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WHAT JESUS THINKS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

is information some folks claim is directly available to them, & the louder (more self-assured) their claiming the less they agree among themselves. Is that discouraging? No! If they agreed among themselves, they'd gang up on me & persecute me: my freedom is in the space between them,

I whose access to the information is only indirect, tentative, forever searching/finding/searching alone & with others of past & present.

This Thinksheet looks at two of the (in my opinion) overconfident.

The first is **Cal Thomas**, an evangelical columnist whose father Lowell was, in his time, America's best-known radio journalist (& in his studio chair--"throne," the staff called it--I sat to do some talk-radio more than 30 years ago). The father was a left-leaning centrist, the son (due partly to his revolt against the revolt of the '60s) is a rightist in whose column today we have this: "Most of the big media subscribe to certain prejudices. They include, but are not limited to, biases about big corporations (they are evil), white people (they are racists until proved otherwise), males (they are sexists), Republicans (they are shills for big business and insensitive the poor), the seriously religious (they are ignorant) and America (a bad country that does bad things to innocent people)....When the media speak of 'diversity,' they are not talking about diversity of opinion, only different faces and genders delivering the same one-sided viewpoint." (Underlinings, mine.)

Hold that up to an idea-mirror & you see (1) what this columnist believes (ie, *his* biases) & (2) his Jesus-idea, "what Jesus thinks of the USA" according to him.

Me? I dis/agree (ie, both agree & disagree) with every one of his charges. And if you were to two-column a commentary I would write (col.A "agree," col.B "disagree"), you would be able to discern (1) *my* biases & (2) my Jesus-idea, "what Jesus thinks of the USA" according to me.....EXERCISE: I suggest that you two-column yourself in response to his ¶. Could be, if you do it, you will get clearer on Jesus-&-you.

The second overconfident is **Frederick Herzog** (d.10.9.95, two weeks before age 70), a life-long liberal pietist enthusiast for Jesus. My keenest memory of him was not of a theological conversation but of an interruption at a 1:1 breakfast in his Duke U. home, where I'd overnighted, looking forward to a theology breakfast. The phone rang, he said "I'll come," & off he went to court to stand by a "black" (as was the term then) whom he believed to be in danger of summary injustice. He was a Christian of devotion, contemplation, & action--the action (pragmatically) sitting in judgment as to the quality of the devotion & the contemplation.

Another Frederick, Trost, minister & president of the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ, saw into print a periodical festshrift to F.H.--as the Nov/96 EKU(church in Germany)/UCC(church in the USA) NEWSLETTER ("published by the UCC-EKU Working Group," Wis.Conf. of the UCC, 4459 Gray Rd., Box 435, DeForest, WI 53532-0435). I am indebted to this issue especially for F.H.'s "New Birth of Conscience" (pp47-55, [ed.] "composed shortly before his death"). Quotes of him are from it.

1 If purity of heart is to will one thing, as a Kierkegaard book-title has it, is purity of mind to think one thing? F.H. would find the distinction itself problematic: in simplicity, his willing & his thinking merged in what he saw clearly as evangelical (gospel) action. (On p7, a former student of his, M. Douglas Meeks, well describes him as "a complicated theologian searching for the simplicity of faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ.")

2 F.H. was seven years my junior, & I never got to know him well. You who knew him better: if I have misread him at any point(s), please let me know. I mean to honor him for what I myself most aim for in this life, viz, holy obedience to the will of God as a disciple of Christ in process of trans/formation under the illumination & guidance of the Holy Spirit. Passionate praise of God & joy in his presence; passion for truth & justice; compassion for & with the suffering.

3 F.H. had the intellectual power to nuance & a praxis (doing theology, theology in/as action) distaste for it. He was demonstration-prone, on the front lines for

any movement he thought standing for what God stands for--so, as a representative of JUSTICE CHURCH, he could, by demonstrating, "walk the GOD WALK" (my caps revealing two of his book-titles).

4 The ('68) murder of Martin Luther King Jr. shocked F.H. into a change which Jürgen Moltmann (p6) describes thus: "He separated himself from the liberal theology of middle-class Protestantism and developed his theology as a form of confrontation." That was the effect of his encounter with Lat.Am. liberation theology, after the King shock, in consequence of which he "moved from a pure hermeneutic of reflection-understanding to a practical-political hermeneutic of the Gospel."

5 Marching, demonstrating, picketing, writing, radio, television--I did my bit of all this, & lost a few jobs in consequence. I'm certainly not against F.H.'s actionalism. But to the end, he had (it seems to me) **liberal illusions**, with concomitant disappointments & acrimony--in which senses he remained a liberal, as I never was since my '35 evangelical conversion.

6 Yes, Jesus' teachings--insofar as available to us--can be read as ethical aphorisms sharpened, make memorable, by semitic hyperbole. But the utopianism they tempt us to (& which, I think, F.H. sometimes yielded to) must be qualified by the **tragic complexity of his life & death** (as well as illumined by his resurrection). As I take F.H.'s life & words as integral, a unity, I take the Jesus event (life-words-death-resurrectin) as integral, a unity. We set ourselves up for irresponsible disappointments, & commit unwitting injustices against persons & institutions responsible for the management of eco-politico-social power, if we preach liberal perfectionisms such as (as F.H. did) ideological nonviolence--especially when, in Jesus' name, we set him up as the model ideolog. Ironically, this political philosophy is itself violent: it does violence to the rational mind (whose moral task is to assess all energies/powers/forces in the interest of the good) & history (in which both good & evil have come from both violence & nonviolence). And, Rousseau-like, it expects too much of human nature "as we know it" (with its finitudes & sin). In the name of justice, this ideology commits unfairnesses; in the name of compassion on some, it is designedly insensitive to others. (To test what I'm saying, review Cal Thomas' catalog of accusations against the media's biases, which root in Enlightenment liberalism & romanticism.)

7 Thinkers should be judged by the quality of their intellectual shapings of the materials that fall to them, but also by what comes of their witness, ie the particularities of their intellectual influence. In **politicizing** his piety largely on the basis of the Jesus canon (Jesus' words/deeds in the Gospels), the canon of 18th-20th-c. Protestant modernism, he helped the national-level UCC become a war-room of "freedom" causes, then regretted the attendant though unnecessary downplaying of theological rigor. Some of his disciples continue his world-change agenda, others (esp. Stanley Hauerwas [still at Duke]) shifted their energy to Jesus-community-building, the church as God's alternative society. None, as far as I know, moved into the quietism of pietism (which today my reading in the Gk.NT turned up in 1Ti.2.2: we Christians are to pray that "the authorities" [lit., those in positions "superior" to ours] will let us alone so we can live quietly & piously). Nor have any I'm aware of become scribists (Book-fundamentalists) or incurvists (spiritual narcissists, leading overexamined lives)....But I must complain that F.H. did let himself become captive to the **liberationistic-hierarchy** paradigm, the vertical view of topdog/underdog. For this model, the operational question is *Who is being oppressed by whom & what can be done about it?* To energize the question, F.H. used the divine sanction to the hilt: The question has been & is *God's* operational question, as visible in Israel's prophet's & Jesus' Cross-&-canon. Here is the engagement-point for any thinkers (including me) who would debate him, as I intended to do at that aborted breakfast.

8 F.H. felt the pains of all underdogs who've suffered from our American gung-ho topdog energy, creativity, greed, violence, comforts, & willful blindness. Taking on those pains, he cried out "No!" in Jesus' name. I'd hoped to quote his essay on all those, to show where (in my opinion) his helpful simplicity of spirit was unhelpfully wedded to a simplism of mind, a rhetoric-driven simplism which slid into unintentional unfairnesses & lopsided "takes" on history & the present scenes. Later?