

WITHIN BIBLICAL-CANONICAL REVELATION

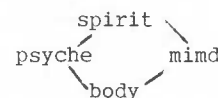
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Biblical religion, Jewish & Christian, recognizes & honors the human realities of materiality (the physical body & its historical flow), spirituality (the reach for & toward more than we are), imagination (the power & urge to analogize, to create & associate mental images out of physical materials & thus extend experience/knowledge/memory/hope), & reason (the capacity to count, fit together, build things/ideas in the interests of utility/intelligibility/plausibility/persuasion). For some decades I've represented all this simply, thus:



Any one of these functions can become a **run-away**, breaking out of the four-horse-chariot harness (a conservative image, for some break-aways have been / are more promotive than destructive of the human cause). Imagination sometimes breaks away into *fancy*, the inventing of "the novel and unreal by altering or recombining the elements of reality" (Web.); or into *fantasy*, "the unrestrained and often extravagant or delusive operation of the fancy" (Web.).

Imagination-fancy-fantasy is a social as well as a personal process. Traditions are in part made up of groups/movements' funded psyches (in the narrow sense on my lozenge diagram). Those who would alter a tradition do so partly by **re-imaging**, **re-imagining**, which may enrich or renew or destroy the tradition.....This Thinksheet is about the biblical-canonical harness (boundaries, limits) I believe Christians should use in critically assessing current re-imaginings of God.

1 In preparing a sermon, God is looked at forward; in critiquing, backward: *what's the God-image, the God-idea*, to be gotten from this sermon? The human-potential movement aimed to help you discover "who you *really* are." Well, who's God, what's God like, in the way you really live-think?

2 Here the Bible is rich & freeing, offering us--within the limits of **revelation** (God's self-disclosure through the whole of [canonical] Scripture)--many approaches, as a flower's every petal is a beeline approach to its Center. "Canonical-Christian thought" (1) exploits all these approaches & (2) excludes unassimilables (foreign bodies its immune system rejects, & cancers [hypertrophies, destructive overdevelopments]).

3 Christian thinkers (in the broad sense, "theologians") are the primary immune system of the Body of Christ. The essence of AIDS is that the body's immune system doesn't work. A parallel condition in theology is the mainline-liberal rejection of the very idea of intellectual leukocytes: "heresy" is heretical, the only intolerance being of intolerance. Anti-canonical theologies based on race, ethnicity, class, gender are not attacked by this pan-"inclusive" mentality. I consider this so degenerate as to question whether the mainline church can, or even should, survive.

4 **Canonical Christians** have existed since the 4th-c. ecumenical decision on "canon," the rule as to which books constitute the Christian Bible (in contrast to other canons [eg, Jewish] & the earlier Christian practice of congregational specialties [eg Matthew's Gospel in his community, Jn.'s Gospel + 3 letters, 1-3Jn., in his church]).

5 Of course every Christian has a personal canon, viz favorite scriptures within Scripture. Nothing wrong with that unless one develops one's whole theology out favorite parts of the Bible. But that personal practice is not uncommon. It's disastrous for the full biblical doctrine of anything, especially of God. Eg, **Jn. Christians** teach that God is Love, & only Christian devotion (perpetual self-giving to God through/in Christ) can save them from treating this as a reversible proposition, viz Love is God.

6 The NT's Jn. literature gets over-used by Christian **psychotherapists**--Henri Nouwen being, currently, the most influential example. He writes so well, & has so devout a spirit, that I check all his books, one after another, for purchase by the N.Y.Theological Seminary library--even though they all say, though from different angles, the same thing: God is love. (The last words of his latest, OUR GREATEST GIFT: A MEDITATION

ON DYING AND CARING [HarperSF/94]: "I will know as never before that God indeed is love.") No discounting the great human good coming from this message & ministry: my concern with it here is theological.

7 What happens when "God is love" takes over the Christian mind? Without the corrective of other biblical angles on God, the mind goes soft, sentimental. Steeped in the Victorian sentimental view of God, Darwin gave up theism: he could not square that God-idea with what he saw in nature. Many now scorn that deity because they can't square him with what they experience in society.

Theological conclusion: While "God is love" is cozy for Christians, in marginals & outsiders it's a nudge toward atheism.

8 But also inside the church, "God is love" can be disastrous. Consider feminism's theological **slippery slope**:

1st-level inference: Being love, God loves women, so....

2nd-level inference: There must be that in God which understands women.

3rd-level inference: Since it takes one to know one, God must in some sense be feminine.

4th-level inference: Women's experience being the baseline for women's doing theology, God must have women's experience.

5th-level inference: Since men can't have women's experience, God must be--at least for women--a woman.

6th-level inference: Being a woman, God should be worshiped as a woman, ie a Goddess (or God/dess).

7th-level inference: All the above being so, the doctrine of the **incarnation** must no longer be limited to God's appearance only once & only in a male, Jesus. The same line of reasoning makes no longer believable that the **atonement** is limited to something Jesus did.

9 No wonder the Nov/93 WCC Minneapolis "Re-Imagining 1993" could offer worship to the Goddess! Beyond lectures & discussion, wor-

ship of Sophia! Theologically, this was possible only by elevating **pre-Christian** thinking over canonical doctrine, which teaches that....

17 **Wisdom** is masculine in incarnation: "Christ...the wisdom of God" (1Cor.1.24). We Christians are to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2Cor.10.5): wisdom is one of the captives.

But the "Re-Imagining" conference distinctly failed to take wisdom captive for Christ. On the linguistically & theologically flimsy fact that in Hebrew (chokma) & Greek (sophia) the main nouns for wisdom are feminine in gender, speaker after speaker--& finally in worship!--hailed the Goddess, in clear, even defiant, violation of the canonical-Christian doctrine of wisdom.

"Let the ladies have their fun" cynically say some males in oral (not written!) comment on the conference. "Not at the expense of sound Christian doctrine," say I, powerless though I be to prevent "the ladies" from doing whatever they want. I'm for re-imagining, but (as this Thinksheet's title puts it) "within biblical-canonical **revelation**."

18 At a recent people-carers conference, I heard the chief speaker say that the ultimate reality, "in Henry Nouwen's words, is that 'We are God's beloved.'....Psychotherapy is an encounter between the gods, the god of people's misunderstanding and the God of Love." That took care of God: the rest of the meal-in-the-middle meeting was about love, into which God had disappeared by absorption. Henri does not like this **secular reductionism** of his teaching, but can we say he bears no responsibility for it? From the time he left Holland for Kansas (Menninger Clinic), he's been on a narrow (shrunken canon) love-trip.

19 "Re-Imagining," out of canonical bounds, becomes **re-mything**. We've had a hundred books so far in support of the Myth of the Goddess Golden-Age, a neo-myth shot down by Jared M. Diamond (author of THE THIRD CHIMPANZEE, Harper-Collins/94) in a recent AAAS lecture subtitled "The Golden Age That Never Was."

HEART-OPENING POEMS FOR THE DYING, AND OTHERS

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Partly in the hope of hearing her say "I can use that," I read poems to Loree, chaplain for Hospice of Cape Cod. Often one deeply moves me, & I think I'd like to hear it when I come to do my dying; but she says "Too complex in structure and/or meaning" or "Too big words." She's better able than I to sense when a poem has power to open the heart at life's last stage. And when the heart is open, when the soul's wings are spread, great scriptures & great hymns may be appropriate.... Tonight she said "I can use that" about this one:

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The night has a thousand eyes,
And the day but one;
Yet the light of the bright world dies
With the dying sun.

The mind has a thousand eyes,
And the heart but one;
Yet the light of a whole life dies
When love is done.

--Francis Wm. Bourdillon, d.1921

This one didn't pass her test, but here it is anyway because it illustrates another truth about poetry for the dying: a patient may be asked if s/he has a favorite, & that may be made good use of. The following death-poem is a favorite of mine; as a child I had to learn it, was not glad to then, have been ever since glad I did.

Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie:
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me:
"Here he lies where he long'd to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the
sea,
And the hunter home from the hill."

--Robt. Louis Stevenson (d.1894), "Requiem"

Often the dying fall into the life-review mood, & a nostalgic poem may help open the heart. "The Retreat," by Henry Vaughn (d.1695), is famous for the lines bespeaking children's moments of time-transcendence, when they feel "through all this earthly dress / Bright shoots of everlastingness." The visitor, clergy or not, may feel led to encourage the patient to try to recall such a moment from her/his childhood.

Happy those early days when I
Shin'd in my Angel-infancy!
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
Or taught my soul to fancy aught
But a white celestial thought:
When yet I had not walked above
A mile or two from my first Love,
And looking back--at that short
space--
Could see a glimpse of His [God's]
bright face:
When on some gilded cloud, or flow'r,
My gazing soul would dwell an hour,
And in those weaker glories spy
Some shadows of eternity;
Before I taught my tongue to wound

My Conscience with a sinful sound,
Or had the black art to dispense
A several sin to ev'ry sense,
But felt through all this fleshly dress
Bright shoots of everlastingness.

O how I long to travel back,
And tread again that ancient track!
That I might once more reach that plain
Where first I left my glorious train;
From whence th' enlightened spirit sees
That shady City of Palm-trees.
But ah! my soul with too much stay
Is drunk, and staggers in the way!
Some men a forward motion love,
But I by backward steps would move;
And when this dust falls to the urn,
In that state I came, return.

Yes, somewhat bathetic, & not a mood anyone should stay long with--but, again, a possible heart-opener, & so heaven-opener. The other's heart has no knob on your side & has a skylight you can't see when the door's closed....Fritz Perls' ironic "Gestalt Prayer" ends "And if we meet, it's wonderful; but if not, it can't be helped." When I changed "can't" to "can," he shouted "All right, then! You believe in God!" Indeed I do; & in the other soul's power to look through the skylight & to open the door toward me.

Death is to be feared/Or revered/Depending on if you die away from/Or die into....If you die away from loved ones/Never to see them again/If you die away from sunshine/To dwell entombed in darkness/If you die away from the scents of seasons/The churning tides, the rolling hills/Death is the awesome pain of hollow void/Of knowing but not hearing/ Life's circus' shout/While suffocating below ground....But if you die into/You fuse with essence of all being/Becoming greenness of leaves/The purpleness and icyness of peaks/The thrilling glint of sunspecks/Reflecting from whitecaps in brisk spring seas/The breeze filling sails of distant hulls/Gliding sunsetward/You become the force that grows the garden/Of those you love/And become them/You become all sunshine/All moonbeams/The sound humming silently in all things/You become the smile of being/Sighing all feeling/If you die not away from/But into.

--in #1278 I tell how this poem came to be. Ambrose Bono, whose wife was dying, disliked having a religious person teaching him "Interpersonal Behavior" (Adelphi U., '78F) until he experienced my religion as saying YES both to nature & to his suffering. When he opened his heart to me after a class session, I asked whether his wife was dying away from or into. I had learned to make an end-run around religious language, as well as to reinforce it when/where-ever appropriate. Nobody in that class would admit to being religious, but all were moved when he read this poem at the beginning of the next session. He had affirmed without defining, like the first poem of this Thinksheet.