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RESPECT TOWARDS GOD AND NEIGHBOUR

A comment on Richard Sennett's book *Respect in a World of Inequality* and a reflection on the concept of the 'fear of the Lord'

If you went for a swim in the river Rhine and allowed yourself to float down the river, after some time, you would arrive in a country called 'The Netherlands'. This is a country where they do not speak German. It is a republic with a President, who is always a member of the House of Orange, and so it is called a monarchy! It is a country with a long tradition of tolerance. However, this tradition of tolerance is in danger of disappearing, partly because of the fear of Muslim terrorism. The Dutch Prime Minister, Jan Peter Balkenende, is very interested in promoting public discussion on values and norms. He stresses, repeatedly, the importance of being responsible and respectful.

'Respect' seems to be a popular word in all western countries at present. The American sociologist Richard Sennett published a book on respect in 2003: *Respect in a World of Inequality*. In the Christian tradition we find words such as 'reverence' and 'the fear of the Lord' that are quite close to the term 'respect'. **'Respect' is used as a kind of password to enter a society in which people who differ in religion, in political views, in social background, in education and income, can live together without too much violence.** However, from the perspective of the mimetic theory one may have some doubts as to whether the word 'respect' is as useful as it seems.

Respect, an ambiguous word

The word 'respect' comes from the Latin word 'respicere'. The word means: to look back, to look at something, to point something out. It also means: to care for someone. How do I look at someone, and how do I look at the traditional cultural rules and commandments? 'Respect' has to do with relationship between human beings. The original meaning of the word 'respect' is something like: standing in awe of the physical or bodily strength of a person, being fearful. Here the attitude of one person towards another is defined by fear. I am on the alert, for the other person may be a danger to me. "I have to watch my back constantly for fear of attack and keep my ears open for gossip about me".

Respect is a typically 'sacrificial' word. On the one hand, the word 'respect' expresses something positive: I accept the presence of another person even though they may differ from me in many ways. But, on the other hand, the root of this attitude is fear. I am afraid, because the other person may threaten me,

take my life, steal my property, turn me into an object of gossip or may use me as a scapegoat. A model can become an obstacle and a scapegoat is seen as both guilty and as a source of peace. In the same way the word 'respect' has a double meaning: to accept another person and to be afraid of him or her. Respect thus is ultimately grounded in fear, but in most cases this fear is covered up and remains hidden by the positive meaning of granting to the other person time and space to live and to develop themselves. Respect is seen as one of the pillars of civic society, of family and friendship and of any form of cooperation in the business community. However, the root of respect is fear, the fear of violence.

Two forms of respect

One can distinguish between two forms of respect:

The first form is the recognition of the dignity of the individual. Every human being has a right to be respected because each person is a human being. The right to exist cannot be taken away. This is one of arguments against capital punishment that quite rightly was abolished in most western countries.

Criminals have a right to be treated with justice and to be respected as human beings. Still, the other's existence can be a threat to me. I am not able to fathom another person completely. He or she may surprise me either in a pleasant way or in a destructive way. The 'other' human being inspires fear. Therefore, we keep some distance - the word 'respect' suggests distance - we know our place and in this place we feel secure. We are grateful to the other person who holds us in respect. I am still grateful to my father who told me that I should not try to work with my hands for I would not achieve very much. Instead, I should work with my head. While he worked with his hands, I read books, and both of us were pleased. I see this as a form of respect from my father's side.

The second form of respect is based on a person's achievements. For instance, I am impressed by his way of playing tennis or her ability to speak in public. I admire Nelson Mandela because of his high moral standard and his courage to speak out in difficult political and family situations. I yield precedence to someone who holds high political office, or who is the director of a company, or a leader in the Church. I have a deep respect for someone with only a few talents but who has used them to the best advantage.

However, behind this form of respect rivalry is lurking around the corner. If I express my great admiration for the Prime Minister or the Pope repeatedly, you might think that I would have liked to be Prime Minister or Pope myself, and it is likely that you would be right. In the same way when I criticise them, you might think again that I would have liked one of these positions for myself. I admire an object or beautiful natural scenery because someone or an organisation taught me to admire it. I may come to the point of desiring this object or piece of land, and start rivalling with the owner, which makes my desire even stronger. This kind of respect can turn easily into disrespect and

contempt. I try to depict the person whom I admire and envy, as a failure and a loser and try to discredit them as much as possible. We may be fascinated by the charisma and success someone enjoys, and yet we may be happy if this person is knocked off their pedestal.

Sennett

In his book 'Respect in a World of Inequality' Richard Sennett complains that our western society is deficient in respect. Generally, the ways to earn respect are: developing our abilities and skills, taking care of oneself and most of all paying back to others and to the community for their investment in our development. In our society respect is granted on the basis of achievement and not on the basis of birth, that is, noble birth. People who are not achievers receive little or no respect. We proclaim freedom and equality for all. The problem is that people do not have the same abilities or a family background that valued education from one generation to the next. I remember that George Steiner says in his book *Real Presences* that his father taught him Greek and Hebrew when he was still in primary school. Most people do not have such fathers or mothers and their gifts are more mediocre. As a society becomes richer, suspicion of those who remain poor increases. In private life dependence bonds people together, but in the public realm dependence is treated as shameful. In our western society autonomy is a cultural ideal and so asking for help is shameful. People feel demeaned, if they have to ask for help, because it shows their weakness. By contrast, people in Indian villages can appeal to each other for help whenever they are in need.

Inequality in power and income is on the increase because we are living in a world that demands more and more flexibility. Flexibility permits a particular exercise of inequality. The power given to decision makers increases and managers take decisions, on the basis of constantly changing information, without being dependent on the layers of bureaucracy below. And so, the execution of decisions can be both swift and precise. On the other hand, true democracy is always slow and is not welcome in more or less totalitarian institutions.

Both the welfare state and the American welfare system with its faith in the private sector demand bureaucratic institutions. The clients complain of being treated with a lack of respect by bureaucrats. They feel exposed when revealing their weaknesses and so feel that they are considered totally inadequate as whole human beings. Their experience of what it means not to have an income, to be unemployed, to be homeless, is not appreciated in any way. The bureaucrats decide what is good for their clients.

Sennett concludes that neither sheer goodwill nor institutional levelling would provide an answer to treating others with respect. Self-respect founded on craft cannot generate mutual respect on its own. Attacking the evils of inequality

cannot generate mutual respect either. According to Sennett, autonomy can be a recipe for equality if autonomy is interpreted as the capacity to treat other people as different from oneself. In this view autonomy means accepting what you do not understand in the other. Rather than an equality of understanding, a transparent equality, autonomy asks for an opaque equality. We grant medical doctors autonomy, when we accept that they know what they are doing, even if we do not understand it. The problem remains how the strong can practice respect toward those destined to remain weak.

Comment

Sennett does not make a distinction between the two forms of respect. Above all, he does not see that respect is based on fear of the other. The recipients of the welfare state or the clients of charities, all those who are weak and are in need, do not inspire fear in those on whom they are dependent. They do not pose a threat and the bureaucracy keeps a proper check on them. The American Constitution, an almost sacred document in the eyes of most Americans, was framed in 1787 in such a way that it provided protection for property against danger from the lower classes. Only the House of Representatives was elected directly and elections for this House take place every two years. The members of the Senate have a term of six years and they have more power than the members of the House of Representatives. At present they are elected directly, but the campaign costs so much that only the rich or those supported by the rich have any hope of being elected. So, it is no surprise that our societies are wanting in respect.

Concern

I prefer a society based on 'concern', or rather 'love', instead of one based on respect, and thus on fear. The first letter of St. John says in 4:18 'there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear' and Romans 8:15 says; 'For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption.' We do not need more respect in our society, but more mutual concern, more 'caritas', that is, love as a dynamic power between individuals and, also, love transformed into institutions and procedures. Human organisations always become frozen after some time and need to be revived again and again. A word such as 'respect' may be presented as a modern translation of the Christian message of love, but it needs to be criticized as well because from the perspective of the mimetic theory respect is the benevolent face of fear.

Fear of the Lord

The word respect seems close to the Scriptural concept of 'the fear of the Lord'. This concept emerges in the tradition of the book Deuteronomy and in the Wisdom literature. God is to be feared. There is no ambiguity here as in the

word 'respect'. God inspires fear in human beings. God is a 'mysterium fascinans et tremendum'. Originally the concept of 'the fear of the Lord' refers to a God who is sacred and thus violent. However, when God or his angel appears to a human being the first word is: 'do not be afraid'. The term 'the fear of the Lord' is used both in the Old and New Testament, but the revelation of God in Jesus Christ forces his followers to reinterpret this term. I quoted already one of the last documents of the New Testament, the first letter of St John that argues that love casts out fear.

Medieval theologians made a distinction between slavish fear and authentic or filial fear. According to Aquinas the slavish fear is the fear of being punished; filial fear is both the act of reverence and the fear of becoming separated from God. (I II, 67, 4, ad 2) Slavish fear is a bad thing in so far as it is slavish. It is not to be rejected completely for the fear of divine punishment can be seen as a kind of educational device: one starts by fearing punishment, but this fear can lead a person to filial fear. (II II 19, 4) The filial fear is not the fear of God but the fear of being separated from God. In this way medieval theologians transformed the original meaning of the term 'fear of the Lord'.

The interpretation of St. Francis of Assisi of the expression 'the fear of the Lord.' is even more surprising. St. Francis interprets the term 'fear of the Lord' as a 'genitivus subjectivus': We are not afraid of God, but God is afraid of us in the sense that God wants to give human beings space, time and freedom to be human beings and to devote themselves to one another and to God. God creates a distance and a difference that makes it possible for human beings to reflect God's image. So, to promote the freedom of human beings God remains hidden. The consequence of this is that human beings can only have a limited knowledge of God.

This God invites human persons to have a similar attitude towards their neighbours. Humans are asked to create a difference and a distance so that there will be a place for everybody to breathe and to be. Creating a distance is an act of love, for love makes people equal and maintains their differences.

The mimetic theory shows that both concepts, 'respect' and 'fear of the Lord', are ambiguous. It would be better to avoid both terms in today's religious, social and political language.

(2468 words)