

# PROVIDENTIALISTS, MORALISTS, EMPIRICISTS:

THE ACADEMIC TRIALOG TODAY AND TOMORROW ----- ELLIOTT #1910

This thinksheet is some notes on a phenomenon that's more and more impressing itself on me (to use a Germanism!): in the making (British, "taking") of decisions, human beings as individuals and groups (including states, i.e., political units staking geographical claims) are getting advice (whether or not asked for) from three clashing/cooperating ways of making sense of the world ("the world" meaning the here and now, history, and hereafter-hope). Here's a sketch of each of the three:

THE PROVIDENTIALISTS, of whom I am one, believe that history is under the personal, direct creation-and-care of the benevolent God. I pray to the One with whom the buck starts, moves, and stops: providence is an intellectual implicate of prayer; and belief in providence cannot survive the death of prayer. But modernity has robbed us of the biblical and pre-Ren.-Enlightenment bold prophetic confidence in naming God's action in particular events. New-Evangelical historian Mark Noll puts it this way (Fall-Winter/01 FIDES ET HISTORIA, p.36): "While believers should affirm that God's providence rules over all events, it is nigh unto impossible for Christian historians to discern the purposes of God for any specific event. To attempt to do the latter is to imitate the failure of deductive historians whose infatuations with generalizations blinded them to the causal skein of the contingent world. Christians fare much better when, instead of trying to describe the finger of God in events, they stick to the analysis of motive and character, an effort for which the Bible provides ample and explicit warrant. Scripture promises the church that it will continue the presence of Christ in the world, not that it will be able to discern God's mind as he rules the nations." This (too?) qualified providentialism has side-effects, some specious (e.g., the temptation to escape responsibility for "declaring the whole counsel of God" in situ) and some authentic (e.g., responsibly dealing with the "skein" and dialoging with those who see/grant nothing beyond the "skein"). The ploy, however, strikes me as too facile: Christians should be ready to say "Hear the Word of the Lord" not just in general, but--sometimes--in particular.

THE MORALISTS, of whom I am one (though less so than I am of the above), believe in (to use an old Stoic phrase) "the moral constitution of the universe," a "res naturae" discernible by reason (logos/nous) guided by personal and social experience. Every strand of the West's spiritual and intellectual heritage puts more or less weight on this conviction. Resisting the temptation to spell this all out philologically, I allude only to "dik-e" (the inherent morality of "all things") as the root of "dik-aio-syne" ("righteousness," heavy in Paul).

THE EMPIRICISTS, of whom I am one (though less so than I am of either of the above), ask us to "sit down before the facts as a little child" (as the Huxley who transposed Darwin into society put it). Have the simplicity and courage and wisdom to let life hit you without the ideological protection of any ontological paradigm, religious or philosophical. This, history's rarest form of spirituality, opens humanity to divine/demonic influences and consequences. How different I'd be if I'd never known the blessings of (to use a Fosdick title) "the modern use of the Bible"!

All three are in me, and should be coworkers today and tomorrow.