

WHAT YOU SEE IS MORE THAN WHAT YOU GET:

## APPEARANCE/REALITY IN PRESENT AMERICAN POLITICS

THE PENULTIMATE SENTENCE OF THIS 3 MAY 91 LETTER IS WHERE THE WALLOP, THE POINT, IS: "ENTERTAINMENT-SEDUCED AMERICA FINDS IT FRIGHTENINGLY EASY TO PUT IN THE WHITE HOUSE RESIDENTS OF MORE APPEARANCE THAN REALITY." The price we paid for this dereliction in the Reagan case was that (1) most of political decision-making was more appearance than reality, especially in matters financial, & (2) the President was Teflon-free of effective criticism both inside & outside the Beltway, & (3) the country went on a bender of greed and corner-cutting, at the moral level of the entertainment industry, & (4) the bills for the showbizz illusionism (moving us, in the course of one administration, from being the world's largest creditor nation to the world's largest debtor nation) have come due & are pinching the poor & throttling necessary innovation.

The root of this corruption? The conspiratorial alliance between entertainment & profit. A brilliant & productive scientist recently commented on his good fortune in growing up without commercial toys; his parents were wealthy, but wise enough to let him entertain himself, including making his own toys. Well, America today makes your toys for you whatever your age. Further, business seduces you into watching others use their toys: one baseball player's 1991 contract is for \$5 million.

I hope it is not so, but what we may have in America is a public so corrupted by commercialized toys, commercialized entertainment, & commercialized politics as to make authentic democracy impossible. Why do we hear so little preaching against it? Perhaps because our religion, too, is commercialized, even so much so as not to recognize the general corruption?

1 The profit motive is a good servant (providing a necessary incentive to transactional economic activity) but a bad master (making machines almost human at the cost of making humans into machines). The ex-communist world is now in danger of doing what we did, viz overembracing it. Our capitalism has had ambiguous results, producing spectacularly goods, services, corruption (eg, the J. Walter Thompson study says 91% of us are liars). How can we warn the world against the downside of our economic way of life (the chasm between our professed "values" & our checkbooks, between the boasted solid floor & all the people falling through the cracks, between what candidates say they stand for & the warchests that determine where they'll put their feet)?

2 I think things have gotten so bad that we're on the verge of a new puritanism. It's instructive to picture now that late-16th-c. England against which the old Puritanism arose & was transported to our shores. It wasn't just that the Restoration theater, eagerly promoted by Charles II, reflected without criticizing the corruption: the very idea of showbizz, the theater, was objectionable to the Puritans, for it was make-believe, illusion, & therefore of the devil, whose

## Oliphant cartoon has redeeming value

Whether or not cartoonist Partick Oliphant has a "sick mind," as a letter writer claims, I don't know. But I do know that the letter writer has a humorless mind. And I fear humorlessness more than I do sickness.

The thought of Kitty Kelley investigating a possible "relationship" between the pope and Mother Teresa is outrageously funny. I like it because of my genetic appetite for both outrage and humor and for hubris-deflating irreverence as well as for God-honoring reverence.

Further, Oliphant's delicious, multi-layered joke is not without "redeeming social value":

1: The pope is so pacific he'd rather die than kill, so presenting him as commanding Kitty Kelley's execution is ludicrously funny, as well as indirectly honoring the pope as a man of peace.

2: Putting the pope in the position of Old Blue Eyes Sinatra, and Mother Teresa in the position of Nancy Reagan is like comparing two tin whistles with a Stradivarius and a Guarnerius. Again indirectly, we're reminded of the deep resonances in the lives and souls of this pontiff and the founder who said of her order's ministry to the dying poor, "All their lives the world has treated them like dogs: We try to help them die like angels."

3: Oliphant's executioner is a Swiss guard who is protecting the pope. As though the pope needed defending from the likes of her! Again, the pope is honored by the extreme improbability of his ever engaging in sexual impropriety. For all leaders, he models the biblical injunction to avoid even the appearance of evil.

4: Why did the media treat President Reagan with excessive reverence? K.K. is helping us ask that important question, which Oliphant is asking off the wall. Entertainment-seduced America finds it frighteningly easy to put in the White House residents of more appearance than reality. Three cheers for political cartoonists!

WILLIS ELLIOTT  
Craigville

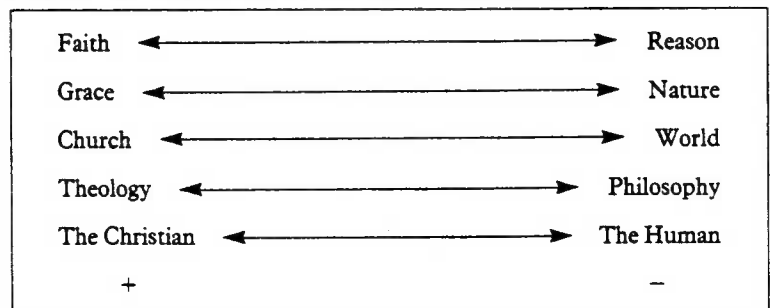
business it is to divert people's attention from reality (supremely, God) to appearance (the unreal & therefore untrue, but having the power to make human beings unreal & false). The same reasoning led them to oppose reversal debate: it requires you to argue both sides, including the side opposing your belief. (During my radical Puritan decade, '34-'44, I saw no movie or play, & refused to participate in school reversal-debates.)

3 In the letter's 2nd ¶ I refer to "my genetic appetite for both outrage and humor and for hubris-deflating irreverence as well as for God-honoring reverence." And it's more than genetic, it's cultivated. I'm a natural-born, but also convinced, Protestant: "Diastasis, separation, critical distance, is part of Protestantism from the beginning....The productivity of the diastasis is the [Tillich's] 'Protestant principle' of the criticism of 'this world' and all its idols," as in the 1934 Barmen Declaration against Hitler...."the greatest strength of the orthodox Protestant paradigm" & "the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth" (p.11, Dorothea Sölle, THINKING ABOUT GOD [SCM-Trinity/90]; my last ThM paper, handed in  $\frac{1}{2}$  c. ago today, was on Barth, & the professor, Harold Tribble, later president of Andover Newton Theological School, did his PhD under Barth).

4 I'm a model American in the sense that the combination of the four underlined characteristics (in §3) profiles "the American" of "(Anglo-)American history." A more modest way to put it is that I'm a typical traditional (WASP) American. I go farther: these four characteristics should be engendered in America's children, for their best participation in & contribution to our society. Pluralism has its limits.

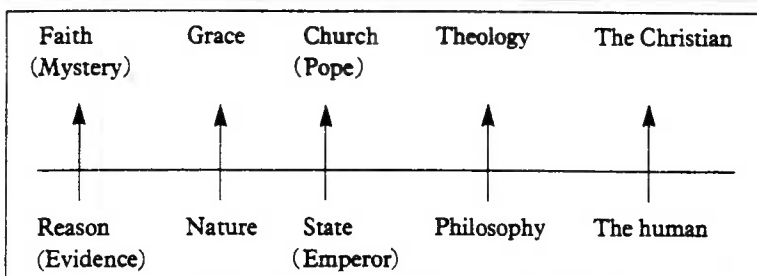
5 Here's DS's schema (from Hans Küng) for the overagainstness of the Protestant mentality (p.11):

The minus column is of suspect items in the sense that the Christian is to exercise critical consciousness on them. I've been reading Thomas Aquinas' SUMMA & am impressed but appalled by many of his straight-line logical inferences--such as led to Luther's calling him "Narristotle" (Ger. "Narr" = "fool"). DS 10: "Fidelity...belonging...loyalty to a particular culture is always in conflict with fidelity to Christ." In U.S. history, this Protestant demand for critical distance (esp. by the Va. Baptists, on Jefferson) was the positive reason for "the separation of church & state," the negative being religious variety in America by 1789.... Back to DS (p.175), who describes her liberationism as "transcendence in immanence." 195: "Transcendence is radical," immanence affirmed from its roots: "God's transcendence shines immanently through the Good Samaritan."



In U.S. history, this Protestant demand for critical distance (esp. by the Va. Baptists, on Jefferson) was the positive reason for "the separation of church & state," the negative being religious variety in America by 1789.... Back to DS (p.175), who describes her liberationism as "transcendence in immanence." 195: "Transcendence is radical," immanence affirmed from its roots: "God's transcendence shines immanently through the Good Samaritan."

6 What was, & is, Protestantism reacting against? DS (p.10) makes good use of Rich. Niebuhr's CHRIST AND CULTURE. "The Thomistic synthesis of reason and faith within a unitary culture" is an instance of CHRIST ABOVE CULTURE, thus:



Because there's "no deep, unresolvable conflict between culture and Christ," the complementarity may easily slip into "a smooth identification, a...culture Christianity, the CHRIST OF CULTURE. (In milieu Catholicism & culture Protestantism, "the Christian element no longer represents a challenge" aimed at CHRIST TRANSFORMING CULTURE.)

"The Reformation tradition breaks with the synthesis in which tradition plays an

excessive role and leads to this identification." Christ & culture are in paradoxical tension (CHRIST AND CULTURE IN PARADOX) or, in the left wing of the Reformation (& radical Christian pacifism), in opposition: CHRIST AGAINST CULTURE.