

DRIFT AS A PRE-THEOLOGICAL FACTOR

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

The phenomenon this Thinksheet chews on is a particular stimulus to "doing theology," viz the discovery-realization that one has unwittingly, inadvertently, unintentionally, unconsciously drifted away from a particular theological mooring-position-paradigm. The discovery-realization may be made on one's own, by noticing the receding shore; or another, gently or roughly, may call one's attention to the fact of drift.

Have you ever "drifted **off**" into sleep while driving a car? If so, you know there's little time between doing so & becoming aware of it: reality does not tarry! Have you ever "drifted **away**" from a major commitment because "the woods are lovely" & you forgot you had "miles to go before I sleep"? Has the canoe you were dozing in, thinking it tied up when it wasn't, ever drifted (or you drifted out to sea because, being so interested in your snorkeling, you hadn't noticed that a current had taken you)?....Both bodily & analogically, the reality I'm asking you to think about is a common human experience.

1 Drift is only one of many stimuli to theologizing (ie, pre-theological factors). There's the discovery that one's parents are not perfect. And the pubescent rush of hormones. And the sudden, or slow, death of a loved one. Earthquake & hurricane. Fire & disease & war & the collapse of clan or nation or ideology. "Inner weather" (Robt. Frost's wonderful image for all the thunder & lightning & rain & dryness & earthquake & calm that goes on inside each of us, constantly nudging us toward new awareness-decision-life). You'll see why, for this Thinksheet, I'm sticking with drift.

2 The metaphor is apropos for theology, which is largely **reactive** (ex post facto): it's reflection on experience, outer & inner, in the light of God, & the reverse (ie, theology proper as "the study of" [-ology] "God" [the(os)-] in the light of experience). Of course theology as done (eg, in the form of creed) is active, or as we're now saying a player, in life; but theology itself as an activity of human beings (not just of professional "theologians") has its locus in after-the-fact-land; it is re-action, re-flexion. Analogy: house-building is **active**, architecture (planning-designing the house) is **pre-active**.

Yes, the point is obvious. But important for this Thinksheet's thesis, which is that a theology is an ad hoc response ("to this" situation-environment-movement-institution-event-idea-person), a response more or less articulated & cosmized according to the passion, knowledge, & acumen of the theologizer. "Rationalization" is a good description of this behavior, but unfortunately it connotes (1) replacing a supernatural with a natural explanation & (2) providing plausible explanations without regard for truth.

3 EXAMPLE: A.N.Wilson drifted out of Christianity in particular & then out of religion in general, & then rationalized his religionless state in a book secular reviewers lionized him for, viz JESUS (1992; following his [1991] AGAINST RELIGION). His Jesus drifted off in the boat with him & is--we're not surprised to find--a moralistic clone of Wilson, who'd reduced religion to morality-ethics.

NOTE: I'm not here interested in why Wilson drifted away, but only in (1) the fact that he did & (2) the theological consequence for "Jesus." Note here the particular meaning of "theological": the account one gives of ultimates, whether or not the account is theistic. I could, but wouldn't, recommend Wilson's book to anyone seeking confirmation for (1) a low christology (viz, no Trinity, Jesus not divine) & (2) atheistic humanism (ie, secularism)....For a stunning criticism of Wilson's truth-free "rationalization" (bad sense: bad theologizing), see the third chapter of N.T.Wright's WHO WAS JESUS? (Eerdmans/92). A winner in publishing, Wilson's book is a loser in scholarship. But it honestly reveals where he's drifted to (& so reminds me of Raymond Carver's short-story anthology, WHERE I'M CALLING FROM [Vintage/86/88].)

4 PROVERB: "Bad company ruins good morals" (1Cor.15.33 NRSV, a quotation from a comedy of Menander, whose epigrammatic style produced many lines

that became house-&-street wise-sayings). Two relevant dynamics are in play here: (1) self-victims, self-corrupters, enter a relational world that drags them down; (2) by repeatedly associating with unsavory companions, they make these relationships habitual. Now comes "theology": hooked on the new relationships (currently called "relational addiction"), they rationalize both the continuation of the relationships & the resulting personal changes in viewpoint, opinion, conviction, & behavior (in Menander-&-Paul's word, "morals" [Vg. *mores*]).

Such habits, all habits good & bad, are not just acquired (you get them / they get you) but drifted into (a verb dramatically describing how it happened). "One day I noticed I was thinking & speaking like everybody else, & knew it was time to leave," a prominent UCC leader said to me of his experience in the national church office. As unconsciously as a chameleon, by perpetual participation in meetings-meetings-meetings, he had surrendered something precious to him, his independence of thought. Not that everything being thought & said was bad. Far from it! And not that unity of spirit-mind-speech is inherently bad. But **group-think** is bad (for "morals," at least the morals of the mind): as Orwell the coiner of the neologism often asserted, instead of encouraging difference, it rewards sameness (conformity) & punishes disagreement as deviance. This mentality is not just in national ecclesial & political offices but, as "political correctness" (PC), on our campuses.

5 A COMPARISON: In white S.Africa by 1948, apartheid had become PC & gradually stopped white opposition (except for the pen of Alan Paton & the mouth of Helen Sussman). The theologians of course produced a corresponding theology, as after 1933 some German theologians produced a Nazi theology. But today, white S.African theology is solidly antiapartheid. Again, American-style apartheid is on the rise, our public schools being largely, by drift, resegregated; & we're beginning to get corresponding theologies justifying the situation--in an old phrase, "making a virtue of necessity" or, at any rate, of actuality....To the descriptive word "pluralism" is being added the ominous-tendentious word "multiculturalism."

We can live with pluralism & even glory in it, but runaway multiculturalism would destroy us. For one thing, it promotes ethnic self-esteem by historical overclaims, building lies into children's minds. Insiders don't call the lies lies: their own people would treat them as traitors. Nor do outsiders; they'd be attacked as racists. So the lies breed more lies. INSTANCE: A pro-Amerind flick, "The Broken Chain" (two hours 12 Dec 93, in a Ted Turner series on "The Native Americans"). The false claim is made that our federal government is made, an Amerind says (referring to Franklin's aside comment), "in our image," as though the structure of the Iroquois league were not only a factor, but determinative as model, for American democracy. Not only lies but red racism: the reds who let the whites land in the Western hemisphere are "to blame" for all the trouble. Down not only with the Mayflower but also the Wampanoags! Unchecked, these lies & racial attacks will only get worse. Whose to do the checking? The schools should, but they promote multiculturalism with its lies & antiwhite slurs. Ditto for the media & the mainline churches. What does that leave us, Rush Limbaugh? That cure may be worse than the disease.

Countering multicultural fragmentation is the unicultural reality of a common language (English, except for one county in Fla.), a common law (Anglo-Saxon in base), & a common history ("Eurocentric," + such special histories as Amerind, African, & Asian). But what is common among us is in danger of being shouted down by the specials, ie "multicultural curricula."

6 The current UCC Annual Report begins with the president's office assertion that "we have sought to take seriously its Constitutional mandates." In its Preface, the Constitution mandates canonical-classical-normative Christian theological language, but the language of the report is something else: it is PC, a patois taboo-crafted to avoid giving offense to any lobby (special-interest group of victimized-oppressed-marginalized-disinherited, including women) & thereby succeeded in offending us who have the right to expect the church's national offices to live under the linguistic-theological mandate of our Constitution's Preamble. How did this disloyalty come about? By **drift**, inattention to the moorings while attending to the cries of self-defined victims.