

TERRORISTS ARE FREE FROM AIMLESSNESS

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"He [God] seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness...."
--The original Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
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1 Try to imagine how aimful you'd have to have been to blow up that Paris-bound plane over L.I.Sound or to set off that pipebomb at the Atlanta Olympics. You'd've had to have a consuming passionate purpose, the diametrical of aimlessness. And try to sense how free you'd feel throughout the planning-&-execution process! Finally, think of the courage the whole project would demand of you all the way from the dream stage to the explosion.

Then ask yourself why the politicians routinely accuse successful terrorist bombers of cowardice, the opposite of courage. A developed analysis of this irrational word-smearing would (1) require a long Thinksheet & (2) divert me from the point of the present Thinksheet, which is to examine how society became mired in the present Zeitgeist of moral aimlessness & to counterpose the biblical way out of the mire....But you--why do you think politicians call courage cowardice? Is it that terrorists thus smeared escape rather than either sacrificing themselves in the act (as the kamikazis of WWII & the present-day bomb-girdled Palestinians) or surrendering themselves? But wouldn't it be just plain stupid, not cowardly, **not** to escape if you could? What we face here is only one instance of the breakdown of ethical discourse in our public culture.

2 Criminologists are converging on the conviction that the root of most **crime** committed by youth & children is aimlessness, "nothing else to do." Clinton & Dole are competing in throw-the-book-at-them rhetoric, but the only aimfulness merely punitive action produces in these pre-adult criminals is the aim to "take it out on society" even more. What's needed is the aimlessness-expelling power of some socially acceptable (better, socially useful-productive-creative) purpose. That's more than a "correctional facility" can manage. What is needed is spiritual-moral transformation. But our culture lacks a moral, even more a spiritual, consensus to ground & drive transformation programs. Miners know that if the canary drops dead, they too will if they don't stop breathing the air they're breathing. Children & youth are a society's canaries. Their rising malevolence signals that we're all breathing morally toxic air. Aimlessness exacts a high price first of persons, then of society.

3 Because society abhors a moral **vacuum**, ideologies rush in to fill it whenever, wherever it occurs. Post-WWI German torpor swiftly disappeared when the Nazis rushed in with their Volk(people)-glory, not many years after mid-WWI Russian confusion was dissipated by the Communist cry of "history"-glory, the quasi-personalistic idea that "history" is purposeful, its purpose being the revolutionary triumph of the proletariat. (Pathos in something Krushchev's granddaughter said five days ago: We shouldn't judge K. & Nixon in "the kitchen debate" harshly, for "they were only doing what history determined they should do.") And need we mention the terrible samurai drive of the Japanese beginning in 1921? Or post-WWII-to-the-present American consumerism, now consuming our people & peoples we influence ("When there's nothing else to do, you can always go shopping")?

4 A phenomenon that could be documented in many places & times is that when a **public** (people) purpose evaporates, it's replaced by egolatry, the individual's excessive attention to self. The more freedom the individual has (including all the "rights" & "entitlements" that can be squeezed out of the courts), the more entangled in wants beyond needs (like a kitten free to play with a ball of string). The social consequence is severe **privatization**, with the drying up of the citizen role. The final psychiatric condition is solipsism, i.e. attention only to "what I can get out of it." This condition, now endemic in our country, corrupts politics by pressuring candidates for office to create the illusion that when in office they'll cater to all of everybody's wantings. To the extent that candidates yield to this pressure, the electorate will not elect them: they have demonstrated their lack of integrity by promising everybody everything! Aimless citizens do not deserve, & will not get, officers of high moral character.

5 Suppose now we view some traditional ethical systems from the standpoint of this egolatry. We get something like this:

The ethics of purpose (teleological ethics) =

What I want to **do/be**.

The ethics of value (axiological ethics) =

What I want to **have**.

The ethics of God (theological ethics) =

What I want **from God**.*

* Wrong direction. Theological ethics is what God wants from me/us.

6 Coherent societies cohere by a consensual foundation in worship (cult), belief system (creed), & behavior system (code). Our present American society is **incoherent** not only in that the three dimensions lack integration but also in that each of the dimensions is in itself chaotic. "The American way of life" has become "American ways of life." We fell into not coercing in cult & creed (early American libertarianism making such coercions problematic, & early American people-diversity rendering them impracticable ["the separation of church & state" being the virtue made of necessity]). But though some are presently proposing that our multiculturalism should provide a system of ethnic court-systems, we continue (through the stackup of courts up to the U.S. Supreme Court) to coerce the populace according to a single code, that explicit/implicit in the Constitution & Bill of Rights & the states' legal codes/traditions.

The last phrase of our Pledge to the Flag--"with liberty & justice for all"--presents the glory & problem of American jurisprudence. If the liberty of the rapacious is not curbed, there will be justice only for a few: the single-minded aim of justice will (as was true in the USSR) so compromise liberty as to dessicate the citizen's personal drive for achievement & thus reduce the populace to motivational poverty with no defense against tyranny (the slavery of the politically inert masses). Post-WWII U.S.Sup.Court decisions lack the coherence of a single vision because (1) so many judgments have been one-eyed (without liberty/justice binocularly) & (2) the gorge separating the "original intent"ists from the contemporary sensitivists is so deep & wide. Because the gorge exists also at both ends of Penn. Av., the Federal government seems **aimless**, & the people's trust in a seemingly visionless Washington has perished....I said "seems": Uncle Sam is no weakling but a strong man overburdened with diversities & complexities & consequently stumbling along like an aged man on his last legs. The national task for today & tomorrow is to clarify our heritage's vision & values & inculcate them with incentives appropriate to the necessities & opportunities of our time. The vision is of personal/national sovereignty limited by the sovereignty of God (Lincoln's "this nation, under God"), not just any god (as Eisenhower was overread as preaching) nor a deity redesigned to present tastes but the biblical God. Biblical people rejoice in this limit as a brake on self-destructive hubris; the deepening fear of societal disintegration may frighten others into accepting it (i.e. into being converted to the biblical God, though authentic conversion requires some motives in addition to fear).

7 For Christians, "Jesus" is the supreme anti-aimlessness word. "Jesus lives a trust that will not quit and a love that will not waver" (p.111 of my FLOW OF FLESH...), & he calls us to live this trust & love for the glory of God & the good of humanity & the good earth. We are to aim to "grasp...the love of Christ" in (to use the Eng. derived from the Vulgate's Eph.3.18 Latin) latitude, longitude, sublimity, & profundity....When I got the word that Roger Tory Peterson, whose life-aim was to make the world bird-conscious, was dead, I thought of "the sparrow finds a home...at your altars" (Ps.84.3); & of (Heb.) *shemayyim* in Ps.8, where it means what birds fly in ("air"), where "the moon & the stars" are ("sky"), & the divine residence ("heaven"). Please think of these three meanings as spheres of responsibility: what in each should be our aim as biblical people, as Christians? Meditating just on that one Hebrew word with its trifold force is enough to deliver me from aimless- & its primary pain-symptom, viz. boredom.

8 I promised to speak of how "the West" fell into aimlessness. Briefly, this is what happened. Theocentric (God-centered) medieval society disintegrated as its aim, viz. the glory of God, was replaced by Renaissance & Enlightenment anthropocentricity (humanity-centered "humanism" replacing "theism" as primary societal value). Newton's life was God-centered, but he showed that mechanical laws can explain motion without Aristotle's (& thus Aquinas') cosmic purpose (so the Arist.-Aq. code of ethics fell into disrepute). Then Darwin's "natural selection" eliminated the need for cosmic-biological purpose & thus for God. Then Marx added his mechanistic materialism to Darwin's biological determinism. Aimlessness is the symptom of God-amnesia.