ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Ellz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008
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Anglo-American Congregationalism as our nation's founding culture

"THE MAYFLOWER/AMISTAD STILL IS SAILING ON"

This Thinksheet is intended for a CONVERSATION OF CONSEQUENCE in our church. Preparation? Please see Stephen Spielberg's current film "Amistad." Point? Let's talk about the film's implications for human life, for our life together in this Congregational-UCC church, & for the gospel's witness & work in our community, nation, world.

1 In Cuba as elsewhere in his recent travels, the Pope stressed Christians' obligation to influence culture, which always has at its heart some explicit or implicit cult (worship, elevation of the culture's vision, highest value). In Cuba he frequently & rightly referred to that people's historic though communist-repressed rootedness in Roman Catholicism, his church. We in the UCC need to remember, & remind our people & nation, of the U.S.'s founding cult-culture, Anglo-American Congregationalism, & its continuing influence through our founding documents (Mayflower Compact, Declaraton of Independence, Federalist Papers, Constitution, Bill of Rights), laws, customs, ethos. ...This historical fact does not argue for present privileged position, nor should "multiculturalism" (the dogma of cultures' equality) obscure (as now in our public schools) the historical fact.

2 Let's look at a few dates. After a detour in Holland, some English Congregationalists came, on the Mayflower in **1620**, to our (not England's) Plymouth. On the tercentenary, **1920**, the International Council of Congregational Churches sang "More Light Shall Break Forth," the hymn (written for the occasion) which ends "The Mayflower still is sailing on." (The first words are from the last sermon the congregation heard from its pastor before embarking hereward.) (I rediscovered the hymn & reproduced it in #2605.)....In teaching the history of our church, & in Spielberg's film, "the Amistad still is sailing on."....**1835**, Britain abolishes slavery....**1839**, our coast guard leads the Amistad, a slave-hijacked Cuban slaver, into New Haven (Conn., whose government-established religion was Congregationalism, & whose major school was [Congregationalism's] Yale), where a Congregational clergyman, a Yale professor of Hebrew, made communication with the slaves possible by finding, at a docks, a worker whose native language, Mende, was that of the slaves. Congregational clergy & laity, the leaders of the abolitionist movement, (1) pressured for the slaves' freedom, including the freedom to return to Africa if they wished to do so, (2) housed the slaves in Congregational parsonages, & (3) raised the funds for the return trip to Africa, as they had raised the money for the slaves' defense in Hartford's federal district court &, in **1840**, in the U.S.Supreme Court.

3 In the Spieberg film how much of this **Congregational saturation** of the Amistad event appears? NOTHING! The secular suppression of "Congregational" is 100% successful. Like Harvard, Yale was founded to produce Congregational clergy, who had to learn the biblical languages--so it wasn't surprising that a Congregational clergyman professor of Hebrew was the language bridge for sound to travel into sense, freeing the slaves' voice, without which they could not have been freed. But in "Amistad," no Congregationalism, no clergyman, no divinity professor, no Hebrew (even though Spielberg is Jewish)....And oh yes: The lawyer who won the slaves' freedom in Washington, DC, was a Congregational layman, a former president of the U.S., Jn. Quincy Adams.

4 But could not one charitably plead that Spielberg's historical fiction was free not to include "Congregational"? Two rejoinders: (1) Congregationalism's presence in l'affaire Amistad was so pervasive that only by being designedly evasive could it have been entirely suppressed, & (2) Congregationalists appeared unnamed, as clusters of citizens behaving in ways that amazed the slaves & now amuse filmgoers: religion appears, as always in secularist presentations, as something only laughable. ...The exception is biblical-story engravings in a Bible a slave stole from a Congregationalist. The English-illiterate slaves could see, in the engravings, Egyptian slavery of the Israelities, Jesus' torture & execution, & Jesus' deliverance from death.

5 A kudo also for showing the courage & integrity of the U.S.Supreme Court, 7 of whose 9 members were Southerners. Adams was forthright in admitting (1) that Pres. VanBuren was against freeing the slaves, & (2) that civil war might break out if the Court freed the slaves. +

6 A masterful melding of Afro-religion (ancestor veneration) & Anglo-culture (our old-dead-whitemen Founding Fathers) occurs in Adam's address to the U.S.Supreme Court. Cinqué, ad hoc chief of the slaves, had said that all his ancestors stood with him in court &, in this, he was responsible to them & for their destiny. Adverting to this, Adams said the same was true of him & the court vis-a-vis the U.S.'s formative ancestors--whereupon he walked past marble busts of our FFs (Founding Fathers)--Washington, Madison, Jefferson, (Adams' father) Jn. Adams--& urged the court not to be unfaithful to their vision of liberty & justice for all. Here the film is a splendid civics lesson for all Americans, as well as a lesson on how cultures & religions can be interillumining. (I'm so enthusiastic about the Supreme Court scene that I can almost forgive Spielberg for not mentioning us Congregationalists!)

(Note that here I said "Anglo-culture," not "Anglo-American Congregationalism." Of the mentioned old dead white presidents, only two were Congregationalists: Washington & Jefferson were Anglicans [later to be called "Episcopalians"].)

7 Yesterday, Conn. made the Pledge of Allegiance optional in its public schools: a black child's father won in court with the plea that "there is no freedom & justice for blacks in America." What would the Amistad ex-slaves have said to that? Ask the blacks you know: what do they say to it? Will further social engineering bring closer the day of King's prophesied "not the color of their skin but the content of their character"? Nobody knows, but our Faith's love-ethic must never be out of play. Blessings on the present White House's "race in America" efforts. It's Black History month, special time for telling the Amistad & similar stories (such as the **1841-2** Creole Case: 130 slaves taking over a ship, most of them released by Congress partly as a matter of "national honor").

8 The Amistad Committee's work led into the formation of the American Missionary Association, now a wing of the UCC national office that employed me for a decade. The AMA, chiefly under Congregational impulses, founded over 500 schools for freed slaves, 10 now black colleges....Forty years before the Amistad (Span. for "friendship"), Congregationalists formed the Mass. Missionary Society. The AMA, 123 years after Amistad, began giving the annual Amistad Award for the betterment of human relations...."Amistad" was the nation's first human-rights movement, & the AMA was our first antislavery Christian mission society.

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309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville MA 02632