DIVINATION: THE HUMAN HUNGER TO READ THE DIVINE WILL

2580 29 Aug 92

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
Noncommercial reproduction permitted

When today Loree & I were leaving the Boston-area church in which we'd led worship, the sexton was noticeably eager to say something to us. "Some people think I'm crazy to believe that God leads us when we pray for guidance, but my wife & I haven't the slightest doubt of it. We were under the burden of a heavy decision as we sat in church one recent Sunday. During the Silent Meditation, the organ played 'Now is the hour,' a gospel song we love. And we looked at each other & knew instantly what God was telling us to do." We thanked him for his witness & were on our way.

What we'd experienced, a few hours ago, was--to put it in a genre of religious literature--**a divination story**. "God usually doesn't talk to us in our words," said the sexton, but in this case God used remembered words called up through familiar music in a ritual setting.

The experience set me to thinking of & praying for a young man who yesterday morning agonized with Loree & me in his hunger to find (to divine) God's will for him in the most painful experience he's ever had. He wanted us to pray with him, which of course we did; & then he prayed with us. Then he said, "I have a little peace now, & I believe God will give me the strength I need." In his case as he saw it, the divinatory means was oral prayer.

This Thinksheet is a prolegomenon to the art of discovering-discerning God's will (formally here called the art of divination).

1 We monotheists have it easier than polytheists. We have only one deity to consult, the One who's the source & destiny of "all things." The socalled religions of the West--Judaism, Christianity, Islam--have, accordingly, significantly parallel histories of divination. Eg, the Qur'an warns against consulting jinns (spirits) & "associates" of God: the believer's business is directly with Allah (the Arabic word on the same root as Mesopotamian-Canaanite-Hebrew "El," in our Bible usually in the plural of majesty "Elohim," the Old Testament's commonest word for "God"). As "the All-hearing, the All-seeing [note the priority of hearing]," to God "belongs the keys [to open]...the heavens and the earth....and He guides to Himself whosoever turns, penitent." For guidance God has given "a Word....the Book [Bible & Qur'an]....Therefore call thou, and go straight as thou hast been commanded....And say: 'I believe in whatever Book God has sent down..'..God it is who has sent down the Book with the truth (XLII "Counsel" 9-16)."

Why on this quote the Qur'an rather than OT or NT? Because (1) my readers are less familiar with the Q., & (2) the Q., even more than either OT or NT, abounds in divinitory-instruction passages, Muhammad competing here with the guidance paradigms of Arabic jinn-religion, Judaism, & Christianity.

2 The traditional terminology hasn't been improved on. God's will becomes known by the **divine** initiative (called revelation) & by **human** initiative (called divination). But I hasten to add (1) that biblical religion tips the balance strongly in favor of the former & (2) that there's divine initiative even in the latter, since (a) God creates the possibility of divination & (b) nothing becomes known by divination that God wants to remain unknown--in which perspective divination is the synergistic form of revelation....So strong is our spiritual heritage's suspicion of divination that for us the word has a pagan ring to it. You may have experienced this when you read this Thinksheet's first word--did you?....The presupposition in divination is that God provides "signs," clues to his intention. It's a crucial word in the Fourth Gospel, & in the Qur'an it's Allah's favorite word for the hints & keys to the truth, the intimations of his presence & will. ...Deut.18.14-15 shows the clash of revelation ("prophet") & divination ("soothsayers" & "diviners": "the Lord your God does not allow you to do this"). The whole chapter is instructive of the contrast. The "disgusting practices" for which the Canaanites are being driven out of the land are (1) child sacrifice & (2) five forms of divination. But the true prophet "will speak in my name," & the evidence that he's not "speaking on his own authority" is that his prophecies "come true."

But "divination" in any good Bible encyclopedia will reveal that the contrast historically was not as sharp as Deut., the latest literature in Torah, makes

it. Israelites consulted priestly oracles (cf. the oracular urim & thummin on the high priest's breastplate; the priest's entire vestment, as mantic, was "ephod"). They were not an exception to the custom, common among peoples of the ancient Near East, of consulting oracles in times of crisis. But among the Israelites the oracular media were limited to "dreams...urim and thummim...prophets" (1Sam.28.6). The first of these three is prominent in Torah (reappearing in Daniel), but (along with the u. & t.) fades as the prophets come to prominence (then much later reappears--eg, in cabala; as, I think, u. & t. reappear as gematria).

My point is that while the tradition doctrinally sets the prophet over against diviners, historically diviner & prophet are in the same category, divination. Modern anthropology confirms here what biblical science affirms. Operatively, the same person is diviner when sought out for God's will & prophet when God-inspired with a message God wants spoken through a human being.

In Judaism, Moses & Elijah are the prototypic prophets; in Christianity, Jesus is the central prophet, & more than a prophet (Heb.1.1-2): "God spoke...in many ways through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son." Hieratically, Jesus is priest & sacrifice: prophetically, Jesus is medium-messenger-mediator-message, fulfilling yet bursting the prophetic category by being "greater than the angels" & the Presence of the Kingdom. But while Jesus transcends the category of prophet, he was both a diviner of God's will for others & a seeker of God's will for himself (the divining medium of his search being prayer).

3 Our understanding of **prayer** is enriched by coming to understand that it has, historically, absorbed into itself both the Israelite sacrificial system & most of the ancient divinatory media. In biblical prayer, we offer ourselves in "the sacrifice of praise" (13.15 in Heb., the NT book which has the most to say about sacrifice); through prayer more than through anything else, we expect God to guide us (ie, to accept our prayer as divinitory means on our side & revelatory means on God's side)....In seeing these continua, I find light, comfort, strength, joy, & openness to all who are likeminded & all who are otherwise minded in "darash" (Heb., "searching" for the way & the ways of life, of guidance from within & around & beyond).

4 Especially since WW2 we've had an inundation of books promising to help us in "the **decision-making** process." Is this apparently thoroughly secular "process" divinatory? Another way of asking the question: is the process only rational, bounded by one's ability "to think things through [to a decision]"? Or is the rational loop open to what's below reason (viz, chance, as in the flipping of a coin) or above reason (viz, intuition)? Are there any repetitive-ritual-incantatory elements? Is the process a substitute for, or form of, prayer? By these rhetorical questions I'm pointing to a fact easily forgotten in our "secular" time, viz the fact of mental-spiritual continuity in human consciousness & "processing" of the world & of decision-making. The press ignorantly & cruelly panned Dan Quayle for answering, when asked what would be the first thing he'd do were he to become president, "First, I'd pray." The press was shocked, having expected him to say something "secular." The other way 'round, Geo. Bush expected the Demo Platform to say something sacred & was (or pretended to be) shocked when "I read the whole thing and found that not even once does it use the word 'G-o-d.'" The style of such politics is pass the Lord & praise the ammunition. We are paying heavily for our present culture's artificial sacred/secular separation. The cure must include showing each at work in the other, with words functioning epiphenomenally (as in Jesus' sagacious-sophisticated parable of the two sons whose words were the reverse of their actions [Mt.21.28-31]).

5 The **modes** of divination are observation (eg, astrology) & manipulation (eg, casting lots [approved in both Testaments: Num.26.55 & Ac.1.26, the latter after the prayer, "Lord,...show us which of these two you have chosen"] & opening the Bible "just anywhere"). The former is passive, its downside is superstition; the latter is active, its downside is magic. Idolatry & antirationality are downsides of both.

6 Easy to see why divination had a bad name during & since the Enlightenment. It's at least as much the province of scoundrels as of saints. So much money to be made by it, so much power to be gained from old priestcrafts & new. A divinatory **catalog** listing would take the rest of this page. New Age paraphernalia jump to mind. Crystals, familiars (eg, "Seth" as medium, or "Jesus" as medium in "A Course in Miracles"). And those old occult standbys, Tarot cards & I Ching sticks. Phrenology is dead, but palmistry lives on. Moving from manipulation to observation, think of the earth as observed object (eg, the Gaia hypothesis & the revival of Amerind paganism), or the universe (as in Mt. Fox's "creation spirituality") or myths (as Jos. Campbell's "follow your bliss" mytholatry) or one's own consciousness (just before starting this page, I had counseling with someone who'd asked someone "Have you been praying about this [crisis]?" Reply: "Pray? Certainly not! I have to get through this on my own [without help from God]") or unconscious (Freud, Jung, & their pop spinoffs).

7 Rus. Oban wrote what's probably the best spoof ever of the divinatory profession. In Thinksheet 1600 I laid out & analyzed the story of (the book title) RIDDLEY WALKER (who, trying to follow in his priest-father's footsteps, walked around trying unsuccessfully to pronounce auguries from omens). R.W. was full of goodwill & empty of **connection-making** power, the heart of the divinatory art. Where the father had seen connections, tie-ins of mutual illumination, the son saw only impenetrable riddles (thus his first name)....This power in mind parallels dendritic development in brain, but the relation is not one of equivalency: some persons of ordinary or even low IQ have a high intuitive connection-making ability. And some, like Edgar Casey, have the gift of "seeing" far beyond even intuition as a quasi-rational explanation. And atop parapsychic gifts by "nature," & even without them, some are "inspired," "God-breathed" (as a Greek word has it), with a message for a particular occasion--an experience either sought (as in ecstatic "schools of prophecy," by dance [eg, Islamic dervishes] or drugs [eg, Amerind peyote ceremonies, & even the peace pipe])....Ecstatic seizures do not necessarily communicate a message from God. In both sections of the NT, demons in "possessed" persons announce, demonically, the presence of the divine, making the right connection between what's going on & who's behind & within it....In sum, connection-making is "natural"-rational, "natural"-intuitive, paranatural, supranatural (as Jacob's ladder's angels), divine (as the prophets & the Incarnation), & demonic. Thus connection-making encompasses revelation as well as divination. Insofar as it's teachable, teaching/learning it can be great fun as well as profit, with transfer values in many directions. Indeed, some pedagogical theory puts it front & center among learning & maturing skills....The Greeks had a word for it: "meta-phor," lit. carrying one known over to illumine an unknown or lesser known (see my #2577). Eg, my morning sermon ½ c. ago tomorrow was "Christian Warfare," preached after a long discussion with my parents the night before on "the Christian meaning of the war [WW2]." Thinking is connection-making, & preaching is rhetorical c.-m. intended to render some connection(s) impressive enough to persuade. Think, too, of the counselor's skills, & the historian's, both aiming to maximize meaning by c.-m....Through the years, several of my Thinksheet readers have remarked that sweating out Thinksheets has helped them improve their c.-m. power. Fun is catching: C.-m. is at the heart of the fun I have in writing the Thinksheets.

8 Not all worldviews are patient of divination. Let me try to list its **assumptions**, which together limn a worldview common to most of the world's cultures-religions: (1) There are higher powers with whom human beings may communicate; (2) The means of such communication are known/knowable; (3) The motives for such communication are guidance, provision (of what's necessary for life, health, happiness), protection, commmunion (fellowship with the higher powers), courage, & wisdom; (4) Human life's limits are set by the higher powers; (5) We are, in variously conceived ways, subject to the higher powers; (6) The higher powers link us, in variously conceived ways, to one another, to all life, to the earth, to the universe; (7) We are responsible-accountable for divining by whatever means we

believe are acceptable to the higher powers; (8) While some have special divinatory gifts, no human being is exempt from the duty to reach out, in humility & hope, to the higher powers; (9) Human beings should respect, & ritualize, the divinatory deposits of their heritages (eg, the Decalog & the Lord's Prayer; Deut.6.4-9: "Israel, remember this!....Teach....Repeat....Fix" the commandments on your arms, foreheads, doorposts, gates as "sign" [Heb. wd. elsewhere trd. "omen"] & "symbol before your eyes" [GP369]). This list follows only the sequential logic of my thinking at this moment, but I think I've left nothing out. I've used "higher powers" instead of my preference, God, as of the diction in anthropology & the history of religions. You could test my list by asking yourself how the higher powers function in some culture other than your own but known to you. It checks out well in the case of the two pagan cultures most influential in early Christian formation, viz the Greeks (instance Homer) & the Romans (instance Vergil).

9 In the Bible, diviners are more prominent among Israel's neighbors--especially the Babylonians & the Egyptians--than in Israel. The Qur'an has what to us is a humorous passage on Pharoah as diviner (XL.35-39): He commands that a tower be built so "I may look upon Moses' God, for I think he is a liar.".....Note that here I'm using "diviner" in the narrow sense, as in this Thinksheet's subtitle, "The...hunger to *read* [by observation or manipulation] the divine will." For the broad sense, change "read" to "find"--which then includes, eg, prayer. Why not be strict, limiting to the narrow sense? Because I want the mutual illumination the broad sense gives between divination & other modes of outreach to the divine, especially prayer. The same value obtains when "prayer" is broadened--eg, to include all worship, as in the BCP (Book of Common Prayer).

This broad/narrow construal is a general principle in semantics, later called semasiology, now being called semiotics or semiology--the study/theory of non/verbal signs & symbols. Semiotician Marshall Blonsky (NYU, NSSR) wants to teach us self-defense against the "mendacity" of image-makers who've created a hidden world-order based on public attention-control. For me, he proves his case in AMERICAN MYTHOLOGIES (Ox/92), reviewed in the 16 July 92 CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR. The present trend to see yourself, whoever you are, as **victim** parallels the burgeoning recovery industry (the "massification" of recovery, with fill-in-the-blank Anonymous) &, I add, the liberation movements. Since speed creates a sense of euphoria & thus sells, a "'migrancy' of privilege" has produced "the lonely narcissist, having no allegiance to anything, to ideology, to state, certainly not [to] spouse or family.".... Have I wandered away from our subject? Not at all. Think of M.B. not as semiotician (his profession) but as diviner searching for substance behind surface & sham. Near book's end, this: "I'm trying to see you, not your image; I'm trying to let you see me, not an image. I'm trying to install profundity back into human life." I'm suggesting he's a colleague for us professional diviners, the clergy. Even a model. And a warner: how much of what clergy, especially liberal clergy, are now paying attention to derives more from the image-makers & their handlers & spin-offs than from the one who's "the [visible] Image of the invisible God" (Col.1.15)?

10 Think about what light the divination angle throws on some important words in the biblical & Christian language. Here's a few: **sacrament**, **election** (calling), **baptism**, **eucharist** (eg, in L.24), **creation**, **blood** (eg, as "speaking" in Heb.12.24).

10 Among literate peoples, **sacred books** have always been central divinatory objects, whose manipulation ("interpretation") has connected what it meant ("exegesis") to what it means ("exposition," "application"). Jews & Christians are, says the Qur'an, "the peoples of the Book"; & Muslims are even moreso the people of the Qur'an. God spoke to Abraham & Moses, then *through* "Moses," ie Torah in the narrow sense, the Pentateuch. The ground structure of Jewish & Christian worship is Scripture(-reading: God speaks to us) & prayer (we speak to God). As for daily exposure to sacred texts (in private & family devotion, in study), the divinatory value is not just in the immediate access between the divine & the human; it's also in the continuing presence of the text between exposures. It's always true

for me vis-a-vis the Bible. Right now I'm experiencing it vis-a-vis the Qur'an: because of daily reading, Qur'anic words-phrases-passages pop into my mind as I go through the day. And I've had the same experience in daily reading of other sacred texts of the world's religions.

Memorizing increases the presence of the text in mind & therefore in life. Call it the internalization of the divinatory object. The better it's known, the greater the access, the bigger the skylight, the roof window. Black actor Yaphet Kotto says he keeps his faith by frequent inner recitation of the 23rd Psalm. "Thy word have I hid in my heart" (Ps.119.11): what words have you?

Not only in public worship but in the daily experience of sacred-text material popping into your head, Scripture & prayer are tied together. For we often, perhaps usually, experience a recalling of text as a call to prayer, at least the prayer of thanksgiving.

The more a sacred text is used for propaganda, the less its divinatory value--propaganda being meaning-closed, divination being meaning-open. With a headful of "the fundamentals," the fundamentalist isn't apt to get any fresh access, any new idea, from Bible-reading. The same goes for those who've been taught, or taught themselves, to read Scripture with liberationist eyes (economic, political, social, feminist, whatnot). Iranians learned to read the Qur'an with Khomeini eyes, to the distress of those reading it with other eyes. As early as the invention of eyeglasses, critics began to call this "spectacled reading." "Shades reading" is better: everything you see in the sacred text has a chromatic value relative to the primary value, which is that of the color of your sunglasses. My patience with this abuse of sacred texts is thinning. Of course it's impossible to read anything without some tint in your lenses. But if you turn the hermeneutics of suspicion on yourself, you can to a large extent correct for the distortion (as "corrective lenses" compensate for the imperfections of your eyeballs). Which reminds me of a quote from Chas. Seymour, erstwile pres. of Yale: "We seek the truth and will endure the consequences."

11 The three divinatory **modes** of any literate religion are spiritual (direct access), institutional (access through priestcraft, clergy), & scriptural (access through sacred texts). These exist both diachronically & synchronically, both through the religion's history & at any given time in that history. Each mode is suspicious of the other modes. Pentecostals-charismatics are suspicious of traditional churches & their ministries, & of fundamentalists who "depend more on the Bible than on the Spirit." Churchly types are wary of the emotionalism & disorder of pentacostals-charismatics & of what they consider the literalistic knownothingism of "Bible types." And of course bibliocentrics hold that pentacostals-charismatics don't give enough attention to "Bible teachings," and churchly types substitute " the teachings of men [sic] for the Word of God."

That by way of introducing what I want to say here about the **Puritans**, who in the 17th c. seized power from the British establishment (monarchy & lords). For them, the primary divinatory potential was in Scripture, not in priestcraft (as the established Church of England) or in spiritistic experience (as the Quakers). Believing in Calvinistic double predestination, they individually "inquired of the Lord," especially through biblical characters, as to their eternal status. (Yes, that was the color of their sunglasses.) ("Inquired of the Lord," originally a divinatory phrase, became in Jer. [21.2; 37.3] an expression for intercessory prayer.) This amounted to "the radical reduction of biblical narrative to divinatory (or 'divineable') life stories. Individual [biblical] lives become saving paradigms for self-understanding" (p.454, J. Sam. Preus, "Secularizing Divinization: Spiritual Biography and the Invention of the Novel," JAAR, Fall/91)....Preus did not note that this is only one hermeneutic mode of the Puritans, viz the individual. The social-civil mode was to use Scripture to divine God's laws for the community (the function the Sharia serves vis-a-vis the Qur'an). As the first mode dealt with every detail of the individual's life, so this political mode with every detail of community life. Eg, still on the books of Mass. is a law forbidding peanut-eating in public worship.

12 The political use of God is on display in the present presidential

campaigning. A former president, Lincoln, concerned himself with the reverse, ie the divine use of humanity. Here we have a third, & the fundamental, Puritan divinatory use of Scripture: how shall we open ourselves, individually & communally, to receive divine guidance as to what (in thoughts, acts, plans) will glorify God? Preus fails to mention this also. The two omissions give the false impression that Puritans were interested in the Bible only as a divinatory device to avoid hell & achieve heaven. But his literary-critical thesis is well defended: our present sense of the individual, as shaped by the Anglo-American novel, does derive from such authors as Jn. Bunyan, Rich. Baxter, Dan. Defoe, & Henry Fielding. As "writing and interpreting written texts transformed the religion of ancient Israel into Judaism," so in the 17th c. "printing enabled creation of a new form of religion,...a lay book-religion. And with it came divinatory use of the Bible in a new key" (443). Bunyan's PILGRIM'S PROGRESS & his other works are extensions of this new Bible-use, & so (in secular vein) are Defoe's ROBINSON CRUSOE and MOLL FLANDERS (on which see my #2557), & even Fielding's TOM JONES!....The self is to be examined in the light of Scripture through conscience as the divinatory medium. (No wonder Freud & Jung "took" better in Anglo-America, where Puritan influence had been strong.) Moll & Robinson, & even Tom, had conversion experiences crucial to those novels. Now, today, the novel's reader is the judge of whether a "revelatory match" has occurred. In self-involved reading, the reader's own self becomes a text to be interpreted, divined through the novel.

13 I began with the story of a sexton for whom a lyric, remembered by hearing its music, was divinatory. For Loree, the song "I'll go where you want me to go, Dear Lord;...I'll do...; I'll be....," had/has divinatory effect. For me, the song "Just as I am,....I come to Thee." For you, what words "work"?

14 In Hebrew, the most frequent word for prophet is "seer," visionary. In Mic.3.6, divinations & **visions** are parallel.

15 I've been spelling out some ramifications of divination. Let's shorten the line with a traditional definition (HASTINGS ENCY. OF REL. AND ETHICS): "the endeavor to obtain information about things future or otherwise removed from ordinary perception, by consulting informants other than human." The witch Saul consulted (1Sam.28) was human: Saul wasn't consulting her, but the (trans-human) ghost of Samuel *through* as medium (even though he'd "forced all the fortunetellers and mediums to leave Israel" [vs.3]: a medium was his last resort, as the usual media--dreams, Urim & Thummim, prophets [vs.6]--hadn't produced the information he was desperate to have). Saul broke through the blockage of silence God had imposed on him, a sin because the "jealous" Monotheos (Only-One God) forbids all efforts to communicate with trans- & supra-human consciousnesses other than himself: spiritualism is forbidden in both Testaments....Note my two expansions of "divination": (1) Not just (active) consulting but also (passive) experiencing of something you (actively) connect with a decision-making going on inside you; & (2) The "informants" may be human or nonhuman. Puritan poet Edward Young saw a spinningwheel & a spider's web, & these concrete objects became for him sacraments of the divine presence & purpose (not some hidden spiritual meaning, as in allegory, but occasions, media, for the soul's leap into the praise of God: "Let all things praise thee, O Lord!"). When Puritanism degenerated, praise collapsed down into things (so, romantic naturalism: "sermons in stones, books in the running brooks"), as the active-eager hunger to read the divine will collapsed down into moralism & legalism). Note the extremes: spiritualism consults nonthingal realities instead of God, secularism (= degenerate Punitanism) consults only the thingal, the material.

16 Divination is not only for self. Intercessory divination is prayer that somebody else will get needed guidance from God.

17 I invite you to think through all the above for what light it may throw on counseling, sacred ("pastoral") & secular. As helping the counselee to become a diviner vis-a-vis the presenting/real problem, & as a diviner ("seer") for the other, the counselor is a medium-mediator toward expanded resources for decision-making, problem-solving, question-answering--& all this as a servant of God.