

ORAL ROBERTS, GOD, THE MEDIA'S THEOLOGY, AND ---- ELLIOTT #2136
THE CURRENT STATUS OF FEAR

Why shouldn't I have a word on OR's latest, creative money-raising gimmick? Everybody else has. And most comments I've read & heard have said more about the commenter than about OR, whom I know eye-to-eye well enough for him to have invited me to teach at OR University (I politely refusing as I was then, 1966, happily ministering from the base of the national UCC offices)...But more widely, it's time for me to make a few theology-of-culture observations on "Whatever became of fear?"--in the vein of "Whatever became of sin?"

1. Credit OR with, albeit unwittingly, getting the media to think, at least momentarily, about the nature-will-behavior of God. In general, however, media commentation has God coming off even worse than OR. The God of this flap is a blackmailer, saying something like "Cough up \$100 apiece or I'll kill your favorite preacher." B.F. Skinner wouldn't like Him (sic), because He uses negative reinforcements. Positive-thinking preachers in "marble" and glass churches wouldn't like Him, because he fails to use positive reinforcements, promises of cornucopia Cocaigine. Geo. Will wouldn't like him, because this putative God is promoted by megalomaniacs (GW's 15Jan87 ref. is to Card. O'Connor floundering around in the Holy Land: "the now commonplace megalomania of the contemporary cleric who thinks solutions to problems elude secular leaders because secular leaders lack the clerics'...what? Certainly not humility." But fair us fair: PBS's 90" docu on Mother Teresa was a radically other view of God--other than both OR's & the media's.)

2. Of the some dozen columns I've read of this OR thing, the best was by Colin McEnroe (no, not tennis; HARTFORD COURANT, 22 Jan 87). "The idea that God, sooner or later, calls all of us home is a familiar one. The idea that you can buy some extra time from him if you have the dough is, as far as I know, brand new. I hope it doesn't catch on." \$4.5 million for a scholarship fund at the OR University Medical School is \$ for what seems a good cause, though the USA is beginning to suffer an excess of MDs (continuing to suffer a maldistribution thereof). But CMcE is impressed with the high figure: "Maybe God started at \$5 million and Oral bargained him down. I have never spoken to God, so I'm not sure how much give-and-take is involved. On the other hand, I can't picture Oral trying to lowball God on his own life's price tag. Oral probably figures the world is getting off pretty cheap if it only pays \$4.5 million to keep him around. Come to think of it, maybe Oral opened the bidding at \$5 million, and God had to explain that, actually, \$4.5 million would take care of things. Anyway, I have noticed that the sort of people who claim to talk with God are very often the sort who would make it hard for God to get a word in edgewise....God thinks I work better in a state of mild-to-severe confusion....I sometimes think I catch the drift of what God wants, and then something like this \$4.5 million deal appears in the newspaper to make me wonder if I have him figured all wrong....People in hot, arid climes (like the Southwest, Oral's territory) seem more inclined to think they have conversed with God. I am from New England, where we nervous Calvinists (enjoy God in nature but)...wring our hands and hope that certain aspects of our depravity will be overlooked in all the hubbub" (parentheses, mine). "I just assumed God was more of a 'big picture' type and that he tended to let us mortals work out the commas and decimal points."

3. Now, the drift of the media has been to translate "call home" as "kill." Instead of being the loving Father-Parent calling home
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an obedient & willing child, we have been treated to a terrorist deity (Holy Terror) threatening to kill a hostage if He doesn't get His way (though the terrorist image wasn't used in any of the media treatments I read/heard). Evangelical-charismatic Christian that he is, OR would see the call home as good news: the bad news would be not to OR but to his followers, who'd be left as sheep without a shepherd. True enough: The OR empire will probably collapse with his demise. And, seen from the underside, he just might well die, of a broken heart, if he can't finish his dream of combining spiritual & physical healing in a great Christian medschool. My point: OR's theology proper in this matter, his understanding of God, is more ethical than the media assume; their comments reveal that it is they who have the lower view as a paradigm for distorting OR's statement. I'm not objecting to the media having some fun with OR, but it ought not to be ignorant & dirty.

4. No media treatment I've read/heard has failed to scoff, at least implicitly, at the idea that anybody ever has anything to fear from God: A mature god wouldn't use fear, & mature humans aren't afraid of the divine. This double assumption pervades our liberal culture in both its secular & its sacred expressions, over against the biblical & evangelical view of the fear of God. The ex-slaver who wrote "Amazing Grace," which is amazingly pop throughout our culture, got so scared of God he gave up slaving: "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,/And grace my fears relieved;/How precious did that grace appear/The hour I first believed!" Biblical religion is holistic in motivation: fear + love = gratitude + joy + peace. The romantic illusion that you can drop the negative and still gain & retain the positives is unworthy of intelligent thinking and has grave consequences for church & society, both of which become effete & self-indulgent. Again, Geo. Will (12 Jan 87): "Fear is an axiom of conservative realism. In a democracy, fear does the work of reason. So we have nothing to fear but the absence of fear itself."....Eg, vis-a-vis sex: The US Sects. of Ed., & of Health & Welfare, say fear (of AIDS & other miseries) should be used in public-school sex education. They say that the goal should be premarital prohibition, & that the sex urge is so powerful as to be impossible to control if fear is not a component in the bad-mouthing of fornication. And the Sect. of Transportation says that drug use by pilots & railroad engineers is so serious that we must increase the fear level by adding random drug-testing. All 3 Sects. have come under heavy fire for preaching fear: the myth that "man" no longer needs the fear of God or of the authorities is, in the minds of the narcissistic public & the leadership establishment of state & church & media, that powerful.

5. Efforts to prettify "the fear of the LORD" by various Latin synonyms need to be seen for what they are, viz evasions of an uncomfortable fact about the biblical God. Face it folks: (1) OT, "The FEAR of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom"; (2) NT, "It is a FEARFUL thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Of course biblical "fear" is more than fright; but so is the Eng.wd. "fear." Those who badmouth fear usu. use the genetic fallacy: We are no longer primitives. But it's neo-primitive to imagine that modern intelligence must eliminate the fear sanction. When a woman writes Ann Landers (26 Jan 87) "I am a God-fearing woman" and AL counters "I am a God-loving woman, and this I believe is what makes us so different," we should sense that the reply is less than honorable & less than intelligent even though other things in the reply seem right on.