

"WHAT QUESTION IS GOD THE ANSWER TO?"
 MY P.O.V.* ON, CURRENTLY, THE HOTTEST PSYCHOLOGIAN

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* Point of view

"Where did the lightbulb come from?" asked the Sunday School teacher. Answered a bright little boy, "I know you want me to say 'Jesus,' but it was Edison." "Right," said the teacher; "and where did Edison come from?" "His parents." "And where...."--but the boy interrupted: "Wait! I know you want me to say God, but it was the Big Bang." "And where did the Big Bang come from?" "I suppose you want me to say God." "Well, what do **you** want to say?"....In this factual-fictional conversation, God is the answer to the question of "In the beginning...." (Gn.1:1): The Bible's first line is its bottom line....Alice Toklas' to her dying companion: "What is the answer?" Gertrude Stein's response: "What is the question?"....The question is a lasso (a de-finer, a boundary-setter) for all its possible answers. In that sense, who gets to ask the question gets to control the answers....We are **free** to ask/answer/reject both questions others propose to us & questions we pose to ourselves. The Bible's first question (Gn.3:1) was not God's or humanity's; it was from the snake, the evil one, who directed their attention from God to the forbidden fruit....We are lifelong called to the adventure of answering/asking & not answering/asking. Call it, within our spiritual formation, our **interrogative formation**. Preachers, teachers, counselors are only special cases of answerers to this call. Our professional temptation is to shape God into a plausible-acceptable answer to whatever questions the clientele are asking. When we yield to the temptation, we are in range of Voltaire's whip about divine formation (ie, our "returning the compliment" of forming God in our image).

To be specific & current, what are people asking for? (1) Earth returned to its natural goodness. **Geologists** (centering devotion in the Good earth) say, in effect, that God is taking the form of the Good Earth. (2) "Justice & peace" in "spiritual democracy" (Steven Rockefeller's holophrase). The **sociologists**, from Durkheim to today, present God as, in effect, taking the form of the Good Society. (3) **Mythologists** (dominantly just now, Jos. Campbell) say people are asking for a story to live by, so myth takes the place of God. (4) **Theologians** (yes, the other three words are tropes on this one) say people are hungering for God, & (Augustine) "our hearts are restless till they rest in You." I am a theo-logian, interested in (1) cursing the other "-logians" for displacing God with some idol, & (2) blessing them for their calling attention to some aspect of what is vital to human life & thus within the will & promise of God.

Yes, I've left out, to this point, the "-logians" in this Thinksheet's title, the **psychologists**, whose locus operandi is the psyche, in the broad sense of Greek "mind" & Hebrew "heart." They come in waves of varying length. The last one to hit the shores of the American mind was a half century ago, which was four years after N.V.Peale started the first local-church psycho-clinic. About that time, I read Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman's PEACE OF MIND, then Msg. Sheen's soon-following PEACE OF SOUL, then many more. (NYUP's PSYCHOLOGY AS RELIGION puts H.E.Fosdick's sermons in this wave, & many of them were.)....Riding the top of today's wave is Rabbi Harold Kushner. The rest of this Thinksheet is my P.O.V. on him. (So I won't seem antiJewish, let's call him the Jewish Robt. Schuller.)

1 K. is more biblical than most psychologists, & in his later writings is showing more influence of his teacher A.Heschel, whose mysticism balanced the rationalism at Jewish Theological Seminary. (About a decade later, across the street at Union Theological Seminary, student Steven Rockefeller--as he told Bill Moyers on PBS "Ideas"--found no mysticism, so turned from rationalism to Buddhism, his present religious commitment.) But if it's what you leave out that wrecks you, look what K. leaves out, more in whole than in part: sin, retribution (God as judge, rewarding/punishing), afterdeath (life/death beyond thisworldly death), resurrection, Jesus, synagogue-church (except as school for learning to be "human"), communion with God (except intermediately through humanizing interhuman relationships), obedient God-pleasing (except by struggling toward a fairer society), justification.

2 The biblical preacher, Jewish or Christian, is commissioned to respond not only to questions people are asking but also to questions they should ask. K. is a populist communicator in regard to the first interrogative category (which makes him popular), & abjures the second (which would make him unpopular). Morally undemanding, he compliments his hearers on being good people (as in his WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE [1981]; &, as a Dr. Feelgood, his baseline sanction is the call so to live that you can feel good about yourself (the ancient Stoic & Epicurean goal). You can't feel good about yourself WHEN ALL YOU'VE EVER WANTED ISN'T ENOUGH [1986]; but when you become caringly involved with other people, you discover you've enough meaning on your plate to sate the soul-starvation pains of existential vacuum--& then your soul will feel good just as your body feels good after a good meal (though the spiritual/physical-food comparison is mine). (My comments in this Thinksheet are largely on this second book.) The first book used Job,; the second, Ecclesiastes; the third, WHO NEEDS GOD? (1989), uses the Psalms. Running through all three is his tonic on the value of religion, that it (1) enables us to confront our mortality & (2) provides us with a "community through which you learn to become human."

3 As a Conservative rabbi, K., it seems to me, must be more traditional & Jewish than he comes across as in his books, which are simplistic almost to the point of blurring distinctions in the interest of what I may call **suburban ecumenism** (he being rabbi of a suburban synagogue these past 28 years). His gospel is a reasonable religious philosophy supporting quite conventional values while avoiding, as much as his solid basic Jewish commitment will permit, everything controversial: "Religion is not a series of beliefs and rituals. It is the community through which you learn to become human." (23Oct89 NW, p.74) The "not" is of course rhetorical, but is it not also disingenuous, approaching dishonest? A religion has five aspects--on my diagram, a Center (for me, "Christ"), a cult (K.'s "ritual") for cohering with the Center, a creed (K.'s "beliefs"--a way of seeing the world, including human life), a code (a way of living in the world, including morality & ethics), & a community (the religion's social reality). K. says his center is the Center, God; but functionally his center & holy place is the community in its interpersonal dynamics as understood through Jung's psychology & Piaget's developmentalism. The reason it all makes such plain sense to so many suburbanities & purchasers of his books is that they, in their secular cultural lives, are bathed in the same mentality, which then is for them "common sense."

4 On his first trip to the USA (1952), Viktor Frankl said to some of us pastors, "For healing the emptiness of souls (his "abyss anxiety," "existential vacuum," "the central neurosis of modern man"), you pastors are in a position superior to mine. I have only students & clients, you have congregations." His logotherapy, as in his THE DOCTOR AND THE SOUL, is the heart of K.'s pastoring, though (as far as I know) K. nowhere refers to the great master of "Existenzanalyse." K. is thoroughly **pastoral**. No self-help (New Age or otherwise), no mere support-group, but God-at-work-in-community. To me, he's far more friend than enemy. But I must speak my discomfort that he seems to me guilty of reductionistic pandering (God reduced to love, sacrificing mystery in order to affirm love over power--as in other popular forms of love-religion, eg Leo Bascaglia)...Frankl in three of Hitler's deathcamps, K. face to face with the meaning-question in the death of his 14-year-old only son: suffering is a stimulant, in many, to (the jacket subtitle of K.'s second book) "The search for a life that matters."

5 179: "To what question is God the answer?....The existence of God is not the issue; the difference God can make in our lives is."....183: "God is the answer to the question, Why should I be a good and honest person?....not because He will intervene to reward the righteous and punish the wicked but because He has made the human soul in such a way that only a life of goodness and beauty leaves us feeling spiritually healthy and human.",,,,God reverses Murphy's Law (184): "Anything that should be set right sooner or later will [be]....good deeds are never wasted and not forgotten."