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I Was a Teenage Kataphatic

A Here's another Blast from the Past. Another Golden Oldie. One of my Essays now unavailable here, since the re-design of this website.

B I believe it deserves a second hearing.

C I reproduce it here almost word for word from its original, that of Essay 24, from January 1999.

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1 Urban Holmes, in his book, *A History of Christian Spirituality* (Seabury Press, New York, 1981), has suggested a scheme for visualizing what patterns of Christian spirituality have looked like down through the ages.

2 It has proved enormously useful to me, in my teaching and indeed in my own piety. I'll describe my classroom version of the scheme that Holmes presents in his book.

3 Visualize a kind of compass circle, with both a vertical and a horizontal axis, pointing to "north," "south," "east," and "west." The circle is now divided into four equal quadrants.

4 The "north" pole on the north-south axis represents a style of piety that emphasizes the illumination of the mind; Holmes calls this the speculative or rational pole.

5 Holmes establishes the "south" pole on the same axis, at the other end of the continuum, as the affective or emotional pole; it seeks the illumination of the heart, rather than the head.

6 At the "eastern" end of the east-west axis/continuum is located the piety which Holmes describes as kataphatic. The term derives from Greek roots, and may be defined literally as "pertaining to forms". This is therefore an imaginal spiritual tradition. It is comfortable with forms, such as ritual gesture, hymns, "prayers from a book". It is a tradition that cherishes doctrine and creedal statements, and liturgical forms in worship

7 At the "west" end of the same axis, Holmes locates an apophatic piety: a sensibility literally "against forms" or "away from forms." This is a spiritual tradition that is suspicious of forms; it is an emptying spirituality, content to allow the naked soul to stand before God, without mediating forms or structures.

8 This "circle of sensibility," Holmes suggests, provides a "phenomenology of prayer". This is what Christian spiritual traditions have looked like through the ages. And within this circle it's possible to locate almost every Christian spiritual sensibility.

9 In the north-east quadrant -- the speculative-kataphatic -- for example, we may find the Rationalists: those who favour the illumination of the mind, and are comfortable with the forms provided by words and gestures and traditions.

10 In the south-east quadrant -- the affective-kataphatic -- we may find a Pietist sensibility. This is the quadrant where I was reared as a child. My father, a second-generation German Lutheran pietist pastor, introduced me to the joys of liturgy and hymns and church architecture, with the express purpose of "teaching my heart"

11 In the south-west quadrant we find (You guessed it!) Quakers and Mennonites and others like them. Holmes calls them the Quietists. These are Christians uncomfortable with forms, and even suspicious of them, such as may be found in liturgical and creedal traditions.

12 And in the north-west quadrant? Holmes locates the Encratists here: the "desert fathers" and "desert mothers." (Yes, there were "desert mothers": women, as well as men, who helped to form an ascetic but vibrant "desert spirituality.") A piety that supports a "social gospel" might also find its place in this quadrant.

13 In my typical classroom exercise with Holmes' model, I'd ask students to "sculpture" a response to three questions, based upon this scheme.

14 I clear the classroom floor and stick two strips of masking tape along the floor, at right angles to each other. I locate the four poles on the room's surrounding four walls. Then I invite students to position themselves in one or another of the four quadrants.

15 I ask students to respond to three questions: a) In which quadrant were you reared? b) In which quadrant are you most comfortable now? And c) Toward which quadrant do you feel the Spirit calling you? (That is, toward which quadrant do you feel yourself attracted?)

16 This exercise almost never fails to illuminate. Lutherans and Anglicans and Roman Catholics come to see larger and alternative possibilities than the ones they were reared in. Mennonites and "Free-church" sensibilities come to realize that others can appreciate and affirm the piety most precious to them.

17 It should be pointed out that Holmes regards the outermost "edges" of each of the quadrants as the location for what he calls excesses. Thus the purest Pietism, in his view, represents the risk of excess in the affective-kataphatic quadrant. Rationalism, at its worst, represents the risk of excess in the speculative-kataphatic quadrant; and so on.

18 And, for whatever it is worth, Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson argues that it represents a type of Christian apostasy to venture too far to the "west" on the "east-west" continuum. The Christian faith is an incarnated faith, a sacramental faith, he reminds us. Pure apophatic spirituality is probably un-Christian. Incarnation implies and assumes a kataphatic mediation. Word and Sacrament represent our Christian life-line to orthodoxy.

19 Jenson has a valid point, in my view. Karl Barth speaks of Christian revelation as a "mediated immediacy." In Word and sacrament, we meet the God of Israel and of Jesus "immediately": a "real presence," one might say. But that presence is always "mediated"; that is, there is always the "sign," the earthly elements -- the bread, the cup, the water, the personality of the preacher -- that provide the vehicles for the divine presence to meet with us "in, with and under."

20 Further: I'd be willing to argue that, beyond a certain point, apophatic piety begins to become increasingly sectarian and non-Trinitarian. Beyond a certain point, apophatic piety begins to ignore the First Article of the Creed.

21 And, I'd argue, it's in this soil that the seeds of contemporary neo-revivalism begin to sprout, among Lutherans, ultimately bearing the fruit of "church-growth-style" worship, with its "seeker services," and "targeted" worship "opportunities," and "entertainment evangelism."

22 We're powerless to resist these very potent and seductive appeals, if we've strayed too far into an apophatic piety.

23 Well. I've been heavier than I'd hoped. Blame it on my head-cold.

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