A NONTHEOLOGICAL FACTOR IN RELIGIOUS CHANGE: ESCAPE FROM EMBARRASSMENT

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I'm always hoping somebody will say-write something that I'll instantly know to be, in my inner life, "a light shining in darkness." Sometimes it happens! Often enough to keep me hoping. Hence a question some former students of mine tell me they remember from me: "Are you just about to hear the most important thing you have ever heard?"....One aspect of this experience of the luminous word is its categoriality: suddenly (to change position along the electromagnetic spectrum), a magnet draws a million filings, orienting all their molecules to itself (in the metaphorical sense, "filings" in my mind). A category I've sensed now has a name. Whenever it happens, my heart leaps to thank God...."The struggle for respectability" happened to me 46 years ago in a doctoral class of Ernest Cadman Colwell, a specialist in the Gospel of John. It was in the course's title: "The Fourth Gospel & the Struggle for Respectability." The thesis was plain & simple: (1) No historical movement survives that fails to survive intellectually, in the world's clash of minds; (2) Christianity has survived; (3) Early Christian literature reveals both that the intellectual competition, Jewish & pagan, was formidable & that, as Tertullian put it, the Christians "outthought" their rivals--at least sufficiently for the new religion's survival; & (4) The Gospel of John has this struggle as its central cultural concern (its central spiritual concern being the preaching of "God so loved the world," 3.16, and "that you may believe," 20.31). (A few years earlier, 1936, he'd come out with a Willett, Clark book titled JOHN DEFENDS THE GOSPEL, which develops this thesis. The 4th Gospel is transitional from merely defending the gospel against charges of treason, superstition, & unfair competition, to counterattacking by "repudiating slanders, intellectualizing its faith, and converting the government"--Preface. But John's adaptations were not accomodationist; the Stoics had the highest intellectual respectability in the Hellenistic culture, yet (p.130) "in John, salvation comes from outside the individual--an idea that would be anathema to every Stoic" (& to most intellectuals in 1987 USA!).) The Church had to decide on the line between adaptation & betrayal: Jn. was taken as inside the line, the Gospel of Thomas (as too gnosticizing) as outside. As I put it in #2181, the trick is to fail neither in communication (with contemporaries in & out of the churches) nor in continuity (with the Christian past & present). ....The burden of this Thinksheet is my fear that my own church, the United Church of Christ, is losing its balance, overweighting communication (including the struggle for respectability) & in the process betraying the Faith by (1) distortion & (2) planned lexical obsolescence (hoping the churches will, & helping them to, amnesia vis-a-vis certain terms common to Christians throughout history, eg, "King," "Father," &, for both God & Jesus, "Lord"). Please have a look at these two charges, each illustrated by a particular action at the 1987 General Synod. (POLITICAL NOTE: I'm speaking of top-down influence, the efforts of the UCC national office to convince the churches to go along with notions shaped up in, & published from, the chambers of the bureaucracy. The main effect of these efforts has been, will continue to be, further alienating the churches from the national office.)

Charge #1: DISTORTION. In fact, as all Jews know, Christianity is antisemitic (I'll use "antijewish"). But since in our culture it's no longer fashionable, or even acceptable, to be antijewish, those who want to be respectable-respected, yet call themselves Christian, have to find some way to conceal, or at least deemphasize, Christianity's antijudaism. That's the exterior socialpsychological dynamic: the inner parallel to this respectability concern is self-respect, self-esteem: how can one think well of onself if one is tinged with what sent millions of Jews to the gaschambers? The Synod's response was to approve a document purporting to present the true way a Christian should view Judaism and Jews but actually presenting a half-picture, a partisan view. The truth is that in & since the NT, Christians have been ambivalent here. One party has seen Christianity as Judaism's replacement (eg, in the NT, the Letter to the Hebrews); the other party describes the relationship as a mystery to be honored by use of yearning metaphor (eg, Romans 9-11).

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The Synod proof-texted (fundamentalist-like!) only from the latter, indeed limiting itself to one chapter (Ro.11). The crudity of the document's be-kind-to-Jews message will hardly fool, be pleasant in the ears of, thoughtful Jews, who know that Ro.11 was written by the early Christian who most eagerly & assiduously sought to convert Jews! The distortion in the document appears in the dissonance between that fact & the fact that the document implies that Christian efforts to convert Jews are inappropriate (the Jews having a living, viable covenant with God)! (No wonder that in the secular press the document was taken as a repudiation of all efforts to evangelize Jews, such as Jews for Jesus. That logic would have Christians attacking, as violating the Christians' living, viable covenant with God, any Jew who tries to convert Christians to Judaism.)....A fact irrelevant to this accusation of distortion: Within the Christian religion, I am of the inclusive party (considering Judaism & Christianity to be one faith taking the form of two religions but with freedom of proselytism between them: excluding mutual proselytism is the wrong thing to do, though for the right reason; but I don't excommunicate my fellow-Christians of the other party, nor do I misrepresent their opinion).

Before proceeding to my second charge, I want to continue my opening exposition of the social phenomenon I there called "the struggle for respectability," which I described on its eso(internal)-side as self-respect or self-regard vis-a-vis the subculture in which these strugglers see themselves. Three factors, not one or two, are operative: (1) They want to be "in," respectable; (1) A good self-opinion requires that they be "in"; (3) They have something they want to say, something to offer, to their fellows in the subculture (which might be described as "liberal" or "secular humanist" or just "humanist"--formerly called "modernist" & "enlightenment"). Some fables of Aesop & Thurber would raise the question whether, in order to be "in," they've left "out" the heart of what they wanted to take in with them: have they conceded so much that they've become chameleons? This Thinksheet warns of that danger, which I've dealt with this (exactly) ½ century since becoming a licensed Christian minister....Let's look at a simple fact: In any evolving culture, parents are embarrassments to their children, & the earlier stages of any historical religion are an embarrassment to the most recent stage. The stupid, self-impoverishing thing to do is relieve yourself of the embarrassment by disowning your parents & rejecting your parental (native) religion. The classic case here is European & EuroAmerican advantaged Jews of the past 1½ centuries, as detailed in Cuddihy's THE ORDEAL OF CIVILITY. It's what I call the dissociative tendency, & it's what I see dominant now in the UCC upstairs (national office). (These Jewish children produced two world-influential atheist movements --for the inner world, Freud; for the outer world, Marx. What are deracinated Christian children producing, what will they produce?) The pendulum response: Overaccommodative Judaism has led, esp. in Am. & Israel, to various forms of Jewish fundamentalism (as has happened also in Islam); & we have a similar revolt going on in the UCC (intellectually, Biblical Witness; experientially, charismatics). Why do we not mature enough to avoid extremisms?....The Unitarian-Universalist denomination is far advanced beyond the UCC in the dissociative tendency, so far advanced that increasing numbers of their congregations are too embarrassed any longer to call themselves Christian. I predict a small movement of radically dissociative UCC congregations into the UU denomination....A relevant personal saga: In the current PARADE, Ted Koppel explains he's married the same woman thrice: (1) civil; (2) UU (because it's between Judaism & Christianity); (3) RCC (because we don't want our children to grow up with no religion).

Charge #2: PLANNED LEXICAL OBSOLESCENCE. The program of the Synod's 1987 Statement of Faith includes the bowdlerizing out of naughty, embarrassing words, esp. the three mentioned in this Thinksheet's intro. Behind charge #1 lies the fear of being considered antisemitic: behind #2 lies the fear of being considered sexist, androcentric, a fear we might name androphobic. On this, see my #2178 & #2181.