

"LIFE" AS GOD, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TOCURRENT BIOTHEOLOGICAL, BIOLEGAL, AND THANATOTECHNICAL PERPLEXITIES

This thinksheet is about current American pressures (1) reviving and creating philosophical-theological-ethical vitalisms and (2) numinizing "life" and synonyms. Our secularization process has seen, here, two reductionisms: (1) The biblical Lord of life and death became the Lord of life only; then (2) The Lord of life only became only Life. The psychosociodynamic is biblical, postbiblical, always: it's a teeter-totter: the biblical God is strong/weak vis-a-vis strong/weak idols. As the biblical God is now weak in our general society, "God"--in society and even in church--gets translated into "relevant" holophrastic words and slogans. These idolatries corrupt the Faith, confuse and divide the Flock, confound efforts toward Christian- and toward secular-ecumenical thought and action, and spread consternation in our lawcourts. Here are a scattering of some of today's complexities under "'life' as God":

BIOTHEOLOGICAL -- I am pro-life in being pro-conception-control (preventing unwanted conceptions from intercourse) and in being pro-birth-control (preventing unwanted conceptions from coming to full term); but the "pro-life" movement nails me as pro-death! Supports for this largely Catholic movement are primitive tabu, pre-Vatican-II natural-law theology, "the worth and dignity of the (unborn) individual" (a notion with roots in Renaissance and Enlightenment), and Ludditism (resistance to newfangled tech-nics here vis-a-vis the human body). What a slippery expression, "pro-life"! Am I not pro-life in supporting a woman's right to control over her own body and society's right to control overpopulation? I hope the Supreme Court never lets one group's "natural law" become all groups' codical law.

BIOLEGAL -- Biomedical ethics, when the population comes to consensus, becomes bio-law. That is the ominous undercurrent in recent court battles over "medicine," esp. burgeoning medical technology, and "life." Pull the tubes on Karen Quinlan? Yes (but she survived it). Remove life-supports from infant that would remain vegetative, as parents/clergy/medics wanted to? No, said the court: the state is the guardian of "life" against family, religion, and medicine! Permit a 28-year-old MS patient not to eat while in a hospital to control pain? No, said the court: sit on her and force food into her! "Life" is essentially, even numinously, valuable--without regard to its quality, without regard for personality, without regard for intimate community. With "life" as god, what can we expect but horrors and irrationalities?

THANATOTECHNICAL -- For Jon. Schell, human life is absolutely and centrally good, so he uses for it the ultimate sanction in his Bible of antinukedom, THE FATE OF THE EARTH. Jews and Christians can use the ultimate sanction only for the biblical God (character, will, works):our religion is theocentric, not (as JS) anthropocentric. (My 1943 ThD thesis, "LIFE" IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL, shows how firm and sophisticated in early Christianity were "life" distinctions.) Yet I'm hearing "life"-absolutism from many Christian clergy--e.g., these quotes from a friend's sermon in today's mail: (1) "The (nuclear) holocaust will not be Armageddon. Armageddon is a decision by God to overthrow evil....The holocaust is not the will of God!" Note the premise that human life should continue on this unrenovated planet and that this is the will of God (this, despite the scientific community's consensus that human life on planet earth is temporary and, sooner or later, doomed)....(2) Note the Manicheism: Nuclear devices are "an incarnation of evil (of Satan, if you prefer), even as in Jesus we have an incarnation of grace." From here on in the sermon, one would expect what one gets: nukes on one side, Jesus on the other (and against all who reject this Manichean simplism). The Catholic bishops' statement is, in contrast, nuanced....(3) "If I disagree with my Lord and Master for any reason, then he is no longer my Lord and Master." This obedience is, in the same paragraph, "obedience to Life": Jesus is made into a Life-preacher, with all the powers, perspectives, and programs pertaining to the current vitalistic, anthropocentric "Life" with capital "L."....(4) "Disciples of Christ are required to support the anti-nuclear movement." Since this preacher views nukes as the ultimate weapon or "device" (since he reserves the word "weapon" for

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lesser thanatotechnical tools), how natural that he use against them the ultimate sanction. Yes, every weapon is contra-life; but nukes are contra-life-itself; and since Jesus is pro-life, he's anti-nukes. The argument bristles with questionable premises, such as: (a) Do the Gospels, upon critical study, yield us an ethical Jesus who can be used (dominical sanction) against some thanatotechnical devices and not others? I claim not. (b) Can computer sandboxing yield a doomsday (species-killing) scenario? I think not, especially when real weight is given to the EMP (electromagnetic-impulse) effect, which would render all but the first few nuclear devices useless. If the nuke-species-killing threat is rhetoric rather than hard-thought prediction, nukes are not in a non-"weapon" class by themselves; and, accordingly, are not separable in battle-planning from other thanatotechnical devices; and, accordingly, cannot receive a special negative sanction (from Jesus or anybody else) apart from the general negativity with which pacifists (peace-makers) view weaponry. (c) The premise that Jesus is pro-life requires the arguer to at least a quasi-indentification of "life" and what Jesus was clearly pro-, viz., "the Kingdom of God." The old modernism managed this synonomizing, but subsequent biblical scholarship has made it tougher to pull off. (d) Another questionable premise: That Jesus, who stood against the powers on behalf of "the (inbreaking) Kingdom of God," can be relocated to stand in the midst of the powers to make to them a specific suggestion on thanatotechnology. (e) And another: That it's true to Jesus to suppose him using the ultimate sanction against nukes, in light of his proximate reference to body-killers in contrast to the One who, "after killing you, has the power to hurl you into hell" (L.12.5)--a reference to a deeper, broader threat than nukes, which it thus relativizes and deprives of ultimate sanction force....(5) "This (antinukism) is the most important ministry in the church today....mission against all pro-nuclear thinking and evangelism to anti-nuclear thinking." Note the take-over, into single-issue-ism, of four words in one sentence: "ministry," "church," "mission," "evangelism"! This ranting reveals the dark side of "Life" as idol: nuclear death as demon-to-be-cast-out-at-all-cost-or-we're-all-undone. This minister's mood is exorcistic; and he must be in trouble with parishioners who think him monomaniacally off his rocker and, somehow, off the gospel.(6)"As a disciple of Christ, I must place allegiance to the Kingdom of God (Presence of Life) above everything else....(Mt.6.33)." The quasimystical "Presence of Life" is here in apposition to "the Kingdom of God." If I agreed with the apposition (which, as a biblical scholar, I cannot), I would have to buy the preacher's whole sermon, and would do so eagerly!....(7) "We are lacking a doctrine about extinction because we have never needed it before." I disagree with both clauses of that sentence. The Pentateuchal divine threat to wipe out humanity is in tandem with a Hebrew doctrine of extinction. And, to limit myself to one NT ref., 2P.3 (cosmic fire-destruction)....(8) "The lack of a doctrine about extinction leaves the churches unable to speak with ethical clarity" against nukes. Rather, the "clarity" this preacher by much thought-taking has arrived at is forbidden, I believe, by (a) the complexity of biblical religion, (b) the (I believe, divinely inspired) fragmentariness of Scripture, and (c) our creaturely ignorance + sinful distortions vis-a-vis "what the other side will do," i.e., deterrence theory/praxis (e.g., whether our insane increase of nukes in Europe is a Good Thing, which I think it is on the ground that an increase in insanity might lead to the peace table--though it might lead to war, as might a one-sided increase in sanity). (For an awesome display of the mathematical complexity, see Jack H. Nagel, THE DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF POWER, Yale/75.)....(9) Jon. Schell, the only author the preacher quotes (which is true of so many antinuke sermons and tracts): "'Extinction is not something to contemplate; it is something to rebel against.'" This preacher (my friend, not JS, who is a journalist) wants to rebel and to "support preservation." The Church as a preservation society! SOS, Save Our Skins, has only a transmogrified relation to biblical salvation....(10) "As the People of God, our churches can say God's YES to life and NO to extinction." Biblical yes/no-saying has other objects....(11) "The Kingdom of God (Presence of Life) is concerned above everything else with an end to our nuclear insantiy. We have become a single issue world....In God's Presence (Kingdom) there is now left to us only the choice of either/or....the Good News of Life rather than the bad news of extinction....I will preach this Gospel....whether you want to hear it or not (2Tim.4.2)." This equation of the Gospel with antinukism disturbs and saddens me.