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# Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank, by Robert W. Fuller

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ment. Many of the arguments are distracted by subjective and opinionated commentaries that confuse the issues. Many of the essays in the book are politically one-sided and unfair in their assessments of the Western governments and media outlets.

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## **SOMEBODIES AND NOBODIES: OVERCOMING THE ABUSE OF RANK**

ROBERT W. FULLER  
NEW SOCIETY PUBLISHERS, 2004  
\$16.95, 208 PAGES

*Reviewed by Michael Brennan*

In *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*, Fuller attempts to “shine a spotlight on rank-based abuse, to learn to recognize its various faces, assess its costs, and conceive a world without it” (p. 11). In addition to personal anecdotes, Fuller shares examples from numerous visitors to the website, [www.breakingranks.net](http://www.breakingranks.net), to illustrate the existence of “rank-based inequity” (p. xix). The heart of Fuller’s book rests on two principles:

(1) Indignity and humiliation feel pretty much the same to a nobody, a black, a woman, or a student, and (2) no matter the excuse for abuse, it persists only in the presence of an underlying difference of rank signifying power. (p. 2)

A critical component of the author’s argument is that those who hold positions of power are the somebodies of the world and the weaker members are the nobodies. The rift among people today “is the gap between the ‘somebodies’—the relatively powerful and successful—and the ‘nobodies’—the relatively weak and vulnerable” (p. 155). Fuller asserts that all people at some point in their lives experience both the feelings of somebodiness and nobodiness. Fuller makes a sufficient case for the first assertion that all people, at one time or another, feel that their dignity has been violated. However, the

author fails to demonstrate that the abuse of one's dignity only occurs in the presence of rank signifying power.

Fuller attempts to demonstrate that rankism is the -ism at the root of all -isms. In the author's understanding, it is the source of sexism, racism, and even terrorism. Fuller asserts,

the reason rankism has outlasted these familiar forms of abuse...is that rank, when it is earned, is a measure of excellence, and distinguishing degrees of excellence is vital to the success of any human enterprise. Thus, rank itself is not inherently illegitimate as a carrier of power. (p. 14)

In other words, there is a legitimate use of rank within the various facets of society, but the problem arises when people abuse this power. Fuller illustrates that rank abuse damages personal relationships, productivity of the business world, learning and leadership potential, and even the human spirit. The author shares personal experiences and the stories of visitors to the aforementioned website. In doing so, Fuller makes a strong case for recognizing that rank abuse pervades many relationships throughout society.

It is true that many instances of racism and sexism have been associated with some sort of power relationship. However, Fuller does not account for the instances in which people are racist and/or sexist when there is no relationship of power. Some people fail to recognize the human dignity and intrinsic self-worth of all people, regardless of relationships of power. According to Fuller's constructs, racist or sexist comments would never be made about those that have achieved a certain level of success. This simply is not the case. Unfortunately, many people in society fail to respect the innate human dignity of all people, those who have achieved some measure of success as well as those who have not.

Fuller makes a tremendous leap with the assumption that power is the only factor which contributes to failing to treat people with dignity. The assertion is overstated. Fuller recounts a personal experience of a discussion with a former high school classmate at a class reunion. Growing up together, both were excellent at math throughout their school years. The friend grew up on a farm and after high school returned home to the farm to drive a truck and sell eggs. Fuller, unlike his friend, was encouraged to go on and attain a doctorate in mathematics. By doing so, Fuller claims life has been more "fulfilling and satisfying" (p. 36). In telling this story, Fuller violates the premise that respecting the dignity of all people is based on a relationship of power. Fuller has no power over the former classmate, but erroneously assumes a life with more accomplishments is automatically more satisfying. In doing so, Fuller disrespects the dignity and the worth of the friend's work as a truck driver.

Another example that seems to contradict the emphasis Fuller places on rankism is the story of a gentlemen who mistreated a waitress at a restaurant. In this gentlemen's coming to recognize he was wrong for this mistreatment he states, "I'm now less prone to pull rank when addressing people who are lower rank than I am" (p. 137). The flaw in the thinking is that simply because the waitress is serving the meal she ranks less than the customer. Technically, there is no formal relationship of power here. It is not an abuse of rank; it is an abuse of the waitress's God-given dignity.

In the last chapter of the book, Fuller creates a "Nobody Manifesto," which highlights the essential underemphasized point of the book. "Dignity is innate, nonnegotiable, and inviolate. No person's dignity is any less worthy of respect, any less sacred than anyone else's. Equal dignity requires equal opportunity" (p. 143). This is the true heart of the injustices that Fuller writes about throughout his book. Instead of emphasizing that the human dignity of all people is violated in any -ism, Fuller attempts to portray rankism as the overarching -ism. In doing so, Fuller attempts to force all instances of disrespect under an umbrella that does not actually encompass all -isms present in today's world.

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## **THE SPIRITUAL WISDOM OF THE GOSPELS FOR CHRISTIAN PREACHERS AND TEACHERS: ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN—YEAR A**

JOHN SHEA  
LITURGICAL PRESS, 2004  
\$29.95, 332 pages

*Reviewed by Peggy Elson*

*The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers is the first in a set of four books based on the Sunday Gospel readings in The Revised Common Lectionary and the Roman Missal's Lectionary for Mass.*