

DISJUNCTIVE RHETORIC'S DISSERVICE TO TRUTH

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DEFINITIONS:

RHETORIC

Utterances, spoken or written, aiming to per- or dis-suade, instead of only to inform or entertain. It's theoretical relationship to truth is indeterminate: it may aim to draw the hearer/reader closer to truth or, as deception, farther from truth.

DISJUNCTIVE

To get you to pay full attention to something, the rhetorician may cut it away from anything that may divide your attention. E.g., the seller seeks to elicit a series of "yes" without intrusion from any "no." Again, the barrister (the court-arguing attorney) tries to get the court (judge, jury) to think only "G" (guilty) or "NG" (not guilty), the evidence often being ambiguous. And again, the "spin" rhetoric of the present Presidential campaigns. Rhetoric aims to persuade: disjunctive rhetoric aims to persuade by preferential isolation of one item from what's in ordinary usage a dyad or series--to disjoin, disconnect, disengage, disunite, dissociate, divide, detach, divorce (all 8 words having, as their 1st syllable, Lat. for "two"--"divide" meaning to "see two [instead of one]").

TRUTH

Reality, actuality, (Christian Science, capitalized) God. I could say "facticity" as in the Sanscrit root for "hard" (so, "wood"), our expression "hard facts"; but since the Enlightenment, "fact" has been elevated above "faith" (though in the Germanic etymology [incl. Eng.], "truth" means faith, fidelity [faithfulness], truthfulness, constancy, thus dependability based on integrity).

1 Please don't grump if you learned nothing from the above. The definitions were necessary introductions to the point of this Thinksheet, which is my irritation at often encountering said disservice to truth.

2 Take two instances that hit me today:

(1) Tacked up on the postoffice bulletinboard was this description of liberation theology, as a promo for Eliz. Dodson Gray's SUNDAY SCHOOL MANIFESTO: In the Image of her? (Roundtable Press/96): "**We are not sinners** to be saved but oppressed and needing to be freed" (bf. mine). The usual tipoff, warning sign, that you are being clobbered with disjunctive rhetoric is "**not...but....**"

Does the author really believe that we aren't sinners? If so, would she exclude from the sinner category those whom she denominates oppressors? Or does she mean that oppressedness is a more significant status than sinfulness? And if more significant, is the significance operational (i.e., oppression is something we can do something about, whereas sinfulness isn't)? Or.... Of course if the disjunction is something she flat-out believes, we have an instance not of disjunctive rhetoric but of (alleged, supposed) information. As to where we are vis-a-vis truth in all this, we are in a jungle of incoherence. And if it's what's left out that wrecks you, we are being wrecked by her leaving "salvation" out, along with the condition--sinfulness--calling for the medicine of salvation.

I have been in the author's bombastic presence & can believe that she takes the promo sentence not as disjunctive rhetoric but as information, God help us.

(2) The July/August 1996 Mass. Conf. Ed. of UNITED CHURCH NEWS, stating that Marcus Borg was the Annual Meeting's "primary speaker," quotes this from one of his Annual Meeting lectures (bf. mine): "The Christian life is **not** about afterlife, **not** about belief, **not** about requirements, **but** is about relationship to the same God or [sic!] spirit that [note, not "whom"] Jesus knew, about relationship to the living Christ. It is **not** about believing in God out there for the sake of heaven later, **but** about relationship to God right here."

How much, here, is disjunctive rhetoric, & how much does the speaker actually believe & was trying to inform the audience as matters of truth? He certainly rejects the canonical Christ (the NT's collective faith in & beliefs about "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior" [the ICHTHUS "fish"]), accepting rather his self-made construct of the so-called "historical Jesus" as "a Jewish mystic, who knew God, a wisdom teacher who taught an unconventional wisdom, and a social prophet with an alternative social vision." That Jesus of his imagination may not have believed in an afterlife (Borg says in his MEETING JESUS AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME), so (he implies) it can't be very important (so of course "the Christian life is not about afterlife"). When asked how now to worship, worship designers should "seek to convey a sense of the reality of God...and to mediate that reality": mystical experience without moral requirement (repentance & amendment of life).

UCC president Paul Sherry said, three evenings ago at our church, that the Mass. Conf. Annual Meeting "missed" the "opportunity" to have Borg formally confronted by a challenger of his academic qualifications. And in the same UCN, Gabriel Fackre worries that in various UCC assemblies, speakers divergent from the UCC official theology "go unchallenged."

3 The disjunctive-rhetoric mentality presents not only to the audience but also the speaker, time & again, a **false either/or** ("not...but"). Besides the inauthentic personal satisfaction of sounding decisive (where decision isn't called for) & clear (on matters of mystery or ambiguity), this mentality is self-reinforcing because speakers of this ilk find themselves to be (as Elmer Gantry found himself) crowd-pleasing. A Christian scholar has two reasons for eschewing this style: (1) Christian humility; (2) scholarly modesty & the intellectual habit of nuancing. I deeply regret that I find neither of these qualities in Borg's rhetoric.

Please parse with me his statement in the 1st ¶ of §2(2). Is the quote accurate? Very probably, as the publication in which it appears has a reputation for accuracy. But even if not, the content of the statement is confirmable in Borg's writings:

"The Christian life is **not** about afterlife." Since the whole Christian heritage is concerned about afterlife & beforelife (i.e., life before death), is Borg joking? Or does he mean "should not be"? Or does he mean "is" but not important (as in MEETING JESUS he says we don't know whether Jesus believed in an afterlife)? He is so rabidly antisupernatural that I'm inclined to read this clause as something he believes, over against mainstream Christianity through the ages. If my reading is correct, his religion is sidestream, offbeat.

"The Christian life is...**not** about belief." Far more than most other religions, Christianity is creedal, a word whose root means "believe." American anti-intellectualism joins New Age religion to applaud this on-its-face ignorant & stupid statement. But while Borg may be stupid, he's not ignorant. He's aware that the Christian religion through the ages has taken ideas seriously under the command to "worship the Lord your God with all your...mind." To move from this objective nonsense to truth (here, facticity), he would only have to say that Christianity (his "the Christian life") is either not only about belief or more about something else than belief. But this honest discourse would violate his quiet bombastic style.

"The Christian life is...**not** about requirements." Another on-its-face incredible statement! Biblical religion consistently has the up-front commands-demands of repentance (including amendment of life) & faith. Mic.6.8, "a perfect summary of the prophetic teaching on true religion" (HarperCollins [NRSV] Study Bible, 1388), asks "what does the Lord require of you," & only thereafter gives the specific demands. And the NT is not less demanding: e.g., Jesus says "Follow me," & the heaven Voice says (L.9.35) "Listen to him [Jesus]!" As Borg knows, the 2nd ½ of the NT also is rich with mandatory notes. But the whole notion of "requirements"* is masculine, & Borg everywhere exercises his preferential option for the feminine. (*versus "relationship")

Notice the God-mush: "God or spirit that Jesus knew,...the living Christ."

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