

"NATURAL law/morality/theology"

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MAKES NONSENSE OF JUSTIFICATION

Craigville Theological Colloquy VII ("Good News & Good Works: Justification & Justice") aims to repair, widen, & strengthen the bridge between faith & action. Carl Henry had a book out to that purpose as early as 1946.* But a bridge is no better than its polar foundations: if the faith is not firm or the action not faithful, what matters the quality of the bridge?...My "J&J" Thinksheet series, looking toward the Colloquy, raises questions as to that firmness & that faithfulness--XX, as to justification's firm grounding in the Christian story's truth....A story to help you feel what I'm feeling as I write this: Christmas Sunday '43 we the Elliotts were listening to the U. of Chicago Roundtable, radio's intellectual feast in those days. The moderator, Ernest Cadman Colwell, dean of the Divinity School & soon to become president of the U. (& under whom at the time I was writing a PhD dissertation), concluded the hour with the simple, stirring words "...and best of all, the Christmas carols are true." For our family, a moment of joy.

FORMAT: This thinksheet is an open letter to Carl in response to his 16 Jan 90 letter to me. What is quoted in my title is from his letter. After saying that my #2354 ["The Cost & Sorrow of Self-Inflicted Diminishment"] "is one of the best things you've done," he follows that the "emphasis on natural law/morality/theology plays into the hands of the secularizers, & all too many evangelicals follow suit & neglect the Reformers. That's one reason I titled my [six-volume] work GOD, REVELATION & AUTHORITY."

Dear Carl,

1. Thank you for the encouraging word from "a godfather of the evangelical reawakening" (as Michael S. McManus calls you, 30Dec89 Lancaster INTELLIGENCER JOURNAL). Judging from your latest, TWILIGHT OF A GREAT CIVILIZATION, we two septuagenarians have the same feelings about the spiritual, ethical, moral, cultural, & intellectual deterioration. We have better memories. We dreamed better dreams, prayed for better things to be. Praying the Lord's Prayer with our whole being, we cannot despair. But we do weep while we hope, sorrow while we pray. And pray while we reminisce....& believe some will profit from our rememberings....

2. You suggest that paying attention to the Reformers would check the drift of some evangelicals into various current naturalisms. I agree. In our United Church of Christ various influences are fighting amnesia about our Reformation roots. You are well aware of the multi-stranded Reformation riches in our Heidelberg theology. Our own denomination is a stranding together of four Protestant traditions, including Calvinist (Reformed) & Lutheran (Evangelical), as well as Congregational & Disciples (the old Churches of the Christian Connection). We are in continuous theological conversation with representatives of other Reformation churches. As for the upcoming Colloquy here in Craigville, here is the first of the three guiding questions in the call for papers: "Set forth your understanding of 'justification by faith' in the light of Lutheran and Reformed traditions (Augsburg Confession, Savoy Declaration, Heidelberg Catechism, etc.) and joint statements (Invitation to Action, The UCC General Synod Response to Invitation to Action, The Leuenberg Agreement, and the Budapest Document Toward Church Development)." I spell this out because the media, seizing upon radical (& sometimes stupid) things we say & do, do not credit us with having concern for the roots (& "radical" in this essential sense).

3. To the extent that the Reformers were restorationists, then inoculated against Roman Catholic naturalism (natural law/morality/theology) by using the insights & energies of the NT, which in its time fought against the pagan naturalisms (which were, to too great a degree, taken up into Western Catholic theology--far less into Eastern Orthodox theology, whose mysticism preserved transcendence)....The old RC naturalism is a bee in the amber of the magisterium & is the chief reference for the present Pope's ethical rigidity, esp. on sexual morality. What of the new RC naturalisms (teihardianism, creation spirituality, et al)? They've less of the woodenness of ancient Roman *iustitia*, but they are ever in danger of selling out to, or at least of being unable to defend themselves against, contiguous secularisms, esp. New Age gnosticisms(eg, Teilhard's Christ Omega & Mt. Fox's Cosmic Christ).

4. You're not entirely comfortable with Karl Barth's way of rescuing transcendence from the clutches of materialist & mystic immanentisms (naturalisms); but you will agree, I believe, that, transposing from then & there (his world) to here & now (our world), his apologetic-polemic project was not very different from ours.

4. We've gone through a half century of efforts to have the cake (transcendence)

* And it was my central purpose in my '66 National Council of Churches (Triennium, Miami Beach) debate with Billy Graham.

& eat it, too (accommodating to Western naturalism & Eastern monism, & combinations of the two [some leaning materialist; some, mystical]). When (as you say in your auto-bio) you were of a mind to add a PhD to your ThD, you rejected the U. of Chicago because you thought its Divinity School so far gone into naturalisms (esp. Wieman's "naturalistic theism") that you'd not be treated fairly. I didn't find it so for me. I found the theistic naturalisms (including Hartshorne's) dialectical, a conversational stance vis-a-vis the generally atheist atmosphere of the university--not dogmatic, a convictioned position to which converts were sought (though some of my fellow-students, eg Loomer, did make a religion of the position & sought converts thereto [Bernie even said, in a Divinity House Luncheon debate with me, "If I were dean, I wouldn't let students of your position matriculate"--& when he did become dean, the school did become, for several student generations, dogmatically naturalistic]).... Edwin Eustace Aubrey was a mediator, the formula I remember him for being "ontological continuity in the prosaic dimension, epistemological discontinuity in the poetic dimension"--but, gentle soul that he was, he wasn't dogmatic about his formula! Instead of being doctrinal, it was programmatically, a bidimensional grid for discussion toward new light without breach of academic & personal community. My first course with him (summer '41, "The Natural and the Supernatural") began with his asking each of us to write a paper titled "**My Definition of 'Nature'**". How is that for going instantly to the heart of the matter? "Nature" is antonymic to what--supernature, the supernatural, the supranatural, the personal (Weiman used to write on my papers, "MUST you believe in a personal God?"), transcendence, dualism, mysticism? (Since your PhD is from the same school as M.L.King Jr.'s, I'm sure you know his BU thesis wrestled with this in comparing/contrasting Wieman [& thus Whitehead] & Tillich, & came out strongly for personalism, in line with the three generations of "Boston personalists.")

5. When Christianity is spiritually & intellectually vigorous, it is itself. When it loses either spiritual or intellectual vitality, it deteriorates in three ways: (1) it regresses into tribalism (the judaizing tendency), (2) it floats off into gnosticism, (3) it sags into naturalism (of various types, including historicism). As Greece's minister of education, Nikos Kazantzakis fought all three heresies. Somebody ought to do a thesis laying this out in (novel & film) "The Last Temptation of Christ." Viewing his oeuvre, I conclude he was most concerned about the sag (my metaphor: the flaccid spirit/mind does what the flaccid body does "dust to dust" all the way back into "nature," as does history unremembered & unattended). Not sag, but ascent: "O Sun,...my red-haired hound, / sniff out all the quarries that I love... / and I shall pass them through my entrail's secret forge / till slowly, with profound caresses, play and laughter, / stones, water, fire, and earth shall be transformed to spirit." But here is no nature-rejecting spirituality. Rather, "Good is this earth, it suits us! Like the global grape / it hangs, dear God, in the blue air and sways in the gale, / nibbled by all the birds and spirits of the four winds. / Come, let's start nibbling too and so refresh our minds.!" (Prologue, THE ODYSSEY: A MODERN SEQUEL [S&S/58/65].)....I'm glad that suspenders are back. Not that I wouldn't wear them if they weren't: I so hate sagging trousers. Is that continuous with my hating atheistic & theistic naturalisms? Or is that a reverse reification of my metaphor?

6. Nobody in God's old creation ("nature") has been good enough to be a Christian. But in his second making, new creation, God made Christ Jesus our wisdom, righteousness-justification, sanctification, and redemption (1Cor.1³⁰, on "history"). Like the two natures of Christ, the two makings are distinguishable and inseparable from each other & also from Christian truth-claims about them. Fudge in any way on this & you have something less than Christianity no matter what it calls itself through whatever critical theory (eg disciplinary/institutional [as Foucault], representative/reproductive [as Bourbieu], hegemonic/oppositional [as Gramsci], sacrificial/transgressive [as Bataille]). Without God's "new thing" both Testaments testify to, our hunger for the More Than is not met, our yearning for the beyond beyond our reach is not reached from Beyond. And, as I assert in this Thinksheet's title, we are imprisoned in a "nature" (no matter how prettified by the analogical imagination) that "makes nonsense of justification." Since we were on the same faculty way back in '42-'43, I've considered

your rigid-Gordon-Clark-like "propositional revelation" as an excessive, hubristic way of saying what I'm saying in this \$--lacking in humility & flexibility. But we've never differed as to the basic truth-content of our religion, our Story rooted in reality. But because I don't foreclose against truth-content in other world-stories, I call myself "evangelical open." While I'm clear about my roots & reach, my grounding & witness, in the human forest my branches touch the branches of other trees with equal right to speak to me of their roots & reach. "God must translate all our prayers into the language of heaven," as I said before praying in Jesus' name at the beginning of class sessions in U. of Hawaii courses in religion....Whatever comes of "post-modernism" & all the other current "post-"s, I see, by divine chastenings in nature & history, less arrogance ahead, more eagerness to learn, more willingness to abandon the dug-in ideological trench warfare of the past (including "inerrancy"). A Harv. prof. today, referring to the race to find "the top quark" (if any exists), said "We're praying for a contradiction that will lead us to a better theory." I love it! No progress without paradigm shifts. We need one right now, from humanity to "nature" as biosphere. A paradox in this paradigm-shift: To be penitently-humbly faithful to Spirit, we must abandon the false transcendence in humanistic claims & frames & learn to see ourselves afresh as a part of, in addition to apart from, nature. One implicate of this shift is that individual rights must be limited by the norm & goal of biosustainability, a new middle axiom between reason & revelation. Christian theology & Christian ethics have scarcely begun to face the eco-crisis & its new opportunities.

7. You've been so great an influence for good, but my guess is that in your own heart your most painful shortfall has been the failure to fulfil your dream of an evangelical academy worshipping God with all the mind as well as with all the heart. My view is that the failure has been a self-defeat: your insistence on inerrancy (expressing & engendering the scribal mentality) & propositional revelation (expressing & engendering the rationalistic mentality) has made impossible anything broader-beamed or deeper than evangelical scholasticism, a plague I've fought for longer than my half-century as an ordained minister of the gospel. We've talked for several generations about a "new evangelicalism." It's time we produce one. There are glimmerings of it in some younger scholars. (I'm always delighted, & thankful to God, when face-to-face or in print I meet one who is brighter than I.)

8. The adjective in "natural law/morality/theology" is a virtual announcement that the reasoning therein will be deductive & circular, or (to use the medieval word) scholastic. The mentality-mentation is the same if, replacing "natural" with "biblical," we treat "Bible" as "nature" was treated, viz as source more of confirmation than illumination. Let's call this pre-positional thinking: a position is assumed (in both senses), then a search is made for props (also in both senses: supports, & data expressible as propositions). A humorous though sad recent instance: The UMC General Commission on Religion and Race decided to oppose the movement to make English our official national language, then asked the General Conference to instruct the Council of Bishops "to express, in writing, a biblical and theological rationale for our opposition to the English-only movement"! Most current "social action" in liberal churches is as mindlessly trendy, deductive, scholastic (odd venue for the term!) as that. So with most naturalism, & most biblicism....By contrast, just before the turn into this century, two Yale scholars working together on the inductive method decided to found, on that principle, two schools--one, a university (Wm. Rainey Harper, first pres. of the U. of Chicago), & the other, a seminary (Wilbert Webster White, first pres. of Biblical Seminary, now N.Y. Theol. Seminary). (Do I remember aright that you & I were fellow-students, summer seminary '37, in Howard Tillman Kuist's inductive study of the Ep. to the Hebrews--or were you there with me a summer soon thereafter?) Beginning in '69, Bill Webber & I, & soon some others, turned NYTS to using the inductive method to discover what sort of theological education was appropriate to the city, esp. the inner city. Cannot this method be used toward a new-new evangelical theology that could body itself forth in an intellectually respectable & ecclesiastically influential academy (or thinktank) of evangelical scholars? The Wheaton-centered ISAE is in that direction (its historians meeting each summer here in Craigville)....But a three-page letter is long enough! Grace & peace.

Willis