An open letter to Joseph C. Hough Jr on the occasion of his installation as the 15th president of Union (NYC) Theological Seminary 4.6.00

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NEED EACH SEMINARY, LIKE EACH HOUSE, HAVE A DISTINCTIVE SMELL?

Dear Dr. Hough:

During the service your wife, whom you looked at often during your address, sat directly in front of me, so that I was tempted to think that at least some of your glances were directed at me, which was highly improbable, as we'd never met till after the service I said to you, "Like you, I'm a renegade Southern Baptist long now in the United Church of Christ," & we had a laugh together, & you said, "There are quite of few of us." I'm hopeful & prayerful that your old (SB) piety will bubble up into your (UCC) politics (i.e., way of perceiving/preaching relations between power & people)....This Thinksheet (my 3000th) ruminates on its question in light of your address & the next morning's plenary.

1 My credentials for the question? I studied in 5 seminaries & taught in four (in addition to college-&-university teaching, & a decade as a pastor, & a decade on the national UCC staff) & have given occasional lectures in others of various denominations. Like you, I've had considerable experience of the multi-organizational power dynamics of schools set to train clergy (& religion scholars), & of the interpersonal dynamics within these institutions, & of the interseminary dynamics (seminaries jostling for distinctive identites for both internal & external consumption)--so my answer to the question this Thinksheet raises is yes, though a somewhat regretful yes.

2 A few relevant stories out of my past:

(1) The smell of **Southern Baptist Theological Seminary** (Louisville KY) when I went there before WWII was antebellum Southern gentleman. A few minutes after my arrival, a group of seven students, after ascertaining my state (which process named me "Elliott of NY," as each student had his natal state as the concluding part of his name), asked me the name of Robt.E.Lee's horse & laughed heartily when I was dumbstruck by the question. We had Negro servants; & when the student body sent a petitiion to the trustees to provide them with a living wage, that body fired them & instructed us students that henceforth we were to maintain our own quarters. The atmosphere was military (a Southern-gentleman characteristic): 1/3rd of your grade in a course came from the 1 (day-unknown!) recital opportunity you had in that course; you got no grades, & were told 1 mo. before what you hoped would be your graduation whether you were to graduate. In 3rd.-yr. Greek we were assigned a book in Latin, & no allowance was made for those who couldn't read Latin (those of us who could formed reading groups for the Latin-illiterate). Boot camp in the biblical languages was severe: I, a NY *Northern* Baptist (name later changed to "American"), an associate member of a Southern Baptist Church only during my Louisville days, went to SBTS specifically because of its (military!) excellence in the biblical languages.

I say, the smell was Southern gentleman. Many of the students, however, were poor: it was the Great Depression: 1 student never paid any $ but brought his cow & milked her for the refectory. But the tone, the atmosphere, was Southern gentleman; & I never experienced any shunning for being (as sometimes jocularly called) a damnYankee: they were warm-hearted, generous-minded, ebullient-spirited.

Of course the school was male: no women allowed on the faculty or in the student body (though the women's Christian education school was on just the other side of the valley). And of course of course, while: by state law & Southern tradition, white. When a beloved teacher died from overwork--giving equal time to us white students & the 3 Negro students he taught segregatedly--some of us students (I worked with Clarence Jordan [later, "The Cotton-Patch NT" & Koinonia Farms, the womb of Habitat for Humanity] & Gordon Cosby [later, Church of the Savior, Washington DC] to achieve 100% nonattendance in classes until the trustees agreed to integrate the school in violation of state law [but Lexington never pressured for compliance].) This the 1st student-forced integration was (if memory serves) Jan.'40.

The smell of SBTS did not include fundamentalist stink, the odor sadly now pervading that then-justly-called Southern Baptist educational flagship. Our readings were theologically broad, & senior theologian Harold Tribble was to become president

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of a liberal seminary, Andover-Newton.

Where were the faculty on the integration crisis? They were Southern gentlemen of honor, & they knew it would be dishonorable not to side with the students even at peril of their positions: that I can remember, not one of them spoke up for the trustees & law-obedience. Too, there was pragma: they wanted to teach, & couldn't if we wouldn't come to class. America didn't yet have such slogans as "nonviolent resistance" & "power to the people," but the reality preceded the words.

Further note on HONOR: An *English* (not just *Southern*) gentleman characteristic. Honor was a sacred virtue & demand. The Englishmen America calls the Founding Fathers pledged "our lives, our fortunes, and our *sacred honor*." Our current degenerate celebrity culture honors the dishonorable, but the Bible will have none of it: the idols are not to be honored, & Mordecai (Esther 3.2) refuses to honor the powerful Haman, & the early Christians refused to honor Caesar though it cost many of them their lives. (My judge-father was called "your honor," & he deserved it not first because of his position but because of his character.) Character ed should teach something deeper than respect.

(2) The theological split that hadn't occurred in the Great Southland before WWII was in full cry in the North, especially in NYC, Boston, & Chicago. I came to consciousness of it in '29 & straddled it in Chicago beginning in '41, where **Northern Baptist Theological Seminary** (where I did a ThD) had a right-ideological smell & the **University of Chicago Divinity School** (where I did a PhD) had a left-ideological smell--& one was as uncomprehending of my straddle as was the other....You may know that in the Great Northland in the '20s, conservative Northern Baptists created antiseminaries alongside the oldline seminaries that had gone liberal: you do not know that I taught in three of these antiseminaries (viz., Northern, Central, & Eastern) & was ejected from all three for impure smell (i.e., my evangelical smell being mixed with my liberal smell). Of course the oldline seminaries didn't want someone whose liberal smell was compromised by an evangelical stink. So I left the Baptists &, when the UCC came into being ('57) during my '50s pastoring of a community church, became UCC & spent the '60s on the UCC national staff, thence a decade back into theological education in....

(3) ....**New York Theological Seminary**, a school with a complex smell & an admirable urban orientation. Ecumenical both denominationally & theologically (& a good fit for me on both counts), it unfortunately had (a) an antisuburban bias & (b) an ideological prejudice against lecturing & in favor of "peer learning" (a pedagogical narrowing I found impoverishing & oppressive & called it a tyranny of style).

3 As for **UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**, my two advantages are objectivity (never having been matriculated there) & friendly various involvements since '37. My professional theological nose has noticed the smell shifts through the decades. It would take a better sociologist than I to judge when the school was more shaping & when more following the cultures, elite & populist. At the '99 ELCA Assembly, a lesbian activist said "Once the rest of society has accepted the homosexual lifestyle, the church will follow." There's considerable of that accomodationism in UTS's history, as well as some against-the-tide stand-taking.

Before getting to my olfactory perception of the seminary's present smell, let's have a look a what was going on in your neighbor institution, Riverside Church, an autumn Sunday (Oct.24) of '37, when Stalin was deep into his horrors & Hitler was only a small dark cloud on the horizon (that afternoon, I toured the German luxury liner "Bremen"). Then as now, that church & your seminary were, as it were, of a smell, harmonious. (As I write, I'm examining the 8½" x 19" bulletin I filed that day after worshiping in Riverside.) Fosdick's sermon was "The Roots of Dependable Character" (in a series of eight on "The Meaning of Inward Personal Security"--the first being "Man's Critical Need of Interior Stability" & the last, "The Security of the Divine Fellowship"). His 4pm sermon was "The Dignity of Being Up-to-Date." The Tuesday series on "Danger Spots in the World Situation" included "well-informed nationals of the countries under consideration." Balancing Fosdick's sermon series on internal spiritual security, the Wednesday evening series was on "The Meaning of Social Security"--each session led by an eminent authority on the session's theme: "Providing Security in Old Age," "Providing Security for the Unemployed," "Dealing with Insecurity Due to Low Wages," & "How Much Security to the Individual Can Soci-

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ety Undertake to Provide?" The Friday morning series, "The Widening Horizon," was on "the child from six to twelve." A roster of social & esthetic offerings, especially for women, filled out the week's buzz. And if you were in need of "experienced workers to wash your windows, wax your floors, clean your house, polish your furniture and your silver, call Miss... or Miss... [phone number]."

I've reported on that Sunday bulletin in enough detail to reveal the im/balances (soul/society, church/world, worship/study, private/public, inter/national, work/play). Some awareness (in the Great Depression!) of economic suffering; none of issues of race, gender, class, systemic injustice, national sovereignty (though some concern about these last three in some of the UTS classes I attended the next day).

My overall impression? *Psychotheology*. A half-dozen years earlier I read Fosdick's TWELVE TESTS OF CHARACTER: now ('37) he's preaching the same Christian uprightness but in the Freudian mode baptized, two years earlier & 93 blocks farther south, when Norman Peale added Smiley Blanton to his ministry staff (the first psychiatrist on a local-church ministerium). (Three decades later, NYU's Paul Vitz, in his underheralded PSYCHOLOGY AS RELIGION, used Peale & Fosdick as his prime examples.)....ITEM: The cover of said Sunday bulletin (10.24.37) has a long psychology quote without benefit of deity or clergy: "From the point of view of the psychologist," you may get "a nervous breakdown" from failure to adapt yourself to yourself. You won't have a n.b. if you put "honor" & "self-esteem" ahead of your "fear and desire for self-preservation" in your list of motives. "A man is impotent to face the onslaughts of the objective world until he has restored harmony within the borders of his soul....With peace in his soul he is capable of facing the most terrible experience, as has been proved by the war [i.e., WWI]."

Fosdick's preaching, as you know, set the tone--in my metaphor here, the smell --not only for Riverside & UTS but for liberal Protestantism in the several succeeding decades.

4 The present smell of UTS, including your inaugural (else you'd not have been hired), is *sociotheology*, *which (I predict) will look no better in the perspective of two generations hence than that psychotheology now looks to us with our advantage of the same time-lapse.* In a prayerful spirit, I hope to speak a helpful word, knowing you'll be sorely tempted to stop reading but believing you wise enough to expect some light from loyal critics.

For the benefit of those readers of mine who weren't at your inaugural or the morning after (Walt.Brueggeman's lecture & sequel), I must sketch the speeches--first yours, then Walt's....CAUTION: Do not judge me as one who takes potshots from afar, the nonparticipant observer. "A man must participate in the actions & passions of his time on pain of not having lived," I remember my mother's quoting. Well, I've been in on the actions & passions & have been guilty of evangelical & liberal excesses & I'm disinclined to think anyone more guilty of foolishnesses than I: I'm trying to be helpful alongside, not from above.

5 YOUR SPEECH on "a new kind of spiritual formation" had three "markers":

(1) **"Reflective piety"** grounded in Scripture & tradition. You adduced David Tracy's "hermeneutical retrieval of the tradition"--a text's context revealing the text's "No!" You did well to put this first; would that you had spelled it out further & with language from Scripture & tradition. Am I unfair in suspecting that in your eagerness for a "new" spiritual formation, you have fewer good words to say for the old than Scripture & tradition warrant? Giving voice to both is a vision we hope for in this year's theological colloquy at Craigville MA (where I live), 7.10-14: "HOW IS CHRIST FORMED IN US TODAY? Exploring Christian formation in a post-Christian culture." I need not tell you the tendency, in our liberal seminaries (most of whose incoming students have no traditional spiritual formation), to teach Piety 201 to those who've not had 101. Those who know not the old confuse new with true.

(2) **"A new Christian ecumenism,"** with "a new Christian theology of religions." God is sovereign (Calvin) & free (Barth). Thank you for being here specifically Christian: no mere mutual toleration among the religions, but mutual witnessing. Yet I must express sorrow at your antimissionary radical pluralism: many paths to salvation, Jesus is Savior & Lord *(only) for us Christians* (in violation of many NT passages, eg. Jn.14.6). This flaccid theology, so comfortable among intellectuals,

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cuts the nerve of evangelism & missions & is not required for "a new Christian theology of religions" (such as I taught in the U. of Hawaii when Jn.Cobb was there).

You gave positive & negative supports for your recently acquired anticonversionalism, that Jesus is only a provincial rather than the universal Savior. Positively, you cited three personal influences: Jn.Hick (more philosopher than theologian), Jn. Cobb (whom you praised for rapprochement with Buddhism [though, I must add, his Christianity washed out in his debate with Masao]), & Diana Eck (not a theologian, but a student of the world's religions). Negatively, you badmouthed three eminences for their efforts to resist the temptation you yielded to, viz. to shrink Jesus: Barth (with his qualified universalism), Rahner (with his "anonymous Christians"), & Tillich (with his "incognito Christ").

Your shrunken Jesus appeals to a number on your faculty. Next day, one of them lectured (at lunch) on why Jesus is not the Savior for the Jews (despite Ro.1, Hebrews, et al in NT). Another is famous for eliminating the atonement: "No man dying on a cross can ever do me any good." When last year I asked a third member of your faculty what he thought of that anti-atonement statement, his response was "The Union faculty represents many points of view." I hope you can help your theologically polychrome faculty to share the first marker of your "vision for Union," viz. "reflective piety." You told me 1:1 that you'd be "happy" if you could achieve only one of the markers. Maybe that one would be most fruitful to work on.

(3) **"World transformation"**--which you spelled out sociotheologically: "The pursuit of justice is *a* practice of piety," & "Poverty is [now] *the* moral issue." The lost are gone, victims of your radical pluralism; & have been replaced by the poor. Union has segued from psychology as religion to sociology as religion. Once this move is made, the signal words ("justice," "poverty," "equality," et al) are defined not in God's dictionary but in the secular dictionaries of sociology, economics, government, & law. The Lord's Prayer's "Your kingdom/reign/rule come" is infilled with the humanistic vision of the ideal society.

6 **WALT.B.'s SPEECH** functioned as an amen to your ecopoliticized liberationistic theology of "the poor" as being (to the reverse of appearances) privileged in God's sight. While theologically blasphemous, the notion of a divine prejudice favoring one cohort of humanity is rhetorically useful & biblically respectable (the prophets often employing this idealistic-utopian device, including such dramaturgic effects as vegetarian [grass-eating] lions & oppression reversal [the expoor oppressing the exrich: not justice, but a refreshing, emotionally satisfying change of injustice]).

The problem is not with the canonical (Moses/Jesus, OT/NT) vision of shalom, which a competent biblical scholar like Walt can well spell out in terms of covenant, community, land, peace, solidarity, prosperity, piety--or, in Elmer A. Martens' GOD'S DESIGN: A Focus on OT Theology (3rd ed. Smithfield Press/00), deliverance, community, knowledge of God, the abundant life as the components. Rather, the problem is with how to get from here to there. The divine "kingdom" for which we daily pray & labor is as a luminous mountain peak, but we must walk toward it through tsalmaweth (a valley of death-deep darkness, Ps.23.4). God's word is a lamp to our feet (Ps.119.105), but it's no map such as fundamentalists on the right & the left imagine it to be. On the way we do acquire some moral wisdom resonant with that of our predecessors on the earth, & we ought to live/preach/teach that wisdom. Wealth blinds. Power corrupts. Land claims require claim defenders, who become land acquirers ("Kings are takers," Walt said; "Greed kills, anxiety [about possessions] isolates, wealth creates amnesia" about the neighbor/poor). But in its polyparadigmatism, its many frames for viewing divine/natural/human realities, the Bible in its very being is a warning against ideology, the seizing upon one frame (e.g., economic analysis) as salvific.

In his speech, Walt honored the worthies in his academic trajectory: G.Mendenhall (a cousin of my wife's mother), J.Muilenberg, N.Gottwald (right after WWII, my teaching assistant in Hebrew & Greek, who says I "radicalized" him)--the latter two, direct teachers of his. I, too, honor them, & him. But I fear simplistic analyses & prescriptions, especially when driven by a hermeneutic dogma such as the revolutionary egalitarian struggle which presumes, contrary to nature, that all inequity is iniquity....In his response to Walt's speech, Rabbi Alan Cooper spoke of the OT "nuancing" of wealth/poverty. He translates Ps.33.5 as "charity," not justice.

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