

PARDON ME, BUT I'M OFFERING YOU

THE BEST WAY OF LIFE & THE ONLY WAY OF SALVATION

The "pardon me" signals that I find this Thinksheet's title offensive though true. My liberal mind recoils from claim-words like "best" & "only." Why? That's what this Thinksheet's about: why, in view of the gospel's inherent boldness, this hesitance to be as aggressive as the NT &, say, Billy Graham?

1 Maybe a good way to begin is to look at the NT's use of the Greek word in this Thinksheet's first line. It appears as vb. 4x, as n. 36x. It's common in the Apostolic Fathers. And in papyri, one sees a shift toward the resultant, viz confidence: if you speak boldly, you will gain confidence in your message. (The James-Lange theory: you act yourself into a new way of feeling & being. So Goethe's FAUST translates Jn.1.1 first as word (speech), then as feeling, finally as act: the three are existentially one.)....If one loses confidence, one's speech becomes hesitant, perhaps even apologetic: if for any reason one ceases to speak out boldly-freely-frankly-plainly-openly-courageously-fearlessly-confidently, one's confidence leaks out.

2 And this Thinksheet's second line? "The acids of modernity," a phrase I heard often in the early 1930s when modernism was only beginning itself to be eaten away by reality (including the Great Depression with its Great Doubt about the human benevolent potential of the capitalist-democratic alliance), was accompanied by challenges to **Max Weber's** sanguine faith in that very alliance (esp. in his THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM). Born in the same German town as Luther, MW (d.1920) essayed, on the basis of German idealism (Kant, Marx) to produce a scientific sociology--because scientific, nonjudgmental in comparative studies, the value-free attitude we now call cultural relativism, a doctrine making nonsense of the fourth line of this Thinksheet. All scientists being as scientists atheists (the left brain being unable to process the personal [except as anomalous, random, arbitrary] in divinity or humanity--though of course not all scientists as human beings are atheists--Weber did his sociological thinking, even in sociology of religion, without benefit of divinity or any ultimate value other than the premises of the scientific method developed within the natural sciences &, by his time, freebooted into the social sciences & even into the humanities. The Grand Illusion of value-free science thus became the Grand Delusion of value-free education in disciplines beyond the natural sciences. One bad fruit in the U.S. is our nonreligious, nonmoral public school system, a multiple disaster continuing into college/university. One reason for the mainline churches' loss of confidence is that their members have had longer exposure to this K-PhD religiously & morally crippled schooling.

3 But MW's bad influence in America has not been limited to education. Consider some of the phrases he's contributed to the American language:

(1) **life-style** Gangsta rap, though viciously sexist & pro-violent, is, as the prime product of a "life-style" (viz street radical black male), beyond public suppression. You've got your I.-s., I've got mine, & we've no ground on which to call for legal public action against either, or even for preaching against each other in hope of effective use of the sanction of public opinion. An implicate of Weberian cultural relativism is the doctrine of social equivalence, which now so thoroughly pervades American communication (schools, media) that anybody exercising "value judgments" against any life-style is ipso facto guilty of prejudice, narrowmindedness, intolerance. This mind-set is itself intolerant. Oxymoron but true: it's a liberal bigotry. Against this, these are felt to be gaucheries:

(a) Claiming that one's way of life is **superior**. Every Hindu I've ever had serious conversation with has claimed that the Hindu way is the best way even though upanishadic philosophy is egalitarian, all paths to "truth"

being equal. It's a built-in hypocrisy of all religions: our way is best, your way is as good as ours. In a secular state, no religion is privileged, every religion is "equal before the law." Good. But to say "your way is as good as ours" while nursing the mental reservation "our way is best"? Not good. Dishonest. Cards up the sleeve. Honorable dialog impossible, as one can read in the reports of the (1994) World Parliament of Religions.

(b) Claiming that another's way of life is **inferior**. Am I antiMuslim for claiming that the Islamic sense of justice is inferior to the Jewish? For claiming that the gay "life-style" is inferior to the straight (& for complaining to PBS for airing the obscenely specific gay series "Tales of the City")? (Two gay groups argued successfully for equal access to PBS on the ground that their l.-s. is as good as any other.) Weber's value relativism has made a virtue of see/hear/speak-no-evil tolerance. Wed this to the irrational in the forms of Freud's unconscious, Nietzsche's radical historicism, & Heidegger's extremist ridiculing of morality, & what've you got? An anarchic brew such as worries Robt. D. Kaplan in "The Coming Anarchy" (Feb/94 ATLANTIC MONTHLY): nations without moral & rational bearings are ungovernable, & their number is increasing. Persons without those bearings cannot govern even themselves. The dream of the global village is turning into the nightmare of a prison riot. (To the article's thesis I've added what I consider the essential intellectual-historical background. Anarchy is of the mind before it is of society & humanity.)

(2) Weber coined **the Protestant Ethic** but as an atheist did not believe that this "worldview" had any more grounding in reality than any other. Only because it was productive of prosperity & democracy, he liked Calvin's blend of God & gold. God, now captive to consumerism, was no longer free to energize the Christian critique of riches (capitalism being rationalized funded riches). Liberalism, founded on rational underpinnings (Locke, Montesquieu, Smith, *Federalist*), has failed to make its case against Weber's pragmatic philosophy & **charisma** (yes, another Weberism) theory. The old liberalism, not yet atheisticized into secularism, had more social power because of its alliance with biblical religion & its protection of God from total captivity to economic theory. (Weber rejected the cosmic grounding of both reason & revelation.)

(3) Weber said regimes could be grounded in tradition (which he relativized radically), reason (which he demythologized), or **charisma**, the only way the West could be renewed. Renewal? The charismatics who took over were Hitler, Stalin, & (in China) Mao! (Pre-Weber, "charisma" was a religion term. He socio-logized it, as he did many religion terms.)

(4) God, with no cosmic means of support, shriveled down into **the sacred**, which now has expanded to take over everything. "Sacred" is now a sociopolitical word for whatever you want left untouched; eg, the fetus or the environment or the human body (whose hand the teacher is not to strike even once with a ruler) or private property. Everything is sacred except the gods, so to this worldview the first petition of the Lord's Prayer is nonsense. Mainline-church leaders fight for "human rights" & "justice" as sacred, as though these terms were revelational rather than culture-specific. And they use these sacreds to argue the value of biblical religion, reversing the traditional Jewish & Christian debate-base.

4 In §3, I did my best to hang Weber with the mainline churches' loss of confidence. I did it because I've not seen it done elsewhere (which may only prove my reading's limited), & it needed doing. But he shares with many other sociologists of about his time--eg Durkheim--the scientistic prejudice of the fallacious fact/value distinction, the illusion that his discipline (indeed, the social "sciences" in general) can be an empirical science, which is what Marx had claimed for it (the historical doctrine of "scientific" materialism based on the "law" of change through class struggle). Even more pathetic, in the psychological "sciences" Freud claimed for his psychoanalysis a scientific base in the sex drive as material (in both senses). And the Maharishi M.Y. jumped on board the scientistic bandwagon in his description of TM as "scientific intelligence." With society's increasing erosion of confidence in science, all the above are in trouble with their ideological foundations. But the church is slow to take internal/external advantage of this development.

5 The gospel is **for** confidence-boldness but **against** arrogance, a prideful sense of superiority. In Jesus, God comes humbly, living & teaching humility (eg, refuse titles of honor [Mt.23.8,10] & positions of privilege [M.10.35-45]), then dies an ignominious death that wounds pride to the death: as the familiar hymn puts it, "When I survey the wondrous cross, ... I ... pour contempt on all my pride." But the paradox is tough-going: how am I going to be humble while claiming that mine's the best way of life & the only way of salvation? It was a tough go for Paul, loaded as he was with abilities & energy; he countered his temptation to pride by boasting not of himself ("if I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness," 2Cor.11.30 NRSV; 12.10: "for whenever I am weak, then I am strong"; 13.4: "Christ was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God") but only of the cross (Gal.6.14: "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world"). (Besides being the most extended self-revealing passage in Paul, 2Cor.11-13 is an example of Christian living's **mix** of humility & confidence-boldness.)

But it is tough. Just as the Jews can backslide from chosen-for-mission to chosen-for-privilege, we Christians can let our grace-ful, self-forget-ful, fervant love of the Lord & dedication to his mission cool down into pride-ful, self-ish claims of spiritual superiority, as though gospel ownership were ours rather than of us. A backslidden Christian/church is worse than a backslidden Jew/synagogue.

6 But can we Christians sustain, apologetically-polemically, the claim in this Thinksheet's fourth line? More early Christian literature aims at answering this question than any other. Here, I'll tell you about a published-abroad book that got too little attention here at home, THE FINALITY OF JESUS CHRIST IN AN AGE OF UNIVERSAL HISTORY (Lutterworth/65; Jn.Knox/66). Last week, its author--Jaroslav Pelikan--was elected president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He's a scholar of world-class eminence, broad gauge in mind & heart. I mention this to indicate that among Christians who make this "offensive" affirmation, he's as far away as possible from the picture much of the public has of those who make this affirmation. Let's see how he grounds it as an historian, indeed the world's leading authority on early Christian thought:

By "finality" he means that Jesus Christ is the apex of God's revelation in history & is indeed God's unique appearance as man, the man through whom all will be saved who will be saved (thus, in the Thinksheet title, "the only way of salvation"). And by "universal history" he means a global actuality & awareness of human solidarity howsoever tenuous. His subtitle is "A Dilemma of the Third Century." Here's his last paragraph: "The dilemma of the third century between the notion of 'finality' and the concept of 'universal history' required that theological analysis be supplemented and fulfilled in a historical narrative [which it was Eusebius' purpose to provide, as historical ἔργα *erga* "facts" to supplement λόγους *logoi* "arguments"]. If finality as an "end" was to be postponed [as in Tertullian], ... a more subtle definition of finality was in order. And if, on the other hand, "finality" was not to be transmuted into a universal history that was utterly independent of the history of Jesus Christ [the danger of Origenism, with the substitution of soul for history], ... the notion of the soul had to be brought into relation with that history. Yet the concept of "universal history" was as vulnerable within the Christian community as the claim of "finality"; therefore, ... the attempt to moralize universality [the danger of Donatism] and thus to jeopardize the catholicity of grace had to be resisted in the name of the unity of the Church. Similarly, ... the abandonment of the finality of Jesus Christ in the name of the finality of the Montanist Paraclete eventually compromised universality as well, and ... the dogma of the Trinity provided a theological resolution of this dilemma. Finally, ... the most satisfactory way for the dilemma of the third century to be resolved was through a history that made the finality of Jesus Christ a guiding theme of its narrative and yet refused to cast that narrative into any frame less ambitious than the universal history of the purpose of God with His world." ([mine.] ... What occasioned the book was Pelikan's objection to a projected WCC study on "The Finality of Jesus Christ in the Age of Universal History"--"the" instead of "an": the present is not the first such age. The third century (p.5)

"points backward to the immediately post-apostolic era, with its understanding of finality as *eschaton* [the end] and forward to the Constantinian era, with its understanding of universality as *imperium* [the Roman Empire]." The gospel's offer was of the best & final life for the whole world. (I add that this is the message of the Gospel of Matthew, which depicts Jesus as [1] the focus-culmination of the history of Israel, [2] the creator of a new & transtribal-ecumenical community while standing in solidarity with his own native people [having a representative role in both communities], & [3] commanding his followers to "go and make disciples of all nations" [28.19-20].)....P.8: "There could be no finality without a universal history. Tertullian's philosophy of history made it possible for him to give voice to that hope."....P.30: 1Cor.15.28 ("so that God may be all in all") points to "an eternal and universal history." In baptism (Ro.6.4), *all* are invited to share in Christ's death & victory.

7 Anticipating deconstruction's reduction of all language to indirection & indeterminacy, Kierkegaard in many ways spoke of the finality of the Christ event as expressible--since it's unique & therefore absolute--only paradoxically, for the incarnation of God in Christ reveals & expresses an "infinite qualitative distinction" between the divine & the human. To blur this distinction, as mainline-church theologies tend to, trivializes God's utter holiness by offering what Bonhoeffer was to call "cheap grace."

8 This **exclusivity**-finality / **inclusivity**-universality is not a Christian invention, is not distinctively Christian. It's a pick-up from Is.45.23 (NRSV: "every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear," immediately following this: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! I am God, and there is no other."). Paul quotes it to provide scriptural sanction for the individual's accountability to God the Judge (Ro.14.11), & also adapts it to Jesus (Phil.2.10-11), at whose name "every knee should bend,...and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"--the context is the opposite of arrogance: as Jesus humbled himself in the incarnation, you Christians should (v.3) "in humility regard others as better than yourselves." Jews say (on OT authority), sooner or later everybody will worship God: Christians say (on NT authority), sooner or later everybody, including Jews, will worship God the Father-Son-Spirit. Meanwhile, we all, all human beings, live under the judgment as to whether we are following our best light (not, *pace* Jos. Campbell, our bliss). My best light includes my Christian witness: "I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Ro.1.8). If I am asked how it will go for those who die with opinions different from mine, I reply "Am I God?" If I am pressed as to whether my Christian claim is a claim-check giving me a leg up in heaven, I reply (as you might expect from the way I've put it), "The very idea repels me; am I the Judge?" The Bible tells me that the heavenly prospects of anybody who seeks preferential treatment on earth are dim: dim too, would you not think, the heavenly prospects of anyone scheming for preferential treatment in heaven? Anybody who just must get to heaven, won't. Yet it is right to yearn for the best for oneself & others as one (again, Phil.2.3) regards others as better than oneself. To yearn for the best, & to witness to the best one believes to be (line 4 of this Thinksheet) "the best way of life & the only way of salvation."

Exclusivity/inclusivity is a **double paradox**. All are included in sin (Ro. 1-3) by the divine righteous judgment, all are intended--by the divine merciful benevolence--to be included in grace. All who will not "bow the knee" are excluded by the divine good will that all be included. (Recall, from §6, Eusebius' interlock of Jesus-only & "universal history.")

9 We Abrahamic montheists have a severe **management** problem. We want the one God to rule (as the Lord's Prayer puts it) "on earth as...in heaven," but always some guy steps in as surrogate, vicegerant, vicar. David. Holy Father. Muhammad. Inevitably, except where it dies an early death, religion becomes institution & bureaucracy. Let's consider two instances of the managerial-corrupt theocratic claim of exclusivity:

(1) The Roman Catholic *Extra ecclesiam, nulla salus* (Outside the church, +

no salvation.). Gibbon overrates the Christian factor in the dissolution of the Roman Empire, but it is true that Pope succeeded Emperor as in the Empire's cities bishops, by secular default, succeeded mayors. The Roman Church slid easily into the imperial (exclusive-power) claim of the Roman Empire, as a new hand fits into a dropped glove. Protestants have too facilely condemned that development, & on the side of fellowship (not power) the ecumenical movement is a parallel in the desire for unity (Jn.17.21)....The current (Roman Catholic) Knights of Columbus print ad, "Salvation outside the Church?", softens the claim in light of the Second Vatican Council, which (it says) "took a fresh look at the old axiom." A good ad: evangelistic without being harsh, off-putting.

(2) Yesterday Israel's Knesset outlawed "theocracy in the biblical Land of Israel and the violent expulsion of Arabs from that land." What was being condemned was not theocracy itself (lit., "God's rule") but *managed* theocracy, some guy taking over & claiming to rule in God's name (in European history, "the divine right of kings"). Specifically condemned are the two radical groups claiming a Brooklyn Jew, Meir Kahane, as their origin-father....I can recall no other instance of the Knesset's voting against "theocracy."

10 Always & everywhere priestcraft has had its temptation to power-**abuse**, for priests have the heady assignment of serving *in loco dei*, a preChristian Latin phrase meaning "in [the] place of [a or the] god" as servant of the god. The temptation is greater if one is surrogate-servant not of a god but of *the only* God!.... Rabbis, priests, ministers, mullahs, beware! Clergy sexual-abuses are now in the news, but they are only the most garish of the oversteppings. Hubris comes easy to monotheists, for monotheism's inherent (only-one-God) boldness-confidence tempts leaders to overboldness-overconfidence.

11 The opposite clergy-woe is **underboldness-underconfidence**, as in much of mainline-church leadership vis-a-vis the Christian faith's distinctives (Jesus' incarnation/resurrection/return, atonement through the Cross, Trinity). Let's have a look at that middle one, the atonement:

(1) Victory Chapel, a fundamentalist church here on Cape Cod, wants the use of a PS for an anti-drugs program, but the super of schools has denied permission unless the church says specifically what's to be said in the program: a former program in a PS featured bands, but (says the super) some children were "frightened" by gospel speeches between bands. "Amazing Grace" says "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear," & apparently the preacher as an agent of grace was teaching the children to fear, to fear God. I've never seen that happen in a mainline church. So mainline church children do not experience the hymn's next line, "And grace my fears relieved." The evangelical experience is powerful, but it's a power unavailable in mainline churches, which have lost confidence (& thus also boldness) vis-a-vis grace/fear/grace.

(2) The theological underpinning of grace/fear/grace is the "atonement" (at-one-ment, from Lat. *adunamentum*, ME "onement"), (RHD²) "the reconciliation of God and humankind, esp. as accomplished through the life, suffering, and death of Christ." This doctrine is extraneous to any church preaching "God is love [period]." Human beings experience the universe, life, as betimes un/friendly, both. In rough correspondence, Christianity teaches that God is both severe & kind (Ro.11.22). Recently an antiChristian to whom I was witnessing rejoined, "You Christians preach the comforting illusion that God is love, & I'm not buying into illusions." I was quick to inform him that classical Christianity preaches that God is wrath to the outsider & love to the insider ("God is love" is family talk, as is clear in the John literature of the NT). If you get as far as the love of God, it's because you've traversed, by grace of the atonement, the wrath of God. This two-handed, righteous-loving God made more sense to him, at least gave him more pause. For it allows, within theism, for mystery, tragedy, anomaly, threat & punishment (not just promise & reward), life's & God's dark side as well as bright side. It's a dangerous world, in which you can lose everything good just for eating a wrong piece of fruit (Gn.3). But the atonement teaching is that the God who afflicts for disobedience (Num.21.6, "the LORD sent poisonous serpents") delivers the penitent from affliction (v.9, applied to Jesus in Jn.3.14-16: "as

Moses lifted up the [saving bronze] serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."). Sin kills, God in Christ offers the antidote to death ("the medicine of immortality," as an early Christian martyr, Ignatius, described the Lord's Supper). Christ "atones" for sin no matter under which of many metaphors the process is described. The underlying assumptions of the doctrine are that (1) sinners have no direct access to divine forgiveness, the love of God, (2) God's holiness forbids the im-mediate forgiveness of sinners, & (3) the mediate meeting of penitent sinners & the God eager to forgive is through the inter-mediate action of Jesus Christ, who on the Cross bears off & away the impediments to reconciliation, the sinner's sins (2Cor.5.6-21: "We are always confident....one has died for all....a new creation!....God...reconciled us to himself through Christ...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them....we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.").

12 Of this Thinksheet's title, "the best way of life" is a moral judgment & "the only way of salvation" is a religious affirmation. The latter assumes (1) the meaning of "salvation" & (2) the human need for it so defined. Biblically, salvation is **from** God (who only can utterly destroy us: Mt.10.28, L.12.5) &, paradoxically, also **by** God (Mt.1.21: "Jesus...will save"). To those who go with the secular buzz & downthink oldthink, the gospel news that human beings on the hoof need supernatural saving is a yuk. The doctrine of canonical fullness (that we should let the whole Bible speak to its parts, the whole picture speak to its details) forbids limiting "salvation" to the condition/destiny of either humanity or the individual human being; but the mainline churches tend (1) to prefer emphasizing social salvation & (2) to neglect what for much Christian fundamentalism is the main point, viz the posthumous destiny of individual human beings.