

Occasion I need to try to unscramble a jumble of recent experiences underlining the clear but neglected truth that a **language is the fundament of a culture**, which fades if/when the language fades or suffers radical "colonization" by foreign languages.

1 Their children's English was fading, being colonized by the Dutch they spoke in school & everywhere else except home & church. That's why the 1620 Pilgrims left Holland. (Not for religious freedom: they had that in Holland.)

But it was a particular English they spoke, **biblical English**--as in the first words of the Mayflower Compact, "In the name of God, amen." That English has now so faded from American life that few parents, and yet fewer children, speak it. Consequence? The biblical culture is fading, even in the churches (where the leader's language has been colonized by the languages of psychology, sociology, the hard sciences, and entertainment). Where, now, to flee? Some parents, in hope that biblical language will not be lost on their children, sacrifice to put them in parochial & so-called "Christian" schools. But that is no guarantee that the surrounding secular culture, with its godless (God-less) language, will not overwhelm them.

2 More than a century ago, Theodor Hertzl & a few others revived Hebrew as a living language--contending that Yiddish was too heavily colonized by German & Russian to support Zionism. In consequence, Ivrit (modern Hebrew) became the language of Israel, where now the old-new language is flourishing in literature & daily life.

Another instance: I remember early-1940s' conversations with Abraham Akaka, a Congregational-Christian (later United Church of Christ) minister who was determined to revive the Hawaiian culture by reviving the Hawaiian language--which he proceeded to do soon thereafter, now with solid success. He became kahuna (high priest, government chaplain) to the Islands, chiefly in recognition of that success. (Services in his church are bilingual. After I preached in English, a staff member preached--much shorter!--in Hawaiian, biblical Hawaiian, from the 1820 missionaries' translation of the Bible directly out of the Hebrew-Aramaic-Greek [not being the ignoramuses James Mitchner pillories in THE HAWAIIANS].)

3 A few days ago I heard a liberal-church ecclesiarch bemoan the fading out of "biblical speech" from the mainline churches--including his, though he seemed unaware of that. Apropos that problem, & the inevitable attendant fading of the Christian culture in the churches (Reread, please, this Thinksheet's first ¶.), the chair of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) committee for a new catechism says that there is now more need for engendering the Christian language in children, because (1) American institutions other than church no longer engender that language, & (2) extra-ecclesial cultural influences are inimical to our religion: "in years past, much Christian education, including the teaching of the catechism, took place in a wide range of institutions: the home, common school, congregations and university....Not only must churches assume more of the teaching once performed by other institutions, but they must do so in the face of an increasingly hostile and seductive environment." (411 CHRISTIAN CENTURY Apr.23-30/97)

Sadly, many of the leaders of these liberal denominations, & the scholars who help prepare the clergy, have become embarrassed about, even hostile to, some aspects of biblical speech--eg, the consistent use of masculine pronouns for deity (a scrupulosity inclining some to relieve the alleged shame by bowdlerizing the Bible, then teaching the children their fumigated version)....In the UCC, the gender language split is widening into two schools or sub-denominations. A congregation I know of has recently acquired 100 new members from a nearby congregation of the "other" (new, anti-masculine-pronouns-for-God) language--the latter congregation's adoption of THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL occasioning the split.

4 Those 100 fleeing from the gender-feminist-egalitarian mentality found a UCC congregation in which they would be encouraged to continue "**to think scripturally**" (which is the meaning of this Thinksheet's first line). Why'd I put it in Latin? (1) Because of a parallel: the Roman Catholic medieval phrase *sentire cum ecclesia* means "to think ecclesially," ie as the RC church thinks, with "the mind of the [RC] church." (2)

Because of the richness of *cum*: (a) space: we are to think within the sphere of the Bible, thinking with its thoughts; (b) time: we are to think simultaneously with the Bible, prayerfully imagining ourselves into the consciousness, the awarenesses, the feelings of then-&-there, in comparison with the here-&-now; (c) events: we are to think of ourselves as vulnerable-fearful-hopeful participants in what's going on in the Bible, whose events by faith happen to us ("Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"); & (d) relations: we are to think-feel ourselves into relationships with the biblical characters (as a woman said to Norman Mailer today [on Christopher Lyden's WBUR "The Connection" phone-in], "Every day I read in the Gospels a story of Jesus & have a conversation with him"--for which N.M. commended her, as practicing what he called the novelistic mentality he had in writing THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE SON, in which Jesus throughout speaks in the first person)....See also the prepositions in chap.35 of my FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT: "On being free through, in, with, and from the Bible."

5 For three years (really, since taking a NT course in college), Mailer--a nonobserver, skeptical, satirical Jew--worked *sentire cum Jesu*, to **think like Jesus**. Not somebody's historically reconstructed Jesus (eg, Marcus Borg), but the canonical Jesus, the Jesus of the Gospels as they lie in front of the reader & sound in the ear of the hearer. Eventually he worked up the courage not just to talk **with** Jesus (as a novelist does with his characters--in Dickens' case, out loud), but to talk **as** Jesus, whom he came to admire, stand in awe of, & even love ("I do love the story.").

When asked why he considers the Gospels important enough to command so much of his attention, he made two responses: (1) Human beings need "spiritual discipline," & that is most available through spiritual narratives; & (2) The Gospels are "the fundamental narrative of Western civilization." (Irony & insanity: Our public schools avoid teaching "the fundamental narrative of Western civilization"!)

Most of the phone-ins expressed astonishment, & asked M. to denounce the Christian religion & the "antisemitism" in the NT. On the former, the most he would say was that he's not a Christian. On the latter, he said that Jesus' death was compassed by a collusion of Jewish & Roman establishment-figures, but for that the NT does not condemn *all* Romans & Jews....Jesus was better at what M. has tried to be, viz a "protagonist"; protagonists "worry all the time, trying to get something done."

I can't agree with everything M. concludes about Jesus. But I'm delighted to present him as an--unexpected!--model of a fundamental spiritual discipline, viz *sentire cum scriptura*. And I assure you that his Gospels thinking was in the language of the Gospels, not in an orthodox feminist version thereof.

6 My diary of ½c ago now explains why my use of radio (in those pre-television days) was "negligible" ("mainly music"): "Few programs do more than relax you, and many don't even manage that!" But the **mental** (intellectual-spiritual) **formation** of most Americans today is via the tube (not the radio tubes, which are long gone), as this 21 Apr 97 NATIONAL REVIEW cartoon shows--even in church! TV seduces viewers to live only in virtual reality, on an "abstract landscape" of (Geo. Trow's 1980 title, now republished) THE CONTEXT OF NO CONTEXT. Along with film & periodicals (magazines & newspapers), television lures the public *sentire cum media*. Said Matisse, "Flowers are always there to be seen by those who look for them." And we can look for "flowers" (worthy themes worthily rendered) on TV. But television's attention-getting dominance of Americans of all ages allows little time for learning the discrimination, the taste, needed to seek out human-worthy TV programs.



"The choir will return in a moment.
But first, these messages...."

7 It seems that what my N.Y. Theological Seminary students & colleagues best remember me as teacher for is beginning class sessions, after prayer, with a brief discursus combining my early morning "thinking with scripture" & what I'd just read on the commuter train, viz the day's NEW YORK TIMES. Today I heard an intellectual say that the NYT "sets the context" for his day. Too bad, though a bit better than letting the tube do it. Best is to let the Bible, *cum testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum* (read with the prayer for spiritual enlightenment by the "internal witnessing of the Holy Spirit"), be the day's context, "until Christ is formed in you" (Gal.4.19 NRSV; see 2.20, Ro.8.9-11, 2Cor.13.5, Col.1.27, also Jn.17.23).