

Invisible Ping-Pong: THE WILL TO DIS/BELIEVE

In the days of my near-compulsion to play ping-pong--a self-feeding drive in that I was better at it than at any other sport--occasionally I came upon a table with two paddles & (oh frustration!) no ball. Every human being has within two wills (like the ends of the p.-p. table), the will to believe & its contrary, the will to disbelieve. You play both ends, & you're never without a ball to bat back & forth: life-long you're presented with pistilougoumena, un/believables, stories (histories/myths) or ideas/ideologies or persons/deities that exercise your desire to dis/trust.

Today in this group the ball, the pistilougoumenon, was **Eden I** (Eden II is the garden-city at the Bible's end).

1 **Fright** is my first emotion when thinking about the will to dis/believe. Life goes sour for somebody, some group, & the will to disbelieve, like a hurricane flood, washes away the underpinnings of the faith (& faith-structures) that had been upholding life & all its interconnections--in another maritime image, shipwreck. Or the reverse: the will to believe, as the German people eyeing-hearing Hitler in 1933, reaches building-frenzy force, inner-outer personal-societal energies producing a new paradigm/politic/program. Both wills, let loose, are so creative/destructive as to be scary even just in contemplation.

2 This year's the centenary of Wm. James' **THE WILL TO BELIEVE** (in the tradition of the primacy of will over reason: Hobbes, Hume, Schopenhauer, Fichte--cp. reason over will [Augustine, Thomas--but both saw God's will to create as the fundamentum, Scotus then taking this note, not reason, as primary in God--followed by Ockham (then Luther, Calvin, Pascal, Kierkegaard), who refused to apply the reason/will distinction to God]).

The relevance to Gn.3? The forbidden-fruit story is voluntaristic, emphasizing that we are not (Aristotle) rational animals but rather willers, choosers, deciders: we are responsible-accountable for our decisions, which are free from God & may be (disastrously) free against God or (salvifically) for God: "Our wills are ours to make them thine" [Augustine & others]). In this, what since WWII we've called "the existential situation," we experience the living inseparability of will (the drive) & reason (the neocortical shaping of the action emergent from the drive).

(NOTE: Wm. James is better known for **THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**, three years later. **WILL** focused on the active dimension of religion, the inner nonrational [spiritual, emotional] elements in religious formation [of a religion, & of religious persons]: **VARIETIES** is the outside-in, objective dimension of religion, humanity being contrastingly passive, experiencing a relationship with, & initiated by, an "objective" "over-soul"--cp., variously, Schleiermacher, Blondel, Rahner, Tillich--but also Kierkegaard & VonHügel.)

3 Gn.3, then, is a religious-experience story with emphasis on the will--indeed, the clash of wills, the Creator's & the will-endowed creatures symbolized by Adam & Eve. The tale, familiar in several forms in that world (as we know chiefly from archaeology), is in Torah-Bible given a shape, a spin, conformable to, & promotive of, Israelite-Jewish religion.

But is it **revelation**? Is God speaking in-&-through it? If not, it can have only indirect significance for our religion. But if it is, as I believe, speech-from-God, ie an "unveiling" (Lat., *revelatio*) of something I/we need to know & on our own, without divine will-act, could not come to know, then I should respond to it voluntaristically, ie by adding my will-to-believe to God's will-to-tell.

How does this cartoon

THE FAMILY CIRCUS



speaking to the revelation issue? While the child believes in prayer (ie, two-way speech between the two worlds/dimensions), the parents' will-to-disbelieve sees the child's prayer only as "pretending": they smirk to each other at the child's report-back on the other end of the human-divine conversation. The parents might learn from Num.22-24: Balaam's donkey speaks, then the angel, then--finally!--Balaam. If donkeys, how much more children, for whom the membrane between the worlds is thin (Mt.18.3 & parallels). (Chap.25 of my FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT.)

(Prayer? Isn't the child merely **continuing conversation** with Grandpa? But isn't prayer, faithful prayer, an unceasing conversation initiated by God & continuing as revelation? (For being negative, the Gk. word in Ro.1.9, 1Thes.1.3, 2.13, 5.17, 2Tim. 1.3 is stronger: "unceasing.")

4 Through the centuries, interpreters of Gn.3 have followed moral &/or intellectual &/or sexual lines (not that these three exhaust the possible paths). Eden has, by God's description, two forbiddens: the Tree of Death (which, in the serpent's mouth, becomes the Tree of Knowledge ["good and evil"--v.5, then in v.22 repeated by God]) & the Tree of Life. I consider the moral line weak: "wisdom" (v.6), not goodness, is the correlation with "good and evil," a phrase which can mean "everything" (thus, the Tree of Omniscience). The sexual angle is also weak &, like the moral, collapsible into the intellectual: sexual awareness (clothing--figleaves sewed by the couple [v.7], leather sewed by God [v.21]) is the only take on sex.

In short, the God of the Garden is concerned lest we know too much (Tree #1) & live too long (Tree #2). He's managed to keep our lives short (though we've lengthened them enough to be bad news for the good earth), but he's failed to teach us to limit our lust for knowledge: we've eaten the chip & live in the Information Age. The will to know has diminished the will to believe & increased the will to disbelieve.

5 But Gn.3 is not a story supporting obscurantism, the calculated suppression of knowledge. Rather, on a warp of life/death it weaves the woof of good/evil (what's good for us, & what's not). (Think what a blessing it is for us not to know tomorrow! The serpent's promise of omniscience was excessive. "Ignorance is [to some extent] bliss" at every stage of life.)

6 The creation of our species ends not with Gn.2 but with the next chapter: we are not humanity "as we have known it" (to borrow Clinton's phrase vis-a-vis welfare) until we come of awareness--age, aware of (1) our mortality (the wellspring of dis/belief) & (2) our responsibility as deciders face-to-face with God, who calls us to obedience, & with death, the outer limit of life "as we know it."

The whole sweep, Gn.1-3, is the greatest story ever told about how things came to be & are with God, ourselves, & our fellow-creatures. (Today, before our group discussion of Gn.3, I played the first fifteen minutes of the Moyers' "Genesis" video on this chapter--enough to show the game being played all over the lot, as I believe the author(s) intended. Excitement! Increased awareness, reminding me of Wieman's definition of God as "the increase of appreciable awareness"--an inadequate definition, I argued with him, but he had a hold of one handle of the biblical revelation, what the Bible is up to.)

7 We are called to be **obeyers as deciders**, but we are never in a position to make "a [totally] informed decision": except in minor decisional matters, we can't wait "until all the data are in." Trust in the biblical God predisposes us to discern his will in the Bible-tradition-church, weighing the scale on the will-to-believe side. But distrust predisposes us to listen to other voices (serpents), who tempt us (1) to redesign the deity (Feuerbach-like) in our ideal image & (2) to exercise, vis-a-vis the biblical God, our will to disbelieve. Eg, with "women's experience" as its ultimate sanction, gender feminism exercises its will to disbelieve the Bible (as "androcentric" & "patriarchal"), & redesigns the deity according to its (goddess) feminine ideal image (based on an ersatz, whole-cloth feminine-dominated golden-age-past myth).

8 Our God-given power of metaphorical-analogical **imagination** frees us to believe, to doubt (ie, disbelieve), & to believe again (ie, to doubt our doubt)--though many do not arrive at this third stage, at which both faith & doubt are suspendable so that neither comes to be seen as expendable--the stage at which faith & reason, confidence & questioning, myth & history, text & context, play ping-pong with each other while the will to love "sings for joy to the living God" (Ps.84.2).