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SEMANTIC INFILTRATION

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Using the hermeneutics of suspicion, this Thinksheet sketches an agendum for the "Confessing Christ" program of retrieval-reform(ation)-renewal in mainline churches. The assumption is that one essential element in this program must be theological semantic-analysis: what can looking at mainline-leadership language tell us about mainline malaise?

1 "Semantic **infiltration**," in the dictionary of diplomacy, means getting your loaded words (chess pieces) advantageously positioned vis-a-vis your opponent's, so as to (1) coop the initiative, (2) remove your opponent's loaded words from play, as you may be able, or at least (3) reduce the valence, the relational power, of your opponent's loaded words. While the usual bearing of the expression is on foreign relations, obviously it can apply also to domestic logomachies....A parallel reality, however expressed, let's call semantic **seepage**, the unintentional oozing of words/meanings from one language-world into another....The result, in either case, is the semantic **pollution** of the receiving language-world as seen from within the latter; but from within the giving language-world, semantic **cleansing** & **enrichment**....You can think of many instances: Churchill's "cold war," Geo. Keenan's "containment," FDR's "four freedoms" & "a day that shall live in infamy."

2 In church life, the extremes of this phenomenon are ***biblicism***, the fundamentalistic attempt to live exclusively in the biblical language-world, & ***relevantism***, modernistic surrender to "the world's [linguistic] agenda." The near-illiterate tele-vangelists at one end, the UUA (Unitarian-Universalist Association) at the other, with the UCC bureaucracy not far to the right of the UUA.

3 The theo-linguistic project for "Confessing Christ" in the UCC is to examine-critique, in light of the biblical lexicon & of semiotics, the loaded terms used (1) in the UCC bureaucracy & among UCC (2) teachers (especially seminary), (3) parish clergy, & (4) the laity...."Loaded terms": words carrying loads not just of their usual denotata & connotata but, atop all, action-proposals (or to say it in Latin, "agenda"). Of course the word "load" is itself loaded, as in the metaphor "loaded for bear." Or just plain rich. Or drunk. Or fraudulently weighted (dice). Or full of extra features (as cars). I'm using "loaded terms" neutrally, in the semantic sense, not in the pejorative sense ("a word, statement, or argument...charged with emotional or associative significance that hinders rational or unprejudiced consideration" [RHD^2], whether or not the hindering is intended).

4 *Where I'm coming from:* Mine is, has long been, an antibiblicistic biblical mind. To use a Hans Frei familiar metaphor, I view language today through the lens of the biblical languages rather than vice versa. And I have long been pained by the dissonance between the biblical sounds-meanings & many of the uses to which their usual English translations are put (which is the general problem of knowing great works of literature only in translation). I am especially aware of this because since 1934 I have easily engaged friends & strangers in religious conversation. Eg, ½ c. ago yesterday, this: "Religious talks are 'openers' into the lives of people, & I learn much from them because I love them & want them to know God as I do. Eg, today I talked with a Spaniard..., a Pole, 2 Hungarians, & an Italian--to mention only off-[U. of Chicago]-campus folk." (That day's diary entry included mention of religious on-campus conversations, & a two-hour lecture by the neothomist philosopher Jaques Maritain.)

Also, I'm coming from a background keenly intellectual by nature (my father's legal mind) & strongly evangelical by choice, so I've long been playing chess on both sides of the board at once (or thinking with both sides of my brain at once). My studies, + those thousands of religion conversations, have made me both controversial & irenic, using the hermeneutics of suspicion on both sides of issues & suffering some alienation everywhere because of my habit of speaking everywhere on behalf of what's being left out & in defense of what's being distorted. (When I made that remark recently to Jaroslav Pelikan, he said "I, too!" And I noted this in Leander Keck's THE CHURCH CONFIDENT (Abingdon/93), p.18: "I have often found myself...a conservative among liberals and a liberal among con-

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servatives." My spirit meets that of my friend Chaim Stern in the blessing on the congregation, opening the bar/bat mitzvah service (GATES OF PRAYER, p.452): "For the joy of community, the gift of diversity, and the vision of harmony, we offer our grateful thanks." My spiritual will to unity, & my internal self-correcting intellectual dialectic, are the poles from which I seek to examine-critique-refine language.

5 A third thing can happen to words/meanings. I've mentioned semantic infiltration, the deliberate thrusting of alien expressions into a language-community; & semantic seepage, the unintentional oozing of words/meanings from one language-world into another. Now semantic **repression**, the effort (1) to prevent the intrusion of a foreign word/meaning or (2) to suppress a domestic word/meaning (ie, a word/meaning traditional in the particular language-world). One illustration for each type of repression:

Type (1): Carl Sagan, reporting on the contest to find a better term than "Big Bang," said that no entry was satisfactory. Many suggested "Genesis," but that could not be considered: its connotation is theistic, which would pollute the (secularistic-atheistic) scientific language-world, whose intellectual immunological system rejects as foreign bodies (by ingestion, wounds, or implants) any terms from religion. Especially Sagan's system: he's aggressively atheist.

Type (2): Some Christians are trying to suppress the classical (biblical-theological-historical) third-person referencing of God as "he-his-him." Eg, the Keck book in §4 asks us to praise "it," never "him."

6 A comprehensive hermeneutic of language has three dimensions, usefully pictured (though I'll not develop the model here) as three mutually overlapping circles. They refer to people, occupations, & the words themselves:

...."**language-worlds**" refers primarily to the people speaking a particular language (as Hitler claimed, & seized, all German-speaking territories outside of Germany); secondarily, nongeographically, it means people who "speak the same language" in the metaphorical senses.

...."**work spheres**" refers to the occupations as each has its own lexicon of words/meanings. Not watertight compartments, of course. Eg, science & philosophy share the word "relativity." (Throughout §6, keep in mind the fact that the circles are mutually overlapping.)

...."**semantic domains**" refers to the words themselves in their constellations--eg, "plants," "animals," "body parts," "emotions," "punish/reward," "forgive," "trust/believe," "value," "time," "space," "power/force," "religious actions." ....How get at semantic domains? Till 1976, biblical-languages knowledge required. That year Michael Darton's MODERN CONCORDANCE TO THE NT (Doubleday) appeared, naming the semantic domains "themes" as it's a compromise between a simple word-concordance & a fully semantic -domains work such as J.P.Louw & E.A.Nida's 2-volume GREEK-ENGLISH LEXICON OF THE N.T. BASED ON SEMANTIC DOMAINS (United Bible Societies/88), which lists its 93 domains in English (xxiv-xxv), though it does not (as Darton does) transliterate the Greek....Why bother with the domains? Consider the zoom-lens analogy: a mere word-concordance is narrow (long-lens), a domains resource is wide(-angle). In the former you find objects, words; in the latter, subjects, idea-&-image territories, intellectual-spiritual contexts. *Awareness* of subjects-territories-contexts is vital when having anything to do with semantic infiltration-seepage-repression. Finally, using the increasingly accurate & comprehensive OT & NT multi-volume "theological dictionaries" is protection against a too narrow reading of specific biblical words, & inductively though indirectly gets at semantic domains.

7 ***Semantic awareness***, from asking the questions inherent in the dimensions (the above §), serves dialog--if both sides are semantically aware!--by increasing verbal clarity, conciseness, coherence, comprehensivity (in short, our zoom lens' whole range). Warning: Knowledge, including linguistic science, is power, not goodness. It can make wise, or lead off into bypaths such as linguistic positivism & deconstruction. But as ultimately a servant of truth, it is good news & a servant of Good News....This Thinksheet has been theory; the next will be application.