

THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE WILL REMAIN EUROCENTRIC, & CHRISTIANITY WILL REMAIN CANONICAL

An open letter to Cynthia Nozomi Ikuta, c: Ansley Coe Throckmorton
American Missionary Association, United Church Board for Homeland Ministries

My dear. Rev. Ikuta:

Your courageous & clear "Cultural Domination, the Bible, and Pluralism" (THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST EDUCATOR 5.2 [Winter 1991-1992]), while it is unfaithful to the gospel & to your ordination, has already become a classic statement of a position increasingly prominent among UCC-headquarters employees. As your paper is being taken seriously in planning "for the Educational Mission" of the UCC (as the editor's introductory "Note" puts it), I take it seriously in this open letter. Nothing personal: I know nothing of you except what's in your piece.

1 What you call "cultural domination" is, from inside the dominant culture, cultural cohesion, which is a necessity for community, which in America today has become problematic (Rodney King's "Can we all get along?"). Of course when the laws are enforced, criminals feel oppressed. And many of nonEuropean background among us experience as domination Europe's cultural dominion (the Western Hemisphere being a cultural colony of Europe).

Since you confess to being one of these many, the second word of your title is correct for you. "I failed," you say, to melt in the melting pot. Of course you would: the melting pot works only for those of European stock. (This ethnocentrism is, as you know, even worse in Japan, whence came here your ancestors.) Atop your resentment that you couldn't melt in lies your rage at what happened to your grandparental generation. As the internment camps were closed, some of that generation came to Chicago & formed a church, of which I was pastor. I can report to you that what I found among them was less rage & resentment than joy, the joy of captives released, & hope, the hope for a new life in a new place. And they had reason for hope: America is a place of hope for those who (1) are willing to work hard & (2) have something to market--& they had both, & made it (of course without melting in).

2 The fuel you seem to be burning is gall against the dominant culture which sees you, & your forebears in America, as hyphenates (Japanese-Americans). The Serenity Prayer asks you to "accept what cannot be changed," but you are not serene. Why not? It must be because you think that the first clause of this Thinksheet's title is wrong. But consider:

Has any nonEuropean language any chance of being spoken in the Western Hemisphere except in enclaves of low political clout? Do the natives, the aborigenes, the preEuropean hyphenates (Indian-Americans--or Indians [as they prefer], or Native Americans) anywhere show any hope of successful revolt against the dominant culture? Does any nonEuropean people threaten to overrun Euramerica as Europe overran the Western Hemisphere? Does any system of customs-laws-government vie to replace the present system? If your answer to all these questions is no, how about some serenity so you can use your energies against what can & should be changed?....As to the last question, you may hope that some system (also short of the fullcome Kingdom of God) will evolve out of the present system as set forth in our Founding Documents. But time & again our system has proved itself capable of digesting major challenges, adapting to new situations without major structural changes; & that flexibility continues undiminished, indeed strengthened.

3 From the outside, without considerations of revelation-grace-judgment, every society has, as its spine, what I've called (in §2) a "system of customs-laws-government" illumined & engined by a vision or paradigm sociologically describable as a "social construction of reality." That's objective fact, to which your spleen gives the spin of "hijacking of my culture....lies." You enjoy your vengeance against the melting pot, which you rejected "but only because it first rejected me." You were historically ignorant to think that the melting pot would melt you. It was never intended to melt Asians. The metaphor was part of the rhetoric of the Age of Immigration, successive waves of Europeans coming through Ellis Island. It was meant to include Jewish Europeans (& given currency by Israel Zangwill's

play of that title) but did not have Indian-Americans & African-Americans in mind.

Once meltables & unmeltables got well mixed together in American life, the question was whether or not the Anglo-Saxon legal construction of reality could be stretched to include all ("equal protection under the laws"). The answer is a qualified yes. I would prefer it to be unqualified, & it could be if a social construction were only legal; but it is of "customs-laws-government," & a "government of laws & not of men" can't work well if the "men" (people) don't share a life-shape ("customs": customary attitudes, values, feelings). In our system, the home, religious institutions, the public schools, & the practice of government at all levels are to engender the customs matrix for jurisprudence.

Now, whatever's to be said of the performance of the other social agencies, our public schools are failing to transmit the Founding-foundational-fundamental **mores** (customary moral habits, attitudes, manners) of the American citizen. Many in the public-school establishment hold that transmission in light or even low esteem. You say, "Our public schools teach...the dominant story." But you must be aware that respect for "the dominant story" is in steep decline in our public schools. And people, clergy, like you are no help. You say "From the Euro-American perspective, Columbus did discover America." The intracultural way to state that is "Columbus discovered America." But you so sniff & sneer at that as to jumble it together with snippy comments: "Columbus discovered America. America has no political prisoners. This is the land of the free. MacDonalds cares about the environment. The war against Iraq is morally justified. The recession is almost over. Tax breaks for the rich help the poor." You want UCC education to pass on your cloying cynicism? No system, either de jure or de facto, is free from flaws; every system needs continuous criticism, reality checks pressed upon "the powers" by the prophets. Our UCC's better at producing prophets than (also necessary to social health) critics to sit on them as I'm sitting on you: the guild of the prophets needs the discipline of internal reproof.

4 More than at your sociopolitical naiveté, I am appalled at what you call "the theological and hermeneutical implications of" your radical pluralism--which brings me to the second clause of this Thinksheet's title. Says Heschel, "The first act in the [prophetic] process is to interfere," & I'm interfering with your revisionistic **abuse of Scripture**. Against the monotheistic core of the Jewish, Catholic, & Protestant canons, you archaize to a supposed premonotheistic stage, which then you canonize in order to retrieve the goddess. Unless "woman church" becomes a new religion, your antibiblical retelling of the Story will wind up in the "Oddities" window of the "Interpretation, History of" file. For you, revelation ceases at a very early stage, apparently before Hosea's polemic against idols, from which emerged the Deuteronomistic historians' rhetoric against Jeroboam (See 1K.13, Judges 17-18, Ex.32, 1K.14.1-18 ["The LORD will abandon Israel" for "making idols of the goddess Asherah"]). Two new Scholars Press books display the functionality of monotheism internally (Wesley I. Toews, MONARCHY AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION IN ISRAEL) & externally (E. Theodore Mullen, Jr., NARRATIVE HISTORY AND ETHNIC BOUNDARIES: Deuteronomism as survival mechanism for the postExilic Judean community, creating identity & resisting assimilation). In the First Commandment, Deuteronomy (5.7) repeats Exodus (20.2): "Worship no god but me." The Shema (next chap. of Deut., vs.4) rubs it in, putting "echad" in the periodic position: "The LORD...is ONE!"--our Lord Jesus quoting the next vs. as the first half of his précis (Mt.22.37, M.12.30, L.10.27) of all the commandments.

Even if your canon is not Scripture alone or Scripture + tradition but only the so-called "historical Jesus," how can you call yourself a Christian if you knock the radical-monotheistic center out of his message & mission? At the least, does not honor direct you to defrock yourself?

5 Your paper is being used to support "dialog," a noun whose specialized UCC-headquarters meaning is this: aggressive verbal behavior aimed at breaking down resistance; conversation as a sales technique. The Inclusive-Language Lectionary, the Hymnal, & now "Pluralism." "Debate" is the honest word. This open letter to you, & the enclosures (#s 2626, 2631, 2632, 2633), are debate papers.

Walter Elliott