

## **Reclaiming the Golden Rule for Public Life 2020**

*A World Interfaith Harmony Week* workshop, 9 February 2020

Location: **Evera** Beatties Road (off Forest Street) Trentham Victoria  
Australia

Program: 12 noon: arrival and lunch  
1.00 -2.30: meditative interfaith walk  
2.30 – 5pm: conversation

### **Introduction**

Theme and first sketch of the project began in November, with a flyer in Melbourne at the yearly Victorian Interfaith Networking Conference on the 17<sup>th</sup>, and the JCMA interfaith friendship walk a week later. On both occasions I received encouraging feedback. The Trentham Newsletter dedicated a column on the announcement and the Trentham Library had a display of relevant books as well as information on the World Interfaith Harmony Week and on the upcoming workshop.

Preparing for this workshop in February, I came to realize two things:

1. that it is in particular the negative version of the rule that needs to be reclaimed: ‘what is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow’.
2. Realizing the seriousness, the scale and the systemic nature of the ways our society makes us complicit in doing harm to others, whether we know or intend it or not, and realizing how deeply entrenched those patterns are, I have no word for this except ‘evil’.

Since the Holocaust and Nagasaki philosophers and religious teachers have become understandably silent in the face of unspeakable horror. The systemic way in which our civilization drives millions of farmers from their lands and whole populations from their countries and makes all of us dependent on means of communication, transport and a decent living, that deprive others from their livelihood and destroy the earth’s resources, needs to be addressed beyond the usual targets of our protests: autocrats and corporate bosses, corporations and institutions, interests and ideologies. The question becomes: what makes those autocrats and ideologies - and everything in between – possible? And how come that billions of human beings, practising the Golden

Rule in their private lives, need to live a public life which is shaped by other rules.

Just as the Golden Rule in its positive form has been extended with 'Love the Good', so in its negative form it may need to say: 'Do no Evil'. The opposition is not symmetrical: there is no end to boundless goodness, as Mother Theresa said, even 'echoes of kind words are endless'. Ending, voiding, sucking dry is inherent in evil, redemption or annihilation, but evil itself is bound to end. My suggestion is, however, that this is not our concern here: if we want to reclaim our capacity to say 'no' to evil effectively, we need to unmask the system(s) that drain the Golden Rule out of public life, and uncover/recover ways in which the Golden Rule has the potential to shape public life again, as it has done in a past in which the Golden Rule reigned long before it had got its name.

There is a third thing that I came to realize after the workshop when reflecting back on its context: World Interfaith Harmony:

3. In most if not all formulations of the Golden Rule, the self is the measure of one's concern

with the other. It's not just the Good, God and the neighbour, it's always also: you! Our

society encourages self-interest, power, wealth, self-indulgence, comfort, consumption,

but underneath this it makes us hate ourselves, resign to being part of the machinery,

conform, give up, suicide...

Reclaiming the Golden Rule for Public Life means also: reclaiming the dignity of oneself as human being, unique, individual, capable, full of potential, self-responsible and part of humanity itself. In other words: Love the Good, love God, love your Neighbour, and love Yourself.

This 'love thyself' has not been included in the official formulation of the Golden Rule, most probably because traditionally this has been implied. In an earlier - collective or tribal - consciousness, this implication must have been justified: our neighbours needs and wishes were probably quite similar to our own. In our highly individualized consciousness, however, it is the individual spirit, the true being that one aspires to become, that demands respect, in myself and in the other. This means that the way this love is to be expressed in practical terms may need to be differentiated with discernment: what I am used to, what comforts me, what I 'love' on this practical level might be quite different from what my neighbour needs or 'loves'. It is therefore only or

mostly where we meet as true individualities, that the love for my neighbour can be the same as the love for myself. And it is also therefore, that a contemporary formulation of the Golden Rule might need to be extended to explicitly include the 'Love Thyself'.

## **Report.**

**In attendance:** Judy Weatherhead, Ian McBean, Tao Bak, Glenda Holmes, Eddie Chambre, Andrew Stranieri, Michael Mweyo, Megan Young, Vicky Stock, Liz Burns, Henk Bak.

## **Arrival:**

Trentham is a country town ca 100km NW from the centre of Melbourne, hence a generous arrival/lunch time. Four participants arrived from Melbourne, one from Creswick, ca 40km from Trentham, and six, including myself, from within the Hepburn Shire.

## **Walk:**

After a brief introduction to meditation we walked part of the way along the 12 sites or shrines dedicated to the world's main religions and spiritual cultures, including aboriginal/indigenous spirituality. Spread out over a slightly undulating area of parkland of ca 3 hectares and located in a pattern developed over time, those spiritual sites are like islands in a sea, realizations of truth in an ocean of truth.

For the purpose of this project, I used the walk to point to some of the symbolisms by which different spiritual cultures identify themselves and to highlight some of the ways in which the Golden Rule is being expressed in the different teachings.

Symbolism: at the **Aboriginal** site there are 4 stones at the centre of a wider circle of little rocks. In the middle a roundish stone like a shallow dish in which a tall stone is standing upright, symbolizing Mother Earth and Father Heaven. Next to these, standing upright: a rather rectangular stone, representing the Law to the right, and an oblong triangular stone to the left, representing the generations from children who come to ancestors who have left. The main law in Aboriginal culture is *'sharing', nobody is outside it...*

We visited the **Dao** site and learned from its Jin-and-Yang symbol that everything is in flux and that dark is never so dark that there is not a spark of light in it and vice versa. I pointed to the Dao's resonance with the **Judaic**

Sabbath: God rested from His work on the seventh day and in the Tao tze King it says: *"learning when to stop is the way to avoid harm"*.

At the site of **Islam**, I drew attention to the fact, that religions haven't started in buildings, that the word Mosque means place, and that for the first ten years the Prophet prayed from Medina in the direction of Jerusalem. The Muslim form of the Golden Rule includes *'desire' for one's brother*, not just 'do'.

The site of the **Sikh** is waiting for a symbolic presence, which in my fancy would be a communal table, as: *'service to others is a sign of worship'*. The two swords in their sign identifies the Sikh as defenders of the teaching and defenders of the poor.

Members of the **Baha'i Faith** have formed a garden around a 'Beacon of Peace'. The garden, shaped by rocks and gravel, on the driest part of the land, as a nine pointed star, symbol of perfection: the numbers 1-9 as well as the zero, are formed as 'characters', each with its own shape and meaning; after the nine the universe of numbers consists of 'digits', hence the saying: the nine is the 'horizon of numbers'. I dwelled on this observation: how our society turns everything and everyone into numbers and digits, no names. One text on the Beacon of Peace says: "When a thought of war comes, replace it with a stronger thought of peace." This text reflects the difference between 'thinking' and 'having thoughts'. Thoughts come and go: a thought of war may come and go, so may a thought of peace, both without my active involvement, but 'replacing a thought with another thought' requires my effort and sustained commitment...

I pointed to the relevance of the **Shinto** expression of the Golden Rule: *'The heart of the other is a mirror. See there your own form'*. This is reflected in the 'Teikei' movement: *'see the face of the farmer on my bread'*, initiating the 'farmers markets'...

We visited the **Hindu** site and the Humanist site, where I had placed a lantern, as my choice of symbol: the philosopher Diogenes walked on one clear day on the market of Athens with a burning lantern. Asked what he was doing he replied: *'I am looking for a human being!'* Here the Golden Rule was expressed as Immanuel Kant's maxim, in short: *'never treat another human being only as a means to your end!'* Which seems exactly the way, public life is in breach with this rule.

We concluded the walk in the centre, which we refer to as '**Ocean of Life**'.

When the spiritual teacher, Shin Gwydiion Fontalba, initiated 'Earth Festivals', 1997-99, in Switzerland, he gave them as motto: 'Many Rivers, One Ocean'.

The main spiritual cultures were presented in a circle of 8 tents, with the main

conference taking place in a large marquee. Shin's evening walk with participants along those eight tents, after a start in the middle, became the inspiration for this meditative walk project at Evera, Trentham, since 20007. Later Shin named his teaching: 'School of the Ocean of Life'. And he explained, that working in and with the spirit requires that one learns to swim. Here we concluded the walk, as it was time for the conversation, but meanwhile we had gathered enough information, how the Golden Rule has been expressed differently in different cultures, and how our dominant culture is in need of reclaiming this for our public life.

### **Conversation**

For most of the time between 2.30 and 5pm we were with ten; only the last half hour a eleventh participant joined our circle around a small table with burning candle and a flower.

First a brief introduction about the origin of the forms in which the Golden Rule is mostly known: 'Love God, love your neighbour as yourself', to be found in the Jewish Bible and in the Gospels, with the story of the Good Samaritan, as well as the story of Hillel's reply to the Gentile, who wanted to know the law within the time he could stand on one foot: 'What is hateful to you do not do to your fellow.' Both forms were 'crystallizations' of the law, that had then reigned for more than thousand years.

To keep ourselves on track I then handed out a sheet with 5 questions, which got the conversation going:

#### ***1. From which-whom or what does the Golden Rule need to be 'reclaimed'?***

The answer went in two directions, outwardly: from governments on e.g. federal, state and local levels, and from power and greed corrupting the process of democracy; and inwardly: from our consciousness, which I understood as a wake-up call to the urgency of this need. In hindsight it may also mean the need to include 'love yourself' consciously in the formulation and understanding of the Golden Rule as suggested earlier in this report.

#### ***2. If the Golden Rule no longer governs public life, what does?***

Here the answers converged: power, greed – zest for instant gratification – systems at play currently, in both government and private sectors – consumerism with a focus on individualism and: "In times gone by, we lived in communities that functioned as such i.e. with a sense of collective. With our thriving consumerism that sense of community has diminished, that system is crumbling".

#### ***3. If all citizens are 'equal before the law', what governs areas of public life, where citizens are not equal?***

Here the answer was simply: ethics and common sense, flowing into the answers to the next question:

**4. If the legal foundation of a society' government is called a 'constitution', what would be the term used for the foundation of lawful arrangements that govern areas of society not (or not directly) governed by the constitution?**

- Areas of government business and non-government business might be a systemic way of looking at it;
- Learning in the family home via modelling etc., an example of non-government business;
- Where are our kids learning ethics from?
- In a lecture for the UN in Geneva, Vandana Shiva called for a new social contract, which at the moment is not there.
- In Victoria the 'Purple Sage' project initiated and structured by Mary Crook of the Women's Trust, at the turn of the century, participants were asked what a new 'social compact' should be.
- In a bill of rights the economy and the environment should be included as well.
- Things that need to happen that you cannot legislate for such as family day to day life.
- A reference to the Dalai Lama's comment: not to look for religions for teaching ethics.

Note: the term 'social contract' was introduced by Jean Jacques Rousseau, before the French Revolution, as the opposite of the 'absolute', 'God-given' authority of the King. Authority should be based on a contract between a people and its rulers.

**5. What has religion or any spiritual world-view to do with any of these questions?**

At this point the question was answered with another question: "Spiritual teachers of the Golden Rule; how relevant are they? Have they changed to accommodate our current world?" One participant expressed his doubt: community and the environment are the central issues now, and the trees and the birds are our neighbours, too. Which then also meant, that the environment itself is sacred, and this not only in indigenous cultures. In aboriginal cultures, however, social justice and the natural environment were and are never separate concerns.

On reflection, in hindsight: If the majority of the world population, i.e. billions of human beings follow their religious teachings, including the Golden Rule, in their private lives, the question remains: has religion become so irrelevant for public life, that it has allowed the Golden Rule to be overruled in public life? The expressions of the Golden Rule, that have the potential of becoming very

relevant for our present 'totalitarian' society, as highlighted on our previous meditative walk, were apparently not significant enough to warrant a mention in answer to this fifth question. This is not to lay blame or identify culprits, but it brings us back to an answer given to question 1: it may be a matter of raising consciousness.

Before we moved on with our conversation, I pointed to a single expression of the Golden Rule, as understood in Jainism:

“Know that violence is the root cause of all miseries in the world,  
Violence, in fact, is the knot of bondage.” (No source)  
and  
“Neither does he (the sage) cause violence to others  
nor does he make others to do so.” (Acaranga Sutra 5. 101.2)

This is to my knowledge the only expression of the Golden Rule, which extends its concern beyond the other to others in the chain of causation. It is this 'making others to do so' that seems to be built in into the way our contemporary society works, via markets, media, ideologies, political processes and so on.

At this point I passed round another hand-out: expressions of the Golden Rule as 'crystallization' of time honoured laws on one side, and on the other: an attempt to formulate something like a condition for a new Golden Rule, a potential, like a 'seed', taken from the work of three prominent thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Simone Weil and Pope Pius XI, as quoted by F. Schumacher. (See attachment).

All three authors formulated their thoughts in response to the totalitarian developments of the time:

In his essays on human energy (1930's) Teilhard sought to envisage a unity in which the individual would thrive rather than shrink under the pressure of a collective. I contrasted his 'union toward the spirit' with 'union toward matter': if the former differentiates, the latter obliterates, generates indifference.

In the first chapter of her essay: The Need for Roots (1943) Simone Weil placed 'obligations' before 'rights', identified 'respect for human dignity' as the only truly universal obligation in society, and listed a number of 'soul- needs' which need to be recognized and fostered to realize this respect: the last, most sacred of those needs is: Truth – the first and foundation of all is Order. The way she sketches rather than defines 'order' stands with surgical precision in opposition to the 'order' under totalitarian regimes, where human beings are

inwardly torn apart by conflicting obligations to the point where even suicide has its evil consequences for the ones one intends to protect.

In his *Quadragesimo Anno* (40<sup>th</sup> year) of 1931, Pius XI responded to the rise of socialist/communist totalitarianism, by summarizing what Pope Leo XIII 40 years earlier had formulated as the 'subsidiarity' principle, which again 40 years later was used by F.Schumacher in his 'Small is Beautiful' as the first principle for a general theory of large organizations.

The above explanations left little time for discussion and I realise that 'lecture' would have probably been a better term for this project than 'workshop'. In the short discussion that followed the subsidiarity principle was recognized but then also extended beyond 'smaller organizations' to include the individuals themselves: the need to have space for common sense and ethical judgement was briefly mentioned and surfaced in other conversations later on as well. A special mention was made of the need for public servants to be ethically and professionally competent to make decisions based on their own judgement rather than unthinkingly following orders. In the last 50 years the public service here in Australia, has increasingly lost its role as the repository of our country's collective memory of how to govern, a process that political journalist Laura Tingle has reported on in depth in an Quarterly Essay on our country's political amnesia. I suggested that the brilliant TV series "Yes Minister" and "Yes Prime Minister" might have something to do with it. Too much influence of the public service might not be a good thing, but too little might even be worse...To this point of ethical and professional judgement vs just following orders, I refer to Hannah Arendt's realization from the process of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, 1961: how 'bana'l evil can be. Playing a major role in transporting thousands of human beings to the gas chambers – just following orders, true to his oath to Hitler.

Just before we finished, I circulated another double sided hand-out, to be read at one's leisure after the workshop: 1. a summary of Hannah Arendt's understanding of the 'totalitarian logic', which reads as the exact negation of Simone Weil's sketch of 'order'. 2. a prophesy by Günther Anders, who foresaw a time, where we all would be in the position of the navigator who detonated the bomb above Hiroshima: 'UngUILTY guilty', complicit in 'making other do violence', whether we know it or intend it or not, following the anonymous 'orders' of a 'totalitarian' society...

Another flaw in the workshop: it ended rather abruptly - according to program - at 5pm, which means that I should have prepared to finish at least a quarter earlier, to allow for a brief reflection and meditative closure.



## **Conclusion**

As usual this project was part of 'work-in-progress'. Even though I myself most probably got the most benefit from it, from the concentration and contributions of my companions at the lunch, on the walk and in the conversation I gather that the project has been meaningful for others as well. The troubles that it was intended to address are familiar enough, but the angle from which I attempted to approach it is not often taken at all. I was happy that there was hardly any 'bashing' at all: corporate bosses, corrupt governments, autocrats and so on, the list of culprits would have been endless and the time was short. Not so much 'evil' itself, but the systemic nature of what seems to make those totalitarian tendencies possible should become accessible to our consciousness, if we put our mind to it.

In the interfaith/intercultural movement our religious leaders are good and articulate at protesting and expressing outrage where indignation is due, and workers in the field do what they can to remove or alleviate the burdens that an indifferent and totalitarian society places on the most vulnerable and everyone else. Reclaiming the Golden Rule from such society requires something else: humanity seems to be bursting with good will, but asleep to what is actually holding it back from realizing these good intentions.

In order to raise their consciousness to a level adequate to this new task, religions may have to revert to their humble origins with their inherent capacity for renewal as well as to the wide range of current disciplines and their professionals with their 'finger on the pulse' of everyday living. Mental health professionals will be the first to tell us, how vital the role of 'love thyself' is in the lives of the mentally 'ill'. Without 'love thyself' there cannot be empathy. Perhaps our society itself suffers a mental illness, in Barack Obama's diagnosis called 'empathy deficit'.

'Restore love thyself as integral part of the Golden Rule' – may become the theme for our next project.

With thanks to all participants for their presence and contributions, and special thanks to librarian Diana Swann, who initiated and put up an informative display in the Trentham Library, with information on World Interfaith Harmony Week, the Reclaiming the Golden Rule Workshop and a rich selection of relevant books from the Central Highlands Library collection; to Tao Bak for taking photos along the walk, to Michael Mweyo for taking notes, to my neighbour and friend Sharlene Wihone for mowing the land as well as to Judy Wheatherhead and Eddie Chambre for preparing the space, for organizing the lunch and their ongoing support. And to my daughter Tineke Bak for helping

me putting this report into the right format for the World Interfaith Harmony Week organizers. And my apologies to all for the shortcomings in this project.

Henk Bak convener  
Trentham 2 March 2020

Henk Bak Hist.Drs. Nijmegen nl

After retiring as senior lecturer, Monash University, in 1996, and after teaching since 1959 at high schools, teacher training in the Netherlands, and since 1978 CAE and UNI in Melbourne, I continued in Trentham a 'Religious Conversations' project that I had convened at the Caulfield Campus (1994-6). I was born in the Netherlands 1931 and studied philosophy, theology, and history at the Catholic University now Radboud University, Nijmegen, where in 1964 I formulated the theme of an interdisciplinary/international conference as 'Ecumene of Cultures'. Emphasis on diverse spiritual and cultural contexts of history in general and of craft, design and art in particular has informed my studies and teaching over more than 50 years. The meditative walk project from 2007 onwards has focused on the Golden Rule and on how different cultures and religions/philosophies have expressed this rule in their own way, revealing a variety of practical applications and so on.

#### Attachments:

- Flyer
- The 5 questions
- Formulations of the Golden Rule as 'crystallization' and as 'seed'
- Hannah Arendt's 'totalitarian logic' and Günther Anders' s first letter to Major Claude Eatherly
- Photos of library display and of the meditative walk