

SAINT & SCOUNDREL: THE TWO FACES OF RELIGION ---- ELLIOTT #1923

A paper this morning (2Feb85) titles its weather report "NOT NICE." Religion, like the weather, comes, betimes & bepersons, "Nice" and "Not Nice." Meaning favorable/unfavorable to humanity. But there my analogy ends: religion comes also, as the weather does not, real and fake--and the fake is always of the nice, pro-human, kind of religion....This thinksheet is an aid to clearer thinking about religion's two faces--or, better, face (authentic) religion vs. mask (phony) religion. Another familiar split: genuine vs. counterfeit....My medium for this meditation is Molière's greatest comedy, "Tartuffe" (AHM/58).

1. You'll never see any fake coal (from which God, through compression, makes diamonds), but in your time you'll see plenty of fake diamonds. Coal is too common to be worth faking. So counterfeit pays tribute to genuine, virtue is honored by pretenders thereto, and--Molière's point--true devotion is radiant against the dark background of pious hypocrisy. The devout pray to become for God's sake more than they are: the crafty scheme to appear, in their own interest, more than they are. And almost all of God's children are a mix of saint and scoundrel.

2. In and beyond the Bible, drama presents pure types--saints and scoundrels set radically against each other. The literary "moralist" thus helps humanity, us, sort out in our hearts the evil from the good, the right from the wrong, the true from the false, the authentic from the fake--in the hope of our choosing the former in each of these pairs. Molière (d.1673) is a master at this. He made his living as playwright and director by entertaining people with plays holding the vices, one at a time, up to ridicule. But when he got to hypocrisy, "Tartuffe" being as repulsive and ridiculous a pious fraud as one could imagine, he was brought almost to ruin: hypocrites in high places banned all his plays. Only "the Sun King," Louis XIV, saved him. The story (1-12) is a classic confrontation of the pious "poor" (Biblical sense: devout but without economic or political power) and (Grand Inquisitor style) the hypocritical "rich" (in power). M.'s enemies, at first successfully, "used the cause of God to mask their private interests" (says M.), exactly as did "Tartuffe": "in keeping with their lofty custom," they accused the truly pious M. of impiety! As did the enemies of (eg) Socrates and Jesus.

3. M. the preacher: "I have used all the art and skill that I could to distinguish clearly the character of the hypocrite from that of the truly devout man,...to bring out in sharp relief the character of the truly good man." I'm reminded of the proverb, "If you do no ill, do no ill like" (meaning that it's not enough to refrain from evil: goodness is concerned also to expose and condemn evil, in individuals and society--to attack injustice and fraud--to use your mouth and your life to witness not only for good but also against evil. M. is a model of + & - word-and-deed piety, goodness: righteousness, evangelism, and social action. Integrity and integration. In short, in the sense of this thinksheet's title, a "saint" and anti-"scoundrel."

4. In us church folk, there's enough saint to draw outsiders in and enough scoundrel to provide them with excuse to resist the pull toward God-gospel-church. To limit this comment, now, to the pastor/people relationship: some church folk are so saintly they want the pastor to be so, but most of them would want to ^{OVER}

"get a new minister" if the one they have is saintly enough to make them unduly uncomfortable (ie, if the pastor is not enough of a scoundrel to help them feel "s/he's one of us")--yet these same scoundrelly members are ambivalent: they quickly accuse the pastor of impiety, of not being "truly religious" (esp. if s/he's messing around trying to change them and society). A close study of "Tartuffe"--by pastor and people together, and in seminary--would be painful and helpful.

5. In view of the fact that the church and synagogue are society's only institutions specializing in God's honor and glory, I'm not at all surprised that (1) "the father of lies" (Jn.8.44) concentrates here against the truth-efforts of "the Father of lights" (1Jn.1.17), "the Father of spirits" (Hebrews 12.9), "the Father of all things" (1Cor.8.9), with the result that (2) church and synagogue are so rife with insincerity and so often wracked with controversy over inconsequentials, much ado about nothing. And I'm not surprised that (3) sentimentalists so easily pass for saints, (4) the anticensorious ("never saying anything bad about anybody") are praised for being "loving," and (5) those who try, in life and lip, to balance truth and love are wondered about. The All-Star Game is exciting and "draws": God's house is the cosmic and historical all-star game between God and the devil, good and evil, authentic and fraudulent. I can't imagine not wanting to be there, and in on the action!

6. CW, our current Sect. for "Defense," stupidly imagines the polygraph accurate, and told Barbara Walters he'd resign if it nailed him as a liar! "Lie detector" is a misnomer: the gadget is only a "nervousness detector," easily defeated by anyone (spies, me as well trained in biofeedback) capable of controlling brain-waves and thus (by turning down the frequency) reducing nervousness. But the Bible--esp. Jesus--is a lie detector, as are great moral dramas. To stop smoking or drinking, you can inject a substance that makes you feel icky when you even think smoking or drinking: inject "Tartuffe," and you find it harder to be phony and easier to detect and name fraud in other scoundrels (ie, "other" than both Tartuffe and yourself).

7. We've been educated against being nasty, but Jesus didn't get killed for observing that rule--nor did M. protect himself against banning: "The function of comedy is to correct men's vices.... Criticism is taken lightly, but men will not tolerate satire." If a play "makes fun of Heaven and religion," the hypocrites don't mind, since they "do not care about (Heaven and religion) at all" --but I make fun of them, "and that is what they cannot bear."

8. M.'s administering here a prophylaxis against saints' being duped by scoundrels (by projection, against my inner evil duping my inner good): "Good men are all the more easily deceived because they judge of others by themselves." Besides, scoundrels gain power: "I need not think of writing comedies if the Tartuffes are triumphant."

9. THE STORY: The phony sophisticate Tartuffe, full of pious talk, moves in on naive Orgon and takes over everything he has except his wife. He tries to seduce her, but she exposes him to her husband--and all ends well, else it'd not be a comedy, would it? Orgon (70): "I am through with pious men." But his brother-in-law says, Don't be an extremist: "Do not wrong true piety," as unbelievers enjoy doing. But beware of "counterfeit piety."