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THE VOIDING OF GOD/CONSCIENCE/AFTERLIFE

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
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Whether this trinity is a triumvirate--whether they stand or fall together--is not a debate I intend this Thinksheet to engage in. Instead, I'm observing that in the spiritual teetertotter of our cultural history, the three are, at any point, of about the same degree of health/sickness.

1 My gerund is important for its associations. To "void" is to eliminate the **unwanted**, eg to pass water; & it is to **empty** of value, eg to declare or treat as "null & void"; & what else might I find were I to peek into the dictionary? So my gerund fits: for millions of our fellow-citizens, God/conscience/afterlife are largely empty of meaning & value & are not found on their want lists....Formerly I spoke of the dessication of this trinity, their losing juices & drying up inside the American soul. That analogy no longer seems to me radical enough to fit the facts we religious leaders face as we enter this century's last decade.

2 Evidence? You yourself can adduce it from many directions, on many fronts. Yes, there's rising interest in "spirituality," especially the self-complimentary & self-complementary sorts, especially New Age cults high, middle, & low. And there's even some return to such traditional forms of religion as liturgically absorb, rather than intelligently confront, the increasing cognitive dissonance between the biblical mind & America's postmodern media mentality. But consider the current fate, in the media & in street-school-house-bar-club-work conversations, of "God," "conscience," "afterlife" ("soul," "heaven," "hell," "life after death," "after-death experiences," etc.). Consider the debasement, especially among the young & on television, of our noble legacy of linguistic coinage in religion, ethics ("virtue," etc.), morality ("goodness," etc.).

2 Yet on the up side, many Christians want to improve their ability to think biblically, a solid conclusion I came to last week when reading my students' evaluation-projections of a Craigville Bible course. Christians sometimes express this as a longing to belong more intimately to God: "What Does It Mean to Give Myself to Christ?" That question arising in his parish led my friend Francis Whiting to preach a sermon of that title, in which he quotes the modern scholar-saint Karl Rahner: "If a Christian can trustingly and confidently say: In Jesus of Nazareth, in his life, his teaching, his catastrophic death, his victory (which we call his resurrection), God has given me himself--his forgiveness, his own life, above and beyond all finite fulfillment--if a Christian believes that this self-bestowal of God's is unconditional, irreversible, and definitive for his own part, and that it can never be superseded or surpassed in some new age to come--for indeed, as God's last word it can no longer be superseded--if a Christian is engaged and committed to this in a free outpouring of faith, and allows this matchless hope more validity than all doubts, skepticism, and reservations--then he or she is an orthodox Christian. This Christian experiences classic Christology, existentially. This Christian finds and accepts Jesus, actually understood, and rightly understood as his or her salvation." I have quoted in extenso not only because of its inherent pertinence to this Thinksheet's theme but also because KR's solid biblical base in his diction is essential if the biblical Story is to be, for us, full instead of empty, void.

3 Almost none of America's founders doubted any of the three convictions in this Thinksheet's title. The thinkers among them considered all three essential to human dignity both religiously & morally. Consequently, these convictions underlie our founding documents, which cannot be understood without a knowledge of them. If our public schools are not to engender these "values," what secular surrogates shall they substitute? Can "self-esteem" replace God? "Values," conscience? "Your future," the afterlife? All these lack the promise/threat, rewards/punishment clout of the originals.

4 Tillich struggled, here, to make an advance on Kant. As for God, he saw a development progression from God as void to enemy to friend; & he well knew that God, at a later stage, could become void again. And death empty of both fear & hope.