hocuspocus in locusfocus
THEOLOGY'S "WAG THE DOG" DANGER

On the Internet recently, somebody said my enigmas are worth figuring out: the payoff is rich. I hope so, & add my claim that these enigmas are discoveries of mine, not inventions of mine. When a child playing with blocks puts an "X" block next to an "E" block, the event is either an invention or a discovery--the former if the child doesn't know the alphabet, otherwise the latter. Within patterns, paradigms, systems, I make discoveries by putting next to (Gk., "para") each other images/ideas/ideals; & I'm especially intrigued with the esthetic-intellectual-spiritual stimulus sometimes eventuating from fresh juxtapositions.

Both title & subtitle of this Thinksheet are enigmatic.

First, the subtitle. You know I didn't make up "hocuspocus," & you probably suspect (rightly) that "locusfocus" is a Willisian neologism. "**Hocuspocus**"? A portmanteau or telescope of the Latin-mass phrase trd. in Eng. as "This is my body." (OED calls this [1632-] the "assumed derivation"; most dictionaries give no etymology only the meanings "deception," "trickery"; RHD2 has "a meaningless chant...used in conjuring or incantation.") The mass rapidly mumbled (fast, the Latin sentence sounds rather like "hocuspocus") was one reason Vatican II opened to the vernacular (people's-language) mass. My meaning here? The public use of *unnecessarily* technical speech/writing. (My Thinksheets are only as technical as my educational purpose requires: they're addressed primarily to religion-scholars, & I throw in helps for others. For a decade I edited FAMILY DEVOTIONS & had to rewrite most of the manuscripts down to the age-12 level: believe it or not, Willis can write simply!) But (as they say in greasy-spoons) "hold" the deception: I seldom see any theological piece I would accuse of trickery. "**Locusfocus**"? Every instance of religion-communication aims to inform or persuade by directing the hearer's/reader's/viewer's *attention* (focus) to some "place" (locus). The gain is in concentration: a horse's blinders concentrate attention on what's important, viz. what's ahead. (When a father discovered that his college daughter was paying too much attention to what people thought of her, he sent her a pair of horse-blinders--with no note. Many years later, publicly, she remarked that that gift marked a turningpoint in her life.) The loss? "The big picture" & proportionality. Keeping gain/loss in mind, the critic/analyst of a communication-effort will ask such questions as (1) is this, for that person/situation, the most appropriate locusfocus? (2) does this locusfocus unnecessarily distort/reduce the whole picture (say, of the doctrine of the Trinity)? (3) does the sermon/essay/film/display, while reducing attention to a little picture (i.e., detail of the big picture), try to make/keep the hearer/reader/viewer aware of the big picture (& if so, how?)?....A well-designed church is a big picture full of little pictures (symbolic representations in many media: stone, wood, glass, metal, paint). In the mail today I read these words (from a church whose "little pictures" I got to determine): "The confirmation classes still study the symbols in the windows" (the symbols covering every aspect of the confirmation curricula: as the Shield of St.Patrick has it, "God be in my eyes and in my seeing"). In that church, confirmation classes for two generations, more than a half century, have been thus seeing the gospel, the little pictures in the big picture, to the neglect of neither.

That's the subtitle (actually, on this Thinksheet, the supratitle). The title? It's from the 1998 **** film "Wag the Dog"--a satire on to-hell-with-the-truth political spinmeisters (word-manipulators). Well into the story, spinmeister Brean is ready for the question Why does a dog wag its tail? "Because the dog is smarter than the tail. If the tail was smarter than the dog, it would [& here we have the film's title] wag the dog." B. sees himself as the smart tail wagging (manipulating) the public (yep, the dog). Elsewhere, using newspaper language, he says "To change the story, change the lead" (the article's title; the titler of letters to the editor determines the readers' point of entry into the letter, often distorting the letterwriter's locusfocus). The film's historical reference is the Keystone-Cops U.S.Marines attack on Grenada, to divert attention from the Marine bombing-humiliation in Beirut. My meaning here? Religion/theology leadership, as a chattering class, faces the same wag-the-dog truth-betraying temptations as does politics--black holes (single issues

Elliott △ Thinksheets
309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville, MA 02632
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008 $20 per year
e-mail: wandielliott@attbi.com
Noncommercial reproduction permitted
12.16.02

inflated like airbags for total attention; a little picture enlarged to fill the big screen), concealment (self-protective secrecy), partisan packaging, fanaticism (passionate intensity trumping reason & fairness), media blitzes, even fake news & phony martyrs & narcissistic demagogs. And *anti*-religion/theology thinkers/movements play the same tricks....A few instances:

1 The present "Left Behind" craze inflates a tiny picture within the multiplex of Christian eschatology to (1) fill the whole frame & (2) manipulate a fear common to humanity, the fear of being left behind/out. Spun out of only three NT passages, the L.B. books have sold 40+ million copies. In a ConfessingChristyahoo-group post today, Max Stackhouse mentions that four times Mt.24 is against being misled. As a take-off on "sit-com" (a "little problem" has "a happy ending for all"), he calls the L.B. craze, as the latest cult of otherworldly escapism, a "**sit-trag**" (big problems culminate in "a tragic ending for almost all"). Not transhistorical (he says), but historical; & "only the Father" (vs.36) knows the time of the end. As for "tribulation," it's "the ordinary state of history." Gresham's law is that bad money drives out the good: Christ's law is that good hermeneutics/theology drives out the bad. IRONY: As the White House plays wag-the-dog tricks with the Al Qa'ida & biowar frights, warning that our enemies will strike again soon, L.B. plays wag-the-dog tricks with the threat that unless we believe as L.B. tells us to, we'll soon miss out on salvation: Geo.W.Bush says we won't be left alone, Tim LaHaye says we will be left alone (on earth, & not saved by "rapture" up to heaven).

2 When interest is more in ethics than theology, "GOD is love" is read as "God is LOVE," then translated (as Ashley Montagu did in a 1952 debate with me) as "Love is God": tail & dog have exchanged places. Recently a UU layman complained to me that in his congregation, worship had disappeared into social "issues."

3 As one of the two speakers at the 1970 NCC Theological Colloquy, Avery (now Cardinal) Dulles' first comment on the other speaker's paper was in criticism of theology from below, need-driven more than God-given (i.e., theology from above [revelation]). The heresy he was nailing is what the Vatican, since 1890, has called (theologically) modernism & (culturally) Americanism. Touché, I rejoined; & added that above & below should be mutually corrective. For my church, UCC, the "dog" is from below; & for his, RCC, from above (Rome telling the faithful what they need with no regard for "new occasions teach[ing] mew duties"). (Today, 2002, Rome is suffering worldwide humiliation from too much "above," too little "below.")

4 Vital doctrine (let's say, above) is in continuing **interaction** with life (below). Life with its "changes and chances" makes fresh discoveries within the Bible & the Great Tradition, & sometimes "sees" in the above something below put there (unwittingly) to be blessed & sent back down as revelation. Instance, our modern idea of the person-in-community has gotten read into the Trinity in many recent books on the Trinity. E.g., Jürgen Moltmann in his THE TRINITY AND THE KNGDOM OF GOD (H&R/81): "the modern, changed concept of the person" (144) "understood in trinitarian terms--that is, in terms of relation... the Persons [of the Trinity] do not only subsist in the common divine substance; they also exist in their relations to the other Persons [anticipated in Jn.Damascene's doctrine of perchoresis, the Persoms in a circle-dance]....the living fellowship of the three Persons" (174-175). And S.Mark Heim (THE DEPTHS OF THE RICHES [Eerdmans/01], 180: "the Christian idea of God is somewhere between our idea of a person and our idea of a community"). The il?/logic is *post hoc propter hoc*: community as we understand it must first have existed in God. Some truth, but caution: the Greek Fathers never use, for intratrinitarian reality, the main Greek root for "community," the root in the Greek word transliterated as "koinonia," viz. κοιν- *koin*. Let's not make either too much or too little of this lexical fact.

5 In his essay title "A Note on Language" (in his JESUS THE SAVIOR [WJK/01]), Wm.C.Placher' concern for inclusive language doesn't even mention the primary theological concern about feminism's attack on the biblical God, viz. the question whether a deity affirmed to be personal can continue to be thought/felt personal if no longer having the benefit of personal pronouns. The medium is the message, & a God-message lacking personal pronouns is a vote for God as impersonal, "It" (or, as radical feminism would have it, "She" with feminine personal pronouns).