

CHRISTIAN FORMATION, The Biblical Fountain of

Lexical note: The form/ation idea uses 5 Hebrew roots & 8 Greek roots. In Christian literature, the dominant root is (West) "frm" (Lat., "forma") & the reverse (μρφ *morf*) in the East (Gk., μορφή *morphē*). For this semantic domain, Eng.'s favorite is "form," "conform," "transform," & "formation." Also, "deform," "reform." The idea is more biblical than "education," which (unfortunately) Protestants (in contrast to "formation") have preferred, as less insulting to the Renaissance-Reformation-Enlightenment (hyper)ego: you had something that could be "e-duced," led out from inside you--whereas in the case of your creational-&-redemptional "formation," you had nothing. In other words, "education" centers in you the learner; "formation" centers in the other, the form-er. Again, & most starkly put: in being "educated" you are somebody, but in being "formed" you are nobody--& "Christian formation" invites you to accept your nobodiness vis-a-vis the divine Somebodyness (I the Lord am the potter, you are the clay; "nothing in my hands I bring, / Simply to thy Cross I cling"). Holy groveling=standing tall. Holy equality: since nobody (vis-a-vis God) is anybody, nobody is (essentially) over anybody, no matter (second-level) existential situations. Holy mystery: even God, on whom the whole creation is dependent, did not, in the Incarnation, exclude himself from nobodiness (Phil.2, the kenosis).

A The Colloquy's **exilic premise** is that we Christians are now once again outsiders--as were the Jews in Babylon ("the Exile"), & our Lord calls us to make the most of this new disestablishment. The only book recommended for preparatory reading is Martin B. Copenhaver, Anthony B. Robinson, Wm. H. Willimon, GOOD NEWS IN EXILE (Eerdmans/99). Addressed to the formerly culture-established "mainline" churches, it's at times hopeful (108: "The future has a name, a face: Jesus"), at times even triumphalistic (116: "Jesus Christ has given himself to and for the world, and he will not desist until he reigns...."--the theme of the 2001 Colloquy: [the liturgical phrase] "Christ will come again").

Exile heightens the **language-&-literature** factor in communal identity-vitality-survival. I've long put it this way: When the Jews lost the holy Land, the holiness was not lost but rather sucked up into the holy Book: Judaism & Christianity, Muslim-called "peoples of the Book," are landless & bookful (Zionism, the State of Israel, being an aberration: good for Jews & bad for Judaism). GOOD NEWS IN EXILE says we liberal churches/Christians, having become (as it were) landless, should now give more attention as to how to get the Word off the page & into life (our scholars having given almost exclusive attention as to how the biblical material got on the page). 81: In a surround in which the options are "atheism and passivity," (80) "the teaching ministry of the church has less to do with information than with formation." 34: We are now a *textual community* in exile: "Scripture has become our home." So (43) we must "learn its [the Bible's] language." (However, GOOD NEWS IN EXILE allowed itself to be culturally conformed to gender feminism: it uses inclusive language, including suppressing the Bible's pronouns for God.)

B While many **biblical passages** are pertinent to "How Is Christ Formed in Us Today?," today the Colloquy Planning Committee decided that the following should be suggested for publicity & for special consideration by participants, especially paper-writers: Gal.4.19; Ro.8.28-39, 12.esp.2; L.24.28-36; Jn.6.52-59; Eph.3.16-19 (today's epistle passage in the Ecumenical Lectionary). I'd asked for suggestions, & this list was chosen from the nominees. It includes all but four of those submitted by the Colloquy's Bible teacher, Paul Hammer, who (of course) is free to deal with any he decides to (including those below that I've added to those I presented today).

C Here's a conspectus of the thick-rich biblical **formation**-idea:

1 The **potter/clay** analogy is the standout metaphor. It's implicit in the Hebrew vb. in Gn.2.7--which appears again in Jer.1.5 ("I formed you"). The same vb. appears also in Am.4.13: God "forms the mountains"--which the prophet-poet even puts ahead of Hebrew's exclusive word for "create": "creates the wind").

Passages with other vbs.: (1) Is.64.8 ("we are the clay, and you are our potter"); (2) Jer.18.4 ("the potter...reworked it"); (3) Ro.9.21 (the potter's right over the clay is absolute).

"Adam" is literally "Clay [adam-ah] man" (Gn.2.7: wet dust, clay): nothing, nobody. That's v.7a; here's 7b: God "breathed" into the clay "the breath of life": something, somebody. In Scholastic terms, God's sovereignty is essential, substantial (primary "actus"): our freedom, as God-willed, is (in the technical sense) accidental (secondary "actus"). What gives biblical prominence to the potter/clay analogy is that it's utterly rejective of human claims, humiliating to the human ego. To the ontological humiliation of our finitude, we add the existential humiliation of our sin. No ter-

tiary humiliation from cultural exile can compete in force with our primary-ontological humiliation or our secondary-existential humiliation. This fact relativizes & diminishes the indignity of cultural outsidership & reminds us that while the Bible has much to say about the ultimate exaltation of the humble, it offers the proud only the most dismal prospect--in light of which, outsidership is an advantageous position.

2 I'll treat the remaining texts in **canonical** order though it'd be useful to use a grid in interrogative order: (1) Who forms? God, Jesus Christ, the Christian preacher/teacher, the church (the Christian community). (2) Who/what is formed? Christians-in-community, Christian community. (3) Who is in-formed in Christians & in Christian community? Christ (Gal.4.19).

3 Ps.139.13: You, Lord, "formed [literally, "wove"] my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb" (NRSV; CEV: "You...put me together inside my mother's body"). From his beginning to his end, the Psalmist is God-known and God-determined--the premise of this Ps. being that God is inescapable, though (paradoxically) we are free to reject or accept his "path" (the Ps. ending with a prayer for guidance). In v.15 occurs another vb. for weaving in the womb (or, ambiguously, "in the depths of the earth"). And the next v. returns us to the potter vb.: in fore-determination, God shaped-"formed" all the days of the Psalmist's life. The mood? The Lord's ever-presence is not oppressive but supportive (quiet trust, confidence).

4 Job 33.6: Yet another vb. for forming! "I was formed [lit., "cut," "hewn out"] from a piece of clay" (NRSV; CEV, "made from clay").

The Gospels

5 To "morph," meaning to take a form, is not yet in Eng. dictionaries, though it's a recent American coinage. In M.16.12, Jesus morphs into "another" form--after assuming the morph of a "slave" (Phil.2.7) after being in the morph of "God" (v.6). How's all this relevant to Christian formation? It reveals a certain plasticity in the NT's use of *μορφή morphē*.

6 L.4.16-21 (Is.61.1-2; cf.58.6): The Spirit forms Christ in us as we take on Jesus' mission to the nonflourishing....24.28-36: "Christ being formed in us involves the inner heartburn of the scriptures" (Paul Hammer).

7 John 6.52-59: "To eat his flesh is to take into ourselves the love of God in the incarnation (1.4) and to drink his blood is to let the outpouring of his bloody love on the cross flow in us and bring the water of new life" (Paul Hammer)....15.1-11: The branches share the form of the vine & participate in its function (love-joy fruit).

The Epistles

8 Ro.2.20 a longer "morph" word to convey the idea of visibilization: "knowledge" & "truth" are bodied forth, embodied, given palpable form, in Torah (the in-form adds out-form). In 2Ti.3.5 the word is used of the out-form (NRSV: "outward form") minus the in-form (CEV: "Even though they will make a show of being religious, their religion won't be real")....Ro.8.28-39, v.29 has the "morph" adj.: "conformed to the image of his Son," the solidarity of Savior & saved, as reality & as basis for confident hope....Ro.12.2: "Don't be conformed [lit., "con-schemed"] to the culture, but be transformed [lit., "metamorphed"] by the renewal of your mind." The 1st v. sets the chapter's theme: Christian nonconformity/transformation. More than some of the others, this text supports the Brueggemann-Hauwerwas exile-paradigm, the governing image of GOOD NEWS IN EXILE.

9 1Cor.4.16: The imitatio: "Be imitators of me" ("as I am of Christ": 11.1)15.49: We who "bear the image of the man of dust," let's bear the image [Eng., "icon"] of the man of heaven."

10 Gal.4.29: "I'm in birth-pangs [& will be] till Christ is formed in you."

11 Eph.3.16-19: "strengthened in your inner being...that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love....filled with all the fullness of God."....Phil.3.21:* Our physical body will be "transformed" to be "conformed [the "morph" adj. in Ro.8.29] to his resurrection body (Trench's NT SYNO-NYMS p246: external/internal change)....ITi.1.16; 2.13; 2Ti.3.5; Tit.2.7....He.3.14: "partners of Christ" if we "hold on...."....2P.1.4: "participants of the divine nature [NRSV; CEV: "his nature" becoming "part of us"]".

* 3.10 uses a "morph" vb. (συμ- sym-) found only in Christian writing. Being together-formed" with Christ's death, we "know him and the power of his resurrection," having participated in passion ("sufferings") through living as he lived.