

"How GOD IS TO BE CONCEIVED, ADDRESSED, & SPOKEN OF"
THE ELEPHANT IN THE LIVINGROOM

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Are you curious about the evolution of a Craigville Theological Colloquy? Improbable, but you wouldn't bother with my Thinksheets if you weren't concerned about the evolution/devolution of theology as sustained thinking about the taproot of culture/civilization. This Thinksheet invites you to listen up on how the topic for Colloquy XV emerged yesterday (yes, emergent evolution). The genre is a letter addressed to my colleagues on the Colloquy Planning Committee.

1 Often, what people avoid talking about interests me more than what they talk about, want to talk about, hope talking about will be helpful. Topics avoided remind me of that oh-so-Thurberian elephant in the livingroom--known by everyone to be there, but never spoken of.

2 Unlike the previous 14 Colloquies, I came to this first session of Colloquy XV planning with an **open** mind vis-a-vis topic (open mind because **empty**-minded: I'd deliberately given no deliberation to topic, eager for what might emerge but not anxious about the fate of a suggestion I intended to champion). Before long, it became clear that the dozen of us sensed that some theme on religious language would make the best sense in the current "mainline" Zeitgeist--have the best hope of (1) attracting participants & (2) contributing to the Great Conversation & Christians' part in it.

3 The study of religious language is a subset of semiotics (a.k.a. semantics, semasiology), the general study of language-as-sign/signal-system (in contrast to language-as-sound). In a Colloquy, a little of this would go a long way; & in our discussion, I had some fear that we'd have too much of it. We could drift off into linguistics, the philosophy of language (esp. its ontology/cosmology). But also we could move more practically into **significs** (RHD²: "the branch of semiotics dealing with signs and what they denote").

Eg, what is going on when I say "The First-Fundraiser & the First Lady flew the First Daughter to the Left Coast on Air Force 1"? What am I up to in crafting this sentence? Base-line reality is that I'm saying there was a planetrip: the vb. gives you that. But did I correctly name the plane? And how could the flight have occurred, since there's no "Left Coast" except on flat maps? Further, I didn't name any of the plane's occupants. (Is Mt.[28.19] right in calling Father/Son/Holy Spirit God's "name"?) And what was I doing in my farcical triple use of "First"? And why did I slip in the current Beltway \$-raising crisis?....So much is going on when anybody says anything! Indeed, nothing was going on, indeed nothing even existed, before Somebody said something (Gn.1.3). To trope e.e.cummings, "Be of language more careful than anything."

4 All of us in the meeting felt the danger, as well as the productive potential, of doing a Colloquy on religious language. How tread carefully while treading firmly? That's where that elephant in the livingroom comes in. Somebody said "Whatever we do, let's not get into **pronouns for God**; nobody would come! Everybody's mind is made up on that." My response is in quotes as the first line of this Thinksheet: we cannot deal significantly & honestly with religious language without dealing with the nature of the Reality on the other end of, & to some extent in, our words. (Note again, in §3, the definition of "significs.")

That Reality is describable by anyone giving a careful reading to the Gita or the Bible or UNITED CHURCH NEWS or the Biblical Witness Fellowship's THE WITNESS or any other sacred literature or religious publication. In each document, internal interpretation yields a quite delineable deity (or centering Reality). If the reader deliberately (on "a foreign principle" [Karl Barth]) re-speaks that Center by systematic New Speak (lexical changes), the document be-speaks a *different* Center, thus a different deity; ergo, "a new religion."

5 The systematic suppression of the biblical pronouns for God--the practice of some on our committee, & of THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL--constitutes the creation of a new religion alongside the old (as the earliest Christianity was, in synagogues, a new religion alongside Judaism). It's the point I made in NEWSWEEK's quote vis-a-

vis that new hymnal (NW 2.12.96, reproduced pp60-65 in HOW SHALL WE SING THE LORD'S SONG? An assessment of The New Century Hymnal, ed.by Rich.L.Christensen, pub.by Confessing Christ, 335 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville MA 02632). In our meeting, the suggestion that the Colloquy planning/experiencing **suppress** the pronouns-for-God issue was in line with the subcultural effort to **suppress** Christian usage of masculine pronouns for God, which is a current lexical effort to **suppress** the masculinity of the biblical deity, who is a "god" & anti-"goddess."

"Suppression," see psychiatric dictionaries, which distinguish it from repression, the latter being "an unconscious process." S. is "the act of consciously inhibiting an impulse, affect, or idea, as in the deliberate attempt to forget something and think no more about it" (p731, Hinsie & Campbell, Ox/70). One aspect of the current main-line-churches' theologomachy (battle over language for God) is the etiology of this very "deliberate" suppressing. One indicator of the appearance of a new religion is the emergence of a new taboo-structure with punishments for the violators of the new sacred (inviolable). In the upper (state/national) reaches of the UCC, one can become--a number I could name have become--instant outsiders just for speaking out in favor of "inclusive language," meaning the freedom to use, or not, the biblical pronouns for God. (The very thought of such inclusivity, on the part of some on the original TNCHymnal committee, was enough to forbid the committee to vote & then even to exist: pp143 of HOW SHALL WE SING THE LORD'S SONG? [a committee member says that the committee was permitted to vote only once, voted "favoring the traditional language for one hymn;" & in consequence "was never permitted to vote on matters again"].) In UCC national publications, **precensorship** absolutely forbids the Bible's pronominal way of speaking of God.

Whether this particular suppression phenomenon be viewed as the emergence of a new religion or as sociopathology (Freud's denial-fixation, Anna Freud's anti-cathexis, Jung's affect-repression), the whole business is **pathetic**--as doomed by the biblical text (the Bible's way of speaking to & about God) as M.L.King Jr proved Jim Crow was doomed by the texts of America's founding documents. I am ashamed that my church, the UCC, was insufficiently sophisticated, linguistically & religiously, to fight off being seduced by the radical-feminist language-agenda.

6 As for the etiology of this masculine-pronouns-for-God suppression, a sophisticated interviewer on television asked me "How on earth did this get started? I am a strong woman & a devout Christian, & calling God 'Father' and referring to God as 'he' has never been a problem for me." I explained that "gender feminists" (radical feminists drawing a bead on traditional language for males & "the male God") influenced some women theological students, who influenced some of their liberal professors, who bought the "women are hurting" line & failed to defend the Christian language for God. "It's a school thing, only secondarily a church thing," I said.

7 On Cape Cod yesterday, the founder of Dunkin' Donuts said to customers entering one of his stores, "You wanna know who's the boss? The boss is the customer." We all agree that designing a doughnut to fit the customer is OK, but--I plead with you--designing the deity to fit the customer is *not* OK. It's a feeble & unworthy defense to say that the redesign is to defend the Faith against the charge of preaching that God is male, something no church (except the Mormons) has ever taught. And if someone says the deity is not really being redesigned, let that person make a God-language analysis of, say, any issue of UNITED CHURCH NEWS. Surrendering the masculine pronouns for God has extensive consequences, not all of them intended.

8 On God-language, the UCC has an embattled clergy & a confused laity. A Colloquy on it should (1) draw participants & (2) be helpful. So I propose as our theme this: **"OUR IMAGE OF GOD: How shall we speak to and of God?"** Only a small subculture in liberal Protestantism believes this question so settled as to be too boring for major discussion. And we must not let those who counsel despair--who say that each side is too mind-set to discourse with the other--determine against this theme.

9 This elephant may be a can of worms. But to have Colloquy XV on religious language while dancing around, & not naming, the elephant--well, that would be neat choreography but an **evasion** of the central God-language issue, which is whether we should continue to speak of God nominally & pronominally as the Bible does.