

"MOVEMENTS," THE PANACEA CLAIM OF.....Elliott #811

1. If we can just get rid of "sin" everything will be all right, says Paul in Romans 1-8: all are sinners, and all who repent shall have "righteousness"- "justice" as gift-assignment. As a Christian, I accept this panacea [Greek: "all-remedy" or "cure-all"]. I tell biblical stories about how folks sinned by consciousness-raising [Gen.3] and using the planning process on a massive scale [Gen.11] and...and...and....And I observe how difficult it was even for Paul to ground this theology in history [the next section, Ro.9-11, on the dilemma of Jewish rejection of Jesus] and ethics [the rest of Ro.]. I'm not washing my hands of panaceas, which tempt humans and their movements to arrogance and thus blindness and to idolatry and thus blasphemy. The particular positive domino-theory I hold is best told in the biblical story of creation/betrayal/repentance/reconciliation. Biblical religion is a "movement" through history, the central movement I believe God in Jesus has called me into.

2. The panacea claim of every movement being exclusive in rhetoric even if not developed into ideology, I'm against all other movements than Christianity. Not easy, for Christian motivation is a part of, if not the dominant motivational strand in, all our post-WWII movements: the black [+ hispanic + amerind + oriental] movement against racism, the antipoverty movement against classism, the feminist movement against sexism, and the peace movement against etatism [statism, nationalism, militarism]. As a participant, in varying degrees of enthusiasm and cost, in all these movements, I've usually bitten my tongue and kept silence when each movement has claimed to be the key movement, the positive domino: "The basic problem of; threat to, humankind is....; if we can't solve this, nothing else will matter, for all will be lost; if we do solve this, all other problems will be alleviated, all other needs at least begun to be met, all threats shut down and all promises opened up." Being myself a preacher, I know decisional rhetoric--what we used to call "black-and-white"*--when I hear it. I begin to get disturbed only when I see folks getting hooked on their own rhetoric and throw millions of private dollars and billions of public dollars mindlessly at massive agonies that in cool moments all of us know aren't going to yield even to the best "I-have-a-dream"-style rhetoric. [*Often escalated with the addition of the genetic and the nothing-but fallacies.]

3. Since every human being has to be in categories by virtue of his Verwurfung, her "thrownness" into a skinbag of a particular shape, color, and size (in relationship to one or more of which one's bound to be "minority") as well as into a particular family and nation, and progressively into different age-levels, nobody can be objective about "movements." My 5'7" puts me in an adult male minority, and Jesus says the situation is hopeless: I can't stretch myself. The other day in Grand Central, an old white man with a beard smiled at me: a triple minority I'm in (aging--how about the movement against agism?--and white and male, with only male offspring on a tight job market that prefers anything but white and female to male). The fact that I'm advantaged in some ways in relation to the four prominent movements [white--male--upperclass--American] does not disqualify me from knowing minority feelings--as, e.g., I get ever closer to joining the ultimate majority, the dead. I hear a lot of humbug about "But you don't know what it's like to be...." It's hopeless for me to counter "And you don't know what it's like to be only 5'7" [or some such rejoinder inviting sympathy I'm not going to get]"--hopeless, because the person who gives me this line is far gone into self-pitying* sentimentality--which I can't tell her/him without being pegged as the appropriate "--ist"! CONCLUSION: Honest, civil, risk-taking communication-efforts on the movements is very rare. Especially in view of my conviction that each movement's panacea-claim is worse than hogwash and needs prophetic criticism as much as the movement needs prophetic reinforcement. [*Or altruistic.]

4. SODEPAX [WCC's new-society combine of social, developmental, pacific concerns/forces] is producing some helpful documents and conferences: I'm more hopeful of efforts to get at a numbers of isms at once than I am of efforts to "turn around" old institutions--e.g., NYTS--into a speciality house for a particular movement, especially when such specialism forces the loss of other values [pluralism, integrational mix, movement-interfacings]. Take-overs have a dismal history, more loss than gain. From fending off their oppositions and competitions, pushers of any particular movement have a high degree of plausibility in their pitches, threatening "to deceive the very elect" by [what else?] illumining them, with the best of will and high spirits--an altogether miserable prospect in the light of the gospel (betrayal/atonement/forgiveness/reconciliation). Against all this machismo, a little more anima, please!