



Reflections on the “Charter for Compassion” founded by Karen Armstrong

John Nightingale

Following our highly successful conference on this topic, John Nightingale reflects on the context and content of the Charter.

The Charter is important as a recent well-publicised attempt by a well-known historian of religions to present TED with an intellectual and practical challenge.

In November 2007 Karen Armstrong was awarded a TED prize (given by “Technology, Entertainment and Design”). These prizes are given to some one who is judged to have made a difference but who could make even more of a difference by recognition, finance and practical help from the organisation. She wrote: “I knew immediately what I wanted. One of the chief tasks of our time must surely be to build a global community in which all peoples can live together in mutual respect; yet religion, which should be making a major contribution, is seen as part of the problem. All faiths insist that compassion is the test of true spirituality and that it brings us into relation with the transcendence we call God, Brahman, Nirvana or Dao. Each has formulated its own version of what is sometimes called the Golden Rule: ‘Do not treat others as you would not like them to treat you’ – or in its positive form: ‘Always treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself.’ Further, they all insist that you cannot confine your benevolence to your own group: you must have concern for everybody – even your enemies. (1)” And yet, she says, we are confronted by the polarisation of our world between rich and poor, powerful and weak, with a consequent upsurge of anger and violence. Religious rhetoric is seen as doing little to dampen this fire and often pouring fuel on the flames. But “in a world in which small groups will increasingly have powers of destruction hitherto confined to the nation state, it has become imperative to apply the Golden Rule globally, ensuring that all peoples are treated as we would wish to be treated ourselves....(2)”

Consequently she “asked TED to help her create a Charter for Compassion that would be written by leading thinkers from a variety of major faiths and would restore compassion to the heart of religious and moral life” (3)... “Thousands of people from all over the world contributed to a draft charter on a multilingual website in Hebrew, Arabic, Urdu, Spanish and English; their comments were presented to the Council of Conscience, a group of notable individuals from six faith traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism), who met in Switzerland to compose the final version.

The Charter was launched on 12th November 2009 in sixty different locations throughout the world and at the time of writing in early 2011 there were more than 150 partners working together throughout the world to translate the charter into practical realistic action. In recent months Karen Armstrong has been particularly occupied in responding to speaking invitations in Pakistan.

Though Karen Armstrong cannot yet claim ratification of the Charter by official religious bodies, nonetheless she can point to support to date from 77,469 individuals including religious

figures such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Rabbi Julia Neuberger and the Dalai Lama. She has also become a significant figure in her own right. We in the Multifaith Project of the Jubilee Debt Campaign (with activities covering England and Wales) were delighted to have her approval in our appeal to faith traditions in our campaign for the cancellation of the unjust and unpayable international debts of poor countries. Consequently I should like to take a closer look at the Charter itself.

What is Compassion?

First of all, what is meant by “compassion”? Karen Armstrong derives the word from its Latin root as undergoing an experience with some one else “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. That is why compassion is aptly summed up in the Golden Rule, which asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatever, to inflict that pain on anybody else. Compassion can be defined, therefore, as an attitude of principled, consistent altruism (4).”

What may be involved here? There is the natural ability to put oneself in the place of a particular other. Maybe I too have at some time or other torn my Achilles tendon or been jilted, lost a father, become a parent or won a medal. Maybe I have to use my imagination and extrapolate from what I know; I may not have ever been blind but can visualise what it might be like – I can even wear a blindfold. At other times it is hard to read people’s linguistic or cultural signs; in some places for example it is thought important to keep smiling after a death in spite of sorrow inside; this could be mistaken for heartlessness. Or it may be hard for the inner feelings of woman recently arrived in the UK from a rural village in Pakistan to be understood by a woman from the UK, let alone a man.



Furthermore the person into whose shoes I may be trying to get may not be altogether aware of what they are thinking or feeling. Sometimes it takes some one else to pick up one's tone of voice or body language: "You really are angry, after all." The same may apply to a culture which may miss its blind spots until pointed out by visitors: "the class system upsets you more than you think." A mismatch of perceptions between different people can work both ways, either deadening compassion or, if worked through, leading on to greater understanding and mutual involvement.

But, even if we can understand the feelings and point of view of another person different from ourselves and respect those feelings as we would like our own to be respected, there are further complications. We may genuinely disagree about what is in the best interest of those concerned. Also third parties may be involved who may have feelings and needs of their own, whatever the first and second parties may want for them; an example might be the above woman's teenage daughter. One can imagine a variety of deeply held feelings about the rights and wrongs of arranged marriages for Asian teenage girls in England today.

Furthermore, talk about principles and consistency goes beyond immediate feelings. I may be moved by a picture of a needy child but, if I recognise that it is right to respond to his or her need, then, if my action is to be more meaningful than a momentary whim, I must acknowledge some claim from others with similar needs, and consider what my response should be, even if am busy, tired or out of sorts. A number of further qualities are required for this, including rationality, determination, temperance, initiative and courage. How far are such qualities stressed in the religions concerned?

Again, there may be different viewpoints about the principles of human welfare or moral health. Suicide, infanticide and the care of the elderly have been subjects over which the various traditions, religious or secular, have differed, even within themselves.

Beliefs and Values

Further points emerge. What is the source of my beliefs and values? My own personal beliefs and reasoning? Or are they out of, even if in opposition to, an existing religious or secular tradition? An interesting example can be found in questions about money – its nature, uses and limitations, benefits and hazards. Ethical principles and technical competence are both required.

It would be patronising to assume that all religions are the same. This is obvious in their views about money; indeed it is clear that the Christian religion has taken different positions at different times. But that's not always a bad thing. Sometimes, as at present, when there is real uncertainty about what monetary justice might mean, it may be good to go back to earlier ages and look again at the principles they were putting forward even if in conditions different from our own. Similarly debate between religions can help in meeting new problems. When one can't unlock a door it's worth using all available keys. Certainly, in the context of today's questioning of our financial system, I have found illuminating the treatment of money and debt in the varying traditions of the major religions.

Questions may then emerge about the metaphysical basis of the different traditions. What are the principles by which one understanding of compassion is held? To what extent are they open to correction? Do some views exclude others? Let us take for example Humanists who profess no religious faith. Values may then be accepted as a personal aesthetic choice (as Nietzsche). Or as a set of self-chosen principles (as Kant). Some of these principles (Kant again) may be seen as universal (for example the moral law – the principle of universifiability itself) otherwise we cannot have moral discourse or meaningful human life. Hence suicide, for example, could be treated as a matter of individual choice, or as a decision which should be governed by universal moral (and legal) principles; the formulation of such principles could be a mere cultural necessity or something essential to us as rational beings.

In addition, different religions have their own traditions and histories and debates about what should be considered as normative. They may differ about the extent to which there can be true knowledge on the part of others outside their own faith tradition. Some are "exclusivist" though others set more store by universal human experience and reason or by general revelation. Some parts of a religion may be regarded as essential to truth, salvation or the means of interpreting human history. One example can be given in John V Taylor's "The Christlike God". The title is taken from a remark of Archbishop Michael Ramsey that God was Christlike and there was nothing un-Christlike in him; the implication is that Jesus Christ is the normative pattern of God's revelation; other religious insights which do not mention his name may still, by this criterion, be acceptable. A similar sort of "inclusive" position is taken by some Muslims. Other faiths seem to be more pluralist, with some Sikhs and Jews claiming that their religion is the right one for them but that other religions are right for other people. Compassion in the sense of tough love would mean sharing views of what is true and right even though they differ – speaking the truth in love, warts and all.

For all these uncertainties, I think the Charter for Compassion is a step forward. Certainly compassion is at the heart of each of the main religions – though I think it would be begging the question to assume it is always the central principle. Furthermore, compassion is enjoined of us in our common task of being faithful to our religions in today's world. There is so much to do for which we need to work side by side, maybe not yet in complete unity but certainly not at cross purposes. Different perspectives may indeed be problematic but they can also be illuminating in the search for answers to new problems, and also, if our theologies will allow for it, in the journey to greater truth. Finally compassion immerses us in the joys and sorrows of real life, which philosophy and theology are called upon to engage with and not to evade.

On pages 1 - 2 of "Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life" by Karen Armstrong, published by The Bodley Head in 2011.

Ibid page 3

Ibid page 3

Ibid page 6



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