

IS YOUR MIND A PACKAGE? Mine isn't.

Maybe yours should be & mine not: This Thinksheet is description, not judgmental.

1 While my social location can be objectively delineated, my mental location can't & since early adolescence never could be. No party has ever been able to trust me: I'm forever coloring outside as well as inside the lines. Explanation? Integrity, mental illness, something, whatever: This Thinksheet's point lies elsewhere. Friends through the years have testified to the fact that I always seem to have one foot outside the circle whatever the ingroup circle is. The outfoot (to continue with my metaphor) is from the working of my critical consciousness, a given of my personality type: I'm 1 of the 4 "J" (judging) types of the Gray-Wheelwright 16 types. As above, I'm not here into explanation (nature?nurture? personal decisions?): I'm pointing here only to the fact that my mind constitutionally suspects that "we" (whatever "we" I'm a part of wherever/whenever) may be leaving out some factor without which our decisions will be distorted & perhaps even disastrous. The outfoot may be into that something.

2 Peoples/persons differ in levels of tolerance for outside-inside ideas/persons (which/who, though inside the group, express marginal or dubious or discomforting opinions). By contrast, inside-outside ideas/persons are more easily dealt with: the body rejects intruders, foreign transplants "don't take." Which describes the 1st-century synagogue/ch.split? Two ways of telling the story, neither without some truth. More than two ways: severances, divorces, are usually two complex for either/or later accounts. And any version leaves the versioner's dignity intact & belonging-potential undamaged (e.g., 1Jn.1.19 NIV: "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us"; CEV on end of the vs.: "they left, which proves that they did not belong to our group").

3 It's a common human experience both to say "I don't belong here" & to hear "You don't belong here"--the coupling/uncoupling characteristic of social/individual existence. One factor in this continuous process is the social "fit," in each instance, of one's "mind," both the way & the what of one's thinking. At the extremes are (1) the **conformists**--some incapable of independent thought, others capable but disinclined--neither distinguishing groupthink from selfthink; & (2) the **contrarians**--some reluctant, happier to agree than disagree (me, e.g.); others eager, habitually delighted to say "on the contrary" (yes, thus "contrarians"). (The subtitle of my FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT [still available from amazon.com] is "Thinksheets of a Contrarian Christian.")

4 This Thinksheet's title's analogy is plain. A group is a package, & so is it's think (its "groupthink"). No group & I have ever been a good fit for each other, & I (unlike tacit contrarians) have not hesitated to speak for the beyond-the-package whenever (1) that beyond seemed to me what the group then needed to hear & (2) I believed that I was being tapped to be a spokesman for it.

While this outspokenness has sometimes been appreciated, often not so (because of my how or what or both). The social sanction to go along to get along has never bitten deep into me, so I've seldom bitten my tongue (though, sinner that I be, I've sometimes bitten it when I shouldn't have, & vice verse).

5 Back to tolerance-level (§2). It's now so low linguistically that I would be unemployable: I couldn't knuckle under to speech codes (e.g., I couldn't taboo the Bible's pronouns for deity). A tight fundamentalism-on-the-left censorship of mouth & press has clamped down even on great universities & on ecclesial institutions (including the UCC) in high deference to their groupthink. I find the atmosphere so oppressive that I'm at a loss as to what to say about it to younger clergy with families. (Sardonic remark I heard from a media star: "It's all right for me to say 'Jesus' now: I'm rich enough.")....Musing on this, let's have a further look at the word....

6**contrarian**. It's not in pre-WWII dictionaries, & appears thus in RHD: "a person who takes an opposing view, esp. one who rejects the majority opinion").

The CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN ENGLISH (CUP/00) has after each word its semantic category, the word listed more than once if more than one category. Thus, "contrary" (opposite), "a fact or opinion that is the opposite of one already stated." Also, "contrary" (unreasonable), "...intentionally wanting to disagree with and annoy other people" (with accent on the second syllable, as in "Mary, Mary, quite [Brit., entirely] c."). For the Christian, the behavior indicated in this second use is quite (yes, entirely) ruled out as violating benevolence, the spirit of goodwill; & while in the process of trying to persuade I someone, I never intend to (this not being on the list of my sins). But in a tight, intolerant climate (whether on the right or on the left), most folks can't, or at least don't, distinguish the first meaning from the second: they consider "unreasonable" & mean-spirited the expression of any "opposite" opinion.

As I am a free, unpackaged thinker both on the right (as an evangelical) & on the left (as a radical), no wonder I have no more friends than I can comfortably manage! The left doesn't trust this ThD from a conservative seminary: the right doesn't trust this PhD from the U. of Chicago Divinity School. Poor me, no? Not really: a small price to pay, as I see it. But the church pays a huge price for partisan theology, as society does for partisan politics. I pray-yearn-hope for a more open public (ecclesial & political) mind, & believe that a loving sharing of differences moves in that direction (as the Romans said, *Contraria contrariis curantur* ["Opposites are cured by opposites."]).

7 Packages have labels, & mind-packaged people aren't satisfied unless they succeed in labeling you: category comfort, let's call it. Today an antiChristian labeler, wanting to label me down (i.e., put me down by label), asked "Is your religion right & all the others wrong?" I: "God has made me a lover of light, not a judge of right & wrong." He: "Why do you think it all ends with Jesus rather than, say, Mohammad?" I: "It all begins with Jesus, who is God come to us in human flesh." (He slammed down the phone.) (In the Gospels, Jesus shows not only nimbleness at evading traps but, more profoundly, steady resistance to enemies' & friends' efforts to package him with a label.)

8 A Cape Cod church steeple has just had both its **rigid** NSEW directional indicators & its **flexible** arrow-weather-vane regilded. May the minds of those who there worship have both qualities! Limitations of the analogy: not so rigid it breaks, not so flexible it's determined by whatever way the wind happens to be blowing. Perhaps you've seen, as I have, some steeples with only weathervanes (befitting the UUA [Unit.-Univ.Ass'n.], which no longer calls itself Christian) & some with only NSEW (befitting the RCC magisterium & Protestant creedal fundamentalists). While I'm not suggesting that by looking at a (crossless) steeple one can know the mind of the church within, I can say that there's a rough correlation between the degree of left/right extremity & the tightness of packaging & of tolerance (i.e., the further left or right, the less tolerance of deviants from the party line, the tight "seamless-garment" groupthink). Another only rough correlation: between "the mind of Christ" (Phil.2.5, the specific tangency here being humility) & "the mind of the Church" (a useful phrase comprehending both "new and old" [Mt.13.52]).

9 Because human beings are not individuals as much as persons-in-groups, breaking ranks from one's group/party is painful enough to be improbable: as my Episcopal grandmother put it, "It isn't done." Every group/party has packaged ("vested") interests; & (as W.Brueggemann put it on p18 of this year's first CHRISTIAN CENTURY) "we incline to make our decisions without any critical reflection, but only in order to sustain the package": reading the Bible, we should be "aware of our propensity to distort in the service of vested interests, anxiety, fear and hurt," clouding "the crucified truth of the gospel."

10 A mature "mind" is clear, comprehensive, changing, & cohesive. It is, in my favorite figure for it, a solar system with a central love/passion/devotion/commitment--for me, Sol the Sun/Son, "Jesus Christ the Lord." Carol Zaleski puts personal integration/integrity/hope well for me: "I will know it is the same me because I will see the same Him."*