

Original citation:

Ellis, Randolph. (2017) Golden rule (standing theology). *Rural Theology*, 15 (1). pp. 52-53.

Permanent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/87174>

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Rural Theology* on 02/05/2017 available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14704994.2017.1298261>

A note on versions:

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP URL' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk

From a Rural Pulpit

The Golden Rule

Randolph J. K. Ellis

University of Warwick, Coventry, England, UK

This study offers an example of ‘standing theology’ as distinguished from sitting theology or kneeling theology. The occasion was the Fourth Sunday of Easter in Bangor Cathedral, 2015. The Epistle reading was 1 John 3: 16-24.

Keywords: standing theology, preaching, rural

A short time ago I was listening to a lecture in which the speaker pointed out that at the heart of nearly every one of the world’s great religions lies the Golden Rule. As you doubtless know, the Golden Rule boils down to essentially this: ‘treat others as you yourself would wish to be treated’. She went on to say that any religious teaching, any religious practice or any religious behaviour that ignored the Golden Rule would be acting completely contrary to the centrality of its own faith and purposes.

In fact, the Golden Rule is almost impossible to disagree with. It makes it impossible to exclude the other person without also excluding yourself; it makes it impossible to separate yourself from the other. It also makes it impossible for you to appeal to abstract laws or reasons in order to justify your ill-treatment of the other. Again and again, the Golden Rule forces you to come back to you yourself and to put yourself in the position of the other person.

If you are slitting the throat of the other then you would have to justify it by saying; ‘Yes I would like to have my throat slit as well, thank you, it’s just sort of thing I have been looking forward to’. Such justifications expose us as liars. The Golden Rule forces us always to take the other person into account.

You and the other person are glued together. You are glued together not because the two of you are shackled or handcuffed or simply just stuck with each other, the glue that sticks you together is *compassion*. You cannot make the other person suffer without *also* agreeing to suffer in exactly the same way yourself. That is why the Golden Rule is at the heart of every one of the great religions. It is stark and brutally literal and cannot easily be overridden. People who suffer are always going to be people like ourselves and people like ourselves don’t suffer in a *general* sort of way they always suffer *very specifically*. They always suffer in great detail, in all the detail and complexity that goes to make up a human life.

In invoking the Golden Rule you are also agreeing to suffer in all the literal detail you are planning to make the other endure. There is no room within the Golden Rule for exceptions. You are agreeing to suffer everything that the other person suffers in exactly the same way. There is no room for you to say to the one you are making suffer; ‘I am suffering everything you are suffering and I am feeling everything you are feeling and I am with you in your pain and distress’, without its being quite clear that you are now actually lying on the ground with your throat actually slit and actually suffering and actually feeling the consequences of all that you have inflicted on the other.

There is no room within the Golden Rule to build a world out of words and then to behave as if that world of words *your words* were the real world of the other person. When we do

that, the Golden Rule exposes us as liars. We cannot build another person's world out of our own words, to do so is to destroy the other person and to turn them into a straw man or straw woman.

Straw people are always easier to deal with than real people. Straw people lack the messy complexity of *real* flesh and *real* blood. Straw people are easily controlled, easily slandered, easily dismissed. To turn a real person into a straw person is almost an act of murder. All of a sudden, in the twinkling of an eye the real person no longer exists. Instead, we have *straw, straw, straw*. And straw people aren't really real. They are, sort of, like dolls onto whom we may project anything we choose. And we don't have to take them too seriously, but above all, *we don't have to feel or show compassion towards them*. After all, to feel or show compassion towards a straw person, (under the Golden Rule), would be to admit that we would wish to be straw persons ourselves.

Earlier on I said; the Golden Rule boils down to essentially this: 'treat others as you yourself would wish to be treated' and that any religious teaching, any religious practice or any religious behaviour that ignored the Golden Rule would be acting completely contrary to the centrality of its own faith and purposes. Sometimes, when a world of words has been built *for* us and we have been invited to accept it as genuinely ours, (or have been *compelled* to accept it as genuinely ours,) we will need to return to the loving heart of our religion and faith, to the Golden Rule that won't allow us to be separated from the other that won't allow us to be separated from *each* other that won't allow us to be separated without doing the greatest damage to ourselves.

Notes on contributor

The Revd Canon Dr Randolph J. K. Ellis is on the staff at Bangor Cathedral where he serves as High Street Chaplain. He is Associate Fellow at the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, University of Warwick, UK.

Correspondence to: Randolph J. K. Ellis, The St Mary's Centre, Llys Onnen, Abergwyngregyn, Gwynedd LL33 0LD, UK. Email: randolphellis@hotmail.co.uk