

* Arrested development: his transcendence-sense did not grow beyond SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence). But his supportless belief that there must be "aliens" more intelligent than we are is, Plato would say, the shadow of the supportable belief in God's omniscience.

RELIGION is an atomic-autonomous reality of soul & society
Priestcraft is an atomic aspect of religion as society

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS 2988
309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008 12.23.99
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

Line 1: The life-message of Mircea Eliade,

this century's most influential historian-philosopher of religions

Line 2: My word to a just-retired priest (temporarily, at least) soured on priestcraft

1 At this both fin de siecle & fin de millenium, how natural for us to compare this century with others, especially the present one, & this millenium with the others, especially the past two. We are humbled by the unpredictables, shocked by the discontinuities, disquieted by the world's prospects of evil, but wisened by pondering the creational continuities, the "things that cannot be shaken" (Heb.12.27; hear the immediately following words in CEV: "We should be grateful that we were given a kingdom that cannot be shaken. And in this kingdom we please God by worshiping him and by showing him great honor and respect. Our God is like a destructive fire!").

2 The two continuities this Thinksheet asks you to ponder are so--are continuous, always & everywhere-- because they are irreducible (in Greek, "a-tomic," literally uncuttable; in Latin, "in-divisible"). (Ancient Greek materialism taught that "all things," the universe, is composed of uncuttable bits accordingly called "atoms," the term 18th-c. Western science used for the bits remaining when a molecule is, as it were, cut up-- the term that's continued even to the present even though in our century atoms themselves have been, as it were, cut up, split into ever smaller subatomic particles.)

3 The more skill we've acquired to split (i.e., reduce to smaller components/forces), the greater have become our powers to do good & evil to ourselves & the biosphere. Psychic coordinates of this have been commensurable increases of can-do arrogance & spiritual blindness. Critics came to call this double pathology "the nothing-but fallacy." Literati reduced poetry to prose, sacred literature to mythology. Psychologists reduced spiritual experiences to psychic states. Biologists reduced mind to brain, the soul disappearing. Sociologists reduced religion to group respect. The so-called cultural elite reduced religion in one direction to art & in another to ethics & in yet another to "spirituality."

4 Eliade saw himself as, & powerfully was, an enemy of this **reductionist mentality**, which I saw him confront face to face in debating "liberal" (we used to say "modernist") clergy.

5 (Thinksheet resumed 1.31.00:) Because spirituality & religion (which is institutional spirituality) are irreducible & thus, in whatever forms, inevitable, efforts to rid oneself/society of them are naive, adolescent, & pathetic. Let's take **Carl Sagan** as an example. A deracinated Jew, he delighted in attacking the biblical way of seeing the world--as the authors of both biographies of him aver (& did so on Book-Span yesterday). Instead of the Bible, as a child he read space comics &, later, increasingly complex forms of scifi.* Instead of dreaming of the Kingdom of God on earth, he created for himself (&, in the process, millions of others around the globe) an exobiological fantasy, life out there on millions of planets beyond our solar system. (Notice the transcendence notes "out there" & "beyond" to indicate his God-substitute). His biographers make several points about his spirituality/religion replacement: (1) He was self-blinded in believing the universe is "life-affirmative" & so once it begins (by an electrical charge creating amino acids, as was proved at the U. of Chicago when he was there), it continues: the factor he occluded is that the universe is also life-destructive; (2) Naively & stubbornly he persisted in his belief even after four decades of listening for radio signals from space--the truth probably being that we are alone: probably out there no life evolved enough to send radio signals, as only a thin slice of human life on earth is that evolved. (He was an exobiological fundamentalist: fundamentalisms obscure facts & feed illusions.)

So much for his spirituality, what about his religion? As we experienced in his TV series "Cosmos," he was the priest of his new religion (& was, lifelong, hungry for devotees, the "church" forming around him).

Both biographers implied that as C.S. was a "practical atheist" though claiming to be open to contra-evidence, we should be practical unbelievers in life out there but should not close down our radio telescopes: he was agnostic about God, we should be agnostic about life-out-there (with an agnosticism that's "practical" disbelief).

6 What happens to a *religionless spirituality*? It becomes increasingly idiosyncratic, it's inevitable center being the idio-self (the persona of individual uniqueness). Instance **Arnold Schoenberg**--born a Jew, converted to Christianity, then (1933, in spite of Hitler) converted to Judaism--deeply spiritual, but never was a participant in synagogue or church (so never had a congregational rabbi or a congregational priest). Since his religion (like that of millions today) was all in his head & not in his hands & feet, God for him was (naturally) heady, i.e. a Big Idea (shadow in his anthropocentric opera "Moses und Aron," a travesty on the biblical theocentric story), not the Bible's Pharoah-sinking & Jesus-raising God of action-in-community.

In his two letters to me, my priestcraft-leery retired priest (actually, Protestant pastor; but, anthropologically viewed, priest) is **anticlerical** not in the historical sense of opposition to clerical power (vs. the powers of laity & general public) but as a move to correct three misperceptions (though he doesn't so line them out): (1) The clergy's misperception of themselves (as elevated above, rather than only ordained to lead in divine worship & service, the laity); (2) the laity's misperception of the clergy, & of the church tandem with the misperception of the clergy; & (3) the public's misperception of the clergy, once as too high & now as too low. I hope that what this Thinksheet's saying about the inevitability of spirituality/religion will at least provide him with a cooling POV on his "grouchy"ness (as he calls it, with some transcendence of his gray mood).

7 An analogy: As the American society is now in the anxiety-producing process of reconceiving masculine roles, church-&-society are in the anxiety-producing process of reconceiving **clergy roles**. One aspect of this is the public's paradoxical (1) lowered view of the clergy & (2) tendency to identify clergy with church (abetting the clergy's baleful tendency to such locutions [which my friend adduces] as "my pulpit," "my church," & "my people"). A literate & cultured gentleman, this letter-writer encloses, half apologetically, a "polemic" of his titled "Today's Clericalism"--on (perhaps) "pet peeves" about continuing conditions which have "troubled me all though my ordained years": his letters to me are not due to adventitious dyspepsia. And he seems urgent in wanting to know "Have you ever written about this?" Answer: Can't remember, but I am now.

8 Leaders being structural to communities, there never has been--& can't be--a leaderless (i.e., priestless) religious community. But some such communities have had, & have, no paid leaders (e.g., the Bruderhof or the old-style Quakers). Problems either way. Pay, & you get a trained professional; don't pay, & you get an untrained nonprofessional who eats off something other than religion. Religion here is only a species of the genus "communities need unpaid-or-paid leaders." A common error is the myopia of supposing that there's something distinct, here, about a religious community. There's nothing. Each particular religion will deal with this communitarian fact in its own way, but let's not lay on religion a burden common to institutions no matter their (now also a secular term) "mission statement." **Leaderless community** is, always & everywhere, an oxymoron.

9 In my 60 years of ordained ministry, I've often been acutely conscious of the temptation to let what goes into my mouth (my salary) influence what comes out of my mouth (my message). Thrice resisting the temptation, I got fired thrice. We need to hear & heed H.L.Mencken's sardonic remark (in TREATISE ON THE GODS, 1930): "The clergy repay this friendly recognition of their place in society by an almost unfailing devotion to the constituted authorities....Always they have been the bulwark of orthodoxy in politics....Their prayers always go up for kings, not for rebels and reformers." (Jesus speaks of honoring rebels & reformers after they're safely dead: the Pope's now honoring Jan Hus [church-martyred in 1415], who's been safely dead a long, long time.) But the situation, in church & state & church-in-society, is not so simple. Spirituality/religion properly stabilize, as well as destabilize, community. The cheap shots of nonparticipant Menckens are, after they've hit some proper targets, still cheap shots lacking fundamental seriousness &, to that extent, irresponsible....Like people, like priest; but also like priest, like people.

10 Properly, my friend frets over clergy who, instead of leading the laity, are themselves the church (instead of only, inevitably, personal symbols of the church): "the priesthood of all believers" is in radical disrepair.