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# Reciprocity and Grace in the Golden Rule

## Proverbial Wisdom as Source for Intercultural Dialogue and Moral Theology

*Grietje Dresen*

### Introduction

After a school committee meeting some other mothers and I came to talk about our relationship to the Roman Catholic Church. This was not a regular topic at school committee meetings, but they knew it concerned me. One mother said she didn't see anything in Roman Catholic faith anymore. The last straw for her was the weekly prayer, right before Holy Communion, with the phrase: 'Lord, I am not worthy...' Her entire Catholic education, and her resistance to it, were condensed in this formula. Somewhat later we came to talk about the awful things that can happen to children these days, for example one mother worked as a nurse in a children's hospital. In that context the first mother said she believed that if some such terrible thing were to happen to one's own child, one would be given 'strength according to one's cross' (strength to bear, *kracht naar kruis*, in Dutch). The spontaneity and conviction with which she uttered that traditional religious saying touched me. That much she retained of her Catholic background, I thought. If one has a saying like that ready at hand and really feels that way, then surely that is a great treasure, whether one uses it in a religious sense or not.

This article is about the living ethos expressed in current moral or religious proverbs. As a moral theologian I find this - often barely conscious - ethos fascinating. The ethical systems within philosophy and theology often lack connection with a lived ethos, or worse, can even conceal and cripple that ethos through their complexity and mutual incompatibility. Of course moral theology and moral philosophy can not do without systematic reflection; but any reflection worth the name, whether historical, analytical or hermeneutical, that wishes to retain its relevance to human life and society, should begin and end with lived practice, in this case lived morality. Proverbs are of course not the only, and hardly the most vital place of encounter with morality. As I shall illustrate shortly, they constitute a preliminary phase of ethics: ethics of the common-or-garden variety. As such, however, current and morally relevant proverbs provide useful insight into the tried

and tested 'emotional economy'<sup>1</sup> of cultures, an insight that can clarify both the ethos of a particular culture and the dialogue between cultures.

This article attempts such a clarification in various ways. In the first part, which is mainly historical, I shall explain why proverbs as expression of everyday wisdom fell out of favour intellectually, and were devalued to the level of popular or pedagogical clichés. The conclusion of the first part - and that of the second part - reflects my firm conviction that in this day and age moral theology cannot afford to bypass (moral) pedagogy. For the sake of clarifying what can still inspire us and bind us together, people need to learn, preferably at the earliest possible age, to talk to one another about what is important to them and why. Therefore I conclude this first part with a proposal to use current proverbs as a point of departure for intercultural philosophical discussion at schools. In the second part of this article I reflect more substantially and hermeneutically on the way in which proverbial wisdom could be relevant for theology, i.e. on the way a seemingly sober proverb can disclose everyday experiences of care and gracious love. In this part I consider more closely a proverb that occurs in many cultures: the so-called Golden Rule. Using Paul Ricoeur's layered interpretation of the Golden Rule in *Oneself as Another*, I intend to show how complex - both intuitive and concrete, as well as reflectively refined and abstract - the insight in a seemingly simple proverb as the Golden Rule can be.

### **I Proverbs as expression of everyday ethos and source for intercultural dialogue**

In the example given at the beginning of this article, the Dutch expression 'strength according to one's cross' was used quite incidentally. In this incidental fashion, we use more proverbs than we realise. Sayings of this kind constitute the deposit of everyday life experiences, but owe their transmission to their catchy, stylised form. They constitute a condensed and - in the case of living proverbs - recognisable expression of how, in a particular culture, emotions are cultivated, forms of behaviour appreciated and existential experiences located within the framework of a particular understanding of humane nature, the world, and God.<sup>2</sup> Insofar as proverbs constitute the deposit of a culture's reflection on human action and the *condition humaine*, including conceptions of good and evil, happiness and unhappiness, they may be regarded as a non-academic form of ethics. Proverbs have their roots in daily life, but they also have a trans-cultural aspect. Many expressions

<sup>1</sup> The term derives from the sociological oeuvre of Norbert Elias.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. P. Berger & T. Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 87; C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), and Id., "Common Sense as a Cultural System", *Antioch Review* 35 (1975), 5-26.

recur in comparable formulations in various languages and cultures.<sup>3</sup>

To the insight that proverbs interpret the ethos of a people (and in the case of illiterate peoples even constitute a unique source) we owe the most extensive and well-financed projects for collecting and documenting proverbs. Missionaries and missions were eager to employ local proverbs as a point of contact for the communication of the Christian message.<sup>4</sup> In this article my interest is not missionary (at least not in the traditional sense), but ethical. I am interested both in living proverbs as an expression of everyday ethos, and in the question of which attitude to life and what values might be transmitted through proverbs. Even more relevant for moral theology is the intercultural aspect of proverbs, that is to say, the question whether and how widely prevalent proverbs could serve as a starting point for intercultural dialogue, and as a pointer in the quest for 'universally' shared moral assumptions.

Before submitting these questions to closer scrutiny, I must consider a phenomenon that, in literate Europe, influences the reception and appreciation of proverbs. Due to the proliferation of worldviews (as a result of social differentiation and the prevalence and accessibility of *written* texts) and a typically Western, enlightened preference for individuality and originality, the use of proverbs has lost much of its power. That is not to say that proverbs have become totally extinct in pluriform and 'developed' countries, but the repertoire has been drastically depleted<sup>5</sup>, and the use of proverbs is easily experienced as old-fashioned or preachy.

#### *Enlightened disdain for proverbs as cliché*

Let me illustrate the above statement by means of the example with which I began. The woman who so naturally used the expression *strength according to one's cross* undoubtedly picked it up from her Catholic upbringing. I doubt whether young people know the expression. And to many people it will sound like a moral cliché - to the elderly because of its association with the traditional glorification of suffering, to young people because of their unfamiliarity with glorified suffering. The same applies to other Christian sayings involving the concept of the cross, like '*Ieder huisje heeft zijn kruisje*' ('each house has its cross') However, it cannot be said that the insight verbalised through this proverb could have no meaning in our

<sup>3</sup> Cf. H. V. Cordry, *The Multicultural Dictionary of Proverbs* (Jefferson N.C. & London: McFarland & Comp., 1997); *The Prentice Hall Encyclopedia of World Proverbs*, ed. W. Mieder, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> There are already more than 1000 written collections of African proverbs. Since 1994, the African Proverbs Project has coordinated the research. This project stimulates research and the publication of books, bibliographies, and electronic information (on CD-Rom and the Internet). Information and links via <http://www.afriprov.org>.

<sup>5</sup> See for details W. Mieder, "Paremiological Minimum and Cultural Literacy", in W. Mieder (ed.), *Wise Words. Essays on the Proverb* (New York & London: Garland, 1994), 297-316, passim.

time. Thus the French philosopher Luc Ferry begins his best-seller *L'homme-Dieu* with a story from the (no less popular) Tibetan Book of the Dead, in which a comparable insight is expressed.<sup>6</sup> Apparently, what can no longer be said through a traditional proverb can be said in the form of a Buddhist tale. Why did the verbalisation of insights through proverbs fall out of favour to the extent that it did?

Historical research into the distribution of proverbs in Europe has shown that, in *learned* circles, the use of proverbs has declined noticeably since the second half of the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> Before that time even great authors like Villon, Cervantes, Rabelais, Chaucer and Shakespeare, repeatedly refer to the moral wisdom of proverbs. Under the influence of Romanticism in particular, a change set in first and foremost among intellectuals and in literature. In Romanticism an explicit preference for individuality and originality emerged, especially as far as the expression of emotions and existential experiences was concerned. Proverbs were increasingly regarded as something rather coarse, belonging to the culture of the simple and unlearned. In intellectual circles there emerged, as a kind of substitute, great enthusiasm for aphorisms, pointed sayings by means of which many 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers gave expression to their individual wit. These aphorisms were subsequently collected in many forms. Thus they in turn began to play the role of proverbs for the intellectual elite. During the second half of the nineteenth century another predilection - now for the utterances of famous men - was added to this.

In Europe, and certainly in the Netherlands, nearly everyone is by now literate. The literate masses are familiar with the aforementioned aphorisms and quotations in the form of the (now likewise disparaged) 'Success Diary' sayings. As a matter of fact, Success Diaries rarely include vernacular proverbs. Proverbs can be found on decorated tiles in pubs or toilets, in paremiological studies and dictionaries, and in schoolbooks and other lowly valued literary genres. More common are *variations* on proverbs that serve as headlines or attention grabbers in newspapers or other

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<sup>6</sup> A young woman, obsessed with the wish that her deceased son should come to life again, approaches the Buddha for help. Compassionately, he says: 'There is but one remedy for the unhappiness oppressing you. Go to the city and get me a mustard seed from a home in which nobody has ever died...' The conclusion is predictable. There are more than enough mustard seeds, but in every house where the woman calls, she hears a story about the heartache that had struck the inhabitants. When she returns to the Buddha, she is already on the Way: She has learned that no one is spared suffering. It is that insight, and into the source of suffering (attachment to transient things), which softens the suffering and constitutes the beginning of enlightenment. L. Ferry, *De God-mens of de zin van het leven* (Amsterdam: Ambo, 1998), 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> I follow the extensive article of an authority in the field, James Obelkevich: "Proverbs and Social History", in Mieder (ed.), *Wise Words*, 211-252.

forms of public communication. Graffiti artists, for example, display a certain preference for such distorted proverbs.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, young people are still familiar with quite a few sayings, but they prefer to use them in new ways so that a shift of meaning occurs. Young people employ familiar but distorted proverbs in order to give their own texts more rhetorical force - more authority, legitimacy or intensity; the distortion of the old saying and its surprise effect is used to draw attention to one's very own, new text.<sup>9</sup> But from where, then, are these old sayings picked up, if they are out of favour in the 'higher' culture?

### *Mother tongue*

The sporadic research<sup>10</sup> mapping the distribution of proverbs in Western societies suggests that, in an *urban* context, it is especially women who use them, for pedagogical purposes informally, in daily life, or formalised, within individual or group instruction.<sup>11</sup> The use of proverbs in these contexts seems to have a predominantly - but not exclusively - moral-pedagogical function.<sup>12</sup> By means of proverbs, values and codes of conduct are mnemonically inscribed, carved into the memory. In this context, proverbs often represent a 'motherly' wisdom.<sup>13</sup> In a pedagogical context there is less of the intellectual disdain for the moralistic quality of proverbs. After all, everyday interaction and education cannot but consist for a great part in the exchange of moral ' clichés'. Moreover, educators tend to revert unconsciously to the example of those who brought them up. Until recently, that example came especially from the mother, simply because she was the one who was most often present. Even if a mother rarely uses proverbs *explicitly*, children will still tend to remember from among the proverbs they are taught later - for instance in school - those that link up with what they already know: the ones that, as it were,

<sup>8</sup> J. Nierenberg, "Proverbs in Graffiti. Taunting Traditional Wisdom", in Mieder (ed.), *Wise Words*, 543-561.

<sup>9</sup> Thus is the conclusion of Nierenberg, "Proverbs in Graffiti", 558.

<sup>10</sup> Over the past two decades, the interest in proverbs as in popular culture has increased. Since 1984, the journal *Proverbium. Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* is published (completed with *Supplement Series* since 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Obelkevich, "Proverbs and Social History", 216. That this could be different in agrarian contexts is deduced especially from the fact that in agrarian cultures many (often warning) proverbs about women circulate. However, this undeniable phenomenon does not have to mean that in those contexts men use proverbs more regularly than do women. Probably women use gender-neutral agrarian proverbs at least as frequently. The fact that fewer proverbs have been passed down with an *anti-male* bias could point to the conclusion that women, for whatever reason, are less inclined to create such a paremiological corpus of warnings against men. Or (and this seems more likely) that such a corpus *did* exist, but has not been preserved in written form; for instance because particular sayings were not recognised as current ones, or because the collectors did not have access to female communities.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the examples reported in Mieder, "Paremiological Minimum", 299 and 303-304.

'click' with their conscience.

Indeed, many proverbs only acquire meaning at a mature age, or in the context of some special occurrence,<sup>14</sup> because the proverbs themselves derive from comparable life situations. Thus a proverb like '*Een mens lijdt nog het meest door het lijden dat hij vreest*' ('People suffer most from the suffering they fear') can lie dormant in the sub-conscious for decades, and then suddenly, in a concrete situation, provide insight into one's own anxiety. Something similar probably applies to all 'religious' proverbs, that is to say, all those proverbs that testify to an active and positive trust in a power that transcends the human actor (like *I do my best, God does the rest*), and even more so at a time when trusting faith in God is no longer taken for granted.

### *Proverbs as point of departure in intercultural philosophical education*

However, these last comments are not meant to suggest that it would therefore be senseless to learn religious or 'sapiential' proverbs at an early age. On the contrary, the 'empty' experiential knowledge, formulated by others and inscribed in memory in the form of a proverb, cannot only be *filled with meaning* at a later stage, but can also *itself* offer meaning in the course of that process, just as other, at first uncomprehended ritual forms and actions do. At those moments when fitting words are sought for extreme experiences, experiences like grief, jealousy or intense longing, the meaning thus offered by a proverb can provide something to hold on to, a meaning that might otherwise have been discovered only after much searching. Therefore I hope that the teaching of proverbs will not be sacrificed because of the relentless march of modernisation in schooling. I even see new and interesting possibilities for the use of proverbs in education; not so much in language education, but in religious or philosophical ('view of life') education, especially at schools attended by students of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

It could be interesting, precisely in such culturally mixed schools, to let children from the senior primary or junior secondary levels discuss well known moral and sapiential proverbs from their cultures. They could, for instance, first interview their parents (or grandparents) as a homework assignment. Probably they would have to bring along basic lists of proverbs from their cultural background, compiled with the help of immigrant language teachers.<sup>15</sup> The provision of lists does of course have a directing influence, but that need not be an objection, since the aim is not representative paremiological research, but to create an opportunity for (inter-generational

<sup>14</sup> Cf. T. B. Rogers, "Psychological Approaches to Proverbs. A Treatise on the Import of Context" in Mieder (ed.), *Wise Words*, 159-181.

<sup>15</sup> Research has shown that people are incapable of collecting many proverbs 'dry', i.e. outside of their contexts. However, this does not reveal much about the number of proverbs they actively know or would possibly use in situations calling for them. Cf. Mieder, "Paremiological Minimum", 300.

and inter-cultural) dialogue on the meaning of proverbs that children understand and appreciate. In the 'interviews', they could search for the proverbs that their parents still know, might possibly use, and, most of all, do appreciate, i.e. recognise as expressions of their (often barely conscious) view of life. Reports of the interviews and the children's reactions on them could then be the occasion for further discussion in class: Do the children grasp what a particular proverb intends to convey? Can they explicate it in their own words? Can they relate it to concrete situations? Is the idea contained in it recognisable to them or not, and if not, why not? Which proverbs recur, albeit sometimes in variations, in different cultures?<sup>16</sup>

In the second part of the present article I focus on the actual content of a proverb that would certainly be included in any such inventory: the Golden Rule. In the Netherlands the Golden Rule attained the status of a colloquial proverb only in the negative formulation: *Do not do unto others what you do not wish done to you*. This negatively formulated version is sometimes called the *Silver Rule*.<sup>17</sup> But whether golden or silver, the adjective makes clear that we are dealing with a rule that is regarded as extremely valuable. In *The Declaration of a Global Ethic*, compiled by Hans Küng, it is even claimed that this rule - whether in positive or negative form - 'should be the irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for families and communities, for races, nations and religions'.<sup>18</sup> What makes the Golden Rule so golden?

## II The Golden Rule. Everyday ethos of mutuality, pre-ethical experience of gift

The Golden Rule in the negatively formulated version already appears in the sayings of Confucius who lived in the sixth century before Christ.<sup>19</sup> A variation on the rule can be found in the Tao Te Ching, from the fourth century before Christ, in which the even more ancient Taoist tradition found written expression.<sup>20</sup> Here I limit

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Rogers, "Psychological Approaches", 170-171, Cf. for an example of such a discussion of proverbs in an educational (but not explicitly multi-cultural) setting; referring to J. Pasamanick, "Talk Does Cook Rice. Proverb Abstraction Through Social Interaction", *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 44 (1983), 5-25.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. by J. Topel in "The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31): The Inescapable Radicalness of Christian Ethics", *Theological Studies* 59 (1998) 3, 475-485.

<sup>18</sup> *The Declaration of a Global Ethic. Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 3 (1993) 2, 101-113, 106. The Declaration was submitted to the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, 1993.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. J. Wattles, *The Golden Rule* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch. 2. Around the same time, the underlying idea of the Rule was formulated - and passed on through oral transmission - in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions; the central concept of *Dharma* or ordinance of life rests upon a comparable notion. In Vedic writings this thought appears even earlier.

<sup>20</sup> Topel, "The Tarnished Golden Rule", 482.



myself, due to my poor knowledge of other traditions, to (recent) Western interpretations of the rule. So this is no round-table discussion. My exploration is meant as an example of hermeneutical reflection on proverbs and, as such, as a contribution to a contextual moral theology that is both culturally and inter-culturally sophisticated, i.e., capable both of incorporating everyday concerns and of putting them into comparative perspective.

### *An ethos of reciprocity*

In *Oneself as Another* Paul Ricoeur implicitly corrects the principle of mutuality based on exchange (or even retaliation) that Albrecht Dihle<sup>21</sup> pointed to as origin of the Rule.<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur refers to the Golden Rule in his theory of the moral self. In that theory Ricoeur distinguishes between three phases or levels of moral reasoning. The first and central phase is a substantial exploration of the good, in which three dimensions can in turn be distinguished: the question concerning the good life, the question of the good life *with and for others*, and the question of the good life *in community* (the classical *bonum commune*) expressed in institutional terms. These first, 'substantial' dimensions of the good must be tested and purified with reference to (far more procedurally elaborated and institutionally expressed) criteria of the right and the just. This critically tested determination of the good and the right must then, in the third phase, be applied in a concrete situation with the help of practical wisdom or *phronèsis*. The Golden Rule plays an important role especially in the second dimension of the first phase, that is to say, in determining what the good life with and for others is. Ricoeur quotes both the negatively formulated rule of the Jewish tradition<sup>23</sup>, and the positive formulation in Lk. 6:31 and Mt. 7:12, and assumes continuity between these two. He localises this continuity in the formal structure of reciprocity in both formulas. In both cases he perceives a resemblance between the principle of the Golden (or Silver) Rule, and the formulation of the commandment to love one's neighbour in Lev. 19:18 and Mt. 22:39 (and parallels).

However, in *Oneself as Another*, where he seeks to develop an autonomous philosophical discourse, he gives special attention to the background of the aforementioned formal structure of reciprocity, and concentrates less on the possible

<sup>21</sup> A. Dihle, *Die Goldene Regel. Eine Einführung in die Geschichte der antiken und frühchristlichen Vulgäretik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 110.

<sup>22</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago & London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992). Transl. of *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990). Cf. Ricoeur's explicit discussion of Dihle's classical thesis in P. Ricoeur, *Liebe und Gerechtigkeit/Amour et Justice* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990), 50-51. Ricoeur and Dihle refer to the same traditions, namely the classical-philosophical, Jewish and Christian traditions of the Rule.

<sup>23</sup> Thus in the book Tobit (4:15) and in the influential Jewish Bible exegetes Hillel en Philo, both from the first century.

theological significance of the resemblance with the commandment of love. The latter he interprets, not as a peculiarity of *content*, but in terms of a meta-ethical 'economy of the gift', in which 'love is connected to the "naming of God"'.<sup>24</sup> Such an economy of the gift transcends the (autonomous) determination of the good and the right, but without disqualifying it. It is precisely this strict distinction between an autonomous *dynamic of reciprocity* and a biblically inspired *dynamic of abundance* that has elicited criticism, as we shall see.

Ricoeur places the mutuality or symmetry that the Golden Rule assumes against the background of a more original dissymmetry: the (grammatically retained) dissymmetry between the one who causes to undergo, and the one who undergoes. This dissymmetry includes, among other things, the dissymmetry of violence, of destructive ways of acting towards others. The negative formulation of the Golden Rule calls for an end to this violence in a way reminiscent of the negative commandments in the Law ('Thou shalt not...'), but formulated on the basis of an everyday context of kinship and care. Thus the Golden Rule - 'one of those received notions that the philosopher does not have to invent, but to clarify and justify'<sup>25</sup> - fulfils a transitional function between a concrete and substantial ethos of care and concern (*solicitude*), and a more abstract formulation of norms in the form of a law.<sup>26</sup> As such the Golden Rule also mediates between a more substantial, eudaemonistic tradition in ethics, and the more formalistic tradition since Kant. In order to illustrate this mediating function, Ricoeur elaborates on Kant's critique of the insufficiently formal character of the Golden Rule and on Kant's transformation of the Rule into his categorical imperatives. The Kantian imperatives<sup>27</sup> call for reciprocity in relation to a supposed, generalised other. The call to reciprocity in the Golden Rule, however, originated as the answer to a concrete dissymmetry - an answer emanating from a material ethos of care and concern. In the rule of 'abstract' reciprocity, we discern the echo of that solicitude that is familiar with the concrete differences and the mutual dependence between people, but also with the potential of violence between them.<sup>28</sup>

Ricoeur is, first of all, interested in the Golden Rule as expression of an 'ethical sense', a 'benevolent spontaneity'<sup>29</sup> connected with self-respect, which precisely in

<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>26</sup> See esp. the paragraph VIII,2, *Solicitude and the Norm*, 218 ff.

<sup>27</sup> 'Act in such a way that the maxim of your will can always hold at the same time as a principle of general legislation' and 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end'.

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 226-227. Cf. S. Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other. The Kohlberg - Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory" in *Id.*, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge, Polity, 1992), 148-177.

<sup>29</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 190.

an asymmetrical situation can recognise the claim of the other. This ethical sense originates in the elementary, sensory-affective sensitivity to the neediness and suffering of the other that Ricoeur calls solicitude.<sup>30</sup> The Golden Rule is an expression of this caring ethos, but formulated at a more abstract or even (in the Kantian imperatives) universalised level, which must in turn be institutionally expressed, and prudently concretised. Thus ultimately the Golden Rule plays a role in all three phases that Ricoeur distinguishes and relates to one another in *Oneself as Another*. It is precisely the way in which the Rule translates a caring ethos into an abstract maxim, still to be institutionally expressed,<sup>31</sup> which subsequently, in its concretisation and application, calls for 'ethical sense' and practical wisdom<sup>32</sup>, that constitutes the 'transitional structure' of the Golden Rule in Ricoeur's interpretation.

A hermeneutical interpretation can thus transform the convictions contained in common proverbs such as the Golden Rule into 'considered convictions', testifying to what Rawls calls 'reflective equilibrium'.<sup>33</sup>

### *Reciprocity and gift*

As indicated earlier, Ricoeur's aim in *Oneself as Another* is to develop an autonomous philosophical discourse. He does elaborate on the Golden Rule as it was formulated in Judaism and Christianity, but he seeks to interpret the ethos of care and the structure of reciprocity within it, in a non-religious explanatory model. That is why he does not specify the relation of the Rule to the Jewish and Christian commandment of love, as indeed he does in other texts.<sup>34</sup> So particularly in his famous address *Liebe und Gerechtigkeit*, Ricoeur explicitly considers biblical *agapè* as taking its meaning from a religious 'economy of the gift', and situates it over against the ethos of reciprocity he displays within the Golden Rule. In *Oneself as Another*, however, Ricoeur explicitly abstains from a theological discourse of love, because it is supposed not to add anything *material* to the argumentation.<sup>35</sup>

In a fascinating article on Ricoeur's interpretation of the Golden Rule, the Christoph Theobald questions Ricoeur's banishing of theology in *Oneself as Another*. Theobald's questions intrigued me, although I do appreciate Ricoeur's

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 191-192.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. *ibid.*, 226-227.

<sup>32</sup> Thus - referring to the Golden Rule - *ibid.*, 265-266.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 288 (cf. 226-227).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. P. Ricoeur, *Liebe und Gerechtigkeit/Amour et Justice*; and Id., "The Golden Rule. Exegetical and Theological Perplexities", *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990), 393-397. In *Oneself as Another* the commandment of love is only referred to incidentally (cf. 194; 219; 351) as an invitation from the everyday ethical domain that has not yet been turned into law, and that - thus formulated - never can become law.

<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* 25.

striving for an autonomous philosophical argumentation, which is indispensable in an 'hermeneutical age of reason'<sup>36</sup>. However, like Theobald, I find it important to attempt to find *within* such an argumentation, the words for a 'poetics of *agapè*', for the significance of the *experience* of love as a gift.

Theobald points out that in those texts where Ricoeur does explicitly consider the relation between the Golden Rule (as structure of mutuality) and the commandment of love (as 'economy of the gift'), he assumes a certain discontinuity between the two. Theobald wonders, however, whether there is not perhaps a more fundamental continuity hidden behind the apparent discontinuity, insofar as such an economy of the gift might be operative precisely in the ethos of care from which the Golden Rule derives.<sup>37</sup> Theobald sees this dimension operative especially where Ricoeur speaks of 'the paradox of the exchange at the very place of the irreplaceable': in the willingness to take the perspective of the other without denying his or her uniqueness.<sup>38</sup> If the different levels on which the Golden Rule is functioning are interrelated (as Ricoeur shows), then why should philosophy and theology be so strictly separated according to a supposed boundary between autonomous philosophy and a discourse of the gift, as Theobald asks. Why should philosophy, for the sake of its autonomy, exclude a 'poetics of *agapè*'?<sup>39</sup> Are 'the gestures and words of the latter not also accessible for philosophy *as* philosophy'?<sup>40</sup>

Like Ricoeur, Theobald does reserve the *faithful naming* of the experience of gift (i.e. grace) for theology; a theology that for the sake of a God who transcends all singular convictions, cannot evade philosophical argumentation. He is convinced though that a philosophical recognition of the *function* of the experience of gift within a phenomenology of conscience need not lead to crypto-theology within philosophy, but, on the contrary, could contribute to a better understanding of the ethical dimension of solicitude or (more precisely) of the capacity and willingness to step into another's shoes - the dimension in which, according to Ricoeur, the Golden Rule originates.<sup>41</sup> A philosophy that does not hesitate to name and specify

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid..

<sup>37</sup> C. Theobald, "La règle d'or chez Paul Ricoeur. Une interrogation théologique", in J. Greisch (ed.), *Paul Ricoeur. L'herméneutique à l'école de la phénoménologie* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1995), 139-158, 151. The article has been illuminating in my reading of Ricoeur.

<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 193-194 [cf. footnote 32 there].

<sup>39</sup> The paraphrase 'poetics of *agapè*' refers to Ricoeurs definition and location of a discourse of *agapè* in *Liebe und Gerechtigkeit*, 12-13 ff and 20-21 ff; cf. *Oneself as Another*, 25.

<sup>40</sup> Theobald, "La règle d'or", 151.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 156. A comparable argument, concerning the significance of the capacity for empathy and listening as a *condition* for the functioning of more abstract, procedural theories of justice (e.g. the ideal of non-dominating communication in Habermas' theory of communicative action, and the [willingness to accept the] veil of ignorance in Rawls' *Theory of Justice*) is formulated by ethicists of care as a complement to these more procedurally functioning theories of justice. Cf. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, and I.M. Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity. On Moral Respect,

this dimension could make an important contribution to the political, agnostic debate that seeks the roots for tolerance and sense of community *within* the various religions or 'views of life', as Theobald argues. Not in order to find, in these views of life, an ultimate foundation for that society as a rightful institution - for such foundation should not be sought in God, but in the institutions themselves, in the way justice is organised in them -, but rather to leave philosophical room for a hidden God, i.e. to leave room for a way to think of God as 'hidden, but simultaneously showing in the moral spontaneity of human conscience'.<sup>42</sup>

The Golden Rule can be seen as the expression of such a moral spontaneity in which 'God' is hidden, precisely in the layered interpretation Ricoeur gives to it. Theobald himself tries, as a complement to Ricoeur's conscious option for philosophical agnosticism in *Oneself as Another*, to name theologically the place where we might find God in the context of the evangelical Golden Rule. In doing so, he focuses not so much on the specific meaning of the Golden Rule in Luke's Sermon on the Plain, but on the so-called fulfilment formula in Mt. 5:17, to which Matthew's version of the Golden Rule in 7:12 refers ('Always treat others as you would like them to treat you: that is the Law and the Prophets'). In Theobald's view, the fulfilment of Law and Prophets, of which Matthew speaks here, is connected with the theme of substitution, which plays such an important role in Matthew.<sup>43</sup>

With reference to the context and interpretation of the Golden Rule, he speaks of a 'Messianic drama', and connects this drama both with the theme of substitution in Matthew and with the dynamic that Ricoeur calls the 'paradox of the exchange at the very place of the irreplaceable'. The evangelical Golden Rule is not new<sup>44</sup>, according to Theobald, but perhaps the context of the fulfilment formula and of Luke's Sermon on the Plain provides it with a (literally and figuratively) superabundant dimension. 'This capacity or this power [to take the perspective of the other while recognising his or her uniqueness, *GD*] is the true place of fulfilment, of which the total and "overflowing" dimension discloses itself in the commandment of love and of love for one's enemies, which lie hidden in the Golden Rule.'<sup>45</sup> In the context of the Gospel, what is at stake here is not primarily an exhortation to do the nearly impossible, but an *appeal to what has already been*

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Wonder and Enlarged Thought", in Id., *Intersecting Voices. Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 38-59.

<sup>42</sup> Theobald, "La règle d'or", 158; see also 157.

<sup>43</sup> Thus e.g. in Mt. 25:31-46, in the way Jesus calls for the performance of Jewish works of righteousness.

<sup>44</sup> In "The Tarnished Golden Rule", the Luke scholar J. Topel exerts himself (as did others before him) to show that the evangelical version of the Golden Rule is new, closely related to the evangelical love commandment.

<sup>45</sup> Theobald, "La règle d'or", 154.

given. Theobald writes, 'Matthew seems to lean on the memory - mediated by the Son of Man - of having been in the situation of the other oneself, and having benefited from the sympathy of another, in order to rouse that "always greater" capacity for putting oneself in the place of another.'<sup>46</sup>

What is at stake theologically, in this 'drama of messianic fulfilment', is not the rather tragic tension between the norm and the complexity of everyday life<sup>47</sup>, nor the question of autonomy versus heteronomy in moral judgement, but the question of whether and how the experience of God's abundance - the experience of *grace* - can be translated into a kind of human action and judgement in which this abundance shows<sup>48</sup>.

### *The experience of grace in everyday life*

The evangelical, positively formulated Rule has not become a current proverb in Dutch. Does this mean that there is no room for the experience of grace in the everyday ethos of Dutch society? I think - or hope - nothing is further from the truth. Let me explain this by returning to the pedagogical context in which my interest in the Golden Rule originated<sup>49</sup>. After all, proverbs are kept alive especially in pedagogical contexts, as we have seen.

To the supposed universality of the Golden Rule, it is often objected that the Golden Rule is in fact not a common proverb in all cultures. The ethical ground-rule put forward in it implies - as Ricoeur explains - an individual process of conscience formation. To be sure, the procedure as such does imply a capacity for empathy or sympathy, as Ricoeur and Theobald have shown, but the train of thought itself has an individual point of departure, and is realised individually and internally. In cultures where actions are primarily determined and judged by community life and by concrete - if not external - codes of behaviour, a proverb such as the Golden Rule will therefore be less likely to emerge, or to take deep root.<sup>50</sup>

This correction is probably to the point as a criticism of the supposed universality of the Golden Rule. However, in so-called modern, complex societies, moral formation will always have to proceed via a process of individual conscience formation (even if it is granted that this process is influenced from the outside, by parents and social environment). In modern societies individuals are not borne by a single,

<sup>46</sup> Ibid..

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 155 Theobald is referring here to Ricoeur's commentary on the theme of *Antigone*.

<sup>48</sup> Comparable to the way in which Mt. 5:17-48 calls for doing more than just the required righteousness; *ibid.*, 155-156.

<sup>49</sup> The same applies for Wattle's interest in the Golden Rule, cf. *The Golden Rule*, Preface, vi.

<sup>50</sup> Thus my inquiry on the relevant discussion list [proverbs-list@afriprov.org] yielded no African versions of the Golden Rule as such [my thanks to J.G. Healey M.M. and D. Sybertz M.M.], and the CD-Rom *African Proverbs* does not have *Golden Rule* as a keyword. All this need not imply, however, that the proverb does not occur - probably it does in more concrete and figurative versions.

closed community, and thus have to face the demands of their own lives for themselves. Precisely in those societies where diverse cultures are united and must live, talk and deal with one another, fixed ethical codes that cannot be argumentatively illuminated by the speakers themselves may well have violent repercussions in social intercourse and ethical debate. As a mother of young, but rather streetwise children, living and attending school in a multicultural neighbourhood, I notice that if I explain to my children the rules I set for them, I often fall back upon simple variations of the Golden Rule, such as 'You wouldn't like that, would you?' or 'What if everyone were to do that?' (which is actually a simple variant of the first categorical imperative). Precisely because of this relying on the Golden Rule myself, I became interested in the currency of this and other proverbs in other cultures.

However, at the same time, I note that at such moments I do indeed revert to variants of the negatively formulated Rule. That is quite natural in the context, for the rules concern bans: don't tease other; don't make a mess in the park, etc. Calling on children to do well would be going a little bit far. Does that mean that the experience of grace and the dynamic of gift based upon it, which Theobald reveals to be the very heart of the evangelical Rule, cannot come to life in a pedagogical context? I think this is far from the truth. Not only can even young children truly feel concern or compassion for another (another child in pain, for instance)<sup>51</sup>, but they want to express their concern or their love explicitly, and preferably as tangibly as possible, by giving something.

This is not the place for an extensive account of how children's capacity for empathy and love can be *smothered* if they grow up in constraining circumstances. However, a society that does not do the utmost to prevent or to ease such constraining circumstances loses any basis on which to speak of 'norms and values'. Theobald saw the capacity for empathy and love of neighbour in Matthew's 'lean on the memory - mediated by the Son of Man - of having been in the situation of the other oneself, and having benefited from the sympathy of another'.<sup>52</sup> I do not want to suggest that the experience of God's love is reserved for those to whom others have already done well. God's love must be greater and more just. But I do think we should read this dynamic of the exchange of places as an appeal not to hinder the conditions for developing the ability to love (to feel and to give love), and to do our best to let children's capacity for love grow to its full potential. In a pedagogical context, children live, first and most fundamentally, by the grace of another. If that other does not evoke the capacity for exchanging places through his or her love and care, the expressions of reciprocity and gift offered by Scripture and tradition -

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. P. D. Hastings et al., "The Development of Concern for Others in Children with Behavior Problems", *Developmental Psychology* 36 (2000) 5, 531-546 (and references there).

<sup>52</sup> See note 46.

including proverbs like the Golden Rule - run the risk of remaining mere dead letters.

*Respect is a gift - not a given*

Both in developmental psychology<sup>53</sup> and in recent discussions on care ethics, great emphasis is laid on this intergenerational transmission of (the capacity for) vicarious emotional responding and perspective-taking skills. In the past these skills were mainly handed down in matrilineal transmission, from mothers to daughters. Empathy, concern for others, and the capacity for affective perspective taking were looked upon as female skills. In present and future times, however, it is and will be more and more important that both women and men develop these qualities. The complexity of our modern, multicultural societies demand of men and women capable of good listening, empathy and care taking, not only in private life, but also in the public domain and in institutional settings.

Like Ricoeur, the feminist political philosopher Iris Marion Young stresses the *asymmetrical* character of the reciprocity implied in most social contacts and in moral and political dilemmas. But unlike Ricoeur (whose work she does not quote), she does not see much in changing perspectives. In order to communicate and deal fairly with one another, we need not so much adopt the position of the other, she argues, for doing so we risk overlooking the particularity of the other. The concept of asymmetrical reciprocity she develops supposes the willingness to really *listen* to another, in order to let the other express her *own* point of view. This openness or 'wonder' (as Young calls it, following Luce Irigaray) she parallels with the practice of giving gifts. As in gift-giving, reciprocity in communication is asymmetrical, facilitated through our *willingness* to communicate, i.e. to listen and to speak out.<sup>54</sup>

I find this concept of asymmetrical reciprocity developed by Young - and already adopted by feminist theorists of care<sup>55</sup> - to be of value because of its stressing real openness towards the other. However, it does not cover the vital aspect of conscience formation by learning to see *oneself* as another, nor the social and institutional levels of moral reasoning that Ricoeur incorporates in his threefold model in *Oneself as Another*. In Ricoeur's model, too, the observation of asymmetry is crucial for each step to be made; but for him, the willingness to change perspectives as formulated in the Golden Rule also offers a clue for determining the righteousness of individual decisions and of social institutions. Above all, the differentiating interpretation of the Golden Rule by Ricoeur, completed by Theobald's motivational reading of the theme of substitution and vicarious responding in Matthew, also

<sup>53</sup> E.g. N. Eisenberg et al., "The Relations of Parental Characteristics and Practices to Children's Vicarious Emotional Responding", *Child Development* 62 (1991), 1393-1408.

<sup>54</sup> Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity", 41 and 54 ff.

<sup>55</sup> E.g. S.L. Sevenhuijsen, *De plaats van de zorg. Over de relevantie van zorgethiek voor sociaal beleid* (Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 2000), 14 ff.



accounts for the *origin* of the willingness to listen that Young supposes but does not go into. The willingness to listen *presupposes* respect for the other. And true respect for others is something we have to learn, by being respected ourselves. The experience of being valued ourselves teaches us the worth of being valued, and thus awakes the attitude of respect that is a vital condition for genuine openness towards others.

In a rich study on the principle of reciprocity, the Dutch law philosopher Dorien Pessers states that altruism and respect can be seen as a gift inviting other gifts, 'according the moral rule of *do quia mihi datum est*: I give to others because once there has been given to me. In the same way altruism can be understood as an ethic of gift giving'.<sup>56</sup> The experience of gift (or, in religious terms, of grace), gained in everyday situations of care and concern, underlies an interpretation of the Golden rule that does not mean to ignore the uniqueness of the other but, on the contrary, aims at true respect for the other as an other self.

Translation: Gerrit Brand

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<sup>56</sup> D. Pessers, *Liefde, solidariteit en recht. Een interdisciplinair onderzoek naar het wederkerigheidsbeginsel* (Amsterdam: Faculteit der Rechtsgeleerdheid, 1999), 245.