

DO "ISSUE-DRIVEN" CHURCHES FOSTER THINKING CHRISTIANS?

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A review, sort of, of
Jn. B. Cobb, Jr., BECOMING A THINKING CHRISTIAN (Abingdon/93)

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I am a member of the United Church of Christ, which derives from four thinking churches, churches emphasizing worshipping God "with all your mind": Evangelical, Reformed, Congregational, & Christian-Connec-tional ("Craigville" named after a seminary professor who'd correspond with his pastor-graduates only in Greek, "to keep them reading their [Greek] NT"). But despite that heritage, the UCC cannot be called a thinking, **mind**-driven church: it's an **issue**-driven church, riven by issue-differences weakening our life & witness.

1 The adjective quoted in this Thinksheet's title is from a Canadian Anglican bishop, Peter Mason, speaking to the 35% decline in membership (1970-90): "We as a church have become increasingly issue-driven, have lost our sense of worship and Christian community, and have found ourselves drained of energy to maintain our ongoing church life" (p.49 CT 15 Aug 94). But a surge of evangelical presence seems to forecast revival-renewal, an end to the theological drift. A church conference in Montreal this June solidly supported the speech of the evangelical-charismatic head of world Anglicanism, Abp. of Canterbury Geo. Carey. The gathering's "Montreal Declaration of Anglican Essentials" is orthodox, affirming the Trinity & the Incarnation, & condemning social corruptions (in sex, family life, et al). J.I.Packer of Regent College called it "live orthodoxy."

2 I knew personally the two St.Louis pastors whose weekly luncheon conversations led to the merger of the E&Rs & C&Cs to form the UCC. Nobody could have justly called either one issue-driven in the societal sense (ie on matters of race, gender, class, etc.), though they were deep into prayerful commitment to overcoming, as much as in them lay, debilitating-impoverishing Christian division: separation is mutual deprivation of what could be shared riches; & from the perspective of unity, separation debilitates of the energy & instruments to confront "the principalities & powers" in Christ's name to the good of humanity.

But during the period of those luncheons, the anti-Jim-Crow demonstrations began--very small at first, lunch-counter sit-ins. By the birth of the UCC in 1957, it had become clear that the USA was facing a cultural revolution of **inclusion**: legal codes & processes were no longer to effect, for Negroes, second-class citizenship: our nation's Founding Documents must be taken seriously as applying to all citizens.

It's not much of an exag-gertion to say that the UCC was **issue-oriented at birth**, coming out of the ecclesial womb with a spin! Our national office, esp. in the person of Bob Spike, had the ear of the President (LBJ) more, I think, than we've had of any other President on any issue. Most of my time & energy went into the BHM Division of Evangelism & Church Development, but on "the issue" I was the most radical person in the national office--the only one calling for, writing on behalf of, an increase in Black ("Negro" by then was dying out) violence.

3 Why the thumbnail history in §2? (1) To explain how, at birth, the UCC got the issue-spin which continues to this day; & (2) To raise the question, Who am I, with my personal history, to complain about it?

4 Cobb's BECOMING A THINKING CHRISTIAN says reason can't reach our underlying beliefs till, surfaced, they can be seen with what underlies them--their presuppositions & assumptions. The surfacing (I say) blocks "causes" & "issues" from becoming **addictive**. A thinking Christian is reason-guarded against becoming "issue-driven," ie addicted to the cause, whatever that is.

My first seminary commencement address as guest speaker (1939) was on the dipolar force of the Christian doctrine of grace: (1) we cannot be saved by reason, but only by grace through faith; (2) without reason, we cannot be idol-free to serve God. In short, it was on "becoming a thinking Christian." Since a few years before that, I've often been a passionate advocate but never issue-driven. The difference? The gospel of grace-through-reason has been a harness preventing me, on many brinks, from falling in. I could never sell the gospel out to some cause

--say, some liberationism--presenting itself as salvific. In the early '40s, Rein. Niebuhr confirmed my self-distancing from -isms (pacifism, antiracism, etc.).

5 But, you may say, wasn't your early '60s pro-violent advocacy in the Black movement a case of being issue-driven? Certainly not. It was to worry the Senate's swing-member on civil rights, to give Ev. Dirksen the nightmare that whites were beginning to support violent Blacks. Ev. was from the area where I pastored a church throughout the previous decade, & I knew how his innards worked. Please! I'm not saying my letters to him should be right up there among the credits for the Federal civil-rights legislation beginning in '64! I was seen, & pressured, as an extremist, a firebrand, an issue-driven radical. But it was all an act: I am an anti-violent person who believes that *on rare occasions* Christian thinking will lead to the threat of violence or even violence itself. Strategic, not ideological, violence/threat.

6 A further irony: I did not participate in the illusion that "the movement" would result in Black *equality*. For me, "the cause" was limited to legal revolution, viz the abolition of Jim Crow laws: I was for equality, as the phrase was, "before the law." In addition, I was a legal activist, supporting antidiscrimination legislation, eg in employment. I never was for supposedly therapeutic "affirmative action," quota-mandated reverse discrimination, which has done more harm than good to African-Americans & to race relations in America: special treatment is Massa patronizing instead of whipping. But "the movement" was driven by a hubris of excessive demands/expectations, & its frustrated false idealism has now rotted down into A.-A. disillusion/depression/despair, a condition King in his last days saw coming --"the pessimistic and radical views that Dr. King came to at the end of his life" (p.10, U. OF CHICAGO MAG., Aug/94, Michael Dawson reporting on "Black Discontent: The Preliminary Report of the 1993-94 National Black Policy Survey," of which he was one of the two directors). Centrifugal forces are widening the Black/white breach in our country. Blacks are deep into psychic, & getting deeper into territorial, self-segregation. And the wider the gap, the less the Black hope of good white/Black relations. Today, A.-A.s have a "dismal and radical evaluation of American society." Black nationalism is on the rise (50% want a separate Black political party), & here and on many other matters the Black "community" is riven with "sharp class divisions." Tragic: the more Blacks self-segregate, the less the Dems & Reps are willing to be associated with Black concerns: "too close an identification with black interests is hurting them in national elections"--a harginger of declining Black political power despite Congressional Black caucuses. 62% want separate schools for Black boys (good idea, I think). The "idealized 1963 version of racial equality"--King's not-color-of-skin-but-content-of-character--is, for the moment if not also the foreseeable future, dead. Institutions in which Blacks & whites interacted are declining. Most Blacks want political & economic autonomy within their communities.

In '48, the Republic of S.Africa *legislated* segregation (Africans, "apartheid"): the USA is getting it by demographic flow in spite of the fact that our laws pressure in the direction reverse of '48 S.Africa's.

7 How is a thinking Christian to see this deepening tragedy? Were the apartheid theologians wrong only in supporting force to effect segregation, but right in their supposition that Blacks & whites won't mix en masse? Nobody knows. But the Christian doctrines of finitude (creation) & sin (rebellion) warn us against doing more harm than good by expecting too much.

Well, where did we get this expecting too much? For one thing, we've had 2½ centuries of **belief in change**. Jas. Watts' steam engine was the first spectacular use of science to conceive/execute a major invention, & in the Western world it had the psychic effect of replacing the static belief that there's no fundamental change in the human condition/situation with the dynamic beliefs that (1) human beings are infinitely adaptable (& thus manipulable) & (2) on the mechanistic (steam-engine) model, society can be changed (& improved, as the steam engine was an improvement in transportation). Philosophy, theology, sociology, psychology were given a new foreward lean by that steam engine! Says Mary Daly, "If God is male, males are

gods." Well, if machines (gadgets, things) are gods, people are cogs.

Coming along a century after Watt, Darwin added to this transformative utopianism (1) a pseudo-biological confirmation of its atheism & (2) unintentionally, a warrant for capitalist insensitivity. In consequence of all this anthropocentric romanticism, what's now needed is a revolution of declining expectations: we must learn to expect that less which reality supports, & deny those false-excessive expectations which reality confounds at great human cost. (An instance of "great human cost": world Communism, now declined from a roar to a whimper.)

8 Every movement seeming to be successful releases, in addition to energies for new causes, toxins of false expectations & baleful unintended consequences. Does that argue against movements? No, but it does suggest that the Christian thinker, the thinking Christian, should (1) generate/participate-in movements with detached engagement--engagement, because love; detachment, because the gospel & one's prior experience have taught critical consciousness; & (2) be ready, even eager, to perform course-corrections &, where indicated, abandonment/replacement of the movement. The question is not What is God's will? but rather What is God's will now & now & now & now? And what is God's will for us/me/you(s.)/you(pl.)?

This continuous quest-ioning, -ing includes the mind's shuttling through immediate, middle, & consequent "axioms" (Gk., the results [-ma] of considering an idea "worthy" [axio-] of assuming, at least for the moment, that an idea is true, so true as to be in some sense[s] self-evident). This continuous evaluating/verifying process parallels the syllogism's major/middle/minor elements in action toward the conclusion (elegantly laid out in Jacques Maritain's AN INTRODUCTION TO LOGIC [S&W/37], pp.169ff). When this intellectual regimen becomes habitual, insights appear as spontaneous integrations (Eliot Dole Hutchinson's definition of creative thinking; see his HOW TO THINK CREATIVELY (Abingdon/49; in religion, pp.216-28). Often this integration, or convergence of two or more concepts/experiences, brings such joy & peace that the pious cannot but see it as divine gift, which indeed in the light of common day it is. "Revelation" is the highest word we have for it, with "inspiration" a step lower. (As a classical-canonical Christian, I reserve the former word for the Word in & through Scripture.)

9 "Issue-driven" thinking is justice-javelin, deductive, *masculine*: **Jesus-loop** thinking is inductive, heuristic, *feminine*. ("Jesus-loop" is my term for Christian thinking's beginning with Jesus as central to devotion & situation-definition & then, after action-decision & action, returning to Jesus for assessing the action, redefining the situation, then doing the loop again in light of the learnings from the previous round, learnings from objective data-gathering, interaction with others [especially one's fellow-Christians], & communion with God in the Spirit.) More than once, Cobb makes the point that Scripture is the beginning & return point in Christian thinking: no matter how radical one's thinking, it ceases to be Christian if one feels free from the duty of finding warrant for one's thinking/acting in the Bible. This circularity, I say, is feminine. It is "Sarah's [vaginal-uterine] Circle," nonphallic (nonlinear, like a syllogism)....**IRONY**: The most feminine-"inclusive" churches are, as issue-driven, the most phallic!

In simplest terms, the issue-driven church is locked into this SYLLOGISM:

The Bible/gospel is for "justice for all" people.
Blacks/women/homosexuals are people.

Therefore, we-the-church should fight for justice for Blacks/women/homosexuals
& support them, however we can, in their struggle for justice.

Instructive for analyzing this syllogism is the syllogism section (pp.169-258) of Maritain (op.cit.). Clear thinking--& Christians must not bless muddy thinking, no matter how good-intentioned--demands avoiding "the confusion" (p.173) of logic & psychology. In the above syllogism, "justice" does not have clarity but is like a cloud-covered planet. The democratic-statecraft denotatum of "justice" is clear: equal treatment for all (& thus she's blind & holding a weighing scale). Jim Crow & affirmative action are instances of violating this denotatum. But the word is covered with cloud-connotata such as (1) the feelings of, & for, "the oppressed"; & (2) the biblical paradigm of shalom/salvation translated-reduced to "liberation" from oppressors (in the above paradigm, whites/men/straights: liberationists are not noted

for noticing their unfairness, injustice, against those they single out as "the oppressors").

10 Another impediment to clear Christian thinking is a second confusion, viz of logic/rhetoric (ie how to think / how to persuade). Christians, to the extent they are Christians, seek to persuade to God, to the gospel (Mt.28.19-20 & all that). An issue-driven church tries to persuade (1) its members to support the issue as church-defined, (2) the public (the social hand), & (3) the government (the political fist). When such a church looks like the Demo Party in being unable to discipline the troops, the ecclesiarchs tend to fall into exclusivism (to freeze out the opposition). The frozen out tend to flee out, leave the church. Some of us in the UCC are trying to do our best to prevent this flight (1) by encouraging the inclusive spirit in the authorities (listening to, engaging, all points of view in the national membership), (2) by ourselves trying to persuade dissidents to stay engaged, "in there," & (3) by promoting clear Christian thinking (the purpose of this Thinksheet).

11 Through the years at N.Y.Theol.Seminary I've suggested various ways of helping students learn clear Christian thinking. The Cobb book is for laity, but that includes preordained students (& most of the ordained students need help here too). I'm suggesting the Cobb book for NYTS, & for church groups that want to take seriously the task of thinking Christianly. Various way to come at this: (1) One Cobb chapter per session, including the questions; (2) Issue-oriented sessions; (3) Values-oriented sessions; (4) The strengths/weaknesses of our religion vis-a-vis our lives, our society, the world society, the future; (5) The trade-off of freedom-liberty & social values....Let's take one instance of this last way:

I believe...

Women should be free to control their own bodies.

I know...

All stable societies have womb-control.

I conclude...

I/we must work/act toward the best compromise of these two values.

Here are some of the questions that might surface in a group: Are girls "women"? Is a pregnant female only an individual? Can killing unborn human beings be Christianly justified, & if so, how? If the sexes are equal, can coming down harder on womb-carriers than on the wombless be justified? Since homosexuals obviate womb-control, should homosexuality be encouraged as a population-control factor? Failure of womb-control (the increasing incidence of teen motherhood) is destabilizing our society, especially among African-Americans: how reverse this trend? What's the role of government in this problem/process? How do "feminist issues" play into the compromise, in addition to the above involvements? Since social decay, esp. family decay, creates a deep hunger for moral truth, how is this hunger to be satisfied? How do the biblical doctrines of judgment & grace illumine this dilemma?

12 Pp.258-87 of Maritain deals with **induction** (*resolutio materialis*, proceeding from singular data to a generalization that seems to make sense), "as a submarine that navigates vertically upwards from below" (p.258, "from the sensible plain to the intelligible plain")--in contrast to **deduction** (*resolutio formalis*, proceeding "from previously known universal truths" to a conclusion), "as a submarine that navigates horizontally upon the surface of the ocean." In the latter, we "remain" on the intelligible plain: In the former, we "attain" to it, the mind inferring a "universal truth from sufficiently enumerated singular cases." (Illustration of induction: copper-iron-gold conduct electricity; they're metals; therefore, metal conducts electricity.) Now consider the truth/error in this statement: "Statistics don't lie, statisticians do." What's the last instance of illogical use of statistics you can remember? Specifically why did it irritate you? Was it "issue-driven"?

Note on the **creativity** factor in thinking, combining (in varying degrees) logic & psychology: In my library, I've found these helpful: (1) Hutchinson (above); (2) anthology of experts on creativity: **CREATIVITY**, ed. by P.E.Vernon (Penguin/70); (3) Anthology of creative thinkers: **THE CREATIVE PROCESS**, ed. by Brewster Ghiselin (U. of Cal./52); (4) **MIND GAMES**, Robt. Masters & Jean Houston (Dell/72); (5) **New Age (!): BREAKTHROUGH TO CREATIVITY: YOUR HIGHER SENSE PERCEPTION**, Shafica Karagulla, MD (Devorss/67/74).

13 One dimension of the UCC national office's issue-drivenness is **antiverticality** (proegalitarianism, eg vis-a-vis feminism & "gay rights"). But in his last & greatest book, **WORDS WITH POWER** (H,B,&J/90), Northrop Fry insists on vertical in addition to horizontal thinking (p.151): "*axis mundi*: a vertical line running from the top to the bottom of the cosmos": no confusing of Father God & Mother Earth!