SOME PERSONAL NOTES ON PROTESTANT THEOLOGY TODAY -- ELLIOTT #2137

A theologian asked me to do this Thinksheet. That's my excuse for this *multum in parvo* effort, trying to cover so much--"Protestant Theology Today"--with so little, a few pages of Thinksheeting. My defense is in the titlewords introducing the theme: not descriptive notes aiming to cover, though in brief, all that's going on in PTT everywhere on earth; rather, only some personal notes on what strikes me as important in American PTT--not arranged in order of importance or structurally, but simply as they pop into my mind...raw, rough, sketchy.

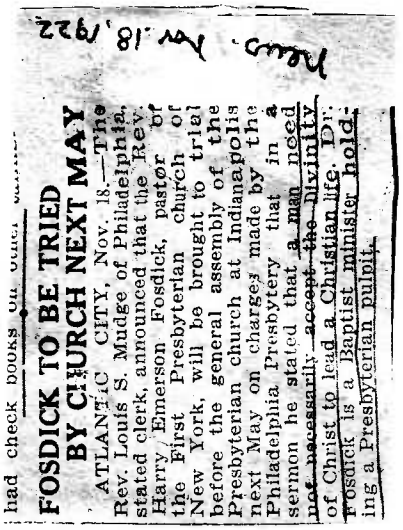
1. APTT (Am. Prot. Th. Today) is, understandably, reflective of our present culture's fragmentation, to which we give the euphemistic & scholarly term pluralism. This is more strength than shame. It is strength because the theological fragments are, in the main, of the fragments: the theologizing arising from and ministering to and witnessing about each fragment of Am. Prot. life, severally, with a proper pride of particularity. But it is also, though to a lesser degree, shame, and scandal of particularity, in that (1) most of the theological fragments pay little heed to our Lord's call to unity (Jn.17.21) as world Christian ecumenicity, (2) "the Protestant principle" of active-reactive-critical thinking-living is but little applied internally, for group self-examination & amendment; and (3) far too little of each group's theologizing is "from below," emergent from all God's people instead of only clergy & theological scholars--so that a fragment's theology is apt to be heavy with the past (the tradition the fragment has inherited & is championing) and with learnedness (the language of the schools & the clergy fellowships), and thus insufficiently responsive to the here-&-now life in & around the fragment.

2. Triumphalism has moved away from "modern" theology (which caused the 1900 transition, in the name of an old publication, to THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY) to "evangelical" theology, esp. rightwing ("fundamentalist") evangelicalism. The test question here is, How much energy does a particular theological school put into hope for the soon defeat of evil & triumph of good? Whether this defeat-triumph is by direct action of God in Christ, or instrumental action of God in Christ through the particular theological movement, is a secondary question even though it divides the thisworldly hopers from both the eschatologists (looking for the inbreaking Realm of God "on earth") & the apoccalyptists (the otherworldlies).

3. To test a theory, I just pulled off my 220.82 shelf (yep, my library's still on Dewey) Fosdick's A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE (Harper/38), which grew out of his bombshell, THE MODERN USE OF THE BIBLE. The latter is out on loan (probably permanently! I have faith in my fellows except as bookborrowers), but my memory is that the subtitle reads "Abiding Values in Changing Categories." OK, here's my theory: The developmental thesis ("changing categories"), of which Fosdick was the most influential American preacher, has now so won its way as to be incorporated into most of evangelical theology, the holdouts being the less literate right, including some trustees in some evangelical seminaries....Ooh: I just remembered the color of my copy of THE MODERN USE OF THE BIBLE, and found it in the 220.6 section (chagrined that I'd undercredited the goodness of my fellows). My 1941 c. of this 1924 classic has not only my extensive annotations & personal index but also a note that the attached clipping, dated in my father's handwriting (he, a schoolmate of Fosdick's), was "Given 5.53 to WEE" Jr. by Sr.: F is to be "brought to (heresy) trial" 5.23, the year before the publication of TMUB. Sorry, I can't resist showing you the clipping:

OVER

Now as I shamelessly bumble along with this Fosdick thing, I should confess to a defective memory: It's not subtitle, but chap. IV; and it's not "values" (a term we've come to overuse long after 1924) but "experiences": "Abiding Experiences in Changing Categories." Which brings me to note another divide in PTT: between propositionalists & empiricists, F having been the premier preacher of the latter--eg, p.173: "It is only experience that lasts; the mental phrasings of it are temporal....the basic creative factors in Scripture are always the living experiences.... Preaching is primarily the endeavor to get men not to accept a formula, but to get them to reproduce a life." On pp.21-24 he roughly anticipates the outline of his 1938 book, which is about ideas (as dynamic developments, not propositions!)....F says we should read the Bible in context; well, we should read him that way too. He had a double audience: (1) the NYC Prot. movers & shakers in business & government; and (2) the academic community of Morningside Hts., with radical empiricists (of the pragmatic instrumentalist variety) just across one street from Riverside Church, and Union Seminary (on the verge of greatness) just across the other street. Those who tried him for heresy were reading, in context, neither him nor the Bible! It's not too much to say that the operational meaning of F's "modern use of the Bible" is just this double contexting (diagrammed as an amoeba on p.50 of my 1943 ThD dissertation), now (Feb/87) emphasized in hermeneutics, hermeneutic, & liberation theology.



had check books on ...

FOSDICK TO BE TRIED BY CHURCH NEXT MAY

ATLANTIC CITY, Nov. 18.—The Rev. Louis S. Mudge of Philadelphia, stated clerk, announced that the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of the First Presbyterian church of New York, will be brought to trial before the general assembly of the Presbyterian church at Indianapolis next May on charges made by the Philadelphia Presbytery that in a sermon he stated that a man need not necessarily accept the divinity of Christ to lead a Christian life. Dr. Fosdick is a Baptist minister holding a Presbyterian pulpit.

4. F was among the liberal-modern(ist) Baptists who took the lead in shaping "the social gospel" in NYC, Rochester, and (the University of) Chicago (the University developing out of an 1866 Bap. seminary). I did a brief stretch as an ANTI-"social-gospel" Baptist, but the values (& experiences!) of the movement combining the historical-critical use of the Bible with social concern were too strong to permit me to stay long in the fundamentalist underground. For one thing, I could hear F's glorious preaching ringing in my ears; and I so admired this saintly preacher even shorter (about 2") than I am!....Thus we have arrived at a further divide in APTT: between social changers & social conservatives (antichangers). What's come to be called "the social agenda of the churches," beginning with the Federal Council of Churches & continuing through the National Council of Churches & now also various organizations of Prot. evangelicals (such as those who publish SOJOURNERS and THE OTHER SIDE), has divided Am. Protestants between crosswavers & flagwavers. But my images are so defective! The flagwavers (Falwell et al) talk so much about the Cross (individual repentance-conversion-redemption), and the crosswavers hear "Take up thy cross & follow Me," identifying with the poor, taking up "the option for the oppressed." The very difficulty in finding appropriate & fair metaphors to designate the opposing parties across this divine signals the complexity of APPT.

5. Another divide in APTT is between the ideationists & the actionists. The former like the quote about the power of an idea whose time has come; for them, ideas have a force of their own, an immortal life of their own, a numinous quality if not also a quasimaterial substance. Some modern ideationists are wont to join their ideas with Jungian archetypes. Biblical ideationists may compare ideas good &

more

evil with angelic/demonic powers in cosmos, history, & the human heart. Whatever words ideationists use, stressing the intellectual-rational or the imaginal-mystical, they all agree that ideas, as agencies, are themselves action, and that all people can get in on the action. Fosdick, paying almost no attention to goings on in NYC or even to pastoral calling, trusted the laity to go out & live during the week the ideas they opened themselves to on Sunday morning. Not surprising that the subtitle of A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE is THE DEVELOPMENT OF IDEAS WITHIN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS. The ideas? His chapters: God, Man, Right and Wrong, Suffering, Fellowship with God, Immortality. Not talk-talk instead of walk-walk, but a continuum of hear (the word of the Lord), meditate (internal integration, including prayer), share (talk the ideas, in mutual education and in witness), walk (pay up to the ideas in private & public life).... Actionists, no matter their high or low intellectual gifts & development, give priority to doing something from the heart & then thinking about it & then returning to the battle: action to reflection to action, or in a recent phrase "doing theology." Wm. Sloan Coffin, F's distant successor as sr. min. of Riverside Church, is as fine an example of the actionist as F was of the ideationist. I remember his saying, at the UN Church Center in a 1967 committee meeting at which I was the speaker, "If this committee doesn't do anything after this meeting, I won't be back." (He said that before I spoke, and I'm sure that no talk of mine or of anyone else would meet his criteria for doing something!) Much later, while considering the offer to become lead minister of Riverside Church, he said to a group of us, "I'd have to have a leading as to what action to lead the people into before I could say yes." Peace action, it turned out to be.... Yes, we must not make the ideationists/actionists too strict a distinction. King, eg, was temperamentally an ideationist, with a PhD in philosophy of religion; and even "in action" he was battling for an idea, equality under the law, later expanded into equal opportunity within the society; but he's remembered by the general public as an actionist, a man of action, reluctant though at first he was to let himself be thrust into action....So many factors are at work in shaping Prot. theologians (pastoral, academic, independent, cleric & laic) toward giving primacy to, & therefore tending to ideologize, idea- or action-orientation: one's personal & historical situation, temperament, personal relations, religious experience & commitment. I must point to the polarizing tendency, the drift into "taking sides" in developing & rationalizing-ideologizing one's style & strategies. "Nontheological factors," in other words, are heavily involved, though I don't want to underrate the theological factor proper, viz the force of ideas & their concatenation.

6. Again a divide in APTT, that between ecstatic-charismatic theologians and all the other kinds. Wherever you stand, you survey all the territory & are tempted to claim all the ground. After listening to a 2¼-hour monolog of ec.-char. theologian David DuPlessis,* I realized that he'd claimed for the Spirit all mystical experience + any ideas worth holding + any action worth risking! But so also with actionists, eg liberation theologians, who as much yield to the temptation to arrogance as do the mystics & the intellectuals.

* + the day I wrote this, 3 Feb. 87.

7. Yet another divide in APTT, that between soul-centering (psychology as religion, or at least the heart of religion) and society-centering (sociology as religion, or at least the heart of religion). These only roughly parallel, though oriented to academic disciplines, the ideationists & the actionists. L.17.21, choosing a word that can point to either inner or outer, brackets the distinction. All over

Eng. translations take it as "within" till 1922, when Moff. "now in your midst." The next year, Gdspd. returned to "within." These have "within," but with mg. "among": Living, NIV. TEV has "within" but mg. "'among you,' or 'will suddenly appear among you.'" Phillips has "inside you." NEB has "among," mg. "'within' or 'within your grasp,' or 'for suddenly the kingdom of God will be among you.'" JB has "among," with this note: "as something already present and active." RSV: "in the midst of you." NAS: "in your midst." Both RSV & NAS have mg. "within." Only Amplified has both in text: "within you (in your hearts) and among you (surrounding you)"--but "surrounding" is wrong to the Greek, whose entos limits to "in" meanings. Myself, I think Amplified is right: Luke's theology of the Spirit & of compassion requires both inner (which goes with Christian conversion & devotion, both of the heart) & outer (which goes with the communal-prophetic themes of the Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish element in Christianity). I took this much space to survey the trs. of L.17.21 because the APTT divide I'm addressing in this sec. of this Thinksheet (1) derives from two readings or slicings of Scripture & (2) distorts the full biblical message addressed to heart & history. While I prefer Protestantism to East-or-West Catholicism, I must say that in this matter, Catholics have their rich inner-&-outer tradition to protect them against the inner/outer polarization Protestantantism inclines toward. Equally repulsive to me are these current extremes: (1) Various liberationisms that, while calling themselves Christian, actually center elsewhere than in Jesus Christ; & (2) Self-serving, sloppy sentimental, masturbatory freakouts into "the inner life," "Christian growth," "spirituality," centering not in Jesus Christ but in "love" (or "peace" or "wholeness" or "wellness" or "prosperity" or "self-esteem"), to the neglect both of critical thinking & self-forgetful struggle for justice & (outer) peace--a love religion that sometimes captures, or even creates, congregations calling themselves Christian.

6. It's time for a confessional word fleshing out the "personal" in this Thinksheet's title. As I'm no longer in the full employ of church or school or other institution, I'm an independent theologian; and I'm of adversarial-irenic disposition: I'm both ends of the teeter-totter (but not at once!), but prefer to be the fulcrum, a luxury circumstances seldom permit. As teacher & counselor, I am confronter & reconciler, bridge--as in Yehoash's poem "The Bridge" (90f, THE GATES OF PRAYER, Chaim Stern, KTAV/70; from THE GOLDEN PEACOCK, tr.&ed. Jos. Leftwich, A.S.Barnes/61): "I am the bridge./ Over my neck/The people pass from shore to shore,/To the happy days in store./I am the bridge. I hang/Over chasms deep as hell./I see what lies below,/But I never tell./I am the bridge. Endlessly,/ The people pass over me/To the land of joy and might./And day and night,/Night and day,/God, this is my prayer,/Give me strength,/ That their weight I can bear." And--I hope that here the observer is not warping the evidence--I see, in APTT, more convergence than divergence; a maturing, a searching for similarities under pressures of the seriousness of the times for soul & society. My work involves much perusing of current literature, but these two publications are enough evidence: (1) The annual premeeting sketches SCHOLARS' PRESS publishes for the learned societies in religion (4,000 attended the 1986 meeting!); (2) BOOKS & RELIGION, which misses nothing importantant (Duke U., periodically).

7. Again, APTT may be viewed from the angle of textual distance. The farther the Bible is from one's eyes, (1) the smaller it is, (2) the more else will be seen, and (3) the stronger will be one's in-

more

clination to see it relatively in both senses, ie (a) in relation to else (eg, scriptures of other religions) and (b) relativistically, ie of mediate rather than immediate, unconditional, absolute force-authority. Our range here is from the scribist, who holds the Bible so close that nothing else can be seen, all the way to the anecdotalist, who uses the Bible only illustratively and, even at that, not preferentially (ie not preferring to find illustrative material in the Bible as over against other sources). To use a wag's words, the former sees the Bible as lawbook, Ten Commandments; the latter as literary stimulus, Ten Suggestions. At the moment in Am. history, the scribist is flourishing & the anecdotalist is languishing. Fosdick was a centrist accused, as in the 1923 trial, of being only an anecdotalist. He had a high Christology, as my personal index to his books shows; but, as the newsclip reproduced here shows, he was accused of a low Christology, of treating the deity-divinity (he used both words) of Jesus Christ an adiaphoron, optional to Christian faith & life. As a youth (MUB,273) he was caught in "naive acceptance of the Bible as of equal credibility in all its parts because mechanically inerrant," then came to see through struggle that "such traditional bibliolatry is false in fact and perilous in result." This was for him the way out: "I saw that the new methods of study were giving far more than they were taking away. They have given us...the Shekinah distinguished from the shrine." Substance freed from accidents; fundamentals freed from incidentals (so, 163, he called the scribists "not Fundamentalists at all; they are incidentalists"). Repeatedly he refers to Jesus as "our Lord" (217: "The first-century Christians used about Jesus all the loftiest categories that they possessed."). But he resisted those he believed were holding the Bible not at mid-distance, as he, but too far away (252f): "Through him (Jesus) God had crossed the chasm that divides divinity from man....He who does not proclaim it is not preaching the NT; he has parted company not only with the church's theology but with the experience of God in Christ which belongs at the very center of original Christianity....The norm of Christian experience in the NT was to find in Christ, not simply the ideal life, but the incarnate God of the world where that ideal life must be wrought out." As to his centrism, he used the phrase "germinative finalities" (GUB, xv): the n. points to the right, is conservative; the adj., to the left, is liberal. The Bible's finalities are, to our subsequent openings (seen from below as discoveries, seen from above as revelation), what Copernicus' heliocentrism is to modern astronomy: the beginning! "The supreme contribution of the Bible is not that it finished anything but that it started something....not so much a product as a process."

8. Sex is another divide in APTT, and that in two dimensions, both describable as on the social-normative & personal-expressive split. (1) The first dimension is genitality: To what extend should a society, should our society, exercise control over its citizens genitals (but of course the diction is usu. less direct, less candid, under euphemistic taboo)? Technology has been both increasing & decreasing this control-potential, as have the socalled social sciences (incl. psychology, which, while preaching do-you-thing, has provided more techniques for psychomanipulation of the populace). (Of course the battle here is more dramatic in Catholicism today: Curran et al. But this Thinksheet is about APTT.) (2) The second dimension is patriarchy, specifically the husband-father's authority in the family. The patriarch (everywhere in society, but the divide I'm addressing in this section is patriarchy vis-a-vis sex proper) is fem-

over

inism's bete noir & the focus of the struggle on both sides. In APTT these are the positions: (a) Old patriarchy, the rightwing position of biblical literalists; (b) No patriarchy, the leftwing position of "equality" or, less harsh, "partnership"; and (c) New patriarchy, the centrist (& my) position, which I believe will gradually win the day (by 1995) in APT. The media have gone from patriarch-bashing (early TV's "Father Knows Best") to patriarch-modifying (as "The Cosby Show," currently Am. TV's most popular show in Am. &---! ---in S.Africa--in spite of it's being a black family!). Cosby, the center-patriarch of every episode, obviously doesn't always know best, obviously listens, & obviously is in charge. Equality: Both the boys & the girls, adult & preadult, get theirs in both senses: pains & satisfactions. The scriptwriters struggle for fairness, for showing the mutual superiority of the sexes, & against letting Cosby's celeb status distort the balance. The chief impediment to the emergence of the centrist position as dominant is that Am. is at present not forming its young males for responsible-enlightened patriarchy. In AP (Am. Protestantism), the chief impediments are (1) The Bible's unenlightened patriarchy, though--as the Amerinds say, "The Great Spirit puts the medicine near the disease"--the Bible is also the primary inspiration for overcoming the old patriarchy; and (2) The fact that mainline seminaries are becoming female institutions, with a preponderance of women students ("female institution" being an old term for girls' secondary finishing schools); and so, to survive & thrive, given that clientele, are inclined to play up to the leftwing, "no patriarchy," position: I know of no mainline Prot. theologian who is openly battling, at the moment, for the centrist position. My guess is that the lead for centrism will be taken by neurophysiologists (hormones & all that) & anthropologists: religious thought will, once again, take its cue from scientific thought.

9. PROBLEM: I'm about to finish p.6 & am determined not to exceed it: no Thinksheet ever has. But I haven't touched my filefolder on the subject! I'll do that now, & only list as unfinished business under "Am.Prot.Theology Today" the items untouched on above. The formula "And..." means "APTT and...."

(1) And the occult, which is creeping into leftwing Protestantism as, eg, reincarnation & (Shirley MacLaine's TV miniseries) spiritism. Best periodical defense: SCP NEWSLETTER (Spiritual Counterfeits Project, Box 4308, Berkeley, CA 94704)...(2) And socioeconomic theory of wealth production/distribution (on which see my #2138).... (3) And gnosticism, esp. the Jungian form, which is esp. insidious because it's the antibiblical metaphysical ground of a psychology that otherwise is manifoldly helpful. Also of its appeal is its combination of the analytic, the imaginal, & the spooky (all 3 req'd. for intelligent religion)....(4) And the media as (a) promo channels, denominational & ecumenical; (b) shapers of the public mind & thus, to a large extent, the church mind; (3) motivated, with few exceptions, by commerce....(5) And secularism, the atheist premise penetrating almost all aspects of culture....(6) And materialism, enemy of invisible values & commitments....(7) And violence, nonviolence, revolution, peace....(8) And character education, incl. the issues of church/state (religion, morals) in the public schools....(9) And participation in the making of U.S. domestic & foreign policy.... (10) And authority issues: inspiration, revelation, tradition, experience, the living Church throughout the world, hermeneutical models....(11) And church order: sectarianism, denominationalism, all geographical extents of ecumenism, mergers, submerger linkages, ad hoc cooperation at all levels....(12) And evangelism & mission(s), denominational & ecumenical at all levels....(13) And ecology.