

A CHURCH WITH THE SOUL OF A NATION?

A meditation on Donald W. Shriver's project in AN ETHIC FOR ENEMIES:
Forgiveness in Politics (Oxford/95)

The church/state boundary in American history has been less a "wall" (to use a Jeffersonian metaphor found nowhere in our founding documents) than an **osmotic membrane** with passage both from church to state & from state to church. This Thinksheet's title reverses G.K.Chesterton's quip that the United States is "a nation with the soul of a church." Both statements carry considerable freight of truth.

1 Shriver's project (not his book) raises, for the thoughtful reader, the question of the **portability** of the Christian doctrine of forgiveness: to what degree, if any, can a religio-moral teaching (1) based on "the blood of Christ" (Eph.2.13; "the cross," v.16), (2) aimed at Christian believers, who constitute a "new humanity" living in "peace" (v.15) because Jesus' self-sacrifice "reconcile[d]" to God, thus "putting to death...[interpersonal, interethnic, & implicitly also international] hostility" (v.16) within the Christian church/community (v.19: "no longer strangers and aliens, but...citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God,...[v.21] a holy temple in the Lord, [v.22]...a dwelling place for God"----to what extent, if any, can this whole intracommunal reality be extrapolable, portable, as a political teaching for humanity in general?

2 The fact that the author assumes this portability, expects a readership who'll not need to have it argued for, tells us that he's a liberal Protestant in believing in the grace/nature **continuum**: grace (gospel/church) functions not so much to transform nature as to provide it with an incremental impetus to discover & fulfil its pro-human potential. The politicization of Christian particulars, instead of being an Enlightenment compromise of the gospel, is the way of Christian faithfulness in the world outside-beyond the church. Blurring the grace/nature divide, with ~~some help~~ of psychology (for individuals) & sociology (for collectives), is so "natural" to this mentality among us mainliners that many of my readers will wonder what I'm trying to get at so far in this Thinksheet. (Reading some reference-book listings of "Grace" might help.)

3 This nature/grace **blurring** correlates with the underlinings in §1: Power (authority, influence) is the political bottom line, so humanity's root problem is the abuse of power; solving the problem is a political task requiring all human resources, including the religio-moral (ethics rooted in ultimates). Salvation for humanity is not by "somebody dying on a cross" (as Delores Williams [on Schriver's faculty] put it at the Nov/93 "Re-Imagining Conference") but by the right use (overcoming the abuses) of power--in short, by what Buddhism calls "right relationships." As Shriver early puts it (ix), "The building of relationships is the heart of ethics." Since the masculine heart of ethics is doing your duty, Schriver is here (& everywhere?) into the heart of feminine ethics, ethics in the feminine mode. Unsurprisingly, the book throughout has a feminine quality. Would I prefer a masculine quality? Of course not! I prefer gender-transcending & gender-balancing thinking. And I'm at least suspicious when "ethics" is used salvifically, as though the world could be saved without grace (God's self-sacrificing intervention to deliver us from "sin, death, & the devil"). At least in this book, Schriver has left off preaching (grace) & gone to advising the world how to behave on its own terms (nature). The world needs good advice, & Enlightenment lingo collapses religion (as in this book, implicitly) into ethics; but the bracketing out of the gospel's call to repentance & faith is odd behavior in one who was ordained to preach & live that call. Whatever value the world may find in this book, I cannot see it as an instance of Christian faithfulness in the world.

4 Appealing to the sick narcissism of the day, a greeting card I received recently bore the motto, "...all forgiveness is a gift to yourself." How thin in comparison with our Faith's affirmation that forgiveness is a grace-gift from God through the cross, which calls us (in peril of losing God's conditional love, Mt.6.15) to forgive others--forgiving others also being experienced as a gift to ourselves. Christian thinking, including thinking about forgiveness, begins-continues-

ends with (Dante) "the Love that moves the worlds." In this the biblical worldview, the primary work forgiveness has to do is to lead us back to God, a work that is subverted when forgiveness is treated (as in this book) as a *Ding an sich*, something almost quasinuminously conceived as a power operating "in itself," *ex opera operato*--to use the medieval phrase for the supposed magical effect of the Roman Mass. Virtues/values "calved off" from the divine glacier bounce around in the watery chaos independent both of the glacier & of each other. In a biblical phrase, they are in themselves "principalities & powers," treatable as salvific energies, goodwill-bearing angels of personal ontological status (e.g., "forgiveness enables...").

The sound psychological explanation of this phenomenon is that if you look long enough at something you value (in the case of this book, forgiveness), it'll soon begin to glow & then speak. In biblical language, it becomes an idol of which unsustainable claims are made even in defiance of realism.

5 Am I a quietist, preaching withdrawal from the world into an apolitical Christian tower? Certainly not. Am I a triumphalist, preaching that Christians should take over the world & "run things"? The Lord deliver me/us from such Christians with their so-called "pro-life" & other coercive dogmas! I try to be a Christian realist, my ultimate sanctions in the Trinity & my proximate motivations in what I perceive--yes, situationally--to be good for the good earth & its creatures, usually with a preferential option for humanity individual & collective. I do not believe in forgiveness, but rather in the God who forgives & commands forgivingness. I do not believe in "ethics," but rather in the God who says "Be holy, for I am holy." I do not believe humanity can save itself: salvation comes only from the Savior, who teaches us to pray for the gift of God's "kingdom...on earth as it is in heaven." Shriver may say he agrees with all this, but one wouldn't know it from reading his book, which he may call cryptoChristian (Christian in invisible motivation/foundation)--but can cryptoChristian action bear the name of Christian witness?

6 On the Christian diamond, 1st base is church (Christians' primary base & language-world); 2nd, "groups of humans" in general; 3rd, nation (& international relations). Shriver begins his "Acknowledgements" with his "experience as pastor," but only to hasten on to "the problem of how groups of humans [sic: not "Christians"] can combine moral judgment with enough forbearance and empathy to hold the group together" (ix, and "groups of humans"). The church not as a school of Christ but a laboratory for studying human interactions, the conclusions to be applied to human groups in general. On the next p., this: "The viewpoint of this book is American; I want to know how Americans might enact an ethic for their enemies." He hurries out of church into social psychology & thence into politics. I've no problem with pastors' toting pastoring-acquired wisdom out into various applications in the world. My problem is with the tacit assumption that the world can receive the profit from the fruits of the Faith without commitment to its roots in the gospel. The Constantinian problem, we sometimes call it: when the nation (the Roman Empire) took on the soul of the church, did the church lose its soul to the nation--the church becoming what this Thinksheet's title fears? The so-called Christian Coalition yields to this temptation in one direction; Shriver, I fear, in another....Also "Acknowledgements," an impressive list of eminences who helped Shriver do his "doctoral thesis on forgiveness" (x). Osmotic membrane, yes: but also, when truth, honor, the integrity of the gospel demand it, a wall.

7 **The kenotic (emptying) question:** On the model of, & in obedience to, our Lord, who "emptied himself" of heavenly prerogatives (Phil.2.7) but not of his message, we are to empty ourselves of what Jn. Updyke calls "egotheism," the self-worshiping self. But to what extent, if any, are we to empty ourselves of our Christian message--as it were, to go anonymous, divesting ourselves of God-&-Christ-talk in order to "communicate"? And if we so divest, what are we communicating? My practice, in secular situations, is to be bilingual, as in the stories of chapter 43 of FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT ("Prepositions have no religion"): first, earth-talk; then, God-talk. I could not be comfortable, as Shriver seems to be, without openly making the connections between earth & Heaven (Jewish & Chinese sense).

While ignorant-provincial Christians imagine that all values & virtues abide in & derive from the Bible, the reverse error is to suppose that all virtues & values are in a common well from which all humanity can drink. The former is tribalistic, the latter is pluralistic. The 1st is a tree standing alone with its roots & reach, the 2nd is a forest whose trees are of equal value. A 3rd picture: our/my tree (by inheritance/choice or choice without inheritance), whose reaching branches touch the branches of other trees--similar branches, but not the same (as no word in one language "means" exactly the same as any particular word in any other language). How shall we name this 3rd way, my way? "Biblical humanist" is Kenneth Woodward's accurate description of me, with qualifiers (FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT, x): "Unfortunately, the word 'humanist' is pejorative among fundamentalists and other defenders of biblical infallibility with whom Elliott has long had profound disagreements....Elliott is a biblical humanist in the sense that for him, the biblical text itself establishes the categories by which we come to know what being human is all about, and the terms by which we can understand and evaluate competing humanistic philosophies and enthusiasms."

Kenosis, for me, cannot include emptying out the biblical categories by failing to proclaim them along with their contents. E.g., "forgiveness" is a content of the biblical category "atonement." In the analogy of the ¶ before this one, "atonement" is the root of which "forgiveness" is a reach & fruit. What happens to "forgiveness" when the doctrine of the atonement is rejected, as e.g. by feminist-womanist exegetes-theologians who say that only a male god would demand repentance & require atonement? Forgiveness ceases to be a divine act costly to God, an act in which a gracious gift is given by life's Source & Destiny; rather, it is only something we human beings do one to another, & (as in Shriver's book) one tribe/nation to another, as though Pelagius & not Augustine were right.

8 Geo. Lindbeck makes somewhat differently my "biblical humanist" point. In his THE NATURE OF DOCTRINE (Westminster/84), 118, he thus describes his "intratextual theology": "the text, so to speak,...absorbs the world rather than the world the text." The primary intellectual-linguistic categories for the Christian should be "within the scriptural framework"; too much is lost (I say, the roots are lost) when one "translates scripture into...[extrabiblical] categories."

9 "From Gandhi, Martin Luther King learned to believe in nonviolence." That sentence is prickly with errors. To take two: (1) Neither "believed" in nonviolence; (2) Jesus, not Gandhi, was the primary root of King's attitude & action. Hardening of the categories is one disease; confusion of the categories is another.

10 In the '60s, hundreds of thousands of white middleclass youth, most of then religiously rootless, "believed" in stuff like "justice" & "love." Shriver wants them, now middleage, to believe in "forgiveness." Though the book is ethically & historically & politically learned, I get from it the same feeling I got from my students & their peers in the '60s, the mixed feeling of wanting it all to be true, yet thinking it romantic-utopian, too sanguine for those who've learned to pray the Lord's Prayer with full mind as well as heart. And it feels so modernist, Fosdickian ("abiding truth in changing categories" if I recall correctly the subtitle of his THE MODERN USE OF THE BIBLE). What doomed modernism, it was discovered, was that when you change the categories, the truths do not abide; they evaporate. "Forgiveness," as Shriver's book uses the word, is only the ghost of (& here I use the title of a number of books in recent centuries) THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF FORGIVENESS. But from another angle, I thank God for all, of whatever roots, who try to improve, make more truly human, relationships of gender, race, class, tribe, nation.

11 Mystery: Why do some find it easy to forgive ("That was then, this is now.") while others find it almost impossible? I think partly genetic-historical (nature-nurture), but mainly investment: the easy forgivers are vested elsewhere than in their victimhood. Shriver seems to me rather too modern (Enlightenment) in his confidence that listening-aided reasoning is an effective dissuasive from vengeance. But where there's a will to let bygones be bygones because not doing so would be guilt-inducing &/or too costly, listening to forget will strengthen the will to forgive. Easier to see how this plays out interpersonally than internationally.

12 Obviously, Shriver wants his readership to include, alongside the churchly, the worldlywise, as did Rein. Niebuhr before him in the UTSNY tradition: we must not fault him for ^{not} writing in a fashion only the pious would find palatable. His appeal is to pragma (ix: the "sober realism" of Robt. Frost's "To be social is to be forgiving") rather than to the will of God, the divine sanction of promise/threat (as in Matt.'s followup of the Lord's Prayer, 6.14-15). I must not, unfairly, accuse him of not writing another, a different, book. But I regret that his biblical-theological warrants are so little adduced, so little as to give his readers little help in connecting his roots & his fruits, his faith & his proffered well-earned wisdom. In our deracinated culture, even the formally pious need help in *understanding*, in positioning themselves underneath action-proposals, down there in (T.S.Eliot) "the ground of our beseeching." In the biblical worldpicture, which I believe & try by grace to live, the bottom line on forgiving is that we're given heaven if we do & hell if we don't, here & there (or as the Germans say [Eng. translation], "this side" & "that side"). The laudable differentium is (173) "the willingness to count oneself as neighbor and fellow citizen with enemies in spite of the latter's continuing resistance to reciprocating. In the most practical sense, this *is* forgiveness in politics." But **why?** Negatively, it's the calculus: the consequences of unforgiveness are untoward. But our Christian faith is profounder, provides the positive (ultimate, uncalculating) motive, viz. the glory of God, every forgiving an act of adoration, praise, thanksgiving. Anything else presenting itself as *the* bottom line is interloping.

13 I've dozens of quotes (from the book) I'd like to comment on, but must limit this Thinksheet to 3½pp....Politics is a question (Rodney King's): "Can we all get along?" Politics is a fact: Locally & globally, we're all stuck with each other. Politics is hope: Historically, there's been enough "cooperation" to "survive our...combativeness" (3). We need to achieve together "a new memory of the past, a new justice in the present, and a new hope of community" (217).

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