

AF FROM WILLIS

31 Oct 77, the day of gnostic-chthonic creatures!

On the reverse of this sheet

7. Calling Yosso a psycho is a cheap shot that would have knocked out all the biblical prophets, including Jesus, whose officialdom opponents thought the situation never so urgent as did the prophets. Mel flares up with indignation and anxiety when talking about "the fulness [shortness] of time" our species has to learn internal communication. He just may be right, instead of sick.

1. As I've just returned from leading a Kirkridge retreat for a group that has been gnostic-leaning and wanted me to bring an antignostic evangelical witness [on which see the NT balance, #1012], I'm mystified that some of you thought me taken in by Mel Yosso's purile gnosticism! I've written scores of thinksheets against gnosticism, and you've received a number of them: how could any of you think me a gnostic dupe? The NT, centering axially in Jesus, listens to the cries of the world and the claims of the cultures old and new: I'm for that anti-gnosticizing/anti-judaizing balance, and have been for 30 years. I feel hurt that any of you could think me compromising in the gnosticizing direction, and even could imply I'm pimping for a two-bit gnostic.

2. Yosso knows very well my evangelical witness, and that I'm committed to standing in public over against his gnostic witness while approving his minimalist drama as an art form enabling transcultural communication. In our NONpublic AF meeting, I expected the other members of AF to come forth with a muscular Christian witness against Mel's gnosticism--and all I saw was flab: none of you said a word for Jesus! I'm ashamed of you. Of course I could have asked Mel not to witness to you, but only to speak of his art-communication matrix; but would that have been authentic, so to tie his hands? I let him at you, rather, "raw," expecting you to be Christian instead of only nice--and I'm disappointed in you.

3. Antignostic though I be, credit where credit is due. Here are some benefits from gnostics. The types of gnosticism are in the first column:

<i>type</i>	<i>example</i>	<i>value to Christians and the world</i>
esthetic	Yosso	a cool dramatic frame for transcultural dialog
philosophical	Whitehead	the scientific-process model projected for cosmological illumination
religious	Wieman	Whitehead's model extended, theologically, to "the person-making process" as definition of God
historical	Wm. Irwin Thompson	communities reliving the primordial roots as the remythologization of history
scientific	Teilhard	telic convergence as scientifically observable
educational	Murphy, Michael	the mystic celebration of the moment
therapeutic	Jung	eidetic exploration of the inner world.

4. McLuhan's "The medium is the message" would prove, if true, that Yosso is more enemy than friend of us Christians. But Mel's gift of minimalist drama is not essentially tied to his gnosticism, any more than "meditation" belongs to the Maharishi. Nor need Mel's artform be viewed as antiparticular, a gnostic transcendence [as he views it] of particular traditions: I've used it in Christian groups as the cool medium it is--like the mandala #1021 ["If you can read this, you're doing it."], in contrast to the hot medium #1023 [Rembrandt's "Head of Christ"], both used in the most recent meeting of MidCareer and, in that connection, both seen by you at the most recent AF meeting.

5. How witness to Mel and his community, Greenwich Village and the doldrumized art community? The Action of God in Jesus Christ, and our response thereto, is axial for our attention and action. What is the alternative to saying "yes" when we can to the products of that world, so that we can say "Jesus" with some hope of being heard?

OVER

AN OPEN LETTER TO MEL YOSSO

Dear Mel--

Since this letter is being written only a few hours after your 26 Oct 77 meeting with us the NYTS Administrative Faculty, whose next meeting is the 9th of next month, what I've written here is only jottings of impressions I have from the meeting and occasional comments of my colleagues.

1. What you and I intended was more exposure than demonstration, as the unicultural situation (NYTS being not only Christian, but in its very existence Jesus-promoting) did not lend itself to demo as much as do most of the situations Transculture is designed for (e.g., excellent for my U. of Hawaii students, with need to feel, instead of only think, their way inside each others cultural skins). But AF is even more narrowly unicultural: we nine have extensive exposure to Western higher education; and while I can't imagine using Transculture in AF, I have used it productively in some of the NYTS programs, particularly store-front and MidCareer Exploration.

2. My fault: When I saw that you were being given the polite treatment, and that my colleagues were not about to break through into real dialog, I should have switched roles from co-expositor to questioner, asking you the questions I felt they had but were loth to raise. The subtitle of this letter signals the general area of questioning which should have surfaced, by me since not by my colleagues. [In church work, we have a saying for this phenomenon that makes so many church meetings so unreal and therefore so soporific: "The real meeting comes after the meeting," out on the street and on the way home. Confronted with this evasive behavior, church members usually present as their motive for being nice in the meeting the biblical virtue of kindness. We now have a little black box called the "Consensor," by which people can honestly and, on a TV screen openly, and immediately report their feelings and convictions; it was used last Sunday for the first time in a church meeting.]

3. Our fault: When we found the response so poor, we should have tried, on the basis of material already presented, to elicit responses of other types than critical (having failed to elicit critical, i.e., hard-questioning, responses). Wrongly, I had assumed my colleagues would engage you, and was unprepared for the meeting's deadness. Understandably, you went on to provide more illustrations of and comments on Transculture, but that only snowed them. After the meeting, one of them, with words from another, insulted the group by saying that the meeting dynamic was verbal rape--the insult being that rape is an act of the stronger on the weaker, and I do not consider my colleagues, individually, weaker. To continue the metaphor, what makes rape cases so difficult, according to traditional jurisprudence, is the problem of determining distributive guilt: how seriously did the victim try to resist the crime? The group today was guilty of nonresistance. But the accusation of "verbal rape" has a more serious, even somber, aspect. As Ervin Goffman and Peter Berger indicate, subcultures tend to develop a style that is self-sanctioning, operating as a self-scaling system that functions, chiefly unconsciously, as exclusionary. Minorities may maintain their subcultures, but persons entering institutions of the majority culture are under relentless pressure, chiefly unconsciously, to conform; and the same is true of individuals whose genes, permitted natural "potential" development, are dissonant with the culture or subculture, which defines the behavior, again chiefly unconsciously, as deviant--so primitive cultures remain primitive by ostracizing all forms of dissent, including creativity; so operates the NYC School System, against innovations. (A rabbi friend of mine, ministering to Stoic-goy-aping yids, uses upperclass goy style--except when at home; and jokes with me about it. If Jews could be taught this en masse, antisemitism could be eliminated in one generation--though the effort would be better put into attacking the tyranny of majority style--maybe with TranSTYLE!)

4. For the integrity of our community, we Christians must resist the two extremes visible in the NT, viz. gnosticizing and judaizing, yet be open to learning from all. While you are a gnostic, I consider your Transculture method as a tool separable from the metaphysics by which you exposit it (whether or not the gnostic metaphysics actually grounds your method, for you). Last week we won the federal case against TM in the public schools, on ground that it's not a tool in practice separable from Hinduism. Not I, but some of my colleagues, are wondering about Transculture....