DID JESUS B L A M E ?

ON OVERCOMING THE TEMPTATION TO FOREGO
BLAMING NAMING (NAMING THE PERSON YOU'RE BLAMING)
ON THE GROUND THAT IT MAKES YOU FEEL BAD

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The older I get, the worse I feel after naming when blaming, so I do it somewhat less than I used to. This Thinksheet is a critical self-examination as to (1) why blaming naming is becoming more painful & (2) whether I'm sinfully permitting lowered neurophysical "fight," in my declining years, to erode my conviction that saints & sinners need confronting short-distance eyeball-to-eyeball & long-distance by name. Long-distance: for instance, in letters to the editor I name names less & do so only when I judge it necessary to draw accusative attention to an individual who, according to my biblical lights, has egregiously offended against the public good--as in the case of the person named in the letter (today's CCT) in this Thinksheet.

What caused this reflection to bob to the surface was the question a priest presented to me. A psychiatrist who's writing a book on Jesus as healer asked the priest, who was checking out with me his written reply.

1 Why does blaming naming violate CB (conventional behavior in the circles I know best)? Because there's nothing, no space, between nasty & nice, & blaming naming is in the "nasty" (ie, "not nice") column. But why? Because these circles consider the nonconfrontational style to be RC (religiously correct) & PM (psychologically mature).

2 And then there's fear. Whoso dishes it out is apt to be served it. It's the surface point being made in this cartoon I found (& made a copy of) on the door of the NYTSeminary veep, the only thing on his door.

3 That priest wrote a highly competent reply to the psychiatrist --exegetically & theologically good.

When church-state becomes tyranny

You did well to give the prayer-at-commencement issue Page 1 headlines. The big news, in historical retrospect, is seldom war, weather, and the woes common to our frail flesh. The big news is about seismic shifts in the soul of a people.

Historically, we Americans are a religious people with a secular government. Religion in private and public life has been a buffer against government, as well as a promoter of the kind of character without which democracy is insustainable.

But as religion has access to an ever lower percentage of America's children, secularity's power to use government against religion increases. A tiny minority of atheists can, through the courts, exercise tyranny over the majority.

A Rhode Island student and her father complained about public-school-graduation invocations and benedictions. There have always been Americans preferring atheist public education, though public education was an emergent form and support for religious education.

What is new here is that the few now have the power to control the many. That is the definition of tyranny.

We the people believe in the separation of church and state. But few of us believe in the separation of religion from education. And more and more of us are more and more alienated from a public school system that is failing to communicate the full American heritage of character, history, and hope.

The "right" of a minority to infringe on the rights of the majority is a sick and stupid reading of the First Amendment.

Barnstable Schools Supt. Edward Tynan's overreading of the court's position is gross. Let him exclude clergy prayers at graduation. But what are we to make of his telling graduates speaking at graduation "not to invoke a diety"? What I make of it is clear: It is more than dangerous nonsense. It is an attack on the First Amendment from a new angle.

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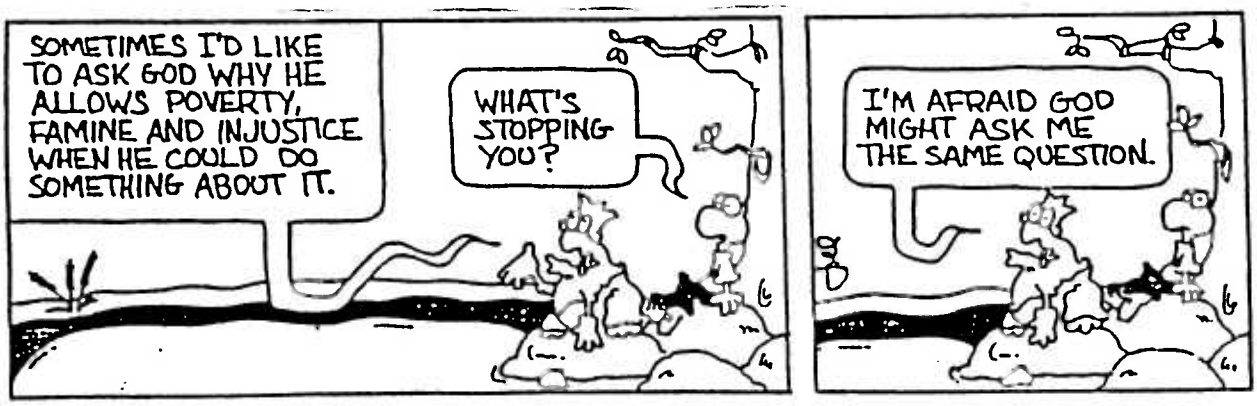

Before he read it to me over the phone, I guessed, correctly, that the psychiatrist is (1) anti-blaming & (2) looking to Jesus less for guidance than (aren't we all tempted?) for confirmation....I'm ambivalent. I want the name of Jesus sounded, but the dominical sanction abuses Jesus when it's used only to help you do your thing.

4 The priest knows the parishioner (I don't), & I wasn't about to tell him what to say to her. But he wanted to know how I'd approach the question given the fact that what was sought was support for anti-blaming. I said, "I'd have to say no and yes. NO: Jesus got killed for blaming. YES: Jesus was intolerant of those who, after blaming, imagined they'd done their duty." Our duty includes asking what form the blamer's love (even of enemies!) should take after the blaming. As truth rules out the sort of blaming that falsely self-justifies by passing the buck to another, love rules out rejecting, having nothing further to do with, the blamed--not even prayer for the blamed.

5 Our psychiatrist's dirty-word list doubtless includes, in addition to "blame," both "guilt" & "shame." Much of this goes back to the Freudian adolescent hatred of biblical religion (as [Marx] "opiate" & [Freud] "illusion"). The mature way to go is to retrieve the powerful traditional religoethical words that for far too long have been on secularism's lexical hate-list. In this endeavor, there's no better way to begin than with biblical word-study, of which I'll do some here.

6 **God** models blaming, which is the bulk of his biblical prophets' recorded utterances. But mainline Christianity puts the accent in God on promise, not threat, on reward, not punishment (and the same "positive thinking" applies to the current revival of Goddess religion, the ancient notes of destruction & death being repressed). Ethical implication: If God & Goddess have their act cleaned up so they don't blame, shouldn't we humans clean up our act & stop blaming? But it doesn't require a Voltaire to point out that the deities improved their behavior in response to our (supposed) behavioral development: they got remade in our current PC image. In the same vein, Jesus as ethical paragon of virtues & values gets updated as "nonjudgmental" (in spite of such a concentration of spleen as Mt.23 [though it's doubtless Matthew's catena of Jesus' blamings])....In a highly competent unpublished paper, "The Concept of 'Blame' in the Practice of Jesus," my good friend F.E.Whiting rails against the "insipidity" of a "watered down" Jesus who, unjudging, has lost "his ability to forgive and atone"--forgiveness implying judgment, atonement implying condemnation. "Jesus comes to us discerning, loving, forgiving," but not loving & forgiving without discerning, without judging, without "fixing responsibility" for wrongs, without the cross of redemption from blameworthiness. Jesus throws us into a "crisis" (Greek for discerning, judging) of self-examination resulting in self-judgment in recognition of the judgment of God. "The cross is designed to result in conviction of sin, righteousness,and judgment (John 16:8-11)."

7 Did Jesus **blame God**? Assuredly not! Rather, he took upon himself the burden of blaming for God, on God's behalf; & he didn't fear to take upon himself the consequence, viz. being blamed. (Please reread §2.)....The fear component is vital to any psychosocial analysis of blaming. It's high when you blame the victor (which is dangerous, for the victor has the power): it is low when you blame the victim (because you can do it with impunity). A rising chorus blames a weakened Christianity/church for whatever's wrong with society & the environment, & mainline religion's counterattack is feeble. Jesus blamed political & religious authorities (by name!), & their counterattack was not feeble. A supine American press (says Dave Beckman, Spring/91 MEDIA ETHICS UPDATE, Emerson College) relinquishes, vis-a-vis the Reagan-Bush White House, "the ethical imperative to discover truth": "a tyranny of sanctimonious deceit and hypocrisy has been allowed rampant reign." (Remember Ed Meese's "protecting the [teflon] president" by keeping him ignorant & thus unblamable?)....A Cape Cod clergyman, asked by the schools superintendent not to mention God in his graduation speech (which the graduates asked him to give), submitted his text to a lawyer, lest he be found legally blameworthy for anything in it.

8 Here's a bit of **word study** relevant to this Thinksheet's topic....The ancient Greeks' most common word for blaming translates as "naming" (our Eng. wd. "name" being on the same root): you may accuse a category of humans, but you're really blaming when you "name names." That feisty people had a rich vocabulary for blaming, & even a fistful of words meaning "fond of blaming"! Converted to Jesus, they needed help in becoming less quick to blame, more quick to forgive--& this accounts for some NT passages (eg, Mt.7.1) overreadable as condemning blaming....A common stem of many Greek words for blaming means "cause": blaming is pointing to the cause of some wrong, & the cause often has a personal name. Resisting this activity are all sorts of cabals & interlocking directorates & bureaucratic lines of defense to prevent "heads rolling," so nobody in particular can be blamed when everything in general collapses. The pathology of blaming includes sociopolitical diseases caused by a public & press too slow to blame & insufficiently fierce at any speed. "Truth is king," concludes a story in the Apocrypha. But when the purgative process of blaming slows & society becomes constipated with mendacious illusions, the lie is king & civility & civil government break down, to be dismally replaced by anarchy/tyranny....In the NT outside the Gospels, the common word for blaming was also common among the ancient Greeks: "faultfinding, complaining" is the root meaning. μμπ *mmp*, the root, occurs in NT 24 times, in 11 words (but only twice in the Gospels: M.7.2* & L.1.6). Some papyri show the word as "censorious," nitpicking, a characteristic guaranteed to produce no excess of friends. (In Jungian typology, the four "J" [judging] types have to resist the temptation to get their jollies by being hypercritical, carping, condemnatory. On the other hand, God would not choose for a biblical prophet anyone from any of the other twelve types, for the prophet must bespeak God's complaints against his people.)....*A poorly attested instance...."Criticism" (from Greek & Eng. "crisis," decision-making; cf. "discernment, discrimination," both from Lat. to "sift") is the general category for a score of biblical words covering judging, blaming, condemning, scolding, cursing (as antithesis of blessing; eg, Jesus' use of "woe"), charging, complaining--inevitable, because biblical religion is so highly moral. Not just in blame giving (ie, blaming), but also in blame taking (eg Judah to his father, on the former's taking responsibility for the safe return of a sibling [Gn.43.9]: "I will always bear the blame" "if I do not bring" Benjamin back "safe and sound." Mutual accusation is an aspect of Christian love (eg Paul's confronting Peter "because he was to be blamed" [Gal.2.11 AV]. And the enduring of blame: God's servants are to be prepared for "blame or praise" (2Cor.6.8). If a fellow-Christian does something wrong, go have it out with them (Mt.18.15:L.17.3). Some grumblers (blamers) are governed only by their own desires (Jude 16); but be quick to resolve quarrels (Gal.3.13). Jn. Baptist literally lost his head for going around complaining about (criticizing, blaming) the king for a sexual-marital deviation (L.3.19). Jesus rebukes Peter (M.8.33), & complains against a particular church (Rev.2.4,14,20). We are called to be blameless in the presence of God (L.1.6, Eph.1.4, Phil.3.6, 1Thes.3.13), who through Christ makes this possible.

9 The present decline of the moral sense in our society correlates with an increase of "tolerance" for a range of dismal, human-relations-disastrous & civil-tranquility-disruptive ("fault-free") behavior. By contrast, the Bible seems ever more "heavy," "judgmental." But the biblical moral sense is built into the private & public structures of our Anglo-Saxon way of life. ("England has two books, the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare but the Bible made England."--Victor Hugo.) The ethical vocabularies of the Bible & the English language are interrelatedly rich, as one can see by using a biblical concordance & WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY OF SYNONYMS on parallel words. Comparing concordances of older & newer versions/translations reveals a lessening of the use of "blame-ing" as these words have been acquiring a more & more pejorative connotation during this period of declining moral sense via-a-vis personal conduct.)

10 But as blaming individuals for personal conduct has declined, there's been

a steep increase in social-sensitivity blaming. The central sin is no longer the abuse of **freedom** (to be independent of God) but the abuse of **power** (to oppress the powerless--the central sinner being the affluent/positioned white male, who more or less gets blamed for everything wrong at home & abroad, including Westernism & speciesism--& of course sexism, racism, classism, & even much of nationalism, as well as genocide & ecocide.)

11 Did **Jesus**, who never had monetary or institutional power, blame the powerful? Of course he did. And did he blame "the powerless," society's unempowered? Again, yes, for he saw them autonomous victims as well as heteronomous victims--sinning as well as sinned against. All the people, not just the powerful, were blameworthy for living impenitently as pertains to God & unforgivingly as pertains to one another & unlovingly toward enemies--each one within the limits of one's freedom, whether wide or narrow. (In law, it takes two to make a crime: *mens rea* [the predisposition, the mindset, the more or less conscious intention--all this independent of outward powers] & *actus rea* [the deed --dependent on outward circumstances, powers, opportunities]. Everybody's blamable for whatever inner & outer powers each has [L.12.48].)

One-sided blaming is ineffectual, an ideological affliction, which on one side sees powerlessness as proof of blameworthiness (=Deuteronomism) & on the other sees power as proof of blameworthiness. The inculpated group is hardened against the accusation, & the exculpated group becomes even smugger in false purity. When the crowds got the message that Jesus was asking everybody to repent, not just their masters-oppressors, their ardor for him cooled.

12 The **early church** clearly followed Jesus in blaming everybody vis-a-vis God --eg Ro.1-3.9, all human beings condemned under sin, the universal precondition for the universal evangelical ("good-news") offer of a new life for new creatures in a new creation....The paradoxical effect of blaming everybody was the emergence of an egalitarian community in which women, slaves, & the poor had higher status than they had before they became aware of being God-blamed, repented, & confessed Jesus Christ as Lord & Savior.

13 This paradoxical effect, lifting the poor by blaming them, has characterized evangelical movements through the centuries. Eg, Jn. Wesley "evangelized the underclass, exhorting pride and combatting family disintegration by reforming behavior." (I'm quoting Geo. F. Will's 30 May 91 column, "Rules for conduct for the poor"). NYU's Lawrence Mead puts it as the need to move from the present sterile "dependency politics" to a new anti-poverty "politics of conduct," remoralizing the demoralized. He says good behavior is a necessary precondition for participation in the goods of a good society, so moral values have to be enforced. And says Joel Schwartz, exec.ed. of THE PUBLIC INTEREST, the "dysfunctional" passive poor must be energized to take responsibility for themselves in personal, work, & financial & legal relationships. Blaming society only leads to further despair & degradation, & more anti-poor feelings (& anti-minorities feelings) in the general populace. ...Of course none of this blaming of the outs excuses the ins from blame. There's plenty of blame to go around for everybody. The claim that in blaming one I'm exculpating the other is one expression of the ideological mentality I'm blaming for much of the current unreality in argumentation on social issues. It's a futile impass to "blame the victims" as though they were nothing but victims or the victimizers as though they were nothing but victimizers. Nor can any good come from debates as to who's the bigger sinner in national or international woes. Repentance & blaming should be in the same breath: when you point with your index finger, most of that hand's fingers are pointing at yourself, but two of them are not. The moral imperative is to combine confessing one's complicity & calling on the other side to join you in repentance & confession. Only thus can we "help carry one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal.6.1f).

14 "Correctional institutions" is not just a euphemism for prisons. The blaming & punishing intends redemption, which like educational blaming (disciplining children into learning) becomes the more difficult the longer delayed.