THE CHRISTIAN'S POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

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As I begin to write this, it's just sunup in Baghdad D1A, Day One After the world-military-threat deadline against Saddam. Said the U.N. Sect.Gen. day before yesterday upon failing to persuade Saddam to vacate Kuwait, "It is a question, if you believe in God, only God knows. If you don't believe in God, who knows."* Either way, Bush (& whomsoever he may have seen fit to reveal it to) knows. And you will probably know before you read this....In an ordination examination Sunday evening, I asked the candidate "What is God doing in the Gulf?" Said she, "God is there, and our prayers should be, that God's will there be done." "Good answer," I replied, though it was only the beginning of a good answer....All across America today & tonight, peace rallies, & I in on none of them: they give Bush only negative advice, & they give Saddam false & dangerous hope. But they challenge me to do something, something appropriate to my persuasions, religious & political. What am I going to do about the Gulf in addition to prayer & witness to how I see it? You guessed it: I'm going to write a Thinksheet at it. Language, said Kenneth Burke, is action, "symbolic action." So here's the action I'm taking: I'm sharing with you C.E.B.Cranfield (THE BIBLE AND CHRISTIAN LIFE, T&TClark/85, p.87 of Sean P. Kealy, JESUS AND POLITICS, Liturgical Press/90):

1 Kealy's conclusion is that Jesus was neither **zealot** nor **quietist** but a witnessing theocrat anticipating, & calling on others to anticipate, direct divine political action. And he quotes with approval Cranford's exposition (here reproduced). I too approve.

2 Jesus' stance was & is easy to misunderstand &, for this & other reasons, hard to maintain. Because purer in the sense of simpler, zealotry & quietism are easier both to understand & to maintain. In Rich.-Niebuhrian terms, the former is "Christ against culture" & the latter is "the Christ of culture."

3 In so many ways, **Jeremiah** is a precursor of Jesus. Was he so in his politics of **diaspora acceptance** (29.7: "Seek the welfare-shalom-prosperity of the city/country where I have made you go as prisoners. Pray to me on their behalf, because if they are prosperous, so will you be.")? He condemned the rebellious zealotry of other prophets, but preached the maintenance of Jewish communal life centering in God.

*Next day: Now I know, & you do, too. In the first three hours, the bombs falling on Iraq = 1½ times the explosive force of the Hiroshima nuke. We the U.S.-U.N. are avoiding population areas & sacred sites.

4 Even before Wounded Knee it was clear that Amerind religion could not survive the loss of holy land, & it's clear in **Jeremiah** that Judaism could. Indeed, what we might call proto-Judaism was formed more in Saddam territory, Babylonia, than in "the Holy Land." And endless is the scholarly debate as to whether Jeremiah in his letter (29.4-?

Cranfield draws three conclusions as to the N.T.'s guidance concerning the spirit in which a Christian ought to try to fulfil his political responsibility:

1) In all seriousness as an obligation from God, as a necessary part of his obedience to Jesus, of his debt of love to his neighbour, of his evangelistic responsibility, of that intelligent worship owed to God in gratitude.

2) In sobriety and realism because (of)

a) The eschatological teaching of the N.T. which makes clear the temporary nature of the state and so warns against all absolutizing of it.

b) The eschatological teaching of the N.T. which makes it clear that we cannot establish the kingdom of God by our political (or, for that matter, by our ecclesiastical) actions, and so forbids 'zealotism' with its inherent tendencies to fanaticism and ruthlessness.

c) The Christian must in the light of the N.T. reckon constantly with the fact that every member of the government, every official and every member of the electorate, in his own as in other countries is a sinner. He will be aware of the need at all times for safeguards designed to limit as much as possible the abuse of power, the need to scrutinize the claims, promises and high-sounding slogans of politicians.

d) A realisation that there are limits to what can be achieved in the sphere of politics and that therefore limited goals are not to be despised.

e) A recognition that the purpose of civil government and of the state in God's intention is a purpose of mercy towards all men for whom Christ died(1 Tim 2:1ff; Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 8:11; Mt 25:40ff).

3) In confidence of hope because:

a) God is in control over the state and civil authority. E.g. Pontius Pilate, unworthy and unwilling servant though he was, nevertheless God's perfect will for the redemption of mankind was accomplished through him.

b) Political affairs no less than the life of the Church are within the domain of Christ (Rev 1:5; Mt 28:18).

c) The end toward which history moves is the coming in glory of Jesus Christ, the decisive and unambiguous establishment of God's new order, his kingdom (Rev 11:15; 21:24).

where does it end?) even included the promise of return to Jerusalem. It is abundantly clear that he views his people's political collapse as "a crisis of the soul," a phrase I take not from him but from Aleksandr Yakovlev, Gorby's closest adviser (in describing the multivalent collapse in the Soviet Union). While by analogy a nation has a soul, the word's primary reference is to the individual's inner life, to which chap.31 is a locus-classicus witness. God's inner torah, written on the heart (v.33), does not describe an autonomous (Greek-type) individual, but a person in the coming society of shalom (all having "everything they need," v.12) after the ingathering, the return to the Land. The visionary formulation of the ideal is God + Person + People + Land. The last two elements cannot be reversed without destroying Jeremiah's message, for you can have the People of God without the Land. Nor can the inner two elements be reversed, for you can have the Person standing not only outside of but also over against the People (though of course never essentially detached from the People). Jeremiah is just such a faithful lonely Person; & our Christian faith derives from "the Christ Event" at the center of which is a Jeremiah-like, & Jeremiah-understanding, faithful lonely Person, whom few of the People followed.

This Thinksheet's title points to a reality to be realized within the sphere of **the Jeremiah-Jesus paradigm.** And earth provides no relief from this. How aptly is Lake Woebegon's RC church named "Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility"!

5 The heart of a politics of **freedom** is a free heart: "All will know Me, from the least to the greatest" (Jer.31.34). I think of a saying for which said Yakolev has become famous in the USSR: It's not so much the empty shelves "but the empty souls which have brought a change to our country,...a revolutionary change." Neither unbridled capitalism (materialism, consumerism) nor any positivistic socialism can fill the heart's hollowness. In a 2 July 90 speech, Y. called on Kant's "mysteries, the starry heavens above and the moral law within," then concluded with (!) prayer to the "Almighty." The heart of a *Christian* politics is witnessing to the biblical God, "Monarch of space and time," whose appearance in & as Jesus sets all things at a new angle requiring repentance from the old ways of doing business & faith through his overarching, undergirding, & approaching Reign. Note, in Cranfield's first conclusion, "evangelistic reponsibility." In the current CHRISTIAN CENTURY, Bob Batchelder pans what he calls the "economic fundamentalism" of American religious liberalism, the persisting belief--despite the crashing collapse, toward the end of our century, of the socialistic beliefs that were bright at its beginning--in (1) salvation as basically economic salvation, & (2) economic salvation as some sort of anticapitalist collectivism ("democratic socialism," or whatnot). This form of fundamentalism on the left, or at least left of center, thinks more of the system than of the heart when it hears the word "conversion." Both need converting, but biblical religion is clear as to which is primary.

6 In Christianity, **pragmatic realism**, which is the procedural heart of any viable politics, has two enemies. Otherworldly conversionism, the hypertrophied form of what I'm preaching in §5, is one. The other is the dogmatic preferential option for peace, as in the Pope's statement yesterday "War can never resolve disputes." That was the opinion of a recent predecessor of his, Pius XII, when Hitler was slaughtering millions in his deathcamps. War did resolve our dispute with Hitler: how could anyone in his/her right mind say "War can never resolve disputes?" War is right now solving our dispute with an expansionist tyrant whose dream of the Third Babylonian Empire we the US-UN are turning into a nightmare, thank God. (But as to this enemy of pragmatic realism, my church's national office is even worse than Rome.) "A decent respect for the opinions of mankind" is a guidestar in humane politics. Bush's coalition-building in continuous interaction with the UN is history's outstanding case of a man of power, in this case the most powerful man on earth, earnestly & persistently exercising "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind." What more could the Pope or anyone else ask for? What are we up against? In one of his mouth-&-mind-filling phrases today, Geo. Will well calls it "political primitivism fueled by religious fanaticism & tribalism masquerading as nationalism." (At noon today on Iraqi TV I saw-heard this: "We must carry the flag of 'God is great' in this holy jihad.")

7 The Christian's political responsibility includes the avoidance of, & opposition to, "'**zealotism**' with its inherent tendencies to fanaticism and ruthlessness" (Cranfield, 2.b). Always, this blight on social order violates "lexical precision, logical clarity, and moral responsibility" (the phrases concluding my CCTimes letter today, Jan.19): Unusal among my letters, personal or public, this one has no theological or even religious language: my faith & theology here are implicit. "My appeal" is against fanaticism in the form of a phrase, "no other choice," which is so common its fanaticism can no longer be felt on its surface. But I remember Hitler screaming that he had "no other choice" but "the final solution" vis-a-vis the Jews! Certain quite ordinay, cool phrases are linguistic fissures up through which the hot lava of fanaticism can flow--fanaticism for peace or war, on the right or on the left. All citizens are morally responsible for the way they use words, & those who are Christians have special obligations & motivations to be lexically precise (in their word-&-phrase choices) & logically clear (their trains & leaps of thought subject to continuous self-criticism as they [Cranfield 2.c] "scrutinize the claims, promises and high-sounding slogans of politicians").

I hate violence & know that much of it begins in violent speech that first, in the mind, has done violence to language. (So my trope on e.e.cummings, "Be of language a little more careful than [of] anything except love.") Each day the average American child sees on television 45 acts of violence, most of them with handguns. How many times each day does said child hear violence done to language?

8 There I go again, preaching critical awareness as to how words are being used, consciousness raising as to how they should be used. Have you been noticing language use in **World War III** (the world v. Saddam)? The first Iraqi voice after the bombs began to fall on Baghdad (3am there, 7pm where I was listening to MacNeil Lehrer & the war annoucement interrupted) was that of a cock that crowed long before dawn, confused by the brightness from antiaircraft & bombs (the dawn of the New World Order?). Prematurely, that cock announced Thursday, January 17, in the world calendar....Arab rhetoric is always on the edge of fanaticism. In our ears it's almost hohum when Saddam says "The Americans will be walking in their own blood up to their belts." Our ears should compensate....Bush strives for the opposite extreme. When his "Operation Desert Shield" became O.D.Sword (with the doubling of our troop-strength in Saudi Arabia), unlike the press he didn't use "Sword," a word which for him has a fanatic edge. I thought he might use it when war began, but no: instead, we got O.D.Storm. It was his Storm/Sword, but "Storm" creates the illusion-delusion of inevitability, taking us back to the "no other choice" deception.

There is choice besides war

"You have no other choice. You tell us what we want to know, or we bury you alive." But the G.I., later a student of mine, did have a choice. He let the North Korean soldiers bury him alive. Through the coffin lid he heard the grave filled in.

Next day, he was dug out alive and shown the hole through which air had reached him by tube.

No human being ever has "no other choice." Even in dying, one has the choice of doing it well or botching it.

Yet your Jan. 15 lead editorial says, "War is only best when there is no other choice." That is a nonsense statement. There's always the choice of non-violence, passive or – as non-violent resistance – active.

Notice the dangerous self-deception. If we had "no other choice," we would be powerless and, accordingly, not responsible. If we are not responsible, we can't be expected to act morally and humanely. And whatever happens is someone else's fault: We are blame-free.

To avoid this breach of logic and morality, you could have said "no other way." No other way to do what? To force our U.S.-U.N. will on Saddam.

I have my opinion as to whether the world's first sanctional global gang-up is working, but I don't want to state it here. I wouldn't want that to divert attention from my appeal for lexical precision, logical clarity, and moral responsibility.

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9 In the way we view political responsibility, what other people are we Christians most like? Obviously our biblical siblings, the **Jews**. In purging them from power in the 1930s, Stalin, refusing to say "Jews," called them "internationalists" (or Trotskyites), almost all Jews at the time being in diaspora (ie, away from Palestine). Internationalists, including Jews & Christians, are potentially, passively, or actively disloyal to the nation--a fact (1) it is a Christian's respnsibility to be aware of, &

(2) Jewish existence can help us understand & affirm.

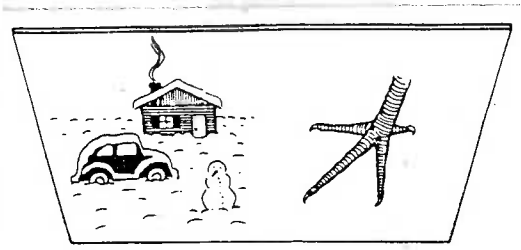
10 Internationalism--better, "transnationalism"--is the attitude & stance of having one's primary human sympathies attached to humanity rather than to one's nation or tribe. It is one form of taking **the larger view**. This is natural, & should be normal, for biblical people: our master story speaks of the largest view: "The earth is the Lord's," "Creator of heaven and earth." It should be normal, since it's natural; but it's not easy, so nationalism tends to be the norm for most Jews & Christians (for Jews, made more complex by the existence of the State of Israel).

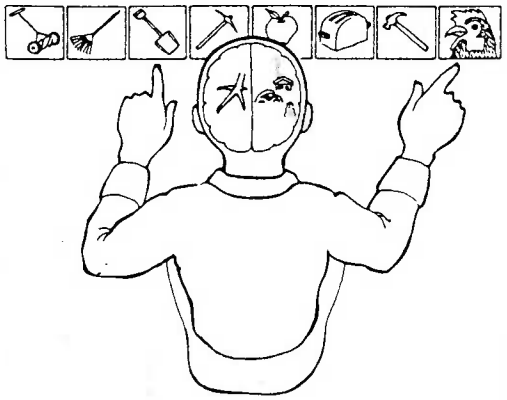
Odd but true, both passion & reason militate against the larger view. It's easy to see how passion narrows one's attention, one's view-field. So I'll pass on to how reason does it.

But first, notice the *idée fixe* phenomenon, obsessive-compulsive attending to one single thought. Hitler: Kill the Jews! Saddam: Hold Kuwait! But Tennyson: "To one fixed star my spirit clings: / I know that God is good." And Columbus (via Geo. Santayana): "To trust the soul's invincible surmise / Was all his science and his only art." Supremely, Jesus, as in the Lord's Prayer. "Obsessive-compulsive" is a pejorative charcterization of the fixed-idea phenomenon, applying only to pathological instances. The essence is the convergence of passion & reason, as two Klieg lights on a single spot-idea. I need hardly remark the importance: Does anything really significant happen in human life, private or public, without this? And is not conversion well described as a redirecting of the two Klieg lights to another spot? Or falling in love, an experience even more common to humanity.

11 As an aid to seeing-feeling how reason can threaten the larger view, I'll use a visual of M.S.Gazzaniga & J.E.LeDoux (in THE INTEGRATED MIND, Plenum Press/78; repro. p.75 of Lawrence Miller's INNER NATURES: BRAIN, SELF AND PERSONALITY, St.Martin's Press/90).

M.S.G.'s experiment showed how the two disconnected cerebral hemispheres process information in different ways, the hemispheres being disconnected by commissurotomy. "Disconnected from the right, the verbal left hemisphere cannot articulate to the self the nonrational, imagistic, and emotionally charged content of the right hemisphere's...activity; this activity, then, remains...'unconscious,'" says neurophysiologist Miller (p.77).





In this neuropsych. lab experiment, a split screen presents (as you can see) different images to each hemisphere--the left seeing a bird's foot, the right a snow scene. The split-brain patient, who makes out fairly well in the world because of compensatory crossovers but is attentionally split by the split screen, has before him the set of cards you see. Then he's asked which card goes with the picture he's seeing on each screen, & you see him making the correct associations in "split decisions" with his split brain & split screen. But when asked to explain, the patient replied, "Oh, that's easy. The chicken claw goes with the chicken and you need a shovel to clean out the chicken shed." Setting aside the possibly complicating factors of gender & handedness, we see that this patient's **preferential mode** of mentation is left-brain analytic-rational (in this case, part-to-whole-to-tool; synthetic-rational would be whole-to-tool, snow scene to shovel). The normal, unified brain moves in both directions, sorting for the appropriate mode. Why, then, do we usually take "rational" to mean the former? Testosterone, the high-drive hormone. Unfortunately, it's been "a man's world," & the male tilts toward analytic reason, the smaller view. In this vein, the Christian's political responsibility is to be correctively feminine, holistic, tilting toward **the larger view**.

12 This **holistic politics** is more mood than program. And we get at moods better by pictorial & historical analogies than by "rational" arguments. So here's a historical analogy cast in the mold of §11: **Exodus** is male-initiative phallic, **Exile** is Judaism-gestative feminine. The prophets opposing Jeremiah were exodus-minded, their project being to get the Jews back to Jerusalem no matter how. Jeremiah's project (chap.29, again) was acceptive, to make the best of the exilic situation. And the Iranians (the Medes/Persians, roughly) were scheming to overwhelm the Iraqis (roughly, the Babylonians, who had dragged the Jews to Babylon), a geopolitical reality Jeremiah roughly foresees as limiting the exile period (Cranfield, 2.a & 3.c).

My lifestory shows me as--betimes, depending on the world's situation & mine--predisposed to **rebellion** or **reception.** Always convinced that change toward the Kingdom of God is necessary, the question has been (1) the speed of it & (2) its benefactors. And I've noticed, in my case & those of others, a correlation between degree of speed & size of view: the larger the view, the more tolerable a slower speed. To extend the biological analogy: in babymaking, the male's part is minutes & the female's is months. And another correlation, though this one is less firm: patience parallels energy-level, the elderly tending to opt for slower everything, including change (making for a alliance with women, whose physical force is inferior, the male musculature being more developed). Reading my present stuff, my fellow radicals of yesteryear might cluck, "Willis is getting old." But those who know me well would respond, "His radicality is appropriate to his here-&-now, not his there-&-then." Yet is is fair to say that the larger view is now more appealing to me. And a further reason for that is that I'm less institutionally involved than formerly: when one becomes free to wear the world & its structures more lightly, looking toward total divestment, the inner world, the spirit, the Spirit has more chance of catching & holding one's attention. (This is the basis of traditional youthism in all societies. "Youthism"? It's my 1991 coinage on the model of "ageism," which [RHD^2] is a 1965-70 coinage on the model of "sexism, racism, etc.")...."Conversion" is change, & I've been steadily for it inner & outer, the emphasis varying at various stages of my pilgrimage. Says my diary of ½ c. ago today (Jan,20), "'The bitterness of [public or personal] loss' is conquered in 'the shelter of the Cross.'" I'd gotten to talk with Roswell P. Barnes, assoc.gen.sect. of the Federal [later, National] Council of Churches, who [my words] "spoke of the discipline of suffering of the war in Europe on European Christians, & our need of a similar discipline by suffering with American sin & social disorder." That long ago, the social & personal gospels were warm in my heart, mind, life, & hope.

13 "There is a touch of exile in every Exodus and a dash of exodus in every Exile," says Norman K. Gottwald (xv, forward to Daniel L. Smith's THE RELIGION OF THE LANDLESS: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE BABYLONIAN EXILE, Meyer Stone/89), pleading the situation's too complex to reduce in either direction: "Exodus and Exile alike share in the social reality and moral ambiguity of the human exercise of corporate power." He associates himself with the fifth of H. Rich. Niebuhr's CHRIST AND CULTURE stances, & identifies Smith with the first. (You remember: Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ & culture in paradox, Christ the Transformer of culture.)

Of the radical (left-wing) Reformation, Smith says (137) "Jeremiah's strategy" is "nonviolent social resistance." 135: "Jeremiah's call to seek the *shalom* of the city/country" is "a direct call to abandon revolt in Babylon and Palestine." Chap.29.5-7 is "the essence of the letter." The theology of Exile is not about taking "land, as the theology of Exodus is. It's about crucifixional suffering in a land not one's own, and there becoming such a community of justice and peace as would be impossible in a land of one's own." In short, the key biblical model is not landedness but diaspora.

Says Emerson, "The field cannot well be seen from within the field." In "the peace churches" of the Reformation's left-wing, Jesus always come out, unsuprisingly, as a pacificist (eg, Jn. Howard Yoder); & land is something God's people can do without (as witnesses the existence of these churches despite their historic landlessness--& negative experiences of land, eg the Münster Kingdom).

I must say yes to Smith that a people can survive & thrive without a land of

its own, provided their religion drinks from deeper wells than landwells. But I must say also a no: Christian political responsibility, & any theology properly expressive of it, must include solidarity with the homeless & landless in their striving for land reform, on which liberation theology does not have a monopoly. However one reads the Exodus period, land reform was an essential of Israelite theology....#757 shows, in Hebrew, the rich ramification of the Semitic root *'mm*, with "space" or "room" or "width" as its fundamental note--as everybody's original perfect, all-supplying land, viz mother's womb; a building's foundation; faithfulness (God's, "for all generations" [Ps.100, last line]) as the glue of divine-human & human-human covenant; & truth as the sine qua non of social order & shalom. There's nothing good about human life that's untouched by the lexical-spiritual dendritic system of this root! It's profoundly God-home-mother conservative, & it's radical (eg, the womb as model for the world toward shalom, the Kingdom without homeless & landless, & the propleptic [as Sermon on the Mount] attitudes & action of Kingdom citizens in anticipation of the Kingdom full-come)....The current TOSHIBA ad catches the "wideness" of this orientation: "To know what is possible tomorrow you must be willing to step outside of what is possible today. The long view is all [a slap at short-view, quarterly-report profits above quality & planning, characteristic of U.S. industry]."

14 "Is the universe friendly?" Said Einstein, "That's the most important question." God created the **land friendly**, & a Christian political responsibility is (1) to increase its friendliness by prohuman sustainable development not at the expense of our fellow creatures, (2) to resist forces (such as certain customs, commerce, & politics) inimical to the land, & (2) to promote the recovery of health to our raped & polluted planet. Here's a radical implicate: We should preach & practice a people-earth -suffering **trade-off**. Trade-offs are reasoned (though not always rational!) actions. Long before the Gaia Hypothesis, "natural philosophers" (later called "scientists") noted what, reversing the metaphor, we might call built-in trade-offs or homeostatic processes, such as the correlation of population with food-supply. The "developed" portions of our species have interfered with many of these natural-nonrational controls. In the case of population, disastrously; eg, war against infant morality unparalleled by war to increase food supply. Now, if we're to be workers together with God and/in/on the good earth, we'll have to prefer, in some instances, human suffering to land (ecological) suffering. The sufferings of people & earth must be confronted as a trade-off calling for holistic-rational decision-making. The theological task is horrendous & perhaps unachievable from within any of the traditional religions--though I hope it will be done within mine. A good beginning-point is to notice that we're not talking about human suffering or not but about some human suffering now instead of more later. And as attrition (not filling vacated jobs) is more humane than firing, so contraception & abortion are more humane than other means (war, famine, epidemic, execution) of bringing swollen populations into a sustainable balance with their ecosystems....We biblical people believe it's the Word, not the world, that's sacred--not the world as land, not the world as (land-substitutional) wealth (ie, capital), & not the world as people (under the aspect of various socialisms). We are now, more richly than the past could conceive, "in but not of the world."....How dissociate capital formation (1) from the myth that increment is progress, (2) from environmental degradation, (3) from socially disintegrative competitive individualism, & (4) from morally corrupting greed & exploitation?

15 A final note on **Jeremiah 29.7**, quotes from J.A.Thompson, THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH (Eerd./80). 546: His "revolutionary" message, to pray not for the "downfall" of the Babylonian regime but its welfare, "cast the people completely adrift from all the things on which they depended and which they regarded as essential to their own well-being, a nation-state, kingship, an army, national borders, the temple. Without all this Yahweh could give the nation...a new understanding of their calling. For the present the action lay in Babylon." (I wonder: Without Jeremiah's advice, would Jesus' "Love your enemies" have been graspable?) J. was being "practical," the alternatives being the living of resentment or the being seduced by "false prophets who might provoke rebellion." Vv.10-14: "God had plans of restoration in due course."