monotheism: the macro/micro-management of creation

For this Thinksheet, the impetus was this letter-to-the-editor title: "God does not micromanage." My first thought: How unlike godly President Truman, who in the Oval Office maintained the sign-up sheet for the White House tennis courts. A more efficient President would have turned this micro-detail over to an assistant or (better) had it automated, requiring nobody's continuous attention.

The **deist** who wrote that letter has a lot of company: 50% of those auto-polled by beliefnet's Tsunami survey (Thinksheet #3230.5) said "Although I believe in God, the supernatural has nothing to do with this tragedy." This is **half-atheist**, the theism of faith in the god of the non-nature half of reality. The full-atheist position is avowed in a spate of letters today in the LATimes, titled "It was an act of nature, period." As beliefnet put it (& 9% of the polled checked this box), "God doesn't exist, and disasters like this are just forces of nature." Combining the two positions, we get this half-atheist (deist) statement: "Although I believe in God, disasters like this are just forces of nature." This **compromise** statement could be signed by almost all of the religion-oriented material I've read on the Tsunami: let's move on (as Rabbi Jon.Sacks put it) from "Why did this happen?" to "What then shall we do?"...Ditheism has two deities, "God" & "Nature"; dualism has two realities, the spiritual & the material; deism preaches one or the other form of modified monotheism --(1) God created but does not manage ("nature" is self-managing); (2) the Creator macro- but does not micro-manage (so, no "miracles"). In biblical-canonical religion, which is full (H.R.Niebuhr's "radical") monotheism, God creates & both macro- & micro-manages (so, both regularities of & miracles in the operation of his creation).

1 Everybody's ignorant when it comes to the mysteries of good & evil, but only radical monotheism requires the confession of ignorance: "Yes, the earthquake and tsunamis were sent by God, but we don't know what the purpose was" (30% in the beliefnet poll). (Beliefnet's "Yes, God is punishing us" [3%] & "Yes, God is testing us" [8%] are not fully radical.)

2 In this month's FIRST THINGS, Cardinal Dulles' "The Deist Minimum" thumbnails the history of deism. A Baptist (Roger Williams), not Anglican Thos.Jefferson,was the source of the "wall of separation between church and state"; & Jefferson's early deism (later modified in the biblical direction) helped him, in defense of the Baptists, to the conviction that in American religion, "divided we stand, but united we fall." (My comment: The urge to merge is not always of divine origin; the more religionists get together, the more damage (as well as good) they can do; many of us in UCC now wonder whether its creation was a good idea.) Declar. of Independence: 11 "orthodox believers," 3 (Franklin, Jefferson, Stephen Hopkins) "have been characterized as deists" (believing, with Voltaire & Thos.Paine, that "without belief in God [the Creator] and in a future life, morality in society could not be sustained"). "But early in the 19th century, the deist tide began to recede," facing "the second Great Awakening." It had been a reaction against "oppressive religious establishments," & it "was not necessary to offset religious oppression."

Further, deism suffered fatal defects: (1) "lacked the metaphysical principles needed to build a viable natural theology"; (2) the deist deity "cannot intervene in the world" (though "Jefferson and Franklin did not rule out all divine intervention. They were convinced that God punished evil and rewarded virtue both in this life and in the next. They also encouraged prayer in ways that seemed inconsistent with deism in its pure form."); (3) God being infinite, "it was unreasonable to reject the notion of mystery" & special revelation; (4) after creation, the deist God was "idle" ("a useless vestige of the God of biblical religion"); so deism "came to be a halfway house on the road to atheism" or pantheism; (5) science moved away from Newton's mathematical cosmic stability (with Wm.Paley's cosmic Watchmaker) to the dynamic & "far less orderly" universe of Darwin/Huxley/Einstein/Heisenberg; (6) "Deism also

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failed as a religion....The gospel assures us that God never ceases to be active in the world....The doctrine that God became man in order to raise us to a share in His own divine life satisfied a deep desire of the human heart to which deism could not respond."; (7) "Finally, the deist reconstruction of the historical Jesus lacked any serious foundation in biblical research....Jefferson...fell into the common error of simply projecting onto Jesus the moral ideals of his age."

But, says Avery Dulles, deism left "a valuable legacy....a civil religion....a favorable climate in which various forms of biblical religion could and did thrive." Deism's "required minimum" included what all the Founding Fathers believed: "the good of society requires a people who believe in one almighty God, in providence, in a divinely given moral code, in a future life, and in divinely administered rewards and punishments." He closes with "new questions": (1) "Can the biblical religions maintain themselves and win new adherents or must they resign themselves to becoming a minority?" (2) "Should the American consensus be modified to make room for a broader pluralism?" (3) "Can Islam, the Eastern religions, New Age religion, and even agnosticism and atheism, find equal acceptance in American society?" (4) "If pluralism goes unchecked, will the nation still have a corporate vision sufficient to sustain the sense of mission and collective purpose that have characterized it at its best? Will factionalism, corruption, violence, and aimlessness proliferate?"

3 "Natural theology" is not an oxymoron but a paradox. We have to do with **two histories** intertwined: "Moral history is not like physical history" ("Creation," pp16-17, in THE TORAH: A MODERN COMMENTARY [UAHC/81]). On the morning of 12.26.04, God permitted one tectonic plate to slip under another & a 21-year-old Indonesian carpenter to be carried inland 1,500 feet, then swept out to sea & not picked up for 15 days: that was physical history. Now here's moral (spiritual) history: his comment (in today's CCT): "The heat was from God. The cold was from God. Death and life both come from God." Clearly, his inner calm & outer acceptance, gifts of God through Islam, enabled him to survive against horrendous odds.

4 Natural disasters (Lisbon 1755, Indian Ocean 2004), in the public mind, untwine natural theology's "two histories," by focusing attention on the disaster's physicality--the focus of public-school "natural science," which tilts toward atheism directly & (via the "halfway house" of deism) indirectly. In 1855, materialist Herbert Spencer in his PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGY asserted that all causation is physical. Four years later, Darwin (ORIGIN OF SPECIES) agreed after abandoning his first printing's deism. And two years after Darwin's first printing, Spencer (FIRST PRINCIPLES) coopted Darwin to form a "law" of cosmic evolution (a book Wm.James called "a polite attempt to bow religon out of the door"). Immediately, the Bible was thrown into this developmental centrifuge, to eject what seemed awkward to the emerging worldview. By the time of Matt.Arnold's "Dover Beach" ("The Sea of Faith....retreating...."), 3/4th of the English had become "agnostic" (p350, A.E.Bailey, THE GOSPEL IN HYMNS [Scrib/50]).

Now, the essence of materialism is (as I said of Spencer [above]) that "all causation is physical": there's no macro- or micro-management beyond "matter" defined as quantitative (therefore, commensurable) reality: mind is only brain (the usual assumption in current articles & books on the brain). (Descartes' compromise [viz., that only God has "substance," matter & mind being derivative-secondary substances] was overwhelmed by the humanistic determination to collapse monotheism into materialistic monism.) But we can no more sustain a philosophy that merges in the mind what are disparate in experience (here, mind & matter) than one that divides in the mind (except for analysis) what is integral in life (e.g., faith & reason): rationalism (the latter) is as much a "bluff" as is materialism (the former, which Collingwood [p105 of THE IDEA OF NATURE] calls a "bluff").

5 But only materialism (which natural disasters reinforce), among worldviews, has the support of commensurable "science," public "knowledge": this circular, self-confirming view--an essential of humanism--is dominant in the West (on this, religious America is not different from irreligious Europe). But as lived, worldviews are religions, materialism in the same category as "the religions." This reality, with the aid of the new science, is moving the postmodern mind beyond the old materialism.