

OF THE PRESENCE OF A WORLD (VIEW)

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This Thinksheet began with a comment of Goodwife Loree upon reading a passage in Rich. Baxter's THE SAINTS' EVERLASTING REST. As Baxter prays, sees things, experiences the world, "our joy & God's glory are interlocked, not independent." Joy is not itself if it does not intend God's glory, & God is not truly glorified without our return offering of joy. Thence my mind leaped to this Baxter hymn on **the cosmology of prayer**:

1 Ye ho - ly an - gels bright, Who wait at God's right hand,
 2 Ye bless - ed souls at rest, Who ran this earth - ly race,
 3 Ye saints who toil be - low, A - dore your heaven - ly King,
 4 My soul, bear thou thy part, Tri - umph in God a - bove,

Or through the realms of light Fly at your Lord's com - mand,
 And now, from sin re - leased, Be - hold the Sav - ior's face,
 And on - ward as ye go Some joy - ful an - them sing;
 And with a well - tuned heart Sing thou the songs of love.

As - sist our song, For else the theme Too
 God's prais - es sound, As in his light With
 Take what he gives And praise him still, Through
 Let all thy days Till life shall end, What

high doth seem For mor - tal tongue.
 sweet de - light Ye do a - bound.
 good and ill, Who ev - er lives.
 e'er he send, Be filled with praise.
 A - men.

- 1 The medieval hierarchy, more neoplatonic than biblical, had God & heaven at the top, the angels a step down, the blessed dead the next step down, the individual or "soul" next, followed downward by the damned, the fallen angels, & Satan & hell. But to catch the dynamic of Baxter's soul & life, draw two circles, marking one **ontological** (the way things are in the universe) & the other **existential** (the way I experience reality). Put "God" in the center of the first circle, then add four concentric circles corresponding with the hymn's four stanzas. That picture has you looking in on the rest of reality from every angle. Then put "I" in the center of the second circle & add concentric circles corresponding successively to stanzas 3-1, & make "God" the outermost circle....What feelings/ideas do you have as you look at the two sets of circles? Now draw the medieval hierarchy & ask yourself the same question (& the additional question, Is this vertical entirely unbiblical?).
- 2 Biblical prayer is the **practice**, the **praxis**, of the biblical way of seeing, & living in, the world. As theocentric, it's the centering practice, praxis, of the presence of God as central to the soul & to "the world," the universe. That world, the real world, exists without our praying; but it can exist for us only by our

practice of prayer, & ceases to exist for us when we give up prayer.

- 3 After a person gives up prayer, how long does it take for "the world" to collapse into "the individual"? Seven days. But if that person, on the eighth day (ie, first day of the next week), goes to church, "the world" may reappear: worship is action in the Bible's **alternative world**, embracing but exceeding nature, law, custom, & personal decision-making. Does it take public worship to prevent spiritual blindness? can't private prayer alone manage that? Impossible. Private prayer alone degenerates into spiritual solipsism & narcissism, egocentric alienation from the biblical God....I've been using religious language to describe what psychosocial cultural analysts use other terms for: the reality of the process is objective, incontrovertible. We live what we remember. We become like what we love. What gets our attention gets us. Each spouse bears responsibility for deepening or "alienation of affection." We die away from what we forget.
- 4 Back to Baxter. For an OT parallel to his hymn, read Ps.148's call to the universe to praise God. Praise is the conjunction of prayer & joy, & Baxter's heart was full of it. Since it was praise of the biblical God, his heart was full also of compassion, which led him to support Cromwell against the royalists & to become a chaplain in his army. For his time, he was "PC" [politically correct] in the good sense, & deserved an "A" for "sensitivity." Eg, knowing that the poor could not afford books, he arranged for them to get his POOR MAN'S FAMILY BOOK free (written "with a request to Landlords and Rich Men to give to their Tenants and poor Neighbours, either this or some fitter Book" of family helps). Our hymn appears (in 16 stanzas!) in the book's 6th ed., 1672. (This PH redaction does not include the political stanza: "All nations of the earth / Extol the world's great King! / With melody and mirth / His glorious praises sing; / For he still reigns, / And will bring low / The proudest foe / That him disdains." Also not here is a stanza combining personal & social concern: "Let not his praises grow, / On prosperous heights alone, / But in the vales below / Let his great love be known; / Let no distress / Curb and control / My winged soul, / And praise suppress." And I must mention one more stanza, on the "Amazing Grace" theme: "He did in love begin, / Renewing thee by grace; / Forgiving all thy sin, / Shewed thee his pleased face; / He did thee heal / By his own merit: / And by his spirit / He did thee seal.")
- 5 Was everybody back then of the same mind as Baxter? Hardly! It's from one of his contemporaries, Thos. Hobbes, that we got the dolorous, cynical phrase describing the original human condition as a life "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (LEVIATHAN, 1651; the people have no right to rebel, as Cromwell & Baxter claimed they did; & his rationalism & associative psychology laid the foundations of a doleful, doomed doctrine, viz. mechanistic materialism). (LEVIATHAN came out the same year as the 2nd ed. of Baxter's THE SAINTS EVERLASTING REST. No more different two books of worldview & lifestyle could be imagined, & both in little old England at the same time.)
- 6 Hobbes' "modern" world is now foundering, & spiritualities are on the rise. My long-held radical monotheism no longer seems so "out of it" as it long did. My heart warms to Baxter's radical monotheism, as in this prayer (#260 in the excellent anthology ed. by Geo. Appleton, THE OXFORD BOOK OF PRAYER, Ox/85/89): "My Lord, I have nothing to do in this world, but to seek and serve thee; I have nothing to do with a heart and its affections, but to breathe after thee; I have nothing to do with my tongue and pen, but to speak to thee, and for thee, and to publish thy glory and thy will."
- 7 A few further COMMENTS on the hymn: (1) Singing God's praise is the pervasive theme. (2) The singing is both in public worship ("our song," 1st stanza) & private devotion ("My soul,...sing thou," 4th stanza). (3) The angels (1st stanza) have three jobs: passive attendance on God, mission assignments from God, & "assist[ing] our song." All that work, & so little recognition in "modern" hymnals! But in our ecumenical worship in the Craigville Tabernacle last Sunday evening, they got good billing: the sermon & benediction were by Father Spyros

Mourikis, a Greek priest for whom the "holy angels," instead of being poetic figments or artistic kewpie dolls, are as real as the human congregation. (4) The church triumphant (2nd stanza) is given priority over the church militant (3rd stanza). (5) Need I mention that the hymn is Scripture-saturated? The author's EVERLASTING REST is as much so as is Bunyan's PILGRIM'S PROGRESS, which came out six years after our hymn. (6) Mood? Solemn but warmhearted joy ("sweet delight," "joyful anthem," "Triumph," "songs of love," "filled with praise"). (7) No misadventure disturbs the one business plied in both worlds, viz. praise: "Take what he gives / And praise him still, / Through good and ill"; "Let all thy days / Till life shall end, / Whate'er he send, / Be filled with praise". (8) Thy hymn is a compendium of theology & liturgy, life-philosophy & practical wisdom. Few of those who first learned it had books in their homes, or could even read. The hymn's furnishing (especially if one takes the whole 16 stanzas!) is as ear-educational to the faithful as cathedral interiors are eye-educational. (9) How did the Puritans get their reputation for joylessness? That false judgment was rendered by the Restorationists who overthrew Cromwell's Commonwealth & preferred bawdy comedy to solemn joyful worship & who could not understand the Puritans' inner joys (& their relationship to the moderate dissidence of Presbyterians like Baxter & the radical dissidence of Baptists like Bunyan). (10) In this Thinksheet's title, replace "prayer" with "this hymn": This hymn is the practice of the presence of a world(view), ie. both a world (the world as it is) & a worldview (the world as the Christian sees it). (11) "The reputation of power is power," said realpolitician Hobbes, Britain's Machiavelli. I'll give that saying an ironic twist: God among such Puritans as Baxter had power because those saints, by their songs & lives that sang God's praises, gave God the reputation of power. So begins the Lord's Prayer after the address to "Our Father": in effect, "May we make your name great toward the coming of your Kingdom."

- 8 Does prayer cease when the biblical God ceases to be its object (in both senses)? Yes & no. YES: What Western civilization has meant by "prayer" does cease. NO: The human soul inherently insists on an ellipse with Self & Other as foci, resisting the pathology of the circle whose center is either egocentricity or heterocentricity. Adoration-praise-thanksgiving-confession-petition-intercession are natural outreachings of our inner life. They must have some place to go, something to revere, someone or something immortal to love. Prayer is the religious expression of the longing for intimacy with another person: another person is another world: prayer is the longing for intimacy with another world. In biblical monotheism, the other world we long for in God is the world the way God wants it: "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Well, how does God want it to be? "Filled with praise" to the glory of God. Does God want praise so he can enjoy it like an ancient oriental monarch in all his glory? Hardly. Why, then? Well, for one thing, only through praise can we become "full of joy." Which brings us back to Baxter & Goodwife Loree's comment.
- 9 In the popular NECESSARY LOSSES (Fawcett/86), Judith Viorst distinguishes unnecessary from necessary losses & aims to give comfort, insight, & philosophical acceptance vis-a-vis the latter--in contrast to Baxter's joyful acceptance (which I aim at in my course, "Separation and Loss"). In his groundbreaking THE ABILITY TO MOURN: DISILLUSIONMENT AND THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS (U. of Chicago/89), Peter Homans extends the concept of mourning beyond Freud's mourning the death of a loved one. (Did he have in mind the post-WWII German psychiatric classic DIE UNABHAENGIKEIT DES TRAUENS [tr., "the INability to mourn"], on the personal-&-political dangers in the Germans' inability to mourn, repent, weep for the devastations wrought by Nazism?) (The Spring/91 issue of CRITERION has "A Conversation with Peter Homans" on the book.)....Homans is one of America's three most penetrating critics of Freudianism, which from its founder was & is radically anti-prayer, atheist. I'll sketch Homans position, as its cultural analysis illumines the project of prayer; The ideas are his, the words are mine except the ones I put in quotes:

What sociologists call a "common culture" has stability because its inner life is "organized by myth [world-story] and ritual [religious praxis]." Thus it's tradition-directed, prayer-centered-&-centering, with insufficient cognitive dissonance for the emergence of many individuals. Columbus & the Mayflower land, &--bang!--the Amerind culture is thrown into crisis [my instance, not his]. Industrialization & urbanization open other options to persons, more & more of whom become individuals (the "individuation" process, "a re-centering of self" between a "backward-moving-ness or return to the past" & a "forward-moving release from the past" in "the creation of meaning, the capacity to generate new structures of appreciation and new patterns of meaningful symbols and values"). Secularization is one name for the whole three-fold process: (1) "mourning, loss/return," (2) "individuation, a kind of letting-go, and a new sense of centeredness that makes possible a willingness to face the future--although it feels empty," (3) "a release from the past and a generation of new values in the space made empty by the loss. That is what I call 'creation of meaning.'" In this process, the individual's fantasy life becomes "more and more accessible to conscious awareness." But the social cost has been "the loss of Christianity's power to bind people together," the culture of fantasy now being "under the influence of the mass media, especially film, TV, and advertising." But in partial compensation for the losses & chaos of modern life, the media are providing shared social experiences & interpretations thereof & thus acting as a "container" for shared fantasy--thus providing at least a little stability....But despite the claims of Marx, Freud, & Weber, there is no such thing as a total break from the past. The old sacreds reappear in new guise; & it's a task of religion scholars' cultural analyses to trace out & smoke out these reappearances. Here Freud & Jung were wrong, Tillich & Eliade were right. But Homans' socio-historical dimension of mourning provides a refining critique to Tillich, Eliade, & Ricoeur....Too, the religion scholar qua scholar mourns the loss of certitude brought on by the "objective" use of critical intelligence. But it's necessary to a better future.