

SADDAM'S DILEMMA:

WHEN SHOULD MY DOGMA YIELD TO MY PRAGMA?

"PRINCIPLED" LIVING IN THE "PRACTICAL" WORLD

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008

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One way to account for Saddam's power is that he has removed from earthly existence anybody crossing or failing him--the latest, according to a report today, is his air minister. Another way--you might call it the decisional-analytic way--is to point to his masterful juggling of **principle** (he's a man of principle, an idealist) & **practicality** (he's a pragmatist). Principle? He's a pan-Arab messianist, a more-secular-than-religious mahdi (Nehru redivivus) & a dreamer of the Third Babylonian Empire (Nebuchadnezzar redivivus). Yet he's also a practical leader, again & again showing agility in adapting to changing terrain. Which side of his personality will determine the outcome of the Gulf War? We pray that he become unprincipled, his dogma yielding to his pragma....Meanwhile, in the USA, some are praying that we "live up to our principles" & "bring the boys & girls home"; others, that we "live up to our principles" & "finish the job." Each side argues that its projected praxis combines faithfulness to moral principles (ie, dogma) with intelligent response to the situation viewed from the anticipated consequences of the proposed action (ie, pragma). And a very few are so principled against war that they believe calculating pacifism's consequences in a situation is itself unprincipled & perverse: the consequences are (1) in the lap of the gods & to be met bravely, or in the hands of God & to be met trustingly & humbly (which, for his mission, was Jesus' position, & should be his followers' under vocation, ie when called by the Spirit to a mission or witness requiring uncalculating obedience: my disagreement with pacifists is in their turning this vocation into a philosophy & ideology)....In self-examination & mutual confrontation, we can learn to deal more relevantly with principles/practice & more kindly with one another.

1 In healthy souls & societies, principles & practice are inseparable; & thus the bromide "Practice what you preach." The integrity of the two demands that the statement end "& preach what you practice," but bromides avoid calling on people to preach! When the two are separated, we have to do with naivete, hypocrisy, deception, false consciousness, or crusade. In this "Id," an animal-rights freak has the courage of her single-issue, monomaniacal conviction. We'd all agree she's highly principled, at least about how other people should behave. (If she makes an exception of herself, she's both highly principled & either naive or hypocritical.) As for the farmer, you could say his principle is survival, the biological ur-principle which might (I wouldn't say "may") persuade Saddam to make a deal instead of becoming a martyr. What the cartoonists want you to enjoy is the horse's two expressions, which need no words to explicate. As an allegory (cartoonists' intended or not), the horse is nature, which would rather we leave it alone (box 1) but if not, that we treat it sustainably rather than terminally (box 3: eating the crops, not the horse). A second level of humor--or do you think it the first?--is the split between principle & practice, a split in the soul as well as in society, a split inside each of us (as in a number of parables Jesus represents fundamentally inner conflicts by two persons--several of them beginning "A certain man had two sons...."). Would the cartoon be as true to life if the sex of the speakers were reversed? (Do you think women are more principled & men more practical? Or is that only culture-specific?)

WIZARD of ID

by Brant Parker and Johnny Hart



2 Which comes first in time, in human development historical-social-personal--practice or principles? In Ro.13.5, Paul mixes Hebrew & Greek incentives: we "must obey the authorities--not just because of God's punishment [which they are God's servants in executing], but also as a matter of conscience." There, in one verse, you have the two legs of Christian ethics: theonomous obedience to God + autonomous decision-making (here in Ro.13, the heteronomous factor, the state, is an instrument of theonomy). But which comes first in time is a chicken-or-egg nonsense question except in such a primordial story as the Fall, where the practice of fruit-eating in obedience to the Creator encounters a "But not from this tree," & both obedience & autonomy emerge in human consciousness as principles. Answers are not found where questions are not asked, principles as conscious **moral generalizations** ("moral" in the broadest sense, viz behavioral) do not emerge except when perplexity gives us pause. "He who hesitates is lost," but so is he who doesn't pause when perplexed.

3 The question, rather, is this: which principle is first, the most important or "principal" one, in coming to a specific decision? "Principle" is Latin for what's "first" (cf. "prince"). For the Jew (& the Jew in us Christians), the first principle is **the Word**, God's torah in history & the heart. The Greeks' four roots for the idea of principle mean "the foundational things," "water" & "semen," "law," & (the Greek word itself brought over into English) "hypothesis." (In pragmatic philosophy & ethics, "hypothesis" with our English meaning is the essence of principle: what we should live by is whatever works best, & the apodosis should continuously modify the protasis.)

4 The historical emergence of **the Word** is chronicled as direct divine events (= revelation) in which God acts freely (without human manipulation) to work & word his will. Allowing for some dramaturgic heightening in the telling & retelling, biblical faith insists (1) that in God's world, God can & does intervene, & (2) that God leaves it to us to become aware of his Presence in history--global, national, familial, personal--& aware of "principles." We should, then, not be surprised when scholars heuristically recast history--as Norman Gottwald, the Exodus; or Mark S. Smith, THE EARLY HISTORY OF GOD: YAHWEH AND THE OTHER DEITIES IN ANCIENT ISRAEL (H&R/90).

Now, God is "the Good" of Plato & "the First Principle" of Aristotle, **the Principle of principles**, (1) **the Reality** before-within-behind-beyond "all things" & (2) **the ultimate-intimate Generalization**. Smith's account assumes theological prolepsis, the tendency to read the God of later historical stages back into earlier periods, one result being that one differing from the current official view of God looks apostate from an earlier established view of God. In the terms of this Thinksheet's title, pragma (as the historical experience in which God [1] revealed himself & [2] was discovered in encounter & cultural development) was the mother of dogma (the settled teaching, torah, about God). (The "-ma" ending = "the result of" [played with in the bumper sticker "My karma ran over your dogma"]. Thus "praxis" [action] leads to "experience" & wisdom therefrom [prag-ma]; & "didaché" [teaching] solidifies as "official teaching" [dog-ma].)

"Taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps.34.8), while primarily an invitation to participate, can be read also as a pragmatic challenge to interpret the feedback from your trusting God: the Bible supports the hermeneutic loop refining our experience & conceptualization of God.

Smith suggests a political motif in the shaping of the idea of God during the (Davidic) monarchy: God is the national deity uniting various peoples by absorbing characteristics of their gods (eg, Baal) & goddesses (eg, Asherah), the pure monotheistic ideal not emerging till the late-monarchic period, the Jews only gradually emerging as a distinct people. Much stimulating, but nothing here disturbing to one who believes, as I do, that God delights in evolutionary developments of the mind as well as of the body.

5 Principle & practice are synergistic: nothing's "practical" except in light of some principle, & every program should honor both. Principles should be so stated as to provide growing room, as the Const. & Bill of Rights toward the rights movements.