

First (1945-79) "the feminized church,"
then (during the 1980s) "womanchurch,"
now (as of this Thinksheet, for the 1990s)

246.1 18 Dec 90

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

Noncommercial reproduction permitted

WOMANRELIGION

I'm writing this Thinksheet to find out what I should think, & I'll know by the end of this page, or at least by the end of this sheet. Walk along with me & you'll know better what you should think, in addition to finding out what I think, which is not as important--to you.

1 My copy of Simone Weil's THE NEED FOR ROOTS is well-worn, for she's been one of my intellectual-spiritual guides through my more mature decades. Being personally deprived, ie in my person, of her half of humanity, I've been especially grateful to God for womanguides in & beyond my bio-stream. Often I think warmly of my first Sundayschool teacher, who was a huge ectomorphic lump of love, in the best sense a goddess in manchurch, in God's church, in Christ's church. At that time, that congregation was very much manchurch Sundays at 11am & feminized church at 10am, the hour of womanSundayschool (coeducation ceasing at puberty).

Architecture? The church proper was feminine, seating 1,400 in the round, with one point on the circle slightly flattened & raised--raised mainly so those in the upper circle, the balcony, could see the proceedings. (Masculine worship-rooms are long, derived from the oh-so-penile-&-powerful Roman basilica, which modulated into Romanesque, then Gothic & the descendants thereof; but eastern Christians, whose theology is more feminine, have always preferred the round, which came to be called Byzantine). The Sundayschool architecture, on the Akron plan, was likewise feminine.

Atmosphere? Warm. During worship, everybody could see not just the preacher but everybody. Sitting in the pew, or preaching from the pulpit (as I later rather often did)*, I felt affirmed by God & God's folk, like "love" in the NT's John literature.

Culture? Formal. White gloves, & tailcoats, on the ushers; white gloves, & hats, on the women; no recognition of the children, who were to be recognized at home & in Sundayschool. A church of the rich, the middle class, & the poor.

Women clergy? No way. Women participating in worship leadership? No way, not even greeting or ushering.

And everybody was honored. The children were made to feel honored to be in adult worship, in addition to their varied participation in Sundayschool. The women were honored with control of almost everything in sight except worship. The men were honored with worship-&-finance responsibilities. Everybody felt honored to be together in God's presence, honoring God, repenting of disobedience to Him (sic), & rejoicing in fresh opportunities to serve Him (sic) in private & public life.

2 When I started this Thinksheet, did I have in mind telling you about my earliest church? No. Why did it pop into my mind when I was thinking about, & being grateful to God for, Simone Weil? Well, an interior bridge suddenly appeared between her & the first woman of God, outside my family, to have a profound effect on me, viz that Sundayschool fatso, whom I think of every so often when coming upon a photo of a spectacularly corpulent prehistoric goddess (?) figurine.

Am I nostalgic for that church of more than 60 years ago? No, for nostalgia has an I'd-like-to-return feel to it, & I wouldn't. Thanks to WWII Rosie the Riveter & some other change-energies moving through our psyches & society, women have become more free to be & do. For one thing, it was quite ridiculous, as well as a violation of Christian essence, that I never heard a woman preach, or in any other way participate in worship-leadership, in that church. But I'm suggesting we might learn something by inquiring of ourselves as to the comparative virtues of that church & the "mainline" church today. We are less formal: are we more warm? No. We are more democratic: are we as communal? No. We are psycho-socio-logically more knowledgeable: are we more interpersonally insightful & caring? I doubt it. We are more global in our consciousness: are we as missionary? No way. We are more politicized: have we more influence on public life beyond the congregation? Not as much. Are we as faithful to the classic understanding of the Christian faith? No. Are we more into hands-on service to the needy? No.

* Loree just reminded me: 1/2 century ago the 29th of this month, I was ordained in this church. A black preached the ordination sermon.

3 How much freedom is good for children? As much as they can handle to everybody's profit, including their own. How much freedom is good for women? Same answer. (A contemporary called Simone Weil "the categorical imperative in skirts.") How much freedom is good for men? Same answer. Who's to ladle out to each child, each woman, each man just the right dollop of freedom at each moment & each life-stage? God through family, church, & society. In ROOTS, S.W. says too much freedom makes for anomie & anarchy; too little, fanatic ideological tyranny. What, says she, is to prevent oscillation on the see-saw of ennui with its energy deficit, & fanaticism with its energy excess & freedom deficit? Lover of all things Greek that she was, she called it μεταξύ *metaksu*, the mediating structures of "home, country, traditions, culture...which warm and nourish the soul and without which, short of sainthood, a human life is not possible" (I picked up this quote from her on p.36 of a review of two news books on her, in the Winter/90 BOOKS & RELIGION.) (In NT & other early Christian literature, the word is very rich.)

4 If these mediating structures are so vital to soul- & society-health, who's to **nourish** them, maintaining their own health? Everybody. So everybody needs education in *metaksu*-nourishing. The lead nourishers, & lead trainers in nurture, have been, & are, women. That is a historical-factual, not a sexist, statement. To say that it must continue to be women may or may not be a sexist statement. It's sexist if made to mean a sexual confining role-assignment: it's women's work & they ought to be satisfied with it (instead of wanting "in" on man's work). But it's not sexist when made to mean, as I do, that women should take the lead, indeed be freed even more to take the lead, in this *paideia* (upbringing, training toward maturity--a word beloved by the early Christians). (Anyone who believes this, yet continues to oppose the ordination of women, is in self-contradiction.)

5 Whatever the female project is, whatever women are essentially (good) for & accordingly ought to be free & freed to be about, cannot be objectively known, for the nature/nurture factors are analytically inseparable, the debate over their comparative valences unending. So much for sexual-role-assignment dogmas. But we do have a few objective factual indicators, one of which is that females are more **relational** than males (which returns us to *paideia* leadership). Nor can the male project be objectively known, but a few generalizations probably hold for all men everywhere always, one of which is that the androgens are more restless than the estrogens, so the male is relationally less stable than the female, because (?) more interested in the nonrelational, the world-universe-cosmos beyond human relationships.

Accordingly, the female project includes stratagems for keeping men in relationship, including in *paideia*. Because more aware of feelings, which are the inner substance of relationship, they are rightly called more "emotional." Because more aware of the ground of feelings, they are rightly called more "spiritual."

6 One thing women are not good at is group **cohesion** as females, ie in the absence of men: MEN IN GROUPS (Lionel Tiger's booktitle) stick together better than women in groups. This confirms the female's relational-*paideutic* "natural," essential (& only therefore cultural) role. Not to worry, then, about "womanchurch"; even less about "womanreligion." The guys sometimes set up their own religion (eg Mithraism); the gals never pull it off, even when the feeling-&-value center is the Goddess.

7 But I could name a score of recent woman-authored books that are so **female chauvinist** as to fall into a variety of silly (anti)historical revisionisms & falsifiable dreams that I gather up into the neologism womanreligion. Some characteristics:

(1) Narcissistic gift-worship, the tendency to think most important what you are good at. Woman are good at relationship, so feminist-womanist-womanchurchist-womanre-lionist theologies locate the divine in relationship, human relationships.

(2) God-hate. Antipathy to the biblical God is virulent, so alienating that finally the woman caught up in this negativity feels freed, even reborn, when abandoning biblical religion &, with it, church-synagogue. In her case, *metaksu* has failed, anti-patriarchal hate having cut the social cord. May Daly was first, thousands are beginning to follow.

(3) Arrogance toward women who continue in church & synagogue.