MetaCryptoParaConstantinianism Elliott #2104

A REFLECTION on 3 American Protestant periodical anniversaries

Christianity is a Lord's-Prayer perspective, not a philosophy or politic. So say I on p.45 of CRAIGVILLE COLLOQUY III: THE MINISTRY OF THE WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD (and as sec.7 of my #2082). But because of a proper concern to make our faith freshly relevant day to day and era to era, we Christians perpetually strive to derive from "Jesus" (ie the NT + Christian experience in the Spirit and the Church through Tradition and Reason) both a philosophy and a politic--both efforts, impossible possibilities and unnecessary necessities.

Our Christian earliest literary materials embarrass and inspire us with their richness, their metaphoric openness, and their courageous leaps into concreteness. They constitute (1) not a lawbook, squeezing our freedom with an excess of order, (2) nor a mystical collection of spiritualia, presenting us with an amorphic excess of freedom. Centered in a Man, the NT is anchored in history and common human experiencing and is therefore involved with sense-making ("philosophy") and power ("politics").

If, given knowledge of Christian history's vigorous and creative action in spirit, mind, and society, one did not know the formative literature of this movement, one should be able to describe the NT: its characteristics, not surprisingly, parallel Christianity's successes, quandaries, flounderings, controversies, refusals to settle for a panChristian orthodoxy or orthopraxy.

Now, you pays for what you gets. Our Christian movement has suffered a loss of freedom whenever we've wedded our minds to a particular philosophy (say, Aristotle) or our means to a particular politic (say, Constantinianism, the use of the state to coerce a populace into submission to the church). And we've suffered a gain of freedom (but a loss of order) whenever we've had enduring breakouts from the established "Christian" order of thinking or ruling (ecclesia reformanda).

This thinksheet aims to illustrate the above, and ratify the truth of the proposition enunciated in its first line, with reference to three Chicago Protestant periodical anniversaries, all of them this month (Oct/86):

THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY, which I've read during more than ½ of its life to date, is--counting its history before it got its present name fin de siecle--a century old. While it's never been Constantinian, as the Roman Church officially was till Vatican II (and Marxist-Leninism, in inverted form, still is), the CENTURY was, as its present (now embarrassing) name implies, triumphalistic. Call it metaConstantinian, maybe, or whatever. (Pray that this Thinksheet doesn't bog down in Greek prepositional prefixes!)

CHRISTIANITY TODAY is 30 and in its way as "Chicago" as the CENTURY (and I've been a reader throughout its life to date, having been a Chicago doctoral student and seminary teacher at the time of its earliest roots in the early 1940s--Billy Graham and emerging Youth for Christ at Wheaton College and Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, where I was teaching with Carl Henry). Carl, 1st editor and so for the 1st doz. years, said in the 1st issue that the mag's purpose was "to articulate historic Christianity and its contemporary relevance." As TODAY was a conscious antipose to the CENTURY, so NBTS (where I was teaching) was (founded in 1925) a conscious antipose to UCDS (Chicago Divinity School, where I was finishing a PhD). Both periodicals, to the extent that they were engined by these educational institutions, were intellectually and emotionally mine! And neither side of Chicago battlers trusted me: I associated with, and even loved, the enemy! I continue to love both periodicals, as well as....

SOJOURNERS, which is now 15 (of which I've been a faithful reader from the start). Yes, founded in the Chicago area, by some Christians who were (as seminary students) in the process of leaving the laity (in the 2nd meaning of "laos," ie as antonym to "cleros"--the 1st meaning being "all God's people, laity and clergy"). I stress this be-

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cause I frequently hear that this periodical is lay in the sense of nonclergy; it is, praise God, open to lay theology, but its original and essential impulse was and is clerical. Says Jim Wallis, the editor (5, Nov/86), "The starting point was Trinity Evangelical Divinity School...a few miles north of Chicago, where the original group first met in the fall of 1971. We were all young seminarians at the time"--and, I add, caught up in the elan of the civil-and-human-rights movement --the aim being to wed a very conservative evangelicalism (far more than that of NBTS) with the Movement.

Now, if the CENTURY is sort of metaConstantinian, I'd call TODAY cryptoC and SOJOURNERS paraC--or the reverse, if you prefer. What I mean is that TODAY has, increasingly, a triumphalistic flavor parallel with that of the CENTURY in this century's early days--but the latter was liberal-modernist in orientation (so my "metaC"), the former is evangelical (so my "cryptoC"). Why then "paraC" for SOJOURNERS? Of the three, it's the most antiC, "alienated" in the 1960s sense of the word. It's more suspicious than is TODAY of power-oriented evangelicals like Falwell and Robertson (a 1956 grad of NYTS), whom secularists (American Way et al) fear as cryptoC (ie, really intending, though concealing it somewhat, a Constantinian takeover of the USA). SOJOURNERS is paraC in that its alienated politics is self-consciously both Christian and aggressive: if you're really a Christian, you're right in there politically, using the political structures and processes both for persuasion and for coercion by suffrage. Your action is parallel (thus, "para-") to that of all others who're in political action....I finish this Thinksheet with a few references:

1. Danny Collum, 1 of SOJOURNERS' 3 editors, says (5, Nov/86) Christians should be able to manage, for political purposes, a "base-line consensus." To illustrate, he refers to Card. Bernardin's "'seamless garment' approach" against abortion, and affirms that "each human life is sacred"--an affirmation this Christian, W.Elliott, considers blasphemy. I nail the underlying illusion, here, with this letter in today's (15Oct86) CAPE COD TIMES: SOJOURNERS' first name was THE POST CHRISTIAN: I consider the antiabortion dogma not only post- but also anti-Christian (in this world of 1986).

Church believes in 'free pulpit'

Recently you published a letter attacking, by name, me, my local church, and my pastor.

That letter writer wondered why I would be permitted to preach in the church mentioned, as I am, according to the writer, pro-death (i.e., "pro-choice"). Apparently the writer assumes that the anti-choice (subtly misnamed "pro-life") position has a corner on the Christian religion. But the fact is that Christians and their churches are all over the abortion-controversy map.

My communion, the United Church of Christ (with "Congregational" in the name of its Cape Cod churches) is pro-choice. The letter's question should, accordingly, be reversed: Why would any pro-lifer be permitted to preach in our churches? The answer is that our denomination believes in the free pulpit and does not censor preachers for their political opinions.

Yes, I can hear complaints that abortion is a matter not of political opinion but of moral conviction. This deception will not wash. All embattled public issues are engined by moral passion. God gave us the ice cube of reason to lower the temperature of the decision-making process so that we need not resort to incivility and violence.

I don't care what you do about seat belts and freedom. But on Nov. 4, please do not vote against poor women's freedom of access to abortion services. Vote "no" on Question 1.

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2. So it's not just the secular humanists who get scared when Christians seem to be getting their political act together. Me to. I think the herd-pressure for divestment is a disgrace to our religion and an ideological impairment to truly human response to South Africa. Mr.R. & Mr.G. are home (yesterday) from Iceland, and pragma had little chance face-to-face with contra-ideologizing.

3. W.Wink (same issue, 15-18) shows the complexity & slipperiness of Christian political self-positioning. He modernizes Jesus into a "nonviolent direct action" ideolog (v. submission & violence as responses to evil) and then confuses "we" as, variously, we Christians and we Americans (shades of "a nation with the soul of a church"!)--the same rhetorical confusion Falwell practices, though to opposite political ends! I would expect of a scholar more nuancing both of exegesis and of the political use of Jesus.