

THE (IM)PLASTICITY OF "THE WORLD" ----- ELLIOTT #1898

My thesis in this thinksheet is simple:  $G^0$  plasticity:: $G^{10}$  implasticity. The deistic notion that God has absented ("G" to no power) so as to turn the shaping of the world over to us, vs. the notion that "all things" are current "acts of God" ("G" to the nth power), our role being to cooperate with God in a natural/human world in which we can "do our thing," shaping life to our purposes, is largely an illusion. These two philosophies struggle in the Bible (where the latter is the stronger by far) and in Christian existence today (where the former is the heart of "liberation theology"). CASE IN POINT: A meaty, just-published (Orbis/84) theological-liberationist tract, Vincent Cosmao's CHANGING THE WORLD: AN AGENDA FOR THE CHURCHES.

1. You don't have to be a deist to believe God is absent; being an atheist will do quite as well. But Cosmao is a deist (though of a flavor slightly different from that of the Enlightenment, esp. the French Revolution literature): "The people of God and all peoples engage in a process of self-liberation, thus becoming free to say that God is their liberator" (107). If they've liberated themselves, it passes me why they'd bother to say that somebody else did it: it'd be false modesty, in addition to violating the law of parsimony. He's a Dom. priest, but this logic is more what you'd expect of an old-fashioned Jesuit. Again: God's "absence insures history's fulfilment," and Christianity "can once again be the liberation movement it was at the start" (not taking power and so "running the risk of turning into a civil religion") (107).

2. Another parallel to the French Revolution: Rousseau's "noble savage" has become the atheist Marxist alongside whom Christians are to struggle for the revolution, confessing that they too are atheist (if a different sort: he's no help here). Here, "identification with the poor" has become identification with fellow-strugglers for the "liberation" of the poor even to the radical extent of adopting their "theology," i.e., the marxian antitheology.

3. Jesus gets coopted to Cosmao's thing, but it's hardly the Jesus of history. Cosmao "modernizes" Jesus into a plasticity radical in spite of the record's clarity that he was on the side of implasticity: the poor, and everybody else, could RECEIVE the Kingdom of God by repentance, but it is not given to humanity to "ACHIEVE" the Kingdom of God. But Cosmao (106) says "'The end of history' is a myth that we must free ourselves from if we are not to remain enslaved to visionary tomorrows." Quite astonishing, as he's as enslaved to the visionary tomorrow of "liberation" as Jesus was to "the Kingdom of God" as gift rather than our achievement! Yet he interprets L.4.16-22 and Mt.11.2-6/L.7.8-28 thus: "The Jews were convinced that some day God would enforce the reorganization of society, a society that had been structured in terms of inequality and injustice. To announce the arrival of that day was to arouse the poor so that they might achieve their rights and fulfil their dreams. It was to prod them to fashion a world in which their rights would be respected, even though it would take centuries." Here's revisionism with a vengeance: Jesus the visionary is revisioned into Zealot freedom-fighter (as I've often been accused of doing, and never did).

4. "The poor" are romanticized, almost sacralized. "The poor, who believe in God, make it possible for us to envision the worldwide revolution needed by us all" (106). And notice the internal contradiction in this (108): "God's revelation in history takes place in and through a praxis of liberation that includes resisting structural injustice and desacralizing everything that is not God." Everything (you notice) except "liberation"! Or that's not an exception psychodynamically, for "Liberation" functions in this book as holophrase for God.

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5. "Why all your put-downs on those who are trying to be 'good news to the poor'? What are you yourself doing to help them?" Nobody has ever socked it to me quite that way, so I take it as a voice from within reverberating from external voices....I have a (prophetic) duty to be negative, but I think not a (neurotic) need to be negative. The cause of the poor cannot be advanced by sentimentality parading itself as love (which is the situation when truth is sacrificed to "love"), any more than by cruelty parading itself as honesty (which is the situation when love is sacrificed to "truth"). I have had the good fortune of living, in the days of my years, with both types of sinners--and the evil fortune of having myself been both types. Now I'm trying hard, in the last days of my years, to balance the claims of truth and love--an effort that opens me from both sides to the charge that I am off-balance! To do this, I must tailor my message to my audiences. And, since my thinksheets audience is more apt to sin against truth than against love, in my thinksheets I seem more conservative than I am.

6. Without referring directly to either, Cosmao strands into his liberationism both Bonhoeffer's kenosis (Jesus as self--"emptying" model) and "secular theology" (with its heavy doses of sociology and anthropology). In Am. theology ("mainline," i.e., liberal), both of these strands tend to utopianism and triumphalism (noninstitutional); and this neoliberalism is now being countered by "Whoa!" neoconservatives (e.g., Novak and Neuhaus) as well as by "Out!" obscurantists (e.g., Falwell, who has his own brand of utopian triumphalism). In liberation theology such as that of Cosmao, all this comes down to a new utopian institutional triumphalism in which the institution is not the (RC) Church but the state reformed in the interest of ("with the option for") "the poor." The bottom line is, Will this turn out to be bad news for the poor, or good news? Nobody knows, but everybody history-conscious knows that nobody knows: past utopianisms have, as often as not, become new ways of grinding the faces of the poor. The Messiah delivers us; but Lord, deliver us from messiahs!

7. The Rev. Jim Jones of People's Temple was undoubtedly messianic, at first in the good sense and at the end in the most evil sense--a model of the ambiguity of utopianisms (messianisms). When liberation theology puts Is.61/L.4 at its heart, and interprets it as meaning that the poor need to be helped to become good news to themselves by revolt against their "oppression" (on the Exodus/Return models), we have a heady "Be your own messiah!" that has the same psychosociodynamic status as "Write your own Ten Commandments!" I'm persuaded of Gottwald's Yahwist peasant-revolt, but I'm dubious of liberationism's Marxist peasant-revolt (an agrarian extension of the original Marxist "revolution of the proletariat"). As did Lenin to E.E.Carr (later, a friend of mine) in the 1911 Stuttgart Communist Conference (which framed the specifics for 1917), Cosmao argues that an intermediate atheist period is necessary to sever the umbilical cord from the sacred state (state sacralized by church); but Communist (read, Leninist) "theology" got frozen into atheism: why should we expect otherwise this time around (say, in Nicaragua)?

8. Cosmao's slogan, "equality and justice," shows he's dreaming of Cockaigne, a never-never land whose preaching has always been bad news to the poor. Cockaigne visionaries, however, can never be caught: they escape through an infinite regress of "changed conditions" most of which are highly improbable, economically nonsensical, and politically unfeasible. Maybe I need to meditate on Elbert Hubbard: "A pessimist is somebody who's lived a long time with an optimist." But I know how cruel it is to preach IFD disease (idealism to frustration to despair).