KING DAY: THE HEROIZATION PROCESS ---------- Elliott #2021

Today (15Jan86) is the 1st King Day, though we have to wait till Monday for the "offical" day so the American populace can have one more long weekend (pressing ever toward the 4-day week I predicted in my 1964 TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF LEISURE)....This thinksheet ellipsizes between the man focus (himself MLKingJr) and the heroization-process focus, each illuming (I hope) the other.

1. Monday's KKK rallies will remind us that the struggle for Black equal personhood is not yet over. Thank God, the legal impedences have collapsed; economic impedences are gradually eroding despite setbacks; and cultural impedences are being undermined by increasing numbers of high-achieving Blacks in every area of human endeavor. Within the limits of history, I consider impossible the dream of "eliminating racism"; but an "impossible dream" can do more to move humanity in the humane direction than can many an operational theory: JFK's Camelot was more motivating than his "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." (We just don't know why humanity generally prefers lighter skintones, but it's in Homer and almost everywhere/everywhen. The religiomoral-political project is to make this preference impotent against the right of equal personhood."

2. I don't know whether equal personhood necessarily includes equal access to political power. I do know it's flat wrong to call S.Africa (in the current rhetoric) "the most racist regime on earth": no nonwhite has a chance at first-level power in the USSR. And I do know that lacking equal access to political power, many of "the oppressed" throughout the ages (eg, in the Bible!) have come to superior personhood. When things (one way or another) quiet down in S.Africa, we'll be able to see more clearly the contrasts between King & Tutu: I can feel the PhD dissertations on the way already!

3. As I, to the left of King, participated in the Black Movement, I spoke of two forms of systemic violence/nonviolence confronting each other. "The System" to Movementers meant structural-processive injustice, Jim Crow at various North/South levels of sophistication, both psychosocial and legal; it was nonviolent (as is every system having come to power through violence, what I called "old violence"); it was violent only reluctantly and only to maintain tranquility, ie, the "peace" inclusive of the established injustice. (Big fat Bull Connor saw himself rightly as nonviolent, only waiting for 5pm so he could go home and have a big dinner without any niggers bothering him before, during, or after; and he was very angry, understandably, when law-disobeyers forced him into violence. All very "normal" and--as H.Arendt said of Eichmann--"banal.") The contracase gets the identical analysis: "King" (personal symbol of The Movement) was nonviolent at heart and in system (the SCLC and parallel Movement organizations) and at first only reluctantly participated in the passive violence that almost destroyed the Montgomery Bus Corp. (King Day puffery, substituting heroizing fantasy for historical reality, has him "eagerly and instantly" jumping on the company upon hearing Rosa Park's story.)...."Violence" and "Nonviolence" are slippery slogans that depend for their force on an uncritical clientele. For pointing this out in the NEW YORK TIMES, I got fired from the national office of the United Church of Christ. My piece said "not enough cities are burning," so I was for an increase in physical violence to move the System toward self-honesty. (In S.Africa today, the System is self-honest: no such constitution and bill of rights as we have promises nonwhites equality.)

4. One (necessary?) component in the heroization process is the dishonest use of language. Not just the puffery that surrounded him/her

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as an audio-aura during life, but palpable distortions, or even contrarieties, of fact. Little of this is deliberate, most of it us due to the afflatus of enthusiasm and as such represents (to make a distinction Plato does in the REPUBLIC) truth as "idea" (including feeling) instead of truth as fact (objective/objectifiable datum)--something I must observe indirectly in "the making of the Gospels tradition" (as I didn't know Jesus in the flesh) but may make direct observations on in the case of King (whom I did know in the flesh). (CHRISTOLOGICAL NOTE: Devotionally, I use all the titles the NT uses of Jesus; but critical-hermeneutical honesty promps me to flexibility vis-a-vis these titles when, eg, in dialog with Jews who, from their side, are surrendering some of their inflexibilities vis-a-vis Jesus (even, in the case of Pinchas Lapide, disbelief in Jesus' resurrection.)) To illustrate, these distortions are parallel: "Jesus gave his life in struggle for the poor" and "King did everything for the love of his people." Both statements are atheistic politicizations: "atheistic" in leaving God out, "politicizations" in transmogrifying the religious into the political mode and motivation. Jesus & King were God-INTOXICATED and parapolitically INVOLVED.

5. Wednesday I was talking with King's PhD mentor ("mentor to the martyr" Paul Schilling) about King Day, and the nonpolitical theocentricity of King's dissertation (unpublished; I read the NYTS copy) attacking philosophers (instance, Tillich) & theologians (instance, Wieman) who denied a <u>personal God</u>. "He esp. didn't like Wieman," said PS. I replied "I esp. did, taking 8 courses from him though I knew only 3 would apply toward my PhD": I loved the man for his God-intoxication and courage, not so much for his ideas (and he gently always acknowledged my opposition, on papers—return to me, with "A+, but must you still believe in a personal God?"). King, who knew Wieman only through paper (ie, his ideas), was unfair to the man--but the unfairness itself is evidence that King's orientation at the PhD stage was metaphysical-theological (a passion for the personal God of his heritage and religious commitment) rather than revolutionary or even sociological. Of course he loved God FROM and THROUGH and ON BEHALF OF his people, but also for all people: his commitment was universal rather than partisan. It is more than a half-truth to say that he was <u>God</u>-oriented, not (as in the King Day heroistic rhetoric) <u>justice</u>-oriented. But I have no doubt that God led him to express, after Rosa Parks, the former through the latter.

6. As Churchill said of himself that he was not the lion (that was the British people) but only the roar, so say I of King. Like Winnie, he <u>combined critical thinking with oratorical mastery</u>. (Though I'd give him only B- on his dissertation, I'd give him A+ on his orations!) PS well says (major article in today's CCTimes) King's PhD work helped him "confront superficial arguments from people who never learned to question." Because critical thinking is a coolant to heads made hot by the internal friction of rhetorical thinking, few leaders can sustain the whole temperature range without either freezing off its bottom or blowing out its top; King could and did. And <u>leader</u> he was: the room, when he walked in, got as quiet as deep down his soul was. You (even I!) wanted to listen more than to talk. If he hadn't been authoritative in personal presence, he might have been authoritarian--but I think not.

7. To make this next point, I'd rather not be white: I fear being nailed with Blacks-are-different racism. But I'll be brave and put it baldly: King was a highly successful (thank God!) <u>Afro-King</u>, a "Negro" (his word) chieftan with decisional power, predemocratic style (by which I mean that he had a democratic ear, listening to and balancing every-

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thing he heard, then announcing what was to be done). Contra some King Day rhetoric claiming his "humble origins" (comparative mush-word!) he was (Black) upperclass (from a Baptist parsonage into a Baptist parsonage) before today, when the Black yuppies are said to constitute the Black upperclass. He was born to rule and acted the part: why not (unless you are radically egalitarian)? Far from saying that King was not as democratic as he should have been, I'm (1) affirming that the SCLC politics was exactly right for the situation, and (2) suffrage democracy (one-"man"-one-vote) is not the best form of government in all situations (though Tutu & co. are now identifying it as "Christian politics"). In our frighteningly rapidly changing world, all forms of government are experiencing serious strains and tears (both senses). We pray and work toward ecopolitical structures everywhere that will balance freedom and order, so control the love of power as to predispose to the power of love, and foster the values and relationships cooperative with the gentle forces which, when not impeded, nudge humanity toward true humaneness and negate all this cripples inner/outer, individual/communal human life.

8. The "Freedom!" cry = the "Justice" cry. Or does it? We needed, still need, the Movement words: "nonviolence," "freedom," "justice," "dream," "equality," and more. All these words are both brimful and hollow. Because brimful, their content cannot be evaded, nor can any other term do just the service of each term: accept no substitutes! But each term is also hollow: it can be given almost any content the propagandist (speaker, writer, dramatist) desires, because "sense-making = reality + fantasy" (title of my #2014). To illustrate (though illustration is not needed!): The Civil War a.k.a. the War of the Rebellion a.k.a. the War Between the States was fought against freedom: (1) the freedom of States to split with the Federal government, a freedom necessarily undenied in our Founding Documents (so that Lincoln was, in this regard, what his assassin called him, a "tyrant"); (2) the freedom of slaveholders to expand their territory; (3) the freedom of Washington to impose on the whole country matters of what we now call "lifestyle"; and (4) the freedom of owned human beings to become unowned, ie, "their own wo/man." Equally easily you might say that war was fought for freedom(s)! Both sides so said! And both were, semantically, right in so saying. (I am a descendant of the good guys, but some of my best friends are descendants of the bad guys: the moral judgment is separate from the fact of semantic flexibility.) (Or was it entirely "good" to increase the power of Washington over the States? What about the Reagan reversal now in process?)

9. Entitlements & entailments: What are human beings "entitled" to? Every entitlement (claimable "right" vis-a-vis society-government) has entailments. Social psychologists are beginning conversations with philosophers, theologians, economists, and artists vis-a-vis the entitlements/entailments foci of the power ellipse. One signal expression of this dialog is the phrase "the big picture" (ie, the wider contexts). "If we do this, this will happen...." or "these may be the consequences...." An entailment of freedom NEW is the filling of the freedom space with responsibilities NEW. Black-Movement disappointments after King as to "Freedom NOW!" root in (1) continuing nonBlack resistance to Black "advances" and (2) continuing Black lag, the imperfect success of American Blacks to "possess their (new) possessions." I put it this way--"imperfect success"--as tongue-in-cheek: (1) no people, released to new freedom(s), could perfectly fill the new freedom-space in this short time; and (2) I pray, and try to cooperate, toward American-Black ("Afro-American") greater success in shaping up to the new responsibilities their widening freedems "entail." Again, this is tough for a white boy to talk about, let alone preach!

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10. I could shoot me down by flipping out, in any of three directions, from what I'm saying: I'm that vulnerable. My comfort? So is everybody else who is, from any angle, into "King Day" and all it signals. It's the human condition on all gut issues, God help us all. What I'm against is opting out of the anguishing dialog by philosophical withdrawal, pietistist withdrawal, or monological announcement (KKK, ACLU, et al). And I'm philosophical enough to grant that while every anguish is a challenge, not every anguish can be construed as a problem juggled around so as to match a "solution." On all the ultimate gut issues, "solutions" are battleflags of revolutions, and I'm for (good) revolutions (as long as I'm free to discern the good from the bad). (INSTANCES: I see no "solutions" to the current S.African and Lebanese anguishes, which I think may continue, under various guises, for centuries. In so concluding, am I pessimistic or realistic? Nobody knows. So I'm an enemy of all those who think they know. Tough luck for me: I'd prefer, especially in these my later years, to be nobody's enemy.)

11. King "was the right man at the right place at the right time for the right job," says PS in the article; his belief in God gave him courage to "stand up to the brutality of police dogs and sheriffs"--and his PhD exhibits his studied and steady conviction that "God is personal and can think, feel, choose, and love." (CCT 15Jan86) For my own life, I wholly concur, while I'm sympathetic to those (Plato, Whitehead, Wieman, Hartshorne, Schleiermacher*) who try to combine the personal/impersonal in God through various formulas. Eg, this from *, ON RELIGION (Jn.Knox/69; original, 1799): "What if a person rejects the idea of a person-type God?...This refusal to think of the deity in personal terms does not decide against the presence of the deity in his feeling. It might have its basis in a person's humble awareness of how generally limited personal existence is--esp. of how tied consciousness itself is to the particular characteristics of any given personality." But King was not concerned with such nuances: he was scholarly, but only up to oratorial-pastoral needs. No criticism implied: why should he have pressed himself beyond those needs?

12. The alcoholic tries to live chemical dreams antagonistic to reality, and the workaholic tries to live grubby reality unsupported by humane dreaming. King let God give him the wisdom and skill to mix reality and dream in the right proportion for his God-given tasks. In this, he models for all leaders in religion and all other endeavors.

13. I thank God as much for what King models AGAINST as for what he models FOR. America today is short of high-quality models. Children, largely amnesiac about high-quality historical models, name among their heroes almost no one outside of current entertainment, including commercial athletics (toned up as "professional athletics"). And if we can keep our secular media honest, King Day will remind us all of God as Center and Motivator and Lover and Judge and Savior through Jesus: King Day will be an annual secular reminder of America's primary religion throughout our history. Racists hope King Day will fade away; secularists hope its religiousness will erode; and the rest of us pray God will continue it full force with integrity and passion.

14. Be it remembered that King was less concerned with distributing the wealth than with (as he said in his last sermon) "redistributing the pain." Too little, since, has been made of this pregnant phrase.

15. Bruno Bettelheim (Nov/85 ATLANTIC) says Jesus' disciples show "that love and admiration are powerful motives for adopting a person's values and ideas." So may King Day help America learn to love/admire the true!