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RELIGION IN THE 20th CENTURY

As you see it, what were the present century's most important religion-events? Yesterday I was asked this question by someone who said I might be asked it by the WALL STREET JOURNAL as they look toward a special end-of-the-century edition. Wanting not to be off-the-cuff in an interview that may not even occur, I here jot down a few thoughts & dates.

1 Going into this century, the cognoscenti predicted a gradual fading of religion, some of them even saying that by century-end religion would be "history" (in the present pop sense, viz dead). *Cognoscenti, cavé!* (Beware, you intellectuals! You are so often wrong!)....As we leave the century, religion is at the heart of revolutions of rising expectations & may well become the 21st century's definitive shaping cultural force.

2 The central selective factor in choosing what's important in the past is the selector's own fears/hopes for the future: today, tomorrow colors yesterday. That was the theme, from my side, of my conversations with America's futurist of futurists, Herman Kahn, founder of the Hudson Institute, who extended the word "scenario" to mean one particular hypothetical future-picture among others. In 1970, he employed me to scenario the religion future. My mind goes back to that project (summarized as "Religion Projections, A.D./C.E. 2025," pp226-236 of my FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT [Eerdmans/95]), which (though I plan not to refer to it below) is important background for understanding my choices in listing what this Thinksheet's title promises I'll list.

1899 Pope Leo XIII condemns "Americanism." I knew the worthies who renamed a denominational (Disciples of Christ) paper THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY. Whoops, the cognoscenti slipped again. But THE AMERICAN CENTURY would be, as a dub of our century, closer to the mark. That Pope was right, not just wrong. Clinton's trip to China reminds us of the good America has done & can do the world. But the downside of our nation's eagerness to innovate is that we become "enthusiastic" (another word Rome is suspicious of) about trivialities & send the effluvia thereof 'round the globe (Hollywood, for one). More often a critic of Rome, I say--facing current American liberationistic fads, not even stopping short of redesigning the deity--thank God for Rome, *defensor fidei*, defending the classical Christian Faith against fashions, fads, novelties, & unassorted revived ancient heresies.

1900 Religion-based nationalisms begin to erode transnational religious movements: resurgent Shintoism, the central heating system of Japanese expansionism (leading to "The Greater East-Asian Coprosperity Sphere" & the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor), is reinstated against Buddhist & Christian influences.

1902 Wm. James' THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE weds religion & psychology, a wedding productive of thousands of squabbling chn. throughout the century. His metaphysical pluralism allowed for the Transcendent, as his contemporary Freud's materialism (variously allied with the materialisms of Marx & Darwin) did not.

1904 Max Weber's THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE BIRTH OF CAPITALISM becomes a tool for the religion interpetation of society (parallel with Wm. James on the religion interpretation of the person).

1906 Albert Schweitzer's THE QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS shocks "the biblical world" into Jesus explorations which continued throughout the century. (Why the quotes? At the time, THE BIBLICAL WORLD was the learned periodical of The Biblical Seminary of New York, which was to become N.Y.Theol.Seminary. The school was founded in 1900 to promote scientific-inductive Bible study over against both modernism & fundamentalism.)

1910 D. of two powerful women: Mary Baker Eddy, whose "Christian Science" claims to wed "science" with the Bible & the Indic spiritual impulse within New England Transcendentalism; & Julia Ward Howe, whose women's liberationism had, by century end, blossomed as a woman religion with the (alleged original) Goddess resurrected.

1912 Carl G. Jung, dissenting from his teacher Freud's materialism, begins to publish his Christian gnostic "analytic psychology."

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1916 While Martin Buber's THE SPIRIT OF JUDAISM gave contemporary respectability to religion, Jn. Dewey's DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION led straight to the 1933 Humanist Manifesto, a war manual for stamping religion out of American public education (a war that had been won by mid-century).

1918 Billy Graham (& I!) was born, to become a symbol & world-figure in revived Protestant evangelicalism long before century-end. In contrast to many of the century's popular religion-promoters, he's been scandal-free in life & work.

1919 Karl Barth's THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS regrounds Protestant thought in Scripture, in reaction against pre-war modernisms. (Dialectical theology.)

1920 Alfred North Whitehead's THE CONCEPT OF NATURE offers a fresh way of conceiving religion, philosophy, & science in a unified field for which the word "process" becomes the signal. (Process philosophy, process theology.)

1921 Ludwig Wittgenstein's LOGICO-PHILOSOPHICUS inaugurates a century-long debate on the nature of language, a debate hugely influential in religion thought. Next year, Rudolf Carnap's radical empiricism eliminates the Transcendent (THE SPACE; logical positivism).

1924 Gandhi fasts for 21 days to protest feuds between Hindus & Muslims in India.

1925 Bruce Barton's THE MAN NOBODY KNOWS (which my father had me read in 1930) uses Jesus as sanction for American capitalism....Hebrew U. is founded in Jerusalem....Etienne Gilson's SAINT THOMAS AQUINUS (in whose classroom I was privileged to be--a gentle soul with a brilliant mind) kicks off one of Rome's vigorous 20th-c. movements, Neo-Scholasticism.

1927 Freud the Jew, with his THE FUTURE OF AN ILLUSION, unwittingly colludes with Gottfried Feder's THE PROGRAM OF THE N.S.D.A.P., the Bible of Hitler's Nazi Party--as, from various angles, do Adolf von Harnack (THE ORIGIN OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY), Martin Heidegger (BEING AND TIME; existentialist philosophy), & Lucien Lévy-Brehl (THE PRIMITIVES AND THE SUPERNATURAL). (All books, 1927.)

1928 Ecumenical Missionary Conference, Jerusalem....Martin Heigedder's WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY? introduces "phenomenology" as a perspective theologians had to begin to take into account.

1930 Alfred Rosenberg's THE MYTH OF THE 20th CENTURY lays the religio-philosophical foundation for Nazism....With ABOUT ZIONISM, Albert Einstein got into Jewish (religio-)politics....And a Jewish atheist romantic (Sigmund Freud), ironically, unintentionally, gave ammunition to neo-barbarian totalitarians with his CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS.

1932 Karl Barth begins pub. of his CHRISTIAN DOGMATICS, the systematic theology of the century's most influential Protestant thinker....Karl Jaspers finds his "existentialism" (PHILOSOPHY) compatible with Nazism....And Henri Bergson's THE TWO SOURCES OF MORALITY AND RELIGION, over against positivism & "scientific" materialism, gave primacy to creative inner experience & thus emphasized religion & morals.

1933 Hitler comes to power, appoints Goebbels minister of propaganda, & sets up the first concetration camps. The cardinal (von Faulhaber) in Munich (!) pub. an anti-Nazi book, JUDAISM-CHRISTENDOM-GERMANISM....Other 1933 books against the totalitarian tide are Jung's MODERN MAN IN SEARCH OF A SOUL, Nathan Söderblom's THE LIVING GOD, & Whitehead's ADVENTURES OF IDEAS.

1934 Just in time for Hitler's book-burnings, the 12th & last vol. of Lazar Goldschmidt's Ger. Tr. of the Babylonian Talmud is pub....Three works of keen Christian analysis of the contemporary scene appear: (1) In Switzerland, Max Picard's THE FLIGHT FROM God; (2) In Britain, Abp. Wm. Temple's NATURE, MAN AND GOD; (3) In the USA, Reinhold Niebuhr's MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY. ...Against the pro-Nazi "German Christians," the "Confessing Church" pub. the Barmen Declaration (heavily indebted to Barth): God's revelation of salvation through the free grace of Jesus Christ is not to be displaced or polluted by any rival claimant, & the Church's mission is to preach this gospel. +

1937 Prot. pastor Martin Niemöller, by an order from Hitler, put in concentration camp, where he is to remain for eight years--& then become a world figure telling his story & preaching the gospel. (So much preaching, I heard him many times.)

1939 The religion-centered small-group movement, beginning four years earlier with Alcoholics Anonymous, gets a major impetus from Frank Buchman's reforming of the Oxford Group movement as Moral Re-Armament....As I well remember, the World's Fair had a quasi-religious excitement about its techno-futuristic vision, soon shelved by the Sept.1 beginning of World War II.

1941 While Rudolf Bultmann is deep into his long-influential "demythologizing" project (NEW TESTAMENT AND MYTHOLOGY), Reinhold Niebuhr is moving out of his pacifism into "Christian realism" (THE NATURE AND DESTINY OF MAN, -1943).

1942 The atom split (under Stagg Field, U. of Chicago; "Manhattan Project" under the physics dept. headed by Arthur Compton, whom at the time I knew as a devout Prot. Sunday-school teacher). Religious ferment over what the school's president, R.M.Hutchins, called "the good news of damnation."....The Holocaust begins....Oxfam, one flower of Christian compassion for war victims, begins....With THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS, C.S.Lewis begins classical Christianity's return to respectability in the world of Protestant intelligentsia....Unlike Kierkegaard's, French existentialism is atheist (Sartre's BEING AND NONBEING), offering (esp. in Camus) a new challenge to Christian thought.

1945 Shintoism abolished in Japan, but new religions (finally, over 300!) rise like mushrooms (as I experienced them, started by women & almost immediately taken over by men leaders)....Hiroshima & Nagasaki A-bombing (the latter, Japan's largest concentration of Christians)....The Arab League is founded to oppose the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

1946 UN's permanent hdq. declared to be NYC. Protestant guidance (esp. through persons prominent in the National Council of Churches) influential in the motivation for & production of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the Baptist family tradition of philanthropy, a Rockefeller (Jn.D.jr) gave the money ($8.5 million) for the hdq. site....Billy Graham begins his evangelistic campaigns.

1947 UN announces plan to Jew./Arab partition of Palestine....Religion splits the Subcontinent into India & Pakistan....The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls begins to enrich our knowledge of Jewish & Christian origins....Michael Polanyi (SCIENCE, FAITH AND SOCIETY) continues & intensifies the intellectual movement against fragmentation, for the convergence of the disciplines.

1948 Birth of the State of Israel....The World Council of Churches is organized (in Amsterdam)....Thomas Merton's SEVEN-STOREY MOUNTAIN launches the post-World-War-II boom in books by monks (Henri Nouwen his successor almost to century end)....Jesus books a parallel boom: 1948, Lloyd C. Douglas' THE BIG FISHERMAN.

1949 Communist persecution of Christians: Hungary's Cardinal Mindszenty sentenced to life for "high treason."....With his sermons pub. as THE SHAKING OF THE FOUNDATIONS, Paul Tillich finds a wider audience....Psychology-appropriating Prot. preachers, beginning in the 1930s with Harry Emerson Fosdick, come to general public notice with Norman Vincent Peale's A GUIDE TO CONFIDENT LIVING (leading toward his immensely popular [1952] THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING).

1950 Buddhist news: China takes Tibet, & the Dalai Lama begins his global wandering, his influence increasing to the present (1998)--along with other Buddhist influences in the USA (esp. in higher ed.)....Catholic news: the dogma of the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary, a further impediment to Christian ecumenicity. ...Prot. news: formation of the 32-million-member National Council of the Churches of Christ in the US.

1952 Pub. of the Revised Standard Version kicks off the English Bible's most prolific pub. period--a score of versions & translations in little more than a decade....At least portions of the Bible in over 1,000 languages....Throughout the century, the Bible remained history's "best seller."

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1955 Black clergy (esp. Martin Luther King jr) lead the Rosa Parks bus strike--beginning of "the Movement," the first of a series of liberationisms (Latin American [also led primarily by Christian [Catholic] clergy), women's, gays', etc.).

1962 Second Vatican Council (-1965): Jn.XXIII opens the windows to let it some fresh air....Next year, M.L.King jr's "I have a dream."

1964 The new women's movement (Betty Friedan's THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE), to have profound effects in liberal Protestantism & in Reform Judaism, less in RCC.

1966 World Congress on Evangelism, Berlin (led by Billy Graham & Carl F.H.Henry)....At the National Council of Churches Triennium, the editor of the CHRISTIAN CENTURY said to me (anent my debate with Billy Graham), "Willis, I'd like to print it, but there's no future for evangelicalism."(!)

1968 World student unrest; in US, opposition (with much church-support) to the Vietnam war....Assassinations of King & Sen. Robt. Kennedy....Rome's "Humanae Vitae" condemns all artificial conception-control.

1970 Two books symbolizing as many revolts: (1) Jon Kimche's THE SECOND ARAB AWAKENING, for Muslim fundamentalism; (2) Theo. Roszak's THE MAKING OF A COUNTER-CULTURE, for Am. youth's attempt to develop their 1968 protests into a "life-style" with religious under/over-tones drawn from the Orient & the Amerinds. Import, native, & mixed "cults" (religions in process of formation)....In Rome, conference of Catholic & Jewish religion-leaders....The Cold War is increasingly (&, I say) properly seen as a quasi-religious Weltkampf (world-struggle)....Paul VI declares clerical celibacy a fundamental principle (ratified by a synod the next year).

1973 Activist US Supreme Court enjoins states against probiting abortion through the second trimester. Throughout the century, crescendoing complaint, esp. by some Catholics, against "legislation by court" rather than by Congress....D. of two great Catholic philosophers, Jacques Maritain (whom briefly I studied with) & Gabriel Marcel....The Mormon Church expanding world-wide as its 11th president, Harold B. Lee, dies....Another Arab/Israeli war, another Arab defeat; oil-crisis Arab retaliation; further fertilizer for Muslim fundamentalism throughout the Arab world.

1974 Russian Orthodox Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's THE GULAG ARCHIPELAGO: 1918-1956 is an early nail in the coffin of Soviet communism--so he's stripped of Soviet citizenship & exiled....Religion war in Northern Ireland intensifies, with terrorist bombings even in London....Four US Episcopal bishops, against church law, ordain 11 women as priests. (Some US churches had been ordaining women for almost a century.)

1975 Beirut fighting between rightist Christians & leftist Muslims....Christian emperor Haile Selassie (who participated in the 1966 World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin) dies. As "Lion of the Tribe of Judah," he becomes the center of a new religion, Rastafarianism....D. of Elijah Muhammad, founder of the Black Muslims, whose Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965, not long after his one extended meeting [unreported in the press] with King (in the NJ home of Presbyterian layman Robt. Washington)....NYC Council of Churches rejects membership application of Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church.

1976 King's integration ideal begins to be replaced by group self-segregation (ideologically affirmed as "multiculturalism"), of which Alex Haley's ROOTS is a metaphor....Anti-apartheid theology supports black pressure for integration.

1977 The Orthodox Church in America selects its first American-born prelate, Abp. Theodosius.

1978 Jn. Paul II, first non-Italian pope in 456 years....US Pres. Carter gets Israel's Begin & Egypt's Sadat to pray together at Camp David....Ayatollah Khomeini emerges as the most powerful leader in Iran....In Guyana, murder-suicide of 917 (Jim Jones' People's Temple).

1980s Rising "theologies of...." Ecology, leisure, work, etc.

1990s Postmodernism....Million-Man March....Promise-Keepers gathers a million in a Washington, DC, rally.