

These stark Yankee words have an arrow quality. They were spoken in 1939, when I was in seminary, by Lee, father of Howard Spragg, who in 1941 was to become sort of a friend*of mine, and later--as executive of the United Church Board of Homeland Ministries--the person who confirmed that I had been dismissed, for radicality, from the employ of that institution (for which confirmation I hold no grudge against him, a man I've admired through the years and have thanked God for).... This thinksheet is a meditation on how hard it is to be a Christian, and how absolutely uninterested I am in being anything else, as I'm convinced that Christianity best melds reason and grace.

1. First, let's get "right" right. Here, in a formula I hope is not too difficult to unpack: "RIGHT" = action understood as obedience to "conviction," which = "opinion" (=experience + "reason") + "passion" (= life ordering/disordering "emotion," which is conscious "feeling"). But is this "right" always right in the sense of pro-human? No: instance Hitler. To be pro-human, this horizontal sense of rightness must be augmented by the vertical experience/conviction of "grace" (= the gift of a transcendent compassion at work in the world/heart)....Howard's father, and my father, were old Yankees in rationality + compassion: both reason and grace were ever-present when they said "right." When I was getting into ever deeper trouble from attacking (in print and on radio and TV) our military operation in Vietnam, which violated both reason and compassion, my father said (in a phone conversation just before my 3-hour WOR debate with America's most powerful rightist of the time, Major Bundy), "Give 'im hell." (For details of Howard's WWII stand and sequels, see the feature article on him in Jan/82 A.D. magazine.)

2. What's the metaphysics of the conviction that pro-human "right" is reason + grace? Or is it enough just to be pragmatic, arguing that reason/grace is the way life "works"? Pragma is not enough, for the reason that it's grace-less: it's nothing more than reason, reason projected--as calculation of consequence(s)--from future into present. "Reasoning" (which is reason with hair and skin, i.e., somebody using reason), without grace, cannot escape the ego-prison (which is, in my opinion, the most important tangency between biblical religion and Buddhism). We remain flatlanders till converted by, to, and for grace.

3. Two illustrations of the above truth from people I've known:

(1) A teacher of mine MORTIMER ADLER. In puberty a convert from Judaism to Aristotle, he tried till old age (1980: see Sept/80 interview, on his book HOW TO THINK ABOUT GOD: A GUIDE FOR THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY PAGAN, in BOOK DIGEST) to live by reason alone. "I've postponed this book for 50 years" because the God I could prove by reason was without a quality I need for living, viz., grace: "To go from a Supreme Being who is omnipotent and infinite, to one who's the just, merciful governor of the universe is too much to accomplish by reason alone," so he supplements with Jesus' double commandment of love (on which he preached in the church he attends occasionally "with my wife"). (The Jewish interviewer asked if this wasn't just Judaism; Adler said no, Jesus uniquely-radically was pointing to grace. Even Judaism + Aristotle is not enough, for neither really manages love for all.) "The supernatural virtues--faith, hope, charity--are given only by God's grace." (Interviewer: Why be godly if you can be a rational, decent human being without God?) Without God, "you do not cherish...(goodness) in your heart," so it exists only in your mind, not your life. I may yet become a Christian, closing "the gap between mind and heart."

(2) A student of mine ALFRED BLOOM, who converted from Judaism to Christianity and then to Buddhism. In his Harv.PhDhe showed the virtual identity of Paul's and Shinran's "grace" experience/conviction/preaching. He'd experienced both Judaism and Christianity as heavy, lacking the lilt of grace (which, objectively, neither does!). In *gratia/fides sola* (salvation by grace/faith alone), Shinran transcended* Buddhism and Paul Judaism and Luther Catholicism.

*And fellow-student.

*Without abandoning.