

Some reflections on spending 9.30am-3pm yesterday (in a UCC "Confessing Christ" seminar) with a member of the drafting committee on catechisms, Presbyterian Church USA, whose '98 General Assembly approved three catechisms (referred to below by the three numerals herewith): #1 ("Belonging to God: A First Catechism"), #2 ("The Study Catechism: Confirmation Version"), #3 ("The Study Catechism with Biblical References")....Order: 1.800.227.2872.

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HONEST LANGUAGE ABOUT GOD

PERSPECTIVE: Since my ordination in '40 I've been involved in the shaping & using of Q/A (question/answer) catechisms--congregational, denominational, ecumenical. Almost 40 years ago, while in the UCC national office, I helped write that church's catechetical materials, based partly on materials I'd developed in a previous 10½-year pastorate. When at NYTheol.Seminary I taught a course titled "Christians Think Together: THE COMMON CATECHISM" (Seabury/75, subtitle "A Book of Christian Faith")--this book being the first Protestant-Catholic effort at stating the meaning and pertinence of the Christian faith. Currently I'm helping on the "Pass Along the Faith Project," a centrist catechism within the UCC (and related to the UCC's "Confessing Christ"). And I'm eager to try some of this new PCUSA material in confirmation ed. in the UCC congregation where I have some confirmation responsibility.

In many ways, catechisms are IMPORTANT! They are the third order--after preaching-teaching & creeds--of Christian predication.

EXPLANATION: Why do I not identify by name the "member of the [PCUSA] drafting committee"? Because, in response to a plenary question of mine, he showed some hesitance about going public with his "perfect hatred" of ideologically-concessive suppression, in the three catechism, of Christianity's pronouns for God--a suppression without which, he said, "the General Assembly would not have approved the catechisms."

1 After studying the three catechisms in an earlier drafting, I wrote said member thus: "I congratulate you (& your committee) for avoiding the traditional creedal substantivitis, the excessive use of polysyllabic nouns. That alone, not to mention other felicities, would explain the clarity and freshness of your text."

2 The "tude" (attitude) of the three catechisms is what said member calls "generous orthodox" (what I've long called "orthodox open" or "libergelical" [evangelical in substance, liberal in spirit]). Personal Christian reality begins with one's being humiliated as a "wretch" in the presence of "amazing grace," & humility abides as a character-mark. Christian humility appears as deep listening, as modesty of claiming, & as ego-free (& thus fear-free) affirmation-proclamation of what one deeply believes. No overclaiming, but honest confession of limits. No triumphalism, but joyful witnessing. Fairness in argument, kindness always. The member quoted Carl Henry who, in my long experience of him ('42-), has been an example of his bon mot: "Generosity without orthodoxy is nothing: orthodoxy without generosity is less than nothing." What do orthodoxy & generosity have to offer each other, (I add) so that each is more than it would be without the other?

3 The scriptures appended to each Q/A in #1 & #3 provide warrant, enrichment, & study-incentive (making these two catechisms excellent group-study material). The member: #2, the confirmation version, is "the bare bones." I would have preferred that #2 also have scriptures....Member: "Scripture is our [Christians'] daily bread," & its message *in nuce* is "the triumph of God's suffering love." This "training in Christianity" should be, & these catechisms seek to make it so, "Christ-centered and Cross-centered."

4 A difference from former Reformed (& other) catechisms is that these have (member) "less complicated syntax." Necessary now, but not easy: Past catechisms have stuck close to scriptural syntax, the syntax of the biblical languages (& Latin), which is not as simple (especially true of the Epistles!) as our everyday Am. English spoken & written. "The future depends on our recovery of catechisms," so their syntax must mesh with today's speech & writing, within the limits of biblical-theological faithfulness.

5 I'm only slightly worried about the shorthand, apodictic (unqualified-definite) quality of the Q/A. At many points my soul cries out for nuancing. But the genre is necessarily positive in tone & wording: I mustn't quibble. But a less dogmatic, more modest mien here & there would gain more in persuasiveness than it would lose in polemic force.

6 #1.20: "the people too often to worshiped other gods." Drop both "too" (which implies it's OK to worship other gods as long as you don't do it "too" often) & "to" (which is a surd)....#1.28: "women and men." This political reversal of the normal biblical order teaches the disciple to "spin" when coming upon "men and wo-

men" in the Bible. This would be counter-spinning: the spinning is in #1, your 1st catechism, which here is *dissonant* to Scripture. Piling up, such dissonances teach the disciple a hermeneutics of suspicion against the Bible, a heavy price to pay for being fashionably PC. (Of the PCing of Scripture, including the catechisms' trendy apophysis in dumping our religion's only pronouns for God, the member said this: "In the future, we may have to pay an enormous price for this compromise." In my 6.17.98 letter to him, I had said "Not that I worry that the consistent biblical-historical-confessional praxis will fail to win out at the end of the day. It's just that I'm saddened when a passing fancy becomes powerful enough to throttle, albeit temporarily, a consistent usage of the Great Tradition.")....#1.29: "rule with God in [power &] love": my addition, to be biblical & to fight the prevailing sentimentality....#1.31: Better get off the periodic position: "Peter preached the gospel to them."....#1.41: If "Supper" is capitalized, then (here & elsewhere) so should "Baptism" be....#1.57: Your answer conceals the conditionality in your three quotes from Mt. Don't bow down to the narcissistic doctrine of "unconditional love"!....#2.7: This weak answer explains why Darwin became an atheist. "Love" does not exhaust "Almighty" (the Pantocrator)....#2.94: Add "to" before "grow."....#3.7: As I said in my letter to the member, "You are too anxious to mix love with power."....#3.42: From, "importantly," drop "-ly."....#3.67: Don't call a "person" an "it" (ditto #3.82). ...#3.82: "God's forgiveness...is unconditional" is false to Mt. See #1.57....#3.85: Add "only" after "a hope" in the 1st sentence.

7 In plenary, the one question I asked the member was this: "I have a question about the language of these catechisms. There are nine parts of speech. Why, in speaking of God, is one part of speech, viz. Christianity's **pronouns** for God, put under the interdict, banned? Did the banning occur in the drafting committee, or was it imposed by the later larger committee?" In the former, the member responded--over his (& only his) objection. My question had included this, after "banned": "in contrast to all previous catechisms, including those in our-&-your Reformed tradition."

The member found my question deeply embarrassing, disturbing, anger-triggering. Said he, "I was the only one in the drafting committee for continuing the masculine pronouns for God." Again: The banning is from a "false consciousness" about language (a Marxist phrase of powerful history, including uses by such an odd couple as Bonhoeffer & Sartre). And finally: "The catechisms could not have passed (General Assembly [80% support]) with the masculine pronouns." "I hate the dropping of the pronouns for God--I hate it with 'a perfect hatred'."

8 The politically (PC) induced ban on Christianity's pronouns for God is dishonest to our religion's language about God, which has only masculine (never feminine) titles for God & only masculine (never feminine) pronouns for God. The **specious** argument for banning is that God is not male; **specious**, because never in the history of the Faith has any movement, institution, or even individual claimed that God is male; & **specious** because it cravenly changes the Christian Language under the feminist "patriarchal" objection (Christian history's only instance of meeting a language-attack by conceding defeat).

9 As everybody knows, one lie-dishonesty-deception is punctiliar-linear: it commits the liar to a series of prevarication, each one less painful to conscience than the former. In these catechisms, look, eg, at #3.11, on gender-language for God. Of course "a living God [is] beyond all sexual distinctions" (though, I must add, [1] The Holy Spirit is the male element, in Mt. & L., in Jesus' conception; & [2] "The Son" in incarnation was male). Now comes something so distortive as to be intellectually & morally dishonest: "Scripture uses diverse images for God, female as well as male." "Female" 1st, though less than 1% of the Bible's gender-imagery for God is feminine! Besides, imagery is a minor linguistic category in comparison with divine titles & divine pronouns. The intention to mislead is plain in the quoted scriptures, all of which are feminine. Current PC culture-Protestantism here suppresses major gender-language facts about the biblical God & substitutes a minuscule minor fact.... In his presence, I heard Social-Gospel-founder S.Mathews cry out "Beware of transcendentalized politics [imposing our politics on God]!" That's the shame & crime the gender feminist theologians, & these catechisms, are guilty of.