

Bob Goudzwaard - on the occasion of Marnix Niemijer stepping down from the position of Director of *Philadelphia* to become Operations Manager of *TEAR NL* 2003.

For Philadelphia, it is an important day. Director Marnix Niemeijer is bidding farewell to Philadelphia to devote himself fully to development cooperation (Tear Fund).

This talk was then the occasion for an idea growing in my reflections, that I would compare these two types of work, these two fields that have our attention: working with and for people with intellectual disabilities - which Marnix has done for more than seven years - and now the field of development cooperation.

It is an extremely fascinating idea, but could I the comparison be made by us with due care? On reflection, I think we can too easily wrong the people involved on both sides of this comparison, and that wrong goes both ways, as it were. You don't do justice to people with intellectual disabilities by assuming an equivalence when you compare them with poor, disadvantaged people in the South - as a matter of fact I am very unhappy with that term "intellectual disabilities", but more about that in a moment. The reverse is, of course, also true.

Still, I think such a comparison is possible, but one that should be made with a one strict condition, namely, that we do so to reflect primarily about ourselves, about our typical methods of approaching these two types of work and that means discussing the shortcomings and imbalances in our way of talking - talking about people with disabilities here at home as well as in the way we approach our help for people overseas. In other words, this is a time when we need to look into a mirror in order to recognise ourselves, and do so with an open eye to how we act imperfectly in both respects, even as we engage with the best of intentions. And that imperfection, on both counts, does indeed probably occur for the same reason, namely that we are, after all, modern, largely secularised Western people with a rational outlook. We thereby betray ourselves in every field and our prejudices and limited perspectives are all too evident as well.

Michel Foucault¹ was one of the foremost scholars to draw attention to the role of prejudice and narrow-mindedness in our culture, including our approach to our handicapped or, as I would better qualify it, our *simple* fellows, men and women. I use

¹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/>

the word “simple” in the positive connotation of the term “simplicity”, in order to start out on a discussion by gaining focus from such a positive designation rather than drawing attention to what we see as a person’s limitations.

Be that as it may, Foucault in his magisterial book ***Histoire de la Folie***² explored how Western society - that is ourselves - has, over the centuries, dealt with so-called abnormal or mentally handicapped people. He introduces Hieronymus Bosch's mediaeval painting ‘The Ship of Fools’³ and does so in a wonderful way. This is a ship without sail or rudder, full of simple souls who cannot steer the ship, with a strange mast to which some in the painting are gazing upon as if in veneration. Medieval society readily welcomed such simple people into its midst, and according to Foucault this was mainly because they were thought to carry a secret. It is, or was, the secret that their innocence and simplicity has made them closer to God than other people. They stand, as it were, closer to the origin, to the source of life than we do, and therefore there is with them an intuitive knowledge about heaven that we lack, a knowledge that we as so-called normal people can only guess at. (In this regard think also of the Arabic ascription that camels have knowledge of the secret name of God and that explains why they look so proud; my source for this is Anton Wessels⁴).

But the image of the simple, limited fellow of the Middle Ages changes drastically in the Age of Enlightenment. They then become mainly people who are not right in the head or in their mind. They are people who, because of this abnormality, should be separated from ordinary society, put away in separate institutions for care and continuous investigation. Is this, Foucault wonders, an indication that the simple or innocent fellow human being has changed so much in the course of time? Of course not, they have remained the same. But our society itself, we ourselves, have changed. We have changed from people who retained a direct sense of an earth under God's open sky, to people who have developed a rational, rationalistic view and have therefore come to see everything, even our fellow human beings, as objects.

² <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/history-of-madness/>

³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ship_of_Fools_\(painting\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ship_of_Fools_(painting))

⁴ <https://www.eerdmans.com/Authors/?AuthorId=23681>

And here, you can feel it coming with what I am wanting to say, namely the genuine intersection between these two fields of work, begins to appear for our reflection.

Development cooperation has had a long history in which it took years before we moved away from a limiting aid concept and started talking about cooperation; this involves a jump from considering the poor as an object for our care and our good intentions to fellow subjects like ourselves with a voice, with a will. But still we go on talking about “developing countries” and about “development cooperation”. We do so even when it is about our cooperation in countries with cultures much older than our own.

Having heard from Foucault, what does the term “developing countries” suggest to you? Is it with anything substantial, anything noteworthy about those countries and cultures? Is it positive in any way? No, in fact it conveys almost nothing or hardly anything at all.

But yet it does say a lot, in fact it conveys all we need to know about ourselves and our way of viewing the poor, in those countries. We talk about so-called developing countries because we have come to think our own, Western style of development is normal, and so we think it necessary that other countries also follow that pattern.

We are normal, we consider ourselves normal, and meanwhile “they” are lagging behind from where they are, and so need to learn to become normal like us with our aid, with our help. I venture the thesis that within the entire field of so-called development cooperation there is still a substantial emancipation deficit: *an emancipation deficit that does not so much apply to the poor fellow human beings in the South, but mainly to the so-called educated, rational people of the North and their development workers*. We cannot help but constantly lecture them all, hound them with our calculations, our methods and evaluations, and force them wholesale to constantly adapt their economies to our western world market. So in that sector we are still a very long way from home.

And maybe that is why so-called development workers may in time learn a lot from people like Marnix Niemeijer, from the way he and you have learned to deal with these mentally disadvantaged, *but secretly equipped fellow human beings*, with your groping and searching for a better way. You too, I judge, are not there yet, as the still far too rationality focused terminology of “mentally challenged people” indicates. *It is not about people with*

a less full glass, but perhaps better to see people with smaller glasses who nevertheless are quite capable of enjoying being filled to the brim.

But you are still further along when you love these fellow human beings intensely, and with such love less likely to regard our fellows as *objects* of good intentions that it is still so easy for development workers to presume in an unconscious and unintentional way.

This fundamental love for vulnerable and therefore valuable fellow human beings is also abundantly clear from Mr Wijnbeek's contribution. Listening to him, I was reminded of that saying by Lucebert: 'everything of value is defenceless'.⁵ That saying implies that it is the defenceless, those who are the most vulnerable, who have the deepest value. With an active but resilient love for the other, with what Dr Anna Terruwe⁶ calls affirmation, it is about starting all over again, and we can say that for both sectors.

A few final remarks, which may clarify and focus things a bit, also in response to what Mr Wijnbeek said.

I start with a Biblical image, the healing of the deaf mute by Jesus in Mark 7:31-37. He begins by giving that vulnerable person his complete attention; it says he led him away from the multitude. And then Jesus shifts the communication from ordinary colloquial language to that other person's own. Jesus puts his fingers in his own ears, touches the tongue of the mute, and then heaves a deep sigh.

In another healing story, of a blind man, he makes a paste of earth and puts it on the blind man's eyes so that he feels, as it were, what will happen to him (John 9:6-7). What captivates us so completely here is not only Jesus' willingness to adapt completely to the limitations of the other. It is even more the recognition of deep dignity of the other, as a subject with whom one must be able to sympathise, to sympathise, to sympathise actively with him. This is truly *dia-konia*, wanting to go through (*dia*) the dust (Greek: *koni*) for the other. Bringing both people back to full life is apparently Jesus' healing intention. And with that, for me, this story is also about what we might call a reverse apartheid.

Wijnbeek speaks of the artificial maintenance of a vast apartheid system in our society, and he rightly draws attention to its dangers. By an excess of apartheid, a disabled fellow can be

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucebert>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_Terruwe

artificially maintained. Jesus' aim is that these people be brought back into the fold.

In the world of so-called development cooperation, perhaps the best parallel is that years ago ICCO, as a Christian aid organisation, started the so-called reversed consortium, with the reverse consultation, enlisting the help and participation of churches and especially the poor overseas to co-determine ICCO's policies. And rightly so, because among the poor too, there is that secret.

Are they not the first ones mentioned in the Beatitudes?⁷

Paul's call for financial support from the rich Greek congregations to the poor congregations in Palestine even speaks of what is both a double abundance and a double deficit: let your financial abundance fill their financial deficit, so that conversely their spiritual abundance can fill your spiritual deficit.⁸ There is wealth to be gained from interacting with both the poor and the simple, the disabled fellow man.

(Personal addition: our eldest son is also a son with disabilities, though not primarily of an intellectual nature. But my wife and I are often reminded of a *sonnet* when dealing with him. The *sonnet* is the form of poetry with, in a way, the greatest limitations; it has a stringent structure of rhythm and form. But it is precisely the most beautiful poems, by Petrarch and Shakespeare that were written in *sonnet* form).

A second and final comment. It is of great importance, both in the work of cooperation with people in the South and in your own work here, that an enforceable basis for human rights is affirmed and is laid, in recognition that in both cases these are inalienable rights of subjects, of living human beings. It is only on this basis, which requires more than so-called equal treatment, that so-called empowerment, enabling the other to participate effectively in society, also gains substance and form.

But I do add something else. And that is that, parallel to this, in our society the awareness of our own shortcomings or deficiencies as rationally-minded Western progressives needs to grow. In other words: we simply cannot, for the sake of preserving our own humanity, do without these little neighbours in our large society. Their presence in the midst of our society is and remains indispensable to remind us of three things:

⁷ Matthew 5:3

⁸ 2 Corinthians 8:13-15

of vulnerability as the basis of all our lives;

of the simplicity that must remain recognisable in human relationships;

and of the need to keep society in all its parts open upwards to what is beyond our reach.

With the vulnerable bearers of a great secret in our midst, there is always that new opportunity, also and especially for young people, to learn care in dealing with the vulnerable. That is why I also agree wholeheartedly with what Mr Wijnbeek formulates as criteria for flourishing, also of parental associations, to which he also adds: science, education, local administrators and anyone who can contribute to 'a better existence.' A better existence, I would then add, applies not only to "them" but also to "us". Because their input is in fact indispensable to a modern society that thinks so haughtily of itself and is so self-centred as ours has become.

Bob Goudzwaard

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