

The secret of God or the need for rules

By Bernard Adarniczewski

A few summers ago I was invited to spend a week or so as a guest at the Tuscan country house of a reasonably successful London professional man. Unlike many others in his general circle of friends and acquaintances he had married only once, some twenty years earlier, and was still married to the same wife. They had one daughter, then in her mid-teens.

The husband came from a middle class family who had been able to provide him with a good education and no more; the wife came from a wealthy family and had on various occasions brought some money into the home, through gifts and inheritance. But on the whole their financial needs were largely met by his substantial income.

Professionally - he was not a doctor - he had to be logical, numerate, capable of assessing risk and managing people; without these qualities he could not have got where he was. After a long period of expansion his business had lately contracted - in common with much of the British economy - and he had had to reduce his staff. Whilst this worried him, his own net income did not seem to have been seriously enough affected to threaten his family's style of life.

His wife had studied music and still retained an active and lively interest in music and the arts. He himself professed to share this interest: they went to concerts, bought paintings and attended exhibition openings. On her part, although she tolerated her husband's discussions of business and business worries, she obviously took little interest in his work. The daughter was similarly inclined to the arts and had little time for her father's occasional and usually quite lucid explanations of mathematical and scientific principles or his discussion of history.

She too only tolerated these efforts on his part, even where she had asked for them

herself, and was rarely stimulated by or interested in them.

In fact of course, his standing in this family of three was very much that of the bumbling, absent minded and funny teddy bear, benignly accepted, smiled at, kissed and tolerated, mostly with amusement, only occasionally with slight irritation, someone whose masculine quirks were what one had to put up with and certainly not that of the admired, domineering male. To the outsider that might have appeared strange, for amongst those three people he seemed to be the most practical; he earned the money to keep them, he was the one who could and would do a practical job about the house, he drove the car - across Europe at times - and it was he who really organised and arranged their lives and worried about getting things just right for everyone. Perhaps if he had worried less he would have had the better of his two women.

But on the whole it seems he didn't. There I was now staying as a guest on their Tuscan "farm", which I have put into inverted commas on purpose, because it yielded nothing: there was land enough attached to the place, but the share of the yield which the sly, Italian peasant farmer finally paid to his foreign neighbour and absentee part-landlord for the use of it was so small it hardly paid for the upkeep.

So it cost money to maintain a double- myth: a myth of nearness to nature, of farming, of almost feudal land ownership, dear to him; and a myth of Florentine culture and art which his wife fancied, that view of Tuscan hillscapes, and Scarlatti floating across them from the hi-fi, the Towers of San Gimignano in the distance and that Fra Angelleo vacuity, that will pass for serenity after a few centuries of holding the same pose. All very pretty and idyllic indeed.

The point and problem however, after all this, was - water. Or rather the lack of it. When they bought the place it had been uninhabited for some years and it was for that reason: lack of water. There was a well against a hillside; sometimes it dried up in the summer, but even when it didn't it was deep and required a powerful pump to raise

what it held. And that needed electricity and there was only 1 kilowatt of that for the whole house. There was also a cisterna the size, in area, of a good size private swimming pool, but not much more than 3 foot deep. So if it was full there would be enough water to supply a family for about a week or two to lavish London standards, no more. Any rain that fell, ran off the roof of the house into the cisterna and it could also be filled from the well by pump. The water from the cisterna was itself pumped via a complex arrangement of pumps and standby pumps into 3 large storage tanks in the house which in turn fed the main tank in the loft above the bathroom.

But in summer in Tuscany it hardly ever rains.

There was rumour of another, as yet unlocated well, somewhere down the hillside, but that again would have required an even larger electrical supply to pump the water up to the house. And to lay on that electricity would have been expensive. The village 2 miles away had a municipal supply of water and a piped connection to that would also have required a sizeable investment. But a water problem on isolated farms is common thereabout so a local contractor provided water by the tanker load at the cost of delivery, which I understood came to about £10 per load and was sufficient for a week's worth of moderate consumption.

All this was explained to me in great detail soon after my arrival. And it constituted a frequent topic of discussion during my stay.

Over some 2 to 3 years of staying there the husband had developed a set of water consumption rules, the restrictive nature of which stood in strange contrast to the luxuriously equipped bathroom that he had had a builder install. This bathroom was fully tiled, had a lavatory, a bidet, a bath, a shower compartment and a large hand basin all of the most elegant Italian design. But no-one was allowed to have a bath, the lavatory was only to be flushed if someone had crapped - gents were told as far as possible to pee outside; for hand or face washing the water was to be left in the basin for as long as it was still useable; a shower a day and a

short one at that was the most one was permitted. In the kitchen too strictest water economy was to be practised: fresh water was allowed for rinsing, but had to be reused for washing up after that, washing up water was kept to be topped up with hot water before its next use.

After a few days consciousness of the "water problem" was deeply impressed on anyone who stayed there. And no summer went by without a stream of visitors and guests, who by their consumption increased the problem further.

The strange contrast between the general generosity of my host, the degree of unstinting hospitality, the amount of wine and food consumed and the miserly attitude to the use of water, puzzled me. For here was a problem, which though real enough, could certainly have had most of its restrictive sting taken out of it by that £10 worth of water delivery service, brought to the house, say, once a week. As my hosts only stayed there at most for, say, 8 to 12 weeks a year the maximum additional expenditure seemed trivial in terms of what must have been their Italian holiday budget, with guests and wine and travel.

Obviously given the wealth of my host and his habit of spending money on maintaining a comfortable life style the reason could not be financial. In fact it was his strange evasion of the straightforward solution of arranging for water deliveries that puzzled me most: he insisted on seeing the problem only in terms of the larger capital investment solutions of installing either pipes or electricity. That such additional investment might not be justified seemed reasonable to me.

Could it be, I asked myself, that my host, not paying for water used in London, had developed a peculiar, cranky attitude towards paying for water? It was out of the question: he was a widely travelled man, had lived in many countries, was old, experienced and flexibly minded enough not to hold onto any such idea, if he ever had it.

So I was left with nothing but to assume that he really did not want to solve this problem. He liked its existence. Why?

Was he the sort of man who needed something to worry about? Well, if he was, he had his business worries then, so it seemed unlikely that a water problem would significantly raise the quality of the worry. Nor of course would someone wishing to worry about fictitious threats choose a problem that so obviously lent itself to being solved in a simple and concrete way; worrying about one's health, one's love life, one's children etc., are well trodden paths to be taken here. And these somewhat more mysterious problems are also less easily remedied.

So what did the continued existence of the water problem do for my host? The solution came to me one afternoon, looking out across those Tuscan hills, and it was obvious once I had thought of it: the water problem allowed him to create rules. Rules, which everybody, including himself of course, had to obey; rules, the need for which was indisputable, once the problem itself was allowed to exist. I realised now why a polite offer I had made to pay for a tankerful of water, seeing that I was also contributing to the problem, had been equally politely, but quite firmly rejected: it would have created water anarchy, a precedent for licence.

Why this man needed rules in that situation could, I imagine, be explained in a multiplicity of ways the absolute truth of which did not seem to matter much. The need for those rules could have had to do with his family life, with some imbalance he may have felt existed between what he might hold to be his real significance as the principal financial supporter and practical maintainer of it and the degree of recognition, authority and respect accorded him by his wife and daughter. Or perhaps it was his wife's money that bought the Tuscan home, so that he needed to impose his stamp on it with those rules? Perhaps in London where such or similar rules were not evident in their home, his general dominance in the more usual environment was more obviously established. Or perhaps finally, it was simply that the day-to-day London routine provided a sufficiently rule-dominated framework, which was now lacking in the more relaxed, more easy going, less regulated holiday house abroad: so rules needed to be invented here.

This strange need for people to invent rules for them and others to live by, even when their existence is as good as nonsensical, was never more clearly impressed on me. But that apart one thing is certain, the creation and maintenance of these water rules gave him authority and power over all who stayed there. To waste water was a sacrilege, everybody was made conscious of that and also of the host's authority, as it derived from his position of the water conservation priest, and of how it extended beyond his physical presence right into one's private doings in the privy.

It occurred to me how, out of the imposition of senseless rules and their ritualisation, God could grow simply because what now still needed to be done for the rules' sake had been so far removed from any sense or understanding. I could imagine, for example, how given the continuation of that situation at the Tuscan farmhouse over a few generations - the actual water problem having from necessity and convenience long been solved - a small extra basin next to the hand basin would be installed in such a manner that each time someone used any water the first flush of it would be preserved in that basin - a kind of holy water font - in memory of what? No one would be able to remember and it must therefore be for the worship of the unknown and unknowable.

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