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No Respecter of Persons

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On 17 April 1630, the biblical scholar and Hebraist Joseph Mede recounted an amusing incident to a friend. Evidently, a local "oatmeal-maker, taking upon him[self] to be a preacher" had been called before the highest ecclesiastical court in early modern England, the court of High Commission:

> Where, keeping on his hat, and being asked why he did not put it off, he answered he would never put off his hat to bishops. "But you will [u]s?" said one of them. "Then as you are privy counselors," quoth he, "I put off my hat, but as ye are rags of the beast, lo! I put it on again!"[1]

In Mede's anecdote, this obstreperous individual represented the excesses to which a lay or "mechanick" preacher might go in asserting the priesthood of all believers. Yet in his refusal to "doff and don" his hat—that is, to pay *hat honor*—to the Commissioners, the oatmeal maker also revealed himself to be an enthusiastic amateur acting on one biblical injunction in particular: "God is no respecter of persons" (KJV). The anecdote provokes a key question for citation practices, and how they assign honor or shame.

This statement of God's impartiality in Acts 10:34—as well as Jas 2:1 and Rom 2:11—can sound jarring to modern ears. Contemporary liberal egalitarianism, after all, relies on the neo-Kantian language of respect *for* persons and its demand that every individual *qua* moral agent or "person" be treated with "equal concern and respect."[2] In the everyday micropolitics of egalitarian interaction, this means

[1] Letter from Rev. Joseph Mead [Mede] to Sir Martin Stuteville, 17 April 1630, in *The Court and Times of Charles the First: Containing a Series of Historical and Confidential Letters, Including Memoirs of the Mission in England of the Capuchin Friars in the Service of Henrietta Maria, and a Variety of Other Particulars Not Mentioned by Our Historians*, ed. Thomas Birch, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1849), 2:71–72. For background on Mede, see B. Ball, "Mede [Mead], Joseph (1586–1638), Hebraist and Biblical Scholar," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* retrieved 26 September 2021, https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-18465.

[2] The locus classicus here is Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (London: Duckworth,

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—at the very least—that we are supposed to address one another respectfully.[3] Today, this means abiding by each other's chosen titles—or, indeed, our chosen pronouns. Still, by deliberately *disrespecting* his social and spiritual superiors, Mede's oatmeal maker was also asserting the equality of human beings, albeit in a negative fashion. He was denying to arrogant men—who were, in fact, his equals—signs of "civil worship" that were not really their due.[4]

Students of the period will know that the oatmeal maker was not the first, nor the last, English Protestant to harness what social and cultural historians call "the politics of gesture" in order to turn the world upside down.[5] In the 1640s and '50s, the so-called Levellers and Diggers adopted similar sartorial strategies. The Leveller leader John Lilburne famously refused to remove his hat to the Peers when hauled in front of the House of Lords on charges of treason, while the Digger Gerrard Winstanley refused to doff and don to the New Model Army leader, General Fairfax.[6]

Incidentally, the essential prooftext for both movements remained Acts 10:34. The Levellers put the case for the equal rights of freeborn Englishmen to Parliament thus:

> Care neither for favours nor smiles, and *be no respecter of persons*. Let not the greatest peers in the land be more respected with you than so many old bellows-menders, broom-men, cobblers, tinkers, or chimney-sweepers, who are all equally freeborn with the hugest men and loftiest Anakims in the land.[7]

Even more controversially, Winstanley applied the language of Acts directly to the issue of land reform: "For if the Reformation must be according to the Word of God, then every one is to have the benefit and freedom of his creation, *without respect of persons*."[8] Others took it in a still more radically redistributive direction.[9]

1977), 180–82. See also Jeremy Waldron, *One Another's Equals: The Basis of Human Equality* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017).

[3] See Sarah Buss, "Appearing Respectful: The Moral Significance of Manners," *Ethics* 109 (1999): 795–826.

[4] For civil worship generally, see Teresa M. Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

[5] See Michael Braddick, "Introduction: The Politics of Gesture," *Past and Present* 4 (2009): 9–35.

[6] Christopher Hill, "Introduction," in Gerrard Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom, and Other Writings*, ed. Christopher Hill (1973; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 27.

[7] Richard Overton, "An Arrow against Tyrants," in *The English Levellers*, ed. Andrew Sharp, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 60 (emphasis added). The Anakim were a race of giants in Genesis.

[8] Gerrard Winstanley, "A Declaration from the Poor, Oppressed People of England," in Hill, *Law of Freedom*, 105 (emphasis added), and passim.

[9] Anonymous, *Tyranopocrit Discover'd* (Rotterdam, 1649), 52.

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It was the "People Called Quakers," however, who finally elevated this principle of divine disrespect to a central tenet of their faith. George Fox began his ministry in 1646 and described its auspicious beginning in his *Journal* as follows:

> When the Lord sent me forth into the world, he forbade me to put off my hat to any, high or low; and I was required to Thee and Thou all men and women, *without any respect* to rich or poor, great or small … and this made the sects and professions to rage.[10]

As Fox's description made clear, he and his brethren interpreted Acts 10:34 as precluding not only the practice of hat honor, but also the use of the plural *you* in addressing their fellow creatures. According to this Quaker politics of pronouns, every person must be addressed alike with the familiar—and increasingly archaic—"thee" and "thou" as a sign of their equality.[11]

"God is no respecter of persons" remained the Quakers' watchword throughout the seventeenth century. John Locke's friend and noted bibliophile Benjamin Furly would identify himself in his early anti-hat honor tract *The World's Honour Detected* (1663) as "a Friend to Truth, who is no respecter or regarder of persons, called a *Quaker*."[12] Likewise, in her defense of women's preaching, *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of the Scriptures* (1666), the Quaker leader Margaret Fell reminded her readers that "the Lord Jesus [himself] hath manifested himself and his Power, without respect of Persons," including to women, "so let all mouths be stopt that would limit him"—that is, by denying present-day Englishwomen, who might be similarly inspired to manifest the Spirit in church.[13]

Modern readers may be tempted to dismiss this mid-century preoccupation with hats and Acts—like the Quaker "thee" and "thou"—as quaint eccentricities, or merely a peculiar take on social practices long associated with sectarian Christianity. Had not the earliest Christians scandalized their Roman neighbors by denominating one another "brother" and "sister" regardless of their sex or social status? These "habits" had likewise been adopted by the early Christians as an expression of their equality—or more precisely, their unity as expressed in Gal 3:28: "There is

[10] George Fox, "Journal," in Thomas Hamm, ed., *Quaker Writings: An Anthology, 1650–1920* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2010), 20.

[11] See Teresa M. Bejan, "What Quakers Can Teach Us about the Politics of Pronouns," *The New York Times*, 16 November 2019.

[12] Benjamin Furly, *The World's Honor Detected, and, for the Unprofitableness Thereof, Rejected, and the Honour Which Comes from God Alone, Asserted, and Reduced to Practice, or, Some Reasons Why the People of God Called Quakers, Do Deny the Accustomary Honour and Salutations of the World …* (London: Printed for Robert Wilson, 1663), title page.

[13] Margaret Fell, *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures: All Such as Speak by the Spirit and Power of the Lord Jesus; and How Women Were the First That Preached the Tidings of the Resurrection of Jesus …* (London, 1666), https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/fell/speaking/speaking.html.

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neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (KJV). Moreover, the refusal of hat honor, in particular, was well attested in England long before the seventeenth century.[14] The influential Yale political scientist James C. Scott has described this practice as a "hidden transcript," one among many signs of social protest indicating popular resistance to social, political, and economic domination in premodern societies.[15]

Neither reading, however, appreciates the significance of the scriptural basis of this seventeenth-century English fascination with *disrespecting persons*, which adherents interpreted as a biblical command, as well as a demand of practical Christianity. As the Parliamentarian side gained the military advantage in the English Civil Wars, the Westminster Assembly of Divines—convened to reform the Church of England in a more Puritan direction—sought to correct what it saw as a definite misinterpretation of Scripture. The *Larger Catechism* issued in 1648 presented respectful behavior toward one's elders and betters as a corollary of the fifth commandment: "The honour inferiors owe to superiors" included "all due reverence in heart, word, and behaviour … and maintenance of their persons and authority according to their several ranks and … places." Meanwhile, the *sins* of inferiors against superiors included any "contempt of … their persons and places … cursing, mocking, and all such refractory and scandalous carriage."[16] This evidently included male Commoners keeping on their hats.

The rise of Quakerism and other dissenting sects in the following decade attests to the difficulty of putting the genie—what the historian John Walter calls "gestural dissidence"[17]—back into the bottle. The plain English of the "authorised" translation of the King James Bible was clear enough. If God in fact was "no respecter of persons," surely individual Christians need not—or even must not—respect them either.

But here, unknown perhaps to its practitioners, ethical citation was taking its cue from a decidedly innovative translation. While theologians, historians, and political philosophers alike have tended to focus exclusively on the creation of human beings in God's image in Gen 1:26 as the decisive prooftext,[18] in seventeenth-century England it was, as we have seen, Acts 10:34 that proved uniquely effectual in translating theoretical claims to human equality into social and politically

[14] See, e.g., B. Wilkinson, "The Peasants' Revolt of 1381," *Spec* 15 (1940): 12–35, here 27–28.

[15] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 87–88. Fittingly, Scott himself went to a Quaker school. See https://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/11-points-of-resistance-and-departure-an-interview-with-james-c.-scott.

[16] Quoted in Andrew Sharp, "Introduction," in Sharp, *English Levellers*, xx–xxi.

[17] John Walter, "Crowds and Popular Politics in the English Revolution," in *The Oxford Handbook of the English Revolution*, ed. Michael J. Braddick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 330–46, here 333.

[18] See, e.g., Joshua Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Waldron, *One Another's Equals*.

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disruptive practices. In this passage, according to the KJV, Peter encounters a Roman centurion, Cornelius.

> [25]As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him, and fell down at his feet, and worshipped him. [26]But Peter took him up, saying, Stand up; I myself also am a man.… [28]God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean.… [Cornelius said:] [33]Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God. [34]Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is *no respecter of persons*: [35]But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him. (Acts 10:25–35)

Here, the English phrase "no respecter of persons" translates the Greek οὐκ ἔστιν προσωπολήμπτης—that is, one who is not partial to faces.[19]

The Greek πρόσωπον, as the "face" or mask that an actor would wear when in the theater, corresponded directly with the Latin *persona*, an important legal term describing an individual or corporate body's public role or position. Accordingly, the Vulgate rendered this Greek expression into Latin as *non acceptor personarum*. Of course, this ancient, external sense of personality is at odds with the modern idea of personhood as an individual's inward capacity for moral agency, and which is—according to contemporary moral philosophers—uniquely worthy of respect. Yet, as a Roman citizen himself, Peter's point in Acts was that one's acceptability to the Christian God depended not on one's worldly status or "face"—that is, one's age, sex, race, wealth, social status, or legal condition—as it did under the Roman civil law, but on one's righteousness alone. In other words, it was what was on the inside that counted.

At first, English translators of the Bible closely followed the Vulgate. The fourteenth-century Wycliffe and the sixteenth-century Geneva Bibles both rendered Acts 10:34 and associated passages as "no acceptor of persons." Only with the 1611 translation authorised by James I did this traditional, legalistic phrasing give way to the altogether more bracing "no *respecter* of persons." This language, as we have seen, was wholeheartedly embraced by early modern evangelicals, and it remains familiar to English-speaking Christians today.[20] Thus, while the sartorial protest of refusing hat honor certainly predated the seventeenth century, the biblical injunction cited by Levellers, Diggers, and Quakers did not.

This fact should, I think, remind intellectual historians and political theorists of the significance to the history of ideas not only of Scripture but also of particular practices of biblical translation and citation. This is true, especially, with regard to the development of modern ideas of equality. The equality of human beings by

[19] See "Πρόσωπον," in *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, ed. Robert S. P. Beekes (Leiden: Brill, 2009), https://dictionaries.brillonline.com/search#dictionary=greek&id=gr5729.

[20] See Linford D. Fisher, "Evangelicals and Unevangelicals: The Contested History of a Word, 1500–1900," *Religion and American Culture* 26 (2016): 184–226.

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nature had been, after all, an ancient Roman legal principle viewed as consistent with all sorts of social, political, and economic hierarchies for centuries.[21] But for the fateful choice by translators to substitute "respecter" for "acceptor" in 1611, would Acts have become such an effective and inclusive vehicle for social and political dissidence in early modern England? One thinks not.

The salience of the refusal of hat honor, combined with a citation to Acts as an injunction to divine *disrespect*, provides a stunning testament to the power of contingency in the history of political thought. Let us, then, remember the oatmeal maker and marvel at the conjunction of text and context. It was here, at last, that early modern evangelicals began to render the idea that all human beings were one another's equals *effectual*, by cutting the great ones down to size.

[21] Alan Watson, trans., *The Digest of Justinian,* 4 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), vol. 4, 50.17.32. Quod attinet ad ius civile, servi pro nullis habentur: non tamen et iure naturali, quia, quod ad ius naturale attinet, omnes homines aequales sunt ("As far as concerns the civil law slaves are regarded as not existing, not, however, in the natural law, because as far as concerns the natural law all men are equal").

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