

OPPRESSIVE MINORITIES

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This Thinksheet is about the underdog biting into the throat of the topdog. Everybody knows that otherwise the topdog has all the advantages, so no point to doing a Thinksheet on that.

1 **STIMULUS:** What got me into this was a remark, at a party in Buffalo Sunday, by a U. of Penn. polisci professor to whom I'd been conversing about his present courses. His PhD is in psephology (the theory/praxis of voting, elections), & his passion is (as I put it, with his approval) the development of political leaders combining the different, almost antagonal, sets of persuasional skills (to get elected) & coercive skills (to get something done once in power, without subverting the primacy of persuasion). I thought of the Irish joke, "If you see a man with chips on both shoulders, it's an Irishman." The rarest commodity in the political world is the leader who can carry *water* successfully on both shoulders, persuasion skills on one & coercion skills on the other.

Whereupon the professor remarked a recent incident of the excessive use of coercion:

2 Red + green is Christian, & the two colors should not appear together in December in public schools. Nor should a red-nosed reindeer: that nose is connected to the rest of Rudolph, who is connected to a sleigh, on which sits--oops!--a Christian, viz Santa. And of course a (adjective deleted) tree is out even though it's a baptized Druidic sacrament. And of course nothing of Chanukah. The town where the professor lives has relentlessly, remorsefully, banned any ritual with its roots in religion. This blanket repression assures general **religious ignorance** in the populace, a situation inconducive to democracy & thus to the professor's goal of instilling the democratic spirit at home & abroad.

3 The professor was favorably impressed, as am I, with a rabbi's letter to the editor in that town's paper, to this effect (my wording): "Oppressed minorities" is two words, not one (cf. "Damnyankee"). The notion that a group is oppressed by virtue of being a minority is false to history. We Jews, a minority everywhere except in Israel, have sometimes been oppressed & sometimes lived comfortably, even prosperously, in nonJewish states. We are wrong, & damage both the general society & ourselves, when we insist (1) on point-by-point equality with the majority & (2) that in the public sphere the majority should do nothing we disapprove of. Doubtless the rabbi fears this double oppression of the majority by Jews will feed a new antisemitism.

4 But it's wrong to charge the Jews with being *the* oppressive minority. Catholics preceded them in squeezing religion out of the originally Protestant public schools & out public areas where Protestantism was the traditional-religious component of the civil religion. And secularists ("secular humanists") are currently America's most oppressive minority, especially since achieving control of public education. Minor players are the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, & Muslims, with Buddhists in only a few pockets of Colo. & Calif. & N.Y.

To these religious & antireligious minorities must be added the ethnic (ie, non-Northern-European) & gender (women as minority in political power) & economic ("the poor") minorities. With his goal of "a team that looks like America," no wonder Clinton is short some 2,400 appointments!

And in a class by himself is the white male, who's increasingly viewed as (1) a minority, which is a fact, & (2) oppressive, which is a claim based on his traditional though shrinking political & economic power.

5 **Multiculturalism**, whose stated aim was diversity in unity, seems to be furthering ethnocentrism, diversity without the former Anglo-American unity or any emergent to fill that function. The ethnics can agree on nothing except opposition to WASP values--which is true also of religious minorities, including West-&-East Catholicism. We are a Protestant Christian **nation** (cultural hegemony) & a secular **state** (political entity, a meaning obscured in the U.S. because our provinces are misnamed "states").

6 "Managed Politics" is a current course of the professor: how combine managerial & political skills, both involving persuasion & power? One result (I surmise) would be a nuanced leadership less dependent on rigid ideological dogmas with their codewords (eg, "equality" & "identity politics"). I thought of a recent L.A. TIMES article (11 Apr 93) by Michael Lerner, editor of the Jewish journal TIKKUM, who see multiculturalism as "a cover for advancing ethnic or sexual particularisms" which are energized by the '80s' "triumph of selfishness in the public sphere." "Respect for difference" gilds with virtue a situation whose essence is "individual or group narcissism." Lerner is hopeful of Clinton's "politics of meaning" versus "a more narrowly economic agenda." I'll add that Hillary's interviews in the current PARADE reveal another corrective side: no rights are sustainable without citizen acceptance of responsibilities (on the basis of which she says "I'm a conservative").

If we combine the professor's "managed politics" & Lerner's "politics of meaning" (a la the Clinton's), is there hope that America's founding cultural hegemony can be revalorized in ways acceptable to America's minorities? More hope, I think, than that (1) secular values will gain sufficient psychospiritual energy to center a new national way of life or (2) some new religion, or old religion other than Christianity, will gain the hegemony, win the country's heart.

7 **Satire** to the rescue! As a sort of spinoff from Harvard's LAMPOON, Henry Beard & Christopher Cerf have burst forth with THE OFFICIAL POLITICALLY CORRECT DICTIONARY AND HANDBOOK (Village Books/92). A brilliant spoof, it displays the ridiculous lengths to which PC has gone to stamp out "insensitive" language. (It's drollery reminds me of my first encounter with the first English-language dictionary, by one Sam. Johnson, Esq.)

It's all right there in Orwell, the authors seem to be saying. Newspeak, when it's succeeded in driving out Oldspeak, will make "heretical [ie, nonNewspeak] thought literally unthinkable" (Orwell, "1984").

In some circles, generic & divine "he-his-him" has become almost unthinkable. I avoid the generic (so don't get a "You're not one of us" look) but not the divine (so do get a "You're not with it yet" look). The ironic flipside of this is that speakers & writers can now get away with generic & divine "she-hers-her"! An intermediate stage of this hypersensitivity linguistic development was text that maddeningly alternated masculine & feminine generics-pretending-to-be-specifics. And an abysmal side-consequence I've noticed recently is the tendency to refer to God as little as possible so as to avoid the "inclusive-language" problem. All this craziness seems, I think (I hope), to have hit bottom. Upscale discourse seems to have settled on "they-their-them" as both singular & plural anaphor except in the case of God, where "they-their-them" would clash with monotheism & "she-hers-her" hasn't risen, except marginally in some church circles, above a joke or at most an oddity.

8 In WHY AMERICA DOESN'T WORK and other books & articles, Chas. Colson-- founder of Prison Fellowship, now in 54 countries; & recipient of the 1993 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion--has been skewering the superscrupulosity that has been progressively depriving America of our central spiritual inheritance. In "Can We Be Good Without God?" (a title he doesn't credit THE ATLANTIC for) he says "We have spent the past 30 years determined to secularize our society" (IMPRIMIS Apr/93). He cites U.S. Supreme Court Lee v. Weisman, the court ruling (CC's wording) that "a rabbi who delivered a very politically correct 'To Whom It May Concern' prayer at a...junior high school commencement had violated the constitutional rights of a [a! one!] fifteen-year-old student in the audience. The court said, in effect, that the girl must be legally protected against listening to views she disagreed with. There was a time when it was a mark of civility to listen respectfully to different views; now you have a constitutional right to demand that those views are not expressed in your presence." Again, the Court demanded that Zion IL clean up its seal, which from the town's founding has had a cross on it. With his customary irony, Peter Berger says that in the U.S. the Swedes (Sweden being the least religious country) are controlling the Indians (India being the most religious country--the populations differential being pertinent).

9 A few days ago, somebody handed me a photo of me teaching in the Craigville Tabernacle 30 years ago. The chalkboard has the subject, **IDOLATRY**, in the upper left corner. In the solar-center is "HOLY," from which deviancy-rays (the idolatries) radiate: right (legalism), good (moralism), beautiful (estheticism), true (intellectualism), pleasurable (hedonism), individual (narcissism), et al--so many sacreds competing with the holy. Each sacred takes many forms. "**Freedom**" in its many dimensions is a form of the "individual" idolatry. Within bounds, of course, freedom is a value & virtue. But unbound, freedom is anomic, oblivious or even scornful of the rights of neighbor, of society, & of society's central spiritual heritage & the current expressions of that heritage. Those who are "free" in this last sense constitute the "oppressive minorities" this Thinksheet is scowling about. Their idolatry here consists in their insistence that the individual's right not to be offended supervenes over society's right to perpetuate its central spiritual heritage & the living expressions thereof. (This individualism is, in its own way, as ideologically oppressive as is/was its collective form, viz communism.)

10 What now most threatens America's spiritual roots is this **hypertrophied** freedom, the cancerous form of individual rights. This disease is often referred to (as if it were health!) as "the sacredness of the individual." Weakness is the flipside of strength: we Americans preach individualism (but, ironically, don't honor individuality), which within bounds is a good sermon; but then we let it "turn again and rend" us (Mt.7.6 KJV; NRSV, "maul"), impoverishing us of our spiritual heritage in the public sphere.

11 The **forms** of a spiritual heritage are tough, but vulnerable from within a society. If you have a tooth with rotten roots, you can (if you've health-care access) get a canal job. Is there a parallel specific when a society's spiritual-moral roots decay? The roots are renewable (impossible with teeth) through revival, or the society decays, dies, becomes compost for another society.

Mircea **Eliade**, with whom I got to spend a few days a few years before his death, had on all this a wisdom derived not from political science but from mastery of the health/pathology of the appearances of the holy. For him, religion was not epiphenomenal, a passing plaything left over from the childhood of humanity: "the 'sacred' is an element in the structure of consciousness and not a stage in the history of consciousness" (Preface at xiii, A HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS IDEAS, VOLUME I [U. of Chicago Press/78]). I lifted this quotation from the frontispiece of Jn. R. Mason, THE LURE OF THE LATE ELIADE: READING AND RESPONDING TO A HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS IDEAS (Edwin Mellen Press/93, unbound copy, a gift of the author), the best intro to Eliade I've ever seen.

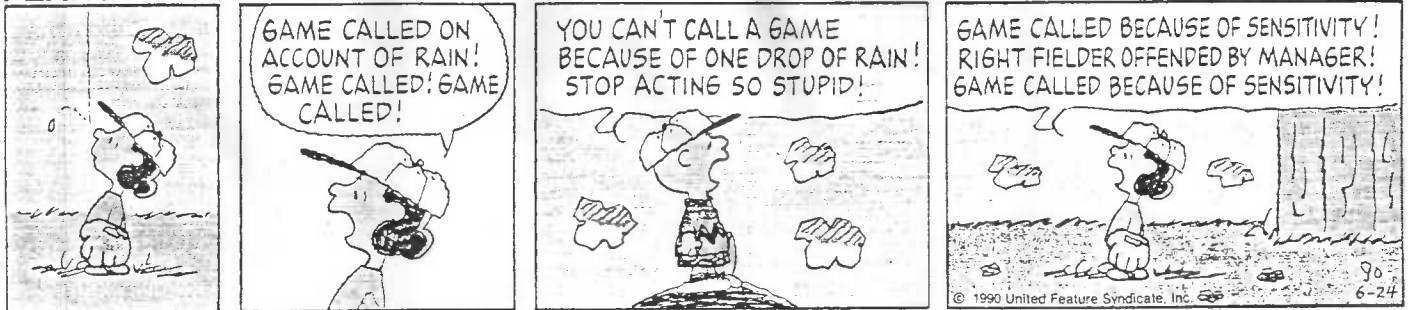
Says Mason, p.16, "the **History** should be approached: (1) anthropologically; (2) seminally ["creative moments" in "seminal periods"]; (3) as a morphology of civilizational complexes; (4) from the standpoint of comparative symbolics; and (5) in terms of Eliade's normative judgments." For the present purpose, I call your attention to (3), on which this (p.29): "Eliade uses the morphological method to highlight both *formative* 'creative moments' and *form-shaped* 'creative developments' within particular civilizational complexes....perceives each civilization as nurturing the seminal seeds of its religious life to produce new 'growths' that provide orientation to the cosmos."....What's unique in the modern West is the collapse of the sacred into the profane (Mason, p.32, quoting E.: "the ultimate stage of desacralization....the complete camouflage of the 'sacred'--more precisely its identification with the 'profane.'").

12 This collapse has not, cannot, eliminate the sense of the sacred, which is (E.) "an element in the structure of consciousness." What happens is that some aspect of the profane now is treated, variously by various segments of society, as sacred (on which remember the idolatries diagram in §9). "The eclipse of God" (Buber) leaves the landscape littered with lesser lights leading in all directions but Godward. The lights are variously labeled "freedom," "tolerance," "equality," "self-esteem," "love," "human dignity," all those seemingly Good Things. But both the **formative** creative moments of America's central spiritual heritage & its **form-shaped** creative developments have been "under God."

13 1 Cor.13 says that as the be all (1-3) & end all (8-13), Christian **love is not touchy** (4-7 NRSV: "patient...kind...not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude...does not insist on its own way...is not irritable or resentful...bears all things...endures all things"). By this account, love is quietist, not activist. It's the reverse of Lucy's short-fuse, hair-trigger:

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Granted the description is situational: Paul's own behavior, in standing up for his rights (eg, Ac.16.37-39), cannot be considered a violation of Christian love. But for Christian character, the times to be touchy are rare, not regular. Yes, there's a difference between being touchy for oneself & altruistically so, touchy for others. But the distinction is blurred when one is representatively touchy, ie touchy for one's particular minority. Then one's ego is surrogate & "point man" for one's group, as in the cartoon Lucy is point female for all females &, by extension, for all underlings.

What I'm pointing to here is not the prickly personality, the "naturally" defensive & quick-tempered, but the **mission-minded**, those whose consciousness has been raised so high that they feel a preaching compulsion to convert the heathen, viz those who (1) are other-minded or (2) lack their zeal in being like-minded. This zeal being driven by a mix of justice & self-righteousness, the recipient must beware of responding in ways that would (1) increase the oppressiveness of the attacking minority or (2) tempt observers to think the response insensitive! All this, combined with the recipient's feeling of some truth in the attack, has a repressive effect, & so the silent majority unwittingly supports the charge, which then becomes more arrogant & strident. Thus unchecked, the attackers become more extreme & move further away from reality--as happens to leaders, eg David Koresh, who hear nothing but confirmation of their stance.

14 From the opposite end, the receiving end, of this dynamic, isn't it the loving thing to do to put up with the attacks in the spirit of 1 Cor.13.4-7? Besides, isn't extremism **self-limiting** ("Give them enough rope & they'll hang themselves")? The latter is a comforting, prudential-pragmatic-political consideration. Besides being unloving, it's dangerous (as it was dangerous for Germany to tolerate the early brownshirts, the tiny minority of Nazis). The former is love in the passive mode; the same author speaks of love in the active mode as confrontive-corrective (Gal.6.1-10, to "do good to everyone"). In the active mode, resisting minority oppressiveness, I've been called racist, sexist, classist, culturist, chauvinist, globalist (in so many, or other, words). This name-calling has given me opportunity to practice love in the passive mode (yes, 1 Cor.13.4-7). Truth & love are honored, or dishonored, together.

15 The **silent society**, in which nothing is said because nothing can be said that would not offend somebody, is the farcical denouement the current "multicultural" supersensitivity is pushing toward. But that's the reverse of the American ideal of an open society of moral consensus, in which everything is freely said because there's agreement that everyone's feeling offended is a necessary price to pay (1) for everyone's participation in the political process & (2) for arrival at public decisions in the public interest. The common values, shared assumptions, that have glued our country together have been eroded (1) by ideological egalitarianism, "one culture is as good as another," & (2) by a radically profane ethos antagonistic to our founding sense of what is sacred & the sanctional-motivational force thereof. One expression of this societal crisis is the oppressive power of minorities.