

Can Compassion Foster Human Solidarity? A Christian Perspective

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IN MY PAPER, I want to deal with the subject whether and if so in which way compassion can foster human solidarity. I am going to unfold my subject in a succession of four theses. First of all I want to point to a few crucial elements desperately needed for the development of political human solidarity. Therefore my first thesis is: *Human solidarity must be rooted in an ethos and in values and cannot be reduced to formal regulations.*

It was the illusion in Western modern political theory that personal convictions and ethical values were seen as private matters which were irrelevant for the organisation of public and economic affairs. A striking example is the so called First Amendment to the North American constitution which guarantees the free exercise of religion, freedom of speech and other rights. But the fathers of the American constitution like Thomas Jefferson interpreted it in such a way as to strictly distinguish between private and public matters. Jefferson coined the phrase 'wall of separation' for such a division between the public political realm and the private moral and religious convictions of an individual (cf. Dreisbach 2002). As long as the public order is not disturbed, the private convictions of individuals are of no interest for the government. Or as Jefferson commented: 'it does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg' (Jefferson 1904: 221).

In his book *The Wealth of Nations* and in other writings, 18th century economist Adam Smith uttered the thesis that, in a free market, an individual pursuing his or her own self-interest will also promote the good of

his or her community as a whole. If only each individual is allowed to tend towards maximizing his or her own revenue, the total revenue of society as a whole is fostered, because the laws of the market are such as to promote a common good which was not part of the individual's original intentions. An example from *The Wealth of Nations* illustrates the simplicity of the principle: "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages."

Or to refer to another, but similar distinction, one can quote the German philosopher Immanuel Kant who strictly distinguished between what he called 'morality' and 'legality'. The state is only concerned with legality, when it sets up rules of commerce and public order, but it must strictly withdraw from any interference with morality, with ethical values or religious convictions. While the state has to regulate public life through public laws, it cannot rule the hearts of its citizens and must not interfere with religious or other belief systems. It can only allow and give the opportunity for self-determined religions of ethical communities: 'But woe to the legislator who wishes to establish through force a polity directed to ethical ends! For in so doing he would not merely achieve the very opposite of an ethical polity but also undermine his political state and make it insecure. The citizen of the political commonwealth remains therefore, so far as its legislative function is concerned, completely free to enter with his fellow-citizens into an ethical union in addition [to the political] or to remain in this kind of state of nature, as he may wish' (Kant 1960: 87s).

This tradition of reducing ethics to normative, but only formal regulations is vital until today. Although more critical theories have tried to question the leading role of economic relations, modern liberal theories still take it for granted that any political theory can only provide formal regulations of justice and fairness, but sees values and convictions as not obliging and in the end irrelevant matters of individual convictions. Thus the American philosopher John Rawls has developed a concept of justice as fairness which refrains from marking out a specific notion of justice. Rawls does not argue in favor of certain convictions concerning the nature of the person, the nature of human relationships, the goals of human existence, or any concept of ultimate goods and a good life. He raises no truth claims concerning anthropology, but tries to construe a strictly op-

erational concept of justice that rests on the idea of society as a system of fair cooperation, and not on any substantial good. What forces us to develop justice as fairness is nothing but 'the common interest in public order and security' (Rawls 1971: 211). Another example is the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who like Rawls wanted to move away from the predominance of economic and administrative rationalization for the shaping of society, and thus designed a discursive theory of democracy, which is centred around the concept of a political community which can collectively define its political will and implement it as policy at the level of the legislative system. In his view a post-metaphysical liberal and pluralistic democracy is based on a public sphere as a place of purely rational independent debate.

There is no doubt that the separation of state and religion, the freedom of religious exercise and the guarantee of civil right independent of a person's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion is an extremely important achievement of modern societies which must not be given up, which on the contrary must be promoted and must become an established reality for all societies. But on the other hand there are severe problems linked with this concept which have to be addressed. They are related to the fact that the wall of separation between the private and the public sphere is an illusion.

First of all, such a society which is based on purely rational rules and regulations never existed. Even our modern pluralistic societies are not value-free. There has always existed a hidden consensus which rests on notions of a good life and is grounded in human solidarity.

The most recent example that even economics is more than regulation is the financial crisis which reveals itself as a moral crisis of trust as well. It has taught us that formal rules and regulations are not enough. We need an ethos which is effective and obliging and which has the power to provide means and ends for human social life in pluralistic, multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies affected by global economics. Greed, lies, corruption and utopian speculations are part of this crisis, and they cannot only be countered by more and more effective formal regulations, but must also be met by a new sense of justice and solidarity. There is no economy without an element of trust. The notion that individual egoistic behaviour leads to a common good, is proven to be an illusion.

The total separation of the public and the private is an illusion. And this illusion can become dangerous because it promotes the notion that economical rationality is everything that counts. In a world which reduces human encounter and relationships to economic relations economical rationality imposes itself as the theory of everything. If the critical quest for integrity, truth and obligation is suspended, trends are fostered that present the supposedly self-evident economic necessities as the unquestionable foundations. The reduction of society to a functional sphere of mutual fairness reduces society to economics and the individual to a consumer. The meaningfulness of the good is replaced by the attractiveness of goods.

Thus I proceed to my second point asking: Why is that so? Where does the attractiveness of this model come from and why does it develop such a universal power in our times of globalisation?

My second thesis is, that *the attractiveness and the danger of a purely formal notion of society both lie in the fact that it does not deal with the ambiguities of human otherness.*

The other human being we experience both as a necessary condition for the development of our own individuality and as an obstacle and hindrance for it. It was one of the fundamental insights of 20th century existential philosophy that it identified the ambivalence, the tension between a human being and the other, between "I" and "Thou", as a central problem for the modern concept of personality and identity. The fact that human individuals always find themselves in the midst of others is not only a prerequisite for the development of an individual identity; it is also a source of constant pressure when others impose a certain view on us, while we strive for acknowledgment and recognition. Martin Heidegger pointed to this ambiguous character of the encounter with the other. Alongside our acquaintance with the material things around us we are also confronted with non-material entities, i.e., the others. At the same time Martin Buber distinguished between our "I-It"- and our "I-Thou"-relationships. Other human beings do not co-exist with us in the same sense as material things do. When we encounter other human beings, we always encounter them as inhabiting their own world and thus *existing* similar to us and not just being there. We file them not as things among things but as beings that have to project, to sketch out their existence according to their cares and concerns. Thus "the others" points to a category of ontological similarity:

We are not different from the others, we are among the others (cf. Heidegger 1986: 118). Therefore we do not relate to the others that co-exist with us as we do to material things – that is, not in a way of managing care (*Sorge* or *Besorgen*), but in a way of concern (*Fürsorge*, Heidegger 1986: 121).

This concern can be twofold. It can supply for the needs and concerns of the other and hence stand in for him (or as Heidegger says, “leaping in for the other” [*einspringen*]) and take over for the other what he should take care of himself. Concern for the other in this sense can, as Heidegger puts it, throw the other out of position by dominating the other and making him dependent. This is the way one “takes care of,” for example, pets, children, the elderly, the sick and the injured. Therefore we have to distinguish between positive and negative interventions on behalf of the other—with the borderline between true solicitude respecting, even strengthening and fostering the other in his otherness, or dependency that deprives the other of his existential care and concerns by ways of paternalism.

But the other is not only the other individual. “The other” is also a trans-subjective category. All the others including myself form the common sphere of the public (*Öffentlichkeit*). I live my life as ‘one’ does life one’s life. Most of the time, we exist in a levelled everyday mode of existence characterised by ordinariness. The others become the public, and the public provides the primordial interpretations of existence. Thus the concept of the others as the abstract public obscures and conceals existence as the task of being oneself by exculpating us from this task. Or as Heidegger put it: “Everyone is the Other and no one himself.” [„Jeder ist der Andere und Keiner er selbst.“]

It is the signature, the task of modernity that we must always strive towards authenticity in which we can overcome the tension between individuality and commonality. In this tension we need the other in order to develop our individuality, and for the same reason we have to be different from the other, we have to reject the other in order to be just ourselves and not to lose our identity to the common sphere. Thus modern human beings in their relationships to others are constantly alternating between repulsion and attraction. Or as the French existentialist philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre once wrote in his play *At closed doors*: “*L’enfer, c’est les autres*: Hell is other people.”

In this situation modern liberal economy offers a model for dealing with this tension: If we reduce the public sphere to formal and basically

economic regulations, then everyone can in his private existence develop his or her individuality. But freedom does not necessarily grow in proportion with the technological and economic means we develop, and while individual self-determination has become the central ideal of western culture, we are in danger to lose overall and obligatory aims and values which in turn are necessary for our public relationships.

Thus I come to my third point: How can we avoid this pitfall and nourish a notion of human solidarity which can balance between individuality and commonality and which can provide a solid ethical obligation for our public and political sphere? It is at this point where the notion of compassion comes in which is a universal feature of all major religions. Thus I assert my third thesis: *The notion of compassion is able to foster human solidarity. It is based on fundamental human character traits, but as an episodic emotion it is incomplete and ambivalent.*

In the history of Western thought it was by no means without controversy that compassion is a positive value with regard to morality and society. Though in the great epics and tragedies of the ancient Greek tradition like those of Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles suffering and sympathy were seen as natural human phenomena, the ancient philosophers started to question their moral value. Our English term "compassion" and its equivalents are, by the way, directly derived from the Latin translations of the original Greek expressions. The terms under consideration are ἔλεος, οἶκτος, συμπάθεια, in Latin *commiseratio*, *compassio*, *miser cordia*, in English *commiseration*, *compassion*, *pity*. *Passion* means suffering, while *com-compassion* means co-suffering with the misery and pain of others (cf. the German term "Mitleid", established only in the 17th century as a translation of the Latin word in biblical texts). Compassion is seen as a spontaneous reaction to the suffering of others which usually results in spontaneous actions to mourn with the other, to comfort and to help him.

But already Plato argued against compassion in morality and pointed to the fact that only human beings suffer while the Gods are passionless. It is human to suffer when one loses something like wealth or health, but it is divine and rational to stand above emotional conflicts. Judges and political rulers must not decide according to their emotions but according to reason and justice. Thus Homer's epics and the tragedies are of no educational use, because they only present emotional movements and do not refer to the necessary principles of rational regulation. This strand of argument was

later taken over by the Stoics who rejected compassion as a positive virtue because it is not compatible with their ideals of independence and self-governing which required a total absence of passion.

Aristotle then was able to develop a different view. He understood compassion as a passion which becomes a virtue when it is controlled by reason. In his *Rhetoric* he formulated a first and influential definition which the history of Western thought referred to through the centuries. Aristotle writes: Compassion (ἔλεος) is “a kind of pain excited by the sight of evil, deadly or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it; an evil which one might expect to come upon himself or one of his friends, and all that when it seems near” (*Rhet. II,8,2*). According to Aristotle compassion is a natural emotion because it is an example for the “the general principle that what we fear for ourselves excites our pity when it happens to others” (*ibid.*).

A few aspects of Aristotle’s definition are of general interest. First of all compassion is a reaction towards real and dangerous evil (Aristotle speaks of an evil which is deadly or painful). Additionally compassion is triggered when three principles are fulfilled: the principle of “non deserving”, of commonality and of proximity. With this definition in mind Aristotle can refer to positive functions of poetry and tragedies with regard to compassion: They transform passions (πάθος) including compassion into the ethical (ἔθος) by cultivating them according to their basic rational principles. Thus according to Aristotle compassion is an emotion which has to be refined and governed by reason.

It was this interpretation which the Christian tradition took over and elaborated. Now compassion became the positive motion of the heart which motivates human beings to see the misery of the other and to help one another. St. Augustine for example contrasts the Stoic ideal of emotionlessness with the Christian idea of love for the neighbour and he asks: “What is compassion but a fellow-feeling for another’s misery, which prompts us to help him if we can? And this emotion is obedient to reason, when compassion is shown without violating right, as when the poor are relieved, or the penitent forgiven” (Augustine, *City of God*, IX, 5).

This was the predominant view throughout the middle ages, but in early modernity, when philosophy moved away from theological predominance, the dispute whether or not and under which circumstances compassion can be considered to be of positive ethical value. The Dutch philoso-

pher Spinoza e.g. regarded compassion as useless, because as an emotion it weakens our moral power and adds nothing to the commandments of reason. The French materialists understood compassion mainly as an act of self-love, because it is triggered by the fear to possibly fall victim to the same evil which the pitied fellow human being suffers. It has no value in itself. Especially the German 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche regarded compassion as weakness, as directed against life, because life is founded on the will to power, whereas compassion was in his views invented by the unprivileged and deprived to counter that will. Compassion and pity are not only degrading the recipient but also the giver when they weaken his power to live. Thus Nietzsche warns against what he calls 'the conspiracy of the sufferers against the well-formed and victorious' (Nietzsche 1980: 864 [Zur Genealogie der Moral, III. 14]). Compassion is justified only as long as it derives from an overflow of strength, from an abundance of happiness, and not from an emotional identification with the weak and suffering thus contributing to the trends of degeneration propagated by Christianity and some moral philosophers (cf. Nietzsche 1980: 731).

But throughout the history of Western thought we also find the advocates of compassion until this very day. Let me just mention three from different traditions. In the English-Scottish tradition of common sense philosophy we find Adam Smith who in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* proclaims compassion as "a fellow-feeling for the misery of others" which is a natural inclination induced "by changing places in fancy with the sufferer" (Smith 1976: 10). In 19th century German philosophy it was Arthur Schopenhauer who proclaimed compassion as the one authentic root of morality. He was inspired by Buddhist thought which in his understanding reveals the identity of all living beings. Therefore Schopenhauer understood the identification with the suffering of others as "practical mysticism" (Schopenhauer 1972: 273) in which one realises the unity of all beings. In the 20th century Th. W. Adorno recurred to Schopenhauer's notion of compassion and interpreted it as a necessary supplement to a purely rationalistic ethics. Compassion cannot be transformed into a theoretical notion, but it is a fundamental impulse of human solidarity with all suffering creatures. And thus Adorno explicitly includes animals as objects of human compassion. Only an ethics which is able to integrate compassion can overcome rationalistic excuses for exploitation and repression which are so characteristic for blind ideologies. That implies that compassion as the

mere feeling of pity is not enough. It must turn into action and it must become aware of the reasons of human suffering. In its concentration on the concrete suffering, compassion as pity is always in the danger of ignoring structural evil. But on the other hand compassion is indispensable because it arises out of a sense of humanity and human dignity spontaneously identifies when human dignity is violated.

Let me summarize: Compassion is a natural, a universal, obliging and effective feature of any human being. It arises out of sense with which we develop empathy when we see ourselves in the places of others. It arouses a spontaneous feeling of human dignity when it indicates a situation of a fellow human being as impaired, as damaged, as a situation that should be different. This basic moral impulse of wishing for the well-being of other human beings is indispensable for any ethics. But, as the discussion through the centuries has made clear, compassion as an episodic emotion is incomplete and ambivalent. It cannot be transformed into a theoretical category, but it has to be developed into a virtue. It can lose its authenticity when it either becomes paternalistic or when it ignores structural conditions of evil by indulging in pity. Compassion in the right sense is a combination of both, nature and nurture.

With this result I come to my fourth and last thesis. *Compassion rests on a natural disposition, but because of its antagonists needs nurture and maturation it needs to be elaborated, to be taught, to be acquired and to be applied:*

a) Science can teach us about the natural mechanisms of empathy and basic social behaviour.

b) Religions offer means for the development of compassion by linking the spontaneous emotion to ultimate human concerns and concepts of the meaning of life.

Let me elaborate on this thesis a little further. Interestingly enough, modern science has proven that we are hard-wired for empathy. From the very beginning of our human existence, that is soon after birth we begin learning by imitating other human beings. Recent brain research has referred to so called mirror neurons, a certain type of neuronal cells which fire both when an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action performed by another (especially conspecific) animal. In that way certain parts of the brain mirror the behaviour of another animal, as though the observer were executing the action itself. These neurons have been di-

rectly observed in primates, and are believed to exist in humans as well. These structures explain why newborn infants (of primates as well as of humans) are immediately able to imitate facial expressions of adults.

Human babies soon know how to detect the direction of intentional behaviour of adults and instinctively distinguish between living beings and inanimate objects and between intentional and non-intentional actions. They have mechanisms of gaze-following, and when they grow older they try to verify the attention of adults in critical situations. With the age of 13 to 15 months they develop gestures to direct the attention of adults in order to share observations with them – a feature not known in the animal kingdom. Thus even before they can speak, children acquire a repertoire of what scientists have called declarative gestures, with which they can share attention and intentional behaviour with others.

The next step is reached when children go from participating in shared intentionality to participating in collective intentionality (cf. Tomasello and Rakoczy 2003). They begin to make friends with others; they develop a sense of being a family member and how to follow rules and norms. All this is accompanied by the development of basic notions of fairness and justice which stabilise social interactions.

Interestingly enough, recent research has found out that the traditional standard theory of economics had started with wrong presuppositions. “Traditional models of economic decision-making assume that people are self-interested rational maximisers who try to get as much out of a situation as possible. Empirical research has demonstrated, however, that people will take into account the interests of others and are sensitive to norms of cooperation and fairness. In one of the most robust tests of this finding, the ultimatum game, individuals will reject a proposed division of a monetary windfall [Zufall], at a cost to themselves, if they perceive it as unfair” (Jensen, Call and Tomasello 2007: 109). Recently it had been shown that in such an ultimatum game chimpanzees indeed are rational maximizers and are not sensitive to fairness. “These results support the hypothesis that other-regarding preferences and aversion to inequitable outcomes, which play key roles in human social organization, distinguish us from our closest living relatives” (ibid.).

As one of the key features which enable us to develop as social beings, cognitive science has identified a specific cognitive ability of human beings which it calls Theory of Mind. That is the ability to understand others

as intentional agents and to interpret their minds in terms of theoretical concepts of intentional states such as *beliefs* and *desires*. Between 3 and 5 years of age children learn how to take beliefs and desires of other human beings into consideration for their own actions. In this way, they develop a sense of what it means to be a human being among human beings. This also puts certain Darwinian concepts into perspective which see competition, survival of the fittest and the struggle for existence as the main features of evolution. The new insights mentioned point to the fact that we are basically social beings, and that our motivational systems are directed towards empathy, cooperation and relationship building.

But all these abilities which human beings acquire and develop are only the necessary prerequisites for compassion, they are not sufficient for it, because they cannot overcome the ambivalences between human beings. Human compassion and solidarity is on the one hand deeply grounded in basic human properties such as empathy and instinctive pity for the needy. On the other hand it suffers from the ambivalence of human relationships, the tension between Ego and Alter, between myself and the other. Mere pity focuses only on the conditions of suffering and even widens the gap of distance, of separation, of otherness between the pitying agent and the pitied person. Authentic Compassion, by contrast, develops attentive concern for the suffering person, is based on awareness of our common humanity and thus, at its best, is able to bridge the damaging gap of separation and otherness with its associated negative feelings.

My suggestion is to rediscover religions as resources for promoting and educating compassion as a basis for human solidarity. All religions offer concepts and tools for a cultivation of compassion as a virtue. Although religions too often have been part and parcel of divisions between human beings by the exclusion of others, by religious justifications of differences, they also in their core beliefs have developed means of overcoming differences on the grounds of ultimate concerns and have provided effective motivation for turning towards the needy and the suffering. They have tried to balance self-identity and selflessness on the grounds of a common human identity. And they have tried to reconcile the difference between a person and the other by seeing the other as a representation of the divine.

Religions have usually done this by presenting role models, narratives and character forming ritual practices. They do not only refer to theoretical concepts of otherness and compassion, because they know that com-

passion in its authentic form is not a rational theory, but an integration of both ultimate concerns and emotional dispositions. Religions do not only communicate information and intellectual skills, they also communicate the spirit of being human. They keep alert our sense of that which cannot be calculated, but is beyond profit and interest. And we now know: even our common economical market needs the incalculable for the calculations to work. By presenting role-models from the past like the Good Samaritan or the Buddha religions present possible options which are not theoretical concepts but offer the chance to act similarly and in that way to practice the shift from mere pity to active mercy without losing, but by actively realising one's own identity.

Thus religions seem to promote compassion vertically and horizontally. Vertically they frame compassion as the *imitation* of a role model, of Jesus, the prophet, the Buddha, of God himself in his ultimate mercy. Horizontally they provide foundations and means for *identification* between human beings (e.g. as children of God or the Divine). Different concepts of compassion might be compared along these lines.

Insofar as religions see the foundation of compassion in the divine which is not within the reach of human action, they also point to *limits of compassion*. Unlimited compassion might turn into terror for both, for the subject as well as for the object of compassion. It can lead to feelings of superiority and contempt on the part of the pitying individual and to feelings of alienation, shame, and inferiority on the part of the pitied. Conceptualising compassion within a comprehensive framework of God himself being merciful is a means against both, feelings of superiority and inferiority.

For the final conclusions let me once again return to the beginning of my presentation. I had started with the thesis that our political and economic culture needs more than formal regulations, but is deeply dependent on universal, obliging and effective grounds of human solidarity. I then tried to show you that there is a biological basis for empathy and compassion, but that it is not sufficient to overcome the ambivalences which exist between human beings. Compassion and solidarity need to be nurtured, developed and educated and religions provide concepts and tools for doing so by linking our natural dispositions to ultimate concerns.

In our secular, pluralistic and multi-religious societies which are embedded into an emerging global economy the dissolution of the knowl-

edge, the practice and the obligatory character of religious traditions poses a challenge. Religious institutions and organisations have once and for all lost their monopoly. The modern pluralistic state cannot provide ultimate orientation, but is at the same time dependent on resources which it can neither produce nor guarantee (Böckenförde 1967: 93). Therefore we need new forms of public discourse on moral value in which religious and secular institutions work together. The reduction of religion to a matter of private opinion is no longer appropriate.

What we urgently need are conventions like this in which interreligious dialogue does not primarily deal with doctrinal matters, but where a fruitful exchange of practical concepts is exercised by which we can learn from one another, question one another and develop a critical and thus deeper understanding of the obligations we feel towards our own tradition. And at the same time we might provide common insights, motivations and relevant role-models for our societies in the global context. We need public arenas where the implications of religious and non religious world-views and moral concerns can be openly discussed, questioned and responsibly defended. In such places the legitimacy, truth and validity for such convictions should be respectfully, but critically discussed and investigated, not only by outsiders who speak about their subject, but by representatives who are actively involved in the development of their respective tradition. I think that it is not an unwarranted expectation to anticipate that such discussions, where the wall of separation between the private and the public becomes penetrable, will not only have a cleansing and educational effect for the respective religious traditions, but will also do good for society as a whole.

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