

On 1:1 television I was asked this & said I didn't know. This was thought odd behavior on my part, esp. seeing as how I'm a theologian, whose public contribution is --isn't it?--to provide society with answers to Watergate-&-Irancontragate-like questions such as what did God know & when did he know it & what did he do about it. The Great Oval Room in the Sky stuff. Like also would God really have killed ("called home") Oral Roberts if the \$8 million hadn't come in on time? And like this: Considering how much good Jim Bakker was doing, why didn't God keep the lid on instead of turning the heat up? And did God use the Miami Herald to punish Gary Hart for besmirching his seminary training?....This Thinksheet is about God's awkward entrances onto the public stage & how he's using his media opportunities.

1. A Jew turned Christian turned Buddhist wrote me what a relief it is, at this stage of his spiritual journey, not to have the "burden of history," esp. the theodic-apologetic burden of covering for God. Now--at least for now, during his Buddhist period--he has only the burden essential to humanity, the burden of the heart, which Gautama reduced down to the burden of suffering, which Gautama Buddha reduced down to how to get rid of suffering....I just read a fascinating article in SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN about a scorpion this guy has given the past 20 years of his life to studying....And revolutions are apt to be Marxist because dialectical-materialistic class-critical-consciousness analysis --despite its fancy language--is simplistic beyond all its competitors.In these three instances--one each from religion, science, and ecopolitics--we can feel the allure & power of reductionism, scaling down the human project to what seems manageable size & then ideologizing both the decision to do so & the resulting behavior ("life-style").

2. IRONIES: (1) Buddhism preaches eliminating suffering but has practiced little of it beyond the individual. (2) Science is more & more becoming itself the scorpion not in its intentions, which are "pure" though in a mindless impersonal way, but in its technological & philosophical effects on the biosphere, human relations, and the human spirit. (3) Marxism in none of its political incarnations has given the world a classless society, but rather has frozen human beings into a rigid & technologically tooled classism allowing for less freedom than before (with more justice for some than before, less for others).

3. The USA today combines these three ironies. Like Buddhism, it's bent on pain-avoidance. Like science, it seeks minimalist explanations (eg, explain AIDS as a virus & you've made the possibility of its being a divine punishment a violation of the law of parsimony). Like Marxism, its control hermeneutic is economic (Wm. Safire on PTL: Jim Bakker's extra woman is a pecadillo, but a hostile takeover would be "Sin")....That's the context in which most Americans hear the question "Is AIDS a punishment from God?" The instant response correlates with the three ironies: (1) It can't be, because God is for me, I'm against pain & suffering, therefore God would not inflict AIDS; (2) AIDS is a disease, something physical & not moral or spiritual; (3) God-talk about AIDS will disappear as soon as we put enough \$ into research & lick this virus. To this constellation of response, the punishing God is not only irrelevant but an irritant &, to modernized believers (Jews & Christians), an embarrassment.

4. Given all the above, no wonder almost everybody, secular & religious, instantly brushes aside the question: "Of course AIDS is not a punishment from God!" So here was my response on television (before I said "I don't know"): "What most interests me is the fact that almost everybody considers that a nonquestion. Why? Not to give the question serious attention is, given the culture of the West, aberr-

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ant. In and since both Testaments, biblical religion has struggled with the burden of history, ie with the burden of making "historical" sense of the human story under, in, against, with, & for God in the context of "nature" (the cosmos & the biosphere). (In #1910 I laid out the three dimensions of or angles on the West's rich & dynamic sense-making paradigm: the providential, the moral, & the empirical. To indicate that "nature" & "history" are not independent & universal human ideas but are rather subsets within the set of Western thought, I have put the two words in quotation marks. To be strict, I should also quote the two other players in the paradigm, "God" & "humanity": both of these, along with the other two, are culture-specific....The "God" who is or isn't punishing for AIDS is not what Pascal called "the God of the philosophers" but rather this quite specific God of the Paradigm, God of the Patriarchs, Moses, & Jesus, the Holy Father who as father is loving & as holy is judge.)

5. What I was getting at in my television response was the fact that two of the West's three traditional interpretive modes have undergone such severe repression as to be unavailable to the public-school-&-media-formed mind. Today (6May87) the Assemblies of God defrocked Bakker & Dortsch, punishing the former for adultery & the latter for coverup & bribery; the text of the condemnation used all three modes. As to why our culture currently represses the two modes, Stephen Jay Gould (31, SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, Dec/79) states the Darwinian root (in the context of showing the influence on Darwin of "the laissez-faire economics of Adam Smith"): "Apparent order arises naturally from the struggle among individuals, not from predestined principles or higher control." Here are the three hermeneutic options, respectively, the first "naturally" subverting the others: (1) Competition, with no moral or religious content, is the control value; (2) The moral constitution of the universe, if any, is unnecessary to sense-making; (3) The religious, specifically the theistic, mode ("higher control") is irrelevant to "science" and thus to sense (and so is at least non-sense, if not nonsense, absurdity). So AIDS can't be a lesson from the structure of reality or a punishment from God.

6. In addition to the above pseudoscientific reason for refusing to consider the possibility that AIDS is a punishment from God is the current sentimentality about the divine: God is unconditionally benevolent (in the religious & secular slogan for human relations, "unconditional love"). The irony here is that in the light of the empirical criterion (in Darwin, "natural selection"), this romanticism is as far as possible from the observed facts of nature & history. It fails the tests of both science & intelligent religion & falls into the Freudian category of wish-fulfilment.

7. Beneficent effects, by presence or absence, test whether something is a punishment from God. Rape is ruled out, for its effects are almost always unrelievedly demonic. But make yourself a list of the social benefits from AIDS. Here are a few for starters: (1) Public as well as private serious discussion of the responsibility factor in sexuality, just when the recreational factor had become runaway (as in "Dallas" & "Dynasty"); (2) The return of dread to close encounters of the three kinds (oral, anal, & genital; will the schools, having taught nuclear dread, now seek to communicate how scary sex is--not just that condoms are 10% unsafe, but that you can blow your whole life by being inappropriately "sexually active"--eg "PTL" now means "People That Lust" & "Pay The Lady"); (3) Virginity is no longer shameful & may even come into style, as "no" to smoking (abstinence) has. (4) Whether God punishes may mature into the return of the question "What doth the Lord require of thee?" God's will may be back in soon. (5) The scariness of the stats may reduce teen pregnancies & abortions.