

"JESUS CHRIST--THE LIFE OF THE WORLD":

Some Discursive Theses toward WCC 1983 Vancouver --- Elliott #1729

*Underneath these statements shaped for discussion lie some long-standing convictions and concerns of mine--neither of which can be read off the surface.*

1. In the Semitism behind Jn.14.6, "life" is not a noun but the adj. "living": the statement's accent is Jewish, viz., on *halaka* (behavior, ethics, by metonymy "way"--thus, "the true way of living"). So the passage speaks not of having "life" but of Jesus' and our *going* and *doing*. In the NT drift away from Jewish conceptuality, Jn. is the most offensive of the Gospels--the one that falls, more than do the others, into a Gita-like gnosticizing of noun-signaled notions (as conotata) and philosophical reifications of abstractions (as denotata). Theologians of Christian commitment increase this distance from the Bible's root mentality by their constructive task: one can build with blocks (ideas) but not with balls (images). Some Third-World theologians (e.g., Thos. Thangaraj) suggest that poetry and song can act as a corrective to this tendency. (In the art of writing, the tendency is whimsically known as "substantivitis.") (Moff.: "I am the real and living way.")

2. In Jn., the religion is Hebraic but the theology is Hellenistic; and "life" is a vortex or holophrase or codeword for the divine action-gift-victory of God in Jesus the Sent One. (See esp.pp.117-243 of my 1943 ThD thesis, "'LIFE' in the Fourth Gospel: An Illustration of a Comprehensive Interpretive Methodology.") The life which is the Gospel's theme goes into action as love, which is the theme of 1 Jn., and as truth, the theme of 2&3 Jn. (pp.117f). The Joh. lit. (indeed, virtually the whole NT) is fighting a two-front battle: against slipping back into tribalism (the Judaizing tendency) and against wandering off into psycho-globalism (the gnosticizing tendency). The two-front war has continued throughout Christian history and will be fought at Vancouver in the camps of the various current Christian responses to what's going on today in human hearts and lives--for Christianity is the world's only comprehensive nervous system, picking up all the signals of earth's human experiencing.

3. Unlike the situation in Judaism, where the number of gods is 1, in Christianity the number is 1 or 2 or 3 or 0. Clearly 1 where the Jewish root remains alive in Christian faith and life. When the Jewish root loses vitality, 2 (as in Marcion, for whom the OT god was dead--see Jn. Knox's MARCION AND THE NT (Chic/42), whose 5th chap. I wrote in its rough form) or 3 (tritheism) or 0 (naturalisms, mysticisms, process, radical historicism, humanism). As the Jewish element in Christianity was a scandal to the alternative (to Judaism) tribalism called Nazism ("German Christianity"), it is a scandal to the rising one-big-happy-familism now motored by many energies (secular humanism, Marxism, global environmentalists, peaceniks, nukeniks, varieties of world-faithers). ...Wm. Johnston (THE STILL POINT: REFLECTIONS ON ZEN AND CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM (Fordham U./70), 187), e.g., fatuously sets aside the primordial fact that our Faith's doctrinal matrix first was and must remain a creation of Hebraic/Hellenistic dialog: Christianity "will find her encounter with the Orient no less enriching than her meeting with Greco-Roman thought."

4. In the '60s, we divided "the Movement" between militants (minority righters) and mystics (hippies) and mixed (Yippies). Today the militants are "liberationists," the mystics are "transformationists" (human-potential, neo-Buddhists, neo-Vedantists, etc.), and the mixed include the Black Muslims. ("Transformationism" mixes variously three elements: (1) personal change, bornagainness, becoming more "evolved," (2) the mystical permeation and thus spiritualization of society, and (3) the re-visioning of the religions--the last as in, above, Wm. Johnston, or in Jn. Cobb's BEYOND DIALOGUE: TOWARD A MUTUAL TRANSFORMATION OF CHRISTIANITY AND BUDDHISM (Fortress/82), which concludes that the Christian mission's first task in self-transformation by two-way osmotic encounter with the world's other faiths, Amida and Christ, e.g., being two names for the same reality.) As rhetoric must reduce reality to a motivationable size, a

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full-orbed theologian has no difficulty in displaying the particular reductionism of a particular promoter in a particular situation: any promoter is a heretic by defect, and may also be a heretic by excess. But the theologian is also a human being and a Christian and so has obligations in addition to this displaying. Too, the theologian may be a promoter or the thinkperson of a promoter. The theological display-task (as defined above) (1) belongs not only, though primarily, to professional theologians, and (2) will be as poorly done at and after Vancouver as was the case with previous ecumenical gatherings, by professional ecumenically-minded theologians.

5. As Marcion created a canon (the proto-NT) to displace the old canon (LXX OT), Christian ecumenism has developed a canonical world-speak as artificial as (and even more useful than) Esperanto. I learned this patois, together with its peculiar biblical exposition, in preparation for participation in ecumenical work (e.g., as president of the Ill. Council of Churches and as member of various committees and commissions at all levels from local to global). As a linguist, I have a better than average sense of the powers and limits of language. One limit of a language is that it communicates only to its own language group (so ecumenese cannot be expected to be understood by Christians nonparticipating in ecumenical gatherings). Another limit is that each language seduces its users into imagining that they are talking reality rather than only symbolics--a strong reason for insisting that education should include competence not only in more than one language but also in a language of a different language-group from that of one's own Muttersprache. And a third limit of a language is that it's fast forgotten when little used: I have to psyche myself up to read Dutch or ecumenese. Children love to invent a language adults can't understand: it's a delicious form of play, mystifying to outsiders. Ecumenical word-play cannot be entirely explained by this children's game...but sometimes, when hearing or reading ecumenese, I get the feeling that I'm not in on an adult activity (unless perhaps as a psychiatrist listening to schizophrenics). NB: Ecumenese is a guild-language development from Basic Christian (cf. Basic Eng.), which I speak (including Father, Lord, and a number of other terms--all offensive to radical feminists). Guild languages are for doing business within the guild, not with the world. They have their own *Denkart* (thought-style), *Denklehre* (internal logic), *Denkbarkeit* (powers and limits), and *Denkzwang* (self-propelled trajectories of implicit and explicit intentions and goals).  
Connecting with what outside?

6. Theology is a stomach digesting foods old and new. That theology serves its religious community best whose digestive juices most effectively use all foods (challenges, issues, influences) the community eats. Ecumenese is one type of theologese, whose digestive juices connect G/community/world. So theology is the art of making persuasive connections: the theologian is a connector. In a student-initiated debate with a fellow professor (Carl Henry), I asked him to interpret 14 lines of Shakespeare I provided him. Assuming it was a sonnet, he gave a masterly interpretation...sheerly eisegetic, as I took the 14 lines from 14 places in Shakespeare. It takes one to know one: I am a master connector, so I don't trust any of 'em. Christian or Marxist or whatnot, they may be only wowing the booboisie with fancy impositions parading as exegesese, webs to catch anything that flies (so it's best to stay grounded). Further on this, see my #1600 on Rus. Hoban's brilliant spoof THE CONNECTION MAN.

7. CLUES TO HEARING/READING/DOING THEOLOGY: (1) It's *rhetorical*, persuasion-aimed, sanctional. When it slips into the 3rd person, it's philosophy pretending to be theology. And it's roots are in the divine rhetoric or mandate. (2) It's *agapaic*, more a form of love (bhakti) than of logic (jnana). When it loses its central love-energy, it's philosophy pretending to be theology. (3) It's *heuristic-semantic*, driven to discover/create sense/meaning for the advance of the virtues--Jewish (holiness), Hellenistic (truth, beauty, goodness), Christian (faith, hope, love). Will reaches out to shape, mind reaches out to understand, love reaches out to embrace: this is my trinity of criteria for theology and theologese (including ecumenese).