

For Session 3 on Dialogue between Religions and Civil Society

TOPIC OF SESSION: Aspirations for the Common Good: Working Together for Shaping a Brighter Future." The focus will be on the dialogue between religion and civil society.

Compassion as a Discipline, Process, and Plan for Shaping a Brighter Future

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[01] Personal Context | I teach biblical and religious studies at King's University College, a liberal arts college that is part of a public university in Ontario Canada. Among the courses I regularly teach is an advanced seminar on religious pluralism. One of our goals in that course is precisely, as our ICCGC session theme states, learning to work together for the common good in order to shape a brighter future despite being members of different religious communities or not at all.

[02] Strategies for Finding Common Ground | To that end, at a certain point in the course, I introduce students to some possible strategies for 'finding common ground among religions' in our current societies (especially in the West) which are characterized by diversity, pluralism, and secularism. The last time I taught the course (Fall of 2023), these were the four strategies that I introduced to my students: (1) the Perennial Philosophy (By this I mean: developing a spirituality that might lead to finding commonality even among people who have different religious/faith traditions); (2) The Global Ethic promoted by the Parliament of the World's Religions; (3) The Charter for Compassion advocated by well-known historian of religions and prolific author, Karen Armstrong; and (4) The Principles for Dialogue formulated by prominent Catholic ecumenist Prof. Leonard Swidler of Temple University (Philadelphia).

All four, I'm convinced, are excellent strategies for finding common ground among different spiritual-wisdom traditions but here I would like to focus my reflections on the third strategy, namely, *the value and force of compassion*, expressed in a declaration called "The Charter for Compassion" formulated by historian of religion Karen Armstrong. This so-called Charter for Compassion is in turn fundamentally based on **the Golden Rule** which, as you know well, is

found at the heart of, and advocated by practically all world religions. I also plan to supplement that with the suggestion that the effort to deepen this spirituality (of compassion) in individuals and communities is not only a narcissistic, selfish self-development program but is connected deeply with the advancement of the common good in society because it involves a deeper awareness that we are truly all interconnected with each other. That will hopefully lead to concrete practices and strategies for ‘working together for a brighter future’. I would also like to suggest that the value and practice of compassion should be given more priority in all the groups that are included in the category “civil society”.

[03] Compassion and The Golden Rule | There is a TED talk given by Armstrong entitled “Let’s revive the Golden Rule.” It is an excellent piece, and my reflections here will follow closely what she says in that manifesto-lecture on compassion, its relation to the Golden Rule, and how compassion can be made a force for the common good in society and help people from different backgrounds and traditions to work for a brighter future.

[see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhHJ4DRZNZM>]

It is very clear that compassion has a central place in all the major spiritual-wisdom traditions of the world. (“Spiritual-wisdom traditions” is how I often call the various religions of the world.) If you dig into these spiritual-wisdom traditions, you will surely meet with a version of what is called “The Golden Rule,” formulated either in a positive or negative phrasing.

For example, the words of Jesus expressing the Golden Rule found in the Gospel of Matthew (7:12) is an example of a positive formulation: “*Do unto others what you want them to do unto you.*” While the version that the Chinese sage Confucius (credited by some as the first who formulated the Golden Rule) is usually put in the negative form: “*Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you.*”

[a quote from Karen Armstrong’s work] *Confucius was the first, as far as we know, to enunciate the Golden Rule. This was some five hundred years before Christ. His disciples asked Confucius, “Master, which of your teachings can we put into practice all day and every day? What is the central thread that runs through all your teachings?” And Confucius said tsu [shu 恕], “likening to the self.” You look into your own heart, discover what gives you pain, and then refuse under any circumstances to inflict that pain on anybody else. Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you. Confucius believed that if we did that consistently—all day, every day—then we would gradually leave ourselves behind, because compassion requires you to dethrone yourself from the center of your world and to put another there. [See: <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-golden-rule/>]*

I’d like to emphasize by way of commentary what Confucius seemed to be explaining. It seems, he was trying to communicate the following: Look into your heart; find out what gives you pain; then resolve under any circumstance not to inflict that pain to others. Moreover, Confucius

taught that this has to be done “all day and every day!” And not just, say, once a day, in order to fulfill what is sometimes called “our good deed of the day.”

[04] Compassion as a Practice and a Discipline | Lest people think that the Golden Rule is just a common platitude or a hackneyed phrase that’s been repeated millions of times in order to say, “Just be nice to everyone!”, Armstrong emphasizes that the Golden Rule is *not just* to be said, repeated, and believed in as a religious or even moral teaching. The more important thing is to *practice* it, because when one engages in a serious and consistent (“all day and everyday”) practice of the golden rule, the process results in us dethroning ourselves from the centre of our world and putting another one there (whether that be our neighbour, others, the world). This in turn enables us to transcend ourselves. Apropos that, self-transcendence *is* the highest need according to an unfamiliar, late version of the psychologist Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

[05] Compassion, the Divine, and Religion | For those who are believers in a Divinity or an Ultimate Being, self-transcendence or the effort to go beyond our selfish selves, actually leads to a profound experience of the presence of--what our religious traditions call--“God”, or alternatively, “Nirvana”, “Allah”, “the Dao”, etc. But here comes the tricky part, most of the time, you do not exactly know what is precisely the nature of that “Greater Something” that you’ve experienced. It remains mysterious. Religions, however, have the strong tendency to define and describe it. But we know that all these descriptions and definitions using human words all fall short of the real nature of that Sacred Presence which is ultimately mysterious.

This is the reason, therefore, that the practice of compassion lies at the heart of all religions—because it leads the practitioner to experience something seemingly ultimate and that experience is truly life-changing and leads the person to change themselves and the world around them.

In this scheme, “God”, or “The Ultimate” comes as *secondary* – the end result of the *primary factor* which is the practice of compassion. In history though, many religions have pushed for *belief in God* as the primary, first, and most important aspect of their message and the practice of compassion as secondary. To me, that seems like a wrong order.

For years now, I have begun thinking that the theme of “God” should be secondary, contrary to the traditional emphasis, particularly of the Western religions. (I am sure that is a consequence of my increasing study of the Buddhist tradition.) It is secondary because the primary factor which, in our discussion today, I’d like to formulate as “the practice of compassion” should come before all other things for the simple reason that practicing compassion is something that will surely unite people from otherwise diverse traditions and backgrounds.

In history though, we note a lot of religious conflict among various religious groups. I think it is because many religions have prioritized ‘being right’ over ‘practicing compassion’. The former divides; the latter unites. The former may cause one to feel good initially but in actuality it just

strengthens the ego or “the false self”; the latter demands sacrifice at first but enables—what spiritual practitioners call—“the true self” to feel authentically happy.

[06] Compassion’s Central Place in Religion, Culture & Society | Karen Armstrong has been on a crusade to promote the practice of the Golden Rule or the practice of compassion to be restored back to its central place at the heart of all our religious and spiritual traditions, indeed, even in all cultures and societies, as well as all other groups to be found in our societies (groups that are classified as “civil society”). And what is the practice of compassion described simply? It consists in treating others as if they were *at least as important as ourselves*. Armstrong warns us that unless we do so, we may not have a “viable world to hand on to the next generation”.

One major and urgent task we have today is to building a global society where people can live in peace and mutual respect. The legacy that spiritual-wisdom traditions can contribute to that task is contained in the Golden Rule. We can even go so far as to claim that in the Golden Rule we can see the practice that can very well be the source of all ethics and morality in order to build a truly just and peaceful global society: To describe the Golden Rule further, it is an imaginative act of empathy, that is, putting yourself in the place of the other and imagining receiving the treatment that you yourself would like to receive, or not receiving the harm that you yourself do not like to receive. It seems deceptively simple but quite hard to practice as we can see that our world is unfortunately *not* a place of peace and justice in many areas.

It is high time then for the different spiritual-wisdom traditions to focus on what is most essential and most important—the practice of compassion, and have the courage to assert (as the Charter for Compassion puts it) that “any interpretation of scripture (or anything in our traditions) that breeds hatred and disdain is in fact illegitimate”.

Now compassion is not just “feeling sorry for somebody else” contrary to the popular image. It is something that is a whole set of practices as we shall see in the so-called “12 steps to a compassionate life” proposed by Karen Armstrong. To begin with, we can use British author C.S. Lewis’ definition of friendship as opposed to romantic love. Lewis says that friendship is like two people standing side by side, looking forward and working toward a common goal while romantic love is two people gazing at each other. Both are good, but friendship is the one that aims to attain a goal together with one’s friend. Better still, friendship should be the foundation of all other kinds of love, even romantic love.

This description of ‘standing side by side working for a common goal’ is precisely what we’re trying to achieve with the practice of compassion. When we get together despite our differences, stand side by side, become friends, and work together for a more peaceful and just world, our differences kind of melts away and we can truly learn amity and appreciation for one another.

[07] The Charter for Compassion | With those preliminary reflections expressed, we can now read the text of the charter for compassion:

TEXT OF THE CHARTER FOR COMPASSION:

[See: <https://charterforcompassion.org/sign-the-charter.html>]

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, dogmatic, 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 indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

[See: <https://charterforcompassion.org.pk/charter-12-steps-book.php>]

[08] The Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life | The twelve steps to a compassionate life are enclosed in-between Step #1 “Learn About Compassion,” and Step #12: “Love Your Enemies.” In between those two bookends, there are concrete steps that propose practices and attitudes to really live a compassionate life, such as self-love, mindfulness, suffering, sympathetic joy, the

limits of our knowledge of others, and “concern for everybody.” These are all concrete methods to help us cultivate and expand our capacity for compassion. The process also encourages us to “hear one another’s narratives.”

Looking at these different components of the practice of compassion, we can understand that the Golden Rule and the compassion which is its foundation is, as mentioned, definitely *not just a platitude*. It is a lifelong project, a concrete plan, a set of disciplines, a whole journey that could potentially really change the practitioner first and then, the wider world for the better.

See: Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. New York: Knopf, 2011.

TWELVE STEPS TO A COMPASSIONATE LIFE

Concretely speaking, the twelve steps are:

1. The First Step: Learn About Compassion
2. The Second Step: Look at Your Own World
3. The Third Step: Compassion for Yourself
4. The Fourth Step: Empathy
5. The Fifth Step: Mindfulness
6. The Sixth Step: Action
7. The Seventh Step: How Little We Know
8. The Eighth Step: How Should We Speak to One Another?
9. The Ninth Step: Concern for Everybody
10. The Tenth Step: Knowledge
11. The Eleventh Step: Recognition
12. The Twelfth Step: Love Your Enemies

[09] Further Commentary about the Twelve Steps |

The comments below use the description found in: [<https://www.oprah.com/own-super-soul-sunday/karen-armstrongs-twelve-steps-to-a-compassionate-life/all>]. I have added some random reflections as well.

STEP 1: Learn About Compassion

"You cannot learn to swim by sitting on the side of the pool watching others cavort in the water; you have to take the plunge and learn to float. If you persevere, you will acquire an ability that at first seemed impossible. It is the same with compassion; we can learn about the neurological makeup of the brain and the requirements of our tradition, but until and unless we actually modify our behavior and learn to think and act toward others in accordance with the Golden Rule, we will make no progress."

Step 2: Look at Your Own World

"During this step, we should take ourselves mentally to the summit of a high mountain, where we can stand back and see things from a different perspective."

Step 3: Compassion for Yourself

The faith traditions agree that compassion is the most reliable way of putting the self in its proper place, because it requires us 'all day and every day' to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there. ... But, as the saying goes, "Charity begins at home." Once you have started to feel a genuine compassion for yourself, you will be able to extend it to others

Step 4 The Fourth Step: Empathy

The suffering we have experienced in our own life can also help us to appreciate the depths of other people's suffering and pain. This is another deep meaning of compassion ("to suffer with").

Step 5: Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a form of meditation that we perform as we go about our daily lives, and is designed to give us more control over our minds so that we can reverse ingrained tendencies and cultivate new ones, especially those that enhance a compassionate life.

Step 6: Action

One small act of kindness can turn a life around, it is often said. What use is theory if we don't transform it into action. Compassion cannot remain theory; it should be translated to action if it is to change ourselves and the world.

Step 7: How Little We Know

The aim of this step is threefold: (1) to recognize and appreciate the unknown and unknowable, (2) to become sensitive to overconfident assertions of certainty in ourselves and other people, and (3) to make ourselves aware of the numinous mystery of each human being we encounter during the day. In fancy terms, this can be called “epistemological humility.” I am convinced that epistemological humility is an absolute condition of integrity.

Step 8: How Should We Speak to One Another?

We should make a point of asking ourselves whether we want to win the argument or seek the truth, whether we are ready to change our views if the evidence is sufficiently compelling, and whether we are making a place for the other in our minds. ... Above all, we need to listen.

Step 9: Concern for Everybody

During this step, we begin to expand our horizons to make a place for the more distant other. Understanding different national, cultural, and religious traditions is no longer a luxury; it is now a necessity and must become a priority ... in our globalized, interconnected world.

Step 10: Knowledge

The effort of getting to know one another demands sound information and a willingness to question received ideas.

Step 11: Recognition

We have learned that we cannot put ourselves in a special, separate category. Instead, we have tried to cultivate the considerate attitude of *shu* 恕 ('likening to oneself'), reflexively relating our own pain to the suffering of others. As a result, we are beginning to acquire what the Tibetan Buddhists call 'the inability to bear the sight of another's sorrow,' so that we feel it almost as intensely as we feel our own.

Step 12: Love Your Enemies

We are aiming at *upeksha*, an impartial, fair-minded assessment of the situation in the cause of peace. Try to wish for your enemy's well-being and happiness; try to develop a sense of responsibility for your enemy's pain. This is the supreme test of compassion.

[10] Compassion: a Discipline, a Process, a Plan to Shape a Better World | By emphasizing the different aspects of compassion as expressed in the Golden Rule familiar to many of us, I hope I have shown that compassion/the Golden Rule is not merely a banal formula that is just a convenient phrase to use in gatherings for world peace. Compassion as expressed in the Golden Rule is actually a real discipline and a process that we have to engage in with tenacity and consistency. The twelve steps have also shown us that it is a concrete and excellent plan to change ourselves and, in so doing, change the world into a better, peaceful, and more just place. May it really be so!

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