

## "HOW CAN WE BE BOTH CATHOLIC AND PROPHETIC?"

A few reflections toward Craigville Theological Colloquy XIII (15-19 July 96)

2793 10 July 96  
ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636  
Phone 508.775.8008  
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

1 We can be catholic by faithful adherence to & proclamation of **the canonical gospel** as witnessed to & through the catholic (ecumenical) creeds & by vigorous efforts to establish & maintain, in so far as practicable, fellowship with all Christians. "The ancient faith of the Church" is what, in a Feb/94 encyclical from the UCC president's office, Jn. Thomas, Ass't. to the President for Ecumenical Concerns, called it (in defending UCC participation in the RE-Imaging Conference, 4-7 Nov 93, Minn., MN: "To the extent that...[it] helped over 2,000 women and men discover new ways in which the ancient faith of the Church can be claimed as Good News for their lives, the Conference deserves our appreciation & support" [underlining mine].) But was it indeed "the ancient faith" that was presented at that conference?

2 The **intellectual identity** of the UCC is stated in §2 of our Constitution's Preamble: "The United Church of Christ...claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers." The next sentence states the **entailment**: The UCC "affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God." (I hear rumblings from upstairs of the intention to "revise" this. So far in UCC history, "revise" has meant "reduce" in the direction of what Leander Keck calls "theological anorexia": Each revision of the UCC Statement of Faith is theologically weaker than its immediate predecessor.)

As for the reference to the Protestant Reformers, their intention was THE CATHOLICITY OF THE REFORMATION, renewal in continuity with the "one holy catholic and apostolic church" of ancient times (P.O.V. of the authors of this bk., ed. by Carl E. Braaten & Robt. W. Jensen, Eerdmans/96): heirs of the Reformation should be (as Philip Schaff, in a UCC tradition, said six generations ago) faithful to the evangelical & catholic elements of the great Christian tradition.

3 My phrase for all this is **the canonical gospel**, God's revelation "in each generation" coming to the Church / the churches / Christians through the unreduced & unincreased canon ("the Christian Bible" as its called in the subtitle of Brevard S. Childs' magnum opus, BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible [Fortress/93]).

4 The UCC cannot be catholic if it falls short of being canonical: canonicity is an essential of catholicity East & West. Academic speculations as to **precanonical** situations are not pertinent to the canonical Christian faith however "plausible" the reconstructions to the post/modern mind. E.g., while we have as many historical Jesuses as we have Jesus Seminar (& other historical-Jesus) scholars, the Jesus of the Church's worship & proclamation is the canonical Jesus, Jesus Christ the Lord.

The same applies to **genetic fallacy** efforts to "discover" a preChristian Hebrew/Israelite deity who's not, as is the canonical God, scandalously masculine ("scandalously," i.e., face-to-face with aggressive gender feminism). (Genetic fallacy? That's the false claim that an earlier stage is freeze-defining: e.g., human beings [according to pop Darwinism] are nothing but apes.)

In his YAHWEH-THE PATRIARCH (Fortress/96), Erhard S. Gerstenberger says the Bible's deity (according to the blurb) is "lone and militantly male." Malelike, he gives commands & things happen: creation, judgment, redemption. He has no hesitation in saying that this is the Bible's (i.e., the canonical) God, cover to cover. For us canonical Christians, that's the God with whom we have to do in both Testaments (& therefore also in [as our UCC Constitution's Preface has it] "the ancient creeds and...the Protestant Reformers"). The author speculates that earlier our spiritual ancestors were **ditheists**, worshiping YHWH & his consort Asherah.

Why earlier? Ditheism may have been, rather, an aberration from monotheism. Either way, the canonical prophets denounced the ditheism, & canonical Jews/Christians accept the denunciation of goddess worship as revelation: God wants us to denounce the goddess & announce the canonical feminine aspects of God (indeed, vis-a-vis feminism, rejoice in these aspects). What canonicity rules out is the surrender of (1) monotheism & (2) predominant masculinity.

5 In the (online) "Confessing Christ" meeting (printed 5 May 96), Gabriel Fackre put Colloquy XIII's question succinctly: "How does the UCC bring its self-defined prophetic stances on ethical issues to the ecumenical community without putting its ecumenical relationships in jeopardy?" Not difficult if both elements are in conformity with the particular biblical-canonical **scandal of historicity**. All canonical Christians live spiritually in the same language-world of religious & ethical ideas. Given different historical circumstances, these ideas would be different. Gerstenberger claims that the tumultuous 6th c. BC/BCE toughened up the deity, who emerged more masculine & militant. But that's the God who's toughed it out to the present day! That same century saw the shaping up of ethical ideals "prophetic" Christians adhere to today: *do those sociohistorical circumstances make those ideals any less ours? or that commanding deity any less ours?* (It should help our acceptance of this earth-&-history boundness of the Faith if we consider that even the so-called ahistorical religions, e.g. Buddhism, were wombed by particular circumstances & thus have each its own scandal of historicity.)

6 In the Jn. Thomas paper (28 Mar 95 Simpson Lecture, ANTS) Colloquy XIII participants are expected to study, J.T. expresses thus the catholic/prophetic tension (p.12): "Conformity, even when it is attempting to serve the cause of unity, and sectarianism, even when it seeks to further justice, are both unacceptable behaviors for the United Church of Christ."

6 Moving from "catholic" to "**prophetic**," the Colloquy faces, vis-a-vis the later word, two facts: (1) In UCC-talk, "prophetic" is code, shorthand, for (primarily) Synod socio-ethical positions (with religious-theological grounding); (2) In the Bible, the **reverse** obtains: The prophets' primary concern is religious corruption (of the God-idea & of worship), & they point accusingly to what they consider the ensuing social evils. As a biblical scholar, I'm especially suspicious of the latter-day captivity of "prophetic" to serve a social agenda of dubious canonical grounding. E.g., Thomas says women's ordination is a matter "central to the Gospel" (p.5). For 60 years I've spoken in favor of women's ordination (& have two in my family), but "central" is excessive unless one eisegetes current gender egalitarianism into "the Gospel." Again (p.9), Thomas says that the UCC gay-&-lesbian advocacy (including "open & affirming" churches) is "what we have perceived to be a Gospel gift" of the UCC to the other churches: again, "Gospel" captive to a current egalitarian agendum, the witness being, as widely unacceptable among Christians, "cross-bearing behavior" (a metaphor I find cloyingly self-congratulatory in this context).

7 On the same p. we get this oxymoron: "How shall we 'imagine' orthodoxy and doxology beyond patriarchy?" Going beyond the canonical divine patriarchy takes one necessarily beyond canonical orthodoxy-&-doxology, beyond & thus outside of mainstream Christianity. Ironically, this "prophetic" redesigning of the deity would ignite the wrath of the biblical "prophets" whose designation, in adjectival form, is thus being used so deviantly. A further irony occurs on p.11: We are asked to consider, as among the UCC's "faithful gifts" to the other churches, our present official mucking around with gender-motivated linguistic revisionism.

8 Thomas affirms both "accountability" (the catholic pole) & "pilgrimage" (the "prophetic" pole). But as he uses "prophetic" in the reverse of the biblical way, he uses "pilgrim" in the reverse of the historical way. Our 1620 UCC-ancestor "pilgrims" were escaping change (the "Dutching" of their chn.'s speech) & affirming their old manner of life in a new venue; but Thomas' UCC-official slam-dunk pilgrims are self-affirmed innovators, drowning out the violins of (comm)unity with the drums of "justice" so-called & even claiming a breakfast-cereal-like distinctive denominational "identity" on the basis of stances most Christians view not as forward-looking but as conformist to the current cultural corruptions (especially extreme individualism) & passions (especially egalitarianism).

9 "**False doctrine** [my bf.] corrupts the life of the Church at its source, and that is why doctrinal sin is more serious than moral. Those who rob the Church of the gospel deserve...penalty, whereas those who fail in morality have the gospel there to help them."--D.Bonhoeffer, *THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP*, SCM revised & unabridged ed., p.264.