REINVENTING RELIGION

2636 7 Sept 93

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

Today Al Gore is to unveil his plan for "reinventing government" --he says, a "rock 'em, sock 'em, shake 'em up" plan....a government that "works better and costs less," "cleared of useless bureaucracy." REINVENTING GOVERNMENT* was a best seller two years ago, & since then the gerund has taken on various additional objects--in this Thinksheet, religion. *By David Osborne & Ted Gaebler

On the phone today, somebody presented his scheme for reinventing religion, & was shocked when I said something like "You've reinvented Buddhism, which is like reinventing the wheel." In religion, it's mighty hard to make an advance on the ancients.

1 The Western Hemisphere is a reinvention of Europe, & America's religio-moral-political ethos is a reinvention of Britain's (our inventiveness & reinventiveness being of one spirit). We are the world's best seedbed for experimentation, modification, & evolution (development) in religion. So in the U.S.A., anyone complaining against reinventing religion is swimming upstream. I'm complaining.

2 The original public schools in America taught religion as a **repair job** on humanity. The little children, their first day of school, were in need of repair, because (as the McGuffey readers not long after had it in the famous acrostic) "In Adam's Fall / we sinned all." According to the reinvented religion of the present-day public-school establishment, religion is a **development job.** From their first to their last day of school, children are to be exfoliated: as leaves open to the sun, minds are to be induced to open to knowledge, skills, "values" (not virtues).

The vision of the P.S.'s first religion included the developmental action of today's P.S.: today's P.S. does not include the vision motivating yesterday's vision (ie, as Fall-Redemption-Consummation, the biblical Story).

Does the P.S. today get along without vision (ie, is it, as it claims, neutral on religion)? Not at all. The founding vision has been rejected, but the operative vision is salvation-by-development: developmentalism is religion reinvented.

Is the P.S.'s reinvented religion compatible with the original P.S. religion? No, it's a hostile alternative to which classical Christianity is hostile (so classical Chrisians--Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant--should not be, as we now are, coerced, by public taxation, into supporting it). One instance of diametricality: repair-job religion has the educational task of teaching children *low* self-regard (as each school-child is, according to "Amazing Grace," a "wretch"), which is a tough task against the P.S.'s teaching the same child *high* self-esteem.

Repair-job religion teaches that in cosmos & history, something's gone so profoundly & pervasively wrong that nobody naturally escapes the evil, which one can be liberated from only supernaturally, viz by "the blood of Christ," the atonement by God's own self-sacrifice in his Son Jesus. Without this doctrine of evil & sin, cosmos & history ain't busted & don't need repair: the preaching of the atonement is the offer of an unneeded repair-job, & "the cross of Christ...[is]...emptied of its power" (1Cor.1.17NRSV), & Easter is myth in the vacuous sense. In short, Christianity is a premodern superstition superseded by cosmogenetic evolution & historical-social-personal development.

3 Millions of America's children believe only in the development-job religion they were taught in P.S. &, if their education continued, in higher education, whose religion is both the cause & the effect of the P.S.'s reinvented religion. Those of them who're converted to Christianity experience the second reinvention of school religion. For them, by conviction of (their) sin & (Christ's) righteousness, the circle doubles back to the repair-job religion of our original public schools. "Back" makes me nervous, for the actual experience of these converts is movement forward if they don't abandon what's right & good in what they've learned. So I'm ambivalent about the Protestant-Right's taking over P.S. boards & the lowest, the local, level of the Republican Party. But I worry more about our country's moral degeneracy & failure to nurture the soul--which will, I believe, be the theme of Wm. J. Bennett's 1996 Republican presidential candidacy: "The

+

social regression of the last 30 years is due in large part to the enfeebled state of our social institutions and their failure to carry out a critical and time-honored task: the moral education of the young." (AP 4Sept 93) Sobering is the 22-p. report "The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators" (issued by Empower America, a study group he codirects, & the Heritage Foundation). The survey found a decline in the sense of moral obligation to others, sacrifice as a moral good, social respectability, observing rules, & restraint in pleasure & sexuality; & a rise in emphasis on "self-expression, individualism, self-realization and personal choice."... Attendant on such moral decline is a rise in misanthropy, as is chillingly documented in WITH CHARITY TOWARD NONE: A Fond Look at Misanthropy, by Florence King (St.Martin's/93): "Familiarity doesn't breed contempt, it is contempt" (people being oh-so nice, hiding hostility behind indiscriminate friendliness).

4 Now that WPR 2 (the 2nd world parliament of religions, also in Chicago) is over, some will push toward a global reinvention of religion, a pan-religion, a world faith based on the ethical agreements in the parliament's report. All such efforts in the past have crashed on the rocks of the reality that the core of any religion is not invention but discovery (as Tillich put it, not signs but symbols), discovery experienced as uncovering-unveiling (eg, the Greek behind the word "Revelation" in the title of the Bible's last book, in which the disclosure is not Revelator John's work but--as in the doctrine of "revelation"--God's).

Again: if the basis for reinventing religion is a shoppinglist of virtues--compassion or unselfishness are the one's often heard of these days--the product will be not a global reinvention of religion but at most the invention of a global ethic parallel with what we already have in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The distance between "What shall we do?" (ethics) & "Why?" (religion) is as great as that between "What happened?" (science) & "Why?" (religion). Religion reaches higher & digs deeper than ethics. As Chicago's Abp. Bernardin said at the 1993 parliament's opening, "There is a hunger for and growing confidence in the wisdom and power of the transcendent." The U.S.A. is becoming ever more multiethnic, multicultural, & multireligious; but it won't become transreligious except among a few of philosophical bent who speculate on "the god beyond God." Reaching for this god finds not a higher god but the devil. It's Promethean hubris. It's the infinite longing for knowledge which Christopher Marlowe portrays in "The Tragic (Hi)story of Dr. Faustus" (1588). The doctor's yearning is boundless, & so is his consequent sale of his soul to the devil as the evil angel wins the wrestle against the good angel.

5 **Deconstruction** (RHD^2 1960s-), by cutting the kitestring between language & reality, opened the door--for many who were discontent with their religion--into the illusion that religion can be radically reconstructed by reinventing religious langauge. To them applies the aforementioned Tillichian dictum: we can control signs, symbols control us. Eg, Christianity's God-talk is stubbornly, essentially, generic-masculine, & any attempt to androgynize it will either dry up or split off into a new religion, a feminist religion of the goddess.

6 **Spiritual autism** is religion reinvented under pressure of religious pluralism. Many times a month, individuals show some level of shock when I ask "What is your religion, if I may ask?" For millions now, Whitehead was right: "Religion is what a man [sic] does with his solitude." Some responses I get, beyond the usual self-identification by birth or traditional-institutional affiliation, are: "I have my own religion" & "I'm not [institutionally] religious, but I'm [personally] spiritual." The double privacy here--call it privatism-- parallels autism: neither public nor private society exists. These religio-autistic personalities experience my question, then, as a double invasion of privacy, or an invasion of double privacy. My religion, Christianity, requires me to invade others' privacy, in prayerful hope of their good, & with my "sharp sense of the Fall, and sharper sense of the Resurrection" (a phrase spoken of Wm. Stringfellow at the recent Kirkridge event to honor him). To be a prophet, as Ab. Heschel put it, "first you make yourself a nuisance."

7 Finally, religion reinvented as **wisdom** or **science.**