

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L. Elitz Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

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Dear Tom:

Today I became aware of your board's "Pluralism Principles," product of a Working Group, which welcomes "comments, observations, and suggestions." I hope you will read this letter, & then pass it on to them.

1 Beware of **aura words**! They have halos, vesicas, & ectoplasm, all without the application of critical consciousness. If you sniff them like glue, you become light-headed & irrational.

All four tributaries upstream from the UCC had exemplary histories of critical consciousness. Any UCC document centering in a word & failing to apply critical consciousness to that word lets down our heritage & betrays our hope. "Pluralism" is the **control word** of the BHM document I'm distressed about, but nowhere in the document is the critical-consciousness control applied to the word itself, so the document is an instance of said let-down & betrayal.

2 A BHM STORY will underline my point. When in 1966 Harvey Cox's THE SECULAR CITY came out & I wrote a study critique of it, including the fact that Harvey was using "secular" fatuously, uncritically, as an aura word, Jerry Jud & I, on the BHM staff, tried to get going a staff discussion based on my critique. Everybody was too busy with "the world's agenda" become the church's agenda! Much of the BHM/UCC agenda in that decade was world-reactive more than gospel-active, a UCC-national-offices tone that's continued to the present....As you know, the most recent Craigville Theological Colloquy was on "The Church Confident": aura-word agenda-control characterizes the mainline churches as the Church Hesitant & goes a long way toward explaining our fading away.

3 A **lexical analysis** of "Pluralism Principles" would diagram the semantic fields & their interconnections, but my intention in this letter is more modest. My comments will be, however, a few lines in that direction....Let's begin with this: The document uses "pluralism" elatively, as a gift of God. But in Genesis 11, it's a curse from God (the particular being language, which the BHM document never mentions). Yes, a Stoic-toned speech in Acts (17.22-31) mentions God's demographic distribution of the races, but downputs two pluralism, viz. (1) theo-pluralism, ie polytheism, & (2) misegenation, God having "fixed...the limits of the places" where each race, distributively, "would live." The speech assumes both racial plurality (a fact) & that racial apartheid as divine territorial assignment (an inference from a fact).

Contrary to the Bible's Niebuhrian ambiguity about pluralism, your document has the defect of simplicity (really, simplisticality, in the bad sense simple-mindedness). Forgivable in a sermon, but not in a platform for planning/action.

4 The document swells with platitudes parading as profundities. I'll note some of these in my Commentary.

5 The doctrine of God one can derive from the document is pallid, "God" being functional-tangential to pluralism. Again, Commentary below.

6 Throughout, church & world are blurred, a common & tragic defect in mainline-church thinking. Consequently, what we get is not a biblically informed & theologically astute mission statement but agenda suggestions almost identical to the NEA guidelines for publicshool teachers.

**Commentary** following the numeration of the "Principles" but fleshed out enough so the Thinksheet reader needn't have in hand a copy of the Principles:

1 Ours is "a God of **wholeness**," a word correlated with pluralism, unity, & solidarity. Since the word's undefined, we can feel its salvific quality only by context. Presumably its more than homophonically related to "holiness," but the parallel is not drawn. Nor do we get any of the Hebrew, Greek, or Latin dominant salvifics ("salvation" is never used) in our biblical-theological-ecclesial lore. It says something sad about the document & its drafters that its holy words, its aura-control-nodal words, are not biblical....."Natural" is a weasel word sanctioning such "diver-

sities" as "sexual orientation" and "disabilities," with God held responsible for the whole schmeer ("creation" & "natural" being interdefining without remainder), the whole mess being painted with the wide-brush-sanctional term "gifts" from God. Contrarily, canonical-classical Christianity is narrow-brush in its use of the divine warrant. But then, canonical-classical Christianity is not, thank God, "pluralistic."

2 That the church's being is for "**witness** to God's intended wholeness for all creation" would be news to the writers of the NT. The document says that mission is to be carried out not against sin but, narrowly, against dividing "barriers in human society." But in the NT (Eph.2.14), Jesus is the barrier-remover not for society but for penitents who enter his church. No wonder the document confuses the "community" of church & world & therefore fails to discern the distinctive mission of the church in distinction from the intra- & inter-human need for human beings to respect one another in their severalities!

3 I define a religion as "a way of seeing, & living in, the world." The document defines pluralism as "a way of understanding the world that values diversity as a divine gift" (the anaphor awkwardly distanced from its reference). So, is pluralism a **religion**? Seems so. Any human being, without reference to the Cross, is "a bearer of God's grace." Again, the church/world blurring.

4 The document uses "pluralism" & "wholeness" as both **descriptive** & (as "genuine w." & "authentic p.") **normative**. But the two dimensions are often blurred, as one would expect in a sloppy rhetorical text but not in an analytic-prescriptive bill of rights/responsibilities. The difference is that between propaganda, which aims to bypass ratiocination, & essay (or Thinksheet!), which aims to incite to clear thinking & thus better decision-making & more intelligent action....The Stoic body-model here opposes "exclusion": what of the body's immunological systems?

6 "Pluralism does not suggest that there is more than one **truth**." Oh? That's exactly what it suggests, the meaning it had when I learned it in philosophy 60 years ago (OED, 1887; Wm. James)....Here, it's against "privileged position[s]." Jews are not to have special privileges in Israel--ie, a Jewish state should not exist? And English should not be the privileged language in English-speaking countries? Beneath the document's preachment of "pluralism" lies, I believe, a radical anti-Anglo egalitarianism, which is conformable to Marxism & secularism but not to history & social reality. Liberal Christianity has tended to collapse itself into utopian egalitarianism, such as in this document...."Pluralism" implies relativism, which brings us back to "more than one truth." Some church-types may deny this, but they're swimming against the American-language tide. But often plurality is meant when the document says "pluralism": observing that distinction would serve (another holy word in the document) "dialogue."

7-10 Other implicates of the sociological use of "pluralism" are **anti-exclusivism** (as in "open & affirming" & "a church for all people") & **anti-evangelism** (every religion & point of view to be respected & considered salvific). A document may deny both implicates in its use of "pluralism," but--again--linguistically, it's swimming upstream, & the two connotations will reverberate in most hearers' heads. (See Schubert Ogden's excellent article, "Pluralism," *in loco*, THE WESTMINSTER DICTIONARY OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY [SCM/Westminster/83]: pluralism as "a state or condition" is by some, such as BHM, to be advocated as "a doctrine or policy.").... "If you can't lick 'em, join 'em" isn't capable of revving up much enthusiasm, any more than is "making a virtue of necessity." The media are into pluralism in spades, so a church's preaching "me too" will draw only a hohum response no matter how many General Synod resolutions buttress up the trendy gospel.

10 The "bold witness" falls short of being conversional: "the norms (standards) of our faith community...may not be universally affirmed."

11 The ideal of the **local church** as a slice of the human rainbow means well but has an imperialistic-triumphalist tinge. It should exclude only those not making a Christian profession, but should not fight "Birds of a feather flock together."

"Age" is not a "nonnatural" diversity. I am old, &, my brother, it's natural! 