

THEOTROPISM VERSUS CURRENT ALTERNATIVE TROPISMS

AN OPEN LETTER TO MAX STACKHOUSE

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008

Noncommercial reproduction permitted

Max, it's serendipitous that on the 5-12 Feb 92 CHRISTIAN CENTURY page facing our ad for the July 20-24 Craigville Theological Colloquy on Jesus Christ & pluralism today ("Who do YOU say I am?"), you begin an article with this: "The most striking theme in recent literature on theological education is pluralism." I've heard you twice on this, know your previous writings on it, & rejoice that you are a sensitive, intelligent defender of the Faith & promoter of dialog across all "pluralistic" differences in church, academy, community, world.

Reading your latest moves me to a few tangential remarks:

1 Toqueville often remarks the American penchant for turning to God, I may call it cultural theotropism. Every day in our greenhouse I see flowers piously "turning toward the sun" (Gk., *heliotropion*, the flower "heliotrope" but also a sundial; in the Gk. myth, an infatuated, compulsive, monomaniacal girl transformed into the flower)....modeling my doing same toward the Source of the sun. The Bible & classical Christianity are theotropic. It cannot be assumed that Christians today, laity or clergy, are so, or that seminaries' primary aim is the spiritual & intellectual formation of theotropic clergy....But I'm not pessimistic: millions of Christians are theotropic. In a meeting a few days ago, a pastor said naturally (v. piously), "What is God doing?" Later in the meeting, "I wonder what Jesus would say to us about this?"

2 Theotropism can be absent, weak, or pathological (as obsession/evasion). Theological education should include regular (monthly?) 1:1 theotropic counseling, spiritual direction, or whatever else it might be called. A compass that does not point steadily to magnetic north is worthless; so is a pastor whose life does not point steadily, "naturally," to God, what God has done, what God wants, what God will do. Seems like a platitude; sad that it isn't....A congregation knows, feels, whether the pastor is a compass or a weathervane. (One reason the country is now jittery is that Bush is a weathervane: [to David Frost] "I'll do whatever is necessary to get elected.")

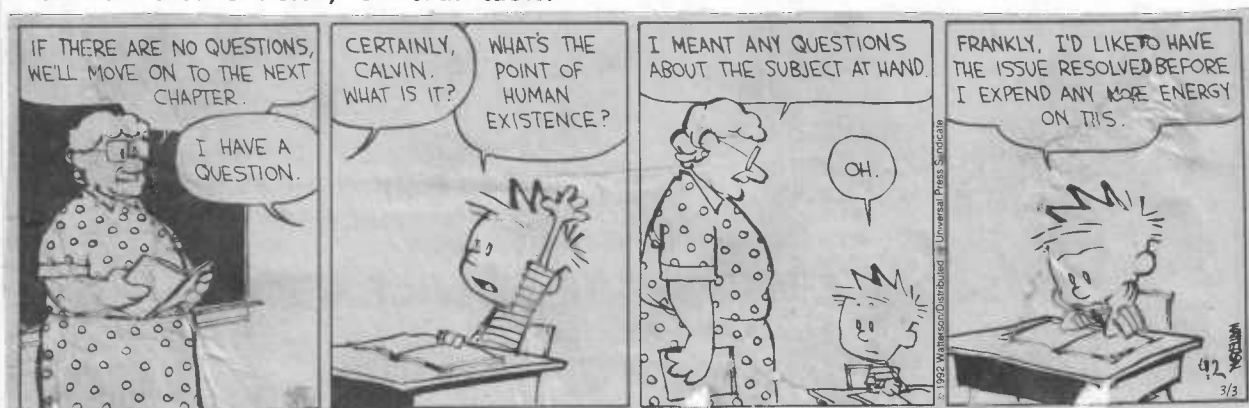
3 Alternative tropisms self-cancel, are dead ends. The ironies here are almost without end. Turning toward, attending to, focusing on "progress" has led to many regresses, such as overpopulation & massive environmental threats. Eco-historical determinism (Marxism) focuses on the means of production, & production dries up! Focus on the individual as sacred, & the individual turns multivalently obscene. Focus on the arts, & meaning leaks out of the life of the esthete gone narcissistic. How does the goal of virtue, righteousness, goodness hypertrophy? As moralism, legalism, self-righteousness, & pressure on others (by legislation, where possible) to conform to one's own moral-ethical motives, values, & norms. And the claim to possess & turn toward the truth tempts one to the untruth, the error, of naming as actionable error whatever fails to fit into one's paradigm. Well, what about turning toward "love"? "Love" is protean, & making it central soon transmogrifies it from an idealistic start into some swamp of stuckness unrelieved by faith & hope. And what becomes of "justice & peace"? It can become an all-consuming, irrational drive spawning new injustices & unwittingly factoring in on the side of tomorrow's actual war in its antiwar cries against today's possible war.

4 Passion leads positively toward self-control & negatively toward addiction. We want all seminarians to be passionate souls; & the more they are so, the more they need a theotropic counselor. For passion unguided is the enemy of what the PB calls "a right judgment in all things." Puppy love pants from one infatuation to the next, but it's not funny when you're no longer a puppy. (Not funny to the puppy either, but that's another story.) Spiritual counseling helps one sort out the big ones from the little ones, gain a mature sense of proportion.

5 Of course the sorting, the reflection, the praying needs to go on also in solitude, which is hard to convince today's harried seminaries of the need for.

In *THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE*, Morton Kelsey has a memorable analogy on this: "Someone has said that the lives of most persons are like jewelry stores where some trickster has mixed up the price tags. The diamonds are priced at next to nothing, and some worthless baubles at thousands of dollars. Unless we stop business as usual and take stock, we are likely to end up in bankruptcy. So long as the store is crowded with people, there is no chance of taking inventory and putting things to rights. We must close the doors and take the time alone."

6 As you can see, Calvin is asking a wrong question. Not wrong for him: it's so right for him, he's so ready for it, that he can scarcely bring himself to think of anything else. But a wrong question for The System, which at the moment is requiring his mind to be tangent not to the universe but to "the subject at hand." What about the subject at heart? Today brings the dismal news that a mother of five in our town has the law coming down upon her for teaching her children at home with emergent curricula--subjects emerging to meet each particular child's readiness, ie questioning: the law requires her to submit a written curriculum ahead of time! How can her wisdom be applied to theological education? Could the functions of academic counselor & theotropic counselor be combined in one person? If that's the ideal, as I think it to be, how train that person for this crucial, central task?



7 The basic unit of seminary education should be a small spiritual-intellectual readiness group. Easy to say what I mean, almost impossible to pull off. I mean a group of not more than twelve who are spiritually compatible (being of about the same level of spiritual maturity, at about the same junction in spiritual pilgrimage) & of about the same level of intellectual maturation.

The second spec is easy: the particular degree-program is a rough indicator of intellectual development. The first is difficult, for so many advance intellectually (1) without spiritual progress, or even (2) regress spiritually as they've been developing their analytic-constructive powers. A story on this:

Beginning a one-year doctoral seminar, I asked that each of the twelve "tell us the story of your conversion, whether or not you familiarly use this word to describe one's decisive turning to God." "Turning" is the metaphor in Latin (*con*) *versio* as well as in Greek (ἐπι)στρόφη (*[epi]strophé*, the second element being the same root as the second element of *[theo]tropion*) & in Hebrew *teshuvah*. Since the NT word *usu.* means "turning toward so as to pay better attention to" & in Christianity acquired (M&M.246) the "deepened meaning" of conversion, I could have asked my students to "tell us the story of your decisive attention-paying to God, when it became clear to you that for you Jesus is 'the true & living way' [Jn.14.6]."
Result? Two told their deeply moving stories, & ten resented the question because, said they, they had no conversion story to tell: they were not spiritually compatible with the two & me. Seminaries should be open to the once-born, but churches languish spiritually when only a minority of the clergy--1/6th, in this case--are twice-born. Kierkegaard's question: how convert church members into Christians? How can seminaries convert or screen out the once-born, a more important screening out than of the intellectually ungifted?

8 "Many Pearls, Few Threads," your article is titled. You well survey the

complexities of our pluralistic situation ("many pearls") & the options for seminary curricular integration ("few threads"). The current contextualistic fad is a cop-out on theological issues (as you say) but also on the issue I worry over in §7, viz the double-readiness problem.

You mention your irritation at Association of Theological Schools conferences: "do they [the contextualistic seminary professors] cultivate a new polytheism in order to get their own contextual godlets recognized in society's pantheon?" I began teaching in seminary $\frac{1}{2}$ c. ago this upcoming semester, & I've seen come & go waves of what I call in this Thinksheet's title "alternative tropisms," enthusiastic turnings to God-surrogates: (1) **Bibliotropism**, bibliolatry, a turning to the Bible as perfect answer-book, inerrant oracle, magical papyrus. How different the feel when the reader says "Let us listen *for* the Word of God"--different from "Let us listen *to* the Word of God"! (2) **Psychotropism**, theological psychologisms, beginning as an early-'30s Manhattan phenomenon (May, Blanton, Peale, Fosdick), with Jung as latterday high priest. "Pastoral counseling" is important, but this movement made it central to the seminary curriculum. (Jung's Easternish fudging of "psyche" & "Psyche" comports better with Campbell's dilettante mythism & other secular human-potentialisms than with the biblical message.) (3) **Sociotropism** has taken many forms from "the Chicago school" through unsorted Marxisms to the present contextualism. As psychologism shifts attention from God to the psyche however mysticized, sociology supplants God by looking to human interaction networks as the *locus teneus* of energy, power, meaning, value, & hope (Durkheim being at the fountainhead of this shift). (4) **Physiotropism**, the turning from God to "nature," a shift our public schools made long before "naturalistic theism" & "process theology" hit the seminaries. (I was at the U. of C. during the transition, before all the founders of "the Chicago [socio-historical] school" were deceased & while the founders of "the Chicago [ontological-naturalistic] school" were just tooling up. For me, the cultic competition was delightful, bracing! Both sides tried to avoid the G-word, "G-o-d." Eg, my diary entry for $\frac{1}{2}$ c. ago today remarks of a that-day chapel talk by a professor "who indulged in the famous indoor sport of getting thru a devotional meditation without mentioning the name of God. At times this may be the more effective approach: but not *all* the time, or the people will fail to discern a religious motivation & intention." An indoor sport of mine, as I was in the octet, was to ask visiting preachers, before we processed, this: "Most of our chapel talks are atheist. Will yours be, too?" Of the 60 men [sic] then teaching religion on campus, all were Christian in background & few were converts [twice-born]. I loved them all & learned from them all: I did not condemn them then, nor do I now. I was then as I am now, not fundamentalist but evangelical, earnestly striving to be open to all light, knowing that as all love points to one Love, all light points to one Light [$\phi\omega\varsigma\ \phi\omega\tau\iota$ *phos photi*]. Call it evangelical pluralism, if you like. I like.) (5) **Thumatropism**, the habitual turning toward the "victim," the construction of salvation as the deliverance of "the [societally] oppressed"--generally, liberationism. Worthy aims, equitable land-distribution, equal opportunity across gender-race-religion divides, that sort of thing. A whole religion is rigged up out of one biblical strand, with such *loci* as Is.61.1-2b qtd. L.4.18-19, & Gen. 1.27/Gal.3.28. Great scriptures, worthy of assiduous-continuous attention. But this religion is an alternative tropism, taking a means, viz justice, for the end, which in the overall biblical perspective is liturgically the praise-glory of God & politically theocracy ("Father, your rule-reign-realm-kingdom come, your will be done on earth"). The question for all tropisms is this: what do you turn toward "naturally," habitually, as a flower turns toward the sun & a compass needle toward magnetic north? If it is not God but some creature, some earthly good, that creature, that good, may become an entrypoint toward "heaven" (ie, God), a waysign toward the divine, a mirror of the transcendent, a sacred tree down which the holy may come like lightning. As sacred to the soul, every tropism is sacramental in the order of common grace & potentially instrumental to special grace. (6) **Geotropism**, the displacement of holiness from God to the earth, reversing biblical religion, which displaces "idolatry" (the holiness of creatures, including the

earth) with devotion to God. The roots of this recidivism, for that's what it is in the West, are (1) the desire to "get with" the ecology movement & (2) a panicky feeling about humanity's bad news to the biosphere. I'm appalled that so many Christian leaders are focusing on the biological danger rather than on the theological loss (public-school condom-distribution being a parallel case as it focuses narrowly on the danger to a few to the neglect of the damage to the many). Atheist Carl Sagan has euchred gobs of ecclesiarchs into signing on to his "the earth is sacred" movement to combine science & religion against ecocide--a good end with a biblically-theologically unacceptable means (as Sandinista land-redistribution was a good end, but the three RC priests in the cabinet had no Christian business signing on to the Sandinista constitution, which uses "history" as an atheist-marxist displacement of "God"). Theotropism must counter this dangerous alternative tropism with the affirmation that (1) we are not the earth's (it's not divine), (2) the earth of not ours (we are not God), (3) as of the earth, we are not sacred, (4) we are fellow-creatures within nature, (5) God assigns us to be worker-trustees (stewards) of our fellow-creatures, whom he owns as he owns us, (6) as responsible stewards, we are accountable to God for how we treat our fellows (human beings & other creatures)--as a cowhand is accountable to the owner for the way the cattle are treated. The biblical doctrine is clear, but the scene is muddy because so many Christian leaders are listening up harder to the world than to the Word. (7) **Ethnotropism** is holophrastic for the spread of self-centering ("-centric") races, tribes, nations, gender subgroups (eg, feminists, womanists, iron-john-ists), sexual-preference groups, ideologies, & school cultures each claiming that the most important human distinction for its members is that between the group & the rest of humanity. Every one of these self-pleading & privileged-thinking groups is a tropism alternative to theotropism, for which the most important human distinction is between human beings who habitually turn toward God & those who don't ("God" here being holophrastic for the Transcendent in the world's religions, as well as specific--as almost always in my writings--to the Christian God). Jon Levenson puts it well (p.141): "Diversity" & "pluralism" are "increasingly hollow" as more & more they function as "code words for an ideology in which certain accidents of birth or early upbringing--race, gender and sexual instinct--are thought to signal the most important human differences." P.146: Postmodern, antiliberal, "politically correct" movements evade self-scrutiny & the hermeneutics of suspicion they lavishly use on outsiders, use as truth-test conformity to verbal rituals that indoctrinate instead of educating, punish violations of group-defined "consciousness" (eg, violaters of rigid "inclusive language," a hallmark of "feminist orthodoxy"). What Barbara Wheeler says of seminaries (p.136) applies even more to these movements: "All seek to achieve something...and for that purpose they develop intense cultures that pattern and invite certain views and behavior and are hostile to others."

9 You rightly say that "the contextualists [with their relativism, power analysis, sociology of knowledge, & hermeneutics of suspicion] end up sabotaging theology and ethics rather than reinterpreting them" (p.151, underlining mine). Globalization (increasing awareness of the existence & potential contributions of nonEuramerican churches) need not harden into globalism (the relativistic-egalitarian claim); evangelism & dialog with other religions are not necessarily mutually exclusive; & "liberating solidarity with the oppressed" need not preempt proper attention to the classical theological disciplines. The four motifs need not become warring alternative pedagogies. Need not, but oh the temptation to partisanship, strife, & consequent impoverishing "specialization"! (1943 Chicago Divinity School debate with Bernard Loomer, who wanted the school to specialize in process theology, I claiming that any specialistic narrowing in a seminary deprives its students, he finally shouting "You never should have been let in this place!")

10 In a Bible group a few days ago, a highschooler said to me, "The Bible has so much to say about light!" Then he added, reflectively, "and darkness." Not much about natural light, the kind the heliotrope responds to, but decisional light, the kind our wills, if they choose, bend toward. Some folks bend so

persistently toward the Light that little attentional energy is left for conventionality. They are unconventional without being anticonventional. Jn. Woolman, eg, an eccentric of uncommon common & uncommon sense (eg, on pro-human means of production of essential material possessions, basically by one's own labor & convictionally without slave labor). This gem from him (d.1772): "There was a care on my mind so to pass my time as to things outward, that nothing might hinder me from the most steady attention to the voice of the true Shepherd."

Contrast the **autotropism** of the Baby Boomers (WSJ 24 Feb 92): "spoiled, cynical, and self-centered." No all, of course, thank God! But as the first generation to grow up with television (which, except for paid televangelism, censors God out) & without religious education (the Sunday-school movement in steep decline, religious ritual in the home having disappeared, & our public schools allergic to religion), it's not surprising that they are religion-ignorant & God-amnesiac. How understandable, then, that the spiritual impulse curves back on the self (=narcissism, another word for autotropism), the moral impulse running to libertinism & utopianism ("passionate intensity," in a wider sense than W.B.Yeats meant it). Their negativity toward Western religion, what little they knew of it, did not prevent their egocentric dabbling in Eastern religions & neoEastern cults. Their suspicion of institutions, confirmed in the turbulent '60s, disinclines them to invest themselves in politics (which shrinks the range of appeals effective in electoral campaigning) & in religion (which shrinks the range of appeals effective in evangelism). But now, chaos in their personal & public lives is combining with a spiritual hunger "self-esteem" has been unable to satisfy, & Western religion is beginning to look good to not a few of them. They make up the spiritually wistful majority in many seminary studentbodies today, & they are more in need of an academic-theotropic counselor & a readiness group (§4-6, above) than were former generations.

11 As the theotropist matures, the weight shifts from the conscious-decisional to the unconscious-habitual. If one must make an effort to think of God, then God is a metaphor for earthly realities. But if it has become "natural," "second nature," to think of God, then the world is metaphoric, "sermons in stones, books in the running brooks." Since it takes 3/4 sec. for the neuromuscular loop, it's said of the giant slalom that "if you have to think about it, you lost." As it takes hundreds of hours of practice to "let the body take over" in slaloming (or in playing a musical instrument), it takes hundreds of hours of spiritual conversation (with one's academic-theotropic counselor, with one's fellow-students, & with faculty, as well as outside the seminary) to let the soul take over, till the soul becomes habitually theotropic--a condition that should be at the top of the list of requirements for seminary graduation.

12 But come now, would there be a graduation if sainthood, "praying without ceasing," the effectual continuous practice of the Presence, were a requirement? And aren't some more spiritually gifted than others? And aren't some neurotically theotropic? (A patient of F.Perls had a God-fixation from internalizing a pattern of self-cancelation that took the form of nagging (GTV.161). Fritz: "Who is the nagger? The director, the pusher." Patient: "God. (resentfully) Your sins are all your fault, but your virtues are gifts of God.") Then there's the humours theory of personality, popular in the Middle Ages & the Renaissance, the physiological dominance of a particular trait (say, theotropism) slotting you into a personality type. Ben Jonson's dramatis personae are more types than individuals: "Some one peculiar quality / Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw / All his affects, his spirits, and his powers, / In their confluents, all to run one way."....I adduce all these qualifiers as modulators of my program of theotropism, which I would not reduce to magic or rob of mystery.

13 A healthy theotropism is not escapist (mysticizing, archaizing) but engaged, involved in struggling toward & receiving "new creation" (Ro.8.18-25; 2Cor.5.14-6.2; "this one thing I do," Phil.3.14). Fulfilment theologies such as Teilhard's & Rahner's sweep the whole universe along in an ecstatic synergism with conscious theotropists. The alternative tropisms will miss history's denouement.