2870 12.15.97
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THE RELATIVE UNIMPORTANCE OF "LIFE EXPERIENCE"

"A Christian life does not consist in words, but in experience. No one is a Christian without experience. That doesn't mean 'life experience,' but the experience of God."--Dietrich Bonhoeffer, PREDIGTEN-AUSLEGUNGEN-MEDITATIONEN, 1935-45

Occasion

Early results of a UCC survey toward our study conference "On What Authority?" indicate, the chair of the planning committee told me yesterday, that primary weight is given not to Scripture or tradition (dead Christians) or church (live Christians) but to individual-**personal** life-**experience** (which, says Bonhoeffer [above], is relatively unimportant).

How has something relatively unimportant become for so many in the mainline churches absolutely, or at least supremely, important? This Thinksheet is a many-angle commentary on that question.

1 Let's begin by noticing what happens to "**God**" when one's life-experience is given primacy. In our eudemonistic (narcissistic) culture, "the good" means what ratifies & energizes the pleasure-paradigm. So "God is good" means that deity supports our pleasure-&-comfort striving, which has "love" at its core & as its goal (which, then, is what "God is love" means). When the resulting divinity is eisegeted into the Bible, what's left of the Cheshire Cat (the Bible's "God") is only the smile. No accident that I made this vid from a "Smiley" sticker. "If there is a God & an afterlife," I'm hearing said by some who have no interest in personal religion (in their "life-experience"!), "I'll be OK." Instead of being up against the "Al-mighty," we're only up against the "Al-smile"! Religion isn't withering away, as Feuerbach & Marx predicted it would; but churches unwilling to challenge this bowdlerized-Bible religion are withering away. Bible counter-movements in the mainline churches, such as "Confessing Christ" in the United Church of Christ, are issuing this challenge. The "On What Authority?" study conference (1.5-8.98) will try to articulate this challenge.

2 "The proper way to determine what 'God' signifies is by examining how the word operates within a religion and thereby shapes reality and experience rather than by first establishing its propositional or experiential meaning and reinterpreting and reformulating its uses accordingly [p114, THE NATURE OF DOCTRINE, Westminster/84]." Geo.A.Lindbeck's project in this book is (1) to lay out the current types of theology (112: "preliberal propositionalist, liberal experiential-expressivist, or post-liberal cultural-linguistic" & (2) to argue for the third type.

Instead of bringing your life-experience to Scripture, you inhabit the Bible (in his terms, "intratextually," "intrasemiotically") & then bring its life to your life. (How this works I detailed diagrammatically in my 1943 doctoral dissertation, reproduced on p165 of my FLOW OF FLESH....) On p5 of his "Theology and Culture Newsletter No.36," Gabriel Fackre, supporting Lindbeck, describes the latter's move as an effort "to reenter the world of the Bible and reclaim the church's own language and teaching."....On the same page, Fackre decries a current liberal theological trend: "the erasure of theological particularity and quest for a universal religious sensibility."

3 But in type #2 theology ("liberal experiential-expressivist"), the move is (not exegetical) from the Bible's life-religion to ours but the (eisegetical) reverse. A particularly egregious & radical result, for many such eisgetes, is the suppression of the Bible's consistent pronouns (always masculine) for God. This "erasure of theological particularity" is a concession to today's gender-egalitarian life-experience (or rather, radical-feminist ideology). The move will have no long-term effect within Christianity, but during its time under the sun it will further weaken the mainline churches, further alienating their folk from the Bible. Far from fulfiling Lindbeck's ideal of "absorbing the universe into the biblical world" (135), this pronominal suppression absorbs a trendy current cultural sensibility censoriously into the Bible. Here the 1st "absorb" (Lindbeck's) is organic-nutritious, as when a bluefish eats a menhaden (or a reader becomes absorbed in Tolkien's Middle Earth or a viewer into Star Trek's "Beam me up, Scotty"). But the 2nd "absorb" is as when a child eats something poisonous & needs a stomach-pump. An alien taboo has been eaten.

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4 It says here in the Holy Book (Ps.121.8) "The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in": it does not say "your going in and your coming out." The **extratextual** way is to take your ("outside," *extra-*) life-experience into the Bible & then come out with whatever confirms what you went in with. (Technically, this is called the epexegetic use of the scriptural sanction.) In §1 (above), we noticed "what happens to 'God' when one's life-experience is given primacy."

The **intratextual** way is not to come in & then go out (eisegeting the Bible) but to come in & stay inside Scripture ("inside," *intra*) till its terms' denotations (primary meanings) become for you the fundamental meanings. Eg, you don't import your life-experience ideas of "father" into the fatherhood of God: you worship God the Father according to the Bible's internal definition-description of him. The Bible's cultures are not normative, but they are formative: the "father" determined the inheritance, & so does the "Father." (Leslie Zeigler was in S155 of the recent annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature & told me Marianne Thompson's paper--"Heirs of God, Heirs with Christ: Reflections on the Fatherhood of God in the Bible"--made this point.)

5 Christian leaders should form a border patrol against **smuggling** life-experience connotations into the Bible. In this cartoon, mother is correcting junior's life-experience of the supposed flattop--actually, a book--in his lap: "You don't turn it on. You open it and turn the pages." What is authoritative here is not the boy's life-experience of laptops but the fact that what he's here-&-now dealing with is a book. What Christian leaders should do is not to rewrite Scripture to modern or postmodern sensibilities but to teach the troops to enter "the strange new world of the Bible" & there learn how to feel-think-talk as Christians. Not easy. "Modern" & "liberal" (as Lindbeck shows) signal the primacy of life-experience as authority (Schleiermacher onward). In its "human-potential" form, I had considerable exposure (under Fritz Perls, Ira Progoff, et al) to methods/processes of enhancing this primacy (& am tickled by the contrarian wag who said, anent Pres. Truman, that "The unexamined life is worth living")....The cure, as I see it, is suggested in this Thinksheet's title. Bonhoeffer's "the experience of God" transcends, is of a different order from, our categorical (gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, class) life-experiences.

6 "Experience" is of God, one's body, family, culture, subculture, transculture. The first of these is the only (comparatively) **invariable.** Right now, the globe is experiencing a radical transformation of consciousness away from land: "Of the world's hundred largest economies, fifty-one are not countries but corporations [p71, THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY, Dec/97]." Everything's being commodified. "The growing piles of our material possessions make personal life more complex and leave less time for communal matters....Americans degrade themselves with mass culture....It is because people find so little in themselves that they fill their world with celebrities," & entertainment takes the place of values (pp73-78). "Life-experience" is vastly **variable** & (thank God), relatively unimportant. And **indeterminate**: the current THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY cover warns of "catastrophic [global] cooling [yes, cooling!]." And **incurved** by sin, self-interest, the Fall into egocentricity, (esp. in Enlightenment culture) the imperial-autonomous self & its radial relationships (including their equality/superiority claims).

7 The fact that the biblical God has never had any "women's experience" (never having been a woman) is utterly unimportant in light of the Incarnation's **masculine generic** (Jesus' maleness being "inclusive" of both masculinity & femininity). In WIDERSTAND UND ERGEBUNG, Bonhoeffer puts this many ways--eg, (1) "If a person like Jesus has lived, then and only then does our human life make sense"; & (2) "Had Jesus not lived, our life...would be meaningless"; & (3) "In the birth of Jesus Christ, God took on humanity, not just a single man."

8 Liberal Christian thinkers for 1/3rd century have erred in their **passive acceptance** of (Hans Frei) "the great reversal" from looking at the world from within Scripture to looking into Scripture from the outside, from the world. That is why ex-Christian radical feminist thinkers like Mary Daly & Rosemary Radford Reuther have proved so intimidating on Jesus' maleness & the Bible's male pronouns for God.