

"....I PRAY THEE, LORD, MY SOUL TO KEEP." ----- ELLIOTT #2141

Most Thinksheets are confluences. Maybe all. To move my soul to make this one, these flowed together:..(1) Today's newspapers (14Feb87), spectacularizing the putative radical effects of the work of The Jesus Seminar (an idea of Amos Wilder, who smiled recently when I credited him with it in a Boston speech --since the idea is often credited to Robt. Funk, who acted on AW's suggestion). What's fresh about the JS is that instead of seeking Jesus' exact words (*ipsisima verba*), it's reaching for his voice (*vox Iesu*), his speech behavior in his language world (though I'm slightly allergic to both coinages in recent hermeneutical epistemology). Instead of "undermining"--scareword of the journalists --the Christian witness, the project will place the essentials on a firmer foundation, though some excesses are certain because sense-making in our secular culture tempts scholars, in the interest of plausibility, to reductionism (on the positive side, minimalism): no "history" without give-&-take of the strengths/weaknesses of both then & now...(2) This month's media frenzy over sex as threat --threat of (unwanted teen) pregnancy & of AIDS (and, in general, SAD--my coinage for "sex acquired diseases"). Sex has always been, existentially, promise & threat. Since the 1960s till now, the promise-pleasure side of the scale has been overweighted & overrated, the threat-pain side neglected, & fear rejected. A healthy fear of sex may be making a comeback, without unhealthy excess (paranoia & superstitions). The currently debated public-school sex-education issue here is: To what extent, if at all should fear be used to protect against teen pregnancy & AIDS? "School authorities" are hampered here by educationism's fear of fear, taboo against negative reinforcement. "Healthy fear" means appropriate fear, fear correlating with actual threats. Everything I'm reading/seeing in the media indicates that teen pregnancy & AIDS are being viewed as actual threats; nothing, not a single instance, of God being so viewed--even though, historically, the fear of God was our civilization's #1 sex-control sanction! So far have we wandered away from this #1 that calling down the fear of God is viewed as a fundamentalist benighted obscurantist obscenity. God, if alive, is thought not to use threat/punishments.

Eg, this letter (CCT, 6Feb 87) --on which see my response,

OVER...(3) My observation that our culture's death-avoidance--only now being somewhat relieved by "death & dying" literature, Hospice, & AIDS--has been at the cost of dessicating the soul & denying the afterlife. Which leads directly to....

1. Whatever happened to the children's bedtime prayer "Now I lay me down to sleep./I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep./If I should die before I wake,/I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take. Amen"?

(a) Right after WWII, we taught parents to stop listening to their children's bedtime prayers & start praying with them.

I confess that as editor of FAMILY DEVOTIONS, I fostered this trend, or at least the second half of it: I can't remember ever directly attacking listening to prayers parents had taught their children. (b) Almost that long ago, biblical the-

## Religion, science and AIDS hysteria

Now that we are apparently done with the great drug hysteria of 1986 and warming up for the great AIDS hysteria of 1987, I think this would be a good time to make the following point: AIDS, despite the fact that it is a nasty disease, is not as some claim, a modern Black Plague.

The plague is estimated to have killed between a fourth and a third of humanity at its peak. It was so devastating because, over the centuries during which it annihilated entire cities, its cause was not known. In the superstitions of the day, it was seen as a punishment from God (a notion echoed today by the religious right) rather than a parasite-borne disease. Relatively simple improvements in public hygiene would have gone a long way toward ending the plague.

Unfortunately, medical science as we know it, did not then exist, and the tireless efforts of hatemongers simply made matters worse.

The situation with AIDS is clearly different: Medical science has identified the disease, the specific virus involved, specific antibodies to that virus, the means of transmission and one means of effective prevention -- the condom. In point of fact, we could stop almost all future spread of AIDS overnight, with little social dislocation and at minimal cost.

Unfortunately, one thing that has not changed since the Middle Ages is the continued presence of those who frankly welcome the advent of any disaster they can use to peddle their doctrines of intolerance.

There is an interesting lesson in all this. When this medical crisis is solved, as it will be, let us all remember that while science worked heroically to offer hope, religion offered only guilt, and blame and despair.

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OVER

ology lent its weight against traditional Western dualism, the soul/body split suggested in the "NowI layme...." To what? It lent its weight to the wholeness-holism movement, which was fed also by streams from the social sciences (incl. psychology & anthropology). (c) Linguistic positivism & the materialism of the natural sciences made talk of the "soul" antique or at least out of fashion. (d) Family religion was in steep decline right along with family cohesion. (e) As the prayer did not fit children's publicschool learning, and the children were less exposed to church religion (& more exposed to secularistic television), the prayer seemed more & more irrelevant and even unreal to the children (as also to the parents). And finally, (f) the prayer, which it itself is affirmative of life here & hereafter, came to seem death-oriented & life-denying, associating bed with grave. A pity, as I shall show:

2. "The soul," whatever the reality the word points to & enshrines, is not an optional for Western civilization with its high view of "the individual," "the person," "the spirit," "the self"--all of them synonyms along with "the soul." The oft-adduced fact that "the soul" was not a major concept in some ancient religions, incl. that of the preJewish Hebrews, and is not a familiar idea in some religions today (eg, Buddhism), is irrelevant to its importance in the religions of the West. We didn't need Mort. Adler to tell us "the soul" is one of the 102 "Great Ideas of Western Man." Just look at our hymns: "Jesus, Lover of my soul"... "Hangs my helpless soul on Thee" ... "Oh receive my soul at last" (an adult version of "NowI lay me..."). All the terms underlined in this section sink or swim together. The Thinksheet immediately preceding this one traces some roots of "the soul" in history, but we must avoid the nothing-but fallacy ("The soul" is nothing but a historical figment I can explain away by telling you it's origin & associations.")

3. In the days of moral muscle, before the onslaught of mushy "unconditional love," "the soul" signaled moral seriousness, the reality of this-&-next-world consequences for human behavior. This ethical dynamic was developed in all the cultural streams converging to form the West, and without it freedom cannot be maintained.

4. In the Gospels, Jesus for us models soul-&-body, now-&-forever commitment to & trust in God, and himself is (as some catechisms have it) "my confidence in life & in death." While in the paroxysms of pain on the cross he at first felt God-abandoned (as Ps.22.1, qtd. in Mt.27.46f & M.15.34f), he made final trustful commitment to God (L.23.46, quoting Ps.31.5, whose Hebrew is exactly qtd. in Delitzsch Hebrew NT, BFBS/37--and used almost exactly in the Jewish liturgical poem "Adon Olam"). (For this attitude, see also Mt.26.39 & Syn. parallels, & Jn.12.27.) "I commit my spirit (or "self" or "soul")."

## Defends religion's tolerance of AIDS

11Feb 87

For our pluralistic society to survive and thrive, we must speak out against all forms of intolerance.

Accordingly, I write this against the letter in today's Times, "Religion, Science and AIDS hysteria," (Feb. 6) which displays this ugly and dangerous attitude.

Where religion and science should work together against AIDS and all other plagues of body and soul, letter-writer Carter Cannon pits religion and science against each other, predicting that after a cure is found for AIDS, "let us all remember that while science worked heroically to offer hope, religion offered only guilt, and blame and despair." I, as a Christian theologian, am close to despair at his "only," which reveals such ignorance. In his "only," I cannot recognize myself or any other theologian.

The simplistic notion of causation, the either/or fallacy. As is the Black Plague, so AIDS is to be viewed either from above (as divine action) or from below (as physical disease): "a punishment from God" rather than a parasite-borne disease. Again, I know of no theologian dumb enough to "rather-than" AIDS or any other disease. Cannon creates a straw man.

The intolerance of this letter complaining of intolerance! Who are these "hatemongers" who "welcome the advent of any disaster they can use to peddle their doctrines of intolerance?" I can feel the intolerance in Mr. Cannon, and that worries and saddens me more than the benighted preachments of a few electronic fanatics on "the religious right."

I am worried about our culture's pervasive naivete in overtrusting science and undervaluing religion. Humanity is now threatened with science's hypertrophy: slow ruin through pollution or fast ruin through nuclear war. Mr. Cannon's good-guy-science, bad-guy-religion illustrates this disease.

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