

THE HOLY ONE IS MORE THAN LOVER

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

OCCASION: Two experiences yesterday: a reading, & a conference.

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

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The reading was of the adoption, a few days ago, by an Episcopal diocese, of a "Report on Sexuality." The report uses the divine sanction for "love" (undefined), in the hope of smothering the fires of the homosexuality conflict; but a theological analysis reveals that the effect is to drag God down into "love": God is so reduced to "love" that, operationally, Love is god.

"God measures human relationships by the presence and activity of love in them, and not by whether or not they unite persons of different sexes....The quality of any relationship is determined solely by love....The perceived Scriptural obstacles to such an affirmation rest on incomplete understandings of the meaning and purpose of the pertinent passages." The report pushes its luck too far in condemning heterosexual marriage in a church that does not practice homosexual marriage: "The Church cannot justly bless or celebrate any human relationship while it devalues and denies other relationships in which love is likewise made manifest."

Here is theodynamics prostituted to psychosociodynamics, which first defined & then divinized "Love," & now claims that this idol is the biblical God! The tools used in the crafting of this idol are different from those of the idol-makers Isaiah mocks (40.18-31: "trust in the LORD," who "is not like an idol"; cf. Hos.13.2; Hab.2.18-20, which ends on this note: "The LORD is in his **holy** Temple; let everyone on earth be silent in his presence"; Ex.20.3-5).

The Report is asking the Church to bless homosexual practice, which canonically has a status lower than war: the biblical God is sometimes said to bless war, never homosexuality. The sanctional range for churches is to bless, to permit ("accept what cannot be changed"), & to condemn. Here's how it stands with homosexual practice: (1) accept scriptural light & it cannot be blessed (no matter how disingenuously clever the Report's hermeneuts); (2) accept modern light and it cannot be condemned; (3) converge both lights, & it should be permitted.

So much for the reading, now for the conference:

Yesterday, some 120 pastoral counselors, psychotherapists, psychologists, chaplains, physicians, and social workers gathered here in Craigville for a 9am-4pm on "Spiritual Dimensions of Psychotherapy." The key speaker, a professor of pastoral psychology in a theological seminary, performed as I expected him to: positively, he praised the biblical God's tangency, viz as the **Healing Lover**, to the range of the audience's occupational commitments as people-helpers, care-givers. Nothing wrong with that. In fact, why bother to come if he couldn't show tangency (long-called, in liberal religion, "relevance")? To his credit, he once even mentioned that "Christianity says" that God so intended tangency (though the speaker did not use this geometric image) as to become incarnate in Jesus. Wryly I mused, "Voltaire was right about this speaker: he has made God in his own image."

That dismal musing deepened as the speaker treated negatively the non-"love" aspects of the biblical God:

1 God's *power* side as **Lord & King & Father**, God's *dark* side as **Judge**, & God's *hidden* side as **Mystery**. All these join with God's *warm* side as **Savior & Healing Lover** to constitute his holiness, **the Holy One** of this Thinksheet's title.

2 Psychologized theology, sociologized theology, politicized theology are doubly alike. Not only do they expatiate each on its one particular tangency in a manner for which the expression "off on a tangent" is appropriate, but they also not only fail to remark but also denigrate the other aspects of the divine, in each case especially the aspect at greatest distance from the emphasized point of tangency.

3 Psychotheologians first translate theo- into psycho-terms. Then, as the disease advances, they stand within psychology looking at theology--from, as it were, "Psychotherapeutic Dimensions of Theology" to (the conference title) "Spiritual Dimensions of Psychotherapy." No criticism here of the conference planners: they titled just right to draw the folk they wanted to draw. And their flier used an apt & true quotation from the keynote speaker, Merle R. Jordan of Boston U.

School of Theology: "If the counselor is not open to hearing theological meanings in the stories of persons who come for personal liberation, then he or she may only be adding to the person's barriers to freedom."

4 Ideas have consequences, & so do their distortions. What happens when theology becomes captive to psychology? The captivity appears as further alienation from the biblical God & thus also from church/synagogue, whether the distortions are by amnesia-producing omissions or by anger-producing misrepresentations. (A parallel: Children indoctrinated with gender-"correct" language for God are thereby alienated from the biblical God, whom the Bible never represents by any feminine names or even feminine metaphors, though by a few feminine similes.) I was so concerned about what our speaker was doing that I had to remonstrate with him, first privately & then in plenum, that, ironically, in a conference intended to draw psychology & theology closer together, his cheap shots at the non-"love" aspects of God were deepening some participants alienation from Bible & church. (I saw many heads nod approval when, time & again, he kicked one or another of those aspects.) In plenum I said, "Jesus used the full reservoir & circle of biblical God-images (with their appropriate tangencies to human existence private & public)."

5 "**Holy**" (with its cognates) is the central code- or signal-word for biblical religion. To miss it is to miss biblical religion. To misunderstand it is to misunderstand biblical religion. To coopt it for some extraneous meaning, eg "wholeness," is to prostitute it (in the instance cited, an error abetted by the fact that the Eng. words "holy" & "whole" share a [Teutonic] root)....For an overview, read Jas. Muilenberg's magisterial article "Holiness," 2.616-25, INTERPRETER'S DICTIONARY OF THE BIBLE (Abingdon/62). In DIARY OF A SEDUCER, Kierkegaard laughs at the reduction of holiness (theology) to "love" (ethics), the very reduction I railed against yesterday. S.K. profoundly grasped the biblical meaning (as intuition, feeling, idea) of holiness. He was equally adamant against reducing holiness to righteousness, the cool side of ethics as love is its warm side. But he saw righteousness as implicit in God's holiness as Judge, whose justice constitutes the divine cosmic & human order & maintains that order jurisprudentially, by revelation & enforcement of his will expressive of his nature (for a distich paralleling justice & righteousness, see Is.5.16)....NOTE that as psychotheology reduces holiness to love, sociopolitical theology reduces it to righteousness. And as love deteriorates into sensuality & sentimentality, righteousness rots down into self-righteousness, moralism, legalism (eg, currently the rigorous enforcement, on some campuses, of politically-correct [PC] speech).

A further characteristic of psychotheology is that it denigrates, as impertinent to an "authentic" image of God, such holiness-associated feelings as fear, anxiety, guilt, & shame. These are treated as servants of hell rather than of heaven. Scrupulousness against these feelings is characteristic not just of psychotheology but of liberal religion in general, rendering it vulnerable to utopian collapse (as, in the 1960s, the death-of-God movement which, face-to-face with Shoah-Holocaust, found it impossible to continue to believe that "a loving God" rules the world): mystery, evil, & sin are given too light a reading to sustain the heaviness of history & of the human heart.

6 In current liberal religion, the name of God in this Thinksheet's title has a circumlocutory force, viz to evade gender-referencing of God. In liturgy--prayers, litanies, even some rewritten hymns--"the Holy One" has been replacing "Lord," "Father," "King," "Son of God." If you know what's up, it makes you smile where the surrogate phrase does not twist the meaning, & frown where it does. Biblically, this inclusive-language move is a disgrace, for it deludes the unwary into imagining that this is in Scripture a general title for God, whereas the truth is that it's rare & always with special contextual meaning. And sometimes the reference is to Jesus, not to God-in-general. How silly & sad to try to erect firewalls of scruple against the biblical lexicon!

7 An empiricism denying revelation will speak, as psychotheology does, of **dysfunction** rather than of sin & evil. The tools for handling "dysfunction" do not include repentance, faith, atonement, incarnation, resurrection, the life eternal.