

# How **serious** should Christians be about

## Mouth-Ear(-Eye) Communication (i.e., LANGUAGE)?

These NOTES--musings, really--are from recent encounters (both face-to-face & distant [phone, email, mail]).

1 Some religions take the inner & outer EYE more seriously than they do the inner & outer mouth-EAR, & so take language less seriously than do the latter religions. In recent days, I've been in close conversation with two Hindus, who (as is their religion) are so unserious about language as to be proud of their imprecision--as Gandhi's "I am a Christian. I am a Hindu. I am a Muslim. I am a Jew." Indeed, one might say that Hindus are serious about words inversely to their precision of meaning--so that the ultimate in verbal seriousness of "OMMMMMMM...." But any Hindu temple is, literally, an **eyeful**! Protestant Hinduism (Buddhism) is an *inner*-life eyeful illumined by inner light, En"light"enment (which is what, in Sanskrit, "buddha" means, & so used as the primary title for founder Gautama). That, + several smaller spinoff religions, is India's East...

in contrast to China's East, which is the religions of the gnostic sages, chiefly Confucianism: let's call them EAR-EYE religions, for praxis is mainly the reading & living of the sages wise-sayings...&

in contrast to two of the Near Eastern religions, viz. Judaism & Islam, which are EAR religions: God spoke...& in contrast to the third Near Eastern religion, viz. Christianity, the religion of the EYE-EAR: God came (the incarnation) & spoke (our Lord's ministry) & overcame "the last enemy," viz. death (the resurrection). 1Jn.1.3

2 Language differences can seriously impede understanding. Paul was trilingual--literate (Hebrew/Aramaic, Greek, Latin): Muhammad was illiterate even in Arabic, his only tongue, like all Semitic languages (including Hebrew & Aramaic) a language emotively-connotatively rich & referentially-denotatively poor--so he saw no point to the Christian squabbles whose fundamental medium was Greek, a language of high intellectual-cognitive precision. (Centuries after M., Muslim scholars--wrestling with the Greek classics--developed a precise Arabic--too late for M., who said he was otherwise inclined to become a Christian.)

3 While words are not material in the physical sense, they are so in the philosophical, legal, ethical, & rhetorical senses. Metaphorically of the physical, words are materials that can be stretched, shrunk, cut, ~~nailed~~, burned, frozen, roughed up, smoothed, hidden, in- & ex-cluded, damaged, repaired-restored, honored, demeaned. As I'm writing this Thinksheet, the carpenters are at work rebuilding our second-floor porch; & I'm concerned about what's happening to the materials. (This morning I found one post installed 3/8ths inch off vertical [needing straightening] & another, 1/4th inch too low [needing raising]: errors quickly repaired.) And as a Christian linguist, I'm deeply concerned about what's happening to language materials, i.e. words. When recently I wrote in an email "Be of words a little more careful than anything except love," I was misunderstood: I meant what happens to words, & some readers thought I meant what happens to people when certain words are used. People are partly responsible for what words do to them, but wholly responsible for what they do to (as well as with) words. E.g., 1Cor.12.3 is about what people do to the word "Jesus." Some say "Curse Jesus!" Others, moved by the Holy Spirit, say (in the earliest Christian seed-creed) "Kurios Insous!" ("Jesus is Lord!").

4 Yesterday, in the Circle Conversation (with the preacher of the morning, in Craigville Tabernacle), a UCC clergywoman bore radiant testimony to something wondrous that had happened to her not long ago, something she'd thought could never have happened: she became legally allowed to enter a word she'd thought she'd always be excluded from, viz. the word "marriage." In §3, the first thing I said about word-material is that it can be stretched: the Mass. Supreme Court stretched "marriage" to include gay & lesbian living-committed couples. NOTICE:

(1) While boundaries can be dysfunctional & invidious, humanity--interpersonally, societally, institutionally, corporately, internationally, culturally, religiously--

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needs the in/out distinction (e.g., to become included, you must first be an outsider). Words are life in the form of sememes, sound-meanings serving as surrogates of human realities. Words can serve as keys to let you in ("Open, Sesame!") or bars to keep you out ("shibboleth"). In addition (as my present story from yesterday illustrates), words can themselves be spaces, areas (in effect) labeled "Stay out!" (which "marriage" says to gay & lesbian couples in 49 of the United States) or "Come in!" (which "marriage" says to same in Mass.).

(2) Did I abuse that lesbian for her abuse of the word "marriage"? No, I said "Thank you for your witness": I saw it as a moment for personal affirmation, not lexical confrontation. But she's become party, in Mass., to rendering soundless a category which everywhere else has a name, viz. the sexual-relationship-usually-intending-the-generation-&-rearing-of-children ("marriage" having been ripped off for naming another category, viz. any committed longterm relationship of adults regardless of gender). Lexically (legally being another matter), she'd not entered the "marriage" category but rather dragged (as in electronic "cut & paste") the word out of its category to apply it to another category.

(3) Predictably, the Mass. homosexual lobby, following up on their rip-off of "marriage," are now attacking "father" & "mother" on the Mass. birth-certificate (to be replaced by "Parent A" & "Parent B")--a lexical ripple-effect on society's fundamental institution.

5 Radfem irons flat the biblical language for God, who is re-imagined as genderless, or rather bisexual (God & even Jesus being each equally male & female: pp99-100, Johanna W.H. van Wijk; REIMAGINING GOD: The Case for Scriptural Diversity [Westm./Jn.Knox/95]). That author is an OT professor (Louisville Presbyterian Sem.), & might pull off her gender-equality-in-deity project in "the Hebrew Scriptures" (which she uses, as Jews might find "OT" "hurtful" [p104]), but in the NT she must overlook the awkward fact that the deity descended not as a couple (as, acc. to Sun Myung, the messiah will) but as a male, who as our Savior & Lord died for us: "When people ask me, 'Why is this happening?' I can say only that God, in loving the world, has made himself vulnerable, and at the end of their battered lives God is alongside them in their suffering, through love." Jesus is he, God, who made "himself" vulnerable: the masculine pronouns naturally-biblically apply to all Persons of the Holy Trinity--& are never used by radfems such as the author of this book with its redesigned deity, a book expressing no worry about its erosion of the personness of God. (The "made himself vulnerable" quote is the last paragraph of the obit of the Anglican-evangelical founder of the international Hospice movement, Dame Cicely Saunders, who died last month.) This Thinksheet is asking "How serious should Christians be about...language?" If we are serious about the personhood of God, we'd better be serious about defending our religion's personal pronouns for God.

This book's summum principium (most fundamental value) is **equality** (of male & female in humanity & deity). But equality implies treating everybody alike--whereas fairness (the biblical equity) means treating everybody differently. (Egalitarians in the military right now want women troops, despite their inferior musculature, to be in direct contact with the enemy in Iraq.) Biblically, we're all sinners (Ro.1-3), though not equally so; & we Christian men & women, though we may not be equal in a particular society, are all "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal.3.28), all subjects of his (though to add "equally" would exceed the statement's assertion). Again, the book repeatedly asserts that women & men are "equally" in the image of God--a claim found nowhere in Scripture, & specifically denied in 1Cor.II.7. The well-worn Gal.3.28 is even stretched (p100) to preach, in Jesus own self, the equality of "the male and female nature"!

6 The Christian language communicates, in audio-form, both the story of God's deeds "for us" (as in the UCC Statement of Faith, officially adopted in 1959) & the story's own past-present-future story (as in the UCC Constitution's Preamble, officially adopted the next year). "The Preamble...offers a way of anchoring and interpreting the set of beliefs that is stated narratively in the UCC Statement of Faith" (p41, vol.7 of THE LIVING THEOLOGICAL HERITAGE of the United Church of Christ [Pilgrim Press/05]). Rightly, Confessing Christ emphasizes the latter.