

Reclaiming the Golden Rule for Public Life Proposal

February 2020 will be the eighth time that Evera participates in U.N. World Interfaith Harmony Week, with meditative walk and conversation on the Golden Rule. This year's focus is on 'Reclaiming the Golden Rule for Public Life'. Most if not all religions and secular philosophies teach this rule in one form or other: negative, 'don't treat others in ways in which you don't want to be treated yourself'; or positive, 'love God or the Greater Good and love your neighbour as yourself.' Most people practise probably this rule in their private life, but public life is increasingly governed by other rules such as 'the market demands' or 'ends justify means' or 'justice is what the law book says it is'.

Organized religions count their memberships in the billions, millions and thousands, and millions more participate in humanitarian movements : if those millions and billions of people can't break the stranglehold that prevents the Golden Rule to govern public life, who or what can? But they can only break what they understand.

Interfaith and intercultural conversations and actions focus constantly on breaches of the Golden Rule through racism, fundamentalist violence, gender discrimination and religious persecution, domestic violence and war, hunger and war on the environment. Our religious and humanist leaders time and again join in protest, to condemn violations of human rights and to take those responsible to task.

What is seldom or never addressed is the systemic way in which virtually everyone is implicated and complicit in this all-pervading desecration of the earth, nature and human life and dignity. Breathtakingly fast developments in all technological fields make all of us dependent on systems, some of which didn't even exist a quarter of a century ago. And those systems are increasingly dependent on what is left of the earth's and nature's resources, including the floor of the world's oceans.

Humanity needs to take itself to task, and as teachers and guardians of the Golden Rule, religions and philosophies need to play a decisive role in raising everyone's consciousness, to unmask and recognize what it is that takes humanity hostage on its road towards ultimate collapse. And I suggest that part of this role is to seriously address the transcendence implied in both the positive and negative reading of the Golden Rule: i.e. the love of God or Divine overflowing goodness, but also the rejection of its opposite: an evil that drains all that is true, beautiful and good out of people and this world, as long as it has a foothold here. An asymmetrical opposition, understandably, as evil can only feed on what is already there, whilst goodness generates goodness out of itself. But 'transcendent' nevertheless: a non-human, active, insidious and dark presence.

Just as our modern, individualized consciousness needs to find an adequate 'modern' understanding of what is meant by 'transcendent', 'God', the Highest, most sacred reality and so on, it needs also to find an adequate understanding of its unequal counterpart: evil is also experienced as 'transcendent' in the sense, that we experience its dark and oppressive presence as beyond our rational understanding.

The Holocaust and Hiroshima/Nagasaki have intensified the experience of evil as 'being', 'agent' or 'dark force', whilst moving 'rational understanding' out of reach. At present it are

poets, musicians, visual artists, novelists and filmmakers that evoke what reason cannot grasp, even though reason should never give up.

In contrast with singular events, the totalitarian character of public life is eminently accessible for rational understanding, but its presence as evil can only be experienced when one empathizes with the billions of fellow human beings who – without being aware of it or against their good will – are complicit in this insidious process. Modern evil has become deceptively ‘banal’ (Hannah Arendt), it makes all of us ‘guiltless guilty’ (Günther Anders).

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Notes:

‘Banal’ was the word by which Hannah Arendt concluded her report on Adolf Eichmann, responsible for the transportation of thousands of human beings to their agonizing deaths in the gas-chambers: not a single sign of empathy, of realizing the consequences of his work, having abdicated all capacity to think things through. Just an office worker following orders: banal.

‘Guiltless guilty’ were the words by which Günther Anders characterized the condition major Claude Eatherly found himself in when he realized the consequence of his role as navigator on the plane that detonated the bomb over Hiroshima. Nobody wanted to hear him, he was silenced by locking him up in a high security unit of an asylum. The Austrian philosopher Anders wrote to him, starting a correspondence that ended by Eatherly’s release. In his first letter, Günther Anders tells Eatherly, that his condition is something that in the foreseeable future all of us will find ourselves in: when technology will have become the dominant medium by which we act and interact, our deeds will inevitably have harmful consequences beyond our control; we will be ‘guiltless guilty’.

Hannah Arendt’s ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem’ and Günther Anders’ s ‘Burning Conscience’ were published in 1961, roughly 20 years after those manifestations of evil gave rise to them. More than 60 year later both have become more relevant than ever before. The kind of evil that men and women in public positions generate, consciously or unconsciously, can be identified, attributed and addressed. Civil society and the interfaith movement are alert and actively doing this.

The kind of evil, however, that makes everyone complicit, with little or no chance of ever knowing exactly where the harm is done, let alone the chance of empathizing with those affected, in other words, with little or no chance of ever being experienced (or thought of) as evil, is exactly the kind of evil that needs to be unmasked, identified and addressed if we want to break the vicious spiral that drives humanity and nature into the ground. And that bars the Golden Rule from governing our public life. School strikes, extinction rebellion and the movement of millions of individuals and groups working to turn the tide, are themselves dependent on the very systems that drive the destruction, and may be swallowed up by them.

Where evil is banal and ordinary, the chance of experiencing it as evil is low, but - at the same time - the chance of unmasking the system by which it operates should be quite high: there might be a raft of disciplines, other than religious and philosophical, needed for this insight. One can only responsibly and confidently dismantle a system, if one has identified – not another system – but the conditions that enable us to shape a society that functions for us rather than makes us function for it. In constitutional democracies, cultural and economic developments take increasingly place in a constitutional vacuum. Society is less and less identical with state.

There is an old wisdom that evil can be disarmed by naming it. For the purpose of this conversation I say:
‘indifference, thy name is evil!’

H.