

This thinksheet gets at something that's been making me scowl for a long time, viz. folks' failure to distinguish the socio-context appropriate to different ways of "doing theology." Theology reduced and sharpened to rhetorical simpli-city is the only theology that can move folks to action: theology cooled by all the complexities of reality is the only theology worthy of being called "Chris-tian reflection toward new action."....In his CTS REGISTER Fall/75 article, from which the excerpt hereon is taken [pp.4f], James M. Gustafson, academic ethicist-theologian, instead of helping us understand this distinction, continues the old polarization. What he says, from the school side, is so true, so well said, and so in need of saying, that I cannot resist sharing it with you, convinced that your action-orientation will not be intimidated by his badmouthing of simplicity --which he gives a cute name to, viz. "thematic unitarianisms," usually called "fads" or "movements."

Displacement, and consequent alienation, is what I am alluding to. Careful, complex, comprehensive theologizing is out of place in pulpit and public forum: it alienates, for it is itself, there, alien. Passionate, trimmed-and-slimmed-down, traveling-light, "engaged" and kenotic theology is out of place in school and in the reflection retreat when it substitutes for the arduous involutions and qualifications there appropriate: "action theology" is alien to situations calling for "reflection theology." Of course not watertight compartment, but a vital distinction, terribly hard to observe.

A couple of clues:

1. The distinction roughly corresponds to the two brain hemispheres' cognate tasks, viz. the right's processing of metaphors ["i-images"] and the left's processing of abstractions ["ideas"].

2. Calvin's transcending of rigorism/anarchism in the "law" as for instructing and goading "believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God...lives and reigns."

While it is proper to accent certain themes of religious faith and life and thought in particular historical circumstances, we need to turn from our penchant for thematic unitarianisms in theology and church life and see things in the complexity and wholeness that reality demands. By a thematic unitarianism I mean the isolation, accentuation, and even the exclusive concentration upon a single theological theme (such as liberation), a single moral imperative (such as the imperative to love), or a simple technique for "salvation" (such as the human potential movement). Thematic unitarianisms are quickly self-defeating, and the rise and decline of one after the other is a public embarrassment to the churches. Theologically it appears that the unitarianism of liberation has a life span that is longer than the unitarianisms that faded in and out in the sixties, and that is probably because it comes closer to a central theme of the Christian faith on the one hand and a central human need of this decade on the other. But the multitextured and multivalent character of the theology of the church as well as the multidimensional character of human experience and life in the whole of creation both indicate that this too will run its course. The power of God is not only liberating, but ordering. Liberty from oppression that is not simultaneously engaged in the development of principles for a just ordering of the free is false both to theology and to the needs of human society. Capacity to affirm personal existence without consciousness of the limits placed upon us by our existence in communities and societies as well by the natural world cannot be sustained by a rich theology or by the demands of life in the world. Encouragement to self-fulfillment which is not tempered with perceptions of our capacities for deception both of ourselves and of others not only ignores the fundamental insight of the doctrine of universal sin, but leads to expectations which are bound to be frustrated by experience itself.

To see things more wholly, and to see things in greater complexity is something we avoid for reasons that are understandable, but not justifiable. Complexity in theology or in life is seldom exciting, for every theme requires qualification. It is always frustrating because it is difficult to define the margins of that we wish to address, and the certitude we deeply desire becomes elusive. To find the key to theology in eschatology, or hope, or liberation, or in the doctrine of sin is always more invigorating than to find a dozen locks which require a dozen keys. To find the key to the ecological crisis in the ethos of technical rationality is satisfying whereas to face the multidimensional character of the crisis and the intricate interrelations of its dimensions to each other is frustrating. Complexity, it must be admitted, sometimes dulls the nerve to act; it promises only partial solutions; it boggles the mind. But the ultimate power, God, is complex and not simple; the natural world in which we live and which he sustains is complex and not simple; the Christian tradition is complex and not simple; the social world in which we live and act is complex and not simple; morality is complex and not simple. Thematic unitarianisms are inherently over-simplifying, and the church needs to avoid them.