

"HE ABODE IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST,
EVER THINKING ON THE LORD":

ELLIOTT #1914

PIETY AS THE BIBLICAL ALTERNATIVE TO POWER AND PLEASURE

God, the world, the neighbor forever call us to "give an account of the faith that is in" us (biblical instances: Mt.12.36,18.23;L.16.2;Ro.14.12;He.13.17;1P.4.5). For me, this thinksheet is an instance of that account-giving.

1. The quote in the title is from this recording that Loree and I happened to catch on a car-radio: "Jonah and the Whale," Dominic Argento PM 5#1. *It's wild, wooly, and wonderful!* And it flipped up the text for a soon (20Jan85) sermon, whose outline this thinksheet--roughly--is.
2. The 3 "P"s in this thinksheet's subtitle are something that popped up recently in my mind as a way of slicing the motivational history of Americans. Piety was our primary founding motive both as a people (e.g., Mayflower Compact) and as a government (e.g., what I may call the Philadelphia papers, the Founding Documents). This affirmation is sustainable, indeed undeniable, though qualifiable: (1) church membership was tough, and not everybody was a full communicant --but "the powers" were "churched," and theism was their motivational heart (2) directly, in the New England Fathers, and indirectly (through the Enlightenment's doctrine of humanity) in the Mid-Atlantic Fathers. Then slavery, Westward expansion, and industrialism seduced us into putting power at the heart of our motivation, self-image, and world-stance. As, after WWII, the limits and ambiguities and anxieties and agonies of power more and more pressed themselves upon us, we turned increasingly to privatism, "self-fulfilment," and pleasure--to feel good about ourselves ("standing tall," we were "better off": "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" overwhelmed "Minnesota Fritz and the Program of Gloom"--and we have Reagan to kick around some more, though he's the least schmoolike of American presidents).
3. The wheel turns, the pendulum swings, and piety is trying for a comeback--it's become "combative," which is one of the four VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS PRESENCE (subtitle MISSION IN PUBLIC LIFE, David A. Roozen, Wm. McKinney, Jackson W. Carroll, Pilgrim/84--the others being "civil," "sanctuary," and "evangelistic"). Jerry Falwell parallels (1) present-day Muslim fundamentalism and (2) post-WWI French Catholic efforts toward re-establishment (out of which came the worker-priest movement and Taizé--as ways of the church being in the world, when it became clear how little boot there was in efforts to get world into church). I need not recount the many efforts, parallel with these developments, to get piety back into the church and synagogue: we are to "ever think on the Lord" even though, in our pluralistic-secularistic culture, we are "in the belly of the beast," which isn't much listening to the sounds from its belly. (Bio-note: the megamouth whale opens its mouth wide enough--1 yard!--to swallow Will Herberg's Protestant, Catholic, and Jew in one gulp!)
4. Piety, as defined by the whimsical line from the disc recording, is the (attentional-intentional) practice of the Presence of God "contextually" (as we've come to say, since WWII, of Christian and church taking seriously what the Germans call the *Umwelt* or *Sitz*, the surrounding culture-world in which we "sit," are "sit'uated). "Welt" is "world" in general, but "UMwelt" is *our*'world," the actual OUTER world we some-way react to and act upon--as well as the INNER world (worlds, roles, each of us, in every congregation, carries into and out of the congregation), and which we may call the *Imwelt* or *Imwelten*. (The language is mine, but the idea is repeatedly in the book mentioned above, which details the ways congregations in Hartford CN are reacting to / acting upon that city.)
5. I call piety, in this sense, "biblical": Sin in the Bible is fundamentally God-betrayal by God-forgetfulness (spiritual amnesia both resulting from and

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resulting in idolatry, "turning from the living God to serve idols," a disease curable only by "re-turning" ("re-pentance," Latin; "mind-change," Greek; the Hebrew being "turning"). Yesterday (Christmas '84) a man who's just gone through deep-deep waters said to me, "I'd done my homework on good-and-evil suffering, or I'd never have made it." Give Jonah credit for thinking about God albeit negatively (trying to run away from God): it was consciousness-raising for attending to God when things got really bad ("in the belly of the beast"). The Psalmists know biblical grammar, Whom to begin the sentences with: "God, my God,...."--the rest of every sentence being comparatively trivial (praise, complaint, outrage, weeping, rejoicing--the Center is forever the same). Psalter-living, you might call it. So, Pss. as prayerbook of temple-church-synagogue: liturgy as life-preparation, life as liturgy. Engender that--or, whatever else you might have, you do not have a Jew or a Christian. The founding "American mind" was, in this sense, biblical; and, since Jews early-on had little influence, it's entirely accurate to say that "America is (in its founding) a Christian nation"--though what you make of it from there on I'd like to monitor!

6. We have the rights to and responsibilities for piety, power, and pleasure--roughly corresponding to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." An alternative assonance: God, governmnet, glands. And another (Tillich's): theonomy, heteronomy, autonomy. Two \$ facts of America today: (1) Reagan's is the most profligate administration in our history (like giving a street-drunk 7 credit cards and saying "Have a good time!"), and (2) 50% of the Federal budget is "entitlements" (a recent coinage for \$ rights vis-a-vis government). Ironically, paradoxically, "the poor" more than any of the rest of us know, feel, that they are "in the belly of the beast."....Biblically, both responsibilities and rights are to be consistently, persistently, viewed "under God," "before, in the presence of, God," providentially. To signal this biblical central call, both words are defective: "piety" connotes piosity, and "providence" connotes deism. Try, however, substituting "Providence" for "Piety" in the thinksheet's title. ...My personal witness: For $\frac{1}{2}$ c., this providence-orientation has controled both power-lust and pleasure-lust--imperfectly, but effectively enough to channel God's grace to my depths in angels of peace and joy and hope.

7. Some points on POWER (reference: pp.32-34): (1) Like Mother Teresa, you can "pay it no nevermind" (as I learned to say Down South) and concentrate on brands from the burning, in "passive solidarity" (on which compare the "sanctuary" type of church, which provides the relief-rehabilitation of an alternative community; and also the "evangelistic" or "converting" church, which attacks the world in the form of aggressive rescuetwork done on "souls"); or (2) Like most suburban churches, you can work on in-church individuals, preparing them for their world-duties (the "civic" or "civil" type of mission-orientation); or (3) Like some innercity churches and upper-urban churches--Riverside Church being an example of the latter--you can be "activist," "combative," aiming at "milieu transformation." (I'm being faithful to the book's message without using the terms just exactly as the book does, but the quoted expressions are prominent in the book. Conceptual clarity, which is at the heart of many of my thinksheets, is more important than verbal parroting.)...(4) "Liberation theology" is right in providing rationalization (good sense) for "milieu transformative" action, and unfaithful in substituting (in effect, whether or not by absolute verbal translation) marxian terminology for biblical (e.g., "History" as holophrase for "God").

8. Some points on PLEASURE: (1) Dr. Feelbad (Freud, CIVILIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS) has given way to Dr. Feelgood (Margaret Mead's 1925 romanticizing of Samoan sex, onward through Michener's HAWAII and the 1960- spate of sex-books; and I'M OK, YOU'RE OK; and the current radical body-orientation of therapeutic cults, spas, athletic centers, health clubs, human-potential centers--in all of which people can get lost in self-absorption as much as do the yuppies in \$-power, which is a parallel narcissism). (2) Bumper sticker: "Nuclear Holocaust: Damm, There Goes My Career." (3) At least 70% of "Ann Landers." (4) Drugs. (5) Consumerism.