebration or in its repudiation--in every aspect of the common life." Similar is Ab. Heschel, whose mystical (hasidic) thinking produced awesome and beautiful leaps, sanctification-of-the-Name connections, to which the first line of the Lord's Prayer invites Jews and Christians. Mysticism in general includes unbounded generalizations, classically on the intuitive side in the Vedas and on the analytic side in the Upanishads. Hebrew poetry, with its obligatory second line of the distich, urges movement of the mind in both directions (to wider and to narrower, more often the former--ie, to generalization)--the mood of meditation and prayer being to maximize awareness of the divine/human encounter.
3. Wisdom literature advises against generalizing in the interest of egocentricity: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart (theocentricity) and rely not on your own insight" (Prov.3.5; TEV: "...never rely on what you think you know"). Here, as often in the world's wisdom literature, two generalizations are set at odds, the mind being instructed to embrace the one and eschew the other. The choice is sapiential, of wisdom against folly; and sometimes one or both are sanctioned (supported by evidential motivation). The force of Prov. 3.5 is illustrated in the case of Presbyterian missionary Benjamin Weir, whose earliest and strongest wisdom-support it was during his Shiite captivity in Beirut (ending in 1985).
4. Mother Teresa has a gnostic mind, as the world's become aware since she's become a media star. Eg, "Never let anything so fill you with sorrow as to make you forget the joy of Christ Risen." So, too, Albert Schweitzer. A heuristic generalization of my own: Do those who work face-to-face with the utterly destitute compensate and counterbalance with nurturing abstractions lest they become overwhelmed by their daily concretions? I've been reading papers toward an upcoming conference on Hospice and spirituality, and I think I see this tendency here (as well as in other Hospice experiences of mine). Biblically, does our primary soaring literature of the soul arise out of the grungy horrors of ancient Near Eastern ecopolitical life?
5. Our greatest living generalizer in "history of religion," Mircea

Eliade, has just now (Apr/86) died--death, the great generalizing of antilife. Diderot (18th c. Fr.) is credited with inventing the encyclopedia, the one form of literature with these two aims: leave nothing out, and comprehend all things with generalizations. So it is with Eliade's last work, his general editorship of THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGION.

6. Religion as praxis of the heart is a reaching through the concrete to the abstract, through the less-real particular to the more-real general. In religions of revelation, it is additionally a reaching in the opposite direction: God reaching out for us. Biblical sacrament is this double dynamic in focus (a matter of attending) and in locus (eg, water, bread, wine). This thinksheet's title is "Generalizations on Religion": religion is itself the one holistic practice of generalizing--parallel with philosophy, which is not holistic (whole-person-in-life) but particularistic (our mental powers applied to abstracting, analyzing, generalizing). "Theology" is the word for efforts to converge these two generalizing tendencies and projects.

7. Historic crises of the body (eg, plagues, wars, droughts) and of the spirit (as "paradigm shifts" both reveal and produce the internal "logic" of a world-picture or project-picture at the time a particular picture is being called into question because of its proved inadequacy) foster two forms of holistic generalization, viz, religion and antireligion. See this blurb for the above ENCYCLOPEDIA: "Recent years have witnessed an explosion of interest in all things religious. Religious communities have experienced surges of vitality. Classes in religious studies and the history of religions are filled. And people of many faiths are rediscovering the strengths of the spiritual in their lives. Knowledge--and the demand for more knowledge--about religion grows....deepening our appreciation of religion in the fabric of human civilization."

8. Here's a generalization: In every civilization, wisdom informs that humans are various in "soul." Some souls have more hunger to generalize than do other souls. Generalizing souls produce religion, philosophy, theology, science. Specifying souls produce technics in the wide and narrow senses. Souls on the boundary between the two tendencies produce the arts, which range from the more abstract (eg, music) to the more concrete (eg, sculpture). If you're given to "journaling" in reverse (a la Progovff), look to your soul-type by looking to your story (as I'm now doing, day by day, as I read my 1934 diary; if we call the above Types #1, #2, and #3, I'm most #1, then #2, finally #3: my earliest passion was for science, which began to decrease in 1935 as religion began to increase).

9. A religion provides a culture with its way of CELEBRATING the common ventures of life and of COMFORTING the victims of life's common misadventures, failures, and tragedies. Why is every religion more successful at the former than at the latter? Because the latter calls forth our analytic powers, and this dimension of our intelligence is acid to our life-paradigms. The phrase "the acids of modernity" sticks with me; it's from the 1930s, when I was paradigm-wrestling more than I've been at any subsequent time.

10. Without the skills of modern engineering, the medieval cathedral builders had to learn by doing: if at first your structure collapses, try, try again. All the radical advances rooted directly in tragic "accidents." My generalization here: the human need for failure, including the failure of the gods, which opens the door to greater temples of soul and body.