

ABOUT REVERENCE

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Paul Woodruff is Professor of the Humanities at the University of Texas in Austin. He is a widely published translator of Plato, Thucydides, and other ancient writers.

I was introduced to him by Bill Moyers on his program, "Now". To me, Woodruff makes good sense.

Webster defines reverence as a feeling or attitude of deep respect, love and awe. Woodruff says that reverence, the ideal, is the capacity for a range of feelings and emotions that are linked. It is a sense that there is something larger than a human being, accompanied by capacities for awe, respect and shame. It is often expressed in and reinforced by ceremony—or simply—Reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods.

Virtue is a capacity to do what is right and for the right reason. Virtues are sources of good behavior.

During an interview, Susan Jacoby said that when a Christian had learned she was an atheist, asked "what keeps you from murdering someone", she replied that it had never occurred to her to murder anyone.

Reverence—like other virtues—and also vices—are developed in the family. Children who are respected by their parents and other adults learn to respect others and themselves. Role modeling is much more effective than lecturing to teach this quality.

Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitation. That is—we stand in awe of something and that something reminds us of human limitations.

Picture of toddler at the ocean---

As adults we continue to experience this sense of awe—birth—the Grand Canyon—the Universe. That something that invokes awe must meet one of the following conditions:

1. cannot be changed or controlled by human means
2. not fully understood by human experts
3. not created by human beings
4. is transcendent

One must believe in one something that meets one of these criteria in order to be reverent.

Woodruff says this belief does not amount to religion or spirituality. The belief in "something" could be nature, the universe, justice, something divine.

Beliefs have not shown the same power to survive as Reverence has. Beliefs are not always based on factual information. Many people have died for challenging belief systems—rotation of sun and earth, segregation. Karen Armstrong states that a continuing flaw within the three great religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) is the oppression of women. She also says that to have faith means to believe twenty ridiculous propositions before breakfast.

Being religious is not the same as being reverent. Reverence does not kill heretics or unbelievers and never presumes to represent literally the mind of God. It is arrogant to be in awe of your tradition and treat it as sacred. It is irreverent to claim divine wisdom—as Robertson, Falwell, Bush and others in Washington are doing.

Agnosticism is a way of recognizing the limits of human understanding. An agnostic does not presume to know, nor make unfounded claims about the gods.

Cultures are always undergoing change. No human cultures were divinely ordained. There is inevitable conflict between those who wish to change and those who wish to retain the old ways. Our needs change and so must our response to them.

People who believe their God commands them to force others into their way of thinking are not reverent. When a religious group thinks it speaks and acts as God commands in all things—this is a failure of reverence. The group may turn violent and feel they are doing so in good faith. Nothing is more dangerous.

The Washington Post of November 14, 2004, carried a story of a young man who was struggling with the realization that he was homosexual. His mother and his church were being supportive as he struggled to come to terms with his sexuality. A Baptist church some miles away was angered because the church was allowing the young man to remain in the congregation. They picketed the church, one person carried a sign which read, “God hates fags”. The young man’s mother was terrified for his safety. She recalled the death of a young homosexual in Wyoming. There was a vigil by some community churches to support the family and the church. I recall that members of the Unitarian church in Richmond received threatening phone calls during the integration of schools in the 60’s.

When we think of reverence, we also think of ritual. “Reverence lends ceremony the feelings that make ceremony worthwhile”. However, ritual can and does become empty and meaningless. Woodruff relates the story of college students attending the funeral for a classmate. The statements made during the service were not congruent with the person they knew. They returned to the college and over coffee talked and shared memories of their classmate. The formal ritual was, for them, empty. I suspect many of us have had similar experiences.

Ritual and tradition used to restrain people is inherently bad because it encourages people to sink into bad habits—accepting authority without question. How many times have we heard, “because the Bible says so” given as the rationale for behavior or belief—ignoring

the facts and advanced knowledge. And, I would add—how many times have we said to our children, “Because I said so.”

Greeks and the followers of Confucius saw reverence as one of the bulwarks of society. Both groups wanted to see reverence in their leaders because reverence is the virtue that keeps leaders from trying to take tight control of other people’s lives.

Reverence has more to do with power than with religion because it is reverence that keeps people from believing they are omnipotent, all powerful, all knowing. Thucydides prized reverence and condemned the tendency to believe too readily.

The Greeks talked of HUBRIS—we say—

Power corrupts—absolute power corrupts absolutely.
Pride goeth before a fall.
You’re too big for your britches.
Get off your high horse.

The ability to doubt and therefore to gather more data, review decisions, and listen to others helps one use power responsibly. A good person behaves well without being forced to do so, that is why virtue is of the utmost importance when men are so powerful that they have no one to force them to behave.

POWER without reverence is a catastrophe for all.

One should never claim the majesty of God in support of one’s political views. Politics without reverence is blind to the general good and deaf to advice from people who are powerless. Protesting bad leadership is never irreverent because there is no reverence to violate. It is also patriotic—not unpatriotic. Reverence is the virtue that separates leaders from tyrants. The leader does not deceive the followers and the leader is open to persuasion in return.

Woodruff states that leaders are often given to devices that prevent them from taking into account the opinions of their followers. They say they know more than their followers, which is true, but that is no excuse for not listening. The greater the powers that are put into your hands, the more important it is for you to develop inner restraints against the abuse of power. Leaders should be more reverent because virtue or vice trickles down.

Reverence comes most into play when the strong have the weak at their mercy. Abuse of children by parents and clergy is particularly offensive.

What about war? Woodruff states, “Even when the goal of war is something as noble as freedom or peace, it may be irreverent to think we can impose these goals by violence.” It is reverence that moderates war and irreverence that urges it on to brutality.

Woodruff believes that wars can be fought by reverent people. That is, respecting the opposition and not engaging in brutality, treating prisoners of war humanely, as per the Geneva convention, that if reverence is lost and the soldier becomes a brute, there is an enormous psychological cost.

At the D-Day Museum in New Orleans, there is a great collection of oral histories. One veteran, on video tape, speaks of his experiences. With tears in his eyes, he says he is still troubled by the reality that he killed people. This psychological trauma has been with him since World War II.

What about us, as a society—how reverent are we if:

We do not adequately fund education for our children?

Abuse children—1 in 6 girls report sexual abuse as children.

Discriminate against homosexuals and deny them equal rights?

Pay women \$.76 and men \$1 for equivalent work?

Do not care for our environment?

Many leaders and the media provide “spin” rather than facts?

Personal faith is infused into the law of the land?

Many people have no access to health care—many of them children?