

INTEGRATION: THE BICENTENNIAL [1976] AS OPPORTUNITY FOR
AUTHENTIC/FALSE INTEGRATION OF TIME/PLACE
AND SACRED/SECULAR.....Elliott #661

EXERCISE: Meditate, Gestalt fashion, on the parallels between this glorious-dismal history of Israel and the history of the USA as a Puritan, then Victorian, then post-Puritan "new Israel."

1. Being on our local Religion-in-the-Bicentennial committee makes me proud and uncomfortable. I'm proud of our nation's messy human floundering-pontificating-yearning exploration toward a better historical way to relate "church" and "state" --the sacred and the secular, religion and politics--proud, that is, on balance. Of course I'm ashamed of our self-righteous blindnesses and our arrogant expostulations and cultural-economic-military impositions on others. And I'm worried about a White House so morally dull that from it we can expect, in our Celebration, little more than chauvinistic self-congratulation and cooptation....It's this worry that occasions this thinksheet, which is addressed (1) to the committee, (2) to the Chappaqua Interfaith Council and local clergy, and (3) to my New York Theological Seminary colleagues and students. It's a biblical meditation.

2. For our biblical patriarchs, God was everywhere and could "hit" anywhere: no hiding place, no holy place. Even making large allowance for dramatic and hagiological heightening, our earliest fore-fathers/mothers were games-free of priests and therefore of places, and God directed them to "a place I'll so you" [Gen.12]--such place-nonchalance! I think he led them to Canaan though it was tough on the Canaanites, and to America though it was tough on the reds and tougher on the blacks...I think, with some heavy qualifications. Biblical religion is relational: God leads us into relationship with himself and his creation, and the prophetic heritage judges the quality of our response. Biblical religion is also local: God leads us to places, and there's the priestly assignment--and temptation. And biblical religion is universal: God leads us to some places for the benefit of all places and peoples: "I will give you as a light to the nations" [Is.49.6], for "The God who made the world...does not live in shrines made by man" [Ac.17.24].... and there is the mission, with its imperialist temptation. Among our Founding Fathers two centuries ago, there was no deviation on any of these ideas, though of course there was plenty of fudging about living them, including deferring the slavery fight till after federalization of the colonies.

3. The patriarchal-prophetic tradition is a partisan of TIME, specifically meeting-time of God and humanity. Jesus comes preaching not revolution to claim sacred space but "Time's up! God's rule is at hand! Repent and believe this good news!" [Mark 1.15]. It's time to face God, who'll soon face you. His symbolic "cleansing" of the temple was a prophetic-Jewish act against priestly-Jewish corruption, a form of Judaism that did not exist before David and has not existed since the destruction of that temple in AD 70. In the night, in the sacred shrine, it was not the priest Eli who was calling the boy Samuel, it was God [1Sam.3.1-10]--the same Samuel who reluctantly anoints Israel's first king, Saul, whose successor, David, centralizes his power by installing at the center of his new capital, Jerusalem, the ark of the covenant, identifying the God-of-relation as the God-of-this-PLACE, thus throwing the weight of Israel's religion toward priestcraft with its accent on numinous more than moral experience and on alliance with political and economic power. I'm not badmouthing priestcraft as such. It speaks as legitimately for the conservative needs of humanity as prophecy speaks for our need to adventure into relationship and the future beyond place. But when religion becomes captive [as it tends to] to the memorialization of past epiphany, preferring only numinous contact, private and/or public, through cultic manipulation, to the neglect of urgent parenthesis to renewed devotion to the prophetic-ethical, the stones cry out against the obscene union of myth and shrine. Contrast, in Gen.28, vs.17, which is place-oriented [9th c., E], with vs.16, which is time-and-relation-oriented [10th c., J]. And see how powerfully Ps.95 and Deuteronomy conflate place-time, priest-prophet, a new remembrance and a new obedience.