

## THE THEOLOGIZATION OF AMERICA

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

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

Phone 508.775.8008

Noncommercial reproduction permitted

As I was hanging the holey (not holy) 8'x11' flag, now in my family's fourth generation, early this morning--day 1 after the U.S. Supreme Court's fetus-fetishistic handing down, eroding women's freedom--it occurred to me that the Court is accepting an increasing number of "theological" cases (both meanings of "theology": dealing with ultimates, & [the humorous secular meaning] confoundingly complex). How are the Justices doing as theologians? and the people? And how shall religious folk & our religious institutions respond to this theologization of America, this being more & more confronted with issues requiring to be addressed viscerally-philosophically-ethically-religiously-institutionally?

1. Look at the Court's theological confusion. Within a few days, it handed down these decisions: it's OK to exhibit a menorah (symbol of Judaism) if the "secular" word "Liberty" is used with it; it's NOT OK to exhibit a creche (only indirectly a symbol of Christianity, the direct symbol being the cross); it's OK to burn the flag, symbol of freedom, sacrament of the civil religion; it's NOT OK for a woman to be free to decide her mother-destiny; it's OK to execute children & retardates, but not to exercise the freedom to die (by refusing food & drink). While the Court reflects the citizenry's confusions, it's managing to add to them.

2. Dukakis stupidly let Bush win the Pledge of Allegiance "thing" (as the Bushism goes). Anthropologists document that viable societies have (verbal) rituals conjoint with (actional-ceremonial) rites centering in (material) sacraments protected against violation-desecration (by tabu/legal sanctions, punishments). Nonparticipants are, at least to the extent of their nonparticipation, nonmembers of the society (as were those early Christians who refused the vow-&-incense to the "genius" of the Roman Emperor). What did D. have to counter B. with? Nothing positive. Just something negative, viz teachers' right not to use the P. of A. (ie, freedom from the ritual). D. is a dupe of the neo-libertarian notion that freedom transcends ritual-rite-sacrament. That is a plank in the platform of anarchism. What obscures the anarchism of the ACLU ilk--& what differentiates it from the anomic "wilding" type of anarchy--is the protestation of certain "values" & *the sacralization of the First Amendment*, which is as sacrosanct-inviolable to them as the flag is to the AL-VFW. (The negative reason I favor a flag amendment is that it would erode the First Amendment, which for secular America has come to function as the Creed of the Enlightened Individual.)...NOTE on this anthropological use of "sacrament" (which has a technical use in Christianity): RHD<sup>2</sup> says "a sign, token, or symbol"; "something regarded as possessing a sacred character or mysterious significance." A "rite" is "a customary observance or practice"--in the case of the flag as sacrament, the P. of A. & the designations in....

3....the Flag Code (Public Law 829, 77th Congress). Odd that there's been, as far as my information goes, no referencing of this law in the present flag flap, the flag flapping in the breeze of public & governmental debate. Most Americans seem unaware that federal law, not just custom, forbade flag-disrespect till the Supreme Court announcement last week. Why? Because the flag law is toothless, sanctionless, without attached punishments. The law was: "no disrespect"; "never touch anything beneath it" (such as the floor last month in the Chicago Museum of Art); if burned when useless, the burning to be "dignified"; no competition for flag honor (so, eg, the "Christian" flag must be in inferior position--on the U.S. flag's right if in chancel, the reverse if in nave or narthex)....As a pastor, I (1) rejected the very idea of a "Christian" flag & (2) refused to lead worship if the U.S. flag were desecrating the sanctuary. Why? Because the U.S. flag is the central sacrament of an alien religion, viz Americanism, which however, as "the civil religion," is my second religion. First things first: no American flag in God's house. (I hid the flags in the church attic when I became pastor. Yes, the AL & VFW gave me trouble, but my people had the good sense to support me even though most of them thought I hadn't shown good sense in "making a big fuss over little or nothing.")

4. I shouldn't have been amazed, but was, that the settled opinion on the Left has been that what the flag stands for is honored by letting the citizenry freely disrespect it. That nutty notion requires ignorance not just of religion but also of anthropology. Everywhere & always, fear is an element in respect. Police unfearful are unrespected;

automatic weapons in criminal hands are making the police less feared, less respected, & more dead. As human beings, we have a need to be loved & to love; as citizens, we have a need to fear (the consequences of our violating laws) & to be feared (by law violators against whom we, as dutiful citizens, use legal recourse--eg calling the police when we notice a house being broken into ["Neighborhood Watch"]). ....Why do Christians tend to have an unhealthy & utopian disdain for fear? Partly because of the biblical counsel of perfection, "Perfect love casteth out fear," there being "no fear in love." Illogically, many Christians overextend to "no fear in respect." Another unhelpful "Christian" view: there's no place for a civil religion since "Jesus paid it all." This leads to the denial that the civil religion is a religion, a position that weakens Christians in their insisting that the secular humanism which reigns in our public schools is a religion....We need a flag amendment to overrule the Supreme Court & teach fear of the flag by imposing tabus-laws with teeth. Forget about "teaching children morals" if the society doesn't teach them healthy civil-religious fear. ...Authentic authority, however, combines, fear (of retribution for violating society's tabus-laws), love (of one's society-country-nation, & therefore desire to obey the rules), & freedom (from societally unnecessary restrictions, as spelled out in the Bill of Rights & its sequels). In a "natural" society, all this is directly warranted and sacralized by a single religion, that of the authorities (secular & religious, where not combined in a single functionary) & of the people. In an (ethnologically) "unnatural" society like the USA, the authorities are artificially split into sacred (leaders of the people's religion[s]) & secular (political leaders in their political functioning)--the former, under separation of church from state; the latter, under separation of state from church. Each type of society, natural & unnatural, has its own set of de/stabilizing factors. The natural type tends to despotism, from its one-party/one-religion suspicion of dissent & intolerance of pluralism: the unnatural type tends to anarchy, from its distrust of power, its sacred & secular hieratic rivalries, & its moral-ethical latitudinarianism (the civil religion serving as the stabilizing counterpoise to this ever-threatening chaos--& thus, in our society, the importance of the Flag Code & the Pledge of Allegiance).

5. The separate histories of legal & sacred hermeneutics should help each other face the new world. Both include the tension between rigorism & circumstantialism, strict & loose constructionism, fundamentalism (literalistic or "original intent") & modernism, & individual & societal focus. Interpreting Bible & Constitution, in our vastly altered circumstances, requires, for relevance, a comprehensive hermeneutic that neither church nor state has well developed. Those who like my biblical understanding vis-a-vis abortion & the environment praise me for careful exposition; the dislikers accuse me of having interpolated a strange god into Scripture. Those who like a Supreme Court decision praise the Court for its coherent expansionist Constitutional hermeneutics; the dislikers of a decision accuse the Court of jurisprudential imperialism. But it seems to me undeniable that the stretch from long ago to here & now amounts, to some extent, to a process of juridically amending the **Constitution**--as exegetical Christian & Jewish stretching amounts to a process of greater/lesser amending of the **Bible**. A current irony is that the American Left has a fundamentalist, anti-amending attitude toward the First Amendment, as though it were untouchable--in spite of the 1942 "fighting words" Court unanimous decision (still the law of the land) qualifying, limiting, freedom of speech, which does not include freedom of expression to "inflict harm" or that "tends to incite an immediate breach of the peace....Such utterances are no essential part of any exposition of ideas."

6. As a society disintegrates, its sacramentals lose their **archetypal power**. At the present stage of our nation's permissive malaise, the Constitution should be interpreted in the interest not of the fetishistic individual (as the Court's current flag & fetus decisions) but of social cohesion, a hieratic function of the Court in our civil religion. Translation: The Court is theologizing America, but not to my liking. In my biblical theology, the fetus is not holy; in my civil-religion theology, the flag-burner is not holy. (On the national-anthem controversy here, see #2259.)

7. It's unbiblical to teach that the fetus is the incarnation of a soul. But the flag is the incarnation of our national spirit, & deserves better treatment than the Court's.