

The **occasion** of this Thinksheet is my reading a book whose title is understated, too modest: RECONSTRUCTING CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY, ed. by Rebecca S. Chopp & Mark Lewis Taylor (Fortress/94). What the book confronts the reader with is not the latest development of Christian thinking (ie, theology) but a novel development **from** the Christian religion. In converting the book's title's participle "reconstructing" into the Thinksheet's title's "reconstruction," I'm alluding to an earlier similar movement within Judaism, viz. Reconstructionism (begun by Mordecai M. Kaplan, 1881-1983)--a movement in the spirit of, but more radical than Reform Judaism (begun in Germany in the early years of the 19th c.)....After remarking some parallels I find illuminating, I'll illustrate from the book my claim that what we are looking at in these essays is a revolution from Christianity, a revolution Ken Woodward for some time has been calling the **feminization** of the Church, on which in the current NEWSWEEK (28 Nov 94) he quotes me: "'The feminization of Christianity,' says Willis Elliott, a theologian in the liberal United Church of Christ who is highly critical of the movement, 'represents the greatest upheaval in the church since the Reformation.'"

1 Organisms, social as well as biological, adapt to their environments or die. Societies-cultures-languages-religions are "dead" or adaptive. Change, or die. But the operative question is *How much change is compatible with continuity? at what point does adaptation become mutation to a new entity?* Post-temple rabbinism was in direct continuity with the biblical past; but Christianity's continuity was indirect, its discontinuity radical enough to define the Faith as a new religion.

2 In a 1924 book (my c., Mac/40), Harry Emerson Fosdick proclaimed THE MODERN USE OF THE BIBLE. As Reform (Judaism) distinguished between "eternal" & temporal-contextual elements (& to distinguish itself from Orthodoxy shows some preference for "temple" over "synagogue" to designate its congregations), H.E.F. spoke of thought-categories as "abiding"/"changing." As Reform elevated the prophetic & ethical above the ritual, Protestant liberalism (with Fosdick as its personal symbol in the '20s-'30s) preached that "religion does not consist in the [theological] formula but in the experience" (186), so biblical & historical hermeneutics should (a Phillips Brooks figure, next p.) "beat the crust back into the batter." Next p.: "the liberal prescription...: translate the formula back into the experience from which it came."

3 The problem with Fosdick's **radical empiricism** & its sequels, such as radical feminism with "women's experience" as its baseline, is that it's based on the illusion that in the origin-time of any religion, languageless experience existed. The truth is that human beings have prelinguistic experience only in the pre-aural stages of fetal development. Our socialization, our evolving into persons-in-community, our becoming "human beings," which happens not in utero but in society, has, as an essential element, language (parallel with the sense of the sacred as an essential element [Eliade]). Christianity comes to us language-wrapped, yes; but without words, there'd be nothing in the package! Like every other religion, Christianity has some **essential words**. Every age must argue as to what those words are. "Word-war" (logo-machy) is what the Greeks called this necessary activity. In the battling, "fundamentalists lacked charity and the liberals lacked clarity" (Fosdick 182; I add, the former taking words too seriously [=logolatry, "word-worship"] & the latter, not seriously enough).

4 The principles H.E.F. espoused in his 1924 book he applied in his 1938 Harper book, A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE, "abiding values in changing categories." A favorite analogy of his: kernel/husk. As far as I know, he never publicly acknowledged the defect in his horticultural analogy: unlike language vis-a-vis experience, a husk, as dead, cannot contribute life to its kernel's continuing life. But we should remember that he was a preacher, & the rhetorical exaggerates in order to persuade: "Preaching is primarily the endeavor not to get men to accept a formula, but to get them to reproduce a life" (173, the "normative experiences with God and man which the Bible...sets forth").

5 Reform, paralleling Protestant liberalism under many of the same winds (+ Emancipation into full state citizenship, for the Jews; & historical-critical biblical scholarship, for the Protestants), had a **modernist** spirit that assumed a moral radical form as Reconstruction. God helps Jews achieve salvation, making the most of their lives; but the emphasis is naturalism-rationalism-humanism, freedom of all peoples & persons of, for, and from religion at will, as each experiences the world & interprets that experiencing. Not quite religion reduced to ethics (as in Ethical Culture, an even more radical reformulation originating among NYC Jews in 1875).

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1. People are lost & need **salvation**
 2. People are sick & need **healing**
 3. People are oppressed & need **liberation**

(1) is canonical, classical Christianity. (2) is Christianity reduced to a therapeutic cult, a soft mutant. (3) is Christianity reduced to a sociopolitical movement, a hard mutant, as in almost all of the chapters in RECONSTRUCTING CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY. (Remaining page-references in this Thinksheet are to the book, without noting particular authors.)....In the downward progression, note the shifting from theo- to anthro-centricity. (1): We cannot save ourselves, or even initiate the divine-human encounter. (2): In our health/healing, we have primary responsibility. (3): We must take the initiative in our liberation, or remain oppressed. So (say the editors, 22) the book "focuses theological questions at the intersection of questions of oppression, meaning, and power." So (next p.), in a book of 384pp., "missing from the list of doctrinal loci [ie, topics] are the notions of providence, the Trinity, pneumatology, and the sacraments." NOTE: The "workgroup in constructive theology" has come up with a book on "reconstructing Christian theology" that thinks it unimportant to deal with God's dominion over / care for his creation (the doctrine of providence); God's self-descriptive action-revelation (the doctrine of the Trinity), God's presence in creation & the present (pneumatology), & the relation of rites to grace & to the constitution of the Church (the sacraments)!

7 Imagine how warped an impression of Christian theology the general reader, or a theological student, would get! Sin is not defined, as in the Bible, as disobedience to the divine will resulting in weakness & ignorance: rather it's the abuse of strength ("distortions of power") & knowledge (available through a process of analysis, theological reconstruction, & "envisioning of emancipatory praxis"--18-22).

8 When sin is "distortions of **power**," the culprits will be seen as those who have power over the powerless/disempowered: "today's structural evil and crisis...drive many to despair because of the blatant and subtle realities of racial injustice, sexism, militarist spirals of violence, class exploitation, handicappism, and discrimination against gay and lesbian people" (the editors, 22). On this accounting, the worst guys, at the apex of the upsidedown pyramid, are those who've had the greatest power, viz. white males, who should be ashamed of themselves for oppressing all the rest of the human race. Next as power abusers, add white women. Since almost all the book's authors are whites, what we have is a display of authentic, knee-bending repentance or sick, masochistic breast-beating (an anorexia of excessive self-effacement). Some of the former health, much of the latter pathology. Oppression is "the social name of evil" (35); we whites are oppressors, therefore we whites are evil--& as sexist-patriarchal, we white males are more evil than are white females.

9 The cognitive dissonance between all this & canonical Christianity is so loud that revolution is a more appropriate term than reconstruction. Masochism is compassion extended too far in a straight line, resulting not in Christian self-denial --a virtue--but in self-abuse, a sin. The customer is always right, & the customers are those whose sense of victimization is fed by those who have a sick need to abuse themselves as the victimizers. It's a codependency, as now between the Japanese government's desire to feed the Japan-as-victim mythology (by attacking the U.S. atomic-bomb stamp) & the Smithsonian authors of the America-was-wrong sign to be placed on the Enola Gay exhibit....And of course in the Index we have God "as female," but not as male (though in the Bible, God is never female except in simile).