

ON CALLING A SPADE A SPADE,
A PAGAN A PAGAN, &
A CHRISTIAN A CHRISTIAN

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

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DAN McCULLOUGH is a respected, lovable, much loved Cape Cod essayist, his huge heart for humanity matched by his huge body. As I said in my published letter three days ago, his pieces in the Sunday CAPE COD TIMES are "not to be missed." Their reverential tone and poetic style help satisfy readers' hunger for reverence & poetry, values uncommon in our common life....So taking a thoughtless poke at him would be unkind & stupid. My thoughtful poke was painful to me, & I see in his published letter (7.15) it was painful to him. Painful to me, for I am a fan of his; & besides hating to inflict pain on any creature of God, I sorrow to have to cause pain to someone I have admiration & affection for.

I continue this Thinksheet as an **open letter** to him:

Dear Dan:

1 Thank you for going public with your response to my letter: I believe the public--yours, mine, the general public--can profit from our interchange....As you know, on the day my letter was published, I sent you a copy of my complaint letter to the TIMES, expressing my distress at the butchering of the letter I'd sent the TIMES--a copy of which I included to you. For my Thinksheet readers' sake, I

must quote some from my complaint letter: "The point of my letter was to state my belief in Providence, not Fate. But in the last paragraph you have me saying the opposite:

"I choose...Providence with...Fate [instead of "Face"!] behind it.'... .Further, the editor eliminated the paragraph which would have provided context for the last paragraph's 'frowning' & 'smiling.' The muddle is only increased by your having God (Providence) frown & Fate smile! ¶The heart of my letter is in the paragraph the editor dropped!"

2 Here's the dropped paragraph: "These lines from a William Cowper hymn well state the Christian position: 'God moves in a mysterious way....Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, / but trust Him for His grace. / Behind a frowning providence / He hides a smiling face....The bud may have a bitter taste, / but sweet will be the flower. Blind unbelief is sure to err, / and scan His work in vain. / God is his own interpreter, / and He will make it plain.'"

3 Why did I say you "claim to be a Christian"? I apologize for overreading your position, but consider how you got yourself into this mess. In the conversation, I said to you "I'm offended when you, a professing Christian, leave God out." Instead of straightening me out by denying that you were a professing Christian, you merely smiled & shrugged. Now your letter tells me that you considered the conversation "pointless": you did not treat it, or me, with respect. Confirming your flip attitude your astonishing statement that the conversation "lasted perhaps 30 seconds." Yet in that flick of time you admit (in your fifth paragraph) that the exchange was somewhat nuanced on both sides. Neither of us can talk fast enough to get all that into 30 seconds!

4 Your disrespectful attitude appears further in your theological arrogance

Providence over Fate optimistic choice

Dan McCullough's Sunday essays are not to be missed, though occasionally he misses big, as he did the Sunday before D-Day. Staring a tragedy in the face, he could have made the Christian response -- "Providence" -- but he made the pagan response -- "Fate."

What's the difference?

If fate's in charge, you can scratch off God. That's what the pagans did in the days of early Christianity. They trivialized the gods by claiming that even the gods are playthings of fate, so of course -- a fortiori -- are people.

Against this pessimism, the Christians joyously proclaimed that God is in charge, and "fate" is only an illusion from seeing too small a picture.

Optimistic, patient trust in the personal, living God, or pessimistic resignation to impersonal fate? The choice is as clear and stark now as it was in the days of

the earliest Christians.

But why do I say that Mr. McCullough's essay Sunday missed big? Perhaps he wanted to preach paganism. No, he claims to be a Christian.

When I asked him why he leaves God out of his essays, he responded, "Because I'm afraid I might offend somebody. Not everybody believes in God." My response was, "You can't avoid offending somebody. I'm offended when you, a professing Christian, leave God out."

America is in the greatest cultural crisis of its history. It is a time for revealing, not concealing, what we most deeply believe.

When things seem to go wrong, I choose the frowning Providence with the smiling Fate behind it. And I seek to understand the frown.

WILLIS ELLIOTT
Craigville

in asserting that "Anyone who doesn't recognize the existence of God in my writings...either doesn't know who God is, or has...narrowed the definition...and doesn't recognize the God in our midst." Christians, sir, have not narrowed the definition of God; you pagans have broadened it.

When in a Cape Cod Hospital ethics panel discussion I used the word "God," you said, "What 'God' are you talking about? There are many gods." I replied, "'God' as in the primary definition of the word in English-language dictionaries: the God of theism, the God who is (Random House Dictionary) 'the one Supreme Being, the creator and ruler of the universe.'" Your asking which God was a cute deflection, unworthy of your usual high-quality moderatorship of these meetings. To your own taste, you have broadened and flattened out the God of Judaism and Christianity, the God of the Bible.

No wonder you could stoop to the snide remark (paragraph four) that my God "resides in Craigville." As did the ancient pagans before you, you attempt to reduce my God so as to flaunt the superiority of yours.

5 Your published letter says you were "astonished when a friend told me" I'd said some things about you in print. Instead of checking to see whether the second-hand reports were true, you astonished me by treating them as true! You accuse me of assuming you were a Christian: I accuse you of assuming that your friend's reporting was accurate. It wasn't. (1) I didn't know you well enough to say that you were (as he reported) "afraid to mention God." People "afraid to mention God" are so because they might be criticized for it, especially in our deepeningly secular culture. I can't conceive of your having any such fear about any deep conviction of yours. What I said was a direct quotation from you (and it appears again in my June 13 letter), & very different: You leave God out, you said, "because I'm afraid I might offend somebody." The primary meaning of such a statement is not self-concerned but communication-concerned: you did not want something extraneous to your story interfering with its impact, as (your words) "not everybody believes in God." Again (2), you assert that I "erroneously" identified you as a "practicing Christian." I could not have written that: I had no information as to whether you are a church-goer (which is the one observable "practice" unique to Christians). I thought you were a professing Christian, a very different thing: since Christianity has more currency in our country than does any other religion, many profess it but don't practice it....I've no objection, ever, to your quoting me; but please, not by rumor!

Ducking label of professional 'Christians'

On June 13, the Cape Cod Times published a letter from the Rev. Willis Elliott of Craigville in which he accuses me of acting like a pagan.

Mr. Elliott and I are casually acquainted. But the total time of all our conversations probably totals less than 60 seconds.

Once, several years ago, in our last brief dialogue, he explained that he was a faithful reader of my work and then complained about my failure to mention God in my Sunday column in this newspaper.

Having had this pointless conversation before with other people who make their living doing religion, I recognized that what he was talking about was his "God," who resides in Craigville with him and his people. Anyone who doesn't recognize the existence of God in my writings about family, death, hope, love and the dignity of human beings either doesn't know who God is, or has twisted and narrowed the definition of that term and doesn't recognize the God in our midst.

I attempted to end that brief meeting by explaining that I didn't mention "God" because there were many readers of the Times who didn't believe in "God" as defined by people such as Mr. Elliot, and I wished to respect their feelings. He persisted by stating that many of my writings had a Christian flavor to them. I agreed, strongly asserting that the young Jewish scholar, Jesus of Nazareth, was one of the most important people who ever lived and whose example

continues to be one of the strongest influences in my life.

Since our conversation was a private one, lasting perhaps 30 seconds, I was astonished when a friend told me several weeks later that, in some kind of newsletter published by Mr. Elliott, I was misquoted as saying I was "afraid to mention God" in my column. The piece went on to erroneously identify me as some kind of practicing Christian.

Since I believed the newsletter to be a little handout limited to the small band of his followers or associates, I shrugged it off. I was, however, troubled when this newspaper published the same assertions by Mr. Elliott a few weeks after that. But once again I dismissed the letter as another statement from one of the self-described professional "Christians."

Then comes the publication of a similar letter again this past Monday.

Let's get a few things clear: I do not claim to be a "Christian." Willis Elliott has no right to describe me as such. Although I am a strong advocate of the lifestyle described in the words of Jesus, I have spent most of my adult life trying to avoid self-described "Christians" and all their cults, groups, and religious organizations. I encourage my readers, friends, and anyone I know to do

the same. It is absurd and contrary to reality for Willis Elliott to describe me as a "professing Christian."

DAN McCULLOUGH
Orleans

6 In paragraph seven, you call me a "self-described professional Christian." No such thing exists. Perhaps you meant "professing Christian," which indeed I do describe myself as. (I regret that the editor picked up your erroneous use of "professional.") Of course there are religious professionals, as there are--& I have been, & you are--academic professionals. Your nasty remark about "people who make their living doing religion" exposes, besides arrogance, a bitterness & alienation that, fortunately, doesn't get spewed out into your essays. But it comes as no surprise that you "encourage" your "readers, friends, and anyone" of your acquaintance to stay away from church ("cults, groups, and religious organizations").

7 Your first paragraph says I accuse you of "acting like a pagan." Your letter confirms my accusation. You don't claim to be Jewish, you do deny being a Christian, so you are in the only remaining category. (No insult intended: some of my best friends are pagans, as were most of my religion-&-philosophy students in the University of Hawaii.)....Odd, though, that you do not allude to the only point of tangency I adduced between you & paganism, viz belief in Fate. The titler of my letter got my point ("Providence over Fate..."), but you apparently weren't interested in my point (assuming you read me carefully enough to get it).

8 Nothing personal as to "Fate." This time it was you, in the letter I submitted May 21 it was Paul Gauvin. I'll repeat here that letter ("Fate or God?"):

In ancient Rome, Jews and Christians were persecuted for believing in God. Their pagan neighbors, and the government, believed in fate.

If he lived then and there, Paul Gauvin would not have been persecuted. His edutorial today, "The pain and blessing of fate," is a confession of belief in fate. Horrors happen, and he concludes that "fate is the real culprit."

I'll limit my rejoinder to two remarks:

First, that belief makes nonsense of the heart of the Jewish and Christian religions, which refuse to deny that God is the Lord of nature and history, the Sovereign over all that happens. Oddly and backhandedly, Gauvin expresses this faith in asking, "Why did sleepless providence [lower-case "p"] choose to take from us" Sean Breen [killed in a car accident]? But tragedies are "preordained" by fate, says Gauvin.

Second, belief in fate cuts the nerve of moral responsibility. Monica Mullaly [the driver], so the press reported, was under a midnight parental curfew. Six hours in violation, she's to blame for Sean's death.* But Gauvin blames fate.

The Bible teaches us the courage and wisdom to search for meaning in life's downs as well as ups and to believe that the center of the search is Providence [upper-class "P," as in Roger Williams' naming of the capital of Rhode Island] --God as Lover-Creator-Redeemer. Gauvin bespeaks the diametrical of that faith when he agonizes over "the inequitability of fate's enigmatic process of random selection."

We should not be surprised at America's rising faith in fate. The public schools do not teach faith in God, so what else is there?

*As the courts later concluded.

9 Children pick up dirty words in our public schools; and two of those four-letter dirty words are (as I see it) "fate" & "luck," both of which you use freely in your essays. As a philosopher, & as such supposedly critical-attentive to words, you could hardly claim to be using these words thoughtlessly or poetically. When you use them, I take you seriously: I think you mean what you say. You probably went to public schools.

This in the WALL STREET JOURNAL 4 Apr 94 "Review and Outlook," on the 1962 Warren court decision: "After the Supreme Court made school prayer illegal, anything remotely religious disappeared from public life, often because of litigation by the ACLU but as often driven off by an overbearing secularism that, for instance, began stripping out religious references from textbooks....In the wake of the school prayer decision, [the U.S.] spent the three decades actively expunging every vestige of the religious impulse from public life and discourse. It is hardly a coincidence that this same period saw the rise of many social pathologies. A reaction from this country's religious tradition was inevitable. It has arrived."

10 As the TIMES doesn't publish letter-responses to letter-responses, I didn't expect this June 26 response to your letter to be published. But as it confesses my misassumption about your religion & advances what I'm trying to say about Providence v. Fate, here it is (titled "Ideas Have Consequences"):

"Ideas have consequences; and newspapers, in their letters section, give readers opportunity to express convictions and opinions on both. The resulting exchanges are good for democracy and humanity. Contrary to a June 21 letter [by M.F.R., reproduced below], this does not violate, but enhances, both "live and learn" & "live and let live."

You titled a same-day letter "Dan McCullough is no Christian," a fact he made plain--correcting my impression--in his June 15 letter.

My impression was not from his columns, which are consistently nonChristian. For example, his column today (June 26) speaks of "luck." The consequences of belief in luck? Life's a lottery, its happenings random. This is the philosophy that encourages legal and illegal gambling.

And it's not unusual for him to speak of "fate." The consequence of belief in fate? We are playthings of an impersonal, uncaring cosmic force. We can and should be compassionate, as Mr. McCullough is; but life is sicklied o'er with a pale cast of pessimism, with no such burst of hope as Christians have through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Why do so many Americans shy away from talking about "religion and politics"? Because being the most important, they are the hottest subjects and easiest to generate misunderstandings. But this hesitance dooms conversations to dealing with less important matters. As I said in my June 13 letter, to which the TIMES has published five responses, "America is in the greatest cultural crisis of its history. It is a time for revealing, not concealing, what we most deeply believe."

11 Our letter exchange would be of little value were folks merely to choose sides. The printed, face-to-face, & ear-to-ear evidence is that more than that has been going on.

Eg, the June 23 letter ("Bible good source...", here reproduced), shows somebody's theologizing out there! Some are free of MOAD (media obsessive-attention disease, as now on the

O.J.Simpson case), though the quality of the product may not be heartening. In this case, the writer has given quality of attention (her best effort) to the task. How did she do? (1) Wrongly, she took you seriously about God-location: you were merely making a nasty crack, to put down my God. Your locating my God in Craigville was rhetorical & gratuitous, not based on anything you ever read or heard from me as to the divine location. (2) She's right that (a) "It's good to know what one believes or doesn't believe" & (b) reading the Bible is an excellent way to find out.

Let us pray we can live and let live

Dan McCullough's letter, "Ducking label of professional Christians," answers Willis Elliott's letter. McCullough's letter certainly was written with spirit. He may have opened another door to help people on their way to accepting each other, and to make the effort often required to

live and let live.

Consider "Live and let live" and "Live and learn." The first, a Scottish proverb, comes to us from the 18th century. "It is good to live and learn" is by Cervantes, in 1615. Ah, let us pray!

MILDRED FOSTER ROBBART
Dennis

Bible good source for locating God

In reading Dan McCullough's letter of rebuttal regarding "who God is," the following came to mind.

As I understand the letter, there is a difference of opinion between McCullough and the Rev. Willis Elliott as to where God resides.

McCullough believes that the reverend's God resides in Craigville with his people, whereas his resides "in our midst."

An intelligent assessment of where God resides can be made individually by reading the most revealing and most neglected book of information in the world, the Bible.

The Gospel of John is a good place to begin; then the book of Acts, which establishes the church God's way; then chapter by chapter to the last book. Chapter 20 in that book will suffice -- the Book of Revelation.

It's good to know what one believes or doesn't believe.

ESTER FLINKMAN
Centerville

12 Your letter has some strange, even idiosyncratic things to say about my religion's Founder:

(1) You refer to him as "the young Jewish scholar, Jesus of Nazareth." I've two earned doctorates bearing on Christian origins, & no Jewish or Christian scholar I've ever read or heard of or met has referred to him as a scholar. God incarnate, yes; scholar, no.

(2) You say, "I am a strong advocate of the lifestyle described in the words of Jesus." Really? His "lifestyle" was to sacrifice life's usual relationships, comforts, & conveniences in order to serve God as an indigent peripatetic preacher of the Good News of God's gracious ("Amazing grace") offer of forgiveness & new life by repentance & faith in God's inbreaking Kingdom-Rule-Reign through him. I am supposed to believe that you're a "strong advocate" of any of that? You do not even believe in God, the Creator-Redeemer-Judge, the *fons et origo*, fountain & base-line of all of Jesus' words & works.

Perhaps you mean you are "a strong advocate" only of Jesus' means--his humanly constricted life--to his end, his mission & message. Or you could mean, but I doubt that you do, that he was preaching as a "lifestyle" his humanly constricted life.

But here is another anomaly in your speaking of Jesus. It's proleptic to modernize Jesus with the word "lifestyle," a word from the Roaring '20s (dusted off for use in the Rebellious '60s), redolent of hippiedom. Scholars are agreed that (1) you can't separate Jesus' mode of living from his message, as though the mode in itself were the or even a message; & (2) you can't, given the nature of the epigraphic evidence, separate "the historical Jesus" out from (Albert Schweitzer) "the Person who comes to us" from & through the whole New Testament.

It seems, in short, that you are "a strong advocate" of a phantom, a convenient reductionism serving to sanction your own lifestyle. In that undertaking, you are right & honest not to call yourself a Christian.

(3) And you say that Jesus' "example continues to be one of the strongest influences in my life." What, pray, is the content of that claim? "Example" of what, for what? In the Craigville Tabernacle Sunday I'm beginning a course on the parables of Jesus, the heart of his teaching: do you mean that as storyteller he's an example to you? If you mean he's an example of compassion, I must say that very few of his parables speak of human compassion. Perhaps you're like the fundamentalists in picking a few self-confirming prooftexts, though your batch would differ from theirs. You are a *people*-person, Jesus was a *God*-person; you can make raids on him for your own purposes, but he complained against similar misunderstanding & abuse by his disciples.

13 You love teaching college-level ethics, & it may be that in your own mind you've boiled the whole of Christianity, including Jesus, down to a **moral residue**. Thos. Jefferson tried to do this by making his own diatessaron (continuous narrative by fictive chronologizing of the four Gospels), but he didn't let that interfere with (1) his faith in God as the "infinite Power, which [not Fate!] rules the destinies of the universe" (text of his Inaugural) & (2) his being a professing & practicing Christian (he was a leader, on the vestry, of his Episcopal parish). Two differences from you. I'm not saying you should be like him. But I wonder why you aren't. Why aren't you a Christian?

14 This brings me to the question of you & **repentance**, of which the TIMES printed two letters growing out of our counter/view printed letters. Their importance, theologically, lies in their exhibiting the two biblical dimensions of repentance, viz the primary-relational (June 21, "Dan McCullough is no Christian") & the secondary-moral (June 26, "Virtuous McCullough need not repent").

(1) S.M. considers you, anent repentance, a good guy, with "nothing to repent for [ie, "of"]." No problem. I know of nobody who thinks you're a bad guy. The writer just doesn't get it, what the writer five days earlier (to whom this writer is responding) was talking about. The basic biblical word for repentance means "turning," & S.M. thinks you don't have any bad behavior to turn from.

(2) A.C. is right that if you were a Christian, you would be obliged to "tell people about God and how they need him in their life." Her letter says nothing about your morals: it's about your failure to repent in the sense of turning to: full repentance is turning from (the moral dimension) & to (the relational dimension). The Prodigal Son didn't just turn from his sins: he **returned** to the Father.

15 Psalm 115.1 in Greek (LXX, the early Christian Old Testament) is quoted in 2 Corinthians 4.13: "I believed [in God], and so I spoke." You do not believe, so you do not speak. You do not bring glory, honor, a high reputation ("Hallowed be thy name" is the way the Lord's Prayer puts it) to the God & Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yours is a sin not of **commission** (needing secondary repentance) but of **omission** (needing primary repentance). Am I accusing you of not being a Christian? Of course not! I am inviting you to become a Christian, to repent of your turning away from God, the biblical God, the God you've heard of all your life & have resisted. I'm not putting you down: I'm trying to help you put yourself up, up into relationship with the living God, the Lord of life & love.

Dan McCullough is no Christian

On June 15 the Cape Cod Times published a letter from Dan McCullough of Orleans. How are we to recognize God in your writing if you don't mention him? Family is family, death is death, hope is really a ploy, love is love and dignity of human beings are human beings, not God. You can always respect a per-

son's feelings and still tell him about God.

One thing is clear. Dan McCullough is not a Christian. If he were he would tell people about God and how they need him in their life. I pray, Dan McCullough, that you repent.

ALMA CAIN
Falmouth

Virtuous McCullough need not repent

I was disturbed by some of the comments about (columnist) Dan McCullough and the grand debate as to whether or not he is a Christian.

It is totally unimportant whether or not McCullough cares to wear the "Christian" label. His love of family, his kindness, his respect of all peoples and their beliefs, his lack of prejudice and bigotry make him one

of the finest human beings I have ever had the privilege of meeting.

Dan McCullough recognizes that we do not all worship the same God in the same way, and he respects our desires to do so. He certainly has nothing to repent for.

SHIRLEY METROPOULOS
Dennis