

The Messianic Banquet and World Hunger

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In recent decades the doctrine of eschatology has been quietly pushing itself front and center, making its bid to become the cornerstone of Christian systematic theology. Concomitant with this there is emerging a proposed new structure for ethical thinking which we might label "proleptic ethics."¹ The key term here is "prolepsis." By it we mean that the kingdom of God, which is expected to become fully realized only in the future, has power in the present. There can be people, events, and ethical actions that embody that power, that anticipate the future, that participate now in the future of God. Prolepsis is the preactualizing of future reality.

Proleptic action involves two basic steps. First, we project a vision or image of God's future kingdom. Second, we make decisions and take action to bring the present state of things into conformity with our vision of God's plan for the future.

The projection of a positive vision of the future is already a form of action because it is a practical step toward bringing that future to pass. Positive images of the future pull people forward and unite a civilization in a single task. They give hope that present problems can be solved and inspire confidence in what is to come. Fred L. Polak, sociologist at the University of Utrecht's Institute for the Future, says that positive images of the future are the primary causal factor—although not the only factor—in cultural change.² Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell contends that "in the end, it is moral ideals—the conception of what is desirable—that shapes history through human aspiration."³ The projection of a vision of the future kingdom of God in our own time and place, then, may provide the moral ideal and inspire the hope we need to confront and conquer the challenges before us.

The content of that vision of God's kingdom comes basically from the Bible. Christian theology is constructed upon two pillars: reflection on the witness of scripture and reflection on contemporary human experience.⁴ Our contemporary human experience is—among other things—the experience of

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mass starvation and malnutrition in a world that presently has an abundant food supply. Can we turn to scripture for elements in the vision of God's future kingdom that may provide a moral ideal appropriate to the challenge of world hunger?

I believe the answer is yes. One element in the biblical vision of God's future kingdom is the image of the messianic banquet. Among its other qualities, the messianic banquet involves communal sharing, a virtue which calls for proleptic realization in our situation.

I would like to examine some scriptural references to the messianic banquet, observing that it has at least five characteristics: (1) luxury; (2) celebration; (3) victory; (4) community or communion; (5) prolepsis. It is the last two characteristics, community and prolepsis, on which we will dwell in greatest detail.

LUXURY, CELEBRATION, AND VICTORY

The messianic banquet is characterized first by its luxury. As a banquet, it is not an ordinary meal. Ordinary meals are for the purpose of obtaining nourishment and energy to sustain daily activities. But at a banquet the taste and elegance of the food become important. This sense of luxury is expressed in Isa. 25:6:

On this mountain,
Yahweh Sabaoth will prepare for all peoples
a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines,
of food rich and juicy, of fine strained wines.
(Jerusalem trans.)

The attention to "fine wines" and food "rich and juicy" means the banquet of God has a special luxurious character to it. There is more to life than bread alone.

The second characteristic of the messianic banquet is celebration. It is because it is at a celebration that we can indulge in luxury. The 25th chapter of Isaiah from which I just quoted goes on:

On this mountain he will remove
the mourning veil covering all peoples,
and the shroud enwrapping all nations,
he will destroy Death for ever.

The Lord Yahweh will wipe away
 the tears from every cheek;
 he will take away his people's shame
 everywhere on earth,
 for Yahweh has said so.
 That day, it will be said: See, this is our God
 in whom we hoped for salvation;
 Yahweh is the one in whom we hoped.
 We exult and rejoice
 that he has saved us.

The father of the prodigal son celebrates the wayward's return with a banquet. "Bring the calf we have been fattening," he says, "we are going to have a feast, a celebration" (Luke 15:23). The parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25 pictures the messianic banquet as a wedding celebration, and the comparison is reiterated in the Revelation beatitude, "Happy are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9).

Thirdly, what is being celebrated is victory. A bowling team that wins the league championship usually celebrates with a victory dinner. The reason Isaiah exults and rejoices is that God "has saved us." The father of the prodigal has his lost son back home, safe and sound. That is cause to celebrate.

One apocalyptic passage in II Baruch (Syrian Baruch) suggests that a heavenly champion will do battle with the great dragons, Behemoth and Leviathan. Once defeated, the corpses of Behemoth and Leviathan will become the food to be eaten at the messianic banquet.

And Behemoth will be revealed from his place and Leviathan will ascend from the sea, those two great monsters which I created on the fifth day of creation, and I kept them until that time; and then they will be for food for all that are left. The earth will also yield its fruits ten thousand fold, and on each vine there will be a thousand branches, and each branch will produce a thousand clusters, and each cluster will produce a thousand grapes, and each grape will produce a cor of wine. . . . And it will come to pass after these things, when the time of the advent of the Messiah is fulfilled, and he will return in glory, then all who have fallen asleep in hope of him shall rise again.⁵ (II Baruch 39:4, 5; 30:1)

The messianic banquet is a meal of luxurious abundance and victory celebration. But it also has a fourth characteristic: community. The idea of community is much more relevant to our present concern with world hunger.

COMMUNAL SHARING

In the Gospel of Luke the banquet is portrayed as the eschatological community. It expresses Jesus' mission to restore communion between God and humanity and among ourselves.⁶ At the eschatological consummation the disciples will "eat and drink" with Jesus in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:30). "And men from east and west, from north and south, will come to take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29; Matt. 8:11). God's future kingdom is imagined as a great banquet involving all humankind.

The actual banquets we read about in the Third Gospel are most likely historical events in the life of Jesus. In their reporting they contain an overlay of Luke's theology which interprets them as the fulfillment of prophecies of messianic salvation. In particular the theme of reconciling sinners to God is salient.

Luke 7 reports Jesus being invited to dinner in the house of a Pharisee. While there a woman of the street with a rather tainted reputation enters with an alabaster jar of ointment. She is crying, and as her tears fall on Jesus' feet she wipes them away with her hair. She also kisses his feet and anoints them with oil.

This brings a stringent objection from the Pharisee host, who says that a genuine man of God would not allow himself to be fondled by a woman of such ill repute. Jesus responds by forgiving her of her sins. Then all those at the table are reported to begin murmuring amongst themselves.

Over and over again Jesus is criticized for eating with sinners. The Pharisees complain because he eats supper with Levi and other tax collectors. And the 15th chapter of Luke, wherein we have the three great parables of the lost (the lost coin, sheep, and prodigal son), opens with the complaint: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

If Jesus or the author of Luke were here with us today, it is quite obvious that they both would tell us not to be snobs. There is no one so low in status or so reprobate due to sin that we should deny having fellowship at table with them.

Suppose someone has behaved in a way we deem improper. Suppose, for example, someone has had too many children and thereby sinned against the moral criterion of two per family laid down by our demographers. Would

Jesus have refused to share a dinner with them? It appears that he would have eaten with anybody.

The Last Supper is the most important of Jesus' meals. It is a meal he shares with sinners. It is no accident that we have nicknamed the sacrament performed in its honor "communion." It symbolizes unity and community between sinner and Savior.⁷ "This is my body which will be given for you," Jesus says (Luke 22:19). Jesus shares—even sacrifices—himself in order to establish the bond between him and us. And no one, no matter how sinful, is excluded.

The sacrament also symbolizes community between those participating. This involves sharing. St. Paul chastizes the church at Corinth for failing to embrace this quality of sharing.

The point is, when you hold these meetings, it is not the Lord's Supper that you are eating, since when the time comes to eat, everyone is in such a hurry to start his own supper that one person goes hungry while another is getting drunk. Surely you have homes for eating and drinking in? Surely you have enough respect for the community of God not to make poor people embarrassed? What am I to say to you? Congratulate you? I cannot congratulate you on this. (I Cor. 11:20-22)

We may eat supper without sharing, but it is not the Lord's Supper!

In a very sensitive treatment of this theme in her book *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World*, Monika Hellwig writes, "The simple, central action of the Eucharist is the sharing of food—not only eating but sharing."⁸ As Christ shared himself with us in the sacrament, he is broken. As we share his body and blood, we share also in that brokenness. We cannot be whole until we share ourselves with those in our world broken by the strains of hunger.

One of the most vivid uses of messianic banquet imagery is found in the parable of the great supper (Luke 14:7-24; parallels in Matt. 22:1-10 and the Gospel of Thomas, logion 64). I would like to cite it as it appears in Luke.⁹

Then he said to his host, "When you give a lunch or a dinner, do not ask your friends, brothers, relations or rich neighbors, for fear they repay your courtesy by inviting you in return. No; when you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; that they cannot pay you back means that you are fortunate, because repayment will be made to you when the virtuous rise again."

On hearing this, one of those gathered round the table said to him, "Happy

the man who will be at the feast in the kingdom of God!" But he said to him, "There was a man who gave a great banquet, and he invited a large number of people. When the time for the banquet came, he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come along: everything is ready now.' But all alike started to make excuses. The first said, 'I have bought a piece of land and must go and see it. Please accept my apologies.' Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen and am on my way to try them out. Please accept my apologies.' Yet another said, 'I have just got married and so am unable to come.'

"The servant returned and reported this to his master. Then the householder, in a rage, said to his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in here the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' 'Sir,' said the servant, 'your orders have been carried out and there is still room.' Then the master said to his servant, 'Go to the open roads and the hedgerows and force people to come in to make sure my house is full; because, I tell you, not one of those who were invited shall have a taste of my banquet.' "

It has become fashionable since the work of Joachim Jeremias to drive a wedge between the teachings of Jesus, on the one hand, and the way those teachings are reported by the Gospel writers, on the other.¹⁰ New Testament scholars over the last decade have told us that Jesus' parables originally took the form of extended metaphors, but in the Gospels they appear as allegories and example stories. The Gospel writers were already preachers, trying to make Jesus' words apply to the time and place in which they were writing. That is our task as well. Perhaps they can aid us in this task.

In the noncanonical Gospel of Thomas the parable of the great supper conveys a sharp attack on the rich. Logion 64 ends with the line, "Tradesmen and merchants shall not enter the places of my Father." (Imagine a clergyman of today being invited to address a local chamber of commerce luncheon and reading this text. Luckily, it is noncanonical.)

The parable is heavily allegorized in Matthew 22. The servants who deliver the banquet invitation are likened to the prophets. Those who turn down the invitation are the Jews. The second invitation to the people of the streets and alleys represents the mission to the Gentiles. The meal itself symbolizes the kingdom of God. For Matthew it is a teaching parable which depicts the history of salvation. Matthew does not denounce the rich tradesmen and merchants but rather makes a different point to his audience: "Many are called, but few are chosen."

For Luke the parable becomes an example story which his reading audience is exhorted to imitate. Luke also regards the supper as the feast of

salvation. And the meals we share now can prefigure or anticipate that final consummate banquet if we follow Jesus' example in the present. Luke thinks proleptically. It is Luke, I think, who speaks most clearly to our situation today.

The parable of the great supper follows closely on the heels of this sentence: "When you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind." In the parable itself it is the poor, crippled, blind, and lame who actually show up. Everyone is invited, however, even tradesmen and merchants. If some people do not actually get to share in the eschatological dinner, it is their own fault and not that of the host.

The messianic banquet has an air of humility about it. Do not be a snob! If you look for your name tag at the head table, you will be embarrassed when the host sends you to a less honorable place. You are going to be keeping company with society's riffraff: the sinners, the helpless, the unfortunate, the despised. But despite the humility, which we will have to swallow, it will still be a great celebration. The rich and juicy food will be accompanied by fine wines.

Could Luke's message be the one we need to hear? "When you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind." In the present situation it is the poor of the world who go without food. If outright starvation is not their lot, then undernourishment warps their normal growth pattern, leaving them mentally retarded or perhaps crippled, lame, and blind. But all are part of God's community. God wishes to invite all to share in his gracious bounty.

Despite problems with drought during 1977, United States farmers produced more than 2 billion bushels of wheat (third best in U.S. history), 6.3 billion bushels of corn (more than the record 1976 6.2 billion), and 1.8 billion bushels of protein-rich soybeans. And there was no room to put the harvest in the grain elevators and storage bins; they were still full from the bumper crop of 1976. The food exists in abundant supply. Why, then, do some people go without? Has the lot of host fallen to us in North America? Is it our task to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind to dinner?

There is an interdenominational task force which has taken this concern for community sharing with utmost seriousness: it is Bread for the World. Made up primarily of church and political leaders, with Eugene Carson Blake as the first president, Bread for the World has argued that beyond private charitable giving Christians should seek to influence the U.S. government. This contention is based on the observation that North America is the single largest food-supplying region in the world.

Within the various denominations a great deal of laudable work has been done on the food problem. Nevertheless, much more is needed to feed the 460 million permanently hungry people than just that which can be gathered through charity appeals. The problem is too big. Only national and international policy changes can obtain the economic muscle requisite to face the issue in a big way. This is the kind of action Bread for the World advocates we take on behalf of the communal sharing of our food.¹¹

PROLEPTIC ACTION

There is a fifth characteristic of the messianic banquet: its proleptic dimension. By "prolepsis" I mean its ability to be prefigured or anticipated in fragmentary ways through present action. Not only can we project images or pictures of apocalyptic fulfillment, but that future can impinge on present reality. The messianic banquet of tomorrow can be preactualized today.

This is best illustrated by the Last Supper. In Matthew's account Jesus alludes directly to the messianic banquet in the future kingdom of God.

Now as they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and when he had said the blessing he broke it and gave it to the disciples. "Take it and eat," he said, "this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had returned thanks he gave it to them. "Drink all of you from this," he said, "for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which is to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. From now on, I tell you, I shall not drink wine until the day I drink the new wine with you in the kingdom of my Father." (Matt. 26:26-29)

To celebrate the Eucharist is to do so not only in memory (Luke 22:19) of the Maundy Thursday meal in the past but also in anticipation of the great consummate communion in the future.

The convoluted bread of life passages in John 6 combine messianic banquet and eucharistic imagery. Jesus' famous speech follows the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, which is the only miracle to appear in all four Gospels. That the multiplication of loaves in that miracle is identified with the messianic banquet is attested by what John says happened. Immediately after the people had eaten their fill, they attempted to make Jesus king, even by force if necessary. "The people, seeing this sign that he had given, said, 'This really is the prophet who is to come into the world' " (John 6:14). Unwilling at that time to accept the crown, Jesus is described as slipping off into the hills to hide until the popular enthusiasm dies down.

The next day finds Jesus situated in Capernaum. There he talks about

the ordinary bread consumed in the miraculous feeding of the five thousand as well as another kind of bread, eternal bread. That eternal bread is eschatological, as the phrase "Son of Man" indicates.

Do not work for food that cannot last
but work for food that endures to eternal life,
the kind of food the Son of Man will give you.¹²

This is reminiscent of the "man does not live by bread alone" found in Deut. 8:3, which Jesus quotes during his temptation dialogue with Satan (Luke 4:4). In addition to bread, we need to live by the Word of God. It is this Word of God which the Gospel of John identifies with the person of Jesus through the image of eternal bread.

I am the bread of life.
He who comes to me will never be hungry;
he who believes in me will never thirst. (6:35)

I am the bread of life.
Your fathers ate the manna in the desert
and they are dead;
but this is the bread that comes down from heaven,
so that a man may eat it and not die. (6:42-50)

That this is a reference to the Eucharist is obvious to every commentator. The eschatological fulfillment of God's purposes is proleptically realized through Jesus' death and our participation in that death through the sacramental eating of the bread and drinking of wine.¹³

The bread of life passages purposely call up the tradition of manna. In Exodus 16 God fed his people with manna from heaven. In later literature the idea of heavenly manna informed the eschatological vision. II Baruch 29:8 reads, "The treasury of manna will again descend from on high." The Midrash Mekilta comments on Exod. 16:25 saying, "You will not find it [manna] in this age, but you shall find it in the age that is coming."¹⁴ Jesus is that future manna made present. To eat his flesh and drink his blood in the Eucharist is to participate proleptically in the future accomplishment of God's purposes.

This eschatological understanding of the Eucharist is tied in a peculiar way with the Lord's Prayer as we find it in Matt. 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4. The

prayer asks for God's kingdom to come. Following this—directly in the Lukan version but with “thy will be done” added in Matthew—it reads: “Give us this day our daily bread.” But Jeremias suggests that the more accurate rendering should be, “Our bread for tomorrow give us today.”¹⁵ His argument is that the Greek phrase for “daily bread” is a wrong translation of the words Jesus actually used. In the fourth century Jerome quotes the now lost Aramaic Gospel of the Nazarenes which used the term *mahar* here, meaning “tomorrow.” If this Aramaic rendering is closer to the original—assuming that the prayer was memorized and repeated intact—then Jesus originally said, “Our bread for tomorrow give us today.” This would tie it much closer to the petition which precedes it, “Thy kingdom come.”

What is the bread for tomorrow? It is the messianic banquet, the final consummation.¹⁶ It extends the petition that preceded it; Lord, make your future kingdom come into our present. To eat the bread of the Eucharist is to have a foretaste of the eschatological communion.

The messianic banquet then has proleptic power. It is first of all an image of a reality that has not yet come fully into being. It is still future. But we can draw power from that future reality now. The future kingdom of God can become proleptically present in the ethical decisions and deeds that approximate its ultimate qualities.¹⁷ To share our daily bread with the crippled, the lame, and the blind of our world is to participate proleptically in the heavenly bread of Christ. The image of the great dinner suggests abundance, celebration, victory, and community. The key that opens the door to the banquet hall is self-giving, whether it be the self-giving of Christ to us on the cross or whether it be the self-giving by which we share one with another.

CONCLUSION

Christian eschatology is not simply pie-in-the-sky-take-me-to-heaven-when-I-die status quoism. God's promise is not a *sedative* but rather a *stimulus*. In an apostolic letter in 1971 Pope Paul VI wrote, “The expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one.” Hans Küng put it similarly, “Jesus did not want to provide information about the end of time, but to issue a call for the present in view of the approaching end.”¹⁸

In the Protestant camp Langdon Gilkey has argued recently that ethical and political action originate with the eschatological vision. He wrote, “Faith, hope, and love define man by specifying his *possibility* for the future

under grace, a possibility that can only be realized or incarnated in actions in his world directed at a better future."¹⁹ And Wolfhart Pannenberg, who authored the notion of proleptic ethics, sums it up: "The striving for God as the ultimate good beyond the world is turned into concern for the world."²⁰ Thus, the image of the future kingdom of God and the messianic banquet within it are not sedatives but rather stimuli to action.

One form of such action is the projecting of the vision itself. Recall we said earlier that positive visions of the future can inspire us to work to bring it to pass. I would like to conclude this exposition with an image, a remythologized image of the messianic banquet. It takes the form of the oneiric judgment scene. By oneiric judgment scenes I am referring to that familiar genre of stories that begin with "Last night I dreamt I died and went to stand before St. Peter at the gates of heaven." The variations of the story are many. Some are corny. But their function is to make the future judgment of heaven apply to the present situation.

In this example, our nameless protagonist dreams he has died and that his soul stands before the judgment of St. Peter. He passes the judgment and is invited to enter heaven. He is of course overjoyed at receiving the invitation, but he has a deep streak of curiosity in him. He wonders what will happen to all those who are damned. So he makes a strange request. He asks St. Peter if he might be allowed one brief visit to hell before he makes his final entrance into heaven forever. St. Peter is taken aback at the strange request, but he consents and makes arrangements with the celestial counterpart of Cook Tours to have our hero guided through the netherworld.

As he neared the gates of hell, he could already hear the weeping, the wailing, the gnashing of teeth. The sounds of anguish grew more intense the closer he got. The gates of hell opened. When he looked in he saw a gigantic dining room. The table was set for millions. It was graced with elaborate cut-glass candelabra, rare bone china with crocheted napkins, the world's finest wines served in jeweled golden goblets, hors d'oeuvre delicacies from every clime, a variety of entrees to satisfy the taste of every palate, and a luscious line of fancy desserts which had no end. Truly a sumptuous repast was to be had.

But there was a catch. Each diner was required to use only the six-foot-long chopsticks supplied by the host. The chaos this caused was overwhelming. No one could feed himself. Each diner struggled vainly with his two- or three-foot arm to guide the six-foot utensils to his mouth. The net product was frustration. They could see the delectable food yet were unable to eat it. This caused universal anguish. This was truly hell.

Our hero had seen enough. He requested that he be taken directly to heaven where he belonged. But when the gates swung open and he could see heaven for the first time, he was dumbfounded. The scene was the same as that of hell. There was the same gigantic and luxuriously decorated table, the same beautiful hors d'oeuvres, entrees, and desserts. And there was the same requirement that the diners use only six-foot-long chopsticks.

But there was a difference. Here there was no frustration, no weeping or wailing, no starvation. Here he found only joy, happiness, laughter, song, and fulfillment. The difference was that the diners in heaven were feeding each other.²¹

NOTES

1. Carl Braaten, *Eschatology and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), esp. chap. 7.
2. Polak, *The Image of the Future* (New York: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, 1973).
3. Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 433.
4. Cf. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 43-45.
5. Cf. R. H. Charles, *Eschatology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), p. 325; D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), pp. 124-25, 294-95.
6. John Navone, S.J., *Themes of Luke* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1970), p. 11.
7. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols. New York: Scribner's, 1951-55) I, 147.
8. (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 10.
9. The theme of the messianic banquet is combined here with the image of wisdom's invitation to dine in her house; see Prov. 9:1-6.
10. Since Jeremias, the task of the biblical scholar has become one of going behind the given text to recover, if possible, what Jesus originally said. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (6th ed. New York: Scribner's, 1963), pp. 19, 22, 42. See also Robert Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 197; John Dominick Crossan, *In Parables* (Harper and Row, 1973), p. 73; and William Beardslee, "Parable Interpretation and the World Disclosed by the Parable," *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, III (1976), 137-38.
11. See Arthur Simon, *Bread for the World* (New York: Paulist Press and Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975) and Dieter T. Hessel, ed., *Beyond Survival: Bread and Justice in Christian Perspective* (New York: Friendship Press, 1977).
12. We must decide here (John 6:27) between the accepted "will give you" (RSV) and an alternative present tense reading, "is offering you" (Jerusalem).
13. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: S.P.C.K., 1965), p. 236; Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel According to John* (2 vols. Garden City: Doubleday, 1966-70), I, 266.
14. Cf. Brown, *John*, I, 265; Andre Feuillet, *Johannine Studies* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1965), p. 68.
15. Joachim Jeremias, *The Lord's Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), pp. 23 ff.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
17. Braaten, *Eschatology and Ethics*, p. 111.
18. Küng, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 222.
19. Gilkey, *Catholicism Confronts Modernity* (New York: Seabury, 1975), p. 133.
20. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), p. 111.
21. This article was originally prepared for the Seminar on World Hunger: Theological and Moral Dimensions, sponsored by Bread for the World Educational Fund; Princeton Center of Continuing Education, Nov. 21-23, 1977.