

IS THE NEW TESTAMENT PLURALISTIC?

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An open letter to the UCC Education executive, Ansley Coe Throckmorton

My dear Ms. Throckmorton:

c: Cynthia Nozomi Ikuta

While at first I thought to make this a personal letter accompanying #2631 (which mentions you in §6) & #2632 (which mentions you in the last ¶ of §5), later it occurred to me that my readers of those Thinksheets might like to listen in on my side of what I hope will be a conversation with you on the **canonical limits** of Christianity in general & the United Church of Christ in particular. The disturbing texts which moved me to write are your editorial, "Viewpoints" (THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST EDUCATOR, 6.1) & an article ("in the previous issue," Winter/91-92) by Cynthia Nozomi Ikuta, "Cultural Domination, the Bible, and Pluralism" (under the banner, "Lifelong Issues for Education: The Gift of Pluralism").

1 In my last conversation with him, Amos Wilder said "Willis, the pendulum will pause at the 'diversity' end for a while." Ikuta & you seem stuck at the diversity end. (For balance, see J.G.D.Dunn, UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT [Westm./77]. Some current hermeneutics bear the Germanic titles, respectively, "canonical criticism" & "reader-response criticism.")

Your fundamental error, which would make Wilder scowl, is that you justify Ikuta's radical pluralism by reference to diversity within the NT. That amounts to radical eisegesis! For NT diversity is bipolar not with humanistic unity but with evangelical unity, NT unity *in Christ*. Ikuta's pendulum flies off the NT's monotheistic pivot at the "diversity" end & falls into "pluralism"--& you raise no objection to this violation of the spirit & substance of the NT.

2 Reginald Fuller, a NT scholar the equal of Wilder, in a readily available source (HARPER'S BIBLE DICTIONARY, H&R/85) puts the matter succinctly (p.1057): Diversity in the NT "raises the problem of the unity behind the diversity....the center of unity must be found in the apostolic proclamation of the salvation-historical event of Jesus Christ, specifically his death and resurrection," which "acquire their significance from the message and intention of Jesus himself.....the proclamation that God raised Jesus from the dead." The NT is not biocentric or even anthropocentric: it's radically christocentric, but one would never guess that from Ikuta's piece or your lame defense of it.

If you two can treat the NT so cavalierly, I'm not surprised at your doing the same to the theological Preamble to the UCC Constitution, which was the basic text for Craigville Theological Colloquy X (on "Theological Standards for Ministry in the UCC").

The answer to this Thinksheet's title question is, "Certainly not!" Not when the word is given Ikuta's construal, which you accept as a player on our church's hermeneutic board (& which I view as a virus in the church's computer).

3 In this matter, what helps me to believe you are ignorant rather than dishonest is the fact that you quote certain theological (not biblical) eminences to support your latitudinarianism. I agree with David Tracy (THE ANALOGICAL IMAGINATION [Crossroad/81], p.448) that NT diversity is an aid to (in your words) "appropriate response to the radical pluralism of contemporary life." But do you imagine he'd agree with Ikuta's radical antimonotheistic revisionism & your acceptance of it for "needed conversation" in the church? As for Hans Küng, do you really think you can find support for Ikuta & yourself in the quotation you adduce? ("There will be no peace among the peoples of the earth without peace among the world religions. There will be no peace among world religions without peace among the Christian Churches."--CHRISTIANITY AND THE WORLD RELIGIONS [Doubleday/86], p.443.)

4 If you do not draw the canonical line against Ikuta's antimonotheism, where would you draw the line? What's outré, beyond the range of positions you would call Christian (in Ikuta's case, UCC clergy)? If you were on a Church & Ministry committee considering an ordination candidate's doctrine, would you go along with Cole Porter ("Anything goes!")? Would you have voted against Ikuta:

did you give her doctrine space in your periodical simply because some UCC ordination committee did see her through ordination, so her opinions have theological standing in UCC simply because she has clergy standing? You cannot but be aware that her P.O.V. sows dissension in our church, so it's ironic that in the very editorial in which you implicitly defend yourself for having given her space, you quote Kung's plea for "peace among the Christian Churches"! Ikuta and you might be ministers of peace & unity in the UUA, but can't be in the UCC. Yes, you propose dialogue, but you load it with the assumption that it would lead to peace & unity through mutual acceptance. (A NEW YORKER cartoon has a spider addressing a fly caught in the spider's web: "Can't we get along?" And the Nebishee: "Now that I've really gotten to know you, I don't like you.")

Yes, you say that you want "a genuine conversation among Christians who are now divided as never before." But you tip your hand when you say "what is required of us now is open, receptive, trusting dialogue--the opposite of closed, rejecting, suspicious monologue." What's wrong with suspicious dialog (hermeneutics of suspicion)? And what's wrong with trusting monolog (such as my Thinksheets, which trust my readers to think through for themselves with stimulus from me)? And is "closed, rejecting" always bad & "open, receptive" always good? I strongly favor ecumenical & interfaith dialog & cooperation & kept these aims in mind when, eg, teaching the world's religions in the U. of Hawaii & serving on the staff of the board now employing you (UCBd.forHomelandMinistries). But while it leads to the discovery of possibilities for cooperation, dialog that's honest-to-tradition-&-truth leads more often to disagreement, or to agreement to disagree, than to agreement (unity).

5 Ikuta & you are so inclusivistic-expansionist that you resist the balancing doctrine, viz **revelation by exclusion**. OT: She's grumpy that the monotheist-consolidating dynamic excluded the goddess. (That exclusion was a Good Idea, says Eliz. Achtemeier in the feature article ["Why God Is Not Mother"] of the Aug.16 CHRISTIANITY TODAY.) NT: Ignoring the catholicizing-consolidating dynamic in early Christian literature, you falsely represent the early church as happy with diversity (as you are!): "the church has always [!] seen fit to accept a variety of theological expressions." What a convenient modernization! The truth is that most of the early Christians (no newspapers, radio, or television) weren't even aware there was a variety. When they did become aware of it, they didn't like it: whom among them can you point to as liking it as you do? The apostolic period became aware of diversity, the postapostolic-precatholic period disliked it, & the catholic period brought it under control.

Classical Christianity, including the founding documents of our denomination, sees revelation in both the inclusion-expansion & the exclusion-contraction. Both canons, OT & NT, emerged out of rich cultural cognitive soups, & I'm against falling back into the old soups. Elaine Pagels, master (mistress?) of gnosticism, speaks to the struggle to exclude (qtd. by E.A., *ibid*, p.20): "the absence of feminine symbolism of God marks Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in striking contrast to the world's other religious traditions, whether in Egypt, Babylonia, Greece and Rome, or Africa, Polynesia, India, and North America." E.A. continues: "God is never called Mother in the Bible and is never addressed or thought of as a female deity. That was unique in the ancient Near Eastern world; Israel was surrounded by peoples who worshiped female deities--Asherat and Anat, Nut and Isis, Tiamat and the Queen of Heaven, Demeter and Artemis. And such a masculine conception of the deity is still unique in our world." Radical feminists now want to surrender, even apologize for, this uniqueness of their spiritual heritage.

6 You (& everybody else in national UCC leadership, as far as I know) share this embarrassment & are on this grave point apologetic about the Bible. Apparently even the 23rd Psalm ("The LORD is my shepherd") makes you uneasy, for you use the Old French "Sovereign" rather than the Old English "Lord" in your phrase "Jesus Christ as Sovereign and Savior." I don't know whether to laugh or cry at such silliness. Probably both.

William Elliott