

BIBLE POLARITIES

For assonance, I almost said "Bible Balances," but that would suggest homeostasis, equilibrium of weights/forces, yin/yang (Sinic philosophy/religion). Rather, the Bible stretches mind & heart to behold, & deal with, reality's dynamic counterpoises, tensions, paradoxes, & oppositions awaiting eschatological resolution. Those who impatiently want simple answers, clear solutions, a graspable cosmos (order) controlling chaos (mess) should look elsewhere: reality is too much for them.

For meditation-prayer-discussion, this Thinksheet presents some polarities with just enough Bible-contexting to suggest the Bible's thickness-richness in helping humanity to wise sense-making, crisis-confronting, fears, hopes, & loves.

1 **God/universe.** This evening in the Craigville Tabernacle we'll be showing & discussing the film "Contact," based on the novel which was atheist Carl Sagan's final effort to spread his worldview: dying soon after the novel's publication, he didn't get to comb white hair. What you leave out wrecks you: how many who come will be able to say they noticed that "Contact" leaves God out of sense-making (as do our public schools)?

2 **Transcendence/immanence.** The Bible's deity is not the universe (pantheism) & is not entirely in the world (panentheism): he's beyond (transcendent over) & within (immanent) the world/universe. Failure to see/feel this polarity results in (too-masculine) deism (the loss of immanence), (too-feminine) sentimentalism (the loss of transcendence), or atheism (the loss of theism, faith that God is personal). Darwin moved from theism to deism to sentimentalism to atheism.

3 **Spirit/flesh.** "God is Spirit" (Jn.4.24 CEV) transcendent over & immanent in creation/universe/world. Can we analogize in both directions? Neither: (1) On the model of human being, is the world God's body? Some theologians (Sallie McFague, e.g.) falsely teach so; (2) on the model of divine being, is a human spirit separable from a human body? Plato (apparently influenced by certain Eastern religions) thought so, but the Bible generally teaches bodysoul/soulbody unity, which death destroys not by separation but by cessation: the resurrection is the re-creation of that unity....In addition to that ontological-unity sense, the Bible uses "flesh/spirit" for a divinely demanded moral division: flesh drags down, spirit lifts up (Ro. 7.25 gives one way this opposition is put).

4 **Demand/consolation.** Here's one of Kierkegaard's many ways of complaining, on behalf of Christianity, against Christendom (DIARY, ed. by P.P.Rohde): "They have changed Christianity (into) too much of a consolation, and forgotten that it is a demand." I remember hearing Ralph Sockman say, in a sermon, something he was famous for till it was forgotten who said it: "The gospel is to comfort the afflicted & afflict the comfortable." The gospel is good news to those who know, & those who need to be told, that they & life are bad news (or at least they!). Grace (God's forgiveness) cannot superabound where sin has not abounded & been confessed (Ro. 5.20)....This polarity is also a sequence: demand (Gn.2.15-17; positive, 15; negative, 16-17); disobedience (3.1-6); guilt-shame-fear (vv.7-13); punishment (vv.14-19); repentance (implied); consolation (God tailor-makes clothes for Adam & Eve [v.21] & gives them a child [4.1]).

The most recent memorial service I attended was 100% consolation, no demand--though purported to be Christian, it wasn't. Funeral & memorial services are ideal times to lay on the divine demands because people are hurting & defeated & open, a captive audience of misery. This, too, from S.K.'s diary: "Not until a man has become so utterly unhappy, or has grasped the woefulness of life so deeply that he is moved to say, and mean it: Life for me has no value--not until then is he able to make a bid for Christianity." (Compare Pascal's "the misery & grandeur of man.") Without the (masculine) demand, the (feminine) consolation falls into the bathos of sentimentality. Neither, please! BOTH, together! The consolation is with promise, & the demand is with threat (e.g., "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God," Heb.10.31; for it, Jn.Updike wrongly credited Kierkegaard; & Geo. Seldes [THE GREAT THOUGHTS, Ballantine/85] ignorantly repeated the false citation --scholars sometimes uncover centuries-long chains of false citations).

5 **Masculine/feminine.** At the beginning of the Bible, this polarity appears 1st (Gn.1.27) as an original idea, 2nd (2.18-24) as a derived idea but more intimate (v.24, "one flesh" [Heb. & KJV: CEV, "like one person"]). The 1st-&-later may be shorthand for the 2nd-&-earlier, but there may be more to the difference than that: this polarity is extremely complex & diffuse. (On its diffusion, see my two earlier uses of it in this Thinksheet, viz. §2 & §4.)....The primordial diffusion is heaven-masculine / earth-feminine. If the polarity is broken by masculine dominance, nature is lost to history; if by feminine dominance, history (including the Bible Story) is lost to nature--which is now happening in American culture, even in some theologians in whom Mother Nature has killed off Father God's pronouns, the Bible's only pronouns for deity). (Meanwhile, on earth, the feminine has been killing off the masculine, a crisis limned in Lionel Tiger's THE DECLINE OF THE MALE [1999]).

6 **Light/darkness.** As with spirit/flesh, the Bible deals with this polarity both ontologically (Gn.1.3-5: the reality of day/night) & morally (Jn.1.3c-9: Jesus as light-life-love in the world's darkness-death-hate)....Good/evil.

7 **Past/present.** In the Bible, this polarity is multiform. OT/NT is both continuity & discontinuity. Old/new creation. Old/new birth. Prophecy/fulfilment. Land/book. Prophets/Son (Heb.1.1-2). Prophets/apostles. Israel/Church. Angels/Spirit. Political/spiritual Messiah. Note that continuity/discontinuity is a polarity within this polarity....Infer this polarity from Jesus' parabolic saying, Mt.13.52.

8 **Present/future.** Kingdom of God "in heaven" / "on earth" (a polarity in the Lord's Prayer). Redemption/sanctification. Time/eternity. Misery/glory.

9 **Law/grace.** While this looks like §4, I've given it separate listing because its terms are biblically/theologically so important (especially in Paul's letters). Here we should be more cautious than were many past Christians, who falsely contrasted OT (as preaching law) & NT (as preaching love): throughout the Bible, God is gracious (only OT passage have both "gracious" & "merciful": Ex.34.6; 2Chron.30.9; Neh.9.17; Ps.103.8; Joel 2.15). God's most gracious act is coming as Jesus to live/die/rise for us; but to neglect, (worse) to suppress, the grace element in the OT is at least potentially to feed antiJudaism (antisemitism).

10 **Lore/experience.** Lore, including Scripture, is funded experience, the life of the millenia able (if we're willing!) to speak to the hours. E-mail was invented by the devil to keep you eating junk food for the eyeballs, out of fear that you might take to the classics (centuries-old soul-food still profoundly nourishing). It's ignorant to think that our experience is so different from theirs, & arrogant to think our experience (*my* experience!) superior to the ancient worthies'. Living this polarity means, however, an unprejudiced conversation between lore & experience....Compare §7.

11 **Faith/reason.** In atheist Carl Sagan's book-&-film "Contact," an astronomer who (like C.S.) won't believe in God without scientific evidence herself has an experience of the Beyond which she can't communicate, & so is able to understand her lover's faith in God. Modernism shattered the Medieval (faith/reason) synthesis: post-Modernism is shattering that shattering.

12 **Faith/works.** The Bible teaches a punctiliar-linear faith-faithfulness. Antinomianism destroy this polarity in favor of faith: legalism & moralism, in favor of works.

13 **Heart/mind** should "make one music" (Tennyson), but sentimentalism & rationalism split this biblical polarity. Mysticism claim mind but are heart-based.

14 **Humanity/(the rest of)Nature.** Eco-theology rightly preaches homeostatic polarity for "a sustainable future" on God's good earth (Gn.1.31).

15 **Suffering/joy.** Cross/Resurrection. In "Contact," the astronomer's grief & loneliness lead to her occupation, through which she discovers "We are not alone" in the universe. Augustine: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in You." Beyond, she meets her father but not her Father.

16 **Individual/society,** autonomy/community. The Bible enhances the person while erasing individualism. Buddhism erases the individual, & the Dalai Lama will soon speak (by Rich.Gere's promotion) to 50,000 in NYC's Central Park.