

"CHRISTIANS FOR JUSTICE ACTION," A COMMENTARY ----- ELLIOTT #1932

This follows up on my #1931, which was proleg. to this commentary on the CJA document. Writing these two thinksheets is hard work partly because I'm more conscious than I used to be of the negative social sanction: "Is s/he (still) one of us?" When I was in a work-network, I didn't mind losing friends, as I had many of them but only one stomach: now I don't have as much "stomach for" saying things that might get me ostracized, excluded (by my most inclusivistic friends, esp!). I'm more conscious of, sensitive to, (Lionel Tiger) MEN IN GROUPS: when everybody's eating out of the same trough, everybody's eating (at least some) garbage...Now, any critical thinker will find (at least some) garbage in any "position," on any "side," as a member of any "party": it goes with the territory. Here, then, is my inner tension: while my desire to "stay in" has increased, so has my impatience with the (as I see it) "in" garbage. Just my metaphor, garbage, is enough to get me kicked out!...The same social psychology operates (to use Nicaragua as example) among Sandinistas ("ins," bureaucrats) and Contras ("outs," as CJA & BWF)...I'm more alienated from the "ins" than from you "outs": call me an independent--but are independents relevant to power? Perhaps at least when both "ins" and "outs" are irrelevant...Unfortunately--I hope not disastrously--Reagan understood all this much better than did Mondale: is either of them, though, really, on the street, more relevant than the other?...Today (18Feb85) I'm starting a Bible clinic in which will be all political viewpoints: the Bible's relevant...Now to seriatim COMMENTARY, the numbers referring to pp. in your document:

TITLE....As BWF accuses UCC of heterodoxy, CJA accuses UCC of heterodoxy: UCC only pretends, in its bureaucracy, to take up the preferential option for the poor (=, in CJA's lexicon, "justice," = "equality"). I must challenge this triplex synonymy even though my old Hebrew-and-Greek teaching assistant of long ago, Norman Gottwald, in his THE TRIBES OF YHWH, gives it learned support (: his peasant-revolt theory of the origin of Israel). I strongly affirm, of course, that all who submit to the biblical God are of equal standing in the divine Presence. What ecopolitical inferences, however, are to be drawn from this to the state (secular, pluralistic) is what's at issue (and where I have problems with Gottwald, CJA): is this theological conviction of direct, indirect, or no sanctional force vis-a-vis the general society/world? I must reject both the 1st and the 3rd positions....FURTHER:** Is prophetism's divine sanction pro-poor//anti-rich tactical (to secure the support of the poor), strategic (to contradict outward appearance, viz., God's preference for the rich, by proclaiming that the inner reality is the reverse), eschatological (to predict, as in Mary's Magnificat, the future reversal of fortunes)--all three? Something more? Something other? Little biblical study gets done on such questions: biblical study is "normally," usu., done "interestedly," to produce scriptural sanction for a party's point of view and angle of attack. I pray and hope that both CJA & BWF will help UCC to more mature and useful Bible study here.**FURTHER:** Locking "justice" into "equality" deprives the former of much of its rich suggestiveness and prejudges concrete cases (e.g., by the one-person-one-vote dogma more and more outsiders are now pressing on S.Africa--even the ABA!). From the history-of-religions standpoint, this is an instance of reductionism, the religious so transposed into the propositional-principled-ethical that the latter obtains the numinous force of the former, which is forgotten. (**INSTANCE:** Currently, I'm in debate with a wonderful, crusading eco-architect who's grateful for my support but wonders why I have to try to ram home my convictions with "all that man-and-god trivia." So, again, "liberation theology" easily slips into "liberation as theology" and then just "liberation" howsoever motivated--humanist, Marxist, biblical, or other.)....**FURTHER:** Would it not be more honest (though of less rhetorical umpfh) to say you're "pro-equality" instead of saying you're "pro-justice" (as**

OVER-

it'd be more honest for antiabortionists to speak of "pro-fetus" than of "pro-life")--both more honest and more accurate, for self-understanding and for confronting other parties/points of view?....FURTHER, even "equality" is no program, but only a code word for a set of attitudes with which to confront a multitude of questions/issues: how's it related to "equity" (an adjudicative rather than, as is "equality," a merely numerical concept)? (E.g., in the case of two radically differently mentally endowed children, it's unjust to treat them equally and just to treat them equitably, which is fair both to the individuals and to society (each person being helped to do her/his best); but the result is reproducing, in social distance, the bio-distance God created when passing out the genes; and when "justice" is defined as including the narrowing of social distance, equitable justice increases "injustice" in society.) (As to the question just what God had in mind in passing out the genes unequally, I put that right along with the question why God, instead of "justly" making men and women of equal physical strength, made men powerful enough to keep women physically in line. If one calls these nonsense-questions, one had better look to the ricochet: I once, in a woods, shot myself by accident-ricochet off two trees.)....Further: While we Christians affirm that Creator and Redeemer are one, we are, some of us, becoming a little easier on those early Christian theologians ("gnostics") who could not reconcile Creator and Redeemer. Our knowledge of both Creator ("science") and Redeemer ("social studies") has been growing, and we need for our religious ethics a more profound and complex view of God than the old Social Gospel had to offer--just as historical studies have forced on us a more complex "Jesus" (the figure in the Gospels). CJA's document seems to me unchastened on both these matters--i.e., the complexity of both God and Jesus.

P.1--Sometimes your "the people of Israel" is your direct addressee, viz., UCC; and sometimes it's USA. Since M.L.King, Jr. and Bob Spike, the distinction has been blurred (so in Sid Mead's A NATION WITH THE SOUL OF A CHURCH; and in A. Lincoln, whose God was more awesome, no less ethical, but far less clear in will than is the God of CJA). I think we bless neither church nor nation/world by being cocksure (1) what God wants and (2) what Wash. should do and (3) how the church(es) should stand vis-a-vis Wash. (government, i.e., power to coerce, at all levels). Ecclesial (organizational) religion has an uninspiring record of sword-wielding both with and against the civil arm, secular government. Prophetic religion is, fundamentally, prophets (persons, individuals), not prophetic organizations: on the spirit/institution balance, prophets are on the noninstitutional side. CJA is prophetic in confronting UCC; but is it prophetic in trying to turn UCC around to be itself prophetic? Is not every ecclesial institution dedicated to the "body" (of Christ), its health and prosperity ("church growth"), toward the liturgy of the whole creation (the priestly task)? Is it biblical to attack that? Constantinianism is our word for too-successful prophetism: the prophet cries out against, then takes over, then corrupts the institution. I think CJA's self-defined task needs critical examination in the light of Scripture and history.

P.2 seems to include a vague ref. to the Craigville Letter (to be worked on, I hope by all, including CJA, 4-6Sept85 ("Craigville II")). CJA, in hoping for new light, seems to me flip about old light. I like, however, what you say about church structure uncritically aping world structure.

P.4 speaks of "care for God's world," meaning an anthropo-ethic. But since we hold to God as Creator as well as Redeemer, we are called also --and increasingly!--to geo-ethics, of which CJA seems unconscious.

Shortsightedly, you're trying to be good news to a species that is increasingly bad news to the biosphere. Your priority is wrong.

MORE

This is a tough one because it requires a Copernican-like shift: as Mr. C. shifted the center from earth to sun, we must now (I'm convinced) shift our basic concern from humanity to the biosphere. And as the Bible was used to resist Mr. C., the Bible will be used to fight the recentering I believe God is calling us to....EXAMPLE: Should Cape Cod be inhabitable in the year 2,000? Depends on whether people are put first, or the aquifer: right now, it's people--but a shift is in process toward political action (1) limiting building-lots to a min. of 1 acre (effectively, without intending to, eliminating both the poor and the middle class) and (2) raising monies for government purchase of land to eliminate people entirely except for recreational purposes. What makes the shift shocking to us Bible-believers is that it's from "preferential treatment for the poor" to (unintentional) preferential treatment for the rich in the interest of the biosphere: the question "What's good for the biosphere?" takes priority over the question "What's good for people?" Fundamentalist Bible-believers (including, I fear, CJA, which on this matter is literalist and antiscientific) will yell against this new modernism. But what to do? My genes say I have another 20 years to live, and the just-published \$100,000 hydrogeologic study of our area says my drinking water then will not be drinking water or even cooking water if the population increase is not stopped N-O-W! Where does all this put me as an evangelical-liberal-radical Christian? Exactly where I'm put when I consider our species' homeostatic situation vis-a-vis the biosphere anywhere else on earth, this fragile planet now far advanced in desertification (including the Am. Midwest, whose watertable has fallen by a factor of 10 since World War II: almost anywhere in the Middle East, water is closer to the surface, now, than it is in Nebraska, whose soil (to compound the tragedy) is rapidly being depleted of natural nutrients and, by water and wind, eroded away (ditto for Kansas, Iowa, et al)). If our Great Plains are to be a resource for future humanity, we must stop overfarming--which will require stopping our ears to the cries of the starving abroad: if we are really Christians, we'll listen more to the cry of the needy (land) than to the cry of the needy (human mouths abroad). It hurts me to speak so; for while intellectually I've made the shift, emotionally I haven't and perhaps never will. But I'm getting more and more angry at stupid sentimentalists who talk as though the biosphere were a renewable resource (like firewood) instead of a thin sky-earth layer of beautifully integrated life-support that is undergoing crimes of multiple rape, waste, pollution, and irreversible damage. Shall not the modern biblical prophet cry out against this sin against Creator and creation, and also for everything that will, in this great recentering, reduce human suffering (e.g., contraception, sterilization, abortion--all with preference for, but no dogma about, persuasion instead of coercion)? If CJA were to lead in this shift among UCC members, would it be more/less relevant than it is now?....But there's always the eschatological option: We can say "If we take care of immediate human needs, which God tells us to do, God will take care of remote human needs--isn't that in the Lord's Prayer?" In other words, we're responsible for today but not tomorrow: one day at a time (Mt.6.24). How ironic it would be, though, if CJA were to use that argument, the very one so long used against the social gospel by "Kingdom's coming soon" Christians! I'm no deist, but I believe God has put us in charge of the garden not just for today but for the howsoever-long tomorrow, to live in homeostasis with our fellow-creatures and manage "history" to that end. To this end, I extend Jas. Gustafson's omnidirectional model: what, in all directions, is the effect of this concrete human (personal or societal) decision? For this, I'm as much concerned for controlling the chain saw as I am for dousing nukes: the rain forests, at

OVER

the present rate of cutting, will have disappeared about the same time Cape Cod runs out of usable fresh water from its only source, the aquifer: 20 years. There's a technological version of the eschatological option: To speak the words of Dickens' father, "Something will turn up" in technics (solar energy for seawater conversion? reduction of water to H & O?) to save our dying planet. The latest version of the old scientism: Trust science, it will save us. Ironic: It's science (reduction of infant mortality, e.g.) that's killing us slowly while also threatening to kill us instantly (i.e., nukes, directly + greenhouse effect)...Hans Jonas (THE IMPERATIVE OF RESPONSIBILITY: IN SEARCH OF AN ETHICS FOR THE TECHNOLOGICAL AGE, U.Chicago/84) comes, for me, closest to describing the needed consciousness-shift: from risk-encouraging to risk-averse (less seeking of technol. good and goods, more resisting what is undeniably evil), from individual-effecting to species-effecting (the collective purpose of survival supervening over what's immediately happening to people--our species' existence being the value without which nothing else human can be valued, and the biosphere's health being pre-conditional to our species' existence). Will we let Jesus, who led us Christians into our revolution in compassion, lead us into this fresh redefinition of compassion? Or is our freedom/justice/equality/peace sentimentality strong enough to prevent our being relevant to this new stage in the human story?

P.5 condemns the notion that "the good news is material prosperity...", but is not your "justice action" aimed to extend from political rights to economic rights? Since God's good earth groans with the prosperity of our upper and middle classes, should CJA--instead of pressing that the goodies be "equally" available to all--not rather be preaching a radical simplification of life that would make all us humans user-friendly vis-a-vis the biosphere? (Can advanced technology really be called user-friendly when it is, more and more obviously, environment-unfriendly?) If you were to press in that direction, you'd be (in my eyes) more pragmatic and more relevant than you are now. Of course you'd also be crazy --"fools for Christ"--but can we put our hope now, in this crazy world, in anything uncrazy? Somebody ought to do something about everything, but who now should do what about what? If you don't answer, you're a wimp; if you do, a fanatic whose behavior may just do more harm than good (a dour Niebuhrian "realism")! Péguy rightly says all politics are the surfacing of mysticism: I believe in risk-taking, advocacy religion (as the Craigville Letter presses for "justice and peace"), but we must now give more attention to revisioining the mysticism base, which is what I see (optimistically!) happening in the present UCC theological ferment. We are a Christocentric fellowship: the figure of Jesus is our mystical-actional center, saving us in the Spirit from the tyranny of both mystical and actional idolatries (such as the movement synonymizing justice and equality, or the contramovement synonymizing justice and freedom). In Jesus, God is in solidarity with us, calling us to be in solidarity with all our human and nonhuman fellow-creatures (UCC Preamble: God's "creative and redemptive work in the world"). Whatever our angles of witness within the UCC, we have the resources for arriving--with Jesus Christ as center-point of faith/order/life/work--at a common witness in the world even though we severally draw from our biblical-theological-liturgical-historical traditions varying, sometimes opposing, confessional and actional implications (Rupert Meldinius: "...in all things, charity"). (E.g., we shall certainly differ on the role of gov't. at all levels in meeting citizen-and-world needs.)

P.8f promises "wholeness" for UCC/world if we act on "God's call to us to be the instruments through which the Divine agenda of justice and mercy is implemented...." Your thesis, worthy of a good go all 'round.