

ON HEARING-SPEAKING-BEING TORAH, WORD OF THE LORD TREE OF LIFE, CHRISTMAS TREE, BABY JESUS, & ABORTION

So you think this Thinksheet can't make up its mind what to be about? Like life, it's about of bunch of things all at once. Things that have gotten thrown into my interior blender in the past few hours, days. A Christmas card with "Jesus is the reason for the season." The very American flap over whether folks should buy, instead of the bland "Season's Greetings," cards bearing both Christian & Jewish symbols & sentiments--or "sectarian" cards, ie either Hanukkah cards or Christmas cards. (My conclusion on that one: Make it sectarian unless you practice neither religion.) The annual battles about creches, menorahs, & (even) Christmas trees in public places, including public schools. The challenge, today, from a global-thinking spiritual leader to do a Thinksheet on spiritual communion-community transcending language-ideas-doctrines by "living the word." A Christian Brooklynite who told me that when he was a child, his Jewish neighbors tried to keep their children from "coming over to see our Christmas tree," which with its lights could serve as well as a Hanukkah symbol as a Christmas symbol, having itself pagan (druidic) origins. A post-Craigville-Colloquy-VI paper, received yesterday, written by a participant in that Colloquy to refine his post-Colloquy thinking on abortion, & using two divine sanctions--the "image of God" (Genesis 1:26) & Christmas (Jesus' conception-birth) as cautionary vis-a-vis abortion (Gabe & Dot Fackre, "Theology and Culture Newsletter 28," Advent/89; pp. reff. below; called "the paper").

1. For many years I've carried a concern for humanity's learning to deepen its **roots** & widen its **reach**, over against either forgetting its roots (deracination) or pruning of branches lest they touch the branches of other trees (xenophobia). By 60 years ago I'd become conscious of the costly divisiveness of these two errors, then called "modernism" & "fundamentalism." When "ecumenism" was broadened first to include nonProtestant Christians & then nonChristians, modernism became "secularism" (or "secular humanism") & "fundamentalism" began to mean adherence to one's own religion without any openness to other cultures-religions-devotees. For 40 years I've opposed these extremes & have referred to myself, my position, as "EO" (evangelical in roots, open in reach). This roots/reach, tree-of-life vision & commitment promises a future for faith against amnesia & for humanity against the past's lethal religious controversies.

2. For the above, the **tree** has been my central symbol & preachment. (Eg, I designed the logo for Transculture, Inc., a fruitful tree seen in toto--roots, trunk, branches, fruit.) For species cohesion, global community, we need shared symbols of **universal** experience & significance. (The Transcultural Allegories are a fruitful source of these symbols.) Tree semantics is diachronic as well as synchronic: Eden's "tree of life" with its immortalizing fruit (Genesis 3:22b) entered our stream of spiritual consciousness long before Europe's tannenbaum became the Christmas tree, & they participate in a vast semantic pool of tree meanings through the ages & around the world (on which see, eg, 328-32, J.E.Cirlot, A DICTIONARY OF SYMBOLS [Phil.Lib./62]).... These universal symbols could be group-studied devotionally (as praise to the One God):* to date, when studied at all, it's been only academically (eg, Jos. Campbell) or, even worse, for dilettante entertainment. On this shrinking planet we shall have to learn to make the most of the **silent language** of universal symbols, which are as much a divine gift & human legacy as are the spoken languages of the world. (Note that in this category of nonverbal language are music, dance, & the plastic arts [painting, sculpture, architecture]. Each nonverbal "word" must be assessed as to its closeness to / distance from words in each language-world. Eg, both a natural tree & the Cross [in early Christian literature, sometimes called "the Tree"] are nonverbal "words," but the former is about as universal a symbol as possible, as the latter is a most particular one.)....*A wider meaning of Psalm 34³ ("Let us praise the LORD's name together.").

3. Note, now, a beautiful parallel between the silent language of universal symbols & the silent language of **saints**, each one an incarnation of the life-language-literature of a particular sacred world, each one being "word of the Lord" with hair & skin, bone, sinew, organs, blood, "heart," "mind." (I can't think along this line without remembering Rabbi Chaim Stern's message at my 60th birthday party: "The point is to be Torah.") We all know that the saint, so understood & so met, is the full tree, with deep roots & wide embrace (magnanimity). And we cannot accept among the saints anyone who has only deep roots (eg, Khomeini) or only wide embrace (eg, J.Campbell).Note, here, that an idea--in this instance, **embodiment**--can be a universal symbol

though having also particular uses (eg, Christmas, God's Incarnation in Jesus). How the de-/--connota of words are interrelated is one model for grasping how the universal/particular meanings of an idea are interaffecting.

4. Embodying one's commitment, both walking the walk & talking the talk, is honored in all the world's religions: "integrity" is an ethical word for it. (A friend of mine has made a rich collection of such reff. in the world's scriptures.) Personal & group tragedies can advance the yearning for the Word "within...on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31³³:Hebrews 10¹⁶; 2Corinthians 3³), as also do profound mystical & romantic experiences: we become what we suffer & what we love.

5. Another instance of the embodiment idea is *imago dei*, the biblical (Genesis 2^{26f}) teaching that our species bears "the **image & likeness** of God." How rich, complex, fuzzy this metaphor is, I tried to lay out in #2331. The contextual meaning is that God delegates some of his authority to us. The fuzziness left the analogy open to becoming, in the history of interpretation, an ark for all the animals. I'll not repeat my exposition, but "the paper" (above, intro) overreads "image" (in my opinion) when it infers from it the dignity of the individual fetus ("fetal dignity"), combining two notions foreign to Genesis ("the individual" in the modern sense of the person, & the dignity of the unborn [in Exodus 21, the death of an unborn from a blow being treated not as a criminal case but only as a civil one, a matter of property, not sacrality or dignity--individual dignity beginning, in Judaism, when the neonate becomes selfbreathing])....The paper & I AGREE: we pray-witness-work toward the ideal, the day when there will be no abortions by human intervention; & DISAGREE: the paper uses theology to reduce, in the interim, the number of abortions; I to increase the number. In dialectical-cyclical tension with the question *How can I use theology to make, or at least support, my position?* is the question *How can I use theology to help me arrive at & refine the position I believe best pleases-glorifies God (vis-a-vis self, neighbor, humanity, the biosphere, the present, the future)?* Much theo-fustian could be avoided if the debaters were upfront about their projects, what they are "up to." Eg, see how I read Genesis 2^{26f} in light of my project: In the "image" context, God puts us in charge of the environment; good management thereof requires better population control; higher abortion rates would correlate with better stewardship of the earth; therefore, faced with rising ecological disaster, we should view abortion as honoring the image of God in our species. Further, the eco-project of sustainability as "the integrity of creation" fulfils the "image" as effective stewardship--& no population-control means, including abortion, can be dispensed with in moving toward sustainability. Drawing from the history of interpretation & of theology, one can use the "image" as a divine sanction against abortion; but it can't be done on the basis of Scripture itself.

6. Nor will Scripture itself support the use of **Jesus' conception-birth** as a divine sanction against abortion, as the paper does: "Christ hallowed all [human] life by entrance into our realm at conception" (p.2) because (p.3) "Christ was 'conceived by the Holy Spirit' (Apostles' Creed)," not by a man & a woman (as is our life). As God come among us as one of us, Jesus indeed dignifies (though not sanctifying, hallowing) our humanity. But *how* he came among us, viz by miracle (to which the Creed is referring), bypassing the natural process by which all the rest of us have entered into life, can be viewed, equally logically, as either honoring, or refusing to honor, our conception. To claim the former is an overreading of Scripture, though not of much theological traditon, for which the paper has more respect than I do. Maybe it should: I'm not judging that point. I'm more biblical scholar than theologian.

7. The paper makes a contribution in correlating (1) esse ("being") with conception understood as the moment, about the 14th day, of irreversible individuation (so a morn-ing-after pill is not an abortifacient); (2) bene esse ("well being") with viability of developing life; & (3) plene esse ("full being") with the developed life of the mother & of the neonate. Says the paper, the "image" does not apply before the segmentation-possibility is passed, ie about the 14th day. Some fresh thinking here, as in suggesting "just war" theory as a rough model for "just abortion."

8. How relate **God** & "**natural processes**" here? Deism separates the two, naturalism identifies them, radical theism (my position) closely associates them (eg, in my statement that God is the great abortionist).