2941 12.29.98
ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Ellz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

CONSUMER ED(UCATION) FOR SOULS

I entered no store to buy anything for Christmas (though I confess to doing a mite of shopping elsehow). American Express knows what you buy, & Amazon knows what you read, & God help all us consumers of visible & invisible comestibles (for what we eat eats us)....This Thinksheet scowls at some of what I consider junk food for the soul, the inner self.

1 This letter to the editor (day before yesterday, CAPE COD TIMES) goes after an ex-hippie Hindu weekly columnist who, '60s-style, prefers the East & its sacred literature to the West & its sacred literature. I need hardly say that the paper has no columnist of reverse preference. For two generations the universities have been pushing "the culture of disbelief" (as Stephen Carter, Geo. Marsden, & others are now naming it), & the sown dragon's teeth have produced vari-sized dragons attacking "the West," especially Christianity. (In the present PC atmosphere of "tolerance," the white male Christian is the only fair game left.)

The Bible fostered marital equality

In his column, Lawrence Brown is correct in saying, "I am not terribly biblical." For one thing, he confuses the biblical perspective with "Romano-Palestinian customs."

But what I find especially irritating is his quoting the Vedas against the Bible. Yes, the Vedas preach "ahimsa," non-violence in the home and everywhere else. He implies that this puts Indic scripture above the Bible vis-à-vis his ideal of husband-wife equality.

What is the evidence?

The evidence is that marital equality emerged where the Bible was and is the foundational sacred scripture — not in the East, where Sinic and Indic scriptures were and are foundational.

"Family values" in the East have been far less fluid than in the West. The Vedic preachment of marital non-violence was within a society in which wives were so status-inferior to their husbands that violence was not necessary. Wives knew and kept their places, husbands weren't tempted to violence to keep them in line. And violence against a husband was inconceivable.

Lawrence Brown can be counted on never to miss a chance to shaft the Bible, and I can be counted on seldom to miss a chance to counter his Bible abuse.

WILLIS ELLIOTT
Craigville

2 This venue is not a good source of Book of the Month reviews: I let books marinate at least a century before I hear the command "Tolle lege" (Augustine's "Take up and read"). But if somebody gives me for Christmas a NYT's Best Seller, I read it as a act of gratitude. So, yesterday, I read Mitch Albom's TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE (Doubleday/97). It was #3 on last Sunday's NYT nonfiction list, & I want to tell you why I think it was.

3 There's a huge market out there in America for do-it-yourself religion. Morrie, a retired university professor whose demise we get to observe, is all for self-discovered "meaning": "He had created a cocoon of human activities--conversation, interaction, affection--and it filled his life like an overflowing soup bowl" (43). "Hell is other people," said Sartre: Morrie could have said "Heaven is other people." Same p.: "The way to get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning."

4 Sounds good. Is good as far as it goes. But *what's left out?* Two sides of the triangle. God & faith-community. Those two sides are collapsed onto the baseline, which is Morrie's ego-self-soul as center, a childlike egocentricity of the best sort, affectionate, listening, caring, benevolent. You'd think it's all there if you were a flatlander, unable/unwilling to attend to the two sides that have collapsed onto & into his ego. Since public & higher education have rendered those two sides almost invisible, Morrie stands out for millions as a model human being, thought healthy because multitudes share his sickness, **hyperindividualism**.

5 Morrie, a U. of Chicago PhD, taught HP, the human potential, which was big when he & I were there & was to become, in succeeding decades, HPM (the Human Potential Movement). Says M. (156), "We should be looking at our potential, stretching ourselves into everything we can become." Again, not too bad. But sad in light of our HP to live, in a community of praise, the biblical praise-life. The best M. can come up with (mext p.) is "Build a little community of those you love and who love you." 113: "At Brandeis, he taught classes about social psychology, mental illness and health, group process....heavy on 'personal development'."

+

6 As I lived through the early & middle stages of HPM (the "personal **development**" movement still continuing in a communications-technology flood of "self-help"), & myself acquired & taught HRS (human-relations skills), I thought it a poor & egocentric sub for "personal **devotion**" to the biblical God, with adoration & obedience. It abides as a popular alternative to, admixture with, & adversary of Christianity, whose pronouns for deity some are now suppressing as supposedly repressive of FHPD (female human-potential development).

7 It's a comparatively bad time for the boys, so we're getting a lot talk & some action about **male bonding**. Secular: Robt. Bly (who's on the book's jacket); sacred: Promise Keepers. Film: "Good Will Hunting." Bio: TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE (the author being a former student of M. at Brandeis, & returnee to conversations with his favorite professor). M. is "Coach," the author is "Player." M. sees himself as fulfiling the wise-old-man archetype (without mentioning Jung; "I delight in being a wise old man" [120]). At age 78, & dying, he's "trying to grapple with the big questions, the ultimate questions, the ones that won't go away." "My issues" are "love, responsibility, spirituality, awareness," & "they should have been all along." The book is popular because (1) in secular language it speaks to (2) these value-**deficits** (largely from the decay, in America today, of the institutions promotive of those values, & the secularization of institutions formerly promotive of those values).

8 Again, the book's popular because it's a neat fit with present-day America's **cafeteria-style religion**. Jew-born M. is mainly Buddhist, preaching acceptance, detachment, & serene dying (81, 103, et al). But he's an "agnostic" who "borrowed freely from all religions" (81, 84: "we're deficient in some way," materialistic, & should "make room for some more spiritual things"--a posture for which he'd catch no flak these days from secularists). Christianity gets one mention (82): "He enjoyed some of the philosophies of Buddhism and Christianity." God comes in twice: (1) When the author brings up the Book of Job, M. says "God overdid it" (151); (2) In Ted Koppel' third & last TV interview with M., when M. said "You done good," M. said "You think so?" (Author: "M. rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.") "I'm bargaining with Him up there now. I'm asking Him, 'Do I get to be one of the angels?'" (Author: "It was the first time [&, in the book, the only time] Morrie admitted talking to God.")

9 **Afterlife**? Nothing about resurrection. A little about immortality of influence. Several references to the reincarnation hope. His **religion**? When Koppel wanted a word to "the millions," M. said "Be compassionate. And take responsibility for each other." Then he quoted his favorite poet, Auden: "'Love each other or die'"--his "mantra" (the author comments; 163). His source of **authority**? Experience (author, 1): "The class [M.-author interviews] met on Tuesdays....The subject was the Meaning of Life. It was taught from experience."

10 M. was a **control-freak**, as self-respecting (vs. God-respecting) Americans want to be. Because of the West, he was more Stoic than Buddhist. "Meditation teachers" came to instruct him in that dimension of "self-control" (the central Stoic virtue)....At his grave, a Brandeis rabbi read a few poems. Practice of Judaism? M. went daily to synagogue as a child of 8 to "ask God to take care of his dead mother and his sick brother." "His father was not a religious man" & was cold, unhugging--so it's no surprise that M. had a life-long outsize hunger for love, & made love (40, 43, 52, 77, 91, 125, 127, 130ff [a chapter], 149, 174, 176, 178) his central concern (qt., 75)....On autonomy, 156ff....On ALS dying, 7-10....On truth-beauty-goodness, 120....On grief, 86....M. lived in W.Newton MA, & it was a 1,400-mi. round trip each Tuesdays for the author, a captive of the culture in which (at Logan Airport) "every face I saw looked ready to kill somebody" (66)....The author's a sports journalist (67): "Football in America has become ritualistic, almost a religion, an opiate for the masses."

11 The book's about living toward <u>death</u> in the midst of life: the gospel (Augustine) is about living toward <u>life</u> in the midst of death. M.'s question "Is this all? Is this all I want? Is something missing?" (65) is a cri de coeur, a heart-protest against thing-living, which can never satisfy the soul. In this, a good book.