

Harry's Rant of the Month

Word Problems

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We humanists have a problem, several problems. I call them "word problems." Several difficult words come to mind immediately: atheist, God, religion, creation, myth, belief. Let me share my own experience from forty-some years ago, when I took on the task of trying to change the way people use a certain word. The word is not as important as those I just listed, but I think you may find the story interesting.

The word is "reverend." The dictionary says, "worthy of reverence, deserving to be revered," and then it slides into the common usage – a title of respect for a clergyman. The word is an adjective, although some unaware persons use it as a noun, meaning simply "clergyman." I couldn't stand the title, or label, when people tried to apply it to me. Finally, I did what we were taught to do in seminary. I resorted to "word studies."

"Reverend." The word appears only once in the King James Version of the English Bible – in an obscure psalm, referring to YHWH, or God. "Holy and reverend is his name." The Hebrew word is translated in other places as "dreadful, fearful, awful, awesome [before my grandchildren's generation redid that word]." The Spanish translation of that verse makes it very plain: "Santo y terrible es su nombre." [Holy and terrible is his name.]

You calling me terrible? Dreadful? Awful? Only one is reverend, and that is God alone, I insisted in those days. And I really tried to get people to quit misusing the word. "Call me Mister." "Call me Harry." I found a few allies among my young colleagues, and we got so far as the presbytery level – that's the local assembly of pastors and elders who together act like a bishop in the Presbyterian Church. The Presbytery of Rio Grande went so far as to declare to the public all this word study stuff, and then to announce that only God is reverend, and then even to forbid all and sundry from applying the word to any mere human being. The story hit TIME MAGAZINE in an article, entitled, "Call Me Harry." My thirteen minutes of fame, I guess.

The result was not one ounce of change that I or anyone could perceive. People, and institutions, went right on calling mere humans "reverend." They're still doing it, to other people. I did get them to quit saying it of me. "Only God is reverend." And then I kept on thinking, and discovered that God is a myth, also, and the whole thing now lies somewhere between moot and ridiculous.