

CLEARING THE VERBAL HURDLES WITH INOFFENSIVE VICTORIOUS WORDS

Dukakis has had the wisdom to choose, as speechwriter, a man clever & informed enough to help him put his foot down on the ground instead of in his mouth. This came to mind when, today, a communicator asked me how to say something "in a way that will not offend theologians." Refreshing that anyone would give a damn what would or wouldn't offend us theologians....

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1. First thing to come to mind, in Scripture, after this Thinksheet's idea came to me, was this (Eph.4:29): "Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you." Balancing this, 6:11: "Put on all the armor God gives you, so you'll be able to stand up against the Devil's evil tricks....put out all the burning arrows shot by the Evil One....Accept the word of God as the sword the Spirit gives you." A gentle solidier, this. Koan, oxymoron: Be verbally victorious & (!) inoffensive. If Jesus could have pulled this off, he wouldn't have gotten executed. But the meaning is clear: In apology & polemic, verbal defense & verbal attack, be bold (parresia, 31 times in NT, incl. this in 6:19f: "Pray for me, that God will give me a message when I'm ready to speak, so that I may speak boldly and make known the gospel's secret.... Pray that I may be bold in speaking about the gospel as I should"). Yes, be bold, but give no unnecessary offense. Which leaves the speaker with fine calls as to when the line from necessary to unnecessary would be crossed, & leaves the hearers to decide when to get mad (ie, when in their opinion the offense being given is unnecessary).

2. The more polyethnic & pluralistic a culture becomes, the more difficult & necessary it is to devise a common speech (a lexicon & locutions that pass both tests, clarity & charity) within our common language (English, which should be the official language so as not to disempower and divide off into enclaves those whose mother-language is other). The two tests or criteria apply not only to the general reality that an increase in cultural complexity, unattended to, leads to a decrease in communicability but also to special problems--such as a spiritual Esperanto for Hospice workers, & "inclusive language."

3. Though the human mind-brain is little understood, we know that a double censoring is one aspect of our sub-pre-consciousness. (1) So that we can "pay attention," there's a shutoff for everything we're not to pay attention to at the moment. (2) So that the patterned connectional matrix can be augmentative, there's a shutoff of what doesn't fit (= "cognitive dissonance"--eg, the hypnotist can't get you, under hypnosis, to violate your moral-ethical code). In any community of bees, ants, or humans, certain members serve the censoring functions. In a theistic community, these functionaries are called "theologians," who have also the functions of intellectually formulating the community's paradigms & programs & processes & of teaching. A useful analogy for the first of these three functions is the watchdog: we have the duty of barking when strangers (who may be enemies) approach & the duty of barking at the residents when they (intellectually) misbehave. (In liberal theistic communities, theologians would rather formulate & teach than bark, ie, censor. For this reason, liberal theistic communities are overrun with strangers-enemies & corrupted by resident heretics.) This rumination stems from that request, of a nonChristian, today that I listen to something he'd written. He wanted to run it past me to see if I'd bark at it (though the watchdog analogy was not in the phonecall). As a theologian, I'm fair at formulating, good at teaching, & excellent at barking--so he made a good choice when he phoned me.

4. Religious founders & subsequent intellectual leaders of religious communities operate within & through a psycho-socio-paradigm that can be designated by three words: condition / vision / conversion. Buddha & his disciples, eg: the human condition is analyzed as at heart, suffering; the vision is of nirvana-nibbana, deliverance from suffering; & you get from here to there by the conversional process known as "enlightenment" ("Buddha" being not the founder's name but his title, "the Enlightened One"; contrast "Jesus," which is both his name &, etymologically, his title, "Savior"). In this light, any leader who preaches a condition/vision/conversion story is a religious leader. Marx, eg. Somewhat less so, Freud. Jung. The religious situation of humanity may thus be described (in German) as Erzählungskampf, struggles of competing stories--the struggles sometimes being intellectual (battles of theologians), sometimes esthetic (as confrontations between Christian & Islamic art), sometimes spiritual (my saints are holier than thy saints), sometimes physical (religious wars). However you slice it, that's the way it is with what James called "felt life." Whether you see this eris, strife, as endemic or transitional, it's here for the duration of what we call history; & it does less than no good to deny it. So religious wars should be viewed not just as a disgrace, but also as an honor to religion, since people fight over only what's important to them, & religious wars thus underline the importance of religion. (Those who resist this point are (1) those to whom religion is not all that important, & (2) those with a merely sentimental view of religion.)

5. In light of the above section, see how the Christian theologian feels-thinks-speaks-writes. The human condition is original & committed sin; the vision is of God's rule "on earth as it is in heaven" (the vision re-visioned every time we pray the Lord's Prayer); & the conversional process is faith-repentance-grace-forgiveness "in the name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit." In explaining to my phoner today why I found offensive, even blasphemous-idolatrous, what he'd run by me, I used the Christian house-language thus for condition/vision/conversion. He's antipathetic to the Christian lexicon, but he began to understand that without some understanding of it, he'd have no clue to why I'd barked.

6. It's about time you got in on this phonecall, so this is what he ran past me: "Life's highest goal is to exemplify unselfish love." After the fourth word, I'd bark at anything other than "to glorify God & enjoy him forever" (or words to that effect). Full of goodwill, he wanted to express altruism as a goal transcending the world's competing stories for bespeaking it; & I fully shared his goal as a subgoal, which is conformable to my world-story as a subtheme within it (viz, "love God & your neighbor as yourself"). (To trope an old line, how can we "raise a (lexical) standard to which all (wo)men can repair"? Can the three loves--for God, self, others, including the whole creation--be expressed in story-free words (not as substitute for story-words but as a bridging among stories)? To allow for, without mentioning, God, I suggested changing from an active to a passive verb: "We are meant to be centers of unselfish-selfless-lifeaffirming love" (we discussed the pros & cons of various adjectives to modify "love"--even, "radiant," which he rejected because of radiation). ("Unconditional" modifying love is a horror: morality involves conditionality, without which there's nothing but sentimentality.)....He's alive to photeric thinking: darkness/light. Said I, "Say 'sin' for darkness & 'grace' for light & you're getting inside the Christian language." Anything that happens confirms either my doctrine that God is love or my doctrine of original sin, & all mature ways of seeing the world have verbal parallels to mine: I think my story the best (or it wouldn't be my Story), but the others are good.