

JUSTIFICATION & JUSTICE XVII

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

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IN THE SHORT RUN, WE'RE ALL DEAD:

TIME TRIAGE: JUSTICE TODAY OR TOMORROW?

This Thinksheet worries & prays about the luxurious attitude ("luxury" as one of the seven deadly sins) that we, humanity, can "have it all," meaning "liberty [spiritual & political] & justice [equal treatment under law + material equality] for all" now living (including fetuses) & all our unconceived descendants. How much of this global inflation of the American Dream is valid (as achievable), how much pernicious (as impossible)?

1. Because love is not zero-sum, neither is justification. It's for all anytime anywhere who consciously, or even unconsciously, open themselves to receive it...Not so with justice. As spiritual liberty & as equal treatment under law, it's not zero-sum. But insofar as the concept incorporates the ideas of complete political liberty (eg, to form a sovereign, armed nation) & material equality (even beyond "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need"), "justice" is zero-sum: in each human situation there can be only so much of it--because of (1) trade-offs with other human values, (2) limited material resources, or (3) both.

2. The historical rhetoric of "justice" divinizes it metaphorically if not also literally ("Justice" as, in various languages, a god or goddess). The spiritual & emotional tone of devotion (which is to the Infinite) is infinite, defiant of the finite. Ergo, justice devotion, devotion to justice, obscures facing the limits "the struggle for justice and peace" is up against--material limits, if not also limits of actual human hearts & histories. Designing government budgets is a perpetual agony because political promises are designedly vague (following the axiom that you're in big trouble if you engage an issue directly), & money is terribly-horribly-inescapably unvague.

3. It's possible--it's common practice in the national offices of churches as well as at all levels of government--to be specific about ends & vague about means, or vice versa, so as not to get caught either with the know-nothingness of vague+vague or the pay-up vulnerability of specific+specific. As long as one factor in the equation is vague, rhetoric can endlessly parade itself as action (as Marion Barry, before a Federal sting nailed him, said of Jesse Jackson, he's not interested in running except "running off his mouth")....EXAMPLES, military dimension: Does Panama need an army? "Palestine" (the proposed Palestinian state)? How about the states in the decaying Russian empire? And Nicaragua: Should the USA insist that the Costa Rican model obtain in all Central American states? In other words, does "national sovereignty" require a military as well as police? does "justice" demand it? or is there a significant component of injustice in the concept of "national sovereignty"? (And, while I'm at it, in "democracy," "the self-determination of peoples"?). Seldom is this military question discussed in government, & almost never in church. In the latter case, pacifists proclaim an ideological solution, as though ideology could ever lead to anything but fresh formations of injustice. National & conference-level pronouncements & resolutions of my own church, the UCC, are pacifistic in the sense that they almost invariably, when touching the military, sniff at it, presume its uncleanness if not guilt. (As when touching race they almost invariably smell of blame-whiteness instead of honestly & courageously dealing with the whole complex of factors in racial justice.)

	JUSTICE	
	YES	NO
TODAY	A	B
short-run		
TOMORROW	C	D
long-run		

4. Space is one dimension of justice as zero-sum: there's just so much space, good Lebensraum, space adequate to sustaining truly human life, including biosustainability; & time is another. Let's look at time. In the Jewish ethics of personal responsibility, the piety of prayer + almsgiving (including Jesus), we Jews & Christians are to meet, within the limits of our ability & responsibilities, "neighbor" (here-and-now) basic material human

needs: "A" says feed all those starving Ethiopians without time considerations, ie without calculating (1) whether there'll just be more of them to feed next famine-time (as is true now, from our having fed them last famine-time), or (2) whether sustaining their present high population (from having been fed last time) will further degrade their Lebensraum (as has happened because of our help last time). Note that our previous aid (esp. '84-'88), in relation to which tomorrow is now today, resulted in situation "D": no justice for those who are now starving who would not be starving if they'd died in previous famines (according to "natural" conditions undisturbed by,

human intervention), & no justice for their Lebensraum, their life-support system, in that it's been forced to pay, in degradation, the cost of the net increase in population directly attributable to yesterday's compassionate intervention. (What if there'd been balanced human engineering, feeding the people while reducing conceptions [by continence, rhythm, & artificial barriers to fertilization] & births [by abortion]? Wonderful--except that the social-control level, given that populace's taboos, would have had to approach that of animal labs: in the trade-off of life & liberty, choose liberty for yourself & others. Better to die, & let others die, than eliminate freedom. But I know of no politician or ecclesiarch who would say so publicly. Well, how about self-sacrifice? I die so those Ethiopians can live? Pious nonsense; doesn't touch the **earthkeeping** problem where they live. Well, how about transporting them elsewhere? We tried that with the Jews, & the Palestinians still don't like it. No, there's nothing for it but to come clean on the **triage** problem--that a choice must be made between the people & the land--or to continue to fog the tragic choice with sufficiently vague & pious rhetoric. In that part of the world [& in some others], we can "do justice" today [A] or tomorrow [C], not both. To put it the other way 'round, shall we be unjust today [B] or tomorrow [D]? The heart says "Be just today & trust God for tomorrow," but the mind says "Be unjust today, or tomorrow's human suffering will exceed today's, as right now in Ethiopia.")

5. Does the heart deserve more hearing? Our grid is based on ages-long human experience & straight-line projecting therefrom. But what if some unpredictable technological development intervened to save the Ethiopians from "D" after we acted on "A"? Or what if some natural and/or human disaster changed the calculus? Or the civil war ended? Or the government's present cruel policy were forgone? Or the Lord's Prayer were answered, the Kingdom fullcome? These possibilities make instant almsgiving intellectually defensible; but, I hold, their improbability makes such action ethically irresponsible. The tilting factor, it seems to me, is **earthkeeping**. But what would it do to our hearts & minds if we were to let people die whom we could feed? If such neglect would damage our souls, would not that selfish fact tilt toward instant charity?....What's to be done, face to face with our **earthkeeping** crisis, to break through the taboo against even raising such questions?

6. A phoner today insisted on interpreting the **Bible** literally, to its disadvantage; & I quoted passages which, taken literally, he had to admit he agreed with--so whether one's for or agin the Bible, literalism is a wash item....No one could take literally all Jesus' dramatic rhetoric, yet we Christians ponder it all as we seek to worship God, as he told us to do, "with all your...mind." In his time on earth, he was into housekeeping (the human house & the house of faith) but not into **earthkeeping**, so we can expect from him no direct guidance in making ecological decisions. Indirectly, yes: he moves us to the glory of God in the good of humanity &, eschatologically, of the human home, the good earth. He expects us to use his words, here, not as laws but as clues for making people/earth triage decisions....RHD²: *triage*, n: "the process of sorting out victims...to increase the number of survivors; the determination of priorities for action in an emergency." "Victims," now, is more than people; we're in danger of becoming bored with the media's dinning in our ears that the earth is our victim. In the agonizing action-priority choices, we shall have to learn to pass over some humans to save victim-earth....Today is the 17th ann. of Roe v. Wade: compassion rightly says that the easiest group of humans to pass over is fetuses unwanted by their mothers & manyways destined to be a social drag and ecological net loss. "Good planets are hard to find," & ours is daily becoming less good. We are altering our environment toward the not-distant point where we can no longer adapt as a species & humanity, after almost inconceivable suffering of body, soul, & society, will end. That, the great new fact of our time, asks of us a mind-shift we may prove unable to manage. Will the church help toward this change of consciousness, fight it, or be only a cipher? Fight it, it seems at the moment....

7.....which explains my title, "In the short run, we're all dead." If we don't factor in the long run (C & D), we'll soon have made earth unlivable for us. God has never asked any previous generation to choose between justice today & justice tomorrow. It's the ominous issue for humanity & the critical issue for theology.