REVELATION, INSPIRATION, DISCOVERY or invention?

This Thinksheet grew out of phonecalls & e-mails I got today.

1 A phoner took it as a compliment (which I didn't intend) when I called him "spiritual." On the revelation/invention spectrum, he's at the extreme left end: all the world's traditions are revelations from the beyond: we are passive recipients of divine disclosures. At the other extreme are those who see all religious ideas as fictive, as altogether active **inventions** of fertile imaginative minds.

The two intermediate positions are (1) **inspiration** (like revelation in passivity [the activity coming from beyond], unlike in content [not having unquestioned truth & value]); & (2) **discovery** (like invention in activity, unlike in content [having the objective reality of something found "out there"--whereas the fictive, invention, is only "in here").

2 The test of these lexical distinctions is whether they are *necessary* to thought & communication. Penicillin was discovered, steel (iron + coke + heat) was invented: the distinction is necessary. Muslims believe that God has revealed that Jesus is not his son, a teaching Christians have been wrongly inspired to believe to be true: the distinction is necessary. (The reverse: Christians believe that God has revealed that Jesus is his Son, a teaching Muslims have been wrongly inspired to deny.)

My great-religion students at the U. of Hawaii quickly grasped the utility, even necessity, of these distinctions. E.g., they perceived the nonsence of claiming that God/Allah revealed both that Jesus is & is not his Son/son. By contrast, multiculturalism--concerned for harmony, uncaring about logic--blithely teaches that all religions (as revelations) are of equal truth & value.

3 The revelation/inspiration problem exists for religions & cultures assuming that reality is one, self-consitent. Polytheism's many gods may each reveal without monotheism's necessity of making concatenic, integrated sense of the revelations. And some minor philosophies in the West--e.g., Leibnitz's monads & Wm. James's pluralism--obviated the problem, a luxury unavailable to Judaism, Christianity, & Islam. This my students saw, & so did not criticize me for limiting "revelation" to my religion, as even the Hindus did to theirs (their polytheism [with the exception of a few monotheistic groups] eliminating the possibility that Jesus could be *the* Son of God--the possibility, i.e., that this Christian teaching could be revealed, i.e. a revelation-of-truth).

4 **Lexical clarity**--clean distinctions/definitions mutually agreed on--do not guarantee amity among the world's religions, but amity--& therefore cooperation toward truly human ends--is impossible without lexical clarity.

And what is true here among the religions is true, with even greater force, within each religion. Logomachies, word-battles, within Christianity East & West, & within each Christianity (Eastern Orthodox, Western Roman, Protestant, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, African, Pentecostal)--these are harmful when antilogs (word-wars), helpful when dialogs. I'm optimistic: our resources for converting antilogs into dialogs & dialogs into lexical agreements are improving.

5 Coming to the end of my nap, I was saying to myself "Polymerous kai polytropos" (the beginning of the stately, elegant, solemn 1st sentemce (1.1-4, long!) of the Epistle to the Hebrews) when the phone rang & the caller, on learning what I'd been quoting to myself (the high christology of He.1.1-4), said (1) "There's no benign Grandfather answering our petitions" & (2) The man Jesus "became ontology" (God's "Son" et al) & so "wound up being worshiped" instead of only admired as a good man. The caller was scornful of my claim that revelation stopped with Jesus' incarnation-resurrection & early Christian canonical (i.e., NT) writing thereon, though illumination continues through the "internal testimony of the Holy Spirit." "Foolishness!" said he. "Christian foolishness," said I, "'the message about the cross is foolishness'* to unbelievers in God's work of salvation through Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection." Said he, "So you deny that Muhammad received revelation?" I: "He was inspired but received no revela-

* 1Cor.1.18

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tion--unless one deity (the NT's) revealed that Jesus died on the cross & another deity (the Qur'an's) revealed that he didn't." But for us monotheists--Jews, Christians, Muslims--mutually contradictory "revelations" are impossible: God does not contradict himself.

6 For the historical religions (the three Abrahamic religions, in which revelation has time-&-place grounding), revelation has personal locus ([in order] Moses, Jesus, Muhammad) & terminus. For Jews, revelation stops before it gets to Jesus; for Christians, revelation stops before it gets to Muhammad: for Muslims, revelation stops with Muhammad.

Each of these three religions teaches its children that the other two teach their children **nonsense.** Jews teach (against Christianity) that Jesus stayed dead, & the notion that he didn't is absurd, false, illusional. Jews teach (against Islam) that the notion that Jesus didn't die on the cross is so improbable as to be antihistorical. Christians teach (against Judaism) that Jesus didn't stay dead, & the notion that he did is--in light of massive historical evidence, centrally the fact that his was the only messianic movement to survive--a difficult-to-sustain aspect of resistance to the Christian witness. Christians teach (against Islam) that the notion that the Romans botched Jesus' execution, failing to kill him, is wildly improbable. Muslims teach (against Judaism & Christianity) that the failure to recognize Muhammad as *the* Prophet is a nonsensical vitiation of the whole prophetic trajectory from Abraham, cutting it off just before its apex....

....but I'm pressing the adversarial, community-defining negatives of each of the three religions toward the others. Every community, in maintaining its **identity** through generations, must shape/reshape replies to the children's questions *Why are we [observably] different from them / why aren't they like us? How are we [invisibly, in thinking] different from them / why don't they think as we do? What can/can't we do together with them?*

7 My assumption is that a frank facing of the children's questions vis-a-vis the negatives (the mutual "nonsenses") as well as the positives will free all three communities to ask *What **bridges** of understanding, benevolence, & unselfish service can we build?* How alive among the three this question is will depend on (1) meeting, being together across the boundaries, & (2) educating clergy & laity, especially parents, in ways to improve interfaith understanding & cooperation in spite of the impossibility of intellectual reconcilation, which could be achieved only at the loss of each religion's particularity (without which a religion would not be itself, i.e. would not exist).

8 A long e-mail (Confessing Christ meeting) from Max Stackhouse, just back from China, where he headed the U.S. delegation of academicians meeting with Chinese intellectuals on the question What use might Christianity be to the new China? Maoism (indeed, every Marxism) taught that religion is not revelation or inspiration or discovery but only invention: priestly nonsense, opiate of the people. But Moism (long ago suppressed by Confucianism) is reviving along with a number of other nonWestern religions, & Christianity (in types & numbers) is spreading. As an orthodox-liberal Christian (which I also am), Max had opportunities to witness to his (revealed!) Faith. His main paper is being translated into Chinese.

9 Except when meeting special needs, Christians should use **the Christian language**, basically the biblical language (in English, based as intelligibly as possible on the biblical languages). The revelation/inspiration distinction (¶2, above) is necessary though unbiblical. Revelation occurred when (2P.1.21) "men and women [were] moved by the Holy Spirit [&] spoke from God." In 2Ti.3.16, Scripture as "inspired by God"* is revelation: inspiration the process, revelation the product. "The breath [KJV "inspiration"] of the Almighty...makes for understanding": Job 32.8. *Literally, "God-[in]breathed," used only once in the Bible, but not limited to revelation (in our technical sense): pagans used it, as e.g. to explain the origin of the Parthenon at Magnesia "to the glory of [the goddess] Artemis." The people were "inspired" to build that pagan shrine, but not by the biblical God....In Gn.27 Vulg., the Latin says God blew into ("in-spir-avit").