IRAN'S INFLUENCE ON US YESTERDAY & TODAY ---------- ELLIOTT #2140

"Irangate," "Iranscam," & other neologisms point sardonically now (Feb/87) to the second of two White House boggings-down in the Iranian swamp in recent years. Learning nothing from Carter's 444-day focus on Iran's seizure of a few Americans, Reagan's men have cravenly groveled to Iran in the vain hope of springing a few Americans from the grip of hostage-takers--behavior that upped the value of, & therefore increased, hostage-taking. The appalling fact, when one steps back from these debacles, is that in effect Iran has taken hostage two successive American administrations and, with them, all of us Americans, in that during these crises, "Iran" has dominated foreign policy and media news. The farce is now so broad that we are sending naval fleets--against kidnappers! And all because of myopic attention to the plight of a few of us --on the hyperindividualistic premise that what happens to a few of us happens to all of us, a Jn.-Donne-type truth that becomes tragedy when extended to mean that the rest of us can be held hostage--by the White House!--to what happens to the few of us.... This Thinksheet muses, beyond the present banal self-inflicted influence of Iran on us, about the earlier creative influence of Persia-Iran on "the West," including us.

1. "Pharisee" & "Pharsi" (Farsi) are related in that the latter is a Persian & the former was a Persianizing Jew (as, later, there were Hellenizing Jews & even, eg Josephus, Romanizing Jews). But I'm getting ahead of my story, which began recently with my hearing Farsi, modern Persian, spoken in our Cape Cod kitchen. By a guest, on the phone with Iran. I could recognize a few words and a phrase or two: it's an Indo-European tongue, not vastly different from some I-E languages in which I have a bit of competence, esp. Greek & Latin....You'll soon see how all this is related to a long letter I got today (9Feb87) from Berkeley, CA, from the Dean of the Institute of Buddhist Studies (related to the Graduate Theological Union).

2. As in the case of God (acc. to Augustine), the geohuman center of the earth is everywhere and the circumference nowhere. NSEW are the directions from where I sit, where the waves of ancient & contemporary humanity reach me. You, too. Everybody. China is the Middle Kingdom: so = "China," the axis mundi, at the center of the world; and as Delphi in ancient Greece was omphalos tou kosmou, the world's bellybutton. Great river valleys, the wombs of the world's major cultures, center peoples and so seem to center the world. And the great land bridges of the Eastern Hemisphere--Palestine, the Bosporus, & Iraq-Iran--have mixed humanity as have no other geographical features of the planet. (As for the Western Hemisphere, the Bering & Panamanian land bridges have seen the flow of far fewer peoples, whose histories are coming only slowly to light because their languages were largely unwritten.)

3. The Iraq-Iran land bridge is, depending on where you're sitting, in Western Asia (if you're an Asian) or the Middle East (if you're of the Atlantic communities of nations, including Africa). For us, "the Far East" is east of this bridge, and "the Near East" is west of it, to the Mediterranean. Yes, you know all this; but please let me lead up to something slowly!

4. Through the millenia, Iran has bridged for Eastern cultures moving west & for Western cultures moving east. Sometimes it was armies: Darius moving west, Alex. the Great moving east. But mostly it was merchants, then also missionaries of all the major religions of Gaia, the world's greatest landmass (Asia-Europe-Africa). One would expect, in this process, what is true: Iran was the birthplace of religions having hybrid, East-West, characteristics: Zoroastrianism, Manicheanism, Sufism, Bahaism. Subterranean to these religions were various metaphysical rivers & aquifers, enabling & even encouraging syncretism both among Iranian-born religions & between them & religions of peoples both east & west of Iran. Of the interrelationships eastward, I'll

OVER

mention only that--as "Indo-European" implies--one people, the Aryans, at about the time of the Hebrew Patriarchs (2nd millenium BC/BCE), took over both the Indian peninsula & Iran: Persian & Sanskrit, Persianism & Hinduism, are not too distantly related. As a Christian, I'm more immediately concerned with the interrelationships westward--on Iraq (Babylon), whose wise men ("Magi") show up for the baby Jesus at Christmas; Babylon, where under the Iranians and two generations before Cyrus' take-over, the Jews shaped the Great Talmud, more influential in Judaism to this day than the Talmud shaped in Palestine--westward along the Fertile Crescent (now Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt)--westward through what's now Turkey, where Persianism mingled with the Ionians, the ancient Greeks of western Turkey, where Paul was to establish most of his churches.

5. Persianism's main influence on Christianity was to be through Judaism, but the influence was not limited to that transmission. That, however, is a story I'll not follow in this Thinksheet.

6. Well, what AM I trying to get at? Culturally, Christianity may be said to have had, like Timothy, a Jewish mother & a Greek (ie, nonJewish, gentile) father--Persian influence coming, as I said in sec.5, from both. What was a nice yid girl like Tim's mama doing going off & marrying that goy? And then giving birth to a "manchild" & not having him circumcised? ....Every religion has, vis-a-vis its environing "world," two parties; a closed one, fearful of foreign dilution & pollution (as were the Sadducees & Essenes-Qumranites, who did not survive the AD/CE66-76 Roman destruction of the Jewish cult & enclave communities), and an open one (as were the "Persianizers," Pharisees, whose survival values included much that the Jews had learned from the Persians, Babylonians, less from the Greeks, least from the Romans). A religion's open party is vulnerable to conversion: Paul made converts only in Hellenistic synagogues. But offsetting that weakness, or danger, is the open party's ability (1) to enrich the religion with treasures from surrounding cultures, and (2) to make flexible responses to foreign challenges that might be fatal were not the religion innoculated (mixed metaphors!) with the foreign treasures.

7. So do we have a soul? Will there be a resurrection? How about angels? And spirits? To the Sadducees, the closed party, all of these are non-questions, as you can see in Ac.23.6-10. They, long before the 1st c. AD/CE, had sneered at the open party, nicknaming them "Persianizers" (so, "Pharisees," who reinterpreted the term as Perushim, "separatists" and as such, "holy ones"). A parallel heightening may have occurred in the case of the closed party: Originally, "Sadducee" probably meant a member of the supreme council, but the party reinterpreted it as Tzaddiqim, the "righteous." (NOTE: The closed/open-parties way of putting it is mine, but no scholar would disagree with the basic reality. As for the etymologies here, they're the ones making the best sense to me. A good exposition of this Ac. passage & these issues is F.F.Bruce, NIC Series COMMENTARY ON...ACTS, Eerdmans/55/64, pp.452-5.)

8. The Jewish open party became both "normative" Judaism & Christianity. Till about the end of the 1st c. AD/CE, you could be both a Pharisee & a Christian: Paul said not "I WAS a P." but (v.6) "I am a P." (Ac.15.5 speaks of other Christian Pharisees.) But Christianity's insistence on Jesus-centering led to the closing of the Jewish open party. Judaism's survival depended on its becoming the closed party vis-a-vis Christianity, which was/is the open party though closed in its Jesus-centering.

9. My Buddhist friend complains that a Christian trying to convert him insisted on the existence of the soul as a metaphysical prerequisite: "he might even have to teach an ancient Hebrew the same thing....a distortion of the basic biblical perspective." In Guyana, a Hindu evangelist worked on Loree and me from the same angle: 1st you must believe in the soul!...Me? I'm an undiscouraged, chastened, ecumenical Christian.