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COMPASSION: AN URGENT GLOBAL IMPERATIVE

WORKING GROUP DISCUSSION PAPER

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This draft is intended to serve as a discussion paper for the Compassion working group at the 2012 U.S.-Islamic World Forum. The final paper will be completed shortly after the Forum, and will include a summary of the working group's discussions and a set of policy recommendations. Please visit http://www.brookings.edu/about/projects/islamic-world/us-islamic-world-forums for draft and final versions of all four 2012 Forum papers.

Compassion: An Urgent Global Imperative

CONVENER

Karen Armstrong
The Charter for Compassion

Compassion is a core value of religious life—it requires us to treat others as we wish to be treated ourselves. For a more peaceful, stable, and viable world, many religious scholars and activists agree that it is essential to try to implement this ethic globally so that we live together in greater harmony and respect. Because of their long commitment to compassion, the religious traditions, often seen as part of today's problems, should be making a major contribution to the building of a just global community, surely one of the chief tasks of our time. This working group will try to find a creative, realistic, and practical way of making the compassionate voice of religion not only audible but a dynamic force in our polarized world.

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Introduction

Our world is dangerously polarized, and religion is often regarded as part of the problem. Yet religion should be making a major contribution to one of the chief tasks of our time. Our religious traditions are rich and multifarious—they differ significantly and in important ways. But they all agree that compassion is the test of true spirituality and lies at the heart of morality. The compassionate imperative has been epitomized in the aphorism that is sometimes called the Golden Rule: “Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you” (or, in its positive form, “Always treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself”). The prophets and sages insisted that we cannot confine our benevolence to our own group. We must have concern for everybody: love the stranger in our midst, love even our enemies, and reach out to all tribes and nations. If we want a viable world for the next generation, it is essential that in the global community, all peoples, whatever their nationality, ethnicity, or ideology, are treated with respect and can live in harmony. If this principle had been applied more stringently in the past by, for example, the colonial powers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we would likely have less problems today. If we want a peaceful, just, and sustainable world, we have to behave more compassionately.

The compassionate message of religion is more sorely needed now than ever. There is a worrying imbalance of power and wealth in the world and consequently an escalating mix of rage, malaise, alienation, and humiliation that has, in some cases, led to terrorist atrocities that endanger us all. We are engaged in wars and conflicts that have entailed horrific civilian casualties and denial of fundamental human rights. Islamophobia has become a growing trend in both Europe and North America and its divisive discourse threatens fundamental human decencies. In India, conflict between Hindus and Muslims shows no sign of abating, there have been fresh outbreaks of anti-Semitism in many parts of the world, and in some countries of western Asia, Christians have been harassed and there is renewed tension between Sunni and Shi’i Muslims. In a world in which small disaffected groups will increasingly have destructive powers hitherto confined to the nation state, it has become imperative to apply the Golden Rule globally, ensuring that we treat all people as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion is no longer an option—it is the key to our survival. If our religious and ethical traditions fail to address these challenges, they will fail the test of our time.

It is crucial that we develop a more global outlook. We need a global democracy, in which all voices—not merely those favored by the rich and powerful—are heard. At the

same time as the world is so perilously divided, we are bound together more closely than ever before. We are interconnected economically: when a bank fails in one part of the world, the effects of this failure reverberate in distant countries; if stocks take a downward plunge in London or Hong Kong, markets plummet in a domino effect around the globe. We are also linked politically. Trouble is no longer confined to remote, disadvantaged regions. We are now aware that what happens in Afghanistan or western Asia today can have repercussions in New York or Madrid tomorrow. We are drawn intimately together on the World Wide Web, and we all, without exception, face the possibility of environmental catastrophe. Yet our perceptions have not caught up with these realities. We still instinctively put ourselves and our national aspirations in a special, privileged category and have not fully appreciated that if we harm our global neighbors, this will eventually have an impact on us. Whether we like it or not, we cannot live without those we may initially regard as foreign or even alien. We need our religious traditions' wisdom, which is universal in scope, to help people adjust creatively to our globally interdependent world.

The Charter for Compassion

In 2008, I was awarded the TED Prize. Every year TED (Technology, Entertainment, and Design), a private, nonprofit organization best known for its conferences on "ideas worth spreading," awards people whom they think have made a difference but who, with their help, could make even more of an impact. The recipient is granted a wish for a better world, so I asked TED to help me create, launch, and propagate a "Charter for Compassion" to amplify this major religious theme and counter the extremism and intolerance that is rife in both religious and secular life. Thousands of people from all over the world contributed to a draft charter on a multilingual website in Hebrew, Arabic, Urdu, Spanish, and English. In February 2009, their comments were presented to a council of leading thinkers and activists, who represented six faith traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism).[1] Together, we composed the Charter. It was a demonstration that, at a time when the various religions are commonly seen as chronically in conflict with one another, we were all in agreement about the importance of compassion and that it was possible for us to reach across the divide and work together for justice and peace.[2]

The Charter was launched in sixty different locations around the world in November 2009. To date, over 85,000 people have affirmed the Charter and 150 partners around the globe have incorporated it into their programs. But the most significant and surprising development has been the fact that, so far, the people who have embraced the Charter most

[1] The members of the council are listed in Appendix II.
[2] See Appendix I for the text of the Charter for Compassion.

enthusiastically and energetically have been business men and women in the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Pakistan. A Pakistani consultant has adapted the book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*[3] as a course for business ethics and has been inundated with requests by companies who wish to implement it. In the wake of the economic crisis of 2008, many leaders in major companies such as Google and Starbucks have concluded that selfishness and greed are not only bad for business, but that a compassionate concern for the welfare of the community and employees actually increases productivity.

Other business people have used the Charter as a basis for more philanthropic projects. Pakistan, a country on the front line of many divisive conflicts, has become one of the leaders of the Charter. The emphasis there is on education: a team of leading educationalists and activists is developing a network of schools that have introduced modules of compassionate teaching into subjects such as language, literature, history, and religious studies—working in tandem with similar initiatives in Canada and the Netherlands. A compassionate character has been introduced into the children's television program *Sesame Street* in Pakistan and will be used in the curriculum that is being developed for primary schools. During Ramadan, the Pakistani team, working closely with a similar team in Jordan, devised a competition on the internet, inviting people to perform a compassionate action every day and post it on the website. Forty thousand people took part. The objective in all these projects is to change the prevailing mindset so that compassion is brought from the periphery to the forefront of consciousness.

In the United States, a team of business people in Seattle formed the Compassionate Action Network (CAN) and, in April 2010, the city's mayor affirmed the Charter and declared Seattle the first U.S. City of Compassion. This did not, of course, mean that Seattle was *already* a compassionate city, but that it was committed to integrating the compassionate ideal into the problematic and challenging realities of twenty-first century urban living. Each year, for example, the community works on a practical project for the city and tries to bring a creatively compassionate solution to crises, such as a particularly distressing shooting incident. CAN has also invited others to join it in creating a global network of Compassionate Cities. To date, eight towns and cities have affirmed the Charter— including Gaziantep, Turkey and Louisville, Kentucky, a city in the heart of the U.S.'s Bible Belt— and nearly ninety cities and regions worldwide are currently going through the process of becoming Cities of Compassion. CAN does not advertise this campaign—it simply responds to requests from cities that approach it, affirming that there is widespread desire for greater compassion in public life.

[3] Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (New York: Knopf, 2010).

Working with business people has been instructive. They know how to think practically and strategically, measure success, pilot a project so that expectations are not raised to an unrealistic level, and assess progress. Businesses must be involved in the effort to build a more empathic and respectful culture. Where premodern societies were based upon religious premises, modern civilization is founded on market principles, so the compassionate ethos *must* operate successfully in the financial world or it will remain marginal and ineffective. Next year, we are holding a big international conference in Seattle on compassion and business precisely to discuss these issues.

The Religious Contribution

The Charter has, therefore, made significant progress in a remarkably short time. But we need the insights of religion to give depth and insight to these initiatives and prevent them from becoming superficial and excessively pragmatic. For centuries, the faith traditions have explored the spiritual and psychological implications of the compassionate life. They know that compassion is the work of a lifetime and cannot be achieved overnight (or even in twelve steps!). They have discovered that it is very difficult to live according to the Golden Rule and that it requires a constant imaginative and intelligent restraint, as well as positive action, so that we do not simply impose *our* will on others. The faith traditions understand the challenge of compassion, which requires a constant transcendence of egotism, and have devised methods of achieving this in sustainable, realistic ways.

Our capitalist society has developed a "me-first" ethos in which self-gratification is regarded as a natural right and a principal objective. When speaking about compassion, I have found that some people have been genuinely bewildered by the phrase in the Charter which says that compassion impels us "to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there." I have been concerned by comments on the Charter's website in which people blithely assert "I will henceforth devote myself entirely to the service of others" or "I am now resolved to bring light and joy into the lives of everyone I meet" with little apparent appreciation of what such an undertaking involves. There is also a widespread tendency to concentrate on what compassion can do for *me*: it will make me kinder to myself, make me feel good and give me a richer life, or provide a nice warm glow that will increase my self-esteem. It has also been a struggle to persuade people to cultivate a larger and more global view. Even among people sincerely committed to the Charter, they are often reluctant to contemplate the suffering of people in other parts of the world or to look beyond their own city or immediate environment.

This is where the religious traditions can help, because they have long understood the importance of transcending self-interest and reaching out to the "other." The Charter

was a collective document that intentionally avoided privileging the insights of a particular faith, but each tradition can appropriate the Charter in its own way. Each religion, drawing on its special insights about the nature and requirements of compassion, has something unique to teach the world. These religious teachings are important because compassion has become so marginal today that many people are confused about what it actually means.

The English word "compassion" is often confused with "pity" and is associated with an uncritical, sentimental benevolence, softness, or even weakness. The *Oxford English Dictionary,* for example, defines compassion as "piteous" or "pitiable." But in fact "compassion" derives from the Latin *patiri* and the Greek *pathein,* meaning to "suffer, undergo or experience." So *com*passion means "to endure something *with* another person, to put ourselves in somebody else's shoes, to feel her pain as though it were our own and to enter generously into her point of view. Compassion can be defined, therefore, as an attitude of principled, consistent benevolence that requires what the Greeks called *ekstasis,* a "stepping outside" of the self.

The Semitic languages introduce another element. Both *rahamanut* in post-biblical Hebrew and *rahman* in Arabic derive from the root *rhm,* "womb," and this evokes the maternal affection that is our first experience of unselfish, unconditional altruism. The icon of mother and child is an archetypal expression of human love which involves affective emotion but also requires dedicated unselfish action at all times. A mother has to put her own exhaustion aside and get up to her crying child every night and her concern for her infant pervades all her activities. She has to watch him at every moment of the day, laying her own preoccupations to one side. Mother love can be heartbreaking as well as fulfilling, but a mother never gives up— no matter how disappointing her offspring turns out to be.

A very early Buddhist prayer, attributed to the Buddha himself, urges people "to cherish all creatures as a mother her only child." It urges us to have the dedication and responsibility of a mother for her infant for all members of our own or other species, no matter how difficult or disillusioning this may be. And we must, the prayer continues, extend our benevolence to the farthest corners of the world, not omitting a single creature from this radius of concern. The Sanskrit word usually translated as "compassion" is *karuna*, but it is perhaps better defined as a determination to liberate others from their grief and suffering and as a cultivated sense of responsibility for the pain that we see everywhere in the world.

All these teachings are urgently needed to counter the self-regarding ethos of modernity. I have found in my travels that people are hungry for these insights, realize their potential, and respond to them, even if they are not personally religious. In our working group, we will discuss ways of making them a practical and effective force in the

world.

A Historical Perspective

In the West, we have become accustomed to regarding religion as a purely private affair that should not intrude upon public life. This is a unique and entirely novel development, which the great sages and prophets who originally developed the compassionate ethos would not have understood. The sages of the Upanishads, the Buddha, Mahavira, Confucius, Mozi, Laozi, the Hebrew Prophets, Hillel, Jesus, and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him [pbuh]) were all living in turbulent societies like our own, in which violence had reached an unprecedented crescendo and older values were being eroded by aggressive commercial activity. The military technology that fueled the conflicts of those far-off days was puny compared with what we face today, but when they contemplated the cruelty, ruthlessness, and suffering of their times, the sages concluded that unless human beings learned to treat others as they would wish to be treated themselves, they would destroy each other. The ideal of compassion was thus a response to the suffering and aggression they saw all around them. They did not regard compassion as an impractical dream. They worked as hard to implement it in their difficult societies as we work today to find a cure for cancer. They were innovative thinkers who looked deeply into the religious traditions they had inherited and made a massive, creative effort to enable them to speak directly to their troubled times. We are told that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) would grow pale, faint, and sweat even on a cold day as he struggled to utter the Word of God and bring peace to war-torn Arabia. This type of effort is required of us today.

Even though the religious traditions have always been concerned with the achievement of personal enlightenment, they all responded to social and political concerns and sought to provide a viable alternative to the belligerence of their times. This was very clear in China. Confucius (c. 551–479 BCE), the first to enunciate the Golden Rule in a form that was written down by his disciples, insisted that it was the thread that ran through the spiritual method he called the Way (*dao*) and pulled all its teachings together; the Golden Rule should, he said, be practiced "all day and every day."[4] He felt that the old world was crumbling: instead of performing the traditional rituals of courtesy, which had held Chinese society together and induced a spirit of moderation among the aristocracy, most of the princes of China were casting restraint to the winds in headlong pursuit of luxury, wealth, and power. Large, new states attacked the smaller principalities with impunity, resulting in terrible loss of life. The Chinese seemed bent on self-destruction and would soon embark on the period known as the Warring States (c. 430–221 BCE), in which the kingdoms and states of China systematically destroyed one another until only one was left. In Confucius's

[4] Analects 4.14; 15.23 in Arthur Waley, trans., *The Analects of Confucius,* New York, 1992.

view, salvation lay in a renewed appreciation of the underlying spirit of the old rites, which he called *ren* ("human-heartedness"). The ancient rituals had taught people not to treat others carelessly and ensured that they were not driven simply by utility and self-interest. In the old days, it was thought that these rituals conferred a magical power on the recipient. Confucius reinterpreted this ancient belief: when people are treated with reverence, they become conscious of their own sacred worth, and ordinary actions, such as eating and drinking, are lifted to a level higher than the biological and are endowed with holiness.

The implications for politics were immense, because people yearned for a just, humane ruler. If instead of pursuing his own goals to the detriment of others, a ruler would "curb his ego and submit to ritual for a single day," Confucius believed, "everyone on earth would respond to his goodness!"[5] What is *ren,* asked one of his disciples, and how can it be applied to political life? In exactly the same way as you apply it to family life, Confucius replied—by treating everybody with esteem: "Deal with the common people as though you were officiating at an important sacrifice. Do not do to others what you would not like yourself. Then there will be no feelings of opposition to you, whether it is the affairs of a State that you are handling or the affairs of a Family."[6] There would be no destructive wars if a ruler behaved toward other princes and kingdoms in this way. The Golden Rule would make it impossible to invade somebody else's territory because nobody would like this to happen to his own state. Politics should, therefore, be guided by a spirit of respectful and considerate reciprocity: "As for *ren,* you yourself desire rank and standing; then help others to get rank and standing. You want to turn your merits to account; then help others to turn theirs to account—in fact, the ability to take one's own feelings as a guide—that is the sort of thing that lies in the direction of *ren.*"[7] If a ruler acted in this spirit of reciprocity, he would become a great force for goodness in the world.

Confucius achieved little success in his own lifetime. His creed had been simple: to love and esteem others; to honor one's parents; to do what is right rather than what is purely advantageous; to refrain from treating others as tools or as mere utensils, as a means to an end; to practice reciprocity according to the Golden Rule; and finally to rule by moral example rather than by force and violence.[8] But after his death, his teachings became normative in China and have persisted despite political and historical upheavals. These teachings articulated a new world view. Each person should be regarded as embedded in concentric circles of benevolence and responsibility, which began in the family but radiated

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[5] *Analects* 12.1 Translation Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1985), p. 77

[6] *Analects* 12.2. Waley translation.

[7] Ibid., 6.28.

[8] Ibid., 12:19

out to the city, the state, and to the entire world. People must take responsibility for past, present, and future generations. Everybody, however lowly his rank, could become a sage—an avatar of compassion—and was therefore fit to become a ruler. Education was crucial for the moral cultivation of the individual, the enrichment of society, and the health of the political order; and, finally, a vital, empathic knowledge of history was essential to cultural continuity and the moral health of the nation. Confucianism became the state religion of imperial China and Confucians remained the valued advisers of the emperor until the twentieth century. Confucians were often unable to prevail against the unpredictable violence of imperial rule, but their presence in the heart of government provided an alternative to the politics of force and compulsion.

Compassionate values have also characterized the monotheistic faiths. The Hebrew Prophets inveighed tirelessly against the injustice of those in power: the prophet Nathan rebuked King David for tyrannically striking down Uriah the Hittite;[9] Elijah condemned King Ahab for murdering Naboth and seizing his ancestral land;[10] the prophecy of Isaiah begins with an oracle in which Yahweh (YHWH) commands Israel to "cease to do evil, learn to do good, search for justice, help the oppressed."[11] When the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah were threatened by imperial powers, Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah refused to inflate the national ego and told them to examine their own conduct. Amos saw YHWH using Assyria as his instrument to punish Israel for its social irresponsibility and systemic injustice, and that divine election was a responsibility rather than a privilege.[12] When the Judeans were deported to Babylonia in 597 BCE, the Priestly author (P) of Leviticus told the deportees to love the stranger in their midst, for they had been strangers in Egypt.[13] The memory of past distress should help us see that other people's suffering is as important as our own. But P was a realist. Leviticus was a law code and P's language was as technical and reticent as any legal ruling. In Middle Eastern treaties, to "love" meant to be helpful, loyal, and supportive to the stranger; far from being excessively utopian, this "love" was within everybody's grasp. When Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, the early rabbis rejected the politics of vengeance and, to replace temple worship, promoted a piety that consisted of "the doing of loving deeds."[14]

Jesus, living under the harsh rule of the Roman Empire, preached an alternative type of kingdom—the rule of God, in which rich and poor would sit together at the same table. In God's kingdom, he said, quoting the same verse of Leviticus and probably using the word in

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[9] 2 Samuel 12: 1~15
[10] I Kings 21.
[11] Isaiah 1: 17
[12] Amos 2:6~5:27
[13] Leviticus 19:33~34
[14] Aboth de Rabbi Nathan I., N, 11a.

the same way, people would "love their enemies";[15] they would not judge one another;[16] they would give their wealth to the poor; [17] when they were injured, they would not retaliate violently but turn the other cheek.[18] The people who would be admitted to the kingdom would be those who were compassionate in practical ways: feeding the hungry and visiting people who were sick or in prison.[19] Observing the Golden Rule,[20] the citizens of the Kingdom of God would forgive their debtors, unlike the Romans who taxed their subjects extortionately.[21] In this alternative kingdom, social inequities would be reversed: princes would be pulled down from their thrones, the lowly exalted, the hungry would be full, and the rich sent away empty.[22] The first would be last and the last would be first.[23]

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) also lived in a violent period, when old values were breaking down. Arabia was caught up in a vicious cycle of tribal warfare in which one vendetta led inexorably to another. In the city of Mecca, however, which was building a commercial empire, the Arabs had become rich beyond their wildest dreams, but in the stampede for wealth, weaker members of the clan had been pushed to the margins. In this time of turbulent change, the Qur'an is a cry for compassion. Its bedrock message is that it is wrong to build a private fortune but good to share your wealth fairly, creating a just society where the weak and vulnerable are treated with respect. In Mecca, the Muslims provided a different model. Instead of strutting proudly around Mecca like the Meccan grandees, they prostrated themselves in prayer several times a day, the posture of their bodies teaching them at a level deeper than the rational what the existential "surrender" (*islam*) to God required: the transcendence of the ego that prances, preens, and postures, continually drawing attention to itself. Instead of hoarding their wealth, they gave a regular proportion of their income to the poor. This *zakat* ("purification") would purge their hearts of habitual selfishness. At first, it seems that the religion was called *tazakkah,* an obscure word, related to zakat, which is difficult to translate: "refinement," "generosity," and "chivalry" have all been suggested as English equivalents, but none is entirely adequate. By *tazakkah,* Muslims were to cloak themselves in the virtues of compassion and generosity. They must use their intelligence to cultivate a responsible, caring spirit, which made them want to give graciously of what they had to all God's creatures. By meditating on the "signs" (*ayat*) of God's bounty in creation, they would learn to behave with similar generosity. Because of Allah's kindness, there was order and fruitfulness instead of chaos and sterility.

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[15] Matthew 5.44
[16] Matthew 7.1
[17] Mark 10:13~16
[18] Matthew 5:39~40
[19] Matthew 25: 31~46.
[20] Matthew 7.12
[21] Matthew 6:11~12
[22] Luke 1:52~53
[23] Matthew 20: 16.

If Muslims followed God's example, they would find that their own lives had been transformed. Instead of being characterized by selfish barbarism, they would acquire spiritual refinement.

All the great religious traditions put suffering high on their agenda. It has been said that the spiritual quest begins with the perception that something is amiss. It is well-expressed in the First Noble Truth of Buddhism: "Existence is suffering (*dukkha*)." All human beings, even the most fortunate, have pain. The perception of our own and other people's pain lies at the heart of the Golden Rule and at the heart of the compassionate imperative. It is well-expressed in the story of the Buddha's decision to leave home and become a monk. It is said that when he was born, his father invited the local priests to tell the child's fortune. One of them predicted that the child would see four disturbing sights that would impel him to leave home, become a monk, and a Buddha—a fully enlightened human being. Disturbed by this career prediction, the future Buddha's father immured him in a luxurious palace and posted guards around the grounds to prevent any distressing sights at bay. This is a powerful image of the mind in denial. As long as we close our minds to the pain that presses in upon us on all sides, we remain imprisoned in delusion and in an inferior version of ourselves. It is also futile, as suffering will always break through our carefully constructed defenses. When the young man was twenty-nine years old, the gods decided that it was time for him to face reality and sent four of their number past the guards disguised as a sick man, an old man, a corpse, and a monk. Utterly unprepared for these spectacles of suffering, the future Buddha was so shocked that he left home that very night, determined to find a way to help himself and others to bear the sorrow of life with serenity, creativity, and kindness.

The story was devised to show Buddhists what they had to do to achieve their own enlightenment. It was a call to action and it tells us that we cannot even begin our spiritual quest unless we allow the dukkha (suffering) of life to invade our minds and hearts. This was what inspired the Hebrew Prophets to inveigh against the injustice suffered by their people. The definitive icon of Western Christianity is the image of a crucified man in an extremity of agony—an emblem of the cruelty that human beings inflict upon one another. The French philosopher Peter Abelard (c. 1079–1142) did not accept the traditional doctrine of the atonement. Instead, he believed that when we look at the crucifix, our hearts break in sympathy and fellow-feeling, and it is this interior movement of instinctive compassion that saves us. But the compassionate impulse must lead to constructive action. We see this in Surah 93 (*Al-Duha*) of the Qur'an in which God asks the Prophet (pbuh) to remember the sorrows of his childhood as an orphan and a marginalized member of his tribe and make sure that nobody else in his community endured this deprivation. Now in our global world, it is not enough to assuage the suffering of our own people. We have to take responsibility for the pain of everybody in our interconnected world.

There are many other incidents, examples, messages, and stories of heroic courage in the face of injustice and cruelty, in all faith traditions, that I have not mentioned. But that is precisely the point. All religious leaders need to delve deeply into their traditions and bring these inspiring tales of compassion to the forefront of their message in a way that makes them speak directly and poignantly to our troubled times. We need to undertake scholarly work so that our understanding of compassion becomes more profound—it should play a major role in the education of clergy and laity alike. Many of the initiatives for the Charter have been devised specifically to bring the compassionate imperative to the forefront of people's minds, and religious leaders and clergy who are steeped in their traditions can do this at greater depth. Religion should resume its mission of challenging prevailing mores and become a dynamic and constant presence in our divided world that bears witness to an alternative human possibility, one based on compassion and mutual respect.

Difficult Texts, Difficult Traditions

Our traditions are many-faceted and we all have scriptural texts and traditions that are exclusive, divisive, and even violent. We are an aggressive, belligerent species, and our brains are programmed to respond violently to a perceived threat and to fight for status and territory. These powerful instincts pervade all our activities, including our religion. Even Buddhists, who are often seen as inherently peaceful, have religiously-justified wars.[24] In all three of the Abrahamic religions, scriptural texts preach violence. In the Torah, God commands the ancient Israelites to drive the indigenous peoples of the Promised Land out of Canaan; the Book of Revelation presents Christ as a warrior engaged in deadly battles at the end of time; and the "Sword Verses" in the Qur'an are believed by some to abrogate the more pacific revelations that preceded them. In the past, these texts have been used to justify pogroms, crusades, persecutions, and holy wars. In the present, they are used by extremists to justify atrocity. Any effort to amplify the compassionate message of religion has to take these more aggressive traditions into account.

Religious language is essentially interpretive. "What is Torah?" asks the Talmud; "It is the interpretation of Torah."[25] The early rabbis called their scriptural exegesis midrash, which derived from the verb darash: "To investigate; to go in search of something" that was not immediately self-evident. Midrash always retained this element of expectant inquiry. There could be no definitive interpretation of scripture, because it was the Word of God

[24]Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Jergensmeyer, eds, *Buddhist Warfare* (Oxford, 2010); Michael K. Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury; Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (Oxford, 2011)
[25] B. Qedoshim 49b

and therefore infinite. Sometimes the rabbis actually altered the words of scripture to introduce a note of compassion that had been absent in the original.[26] A good midrash, some of the rabbis argued, sowed affection rather than discord, because anyone who studied scripture properly was full of love and brought joy to others.[27] This principle also guided early Christian exegesis. For St. Augustine (c. 354–430 CE), charity was the essential principal of Torah, so it followed that "we must meditate on what we read until an interpretation be found that tends to establish the reign of charity."[28] Whatever the biblical author had originally intended, a biblical passage that was not conducive to love must be interpreted figuratively:

> Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and neighbour does not understand it at all. Whoever finds a lesson there useful to the building of charity, even though he has not said what the author may be shown to have intended in that place, has not been deceived."[29]

By habitually seeking to interpret divisive texts compassionately, we could learn to put a kinder interpretation on disturbing events in our daily lives.

In the same spirit, every reading of the Qur'an begins with an invocation of the compassion and mercy of God. Unlike the Bible, which consists of a library of texts spanning a millennium, the Qur'an is a homogeneous and deeply unified scripture and Muslims have developed different methods of exegesis from Jews and Christians. Very early, Muslims researched the life of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and were therefore aware of the particular circumstances and the historical context in which he received a particular revelation. Traditionally, the Qur'an has been read as a unified text in which the sound and phrasing carries much of the meaning. Themes, words, phrases, and sound patterns recur throughout the text and link passages together, which initially seemed separate, in the mind of the hearer. Thus various strands of the text are integrated, as one text delicately qualifies and supplements others. Every verse of the Qur'an is called an ayah, a "parable" or "similitude." The language of the Qur'an is rich, complex, and allusive. Instead of imparting instantaneous factual information, listeners are to absorb its teachings slowly, and as they listen to its daily recitation, their understanding would grow more profound and mature over a lifetime. The Prophet himself (pbuh) was warned by God to listen intently to each revelation as it emerged; he must be careful not to impose a meaning on a verse prematurely, before its full significance had become entirely clear.[30] Traditionally, Muslims have used this warning to deter a "hasty" interpretation of the

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[26] Eg. M. Sanhedrin 6:4~5; Sifre Benibar, Pisqa 84 59b. Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989), pp. 22~32.

[27] B. Sanhedrin 99b

[28] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* trans. D. W. Robertson (Indianapolis, 1958), p. 30.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Qur'an 20:114; 75:16~18

Qur'an or one that sees an ayah out of context, but to wait and see it in the context of the entire scripture.

Today, however, the rational and scientific bias of modernity has meant that many people read their scriptures with a literalness that is unprecedented in the history of religion. There is a tendency to quote lines of scripture out of context and in a way that is not in keeping with the spirit of the whole. It is unrealistic to expect readers to resort to the allegorical exegesis of an earlier time. But we can study the texts that seem to preach violence carefully, examining the ways they have been interpreted throughout history, and undertake an in-depth examination of the exegesis of the people who have used them to promote violence today. Their significance in the tradition as a whole should also be defined clearly. If, as Augustine claimed, the Bible teaches nothing but charity, what are we to make of the massacres of Joshua, the gospels' abuse of the Pharisees, and the fearsome battles of the book of Revelation? We should probably consider the historical context in which they were written, and then look at the ways they have been interpreted over the centuries. Our modernity has been spectacularly violent; we are, therefore, reading scripture in a context of violence, so it is not surprising that this has influenced our interpretation. Perhaps the emphasis on these particular texts today sheds light on the lack of charity in contemporary discourse and the modern political scene.

It is essential that we examine our own scriptures before pointing a condemnatory finger at the sacred texts of others. If we do not like our own holy books denigrated, we should not disparage the scriptures of others. A story attributed to the great Pharisee Hillel, the older contemporary of Jesus, is apt. It is said that a pagan challenged him to recite the whole Torah while he stood on one leg. Hillel replied: "What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellow human; that is the whole of the Torah and everything else is only commentary. Go study it."[31] It is a deliberately provocative exegesis. Hillel claimed that the essence of Torah was the disciplined refusal to inflict pain on another human being and that everything else in scripture was merely "commentary," a gloss on the Golden Rule. This means that we must respect other people's scriptures. The Talmud argued that any interpretation of scripture that spread hatred or denigration of "other sages" was illegitimate.[32] Today those sages must include the Buddha, the sages of the Upanishads, and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), and so the almost-routine vilification of the Qur'an that is currently in vogue in the West must be declared illicit.

We can use these difficult scriptures as a way of appreciating anew the extreme difficulty of uttering and hearing the word of God in a world of violence and cruelty. This is

[31] B. Shabbat 31a.
[32] B. Sanhedrin 99b

a jihad in the original sense of the word. The belligerence of some of the psalms makes us confront the rage in our own hearts as we struggle to listen to the divine. The systematic development of a more compassionate hermeneutics, the effort to bring peace out of aggression—whatever form this takes—could provide an important counter-narrative in our discordant world.

The Task of the Working Group

"We urgently need to make the compassionate voice of religion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world" (*Charter for Compassion*). The goal of the working group is to find a practical way of achieving this. Many religious leaders speak out regularly and bravely against injustice, criminal violence, state violence, lawlessness, and oppression; they speak eloquently of peace, cooperation, and respect for others. But the media tends to prefer more dramatic stories of aggression and hatred. An American journalist once told me: "If there is no conflict, there is no news." We have to find a way of making the compassionate message of religion audible and accessible to a world that urgently needs it; like the sages, luminaries, and prophets of the past, we have to show that there is an alternative to greed, aggression, self-interest, intolerance, and violence. To this end we will discuss two questions:

1) *What would a compassionate synagogue, church, or mosque look like?*

How can a religious community become a force for compassion in its immediate environment? Potential issues and questions for discussion include the following:

- Much will depend on the community's circumstances. Is this church, mosque, or synagogue located in a war zone? Is it threatened by sectarian violence or economic deprivation? Has it suffered from warfare, conflict, or discrimination in the recent past? Is it subject to authoritarian or oppressive rule? If so, how can the clergy and congregation draw upon the rituals, narratives, and practices of their tradition in such a way as to work through their grief, rage, despair, and fear; ensure that these do not harden into ungovernable hatred; and make the slow, patient journey to a measure or peace?
- A more privileged community has different challenges. How can the congregation be made aware that the suffering of people in other parts of the world is something that should deeply concern them? Perhaps their government has in the past been complicit or even responsible for some of this global suffering. How do we learn, like the Buddha, that sensitivity to global pain is a spiritual opportunity?
- How should a compassionate religious community relate to other faith traditions?

- How can a congregation reach out practically to the physical and spiritual needs of its immediate environment and make such concern integral to the life of the religious community?
- How can the religious leaders of the community offer a vital alternative to the aggression, indifference, anomie, materialism, or self-interest that characterize some aspects of modern society, so that congregants actually experience another way of living?
- How could a compassionate community—in the words of the Charter—"acknowledge that we have failed to live up to the compassionate ideal and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion"?
- The tenor of much modern discourse in so many fields—the media, academe, politics, *and* religion—is inherently competitive and aggressive. We all tend to be guilty of this. When we engage in "dialogue," it is not enough for us to seek the truth; we also have to defeat, humiliate, or discredit those who oppose our points of view, be they members of a political party we dislike, an adherent of a different faith tradition, or a rival in our academic discipline. Even in private argument, we often feel impelled above all to *win.* This is very different from the dialogue invented by Socrates, which had to be conducted throughout with gentleness and courtesy. Nobody could "win" a Socratic dialogue, because it always ended with all participants realizing how little they knew. And that realization, Socrates insisted, was the beginning of wisdom. How can we introduce this humility into modern discourse? What should characterize the discourse of a truly compassionate mosque, church, or synagogue?
- We are a very talkative society but not so good at listening. How can congregations be taught to listen (surely an essential part of prayer)—not merely to the words that are spoken, but to their underlying emotion?
- The Confucians saw education, especially an education in history, as essential to compassion. If we do not understand our own past or the history of other peoples, how can we ever get to know them? If we are taught to regard our own history only through rose-tinted spectacles, will we not be inescapably intolerant of others? How should the church, synagogue, or mosque address this challenge?
- This is the age of information; we can learn so much at the click of a mouse. We tend to speak about one another—individuals, cultures, nations, and whole traditions—omnisciently: "The trouble with her is……." Strident certainty is dangerous to world peace and incompatible with compassion; how can religious leaders help their congregations recognize the limits of their knowledge?

2) *What would an international council of compassionate clergy look like?*

Imagine a group of clergy committed to compassion and world peace with an international profile.

- Of whom would it consist? And how would it function?
- How would its members be selected? On what criteria?
- To what values could such a council witness? How could its membership and activities embody the compassionate ethos that all our great traditions have in common?
- How would it respond to oppression, poverty, and suffering, such as that felt by victims of natural or man-made disasters?
- How would it respond to national or international crises? How could its members transcend national, political, or sectarian barriers at such moments and what could this show the world?
- How would it respond to flagrant abuses of religion? Would it be possible for such a body to give voice to those who have no voice on the international stage? How would it respond to injustice, oppression, and cruelty, wherever this should occur?
- Could such a council provide a counter-narrative that could challenge the prevailing narratives of the powerful?
- What would characterize the discourse of such a council?
- Could such a council challenge the popular view which sees all religion as inherently violent, sectarian, chronically unable to cooperate with those of other faiths, or guilty of institutional idolatry?
- Could it become a force for world peace?

Appendix I

The Charter for Compassion

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves.

Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow-creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others ~ even our enemies ~ is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women

- To restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion;
- To return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate;
- To ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures;
- To encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity;
- To cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings ~ even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensible to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

Appendix II

The council of thinkers and activists who wrote the Charter for Compassion:

Salman Ahmed, Musician and Social Activist

Ali Asani, Professor, Practice of Indo-Muslim Languages and Culture at Harvard University

The Reverend Dr. Joan Brown Campbell, Director, Department of Religion, Chautauqua Institution

Sadhvi Chaitanya, Spiritual Director of Arsha Vijan Mandiram

The Right Reverend John Bryson Chane, Eighth Bishop of Washington, D.C. (Ret.)

Sister Joan Chittister, Founder and Director of Benetvision

His Excellency Sheikh Ali Gomaa, Grand Mufti of the Arab Republic of Egypt

Mohsen Kadivar, Professor of Religious Studies at Duke University

Chandra Muzaffar, President of the International Movement for a Just World

Baroness Julia Neuberger, Prime Minister's Champion for Volunteering, United Kingdom

Tariq Ramadan, Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at Oxford University

Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp, Rabbi of the Reform Jewish Community of The Hague

The Reverend Peter Storey, Former President of the Methodist Church of South Africa and the South African Council of Churches

Tho Ha Vinh, Head of Training, Learning and Development, International Committee of the Red Cross

Tu Wei Ming, Professor of Chinese History and Philosophy and of Confucian Studies, Harvard University

Jean Zaru, Presiding Clerk of the Ramallah Friends Meeting