9/11 AS A SECOND COMING OF GOD

The **ambiguitities** of the human heart & history are the despair of purists (who, when they say "Keep it simple," think it's possible) & moralists (who know the difference between good & evil and, surprisingly, are never on the wrong side). The **dilemmas** are that if it's not kept simple, it won't motivate to action; & if there's no appeal to conscience, people will feel, anticipatorily, neither guilt for bad behavior nor dignity for doing the right thing (good/evil = right/wrong).

9/11 has been a kairos of the full range of political, moral, ethical, cultural, and religious rhetoric--most of it exposing hermeneutic *thinness* (the analysts' resources being inadequate). Everyone sensed that a horror of previously unimaginable magnitude had suddenly hit the heart of America's financial & military might; & most knew that if "a moment of silence" were ever appropriate, this was it. But chattering classes had to keep chattering on schedule, & the clergy (& lay wonks on religion) is one of those classes. The one I belong to, so please listen despite how you feel about this Thinksheet's title...

...which is not (1) a reference to the Second Coming (Jesus' Parousia), (2) an approval of Wahhabi (Islamist, radical Islamic) violence, or (3) an antiAmerican huff that "we had it coming." What is it? Please be patient.

1 The Bible models for us the courage to view human life & history, even the cosmos itself, as concealing/revealing that reality has a **moral** dimension: good & evil forces are entangled, & the believer bets everything on the good even when, indeed especially when "upon the throne be wrong" & God seems not to be "keeping watch above his own" (in Jas.Russell Lowell's age-26 "Once to every man and nation").

Further, this biblical vision & understanding views this moral dimension as personal, God as the Just Judge, whose "providence" appears not only in towardnesses (i.e., what we like & welcome) but in untowardnesses--as in Lincoln's Gettyburg's equalization of blood-volumes ("by the lash...by the sword").

2 **Conscience**, a lively sense of right/wrong based on good/evil, is optional neither to democracy nor to capitalism; & our Founding Fathers were in agreement that the former is impossible without a cosmic Root of conscience, viz. God: the citizen who faces civic responsibilities does so knowing s/he stands under the judgment of the Just Judge, the heaven-Father. Cut loose from this Ground, neither the republic nor the free market can survive. ("What did you make today, Mr. Franklin?" said a lady on the street on the last day of the [1787] Constitutional Convention. "A republic, Madam, if you can keep it." He had asked that the sessions be opened with prayer.)

3 At that Convention, Geo.Mason, a slave-owner, argued against slavery that God, who cannot punish nations for evils in the afterlife (as he does individuals), will punish America if slavery is not abolished--but the issue was allowed to rot down into the Civil War. On PBS last night, in a West African market, I saw slave-shakles being sold not as souvenirs of the past but for use: the four largest West African tribes still practice slavery, still raid one another for slaves: no change from when their raiding was to sell fellow-Africans to white slavers. (IRONY: Whites stopped enslaving blacks, blacks haven't.) West Africa has long been suffering chaos & war: shall we say it's providential punishment for continuing what our Old South called the "peculiar institution"? I would not be so bold. Nor would I deny the possibility. Indeed, those who deny the possibility have undercut the biblical sense that, & how, this is a moral universe.

We white folks believe it's **evil** for anybody to own anybody: on said PBS program, a slave-owner said it would be stupid not to: "those who don't own slaves have to work [he said proudly], we don't." Underneath wrong is evil: underneath right, good. Evil exists in an underworld of chthonic-demonic-chaotic forces whether or not one pictures them as personal (Satan, Apollyon, the devil, demons): good is deeper than right (as moral is deeper than legal), and it exits in an overworld or "kingdom" of benevolent order whose heaven-Father has the power to cause to "come on earth," replacing the historical and present chaos-kingdoms (as the Lord's Prayer puts it). (Plato called this overworld simply "the Good"; Anglo-Saxon, g-o-d, different pronun-

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ciation when meaning "good" or "God.")

4 The horror of 9/11 was so great that many a commentator/preacher nailed it as "sheer **evil.**" I had emotional sympathy for that outburst but was intellectually & spiritually revulsed at its moralistic simplism (though I could & did use the phrase of Shoah/Holocaust). (The difference? The latter was an overall plan to destroy a whole people; the former, being only a symbolic destruction of "the West" & "the Great Satan," was theater.)

Now, sheer evil suggests its antonym, sheer good, which (as "the Good") was Plato's deity ("God...is the cause of a few things only," Rep.2.379). Contrast the Jew's deity, whose sovereignty is absolute (says Is.45.7, as a comfort to Exiles tempted to believe that things had gotten out of [even God's] hands). Nothing is outside of Yahweh's dominion: "I make weal and create woe" (same vs., TANAKH). At one blow, this radical doctrine--providence extended to its logical limit--(1) proclaims absolute monotheism, (2) denies dualism (the two-deities solution of good/evil puzzles), (3) asserts that God's providential activity transcends his special relation with Israel (as, for the Jews' return to Jerusalem, he choose Cyrus as "messiah"-deliverer--vs.1), & (4) reinforces the pious conviction of the tsadiq/hesedh (the righteous-faithful) that they are correct in consolidating their hopes in the one Lord over heaven/earth, good/evil, present/future.

Lexical note on Is.45.7: Heb. **ra'** can mean either "evil" (physical or moral) or "woe" (calamity, disaster). Heb. **shalom** means prosperity (vs. adversity) or (in the widest sense) good (& so, in the Dead Sea Isaiah scroll, **tov** ["good"] appears here instead of **shalom**). Since God is good, he does not create moral evil; but he does create both physical evil & the possibility (in creatures' free-will) of moral evil. With theodic concern, some have tried to lighten the translation: TEV has "blessing and disaster," CEV has (even lighter) "happiness and sorrow." Modern versions & translations avoid "evil," but shouldn't--as one can see in the Jewish two "tendencies" (**yetzer**) in the human heart, viz. to good (**tov**) & to evil (**ra'**): the latter is deeper than a tendency to "disaster" or "sorrow" or "woe." God, who is beyond good & evil (in a sense more profound than in Nietzsche), is within both, in the conjoint mystery of good & evil, both under his sovereignty. But as for us, so much (in nature, in the human heart, & in history) is beyond our control (including unintended consequences).

5 586BC/BCE (the destruction of Jerusalem & exile to Babylon) was, for the Jews, **ra'**, "sheer evil" (far more entitled to the phrase than was 9/11). Yet for Jeremiah, it was no such thing: yes, it was evil, but evil God meant, & was working in, for good (as Gn.5.20). Now, post-9/11, is a good time for God's people to expose themselves to Jer.32. Many would be offended at the title of this Thinksheet, many were offended at Jeremiah's preaching that Jerusalem would be destroyed because the people **had** "turned their backs on" God & "would not listen and learn" "though I [God] kept on teaching them." Not that the people had abandoned religion: rather, they abandoned the LORD & practiced idolatries. So God came to them ("a second coming of God"--the phrase is mine) after they forgot the Covenant: God came in **fire.**

Now, is it just conceivable that 9/11 was, for God-amnesiac America, a second coming of God in **fire**? Two very religious nations, Jeremiah's Judah & our America--but what was, what is, being worshiped? The West--in the persons of Feuerbach, Marx, & Darwin--had killed the biblical God before Nietzsche's madman said "God is dead, we have killed him!"

6 Because God is in charge, **evil**--no matter how final it may seem at the moment of impact--has only a provisional character. Reagan's "evil empire," Bush W.'s "axis of evil," Franklin Graham's Islam as an "evil religion"--academia, with its false humility of postmodern relativism, denounced them all out of hand for the very use of the word "evil." But our 9/11 enemies, profoundly God-centered, saw *us* as evil & their act as a coming of God which they were enacting (Lee Harris' "Al Qaeda's Fantasy Ideology: To understand Sept.11, think of it as theater, not politics"--8.13.02 WALL ST. JOURNAL). Yes, for deferred benefits, they wrote off the world & their lives in it. We may profitably fantasize that 9/11 was a coming of *our* God, not theirs----a second coming, to renew the 1620-1787 covenant which our nation gradually abandoned to the idols of the marketplace (materialism) & the human mind inturned to worship itself.