

I'm teed off by Ann Lander's column today (29Jan87), so I'm running this midrash on her text, which is sacred to millions. Here it is, so you can judge for yourself before I have my go at it. And, OVER, is my response sent to her.

1. Here we have a baleful instance of the blurring together of God-goodness-morality-class. This continuum is serious not only because it impedes clear thinking and thus mature decision-making but also because it (1) strengthens the self-righteousness of those who view themselves as morally superior to the masses, and (2) self-segregates the advantaged from the unprivileged.

2. Note a chiasmus: The unprivileged are privileged not to have the warpings peculiar to the advantaged, and the advantaged are unadvantaged with the freedoms peculiar to the unprivileged. Both statements will get clearer in the course of this Thinksheet.

3. "Class" is, always & everywhere under the conditions of history, a human reality, as alcohol is a reality in the world of nature; but "classism" is a disease, "an abnormal condition from excess of" class-consciousness, precisely as alcohol-ism is a disease from excess of alcohol (for the alcoholic, any alcohol being excessive). Marxism, in its fatuous dream of a "classless" society achievable under the conditions & impulse of history (in contradistinction from as gift of God), blurs the distinction between "class" & "classism." The democratic capitalist parallel is the preachment of "equality of opportunity," a doubly cruel slogan: (1) The chn. of the upper classes have a leg up on openings; and (2) Chn. of high gifts & energy have a leg up on openings regardless of class, so chn. of less gifts and/or energy hardly have "equality of opportunity." ("...excess of" is "-ism" in Webster unab.3.)

4. IRONY: Classism in its 1st aspect, viz "an abnormal condition from excess of" class-consciousness, while it exists in all societies, is esp. rigid in pseudo-classless, ie Marxist, countries, where the ruling caste of Party privileged are advantaged almost beyond the dreams of the masses--Russian gov't. officials with their dachas, Chinese gov't. officials "farting smoke" (the masses' sneering way of pointing to the only citizens who have cars, & with lace curtains in the windows!)....Which gets us on to the 2nd aspect of classism, viz injustice. The advantaged "taking advantage of" the unadvantaged. Which is not the same as taking advantage of one's privileges and (noblesse oblige) advantaging the unprivileged by assuming one's responsibilities.

5. The family in question is not upper class but middle class, the class closer to the lower class & therefore more attentive to distinguish itself linguistically from the lower class. When Grandmother said "Bull(shit)!" mother & daughter accused her of swearing, ie emitting an oath, which she'd not done and among either upper or lower classes wouldn't have been accused of doing. (OED shows swearing as profanity as only the 8th meaning, late in the development of the Eng. language. And it has "Bull!" as a "late" meaning of ^{over}

Dear Ann Landers: Recently I was chiding my 13-year-old granddaughter for not wishing me a happy birthday. She said, "I didn't know when your birthday was." I replied, "Bull."

My birthday is exactly two weeks after hers and we have lived in the same house for six years. I have never forgotten her birthday.

Now my granddaughter and her mother are mad at me because they said I swore at her. I did not swear at her, I merely expressed my opinion about her response to my statement. Granted, the language was a bit strong but it was an honest reaction.

Please tell me, Ann, did I swear at her or merely express an opinion? — M.J.C.

Dear M.J.C.: You expressed an opinion all right, but your choice of words could have been a lot better. You didn't take the Lord's name in vain with your granddaughter, but you certainly used an obscenity, which is just as bad.

the 4th noun "bull," meaning deceit, nonsense, self-contradiction --which, instead of scatology, may have been what Grandmother had in mind;#in which case she was even farther from what she was accused of.)...Note further that mother & daughter focus on (OED Am. colloq.) the "swearword," without (as far as we know) using "swearword." The middle class, and those in the lower class bucking to enter the middle class, react with anger-hostility-ostracism (in extreme cases) to "swearwords," a category in which blasphemy, profanity, & scatology are lumped together (= the downside of what in sec.1 I call the blur), as Ann Landers does in her reply. Curiously, this middle-class taboo works exclusionarily against the upper class as well as the lower class, thus providing the middle class with a bogus oral purity that is itself an impurity, a corruption, a mere moralism parading itself as morality, a class identification constricting & impoverishing those within with a negative righteousness while excluding all, both members & outsiders, who violate the "swearwords" taboo.

---MY RESPONSE TO ANN LANDERS-----

6. The asterisk in my Response refers to this Think-sheet, which now undertakes to support the asterisked statement. # But this 4th meaning of "bull"--as in "shoot the bull"--is not an expletive, an interjection: modern lexicographers list "Bull!"--the interjection Grandma used--as meaning "Bullshit!" (so, eg, RHD). And this is the meaning in the minds of mother & daughter, as in Ann Lander's (who said it was "an obscenity").

7. But whythell is this wordnitpicking so allfired important? Becuase, I remind you, this Thinksheet is about a particular way some humans abuse other humans--which is a high concern of a Christian theologian, Jesus being so sensitive as to how folks treat one another.

Since the Ten Commandments mean a lot to you, I was surprised that in today's column you say it's "just as bad" to "use an obscenity" as to "take the Lord's name in vain."/As you know, blasphemy--taking the Lord's name "in vain"--rates a whole Commandment. But obscenity isn't even mentioned. Not in the Ten Commandments or--in the sense your correspondent mentions, namely, "Bull!"--anywhere else in the Bible.*/How could you make this mistake? Simply by living in a culture that has collapsed the divine into the moral and the moral into the moralistic./The Bible is against dishonoring either God or neighbor, other human beings; it is against blasphemy and abusive language. But it is not against appropriate metaphorical use of the human body's parts and functions in situations requiring strong, shocking language. My guess is that Grandmother, in crying "Bull!" against her granddaughter's fraud, was administering an appropriate therapeutic shock. Something good, not bad. So take from this old theologian three blows with a wet noodle.

HAGAR THE HORRIBLE

by Dik Browne



MORE

8. Hagar, the horrible-natural-evil-good human being, makes my point well for me and does so with a flourish of lovable pseudoinnocence & ugly hypocrisy. The bromide he mouths honors, by saccharin counterfeited, the preachment one encounters in the Bible, esp. the NT: one's speech should, within the limits of honesty & prophecy, lean toward benevolence, reflecting & honoring the divine holy love and shalom-eagerness, in the eucharistic (grateful, gracious) spirit. (Paul's instruction to ask God "to bless, not to curse" one's persecutors--Ro.12.14--reflects Jesus: Mt.5.44, L.6.28.)

9. The relevant NT reff. show that this benevolent speech, in addition to living forth the divine nature & will, is a natural & essential witness both within & beyond the Christian community. See both texts & contexts of the passages exegeted below.

10. Hate the sin, love the sinner. Invective seldom should be directed to the offender (frequently, in Scripture, the oppressor) but is sometimes appropriate against behavior, as in the case of the grandmother's "Bull(shit)!" But "nice," "polite" middleclass people condemn invective itself, esp. when strong, which they call "dirty."

11. My shock & outrage of the abuse of Grandmother--mother & daughter accusing her of abusing granddaughter--focuses, for this Thinksheet, on language abuse, viz the confusion of swearing & what in the Berkeley '67 hubbub was called dirty speech, though the latter included all the behavior I'm about to sort out (no synonymy doing a good job of it, though WEB.'S DICT. OF SYNONYMS is good as far as it goes). The terms' three categories are (1) BLASPHEMY, (2) VERBAL ABUSE, & (3) SCATOLOGY/VENEREALITY. Here we go (braving the taboo against our "dirty minds" & "dirty mouths"!):

(1) BLASPHEMY, while it can mean verbal injury to the reputation of either divine or human beings, is used in mod.Eng. almost exclusively for the former: it's the opposite of "Hallowed be Thy Name." Also: contempt, or lack of reverence for, God (or, though rarely, something sacred). Also (HARPER'S BIBLE DICT./85): "claiming for oneself divine attributes by word or deed." So powerful was the taboo against this in my childhood that as far as I know, I've never even thought blasphemously, let alone spoken blasphemy, (to quote Ann Landers) "taken the Lord's name in vain." I cringe whenever I hear blasphemy, esp. from the mouths of clergy (never in public!).

(2) VERBAL ABUSE OF FELLOW-HUMANS is profanity, cursing, swearing (in the sense of cursing)--if the abuser calls down God's illwill upon the abused. ("Profanity" is sometimes used as a syn. for blasphemy, which is more precise for the meaning of category (1).) Said a woman to me today in a supermarket, "I don't swear, so I had to open this plastic bag only by hand!" She was avoiding swearing not in its primary meaning, ie taking an oath, but in its secondary meaning, ie uttering an oath (=cursing; as in the Ann Landers correspondence). But had she "sworn," it'd have been verbal abuse against the plastic bag--and maybe the store manager. Pertinent to this Thinksheet was the whiff of classism in her statement: "My class doesn't swear" (though of course she didn't state this). ...Other terms in category (2) are insult, invective, vituperation, denunciation--none of these involving category (1), but any one of them possibly category (3).

(3) SCATOLOGY/VENEREALITY are, in the narrow-proper sense, "dirty speech," "talking dirty," "filthy language"--all expressions using the sanction of purity against the metaphorical use of excre-

OVER

tory & sexual body-functions. Here note Ann Lander's confusion of category (3) ("obscenity") with category (2) ("swearing"). I've a religious taboo against blasphemy, but it's a classistic taboo to load categories (1) & (2) onto category (3): it (to use a Victorian phrase) "pits the classes against the masses," whose use of category (3) is prejudicially taken to be blasphemy against God (category (1)) & verbal abuse of people (category (2)). Note that classism does not distinguish the two uses of scatology/venerality, viz (a) attack on a person (as "You shit!"--category (2)) and (b) emphatic-earthly speech (as "Oh shit!"--category (3))....NOTE on classism in the Eng.lg. vis-a-vis category (3): From 1066 on, the simple Anglo-Saxon terms yielded to ruling-class French & Latin terms; the Normans considered A-S terms lowclass, dirty, vulgar, bawdy, then (by Victorian times) sniggeringly humorous. Should not those who preach against classism help liberate Anglo-Saxon speech, removing the overlay of Frankisms & Latinisms (not to mention Grecisms)? Historically, this would be taking up a preferential option for the oppressed.NOTE on middleclass consciousness: The historical & psychological repression of Anglo-Saxon terms in category (3) explains why their use today impacts shockingly in the middle class (but less so in the upper class, & little if at all in the lower class): such A-S language is an irruption (yes, from below!) up into middleclass ears, which think the holy (or at least the sacred) has been violated, so the speaker is a blasphemer (category (1)) & an offender against humanity (category (2))--so why shouldn't the speaker be ejected from "decent company"? When such ejection occurs, sanctimonious piosity parades itself as righteousness & piety, and the company is in severe spiritual & moral & communal peril. Instant moralism-legalism substitutes for Christian critical consciousness, one of the aims of which is to help Christians see through & transcend classism, including the classism built into the Eng.lg. (as also in the cases of sexism & racism). It won't do to object that middleclass feelings vis-a-vis category (3) words are too deep to be reformed; the same could be said about sexist & racist feelings, which we all agree should be attacked & rooted out to whatever degree the grace of God enables.... The liberation of category (3) A-S words is proceeding apace. "Fuck" is the only such term recent lexicographers are keeping out of their computers. RHD has these terms of venerality as well as the full range of scatological terms: "frig," "screw," "screw up," "screw around" (yes, all of them identified as sexual metaphors). (RHD has, among its scatological listings, "pissed off," which I am at the Ann Landers correspondence, enough to explain the long outburst of this Thinksheet.)

ADDENDUM ON CATEGORY (2): "Hell" & "damn" are in this category only if transitive with the object a human being--as "To hell with you!" & "Damn you!"--both consigning the victim to perdition. These two words are frequently used as transitive impersonals, some thing being cussed out. The most frequent use is intransitively, as in the expletives "Damn!" "Oh damn!" "Hell!" "What the hell!" These transitive-impersonals & intransitives are not in any of our three categories....In the weakest, & literal, sense of "profane," all uses of "hell" & "damn" in this addendum are profane: they are all "outside the temple"--words displaced from religion and in this sense being used "in vain." Personally, I use both words, though sparingly & seldom privately, as transitive-impersonals & intransitives.

12. Let's have an attitudinal cut through our materials. The subject of this Thinksheet finds these foci as it looks at relevant ^{more}

biblical passages & at the cultural contexts thereof (eg the religiophilosophical schools of the Hellenistic world): (1) God; (2) heaven-hell; (3) earth; (4) body as sexual; (5) body as mortal; (6) body as evil (eg gnosticism). I'll spare you the reff.; this Thinksheet is going to be a 6-pager even without them.

13. NYC is the world's most wondrous spot for unconstricted English, multi-everything (-ethnic, -racial, -class). Take Mayor LaGuardia, to whom my father introduced me: a fountain of Yiddish-Italian Eng. (Jewish mother, Italian father)! Or take Mayor Koch: study the ethnic, racial, & class connotations of his self-designations (p.16, Feb/87 HARPER'S MAG.). Would you consider any of these "dirty"?.... The same issue shows upperclass freedom from the middleclass taboo against category (3) terms--eg, an essay, by Yale's chair of philosophy, titled "Reflections on Bullshit," which begins "One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit." And it quotes father to son, "'Never tell a lie when you can bullshit your way through'"--on which see the current hearings on Irangate! (The quote is from a novel titled DIRTY STORY.).... Now, you're free to see this as evidence that our culture is on the slippery slope into linguistic depravity; I see it as linguistic liberation, though with a dark side (as all liberations within history have a dark, costly side).

14. Way back in sec.6 I promised Ann Landers & you I'd back up my biblical assertion. I've refined the issue by showing that for the Christian, category (1) is entirely out & category (2) almost entirely out. Is category (3) anywhere out in the Bible? Nowhere except possibly Col.3.8 & Eph.5.4--both traditionally said to be by Paul, both now challenged as possibly Paulinist (meaning not by, but of the school of, Paul; for one thing, their cosmic Christianity seems an extension from Paul; for another, & relevant to this Thinksheet's point, they seem more responsive than Paul was to the sanction of public opinion--but, as will be seen, Paul/Paulinist is no great matter for this Thinksheet).

15. Early Christianity, missionizing both the masses & the classes, was keenly conscious of obstacles to Jewish & pagan conversion to Jesus & the Church. As the gospel ascended (upward social mobil-^{on}

[List]

NOT-KOCHISMS

From "The Edward I. Koch Identity Search," a list of quotes by Mayor Koch posted in the City Hall press room.

This is an attempt to find out not what Ed Koch is but what he is not, according to Ed Koch in his various pronouncements over the years.

So far, we know that--based on his own observations--the mayor is not:

a schmuck	a homosexual
a kibbitzer	a punching bag
a whacko	a showboat
a wacko	a dog in a manger
a yenta	a conservative
a dummy	a dupe
a doctor	a dope
a demagogue	an ass
an ideologue	a magician
a bookie	a statistician
an oracle	a leper
a one-cheeked Christian	the governor
a diplomat	a sociologist
a little old lady who stood up in the back of the room and said "mug him again"	Mr. Humble Pie
an expert (on wolves)	a hypocrite
an elitist	a prophet
a test evaluator	a populist
the personnel director of this city	a genius
Billy Budd (who was "a schmuck")	the corporation counsel
a nut	a prosecutor
	an expert on constitutional law
	a psychiatrist
	a scientist
	a pollster
	a horse's ass

ity), early Christian faith-order-life-work adapted to its ever higher environs, as the literature in & beyond the NT shows. As by conversion & adaptation (which amounted to Christians' being culturally converted!) Christians increased in influence & power, they moved ever farther away from the common people and more & more preached not just being a Christian but being a Christian gentleman, "refined & well-bred," eschewing "saying things a man of refinement would not say," and "observing the (golden) mean" of nothing to excess. The quoted material I've taken directly from the arbiter of polite discourse at that time, though he lived four cs. earlier: Aristotle, NIC. ETHICS, 4.8. You will recognize here the Victorian ideal stilled preached in our middleclass churches & in churches where folk are struggling for middleclass respectability....One would expect that Bible translating would reflect this preferential option for avoiding the ways of the common folk, and it does (just as it becomes more sexist after 1850, when the Brit.Parl. legislated "he/his" as generic). Paul's language in Phil.3.8, eg, is cleaned up, prettified, as a matter not of truth (which has him saying "shit" or "dung") but of taste (which makes him say "refuse" or "garbage" or "rubbish," 1881 being the earliest Eng.tr. to avoid Paul's scatology). The ordeal of civility even affected lexical history: the Greek dictionaries reflect this respectable-perverse revisionism. E.g., for Phil.3.8, L-S-J has "refuse" --though in Eng.-Gk. Yonge, Paul's word is not one of the 7 listed for "refuse"! (Hebrew, a gutsy lg. of few wds., has 5 for excrement.) And the commentaries! You can trust them to reflect the cultural predilections of their authors, ie to be classistic....(To study the classistic distortions, I worked the reff. on this p. in stacks of Eng.Bibles, Gk.lexicons, & both technical & popular commentaries, as there was no other way to acquire critical consciousness on the matter.)

16. Now you can guess that Col.3.8 & Eph.5.4, neither of which inherently opposes category (3), have been revisionized in the "Bible helps" so as to oppose category (3). But we must allow for the possibility that upward mobility has tinged the texts themselves (as it tinged the Pastorals, 1&2Tim.&Titus, with "sexism"). Here & in some other NT passages Aristotle's golden mean may have merged with the Jesus image of Christian character--a somewhat risible merger, as it forces the volatile Jesus into a model of equable emotions: our Col. 3.8 instructs us to "get rid of anger, passions...obscene talk...." (TEV). And Eph.5.4, in a passage concerned with what's "fit" and "proper" behavior for Christians, reminds us of Aristotle's gentleman; we're to observe a taboo of silence on "sexual immorality," "indecentcy," & "greed" & avoid "language which is obscene, profane, or vulgar" (TEV). Now, Christian behavior exists not in a vacuum but in cultural context: what, in our texts' advice, transcends culture & class and is everywhere & always Christian? Legalists, claiming to read all scriptural advice as law, don't have this question; the rest of us do, & need critical consciousness to respond to it.

17. The genre of our two texts, Col.3.5-4.6 & Eph.5-6.20, is the Hellenistic vice/virtue list, a prescriptive way of describing the ideal character (Stoic, Epicurean, Christian, et al). These lists (a form of wisdom literature) do each one a lot of business with history & the here-now pressures, identifications, intentions, hopes. Their differentia (values) & sanctions (motivations) both vary from list to list within a particular tradition, but the core continuity is clear; in the Christian case, the memory & Spirit-presence of Jesus in the churches. In the Christian case, "shame" is important; it's the root of the words TEV-translated "obscene" in our two texts (as others tr. with dirt, filth, foulness, coarseness, nastiness, baseness, indecentcy, pollution, dishonor, reproachfulness).