

POWER as PRIVILEGE-OVER\* / HOLINESS as SHARING-IN:  
a thinksheet introductory to the course titled

"RACE, CLASS, NATION, AND SEX IN THE OLD TESTAMENT".....Elliott #847

1. The double occasion of this course is (1) the present American situation in the world struggle for justice and peace and (2) a fresh exposure to the Old Testament as our Jewish and Christian primordial literary resource for light and strength in facing sin and opportunity vis-a-vis the privilege enclaves [race, class, nation, sex]. The methods of world/Word interfacing derive from general hermeneutics, the NYTS tradition of "inductive Bible study," and my experience as biblical scholar, pastor, and participant in denominational and ecumenical, as well as in secular political, life. The process involves the relevant resources of all students, each student majoring in one of the enclaves as the central issue for approaching the OT materials.

2. Only in the God of Heaven and Earth are energy and goodness, power and holiness, at one. On the earth, in history and the human heart, the two are fragmented and fissiparous--goodness victimized by power, rights ravaged by privilege, community sentimentalized by false faith and cheap grace, love parochialized into provincialism and lust, holiness counterfeited by the spotty purity of partial repentance and self-serving piety [the sacred degenerate into the merely sacrosanct], equality defined so as not to limit the opportunities of the powerful, justice prejudiced toward immunizing the influential against legal sanction, integrity sold to advantage, loyalty at the mercy of temptation, peace treated as policy, the Holy One crucified for good reason. What's unique about the OT here is that its prophetic base is history's only record of a people's preserving their history's underside (America problematic as a possible second). In Israel, the official laundered versions never managed to obscure for long the schisma, the duplicity of promise and reality, the sin that would lead only to cynicism and despair were it not for the ever-renascent faith that power and holiness would converge in history as "judgment" eliciting hardness--"retribution" and/or "repentance"--"redemption"[forgiveness]--and thus Exodus, Return, Resurrection, Parousia. In American life and ministry now, how may/should this realism appear--specifically in relation to the four privileges--both in self-understanding [as Americans, and America-in-world] and in action?

3. Since WWII, especially since the late 1950s, the four privileges have emerged as national issues in the order indicated in the course title:

RACE as "civil rights" picked up on our earliest internal agony as a nation, over the "peculiar [privileged, Lat. "private law"] institution" of slavery, the false-power reality signaling the whole mercantile imperial underside of America in genesis and dynamic [on which see Rosemary Reuther, "The Two Faces of America," CHRISTIANITY AND CRISIS 16Aug76]. Preaching first abolition and then equality was biblically required; moving to action has proved (a) possible and (b) limited by ingenious backlash and ambiguous complexities beyond anticipation.

CLASS immediately appeared, as "civil rights" [on paper] did not automatically produce "human rights" [in the realities of opportunity]. So to "the war on poverty," which picked up on our earlier [1880s-WWII] internal agony over "the labor issue," the Christian preaching response being "the Social Gospel." The New Deal+[FDR+] came closer to solving "class" than the earlier period, "race." But "class" opportunity-change effected more "labor" than "the minorities." Caste laws based on race were largely gone; minorities-class exploitation, not.

NATION as issue was dramatized when King came out against American interventionism [Vietnam] as privilege-over parading itself as freedom-from--"the new world" having becoming a new "old world" of anti-change and counter-revolution.

SEX was the natural next--negatively as testosterone-factor ["machismo"] analysis, positively as consciousness-raising about "personhood" in light of all the post-WWII humanizing trends [human (political-social-economic) rights, the human-potential movement, reluctant leisure, relaxed social sanctions in private mores, recrudescence individualism, institutional world-weariness, "new frontiers" of consciousness, Dionysos over Apollo, Athena over Eros].

\*The special term "privilege-over" exhausts neither the meaning of "privilege" nor the meaning of "power": both words have good meanings.