

THE UNSPEAKABLE:

LANGUAGE TABUS AS PSYCHOSOCIAL CONTROLS-----Elliott #1780

It's a few hours after New Year's Eve '84, and I didn't make a resolution to talk more in '84: it would kill me, as I already talk as much as energy permits. I'm not as good at it as was my father, and not as elegant at it as was his mother; but I get along. A half century ago I bumped into the notion that we are the language animal, and I've never doubted it since. Rather, I've developed the notion that this is our distinctive among God's creatures: on a triangle intervenable on any corner or side, we say/see/feel in a continuous energy/consciousness flow. When we shift every so slightly in any of the three, the other two change. Anybody go to messing with my language, and succeed--and I'll have to change my self-image, my "world," and my feelings about everything! Understandably, therefore, language is the most conservative thing about us.

1. Shock #1: A few days ago I heard a fairly sophisticated relative tell his pastor off for favoring "inclusive language." To me he'd put it stronger: "I'm considering giving up Protestantism, I'm so sick and tired of this nonsense!" Most folks stand ready to mete out outsize punishments to those who mess with language; and I predict that the Protestant Lectionary and other inclusive-language efforts of NCC and mainline denominations will cost the churches more than did "letting the Negroes in."

2. Shock #2 is not about language unchangeable (in tradition, and especially in Holy Writ--as in the case of shock #1) but about language unspeakable. Another fairly sophisticated relative, two days after shock #1, complained vehemently against me for using "shit" in a quotation from something the eminent evangelical leader Francis Schaeffer had written to me: "Either you shouldn't have quoted him or you should have changed the language so you wouldn't demean yourself." I was incredulous: "You want me to abuse the truth so as not to offend your ear? The guy said what he said, and the word he used --he's a highly gifted word-user--was precisely the right word to convey his feeling!" My relative was unfazed: "I want to continue to respect you; but I won't be able to continue reading your thinksheets if I come across this word again." After a pause, he said: "I use the word myself, in conversation; but I'd never write it." He's an honorable, even admirable, man; and I'm entirely convinced this his hypocrisy is innocent. This thinksheet is a direct response to my puzzling over our shocks, his and mine.

3. One way to get at the problem is to compare unspeakables on levels of shock-intensity, + and -. On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest shock) the only 10s are (in Judaism) the Name of the Holy One ('G--' in Orthodox writing; \aleph/\aleph), YHWH, Y--- --rendered, by those without this tabu, "Jehovah" or "Javeh" or, my preference, "Yahweh"); and (in the American Language) "shit," sometimes daringly printed "s---." What, pray tell, has the most unspeakable POSITIVE have to do with the most unspeakable NEGATIVE--in addition to the fact that each is its category's "most"? This, for starters: each has its exclusive sphere: "shit" is unspeakable in church (and print, though it's coming into the nonprint media), and "God" is unspeakable outside of church. This spheres in/ex-clusion is almost as mechanical as the dis/appearance of the "Day" and "Night" figures on a horizontal rotor of an ancient grandfather-clock. Warning: You catch hell if you say "God" and "shit" in the same place, whatever the place! (Exception: blasphemy, which says both words outside church. Not personally puzzling to me, as I've never even thought blasphemy, which is using divine Names in nondevotional contexts; and I've often been shocked by clergy who (1) both blaspheme and use no-no words in private but not public, which is one level of hypocrisy, and then (2) complain against my "language range" in public, which is a projection of their hypocrisy onto me. Instance: Almost all mt NYTS colleagues objected

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film of 1983, viz., "Terms of Endearment," which time and again uses "s---" so naturally and accurately and appropriately as to be virtually unnoticeable by the general public, which of course (at least privately!) uses the word and its adjective naturally, accurately, appropriately. "S---" is fast losing its tabu, as "s-e-x" already has. (See #1764.)

when, in preaching in Norman Vincent Peale's pulpit for an NYTS occasion, I accurately quoted a conversation in which "shit" was used, and used both precisely and effectively. I was told I should have "fittingly" misrepresented what was said, dulling it down so as not to offend the ears of folks "in worship." My rejoinder: This "playing church," rendering life's primary and secondary colors of brilliance as pastels, helps explain, about worship, its (1) colorlessness, (2) sense of unreality, (3) false piety, and (4) hypocrisy. The basic dishonesty of schizosocial language--dividing up life into spheres of "appropriate" speech, with a respectability-scale of tabus--did we not get a national shock when the Watergate tapes exposed Nixon as practicing it? How sickly-sweet-mouthed so many clergy are in public, and how foul-mouthed in private! I can feel this conning in my gut and am convinced most of the laity can, and the duplicity goes a long way to explain 'Elmer Gantry'--the image of the phoney clergyman--in American literature.)

4. In coming/living/dying/rising, Jesus was God/man God's man "for us"--representatively, salvifically; thus, our "High Priest" (Letter to the Hebrews). Under sick priestcraft, the people let their priests be pious and good instead of, and in that projective-substitutionary sense, "for, us." Clergy strive to be, at least in public image, squeaky clean, super-devout; and the strain ultimately goes public because of double-split: (1) priest split off from the human being, the priest publicly living his/her role instead of her/his life; and (2) the priest's soul split off from body, a crime the body takes vengeance against (instance: yesterday an interim pastor said he's interiming where he is after the new pastor, ten days on the job, ran off with the minister of Christian education, the lust-fix of each on the other leading to the abandonment of their families--behavior I can best describe as, if you'll pardon me, or whether you will of not, s-----). The second split is aided and abetted by the priestly-public avoidance of (original sense) "body language," i.e. words metaphorizing from body functions to transphysical realities (a practice the Hebrew language, and therefore the Bible, is rich in). (The later sense of "body language": what the body nonverbally "says" to the un/practiced eye.) Original-sense "body language" has three levels: (1) straightline, nonvaluational metaphorizing--e.g., "underneath are the Everlasting Arms"; (2) positive-affirmative metaphorizing --e.g., "heart"; and (3) negative-revulsive metaphorizing--e.g., scatology --e.g., Jesus' reversal of the alimentary canal, making the mouth the anus (Mt.15.11; which, the next vs. says, "hurt the feelings" of his enemies, and led, along with many other instances of feelings-hurtings, to his death; most Christian priests so clean up Jesus' act as to be in no danger of death, or even of rejection)).

5. Cultures and subcultures differ in language tabus precisely because, from sub/culture to sub/culture, psychosocial controls differ. Our set (subset, subculture), as I was growing up, used no blasphemy--so we children were taught to avoid the company of blaspheming children, which meant all children not "like us," which meant, in addition to all "elements" (the all-purpose word for nonWASPs), poor WASPs. Yes, the classic use of the unspeakable in language. The churches are a cross-sectional subclass of the general society, so churchfolk are taught, largely unconsciously and non-verbally, what NOT to say; and, as the clergy are the primary and paid engenders of these language tabus, the stricture against language-fractures by clergy is very severe (including in ghetto and barrio churches, whose talk is so foreign to street-talk that they have a hellava time interesting young men, who suffer from double cultural-alienation).

6. In general American talk, we can now say "sex" but still not "s---." In his autobiography GROWING UP, Rus. Baker says "To call it 'sex' was to talk dirty. Everybody called it 'the facts of life.'" Hours after I encountered that statement, I saw what'll prove, I'll wager, the greatest Oscar-grabbing