

The gamut runs downward from certainty to certitude to suspicion to doubt to unbelief to cynicism to nihilism.

And each degree of descent has its own ranges of ideational & emotional intensity from 1 (mildness) to 5 (fanaticism). At a party sometime, ask a few folk together what Pilate asked (Jn.18.38): "What is truth?" (You may not be invited again, but you will be remembered.) Everyone has a lifelong conversation with **truth**, with beliefs coming & beliefs staying & beliefs going. And a lifelong conversation with **trust**, which means truth in relationships & has the same root as truth (phys., what is "hard" & so [phys.metaphor.] "dependable" & so [pers.metaphor.] "faithful")....Important in theological history is the Heb.-Gk.-Lat. roots & their verbal developments/intertwinings in "faith," "faithfulness," "trust," "truth," etc.

1 So much of liberal religious discourse reminds me of Dickens' Artful Dodger. So many ways to duck & weave around the ontological bottom-line questions "But is it *so*? is it *true*?" The academic dogma splitting fact/value & objective/subjective frees the cognoscenti, the knowledge elite, from the vulnerabilities of commitment (except to scientistic & historicist dogmas) & confession (personal witness to life's great Unprovables).

2 Yeats despaired that those of goodwill "lack all conviction" while the others are "full of passionate intensity." This Thinksheet is about the maldistribution of passionate intensity.

3 For relief, encouragement, empowerment, I choose to read much that's intensely passionate about what I believe to be true (of course privileging great passages of Scripture, on which I meditate daily). The great poets. Yeats, Auden, these lines of the latter about the former: "In the deserts of the heart / Let the healing fountain start, / In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise."

4 In the 86th & last stanza of Christopher Smart's "A Song to David," the poet addresses the Shepherd King as one who reached "at" truth, toward redemptive revelation, leading to the incarnation & atonement by David's Son. Note the energy, passion, ecstasy, joy, triumph in the words--none of which could be unless the poet were committed to canonical (biblical) truth: "Glorious--more glorious is the crown / Of Him that brought salvation down / By meekness, called thy Son; / Thou at stupendous **truth** believed, / And now the matchless deed's achieved, / DETERMINED, DARED, and DONE." As I'm about to teach a course on the Jesus Seminar, I can't help but contrast Smart's truth-confidence in the gospel with the Seminar's gospel-eroding effects, from suspension of disbelief to suspension of belief.

5 "What does it mean to say that Jesus died on the cross for our sins?" This question a UCC seminary professor asks in interviews of candidates for ministry. But many liberal religionists, including many in the UCC, would answer that it means nothing--indeed, less than nothing, for its not even true. (M.Borg & J.D.Crossan will be parading this denial next month at the largest annual gathering of UCC clergy.) Contrast the solid research of a UCC pastor-scholar, Rich. L. Floyd, on his '89 & '95 sabbaticals on the Cross. On p.3 of his U. of St.Andrews, Scotland/95 report titled "'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross': Essays on the Atonement," he affirms that "the coming of Christ, his life death and resurrection, accomplished something rather than merely demonstrated something about God." He's resisting those latterday theologians who believe that "the cross is illustrative rather than constitutive for Christian salvation....Liberal Christianity since the Enlightenment has tended to view the cross...as merely a historical symbol of a timeless truth, and so is particularly vulnerable when that symbol comes under attack for a variety of perceived sins." On this he quotes Jaroslav Pelikan in his preface to Aulen's CHRISTUS VICTOR: "'Jesus became at best a picture of God's love for mankind and at worse nothing more than one of the martyrs'"--an accusation befitting so many of Jesus Seminar participants' portraits of the so-called historical Jesus. The previous clause in Pelikan's sentence: "The reality of sin, the authority

of the Law, and the power of the demonic were trivialized in liberal theology'."On p.4, Floyd has this to say about Colin Gunton's THE ACTUALITY OF THE ATONEMENT (1989): The author argues for "a constitutive understanding of the atonement, saying that illustrative approaches tend toward exemplarist and subjective models which are inadequate to deal with the real evil with which the world is faced." The Cross ("the whole saving event of Jesus Christ," as Floyd represents Forsyth) is the **objectively true** salvific deed of God. True devotion, worship, & service can bring this truth to the idea-&-feeling intensity level of Christopher Smart's "A Song of David." Then the ecumenical creeds will come alive again--or maybe for the first time.

6 But while I want to see, in Christians, a vigorous joyful confidence in the canonical gospel (the "good news" richly though unsystematically seen when the whole Bible is in purview), certainty⁵ (i.e., fanatic intensity of conviction) on the right or on the left worries me: I'm an anti-**extremist**, as appears in my CCT letter today (14Dec96). I'm disturbed when "intolerant secularism" suspends a publicschool teacher for having made a favorable comment on the Bible during a class session, or when a Jn. Salvi II commits murders in a women's health clinic (pejorated as an "abortionium") on the ground that his intention was to prevent murders (his church having taught him that abortion is in the "murder" category); I tremble & weep.

DILEMMA & challenge: How can there be effective confidence about the true, the good (including the benvolent), & the beautiful without the fanatic **overconfidence** perpetually slouching up in fundamentalisms on the right & left? Confidence is a necessary ingredient for **prohuman** action, but overconfidence produces **antihuman** destruction of human values (as in Jn. Dewey's 1934 "Humanist Manifest," forecasting the elimination of all positive references to religion in America's public schools) & even human beings (as in Paul's preconversion murderous intent against Christians--brilliantly explicated by N.T. Wright in his Winter/96 JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE article).

My personal RESOLUTION of the dilemma is this: While I believe that truth is available to us by experience, revelation, & reason, I qualify this by my conviction that no human being can ever be in such possession of truth as would justify violence to mind or body in its promotion.

7 Today's letter responds to a self-confessed "intolerant secularist" whose letter attacked a Colson piece in FIRST THINGS, a periodical I read avidly & thoroughly despite the occasional outcropping of what strikes me as an arrogant tone from what strikes me as overconfidence that Rome (the RCC) has, is in triumphalist possession of, the Truth. E.g., criticizing the saintly Jos. Cardinal Bernardin for his irenicism in seeking to reconcile position-parties in the RCC, editor-in-chief Rich. Jn. Neuhaus (Nov/96 74) says "We cannot achieve Church unity by accomodating those who dissent from Church teaching--whether on the left or on the right": the magisterium settles truth-issues. The Church does not change its mind. (Oh? When the Church does change its mind, theologians go to work to explain that the Church has not *really* changed its mind.) But please read once more the last sentence in my letter: in the culture war between the postmodern pluralists-relativists (who are agnostic about all truth-claims [except their own, of course]) & the traditionalists (who make truth-claims on the bases of experience, revelation, & reason), I lean toward the latter, whose temptation to hubris of order seems to me a bit less debilitating than the former's temptation to hubris of freedom (with resultant chaos & anarchy).

8 What, now, does it mean to say that the Bible is true? What true is authoritative: what's partly true has commensurate **authority** automatically carrying the demand

A columnist's 'dangerous bias'

In his column on Wednesday, James Harper's "intolerant secularism" (which he affirms) expresses a dangerous bias against what he calls the "philosophy of selective compliance" to law. How ironic: unwittingly, he demonstrates the very narrowmindedness-on-the-left which those whom he's attacking accuse the likes of him of.

Like Mr. Harper, I don't agree with everything Cal Thomas and Charles Colson say. But unlike him, I tolerate both their extremism and his.

"Selective compliance" has a long and honorable American tradition from the Boston Tea Party to the Civil Rights Movement and beyond. We've made social, economic, and political progress by disobedience to unjust law. Why stop now?

I worry more about the Harpers than about the Colsons.

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for obedience (as, negatively, putting abortion in the murder category proscribes it). In "On being free through, in, with, and from the Bible" (176-81 of FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT), I've nuanced what I mean when I say that the Bible's true & therefore authoritative. I reject the extremes: inerrancy (the notion that Scripture is errorless) violates reason, & foundationalism guts revelation....By foundationalism here I'm referring to a 1995 article of Robin Scroggs, "The Bible as Foundational Document" (INTERPRETATION 49:1 17-30), which cancels biblical authority in the interest of doing his thing extensively wherever he finds Scripture unacceptable to him (as in his THE NEW TESTAMENT AND HOMOSEXUALITY, Fortress/83; in the 1st art. of the summer/96 issue of the JOURNAL OF THE AM. ACADEMY OF RELIGION, Mark D. Smith praises Scroggs for his methods, then pans him for "selective use of the evidence" [227]: "Scroggs' book embodies every virtue save one, that of being right").

9 "...and best of all: the Christmas carols are **true!**" While I try not to repeat anything I've said in previous Thinksheets, this time I must. These quietly, piquantly spoken words of Ernest Cadman Colwell (then Divinity School dean & my PhD adviser, soon U. of Chicago president) concluded the '42 U. of Chicago Radio Roundtable, at that time America's most intellectually stimulating weekly on the air. I was seated at Christmas feast with my parents & siblings, & the words stopped us into momentary immobility. Diapason of joy! I could hear the words again, in my inner being, as last night PBS television replayed the 1990 Carnegie Hall Christmas Program, a classic of carols unpolluted by such gender-feminist bowdlerizations as one encounters in, e.g., THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL.

10 The "Christmas Stroll" is a Cape Cod tradition. In each of our main towns, the stroll committee blocks off main street, which then for about four hours is open only to pedestrians (pleasantly crowded with pedestrians!) & horses (drawing carts full of giggling-shouting-pushing children). Everything in sight-range is festooned with multicolored little lights soundlessly singing "Joy to the world!" Up & down our Centerville main street were little stands with free food & drink. And in front of the church (our church, South Church, "the village church") was a live creche which the town committee later called the "centerpiece" of the celebration. (Three shifts of children for the manger scene, including three different baby Jesuses!) And carols from loudspeakers up & down the street. And a 7-8pm open-to-the-public carol sing inside our church--a "nondenominational" event, as was formerly said.

My painting that picture of last Tuesday evening--was it just a nostalgia trip? No, it was a statement that not everywhere is religion thoroughly driven from the public square, not all the time. Jesus, occasionally here & there in America, can still be the gathering **truth** for the general community, as he was for the creation of our Mass. towns (legally, you couldn't constitute yourselves as a town till you'd installed a [Congregational] minister).

The Christian Coalition dreams of reinstalling this public, public-square Jesus. How it's going about putting legs on the dream is a model of how to do politics a la America. In my opinion, they cannot, & even should not, succeed in their program to coerce (i.e., to control legislatures & courts). But I bless them for their intelligent persistent efforts to persuade (1) that some things have gone profoundly wrong with the American experiment & (2) the experiment can be self-correcting if the country overcomes its amnesia about, & resistance to, the dynamics of its origin.

11 Amnesia--& paganism. At Advent breakfast in our church this morning (Sunday, 15Dec96), a large creche on the grand piano in the fellowship hall looked great from a distance; but when you came up close to see the baby Jesus--no baby Jesus! Must've gotten lost in the packing-up a year ago.* Off-the-wall amnesia metaphor.

But also paganism. After breakfast & before Sunday school, two small boys were playing a new (1995) card game--"MAGIC. A Richard Garfield Game"--which, in addition to some real educational values, pushes (1) Melanesia animism (the spirit-forces, called *mana*, in non-human nature & the deceased; cp. Amerind *orenda*, *manitou*, *wakanda*) & (2) covetousness. By cornering cards representing natural objects, you add to your own individual personal "mana pool," in zero sum over against whom-ever you are playing *against*. The **error** here being surreptitiously taught

*Erroneous assumption? Maybe that Baby Jesus will show up for Christmas Eve worship.

(unwittingly, in church!) is manifold: (1) competition is more important than cooperation; (2) earth's there for us to rape; (3) unseen forces are there for us to control (yes, by "magic!"). What on the surface seems completely innocent, & even educationally valuable, proves on peering within to be manifoldly at odds with the **truth** the church exists to preach, live, & propagate....If you'd been in my place observing the small boys, would you have done anything? I didn't do much: (1) I discovered the boys hadn't a clue about "mana"; (2) I told their RP (responsible person, in this case their grandma) that the game's central idea is pagan.

But does this mean that since the gospel is **true**, everything else is false? By no means. For me, the world's scriptures are (as the Bible is for Scroggs [above]) foundational, recording the human spirit at its best (though for me, though not Scroggs, only the Bible is authoritative). Many truths potentially enriching human life come to us from sources other than the gospel, the Bible's cumulative (canonical) way of seeing, & living in, the world. If I live the gospel truth unChristianly, I've turned it into a lie; & I'm always in danger of doing that, if not from occasional spasms of ill will (sin), then at least from the partiality of my knowledge (finitude; 1Cor.13.12). But with courage as well as humility my commitment to living the gospel truth requires me to name as enemies not only its opponents but also its competitors: I have need of words like "false," "error," "pagan," "Jewish" (which is, in my usage, almost always positive), "heresy."

12 Radical contextualism (viz., truth exists only in culture-specific contexts--the philosophical base of multiculturalism) relativizes "**truth**." The liberal establishment of educational ideologs decrys the traditional curricular dominance of "old white men," usu. meaning Eng.-language literati (Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, Dickens, Jefferson, Madison, Browning, et al). But these ideologs do not attack some old white men I'd rather have them attack: Darwin, Marx, Freud, Dewey (their paragan of "progressive" education). The arena of old white men, if we throw into it all the primary influentials, can be a useful battleground for fighting over the canons of truth. That fight would expose the ideology & provincialism of the educrats now in control of our public schools....Like freedom, truth can never be assumed; it must ever be fought for. And through the fighting we come to a better knowledge of the true, as in fighting for freedom we come to a better understanding of liberty.

13 Truth doesn't always stand in the middle between extremes, but it does so often enough for the old Lat. generalization to ring true: *Veritas in medio stat*. While I can't be **true** (faithful) to my vision & understanding of God, the world, others, myself unless I'm ready for occasional radical left/right action, I live my life mainly in the overlap between extremes. This overlap bromide is familiar to my readers, to whom I apologize for laying it on them once more: *It's what you leave out that wrecks you*. Privatizers (now called "cocooners") leave out, as relatively unreal where not actually evil, everything that can't be sucked into the ego's small world: the public sphere is naked of them; & God, if present at all, must come in through the small door of their personal (including familial) needs. Tribalizers can't see anything really real, or at least really important, beyond the perimeter of their tribe (be it gender, race, religion, nation): for them, "humanity" does not exist. Conformists leave out every challenge to saw crossgrain, swim against the current; they're happy to go along to get along, & they can't even image that **truth**-reality-God would ask them to do anything else. Their mindset is the same whether they are conforming to some past (in which case let's call them "traditionalists") or some present that's disdaining some past (in which case, "modernists" but also "postmodernists")....This half-millennium axiom is therapy for leave-outers of all sorts: *In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity*....And one more medial message I've cautioned myself by through many decades: *You're probably right in what you affirm & wrong in what you deny* (but also I must caution myself against this caution: can a truth, an idea, a doctrine be clear to the mind at either end of a communication unless it's made clear what, contrarily, is not being said?).

14 Another servant of truth is the metaphor of **balance**, with its image of a dynamic fulcrum over against the static center ("middle"), the metaphor in §13. The extremes in §13 are only oppositional; the polar elements in §14 are paradoxical. E.g.,

truth/tolerance, revelation/reason, nature/nurture, nature/humanity, Jesus the Lord as divine/human, the gospel as inclusive/exclusive, rights/responsibilities, grace-faith/discipline-faithfulness, appreciative/critical consciousness, fact as knowledge/fact, fact as knowledge/value, God as present/absent, God's kingdom as here/coming. In each of these polarities, the position of the fulcrum is unique to the polarity & depends on one's own view of the polarity. E.g., since I believe that homosexuality is in most cases more nurture than nature, for me the fulcrum, to level the bar, must be moved close to the "nurture" end: "nurture" is heavier.

EXERCISE: Write "nature," then continue with a line, then write "nurture." Now position the fulcrum (as a small equilateral triangle with apex) to represent your personal conviction about homosexuality. Then try the same visual process with another or others of the stated paradoxes. If you do this & stand back to view the results, what type of mentality do you think you'll see? Any pattern(s)?...A truism: Every human being's "mind" is unique by virtue of genes, nurture, & the layering & compounding of personal decisions. What potential for enriching one another when we stop killing one another!

15 **Truth** lies at various depths within us, as does the lie: as error is the opposite of truth objectively, the lie is the opposite of truth subjectively-intentionally. In biblical demonology, the creature Satan is the father of lying as the Creator is the Father of truth-telling. Adam & Eve did die, become aliens, though the Liar said they wouldn't (Gn.3.4; the ambiguity is doubtless deliberate). But God is the Lord of the lie as well as of the truth: he put "a lying spirit" in some prophets (1K.22.22-23; 2Chron.18.21-22). We are not to "walk in lies" (Jer.23.14, i.e. live lying lives), and "teacher[s] of lies" are condemned (Hab.2.18). "Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors" (Eph.4.25 NRSV). And passive resistance is not enough: "Put on the whole armor God supplies you with, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph.6.11 NRSV, but I have rendered "of God" as "God supplies you with"). Your concordance would show you how closely Scripture associates cosmic evil (satan, devil, demons) with lying. In Eph.6.11, where Luther has "Teufel" (which sounds like Eng. "devil"), Zink's paraphrase precedes "Teufel" with "der grosse Lügengeist" (lying spirit, *lit.* spirit of lies). In the Bible, truth is not only to be affirmed & lived, it's to be fought for (on earth as in heaven: Michael's triumph at Bible's end). When we hear the comfortable saying "The truth will out," let's reply "Not without a little help from its friends."

16 Politically, truth always has been profoundly resisted by the power-hungry, who speak power to truth & are themselves resisted by prophets who (to use the title of a WWII Quaker pamphlet) "Speak truth to power." A wit has combined "flack" (from "flack control") & "apparatus" (the structure of political power, in Russian *apparatura*): "flackaratus" = an administration's collective spin-control efforts to maintain a favorable image by denigrating the opposition. As the public becomes more cynical, the lying must become more elaborate--until the system crashes.

Crash it did in Czechoslovakia under the invisible hammer of dramatist Vaclav Havel, who in his "The Power of the Powerless" thundered that only a people "living in truth" deserves, or can achieve, liberation from the tyranny of empowered lies. If we are not guardians of the truth, said he, the end of our efforts will be only to replace one tyranny with another. To fight for the truth means to fight for the past as well as for the future: we cannot afford to let the memory of the past's lessons erode: amnesiacs are not free....America, amnesiac about its spiritual roots, is not free.

17 The world's spiritual traditions have each its own way of saying that the opposites of **truth** violate reality itself. One picture is of a Book of Death in which all one's lies are cumulatively recorded (*ets mot*, parallel with *ets chaim*, the Book of Life, where one's true & good deeds pile up). The Lord's Prayer reminds Christians that their "trespasses"--"debts"--sins need forgiving, erasing from (as it were) the Book of Death. The Christian doctrine of the atonement teaches us that that forgiving, erasing, was at bloody cost to God, whose nature is truth & who therefore will not--cannot?--just forget about violations of truth just because "God is love." It was not by general good disposition but rather "in [the cross of] Christ" that God stopped "counting their trespasses against them" (2Cor.5.19). Where this is not be-

lieved, as it is generally not in liberal Protestantism, theologians conclude that "somebody dying on a cross is not going to do anybody any good" (Prof. Delores Williams, Union Theological Seminary, N.Y., & '96 commencement speaker at Pittsburg [Presbyterian] Theological Seminary). A shallow diagnosis of sin, the sinner's situation facing God, condemns doctrine to shallowness & reduces Jesus to the humanistic portraits the Jesus Seminar scholars have come up with. Pluralism--Jesus alongside Buddha & whonot, with all "truths" relativized--triumphs. The NT's Jesus Christ the Lord becomes only an option in the world's spiritual cafeteria, only one among allegedly equally nutritious spiritual guides. We then are invited to forget--er, reinterpret--"I am the the way, **the truth**, and the life" (Jn.14.6) & like assertions of THE FINALITY AND UNIQUENESS OF JESUS CHRIST (a Jaroslav Pelikan title).

18 "Jesus Christ is **the truth**!" shouts a bumpersticker. So I believe, & mean the canonical Christ, who however is a multilayered complex historical numinous figure. Says an old hymn "Christ for the world we sing! / The world to Christ we bring / With loving zeal....With joyful song: / The newborn souls whose days, / Reclaimed from error's ways, / Inspired with hope and praise / To Christ belong." Yes, I believe what is not of truth is error; but in my witnessing of & for the truth, the Truth himself cautions me against condemning disagreeers with me (Mt.7.1). Without clarity about & confidence in the Truth, there's no passion, so no power, in witness--as recent evangelical works insist (e.g., David Wells' NO PLACE FOR TRUTH & Alister McGrath's A PASSION FOR TRUTH). But overconfidence violates the superior commandment of love & disrupts Christian unity (on the later, hear Calvin: Christian witness & dialectic should join "a diligence for **truth** with a care for mutual fellowship"). Honest to words & ideas, yes; but underneath all, honest to love....A caution from a great Muslim scholar, alGhazzali (d.1111): "The only thing which is **true** is God's face." I shudder at the reverse of this modesty in the 1982 "Christian Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics" by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy: "The Bible speaks **truth** when it touches on matters pertaining to nature, history, or anything else." (The fact that Qur'anic inerrancy plagues Islam even more than Biblical inerrancy does Christianity is no excuse for the latter.)

19 We need fresh avenues of access to locally & globally usable **truth** over against the immodest overconfident overclaiming spirit that narrows the mind & sharpens the sword. Against such immodesty on the left, viz, "intolerant secularism" (\$6, above), Stephen L. Carter wrote his THE CULTURE OF DISBELIEF (Anchor Doubleday/93). This on p.277: "This is the principle distinction I have defended in this book: we must be able, in our secular society, to distinguish a critique of the context of a belief from a critique of its source." That, + some other nuancings, I hold, make it possible for crosscultural argumentation to be both vigorous & peaceable. This question uses the space metaphor: In an argument (say, adversarial mutual witnessing on religion), **where is truth**? Surely it's not entirely in either party--a fact we should the more remind ourselves of the more passionate we become. It is underneath us, to ground our thinking. It is above us, to judge us. It is between us, beseeching us to grow up in our awareness of it. At any moment, it's being honored & victimized in how each party is feeling(which falls easily into emotionalism & sentimentality) & thinking (which easily ossifies into rationalism, of which inerrancies of the right & left are instances).

20 Every preacher's dream: "**Truth** from his lips prevailed with double sway, / And fools who came to scoff remained to pray" (Oliver Goldsmith's "Village Preacher"). O.G. was a contemporary of Jon. Edwards, whose God had the full character of the Bible's--in contrast to today's God (said H. Rich. Niebuhr in his address on the bicentennial of J.E.'s death): "He is without wrath, because we have made this image wrathless; his love is not holy love because we have painted the icon without holiness" (485 CHRISTIAN CENTURY 1May96). The address was almost 40 years ago. What would H.R.N. say about today's latest levellerism, which has rewritten the Bible to conform to an import into religion from socialist politics, viz. egalitarianism (panned by Orwell in ANIMAL FARM): "This version has undertaken to replace or rephrase all gender-specific language not referring to particular historical individuals,...[thus] conforming the language of the work to an inclusive idea" (preface of THE NEW TESTAMENT AND PSALMS: AN INCLUSIVE VERSION, Ox/96).