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*New Perspectives on Time-Honored Practices*
A Review Essay

A Book of Courtesy: The Art of Living with Yourself and Others
Sister M. Mercedes, O.P.
*New York, New York: HarperSanFrancisco*
2001, xvii, 108 pp. hardback, $14.95

Humility Matters for Practicing the Spiritual Life
Mary Margaret Funk
*New York, New York: Continuum*
2005, 188 pp. hardback, $19.95

On Apology
Aaron Lazare
*New York, New York: Oxford University Press*
2004, ix, 307 pp. paper, $24.00

Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue
Paul Woodruff
*New York, New York: Oxford University Press*
2001, x; 248 pp. hardback, $12.95

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This review essay focuses on four relatively recent publications that discuss attitudes (humility and reverence) or actions (courtesy and apology) that contribute to harmony within families and communities. The authors of the works on humility and courtesy write from within the Catholic tradition while the authors of the books on reverence and apology write from secular philosophical and psychological perspectives, respectively. All writers advocate for the revitalization of practices that have been part of the human repertoire for centuries, but which currently have fallen out of fashion (courtesy), been neglected (reverence), been misunderstood (humility), or poorly modeled (apology). First this essay will review the individual works, and then it will engage in analysis and discussion.

*A Book of Courtesy* by Sister Mary Mercedes was first published circa 1910 and has been read by successive generations of students at the Dominican Convent Upper School in San Anselmo, California. In 2000 alumnae of the class of 1950 honored Sister Mary Mercedes (1871-1965) by updating Sister Mercedes’ work on basic rules for “the art of living.” Mercedes defined courtesy as “the ability to put oneself in someone else’s place in order to see what is needed in any situation.” This small volume presents a “code of civility” that is intended to help its readers find common ways to embody the commandment to care for others by looking out for their interests rather than one’s own (Phil. 2:3-4). Within a few pages one can find directions on how to navigate friendships, make proper introductions, create electronic and personal correspondence, set a table, and conduct oneself in various locations such as school or the workplace. In essence, this is a book on practical empathy.

*A Book of Courtesy* was never intended to be a psychological or theological treatise. Its sole purpose was to be a guide to the social graces for young women at the turn of the 20th century. Today pockets of our Western society may have little appreciation for or awareness of these rules of etiquette that were bred into the DNA of today’s grandparents and great-grandparents. Many readers may find the directives quaint or out of date. Yet, if used as a study text with today’s youth, *A Book of Courtesy* may generate some interesting conversation on the shape of courteous behavior in the 21st century. Unfortunately *A Book of Courtesy* does not describe the cultural differences in practices of courtesy that one finds in the world. Readers should keep in mind that multicultural
competence was not taught in 1910, the date of its first publication. Perhaps that type of updating was beyond the intended scope of those who revived the manuscript.

_Humility Matters for Practicing the Spiritual Life_ by Mary Margaret Funk is the third volume of a trilogy that offers guidance for today’s contemplatives. According to Funk, humility is “the abiding disposition that accepts life as it is and lives it consciously, fully embracing its burdens and its gifts.” Humility requires that one recognize one’s human condition, and also renounce attachments to self-made thoughts of self and God. As one does these things, God’s thoughts of God and God’s thoughts of self emerge into awareness. The kenosis passage (Phil. 2:6-11) is the Christ example of renunciation and the template for our experience of humility.

For Funk the path to humility lies in the degree to which one embraces the four renunciations of the Christian life based on ancient monastic tradition. The four renunciations include (1) renunciation of one’s former way of life; (2) renunciation of the thoughts and desires of one’s former way of life; (3) renunciation of our self-made thoughts of God, and (4) renunciation of our self-made thoughts of self. Each renunciation is empowered by grace and takes one into a fuller experience of purity of heart, which becomes manifest as humility. To help readers grasp more fully the third and fourth renunciation, Funk engages in imaginary interviews with St. Teresa of Jesus (of Avila) and St. Thérèse of Lisieux, respectively. A third imaginary conference with John Cassian, who shares his ten indicators of humility, concludes this book.

Readers who have a base knowledge of contemplative practices within Catholic traditions will find help and guidance for deepening their spiritual life in _Humility Matters_. However as one steeped in a non-contemplative, Protestant tradition, I found Funk’s discussion of the four renunciations foreign yet also somewhat familiar. The concept of total renunciation of one’s former way of life and thoughts and desires related to that (Renunciations 1 and 2) is parallel to John Wesley’s call for personal and social holiness through sanctification. Holy lives are dedicated to service to God and neighbor, a concept consistent with an outcome of the first and second renunciation. Renunciation of one’s self-made thoughts of self and self-made thoughts of God (renunciations 3 and 4) may not have the same ready made parallels within contemporary Wesleyan traditions.

Funk observes that these renunciations bring one into fuller awareness of one’s true self via renouncing the false self. However, without the support of a wise spiritual guide, some may interpret his as leaving one without any sense of self at all, rather than seeing these practices as making room to be filled with God’s sense of God’s self and God’s sense of the one who is practicing renunciation. The author readily admits that few have
attained the fourth renunciation. The author's conceptualization of humility did not include any reference to the developing work on humility from psychology and differences do emerge when one compares contemporary psychological conceptualizations of humility with Funk's ancient spiritual one. Psychology does not conceive of spiritual outcomes for humility in the way that Funk does. Nevertheless, Funk's portrait of humility and current psychological study on humility affirm that humility enables one "to not regard oneself as more special than one is."

Psychiatrist Aaron Lazare explores the contours of apology in *On Apology*. According to Lazare, "apology refers to an encounter between two parties in which one party, the offender, acknowledges responsibility for an offense or grievance and expresses regret or remorse to a second party, the aggrieved." Based on a study of over 1,000 apologies, Lazare describes the nature of apology, explains factors that contribute to the success or failure of apologies, discusses the steps of apology, and outlines attitudes and actions that restrain apology. Lazare argues that apology is more than saying "I'm sorry." Good apologies acknowledge the offense adequately, express genuine remorse, and outline appropriate reparations, including strong commitments to future changes. Pseudo-apologies lack one or more of these vital elements. Lazare emphasizes the role that timing, empathy, guilt, and shame play in successful apologies.

Lazare's work is a strong addition to publications in the popular press that advance strategies that attend to interpersonal wounds. *On Apology* analyzes historic and contemporary examples of successful and failed apologies. In this way Lazare gives clear guidance on who, what, when, where, how, and why of apologizing. The author discusses the difficulties inherent in making a good apology and reviews the emotional risks that apologizers may assume. In addition, he emphasizes the personal and interpersonal benefits of apologizing. Although Lazare does not include any studied review of current psychological literature on apology, his advice is consistent with the present state of the field at the time of publication. Readers from a Christian worldview will find that Lazare's advice is also congruent with behavioral aspects of the biblical directives on interpersonal repentance, a concept that is much broader and richer than apology. However Lazare's secular, psychological perspective of apology lacks the power of the personal and spiritual transformation that accompanies Christian repentance. Nevertheless, this practical guide to apology can be helpful to people involved in interpersonal conflicts.

In *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* philosopher Paul Woodruff seeks to reintroduce the concept of reverence. Woodruff classifies reverence as a virtue, and defines it as "the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have."
Woodruff argues that reverence has more to do with politics than it does religion, as one can be highly religious and irreverent. Reverence belongs to and is shaped by community and infuses the community’s rituals with meaning. Reverence lies behind that which contributes to civility and living well together. In this work, Woodruff seeks to describe reverence without reference to creed or culture, in other words, he outlines the “bare essence of reverence.” He affirms that creed and culture shape reverence in particular ways and draws heavily on conceptualization of reverence found in ancient Greek and Chinese. Woodruff concludes his work with a discussion of the important relationship between reverence and leadership, and reverence and teaching. Because reverence reminds one of one’s humanity, it is an essential component of excellent leaders and teachers.

Woodruff seeks to revive a practice that at best has fallen out of fashion and at worst has been forgotten altogether. Reverence is an attribute whose presence is difficult to describe, but whose absence is easily spotted. Woodruff emphasizes that reverence starts from within. Actions in and of themselves can be reverent or irreverent, depending on the actor’s attitude. Woodruff emphasizes that reverence can be consistent with dissent and conflict. Because Woodruff classifies reverence as a virtue, reverence stands against injustice. Therefore protest against injustice may indeed be a sign of reverence. Woodruff might even suggest that reverence demands such dissension. Of interest to readers of The Asbury Journal is the degree to which Woodruff distances reverence from religion. For Woodruff, the motivation for reverence does not originate with a Divine being whose very character defines reverence. Instead reverence is defined by our ability to be aware of our human condition and its accompanying limitations (i.e., we are not gods). According to Woodruff, “Reverence is a matter of feeling, and as far as feelings go, it doesn’t matter what you believe...[R]everence makes few demands on beliefs.”

What comparisons can one make among the ways in which these four works comment on variables that promote relational well-being? First, each topic contributes to living together in harmony. This constellation of virtuous habits is dynamically related. Reverence and humility are mutually reinforcing. For example reverent people more easily put on humility than irreverent ones. Humble people are more likely to approach life with reverent attitudes than arrogant individuals. Reverence and humility contribute to courteous interactions. These three contribute to sensitivity to divine and human covenants, and when these covenants are broken offers of apology are extended promptly, with a minimum of defensive blaming. Second, courtesy, humility, apology, and reverence are characteristic of people who continue to engage in intentional spiritual growth. Funk’s book on humility explicitly targets spiritual formation from which greater depths
of reverence for God and Christ-like living may arise. While readers may desire all authors to have approached their topic from robust biblical or theological perspectives, the content of each book can contribute to one's spiritual sensibilities.

Of greater interest is the co-occurrence of interest in virtuous matters in secular and sacred publications. I propose that this phenomenon is influenced by the convergence of two streams. The first stream is related to the emergence of the positive psychology movement while the second stream is associated with a growing interest in community formation and development.

The past two decades in psychology have witnessed a shift away from illness-based models (psychopathology) and toward models that emphasize strengths, flourishing, and virtues. This coalesced into the creation of a “positive psychology.” Martin Seligman, the incoming president of the American Psychological Association in 1998, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Professor of Psychology and Management at Claremont Graduate University, define positive psychology as follows:

The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverence, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic.9

Positive psychology explores variables such as hope, optimism, self-efficacy, wisdom, courage, empathy, gratitude, forgiveness, humility, faith, and morality. Seligman and colleagues developed a classification of six virtues and 24 character strengths: (1) Wisdom and knowledge include creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective; (2) Courage encompasses authenticity, bravery, persistence, and zest; (3) Humanity consists of kindness, love, and social intelligence; (4) Justice embraces fairness, leadership, and teamwork; (5) Temperance includes forgiveness, modesty, prudence, and self-regulation; and (6) Transcendence takes in appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and religiousness.10 While the themes of the books reviewed for this essay are not explicitly mentioned in Seligman’s classification, one can easily fit humility, reverence, apology, and courtesy in several of the above categories. In addition, researchers have begun to explore variables related...
to humility and apology.\textsuperscript{11}

Interest in positive psychology is emerging in theological circles as well. Burrell Dinkins, recently retired Johnson Professor of Pastoral Leadership at Asbury Theological Seminary, discussed Wesley’s concept of holiness as happiness.\textsuperscript{12} Dinkins proposed that Wesley’s picture of holiness included contentment, happiness, and well-being, concepts in sync with positive psychology. While Wesley might take issue with the perspectives from which some of the target books were written, he most likely would find their subjects of great interest to those who desired to live lives characterized by personal and social holiness.

*The World is Our Parish.* Community is experienced locally and globally. On one hand, neighborhood churches wonder about the practices that contribute to the development of close-knit church congregations where members feel like they belong to that particular worshipping community. Research into practices that form or deform community is currently ongoing. Promise-keeping, truthfulness, gratitude, and forgiveness are central factors in this process.\textsuperscript{13} One can see how courtesy, humility, reverence, and apology complement these community essentials. On the other hand, it is clear that we live in a global village. Economically and ecologically we are connected on a macro level. No longer can Americans ignore the rest of the world; it comes into our living rooms every day through the news. No longer can Americans of Western European descent remain ignorant of the ethnic communities that embrace worldviews very different from our own. Ever since 9-11 the United States has been faced with her own ethno- and ego-centrism. Americans can respond in at least one of two ways. It can lead to demonizing all others who are “different,” solidifying an “us versus them” mindset; or it can call us to repentance/apology as eyes are opened to ways in which America has not acted humbly, courteously, or reverently toward those that embrace a different worldview. While some may be tempted to bury their heads in the proverbial sand, pretending that the rest of the world does not exist, the vast majority of our globe searches for ways to live well next to someone who is very different. The topics explored by the authors of the four review books offer skills and attitudes that can assist us in this endeavor.

In its own way, each of the four books reviewed in this essay helps readers to see their place in the world. It is as if these texts tell us how to implement Romans 12:3 “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.” (TNIV). The virtue of humility helps us to surrender fully to the love of God and live in service to God and others; reverence reminds us that we stand in awe of the transcendent, that we offer respect to others, and feel shame when we have
violated this sense of “oughtness.” Courtesy in interpersonal relationships easily follows reverence and humility, as courtesy is the skill of considering “others more highly than yourself.” Finally we offer apology to help restore damaged relationships. One can imagine that when apologies are offered with courtesy and humility, supported by an attitude of reverence, then relationship repair may happen more quickly. Taken together these four works set forth a constellation of attitudes and actions that may deepen one’s relationship with God and others. Although two of the authors make a point of distancing their discussion from Christianity, their discussions and descriptions can be drawn into a Christian worldview.

Notes


6. For a fuller discussion on interpersonal repentance see Holeman, Virginia Todd, Reconcilable Differences: Hope and Healing for Troubled Marriages (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).


8. Woodruff, p. 117


