

"Religion Projections: Early 21st Century"—1/3rd Century Later

WHAT NOW, "Confessing Christ"?

A letter to Russ Mitman, convener of the UCC Confessing Christ national planning meeting, 1.27-29.03

Dear Russ--For a pesky but hopefully not permanent health reason, today I regretfully canceled my reservation for the semi-annual national planning meeting. I'm not being so bold as to ask that any particular concern of mine be put on the agenda, but I am asking that--in lieu of my presence--this Thinksheet be distributed to the attendees.--Grace and peace, *Wendell*

1 In Chappaqua a quarter century ago, our dog Tippy could catch Frisbees higher than my head. Awesome! He never failed! With God-given wisdom he knew, he had to know, before he left the ground, where the Frisbee would be when he got to it (which is something Washington's "Star Wars" projectiles have never managed).

For your planning, I would like to tell you what the world & its religions will look like in 2025, which is the year Herman Kahn (founder of the Hudson Institute) assigned me to do religion projections back (to 1970) from (so he could work them into his "scenarioing," as he called it). For this Thinksheet, I pulled out that paper to see & rate how I did (& I just gave myself a generous 90%). Missed? (1) In 1970, world Islam was quiescent; in 2002, it's explosive (killing four Christian medical missionaries in Yemen three days ago because they were "preaching Christianity," which is forbidden in all Muslin countries, though preaching Islam is forbidden in no Western country). (In the 22nd century, the religion feature of the 21st century will be seen as the conflict between Islam & Christianity.) (2) I predicted that by 2025 12% of pastors would be women. Today, I think it'll be 40%. (3) Here's "21a-g. American civil life has become [in 2025] more secular in the sense that religious institutions have less political weight than ever before, and religion itself has become a boundary phenomenon. This, however, needs qualifying." Indeed it does! But (b) "the churches have a potential for more political influence than at any time in the past century"; & (c) "Religion has become more skillful in translating its doctrines into human values in the public domain." I didn't foresee the Christian neo-cons' present capture of D.C.

Why reproduce this diagram from the Hudson Institute paper? Because I want to show the major world-cultural shift from tribal to global & also (as three arrows show) the regressive tendency (i.e., increasing tribalization, including making virtues of intolerant "tolerance" and "diversity" & "multiculturalism").

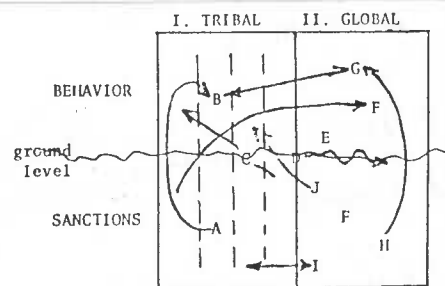
2 Confessing Christ needs to speak consciously toward its two primary audiences, viz. the churches & (national/conference/judicatory) officialdom. Not always an easy distinction, but a worthwhile question: Whom (in any particular instance) are we talking to? Keeping this question in mind should give our statements more focus & acuity.

3 When we speak to "the churches," is it useful to distinguish between their clergy & the laity (the latter as a secondary audience)? My question intends not to bypass the pastors but so to speak as to be "understandable of the people".

4 Beyond our own UCC publications, should we bear in mind the possibility of occasionally speaking through other media, religious & secular? A useful question: If we were to speak to _____, how would we word our witness?

5 Simply by coming together prayerfully & thoughtfully & joyfully, "Confessing Christ" at the national & area levels is enacting faithfulness to the gospel as described in the UCC Constitution's Preamble: just this coming together is action & witness. What if anything beyond this we should do should be a matter of continuing conversation. Should we take positions? If so, should those positions be spelled out both positively (what we're saying) & negatively (what we're not saying), & adversarially (what we're speaking out against)? Should we make statements only when we have

THE ETHICO-DYNAMIC
SITUATION:
BEGINNING
OF THE 21st
CENTURY



consensus, or sometimes report a divided house (& the details of the division)?

6 When we sponsor forums on disputed questions, should they be balanced (as was the Mass. Confessing Christ on gay marriage/union), or conclusive (after balancing presentations, the C.C. POV presented)? The same question vis-a-vis publications (HOW SHALL WE SING THE LORD'S SONG? [on TNCH] being of the second type)?

6 How do we, as a loyal opposition within our beloved UCC, say YES (& give hope) as well as NO? In the U. of Chicago's "Sightings" (which appear automatically as brief occasional papers [by various scholars] on my computer's "Inbox"), today Martin Marty declines to have a go at 2002's most significant religion-stories, & instead, after exclaiming "how big the religion story was" in 2002, has this to say: "What is hard to find [among the 2002 religion-news releases] are references to stories that reflect positively on any of the religions," but we are aware of the positive news, "where faiths provide meaning and inspire acts of justice and mercy."

7 Theology is thought, doctrine is taught, dogma is imposed: three obligations, I hold, of Confessing Christ. We try to do theology (joyfully); we should attend to what's taught (as we did in the case of the Penn. group's catechism); & we should condemn, as violating free discourse, INclusive-language speech-codes crafted to EXclude (to various extents) the Bible's way of speaking about God.

In the UCC, the speech-code oppression hit hard with the new hymnal's wooden use of Letty Russell's version, which was adopted by BHM for its publications (the press rewriting, to the code's specs, manuscripts, & publishing the bowdlerized versions without the authors' permission [an arrogance Dot Fackre experienced]). The heresy-hunting mentality (the heresy, here, being the use of the Bible's way of God-talk) has infected our colleges, seminaries, & hierarchy (being particularly oppressive in clergy's church-search). The UCC has some in-house liberating to do, & I think Confessing Christ should lead out against both forms of this repression, written & unwritten. (**None** of the codes bans the masculine title "God"; **some**, one or more of the masculine titles "Savior," "King," "Lord," "Father," "Son"; **all** ban the Bible's personal pronouns for God [& some are post-mortem neodocetist, banning "he" for Jesus Resurrectus: the crucifixion permanently killed "he"].)

8 We in Confessing Christ should lift our eyes **beyond** (with its multiple meanings of transcendence). Herman Kahn asked me to do religion-projections 55 years beyond 1970: how now do I see the world of 55 years beyond 2003 (I'm finishing this Think-sheet New Year's Day)? (Forgive my boldness, or--better--match it with yours.) We shall have gone through cataclysmic wars, the death-throws of fossil national boundaries. (E.g., the present boundaries of Iraq were a 1921 British make-shift.) This globalization by geographical dissolution will result in tribal militarizations to form ethnic boundaries (e.g., "Kurdistan" for the Kurds, now captives to five countries) --intensifying religion differences to the extent that those differences are primary-ethnic (e.g., Arab-Islam) or secondary (e.g., world-Islam against world-Christianity, the conflict that will be the chief religious news of this century). By population increase but even more by per capita demand for potable water due to development in the now "developing" world, the world will be experiencing unprecedentedly high die-offs unstoppable by "developed" world hand outs-&-ups. (Against these historical probabilities we Christians should pray "Thy kingdom come" more intensely than ever before, & "do what we can" (as Fred Trost's upsidedown sparrow against the expected falling of the sky).

9 Well, what *can* we (meaning Confessing Christ, on our spindly sparrow-legs)? (1) We can practice & preach the unshakeables (Heb.12.27). (2) We can strengthen the covenantal bonds with those who share our commitment & longing. (3) We can witness & work toward a post-"post-modern" revival of "piety versus moralism" (Jos. Haroutunian's 1932 title; "post-modern" on p.xxv). (4) We can resist the Feuerbachian projection of egalitarian androgynism onto the deity, & instead make a virtue of the Bible's strong God-language. "A New God for the New Year?" is my sermon-title for the first Sunday in '03. The text is our Confessing Christ theme-text: Heb.13.8 (CEV): "Jesus Christ never changes! He is the same yesterday, today, and forever."