

"THE OFFENDED POWER"

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

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

Phone 508.775.8008

Noncommercial reproduction permitted

Lincoln's language was, I'd say, biblical-elevated, or Christian-Stoic-rhetorical. Often I've mulled over the phrase I'm mulling over again in this Thinksheet--this time, in the context of Jesus' question (the title of this year's Craigville Colloquy) "Who do YOU say I am?"

1 CONTEXT, his call for a national day of prayer during the Civil War: "We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace...; we have vainly imagined...that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness." (Underlinings, mine.)

2 "Power" is God's only title in this passage: Lincoln was a man of power, driven by the social necessity of using it (abusing it, his assassin shouted), saddened by its easy corruptibility, steady in his sense that all human power is only under-power, power "under God" the Over-Power. Our human powers to persuade & coerce, being on the divine model, are gifts we are responsible to use according to the divine nature & commission: we are accountable to God for the proper use, & the nonuse, & the abuse, of both.

3 Lincoln was a master of both persuasion & coercion, & sensitive to his stewardship of both. He strove mightily to persuade the South, then coerced it into remaining in the Union: he could have avoided the war, but believed that war was less serious than secession. Yet he was not chauvinistic in his theologizing of the crisis: his sense that both sides were under God's judgment was stronger than his conviction that his decision for violent defense of the Union was right.

4 In Lincoln's mind, our nation has theological standing. It exists (has ontological substance) under the eye & in the hand of God, Observer-Judge of its political (not just its religious & private) life. In Marty's shocking phrases (Apr. Fool issue of THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY), he's the Cosmic Snoop, the Gotcha God. (Unfortunately, unlike Lincoln, Marty treats irreverently this dimension in the divine.) In the words of the black spiritual, "He sees all I do, he hears all I say, my Lord's awatchin' all the time." That's the **ominous** sense of the Presence. But another: "Nobody knows like Jesus." That's the **gracious** sense of the Presence. You can have the latter without the former, but yours in that case in not the biblical God.

5 Why ominous? Because offendable. But not ominous, threatening, if an offended Weakness. Ominous because "the offended Power" who responds destructively to offense when the offender is impenitent, unhumble. To live in prophetic-biblical fear of the Almighty is to avoid thinking-saying-doing anything that might rile God up, offend him: to live in love of the Algracious is to behave with the design of pleasing God, as one delights to delight the Beloved.

6 The Jesus who asked the question that is Colloquy '92's theme--"Who do YOU say I am?"--should get from us this (among other responses): "You are one who steadily lives in the Presence of the Almighty-Algracious, the offendable One who destroys but prefers to forgive." Long ago, in Thinksheet #70, I detailed what, in my opinion, we can know of "Jesus' 'Consciousness.'" Because it's postbiblical--Augustinian & modern, the question of Jesus' self-aware interiority can't mine from the Gospels anything like a full answer. But we can say with certainty that Jesus lived, & taught us to live, in fear & love of God--& in this, Lincoln was a faithful disciple. "Clemency and forgiveness" are available if we "confess our [personal, interpersonal, collective] national sins," at heart the sin that "we have forgotten God." Otherwise, doom by "the offended Power."