

AN EMERGENT RELIGION WHEN WE SEE IT?

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The story of life on planet earth can be told **backward** by noting the emergence of genera & species, but bio-change is too slow for us to observe such emergences now in process. The story of religion in the human world can likewise be told **backward** by noting when a distinct new religion had appeared, parturition complete. Here the problem of recognition is not that the emergence is too slow but that it is too complex. Sometimes it's by some Great Affirmation, sometimes by some Great Denial, sometimes by some Great Event, sometimes--& here I switch from the human to the divine mode--by Revelation.

But can we catch sight of a new religion just as it begins to emerge from the womb of history & thus be free to interpret **forwards**? Tough. Improbable. But observing how religions have emerged in the past can give us some clues for seeing what's happening now & may happen in the future. This Thinksheet is about clues we may pick up if we take a historical-geographical clue-sniffing tour of religions at the point of their emergence.

EGYPT The "Great Event" emergence-type is often a Great Person, Ikhnaton (d.BC/BCE 1358) in the case of ancient Egypt's brief candle of monotheism.

PERSIA Zoroaster (ca.BC/BCE 1000) became a ditheist, recognizing two deities, good Ahura Mazda & evil Ahriman....If we had what Clifford Geertz would call a "thick" knowledge of how Ikhnaton & Zoroaster came to their conviction/preaching, what now seems simple in the telling would be seen as complex, in each a distinctive pattern of affirmations & denials, & in each case triggered by personal &/or societal crisis.

INDIA The Hindu prince Gautama had an experience of "enlightenment" (so, "Buddha") that resulted in his reducing Hinduism's deities from ca.30,000 to 0: before the development of its pop forms, Buddhism was atheist but negative positive (Nibbana/Nirvana), not negative. (B.'s date? BC/BCE 6th, 5th, or 4th c.)

CANAAN "Moses" is the personal symbol (as well as, I believe an historical person: BC/BCE 13th c.) of an enduring-to-this-day (as Judaism) ethical monotheism, to be contrasted with contemporary polytheisms & henotheisms. Known by many names but centrally as YHWH ("Yahweh?"), he was addressed (by titles), & referred to (by pronouns), only as masculine, though he had the best of feminine as well as masculine attributes.

PALESTINE Jesus, a 1st c. AD/CE Jew, so offended religious & political authorities that he was officially put to death. The offense was compounded by his followers' preaching that he hadn't stayed dead but was (Ro.1.4 NRSV) "declared to be Son [masculine incarnation] of God...by resurrection from the dead." The story of Christianity's birth out of Judaism can be told from a number of true angles, each offering a slightly different birth-occasion.

ARABIA Muhammad (d.AD/CE 632) examined, but for various reasons rejected, both Judaism & Christianity. An exception among religions, this one was easy to recognize at its birth: based on the mystical experience of one Arab, who promoted his vision by (1) persuasion, (2) military coercion, & (3) producing the makings of a supplantive scripture proclaiming him the last & greatest of the prophets. (By contrast, the NT is supplemental [to OT] scripture, not supplantive.)

AMERICA Birthplace of two new monotheistic religions--the earlier materializing, the later etherealizing, the deity...(1) **Mormonism**, "a new religion of concreteness" (AAR presid. address, Catherine L. Albanese, JAAR sum/95 210)....(2) **Egalitarianism**, derived from the Enlightenment ("created equal"), from philosophical Hinduism (N.Eng. Transcendentalism), & from liberation movements (anti-slavery, anti-classism, anti-racism, anti-nationalism, anti-sexism). Of the five sources, the 1st is our "civil religion" & the Unitarian-Universalist Association (also the 2nd). The 2nd appears in New Age non-Christian groups. And of the 3rd, only the 5th form, as radical feminism, so subverts the biblical God as to constitute a new religion (whose god is no longer "he" but an ungendered etherealization; some Christians have surrendered "he" without realizing the denial signals a new religion).