DERELATING CHRIST FROM GOD

Quotations from Contemporary English Version (ABS/95)

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
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This **was** "my beloved Son," but now is only "my beloved One" (NCH #183)

Since the Unitarian-Universalists have largely relieved themselves of the embarrassment of the to-them sectarian name "Christian," mine (the UCC) is, as the farthest-left liberal church, the supreme testing-ground, among the churches, for verbal **changes** that are/aren't (will/won't prove to be) faithful to the biblical God (so, worthy of the name "Christian"). At present, the logomachy (Gk., "words-battle") in the UCC is hotest on the battlefield of the new UCC hymnal, THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL (Pilgrim Press/95). As Blake says that faith sees "not with but through the eye," my many Thinksheets using NCH's wording are less **on** that hymnal than doing theology **through** it. I hope this defensive statement will stop you from crying out "Oh no, not another Thinksheet on that hymnal!"

1 In the NT, 6 times the Bat Kol ("daughter of the Voice," ie words from God) names Jesus God's **Son**: thrice at Jesus' baptism (Mt.3.17; M.9.7; L.3.22), thrice at his Transfiguraton (Mt.17.5; M.9.7; L.9.35). If you look up the 6 passages in any Bible, you'll find "Son" the rock-solid term in the Voice's utterance (to use another figure, the tonic of its music). Bible-aware Christians can hear an OT model, Gn.22.2: God commands Abraham to "Go get Isaac, your only son, the one you dearly love!....sacrifice him...." The long & deep Christian doctrine of the atonement is **a son story**. Genesis, the Abraham/Isaac source, is **a book of sons**: 19 of them (Adam, 3; Abraham, 2; Isaac, 2; Jacob, 12).

The father/son **relationship** is the Bible's **ground-metaphor** for the divine/human relationship & the intra-trinitarian (Father/Son) relationship. In an essential strand of early Christian logic, Jesus as Savior (by grace relating sinners to God) is coeval with Jesus as Son (himself essentially related to God the Father). To take just two references from the Fourth Gospel (which alone among the Gospels does not have the heaven-Voice call Jesus "Son"), we become "children of God" by faith-trust "in [into] his [Jesus'] name" (1.12); & if we are saved, it's because God "gave his only Son, so that everone who has faith in him will have eternal life...." (3.16, underlining mine; you can't be saved by believing-trusting in Jesus or even in Jesus Christ, but only by believing in the Son, whose relationship with the Father is the ground of the possibility of your becoming related to God).

Two more angles from the OT: (1) "Servant" (Is.42.1: "my chosen one; I am pleased with him") is relational (lord/servant), but less intimately so than (2) "Son" (Ps.2.7: "today I have become your father"). We Christians consider both these reff. christological, the ancient NearEastern model being the king as servant/son of God. Certainly both reff. contributed to the Christian understanding of the Trinity. How powerful "Son" was in the NT mind appears in its substituting, in using Is.42.1, "son" for "servant" while retaining the subsequent clause....For the power of "Son" in the NT, see Col.1, which has the Trinity as "Father" twice, "Spirit" once, but "Son" 5 times in CEV (instead of, as in the Gk., once + 4 masculine pronouns; though CEV is somewhat inclusive-language sensitive, & even has [v.22] "a human" where the Gk. is masculine).

2 In the NT & Christian theology, is the Father/Son relationship & its biblical-historical underpinnings deconstructible? Ie, would replacing the domestic (parent/child) relationship-metaphor with some other metaphor(s) change only the **language** (a nonessential matter, an adiaphoron), or would it so alter the religion's **structure** as to constitute transformation into a new religion? That is the theological bottomline in the current inclusive-language debate (which of course covers more territory than that with which this Thinksheet is working, viz the domestic [parent/child as father/son] relationship). POSITIONS:

(1) Yes, a new religion. Instance: In the hymn referred to in this Thinksheet's subtitle, the scriptures adduced include thrice the Synoptics' "Son" in the Transfiguration & twice "Son" at the cross ("God's Son," Mt.27.54, & "Son of God," M.15.39)--but the three-letter dirty word never appears in the hymn! Stanza 3 ends with God saying, instead, "One"--which, at the end of stanza 4, the centurion says, & at the end of stanza 5 Peter, James, & John say. In each case, putting

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"beloved" in front of "One" fails to sustain the domestic (parent/child, Father/Son) relationship, reduces the relationship from essence to affection, destroys the relationship's uniqueness, & (as can be seen in the text of L.9.35 NRSV [the new hymnal's preferred version]) is not a constant in the Transfiguration accounts. (Often NCH substitutes "promised One," a replacement of relationship with anticipation, an idea foreign to the biblical contexts involved.)...."A new religion" is what I must call it.

(2) No, only the old religion updated to eliminate embarrassment vis-a-vis today's advances in justice-sensitivity, improvements in what being good (especially to females) means. Not just the biblical morality (patriarchal), but the biblical theology (the religion of the heaven-Father Patriarch) has been outgrown: both must be surrendered, or biblical religion will have no future. This position bifurcates as:

(1) We can shrink the Bible's divine masculine by eliminating all masculine pronouns for God (as NCH does, this being its root radicality), cutting out some instances of masculine divine titles (Father/Son/Lord/King et al), and increasing feminine divine references (maybe even adding feminine titles for God).

(2) We can shrink the Bible's divine masculine by eliminating all masculine pronouns for God, at least in our own speaking/writing if not also in the Bible. This curious, unstable position would not deny the Bible's consistently masculine divine titles but refuses the normal (I'd say also normative) pronominal referencing them as masculine: God, who is always masculine by nouns, is never masculine by pronouns! By unstable, I mean that this position is dynamically (though not intentionally) on the way to position 2.1 (that of NCH) or to position 1. It won't have a long shelf-life. It's trendy, has captured the liberal seminaries. But as the great Lewis Mumford said about urban architecture, "Trend is not destiny."

3 Beneath/beyond/within the language is the Bible's **harmonic convergence** on the masculine. Radical feminists who've given up biblical religion freely note the Bible's language/behavior integrity: the God who's spoken to & of as masculine (by nouns & pronouns) sees/feels/acts like a man. At the Bible's beginning, he acts like a man of authority, insisting on being obeyed (sin being thus defined, Gn.3.14-19, as disobedience). Even if it can be shown, as it can be, that this deity incorporates all good feminine characteristics, these radicals remain irreconcilably offended by "his" masculinity. (To holy women like Julian of Norwich & Hildegard of Bingen, this God is "our mother...*he*" & his parts include "*his* womb.")....Increasingly, these radicals who've gone beyond gender in the divine are going beyond person, as happened in the philosophical versions of the Indic religions. Another way to go is the goddess route, absorbing the good masculine characteristics into the feminine. And another (limited to Bhakti Hinduism) is to merge god/dess (eg, Shiva/Shakti & Krishna/Radha, sometimes worshiped through hermaphroditic images--creative gender-consolidation!). (The biblical God, who creates male/female & as source is, by analogy, masculine/feminine, has, unlike the Bhakti instances, names for "his" masculinity but not for "his" femininity. Whether this makes "him" an inferior deity, one must decide for oneself.) ("Wisdom" [Hockma/Sophia], in nonChristian Jewish literature, designates--sometimes by personalization--a quality, not a name, of God.)

4 E.Jüngel remarks the divide between beginning with (philosophical) theism or with (religious) revelation, & makes the case for the latter. Theo-feminism is theistic, grounded in the secular-feminist assumption of the sexes' equality, which then is projected into God--which then makes the theo-project How can the divine be presented as (1) transcending gender (the philosophical stance) but also (2) incorporating both genders (the religious stance)?

How does that distinction look alongside the traditional differentiation of *deus absconditus* (God as "hidden" from, unrevealed to, us) from *deus revelatus* (God as "he" --in the Bible & tradition, consistently masculine in names & pronouns--has revealed himself)? (1) comports well with biblical humility about our knowledge of God (eg, Is.55.8-9), but (2, no personal [ie, masculine] pronouns for God) conflicts with revelation, which presents PC with the scandal masculine particularity in God-as-revealed (including the [masculine] incarnation). But Americans are free (as a newspaper put it yesterday) to mock up "the supreme being of your choice." Me, I'm against redesigning God, polluting revelation with philosophy, confusing God hidden/revealed. All this conceding under the PC climate of fear & egalitarian dogmatism **weakens** Christian faith, witness, & life.