

Religious Assertion

Sample religious assertion:

"God" used a rapist to "give" a 12-year old "girl" a "baby."

1 Why the quotation marks around some words in the assertion? Because we will subject those words to semantic analysis.

2 Everybody agrees that a "baby" is "a very young child" (Camb.Dict.Am.English; first ill., "had a baby on May 29"; no allowance for the common proleptic use for the unborn, who thus are viewed as "children" because viewed from the far end of the telic process: since they'll come to be children if the generative process is not stopped by miscarriage or abortion, they are called by anticipation "children" even though in reality they are only zygotes/embryos/fetuses). Because they are pressuring for the extension of "baby" rights to the preborn, anti-abortion rhetoricians **spin** "child" from proleptic to actual status.

Far be it from me to object to spinning; it's an important way language develops. But the public has the right & need to know when it's being spun at, when a torque is being put on a word to twist it in a novel direction.

Further, language guardians (including clergy) have the responsibility (1) to protect language from pollution & (2) to warn the public against hucksters who try to advantage themselves by using words imprecisely, to occlude clear thought. This responsibility is all the more serious when one considers the sad fact that most of the public is unadept at linguistic precision & so is easily bilked (not that your average person couldn't learn linguistic precision: I'm saying only has-n't, not couldn't).

3 Well, everybody knows what "girl" means, right? Uh-uh (said dictionary defines "uh," "uh-huh," "uh-oh," & "uh-uh"--all good American English). That 12-year-old ceased to be a girl, biologically, the moment she became pregnant; from that moment she had the biological rights of womanhood: she's a woman. A girl-woman, if you wish; but a biologically adult female. The rapist destroyed her biological (and more!) girlhood. Raping a woman is bad enough; the forceful destruction of girlhood is even worse.

Why am I being biologically precise about the meaning of "girl" here? To emphasize the evil & horror in our sample religious assertion.

4 So why be picky about "give"? Because it reverses the rapist's intent: he was on the take, not on the give. Leaving his semen in the girl is giving only at the level of giving STDs & HIV. Further, in the assertion the rapist is only the secondary giver: "God" is the primary giver. Horror at a higher level.

5 But why would I put "God" in quotation marks? Can't we assume who "God" is? Uh-uh, not in this assertion. In this assertion, "God" is a horny Zeus-Jupiter-like deity who gets his jollies out of sicing rapists on girls. Utterly immoral and contemptible.

Assertion-reconstruction samples:

1 We who "believe in one God, Maker of heaven and earth" are stuck with the theodic problem of reconciling the canonical-biblical character of God as good with the reality that though the creation is "very good" (Gn.1.31), some creatures & some of the processes of their creation seem to us--we must judge as--evil. The theodic project is a balancing act: We cannot admit anything to be uncreated by God, nor can we allow that there is evil in God. Strings of historical heresies hang on these two unacceptable solutions--the former, dualism; the latter, amoral

monotheism. But the particulars of these heresies need not delay us here.

2 How about substituting "permitted" for "used"? Would this solve the problem, or only push it to another level (viz., to God's action being indirect rather than direct)? The God who only permitted the Holocaust would not be much less culpable than a god who caused it, would he?

This move, called the deistic distancing of God, denies direct divine evil action at the cost of sacrificing direct divine good action--no big bargain. Besides, religious thinkers may push too hard in this direction: God may get pushed all the way off the stage, leaving a condition variously called humanism & secularism. The deists of the Enlightenment & of the American Revolution pushed somewhat less hard than the atheists of the French Revolution. A dog, a child, or a god who embarrasses is apt to be excluded from the party.

3 How about "God couldn't stop a racist from....?" This doctrine of a limited deity--God is both good & powerful, but not powerful enough always & everywhere to see to the triumph of good--radically compromises monotheism & the biblical vision's eschatological confidence that wholly evil demons will prove no match for holy Love....Then how about wouldn't stop? While not limited in his power, God is self-limited by his goodness, honoring our will instead of crushing our spirit? Some improvement, don't you agree?

4 Now that millions of unwanted testube zygotes ("persons," according to the abortion-haters) are being unceremoniously disposed of, it's become easier to question whether Bush's "every [unborn] child conceived in love and protected by law" is anything more than a dangerous sentimental ideal. To use the divine sanction (every zygote a person created by God in his image) against that 12-year-old's access to a legal abortion seems to me to compound criminal horror with theological horror in the interest of hoped-for codical horror.

5 God creates, cares, in Christ suffers both with & for us. In the squeeze between the mystery of good & the mystery of evil, we pray & struggle to make the best decisions we can manage without sacralizing (rendering untouchable) human life born or unborn.

5 *Consequent assertion:* God, who suffered with the rape victim, loves both victim & rapist (Jesus' "love your enemies" [Mt.5.44; L.6.27,35]) & does not will that the unwilling pregnant be further victimized by being forced to give birth to the forced growth within her. (Anyway, that's the best I can manage now.)

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