

THE SENSE OF STAIN:

THE RETIREMENT/REVIVAL OF THE PURITY SANCTION ----- ELLIOTT #1871

"I was sinking deep in sin,/Far from the peaceful shore;/Very deeply stained within,/Sinking to rise no more./Then the Master of the Sea heard my despairing cry,/From the waters lifted me,/Now safe am I./LOVE LIFTED ME...." This ol' gospel song mixes metaphors: I couldn't float because I was dirty! The song's dynamic is the dirt/love relationship, always and everywhere a prominent feature of evangelical Christianity. This thinksheet explores the more-than-a-curiosum fact that the fortunes of inner filth correspond with the fortunes of religion-type: liberal religion retires the purity sanction, which is revived each time evangelical religion is revived.

1. All vigorous cultures take transphysical purity seriously and tend to hot foci thereof: e.g., focus on the mind (no "dirty thinking"), on the mouth (no nonkosher eating), on the genitals (no "dirty sex"), or combos of these and other factors. In the positive mode, the holy place/time/person/ritual is to be kept "pure" from the "pollution" of nonpious use. All this has only an ambiguous relationship with the metaphor's physical base, viz., being physically clean--and all efforts to relate the latter to physical health are embarrassing rationalized props for the cultures purity/filth taboos.
2. When concern for transphysical purity weakens, concern for physical purity and its context (viz., asepsis) becomes stronger: most Americans sicken when they go abroad because America is the Aseptic Society, far more dedicated against body-pollution than against mind- and soul-pollution. And far more dedicated to "freedom" than to the avoidance of mind-pollution (e.g., commercial propaganda) or soul-pollution (e.g., pornography).
3. Biblically, soul-mind-body purity/pollution are one: "I am holy; therefore, be thou holy." Holiness and purity are not identical, but they are inseparable; and in spite of the bias of most of them against biblical purity/holiness, anthropologists are important illuminers of this relationship. (Jas. Muilenburg's masterful IDB "Holiness" begins: "The 'given' undergirding and pervading all religion; the distinctive mark and signature of the divine....the innermost reality" to which all other divine attributes are related.) While holiness has many aspects, the purity aspect tends to dominance when a tradition goes moralistic/legalistic--which is one form of evangelicalism, the other being charismatic. When evangelicalism goes liberal, the anti-energy of "obscenity" is largely transferred to known/supposed causes of social distress (e.g., great wealth is "obscene," "filthy rich" --"obscene" being from Latin for "dirt").
4. For its power, the purity sanction needs a community that feels clean/dirty about the same matters. Our present moral confusion in many life-areas weakens this sanction among those who live culturally rather than anticulturally; e.g., UCC's got problems here, Moonism does not....The central spiritual peril of purity-sanction use is an almost inevitable slide into blind arrogance: sex or the U.S. Government viewed as dirty, the very devil.
5. It wasn't entirely a good idea to stop talking about sex as dirty: a consequence has been that sex has gotten dirtier, more dehumanizing. Venessa Williams (ex-Miss Am.) was graduated from the same high school as our children: upperclass, with sexual "freedom." To her, "dirty pictures" did not exist, so she permitted nude lesbian poses. Under sexual "freedom," it's impossible to define "pornography": one cannot define nothing. So she became a prisoner of a false freedom.
6. In the distich Ps.51.10, having "a right spirit" correlates with letting God create in you "a clean heart." So, another ol' gospel song: "Are you washed in the Blood of the Lamb?" Purity is primarily not social-contract but divine/human relationship (so my PhD thesis has "the holiness sanction" under "spiritistic sanctions": Does the leader "spur with thoughts of the sacred and pure?" (P.185)). P. 171: "The longing for purity, forgiveness, communion, and inner power varies in

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intensity from time to time and from culture to culture. In the Hellenistic world it was very strong; and Christianity with its kerygma, differentia, and sanctions proved adequate to the longing. The religious desire took many forms, but Christian leaders reached out in love to meet them all. And this very struggle to meet human need was responsible for *l'infinie complexité* of the Christian ethic, which through its spiritism gave all willing men (*sic*: written 30 years ago!) a joyous sense of moral liberation and the hope of a new life."

7. Why did "purity" get such a bad name in liberal Protestantism? Some thoughts:

(1) Because, from enthusiasm for "righteousness" in nonliberal Protestantism, the domain of the impure because overextended, versus M.7.19 ("Jesus declared all foods 'clean,' (GNB) 'fit to be eaten'") and, more radically, Tit.1.15 ("To the pure all things are pure"). (NB: At this point in the thinksheet, Loree entered to say that some housecleaning I'd done was "not good enough" and "would have to be done over": cleanliness is relative, and my standard is too low for her.)

(2) Because rising compassion, beginning with the antiPuritans of N.Eng. (e.g., Hawthorne's THE SCARLET LETTER), overextended purity to the shrinking of the domain of the impure. On the Vanessa Williams scandal, letters to the editor divided between sock-it-to-her and how-about-a-little-compassion, with (my count) 2:1 in favor of the latter (as one'd expect in our permissive culture--Miss Am. committeemembers holding out--nostalgically?--for the earlier, nonpermissive, virginal image). I've no doubt that in the shakedown, it'll be clear that our over-indulgence in both personal and societal compassion will eventuate in a moral-ethical +: when in doubt (or confusion), lean toward generosity (though "To know all is to forgive all" is immoral and society-destroying). This statement identifies me as a (mainly) liberal Protestant.

(3) Because rising knowledge across the whole spectrum of science-aided disciplines (literary hermeneutics, biology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, history) has, thank God, eroded the old simplistic certainties which based former customs/codes/attitudes and energized these with the purity sanction (cleanliness, which on the negative side this thinksheet's title calls "the sense of stain"). E.g., anciently, these involved impurity: corpses, bodily emissions, physical and "mental" diseases (esp. leprosy), eating tabooed foods; as to the second, it was a powerful strand in the complex against male masturbation, a taboo that was itself insane.

(4) Because rising permissiveness, esp. sexual, overidentified "purity" with an old code of behavior thought, by liberals (secular and religious), to be no longer feasible or even moral--indeed, thought to be inhumane and insane. The heat got so high that virgins felt guilty of their (impure?!) virginity, and marital faithfulness seemed immature (so a number of couples I knew destroyed their marriages by reading as truth the O'Neills' OPEN MARRIAGE)...I do not say the old ways were better, but (1) they weren't, on the whole, as bad as (mis)represented, and (2) they weren't, on some matters, as bad as the present sexual situation in Am. NOW, we believe that perhaps 10% of marriages are "good"; THEN, we thought that perhaps 90% of sex-as-practiced was "bad." All nonmarital intercourse was bad, and a hellava lot of marital sex was more burden than lift to the relationship; about 90% of sex was "dirty," and (nuttilly extended) so "sex is dirty." One consequence: I married as a virgin and am still a virgin except to my wife. In biblical analogizing, YHWH models faithfulness to Israel, Jesus models faithfulness to the Church, and I model faithfulness to Loree--and the whole interconnection stands or falls together as a monotheism/monogamy interlock. Unfaithfulness is filth and guilt of soul-mind-body. (And the ordination of bisexuals, now promoted by my denomination, is a funny dirty joke: those open to bisexual action are intentionally committed AGAINST monogamy, and that's the category of bisexuals UCC is promoting.)

8. T.S.Eliot: "all shall be well.../...By the purification of the motive/In the ground of our beseeching." PhD, p.173: "In Jesus Christ the power and love of God are still available for this 'purification of the motive.' And historical research can provide light for the laundering of motives and sanctions." Forgiveness is a relation with God, purity is a condition in the present of God: God offers both.