

CHRIST DOES NOT ASK THE COMMON CHRISTIAN
TO SUFFER FROM "METAPHYSICAL OVERLOAD"

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Yesterday on NPR, Geo. Gallup reported on the latest Gallup poll, which was on the state of America's soul. After generations of public-school spiritual-religious deracination, we as a people are a cut-flower civilization (as Elton Trueblood put it in 1941 lecture I heard, which predicted a wilting down into futility & cynicism): most Americans, eg, believe in the Ten Commandments but don't know what they are. "American values" cannot be sustained without energy from our religious roots, whence the "why" (commitment-motivation-sanction) of the "what" (the differentia, the values themselves). Now, our most serious **social crisis** is upon us; a mindless egalitarian multiculturalism threatens to overwhelm the American civilization. This wide concern, & within it the narrow concern of the Colloquy on "Theological Standards for Ministry in the United Church of Christ," is the burden of this Thinksheet.

1 First, I clear up (I hope) two expressions in this Thinksheet's title:"the common Christian," ie the ordinary Christian, ie almost all Christians, excluding only those who've had unusual opportunities (& taken them) to become learned Christians, ie informed about & skilled in Christian thinking, intellection about Christian existence--our essence (*esse*, what being a Christian has meant & means), our health & prosperity (*bene esse*, our well-being), & our flowering & fruiting for the glory of God & the good of the good earth, including humanity (*plene esse*, our full-being). Another meaning of "common Christians" is everybody except outstanding leaders, as in the course-&-book title "The Common Christian in Early Christian Times." And a third meaning is non-saints, ie those not outstanding in sanctity (though most saints get small press)....To put it in three words: intellect, leadership, character....But in a rigidly PC, antihierarchical egalitarianism such as now afflicts our country, the very phrase "the common Christian," though accurately descriptive, feels demeaning, even derogatory, a put-down. An oft-quoted Lincolnism is a corrective: "God must have loved the common people or he'd not have made so many of them."....Another caution about using "the common Christian": it tempts to arrogance any who are, in one or more of the three ways, uncommon. But arrogance is stupid & sinful in light of the pervasive biblical "what hast thou that thou didst not receive?" All Christians are common "in common" in the community of beggars all of whom receive grace, the greatest gift (Jn.1.16). So (1Cor.4.7 NRSV), "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you have received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" And a capping caveat (L.12.48): "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required;...entrusted,...demanded."....Finally, the common Christian has the twin duties of (1) honoring the uncommon by fostering the exercise of their gifts, & (2) confronting & correcting the uncommon when those gifts are unexercised or exercised amiss.

...."metaphysical overload" is what the common Christian (& sometimes also the uncommon!) experiences when Christian discourse (speaking, writing) makes theological-philosophical demands beyond the common Christian's ability to understand. If the extension cord to a motor gets hot, get a heavier cord or you'll burn out the motor. But when Christian discourse is too heavily demanding, the common Christian does not have the option of replacing the interpretive cord with a heavier one. What then are the options? (1) The sender can simplify the discourse so the receiver won't experience overload & possible burnout. Of course this is the way to go when the uncommon Christian is addressing the common. But what obtains when the uncommon is addressing the uncommon (as eg in almost all of my Thinksheets)? (2) The common Christian can (a) opt out, saying "That's not for me," or (b) become indignant, saying "Why can't you use plain language?" or (c) humbly struggle to find digestible food, skipping what would only give hermeneutic heartburn. Those who choose option (c) are soon surprised to discover their powers of understanding increasing, as those who are regular in physical exercise are pleased to discover their increasing muscular strength & energy.

As for the n. "overload," from the 15th c. on it's been a weight reference, as overloading a beast of burden or a raft. It speaks to the technological shape of our minds that most of us now would think of an overloaded electrical or electronic circuit. But excessive weight is the basic idea, & on this note "metaphysical overload" means just too much metaphysics in a discourse (&, by implication, not enough of something else). The "too much" may be too much for the hearer-reader, or just more than necessary to convey the message. Eg, the sermons of many a young preacher are too abstract, from (1) lack of courage to be concrete or, worse, (2) vain desire to display erudition.

2 What occasioned this Thinksheet was this worth-quoting passage in Karl Rahner (THE LOVE OF JESUS AND THE LOVE OF NEIGHBOR, trd. by Robt. Barr, Crossroad/83 [from German/81], p.61, inclusive language being unevenly applied by the translator): A deep relationship with Christ "is altogether available to the ordinary Christian who is not a professional theologian, and...indeed it can be expected of him or her. To be sure, it is desirable that such a Christian have a certain acquaintance with the formulations of classic Christology....But if he or she finds this a difficulty and experiences, shall we say, a 'metaphysical overload,' he or she need not consider himself or herself a poor Christian, or one of doubtful orthodoxy. ¶ If a Christian can trustingly and confidently say, 'In Jesus of Nazareth, in his life, his teaching, his catastrophic death, his victory (which we call his resurrection), God has given me himself--his forgiveness, his own life, above and beyond all finite fulfillment[']--if a Christian believes that this self-bestowal of God is unconditional, irreversible, and definitive for his [or her!] own part, and that it can never be superseded or surpassed in some new age to come--for indeed, as God's last word it can no longer be superseded--if a Christian is engaged and committed to this in a free outpouring of faith, and allows this matchless hope more validity than all doubts, skepticism, and reservations--then he or she is an orthodox Christian. This Christian experiences classic Christology existentially [underlining mine]. This Christian finds and accepts Jesus, actually understood, and rightly understood, as his or her salvation."

This mighty man of metaphysics says one can make it without metaphysics! Ie, if one's an "ordinary" Christian. But Rahner would not say one can make it with some alternative metaphysics, some view of the really real that's at odds with the classic Christian "first principles" (the idea of being [ontology] & the idea of order [cosmology]). What this eminent Roman Catholic thinker has described in this passage is not a theological standard but a religious standard.

3 This Thinksheet's title is a negative affirmation. It states something Christ does not ask of the "common" Christian, viz a particular form of suffering. But the very idea of theological standards incorporates the necessity of metaphysical mastery. In a candidate for ordination, metaphysical modesty is acceptable but not metaphysical vagueness, certainly not a cavalier attitude toward metaphysics, as though the existential (actual experience, including religious experiences) were all, or at least enough....Do you think I'm being too "theological" (in the secular sense, viz cloudy-heady, "metaphysical")? Not so, for I'm speaking to the actual ordination situation in the United Church of Christ.

4 While metaphysics is **implicit** in experience, it becomes **explicit** in theology, which is the science & art of thinking about religious experience & the components thereof, viz God, saints (in the broadest sense, present & past mediators of Christian experience), Scripture, history-tradition, church (religious community). The believers (the experiencers of God) serve God, theology serves the believers, & metaphysics serves the human intellectual **hunger** for nets that let no fish escape, ie for clear-cohesive-comprehensive principles-models. When we should be specific-concrete but aren't, we need to hear "Don't generalize!" Sense-making requires us to generalize, to abstract "person" from a human being & "deity" from God. But the balancing **hunger** is to experience reality concretely, bite-size....The pathology-neurosis of the first hunger is an escape metaphysics that turns God into an unreal apparition ("Metaphysics is the ghost of God"); of the second hunger, the pathology-neurosis is pantheism, which escapes from the biblical God by god-ding everything (as mythologist Jos. Campbell).

5 The **angelic mode** avoids those two neuroses. It satisfies both hungers. The holy appears in the common as sacrament, supremely in the Incarnation. Let's illustrate in a number of directions:

(1) Today in the church calendar is the feast of Pentecost, which

memorializes the church's birthday in the coming, the experiencing, of the Holy Spirit concretely (Ac.2; the whole book shows the concrete-definite acts of the Spirit, who takes over many functions formerly in the hands of angels). Ironically, today the AP released a list of instances of public-school repression of free speech vis-a-vis the transcendent (ie, the divine & angelic modes). The Milton, Mass., schoolboard has ruled that clergy may speak at graduations if they sign (!) that they will not pray or mention any deity. And the compromise struck by the Elizabethtown, Ky., schoolboard is that a student may lead in a graduation prayer on condition that the prayer not include the word "God." This silliness is serious: in denying both hungers, it's doubly neurotic. Yeats is right: "The Center cannot hold."

(2) A culture's religion-theology-metaphysics is a **fragile fabric** easily torn by degeneration (the culture's loss of its faith) or invasion (Kulturkampf, culture war with another culture or cultures, as in America's present "multiculturalism"). To prevent war & promote understanding, "transcultural" events & continuing groups may be instituted, though "transculture" easily deteriorates into "transreligion," the illusory hope of broad-front advance beyond religions.

Our pathetic public-school situation vis-a-vis religion is one effect from cultural invasion, an effect so serious that the very existence of the public-school system is threatened.

As for degeneration, some immanent-idolatrous passion absorbs the angelic dimension. Since sex is the most pervasive & insistent passion, the human object of this passion becomes the lover's angel & (in instances of extreme pathology) deity. (In HARPER'S 30 years ago, Harvey Cox brilliantly analyzed this syndrome, using the Miss America pageant as his base; then, wrapping this around with some other essays, in 1966 came out with his smash hit, THE SECULAR CITY.)...If memory serves, English literature's earliest instance of this substitution of human love for the angelic dimension is Matthew Arnold's poem, "Dover Beach" (1867). He's pessimistic about the modern world with its ebbing of the "sea of faith," & preaches the solace of human love & personal fidelity: "Ah love, let us be true / To one another! for the world.../.../Hath...neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain; / And we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night."...But another kind of love, the 1Cor.13 kind, instead of being a substitute for the transcendent, exists in the context of biblical faith & hope (last vs.). Without this altruistic attitude & action (*agape*), speech (vs.1), even of angels, is only noise. (Would angels speak *agapaically* & not act so? Sure. Like everything else, angels come in two kinds, good & bad. Also, Paul may be here anticipating what he'll say in the next chapter about glossolalia, the "gift of tongues" [Web. Unabridged, 2nd ed.; here RHD² does not refer to the gift, & ends with "schizophrenia"--showing modern dictionaries' tendency (1) to wash out biblical terminology & (2) to psychologize religion].)

(3) The angelic mode epistemologically is the **intermediate-intermediary** dimension ontologically. In the first article of the Great Books' SYNTOPICON, Mortimer Adler has a thorough "go" at this. Human thought-consciousness needs/reveals a penultimate realm (the angelic) beneath an ultimate (the divine). While philosophy necessarily fills this dimension of reality with abstractions, religion peoples it with "**angels**" (as a categorical term, inclusive of angels proper & ghosts proper, the living spirits of the dead). (This peopling can be psychologized as "projection," or--as religion does--accepted as revelation.)

(4) The particulars, specifics, of the angelic dimension are **culture-bound** (thus, epistemological), though the reality is culture-transcendent (thus, ontological). Eg, the 6th-c. BC/BCE Iranian influence on the Jews flooded them with angels, so the Jewish-Christian Stephen's sermon has Moses receive Torah "as ordained by angels" (Ac.7.53 NRSV), though the original Giving of the Law (beginning with Ex.19) is angelless--though (& here we learn of Jews' pre-Captivity acquaintance with angels) earlier, "the angel of the LORD appeared to" Moses "in (TEV "as") a flame of fire" (Ex.3.2).

(5) Abstractions are unpeopled, **stories** are abstractionless. We think partly in abstractions, we live wholly in stories. (Take science, eg: "the Big Bang" is not abstraction, it's a story: "Once upon a time there was this big bang, and....") A liberal Protestant church uses more abstractions than a fundamentalist church, but just look at the hymnody in our Centerville, Mass., UCC worship this morning. Just look at the "angels"!

..."To Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, / The God whom heaven and earth adore, / From men & from the **angel** host, / Be praise and glory evermore."--Wm. Kethe, 1561 (5th stanza of "All people that on earth do dwell").

..."Teach me to love thee as thine **angels** love, / One holy passion filling all my frame; / The baptism of the **heav'n-descended Dove**. / My heart an altar, and they love the flame."--attr. to Geo. Croly, 1867 (5th stanza of "Spirit of God, descend upon my heart").

..."**Cherubim and seraphim** falling down before thee"--Reginald Heber, 1826 (2nd stanza of "Holy, Holy, Holy").

..."And mystic sweet communion / with **those whose rest is won**. / O happy ones and holy! / Lord, give us grace that we / Like them, the meek and lowly, / On high may dwell with thee."--Sam. J. Stone, 1866 (4th stanza of "The church's one foundation").

And this in the anthem: "Take us to dwell in all our days / With **those who have become immortal**"--text & music by Carl F. Mueller, 1952.

With the exception of the Unitarian-Universalist, all churches are angel-saturated even though the sky does not hang low over us as it did over the ancient Mediterranean world. I play with my metaphor: When you cross the threshold into the church, space becomes the heavens & the high sky becomes low to advantage hands reaching down & up. Which is the more "real world"? It's your call. Maybe it's a story overload for you, fracturing your imaginal will to believe. But you don't have to be a wonk to get it: it's nobody's metaphysical overload.