

After preaching this morning (26Aug86) in the "America the Beautiful" church (Church on the Green, Falmouth, MA--this year its and the town's 300th year, and the 127th anniversary of the hymn's author, a daughter of the Rev. Wm. Bates, then pastor of this church), I asked a parishioner his work and he said (Dr. Robt. Chase, Woods Hole) "I'm a minor-currents oceanographic physicist." "So what do you DO?" I half-jokingly asked, and got a clear answer. Now, suppose he'd turned on me and said "And what do YOU do?" Could I have given him as clear an answer? If I'd said "I'm a theologian," he might have responded (using the current media meaning of "theological"), "But what do you actually DO. You don't have to tell me you're confused; I just heard you preach."This Thinksheet is about my way of being, at this life-stage, a theologian. Most broadly, all Christians (even all humans!) are theologians: we all try to face ultimate questions, the Big Issues, as intelligently as we can. Most narrowly, only those are theologians who make their money off doing theology; they are professional Christian thinkers-teachers-writers in the ecclesio-academic discipline called "theology" (with various verbal modifiers fore and aft designating subdisciplines & points of view). Me? I'm a theologian in a sense I'll try to clarify through the metaphor of weaving.

On the rare occasions when Loree takes time off from her worldly (Hospice) and churchly and community obligations, she enjoys studying how, on her particular current weaving project, she's going to use the heddles, those foot-peddle-elevable frames that determine what the shuttle will "see" (ie pass through) as it flies. Thus heddles are the co-determinant, with the shuttle, of the pattern, the particular weave of the heddles' vertical threads ("warp") and the shuttle's horizontal threads ("weft" or "woof"). In my analogy, my theologizing produces weavings (eg Thinksheets) of the woof of my shuttling, reflecting mind on the warp of some immediate concern of mine to adore God, to bear witness, to argue for/against some-thing/body, to explore, or to construct --total, five heddles, adjectived as follows (respectively):

1. DEVOTIONAL theology thinks in order to praise-adore-worship. In some theologians, eg Juliana of Norwich, it's the central aim. Minus this mood, "theology" is not a proper word for whatever's going on.

2. EVANGELICAL theology thinks in order to bear witness, to testify to Good News from God. Note that I'm using "evangelical" to designate not one school of theology but all Christian theologians to the extent that their work includes this element of Good-News communication. In this sense, liberation theology is as evangelical, without making much if any use of the word, as any form of theology that calls itself evangelical. ...Heddle #1 talks to God; #2, to humanity.

3. PROPHETIC theology thinks critically, argumentatively, dialectically, initiating and/or responding. Theologians as prophets are "agin"-ers, attackers/defenders. The social-criticism aspect of this prophesying is not limited to those called theologians: here are a few who do this critical work on some base other than religious institutions: Vance Packard, Robert Bellah, Theo. Roszak (whose recent attack on the present tendency to substitute computer data-processing for "master ideas" was written, you guessed it, on a wordprocessor). Since many of my Thinksheets use this heddle, I qualify for what Wm. Safire taught Spiro Agnew to call a "nabob of negativism." (Which is better than what SA turned out to be, viz, a nabob of corruption, a condition he tumbled into by thinking too positively about what was seemingly for his selfish advantage.) Note on the Hebrew prophets, which Loree & I are currently reading daily just before lights-out: Take out the negativism and you'd have maybe 18% of the text left. How odd of God to have the Jews choose to preserve such a "critical mass" of their ancient literature! Those who know me know that by this statement I'm criticizing not Judaism but Christian sentimentality. Marble churches & glass palaces and all that.

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But I do think "kiver-to-kiver" Bible-reading is a virtue traditionally overrated, though I admire my English greatgrandmother Mary Burton for doing it* to her husband 33 times before he finally died of something else. (* Yes, all the way through.)...Structuralism and literary de/re-construction are helping us distinguish between a "coherent core" among the Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish prophets (including Jesus & Paul) and the free-and-unintegrable surface opinions/convictions. (The quotation is of J.C. Beker, PAUL THE APOSTLE: THE TRIUMPH OF GOD IN LIFE AND THOUGHT, Westm./80, 193f. The author's particular ref. is to the relative unimportance of the fact that Paul's surface-situational statements cannot be made to form a coherent set vis-a-vis the particularist/universalist question: deeply, he says God in Jesus will be omnivictorious; situationally, he says both that and that some spirits will, by choosing death against life, defeat the totalism of the divine victory. For a splendid article on this issue, see pp.269-292, JBL June/86.)

Note the 3 heddles together: Missplaced devotion (heddle #1) converts the Good News (heddle #2) into the bad news of idolatry (heddle #3). "Idolatry" is the best term for the enemy, for evil, in the perspective of the Biblical prophets. Idolatry is multivalent evil: (1) What persons & society need for health and wholeness, viz Source-centering (worship-praise-honor-adoration of the true God), is out; (2) What's in is wandering from health and wholeness by centering in false god/desses, so that God's enemies are strengthened at the expense of God's potential strength; (3) Authentic community & institutions deteriorate, and "principalities & powers" (inauthentic structures) oppress & enslave; (4) Not without anguish are these false powers overthrown, so that individual and corporate human life may be reoriented to Reality, Truth, Love (repentance, conversion). Prophetic theology is a persisting need: even the Bible's very last page (Rev.22.8f) reminds us of this; Jn. the Revelator worshipping a creature rather than the Creator!...."Causes" are especially vulnerable to idolatry. I remember the mid-1930s pull on us Am. boys to become antiFranco soldiers: success would have meant a communist Spain. The Nazi cause, now seen by all of us to have been idolatrous (demonic), had just succeeded, and the Samurai cause (the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere") was flourishing (as it did till the 1945 Battle of Midway). Today (Aug/86), the Cause of Anicomunism rules the Oval Room, and the Cause of Divestment dominates the chambers of religion in Am. Causism is, like all forms of idolatry, irrational-intemperate-intolerant.Confrontation with & for the Good News is prophetic theology's heart.

4. HEURISTIC theology thinks exploratively out from the bases of images & ideas. No neat split between the two, but these characteristics:

(1) Imaginal heuresis, in its hunger to exploit images (eg, Prophet/Priest/King for Jesus, Speaker/King/Judge/Father for God, Flock/Body/Building for the Church), does not mind the consequent generation of conflicting statements (eg, Paul "operating with more than one encompassing image which generates conflicting statements," p.289 JBL June/86). Esp. notable in rhetorical situations, where emotional persuasion has priority over intellectual consistency (which is something other than coherence, which is at a deeper level than consistency).

(2) Conceptual heuresis, in its hunger for archetectonic qualities (eg, verifiability, defensibility, internal/external consistency), suspects imaginal thinking, which is ever tempted to underrate reason--an error leading toward internal/external social incoherence, the breakdown both of community within and communication with the outside world --internal/external idiosyncrasy, solipsism, schizophrenia, the death of the community resulting from its inability to sustain intelligible relationships with other communities.

5. POSITIONAL theology thinks integratively, structurally, systematically with the aim of providing for its community a "thesis" (Greek, "base").