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"Lord, don't do it to me again."

THE GOD AT THE OTHER END OF OUR PRAYERS

Have you noticed how often praying is mentioned in your daily paper? This morning, the only daily I never miss had the prayer which is this Thinksheet's first line. It was prayed yesterday at the Kentucky Derby, by winner Gary Stevens, who feared God would do to him what He did last year: made him lose the last split second even though he'd been far in the lead. Yesterday, the corner of his eye caught a horse moving up fast on him near the finish line. Was his prayer related to his winning? Of course! How? I don't know. But I do know that God didn't do him this year the way He did him last year. Or did He? Did He make him lose last year? Did He make him win this year? Do **you** know?

The point of this Thinksheet is that from anybody's prayer, you can sketch a picture of the deity at the other end. I got to thinking about this during the 9-10am church adult education session, also this morning. Each of us was to read a prayer written sometime since last Sunday; & during each person's reading, my mind was forming a picture of the Person at the prayer's other end.

1 EXERCISE: Before you read beyond this sentence's period, please write a sentence describing the deity Gary Stevens addressed....Probably you came out something like this: "Es wirt regiert" (God rules--Karl Barth's last words). God is in charge of the intimate as well as the ultimate. So he gets the credit/blame for anything that happens.

2 Trouble with that "so"! Read in cold blood, "es wirt regiert" leaves no room for angelic & human freedom. To avoid **determinism**/fatalism, we must cut ourselves some distinctions--such as: (1) God does/permits things (the distinction between his intentional & his permissive will); (2) God does not overdetermine events (ie, impose his nature & will to such extent as would reduce our relationship with him from prayer to mere prudence [which Ps.1's neatness, on the surface, seems to teach], though he is the Lord of history); (3) Within the realities of cosmos & chaos, & of the directive & the random, God teaches us to worship him "with all our mind" by letting us experience consequences; (4) God's holiness, which includes justice, makes judgment inevitable for the impenitent, though his grace "does not want any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2.P.3.9).

3 §2's biblical description of God has billions of prayers behind it & billions of puzzling experiences behind the prayers. Adam & Eve don't pray when tempted, & get the Fall. Cain prays, but God rejects his sacrifice. Abel prays, & gets murdered. Moses prays, & is forbidden to enter the promised land. Jesus prays, & is executed. The earliest church prays, & the Spirit descends upon it. We Christians perpetually pray the Lord's Prayer & believe that it is perpetually affirmed in heaven & to be fulfilled "on earth, as it is in heaven." But no puzzle, no prayer.

4 The one God at the other end of our prayers when we pray canonically (ie, within the sphere of the Bible's mind) is both **known** to us (to the extent he wills to be known by us--"revelatus" [Luther]) & **hidden** from us (to the extent he wills to remain hidden--"absconditus" [Luther]--till "I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" [1Cor.13.12 NRSV]). No matter how much or how deeply we pray, none of us can exhaust "what can be known about God" (Ro.1.19 NRSV, of knowing God in/through nature: a general revelation, + the special revelation in Jesus Christ, eg, 3.21-22). Love lessens with inattention, affection deepens with attention-- prayer at its deepest is earnest attending unto God. At the end of the Gospels, Jesus reinstates Peter by asking him the love question (Jn.21.15-17: twice whether Peter's mind & will are set on loving Jesus [αγαπ- *agap-*], but four times whether Peter feels affection for Jesus [φιλ- *phil-*]).

5 The god at the end of billions of prayers is one**self**. Seldom has this incurvature, this boomerang, this circularity been as forthrightly set forth as Walt Whitman does in "Leaves of Grass." Note that his egocentricity is an explicit alternative to theocentricity (God-centering): "Why should I pray?....In all people I see myself....To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow, / All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means....I exist as I am, that is enough. +

One world is aware and by far the largest to me, and that is myself." ("Song of Myself," 20; even if one reads the "I" as collective, in my opinion an overgenerous reading, the god remains the ego; in 31, "I incorporate" items in nature; in 32, the animals have the joy of freedom from religion: "They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins, / They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God, //....Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago."). ....We recognize here a second-level, sophisticated, infantilism--such as appeared again in Fritz Perls' "Gestalt Prayer" ("I do my thing...." In chap.37 of FLOW OF FLESH,..., I replace Fritz with God: "**God** prays the Gestalt Prayer"--with scripture parallels to each line).

6 The deity at the other end of some prayers is **father**like-masculine-transcendent; some other prayers, **mother**like-feminine-immanent; still others, both (eg, the Lord's Prayer, which begins as the former but includes the latter). In much current American religion--eg, New Age, gnostic (Jung, Jos.Campbell's "Follow your bliss"), feministic--the transcendent is at risk. I must include here also much evangelicalism & most pentecostalism, where the stress is on God's intimacy rather than his majesty (fr. Lat., "greatness," as in "Magnify [Lat., "make great"] the Lord with me").

Too much intimacy-praying expresses & encourages spiritual infantilism, the devout as religious consumers: "Ask not what you can do for your God but what your God can do for you" (to give a double twist to JFK's axiom on citizenship). It leads not to joy but what we used to call the gimmie-God blues.

A prayer outline that has helped many to get outside the self-prison is this acrostic: ACTS: **A**doration, **C**onfession (of faith & sin), **T**hanksgiving, **S**upplication (prayers for self & others). The order is vital: the deity at the other end of such praying is first "high and lofty" (Is.6.1); "Father...in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Mt.6.9). Uniquely as an address for God, "Father" signals both distance-transcendence (as father is biologically more distant from child than is mother) & nearness-intimacy. The former signal includes authority (thus the two aspects of Confession), providence (thus Thanksgiving), & benevolence (thus Supplication)....At the other end of Christian prayer is our "Holy Father" (Jn.17.11) who is also motherlife but in the Bible never addressed as mother. To address God as mother, as some now are wont to do, threatens religion with the loss of transcendence, of the distance between Creator & creature, & of the fact that we human beings are apart from (& not only a part of) nature--a cumulative calamity eventually spawning a new religion. The best verbal protection against this tragedy is to continue to use masculine pronouns for God, the invariable biblical practice.

7 If the deity at the other end of our prayers is the Bible's God, he will be also the **center** of our lives. This is nowhere better said than in Deut.6.4-9, which begins with the Shema (renderable six ways, as NRSV shows): "HEAR, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone." Then comes the will to love: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (or, simply, "with all"!). Then comes meditation ("day and night," Ps.1.2 says): "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart." Next, be everywhere a GodGodGod motor-mouth: "Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise." Finally, the visual aids: "Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem [or "frontlet"] on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." Anything more? Nothing! The instruction is comprehensive. Yes, this spiritual praxis may go dry, become legalistic. But note that the overarching commandment is to **love** God: on this "hangs" all else (Jesus says: Mt.22.37-40).

All of this **prayer-living** is praying "without ceasing" (1Thes.5.17 + 4x), or continuous consciousnes of the mitzvot (commandments), or the practice of the presence of the Commander-Creator-Lover. (In the resultant sense, a mitzva is something you do in awareness of & obedience to God--something you would not otherwise do. Such deeds are **pray-acts**--in the medieval monastic formula, "Orare laborare orare" [To pray is to work, to work is to pray]).

8 **Bible-reading** is mainly for listening to the deity at the other end of our prayers. "If you can't find the Word in the text, it's not the text's fault. Go back again. Dig until you find it" (Marcus Barth, quoted by the Presbyterian Church (USA) moderator as in his mind always during sermon-preparation [CRITERION Win/97, 18]).