YES & NO TO POPULIST THEOLOGY ---------- ELLIOTT #2101

This is written the day after Craigville Theological Colloquy III (on "The Ministry of the Whole People of God"), 30 Sept. - 2 Oct 86. These colloquies admit not only non-theological clergy (ie clergy untrained to practice theology as a profession) but also laity (ie Christians untrained to be clergy). I say a resounding YES! to mixing these three categories together, with equal voice for all, to "do theology" interactively; and I affirm our process in this---the process we've used in all three of the colloquies---as the purest I've ever known or even have ever heard of. By pure, I mean uncontaminated by prior or processive input from experts (ie theologians: scholars in Bible, theology, church history, theophilosophy, theopsychology, theosociology).

1. "Populist theology" is God-thinking arising from below in the information sense: it is theology either (a) done upward from the least knowledgeable in the formal-educational sense, or (b) done (as in the Craigville colloquies) by all believers (regardless of theo-educational achievement) with equal voice. *Let's look at some shadings of "populist theology":*

(1) Most narrowly, it's the theology of the Populist Party (1891-), chief rep. being Wm. Jennings Bryan, representing agrarian interests--most of "the people" of the time being farmers--against the robber barons, their banking system, and the Federal buttressing of the shaky gold standard. Thus Bryan's "Thou shalt not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold"--his famous pro-silver speech in Congress. (My farm-girl wife had grandparents in both of whose homes Bryan's newspaper was regularly read aloud.) "Populist theology" in this sense means more *for, on behalf of,* the people than *by, out of the deliberations of,* the people. Most of the current "liberation theology," though presenting itself as people's theology (Marxist tinge!), is of this type....

(2)....so on to liberation theology. Basic black theology is as close as the Christian world has come to purity here: the slaves, with little help from their white friends, evolved a hermeneutic (expressed in song and sermon) expressive both of their faith and of their yearning. If we go with the peasant-revolt theory of the origin of Israel (eg Gottwald), we'll view Yahwism as the heart-and-mind work of the people but with input from the spiritually-culturally-intellectually trained among them (Moses et al; and, a recent controversy, did "covenant" come after "law"?). Iberian liberationism south of our USA border is, as a study of its initial published materials reveals, a highly impure type of populist theology: illiterate peasants were and are taught by religious professionals to "read" Scripture with sociocritical eyes (as in Segundo's "hermeneutic circle"), input from the people being mainly narrative and nuance (as I predicted in my 1966 study for Herman Kahn's Hudson Institute). (Near-cynical note: This form of "people's theology" is about as much of and by the people as is "people's party" politics in a Marxist-Leninist state, much of the lexicon of the former being drawn from that of the latter.)

(3) Knownothingist theology, eg in American Protestant fundamentalism at the lower cultural levels, is of and by anti-intellectuals. The term comes out of 19th-c. American nativism, but I'm extending it here to the levelistic pride (parallel to that of the KnowNothing political party) that combines Wyclifian plough-boyism (everybody free and equal to interpret Scripture) with American frontierism (nobody here but just us chickens). Some of this suspicion and hatred of the intellectual, the expert, the professional, (here) the learned in religion (and thus one dimension of anticlericalism) is deserved: *la trahison de clerc* (the people betrayed by scholars, the original narrow meaning of *clerc* being clergy, ecclesiastics, church scholars). Even in UCC one can observe tinges of convergence of these two knownothingisms, viz anti-intellectualism and anticlericalism. Far less than in most churches, for all four traditions combining to form the UCC were clergy-honoring and scholar-honoring.

(4) Subjectivistic theology takes many forms in modern America. Charismatism is of rising prominence in and out of the official churches. Spiritistic cults is another (a group of Satanists now bugging our neighboring town of Sandwich, MA). Human-potential "retreats" combine one or more religious heritages with the latest "exercises" dreamed up by practicing social psychologists. Futuristic, "new age" groups, mainly among the "upper-middle classes," continue to proliferate. And, in the UCC, some persons/groups crown Experience king (or, more often, queen). Jung is (if I

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may risk the word) father to much of this introversion (in spite of Luther's warning that *Peccatum incurvatum est,* "Sin is incurvature"). This form of populist theology is, today, devilishly hard to deal with because it's so natural an ally of narcissism (attacked by Christopher Lasch) and hyperindividualism (attacked by Robt. Bellah et al in HABITS OF THE HEART). It takes high intellectual form in the radical feminist theology of Eliz. S.-Fiorenza (eg BREAD NOT STONE) and has corrupted a number of women thinkers to whom, in the UCC upper regions, too much attention is being paid just now.

2. To the two forms of populist theology suggested in the boldface portion of sec.1 of this Thinksheet I'd like to add a third: Theology done by all believers together but (1) with no vote given the theologians and (2) with more voice given the theologians. Various ways I conceive we might go about this: I'm speaking here only for the principle. One way this change would sharpen and enrich the products of populist theology is through raising to the level of awareness the linguistic modalities we Christians inevitably (whether or not consciously) are involved with when we do theology: the biblical languages and their attendant sociopsychologies, the various shapings of the Christian mind (in itself, and in dialog with the Jewish and other minds) fed into the present particular conversation, denominationese (the in-language spoken by the particular communion in the case of dialog within a particular denomination), conciliarese (the in-language of the Christian conciliar movement at all levels but esp. at the world level), movementese (the jargon of movements affecting participants severally and in their collective concerns --eg, "inclusive language"), trendese (the coinage of what's going on in the surrounding culture--subspecies, issuese). A problem with using loremasters in language is that they live, professionally, with academese, a language understood only in their academy (ie academic discipline)--so they tend to turn the public off; pastoring is the nearest thing we have to a cure for this disease and disability.

3. Now for a case study of what I'm talking about. In the Colloquy III workgroup of which I was a member, an electrical engineer and an insurance broker helped us eight clergy to hear with lay ears. In the phrase "The Ministry of the Whole People of God," they two agreed that "the whole people of God" is invidious when used to exclude any human being whom God created and for whom Christ died: (1) It's antisemitic when used in a way that excludes Jews (though they hadn't been aware that the phrase itself is Hebrew!); (2) It's intended to include Christians and Jews and exclude everybody else (ie its biblical in that, within the one biblical faith, both religions use of phrase--see the Niebuhr/Heschel dialogs); (3) It's intended to exclude only people who aren't religious, ie to include all the devout of any and all religions. Further (said the two laymen), if by the phrase you mean the church, why don't you say so ("The Ministry of the Whole Church") instead of using such ambiguous language?

OPTIONS for our workgroup, at this point: We might have (1) taught the laity to view and use the phrase as a technical term in ecumenical dialog (= all Christians); (2) We might have clarified the term by adding church, thus: "The Ministry of the Church as the Whole People of God"; (3) We might have struck out with some fresh terminology, such as "The Ministry of Those Who Name Jesus' Name" (biblical phraseology) or "The Ministry of Christians, Corporately and Individually"; (4) We might yield to the laity's first and thus natural impression of the phrase--which is what we did, beginning our paper thus: "The whole people of God is all humanity, whom God created and for whom Christ died." * This, however, was so radical that the Writing Committee of the Colloquy merely set it aside, as a member thereof said in the final plenary.... as though our group hadn't understood the assignment. Well, what was the assignment? If it included remaining within conciliarese, that fact should have been stated aforehand and the definitions pre-given.

* #2102 includes this paper.