

THE BIBLICAL GOD DOES NOT PERFORM UP TO EXPECTATIONS:

THEODICY AS THERAPY FOR IFD* DISEASE -- ----- ELLIOTT #1757

Among life's disappointments, the most devastating is disappointment in one's god. I consider this a primary strand in the public malaise, and it pains me enough to write this thinksheet about it.

1. IFD disease (excessive Idealism, Frustrated by reality, ending up in Disappointment-Depression-Despair-Death) is the baneful fallout of over-enthusiastic promotion of a salvific promise. The whole scene is bathed in warm pathos from the fact that this hypertrophied promising is driven by authentic human caring committing hybris by refusing to be in dialog with the common sense of pragma and the uncommon sense of reason. The Jewish and Christian biblical preachers overpromise for the biblical god, and Leo Bascaglia overpromises for "Love."

2. Some successful religion-hawkers flip the problem: it's not the god but we who're not living up to expectations. E.g., in Robert Schuller (esp. in his SELF-ESTEEM, Word/82) the Self (center stage) uses the god (waiting off-stage) for its project of achieving a success-promising feeling of self-regard/respect/worth/liking. (NB: I capitalize what's being focused on: "Humanity" if the god's adjunctive to the human project, "Self" if the god's adjunctive to the individual's project of arriving at dignity.) His book's intro explains that "self-esteem" is his missionary theology, implying that evangelicalism is his theology for the committed; but as much as does Norman Vincent Peale he uses psychology AS religion, though he claims it's psychology AS INTO religion. Further, it's the deontological (needs) approach shrunk down to one human need: the "core" human problem is "the lack of self-dignity," so "'lack of faith'...is really a profoundly deep sense of unworthiness....The unsaved person cannot perceive himself as worthy of 'divine grace' and hence rejects it." To be "'unloving'...is the result of a too-low self-worth." This one need is "all-important" and "all-consuming....How human beings handle that hunger for glory explains all psychological problems, all spiritual sickness, and all human sin." (pp.15-17.) Sense-making and salvation so reduced to a simple formula is supremely preachable, as lucid as the glass cathedral it's built to the glory of the Self--and more fragile. The heart of narcissism being the thinking of the Self, what the Self thinks of itself is a secondary problem: switching from low to high Self-thinking creates only the illusion that one has escaped from narcissism, but the illusion is hard to puncture in a narcissistic culture like ours: the fish does not know it's in water. The narcissist--e.g., Ronald Reagan--responds only to a narrow band of reality, and it's what you leave out that wrecks you (and civilizations)...Within theocentrism (God/self-society), I try to help folks think neither too highly nor too lowly of themselves. In 1963 Phila., a black Georgian got off the train and asked me "Where's the black toilet?" Said I, "In Phila. we have toilets for sons and daughters of God but none for black folks." I took him to a toilet, and in appreciation he said "Why do you treat me this way?" I: "How do you think a son of God should be treated?" (I told the story, and two men made it into a powerful radio-drama.) My emphasis: "son of GOD"; Schuller's, "SON of God." So back to an honest, nonnarcissistic dealing with theodicy:

3. My other reason when I spell it "god" is--as in the italic paragraph above--comparative-religion, history-of-religions: it's a transcultural way of referring to (and here no one can speak except by analogy) the Above, the Beyond, the More Than, the Within, the Eternal, Life Itself. Theodicy is theology's wrestling with the universal human disappointment that our expectations from this Reality exceed the event. Develop-

*The natural-sinful temptation to overexpect: idealism leads to frustration leads to disappointment/depression/depair/death.

mentalists say it's part of "growing up." Idealists say it's constitutive of soul (as in Browning's "A man's reach must exceed his grasp/ Or what's a heaven for?"). Cynics say "Mother Nature has no interest in you personally; in this cold, impersonal cosmos you'd better concentrate on looking after #1." What does a biblical person, Jew or Christian, say?

4. Well, what have biblical people said? Since we assume the goodness of God, we have written "problem of evil" books. (If we'd assumed the world to be in the hands of the Evil One, we'd have written "problem of good" books; and if we'd assumed no God, we'd have had to write "problem of value" books. Philosophically, we're all in the same boat, with no room for arrogance.) You might read "Theodicy" in reference works-- e.g., pp.895f, THE INTERP. DICT. OF THE BIBLE: SUPPL. VOL.; or S. Paul Schilling's excellent GOD AND HUMAN ANGUISH (Abingdon/77).

5. The casuistic approach: the case of the black Georgian (above). Did God treat him as a son of God? Obviously, God-through-me was good to him: "the goodness of God" is at least a directive for our behavior (as in Camus' "We must be kind, for God is not"). But if our INtent exhausts the CONtent of "the goodness of God," the phrase is only a supernatural way of speaking of our goodness. Even at that, don't knock it: a supernatural way of speaking of our goodness-duty augments the actual goodness in the world because it includes the ultimate-sanction force to all the proximate-pragmatic sanctions for goodness. But it would fail the test of honesty; God, here, would be only a fossil word in moral discourse, an antique frill justifiable only in poetry. But I hold that, in addition to this imperative force, "the goodness of God" points to an indicative reality: God is good and (Wieman's definition of God) "the source of human good." So we are left with the need to account for evil in God's world.

6. Accounting for evil in a world created-sustained by a good god faces the same problem as accounting for good (if god is evil) or value (if god does not exist): no less than a fistful of accounting-possibilities must be explored and simultaneously exploited. Children (of all ages) who insist on neat, packaged answers need not apply: one's intellectual maturity is directly reflected by the number of conflicting angles one can entertain simultaneously on the same topic. Cp. the NT's fistful of reasons why Jesus died (developed into "theories of the atonement"), or the Bible's multiple views of the afterlife (each appropriate to particular circumstances). We are invited to (Rilke) "love the questions" and struggle for ever better answers: pragma, the payoff, proves this stance as a *lex naturae humanae* (law of human nature); and condemns Promethean efforts to transcend this human condition, for the pragma of such efforts is antihuman (viz., coercion, violence, death).

7. My tapes of Viktor Frankl lectures became his MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING, in which he tells the story of the artist who lost, by MS, his power to create, then, going blind, his power to appreciate, but never his power to choose the attitude he'd take to his shrinking physical sphere --"so his students continued to come to him, for he himself had become the work of art" (that's on my tape; I don't recall whether these words are in the book). For Frankl (whose patient the artist was), the center was not in that noble soul but in (his holophrase for God) "meaning," the ever present and available fountain of life, love, joy, faith, hope. In the dark humor of another Jew, Woody Allen, you can see this in upside-down form: "If it turns out that there is a God, I don't believe that he is evil. The worst that can be said is that he's an under-achiever." "Not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on weekends." And this beaut against those content to live at the superficial, CONTENT level, missing the struggle for the INTent: "I speed-read WAR AND PEACE. It's about Russia."