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HANDING ON TO OTHERS WHAT, OF WHAT I'VE THOUGHT UP, I CONSIDER WORTH GETTING OUT

This Thinksheet title puts simply & humorously what I've been up to 2,782 times, & adds a fillip: it's a rough translation of the Thomistic aim stated in this review (below), viz. *contemplata aliis tradere* (& oh how delightful for this middlesized mind to be set alongside, even for one sentence, a great one!). *Deo soli gloria* (Only to God be the glory!)....A few comments on this review: (1) It's the second by a Roman Catholic, the first being by someone lifelong in statecraft; pleasant to read, but unhelpful because only laudatory....(2) Cunningham notes a plain & limiting fact, viz. that my "world is very much a Protestant one"; with the exception of one quote from Thomas (whom we Protestants usu. call "Aquinas"), "Elliott never quotes a Catholic author or comments on matters Catholic." 'Tisn't a quoting kind of book, but he's correct, & I thank him (a) for calling this to my attention & (b) for not being so provincially Catholic as to sniff at a thoroughly Protestant project, judging such unworthy of his reviewing....(3) Thrice in a short review he dubs me, properly, a contrarian. In addition to his supporting attributions, I'll mention one I've never before mentioned in a Thinksheet: While I've had some books published, I'm too much the contrarian ever to have initiated the process: I've never sent a book MS to a publisher: the personal "thinksheet" genre, in bypassing publishing houses, suits the contrarian style.

Flow of Flesh, Reach of Spirit: Thinksheets of a Contrarian Christian,
by Willis Elliott,
Eerdmans, $15, 252 pp.

Willis Elliott is a Protestant pastor with a Ph. D. from Chicago and was, for years, a seminary professor in New York City. For the past two decades he has been a scholar-in-residence at a retreat house on Cape Cod. Most important, however, Elliott has been a keen student of the Bible. He reads it daily in the original languages. For over twenty years he has also sent out, to a group of willing readers, a "thinksheet"—a few pages reflecting on current events or reflections on his Bible study or ruminations on church life. By his count, he has composed well over two thousand of these reflections. This book is a sampler. To some of the older thinksheets a "1995 Supplement" has been added.

Elliott describes himself as a "contrarian Christian." That is true in more ways than one. He is contrarian in the sense that he is unabashedly and enthusiastically a Christian and, in that sense, stands against the pretensions of contemporary secular culture. He is also a contrarian in that his opinions are stated baldly enough that almost any reader will want to take him on with a "Yes, but...." That would please him because, as Kenneth Woodward says in his introduction to the volume, this is not a "newsletter" but an ongoing conversation.

There is a lot in these "thinksheets" with which to argue. It is not clear to me that abortion and wholesale contraception are the solution to the population problem (which Elliott describes in apocalyptic language), just as it is not clear to me that Latin American liberation theology is reducible to Marxism. Others will bristle at his profound distaste for gender inclusive language in Bible translations,* but still others might applaud his unsentimental critique of the relentless godlessness of public education. Is, then, Elliott a liberal? a conservative? Well, the better term is his: a "contrarian."

The forty-six chapters which make up this reader are a mixed bag (not enhanced by Elliott's penchant for diagrams which, for the most part, are puzzling), but what most attracted me to the book is the basic vehicle which he calls the "thinksheet." I very much like to see how a highly literate Christian, steeped in the Bible tradition (Elliott is no fundamentalist), can focus, in a few readable pages, on a topic and bring a fresh angle or a new approach to it. The best pages, for my money, were Elliott's reflections on how to read the Bible. In these I discovered, in a new language, what has always been important for me: reading strategies that combine a critical sense with a sapiential one.

How, then, to describe Elliott and his enterprise? Apart from a short quote from Thomas Aquinas in the epilogue, Elliott never quotes a Catholic author or comments on matters Catholic. His world is very much a Protestant one. Nonetheless, it is to the old Thomistic vocation of "handing on to others the things already contemplated" (*contemplata aliis tradere*) that I would appeal to describe what he is about. I like the way he goes about things even when I do not like all the things he says. That, however, is as it should be when reading a contrarian Christian.

Lawrence S. Cunningham *teaches theology at the University of Notre Dame.*

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* I'm for horizontal (people-talk) gender-inclusive language, against vertical (God-talk)--the policy also of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.