



at BROOKINGS



The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World
2012 U.S.-Islamic World Forum Papers

COMPASSION: An Urgent Global Imperative

CONVENED AND AUTHORED BY:
Karen Armstrong



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For the ninth annual U.S.-Islamic World Forum, we returned once again to the city of Doha. The Forum, co-convened annually by the Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World and the State of Qatar, serves as the premier convening body for key leaders from government, civil society, academia, business, religious communities, and the media. For three days, Forum participants gathered to discuss some of the most pressing issues facing the relationship between the United States and global Muslim communities.

Each year, the Forum features a variety of different platforms for thoughtful discussion and constructive engagement, including televised plenary sessions with prominent international figures on broad thematic issues of global importance; morning “breakfast” sessions led by experts and policymakers focused on a particular theme; and working groups which brought together practitioners in a given field several times during the course of the Forum to develop practical partnerships and policy recommendations. This year, the Forum also featured a signature event, “The Long Conversation,” in which all participants came together in an off-the-record and town hall style format discussion on the evolving relationship between the citizen, religion, and the state. For detailed proceedings of the Forum, including photographs, video coverage, and transcripts, please visit our website at <http://www.brookings.edu/about/projects/islamic-world>.

Each of the four working groups focused on a different thematic issue, highlighting the multiple ways in which the United States and global Muslim communities interact with each other. This year’s working groups included: “Compassion: An Urgent Global Imperative,” “Between Interference and Assistance: The Politics of International Support in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya,” “Water Challenges and Cooperative Response in the Middle East and North Africa,” and “Developing New Mechanisms to Promote the Charitable Sector.”

We are pleased to share with you the first of our four working group papers, “Compassion: An Urgent Global Imperative.” Please note that the opinions reflected in the paper and any recommendations contained therein are solely the views of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the participants of the working groups or the Brookings Institution. All of the working group papers will also be available on our website.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the State of Qatar for its partnership and vision in convening the Forum in partnership with us. In particular, we thank the Emir of Qatar, HRH Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani; the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Qatar, HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani; H.E. Sheikh Ahmed bin Mohammed bin Jabr Al-Thani, the Minister’s Assistant for International Cooperation Affairs and the Chairman of the Permanent Committee for Organizing Conferences; and H.E. Ambassador Mohammed Abdullah Mutib Al-Rumaihi for their collective support and dedication to the Forum and the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World.

Sincerely,



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ABSTRACT

At the 2012 U.S.-Islamic World Forum, the Religious Leaders Working Group brought together religious leaders and activists from all over the world to discuss compassion and how to restore it to its rightful place as the test of true spirituality and the heart of religious and moral life. The working group's participants discussed the Charter for Compassion, written in 2008 by leading activists and thinkers representing six of the major world faiths, and how the group could build a global network of compassionate religious communities. The group decided that it would initially develop a succinct guide to explain what a compassionate synagogue, church, temple, or mosque would look like in the 21st century, making it clear that compassion has nothing to do with pity or sentiment but consists of a principled determination to transcend selfishness and reach out imaginatively and practically to all others—not simply those we find congenial. In September, Karen Armstrong will give the keynote speech at the Islamic Society of North America, and

will announce that ISNA has endorsed the Charter and that Imam Mohamed Magid has declared the All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS) Center a Compassionate Mosque and will invite all ISNA mosques to do the same.

After we have piloted this scheme, we hope to create an international council of clergy from all faiths, who would bring a truly compassionate and authoritative perspective to world crises and challenges, countering the strident voices of extremism and making the compassionate voice of religion a dynamic, practical, and positive force in our dangerously polarized world. Only then can the faith traditions fulfill one of the chief tasks of our time: to build a global community where people of all ethnicities and ideologies can live together in mutual respect. It is time for religion to become pro-active. As a first step, the group would like to make a two-minute video, filmed and edited by Unity Productions, to make the compassionate ideal more comprehensible and accessible to a still wider audience.

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York, and is an ambassador for the UN Alliance of Civilizations. In 2007, she was awarded a medal by the Egyptian government for her services to Islam, under the auspices of the prestigious Al-Azhar University, the first foreigner to have been awarded this decoration. She was presented with the Four Freedoms Medal for Freedom of Worship by the Roosevelt Institute and the Dr. Leopold Lucas Prize at Tübingen University in 2009. In February 2008, she was awarded the TED Prize and is currently working with TED to propagate the Charter for Compassion.



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INTRODUCTION

Our world is dangerously polarized, and religion is often regarded as part of the problem. Yet religions should be contributing 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. This was what we wrote:

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

¹ The members of the Council are listed in the Appendix.

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

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 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*² 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. 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 during Ramadan 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

² Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (New York: Knopf, 2010).

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.

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 *compassion* 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.



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.”³ 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

³ Analects 4.14; 15.23 in Arthur Waley, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York, 1992).

destroyed one another until only one was left. In Confucius's 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!"⁴ 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."⁵ 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*."⁶ 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.⁷ 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 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;⁸ Elijah condemned King Ahab for murdering Na-

⁴ Analects 12.1 in Benjamin I. Schwartz, trans., *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1985), 77.

⁵ Analects 12.2. Waley translation.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.19.

⁸ 2 Samuel 12:1-15.

both and seizing his ancestral land;⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.”¹³

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 the same way, people would

“love their enemies”;¹⁴ they would not judge one another;¹⁵ they would give their wealth to the poor;¹⁶ when they were injured, they would not retaliate violently but turn the other cheek.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Observing the Golden Rule,¹⁹ the citizens of the Kingdom of God would forgive their debtors, unlike the Romans who taxed their subjects extortionately.²⁰ 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.²¹ The first would be last and the last would be first.²²

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

⁹ I Kings 21.

¹⁰ Isaiah 1:17.

¹¹ Amos 2:6-5:27.

¹² Leviticus 19:33-34.

¹³ Aboth de Rabbi Nathan I., N, 11a.

¹⁴ Matthew 5:44.

¹⁵ Matthew 7:1.

¹⁶ Mark 10:13-16.

¹⁷ Matthew 5:39-40.

¹⁸ Matthew 25:31-46.

¹⁹ Matthew 7:12.

²⁰ Matthew 6:11-12.

²¹ Luke 1:52-53.

²² Matthew 20:16.

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. 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.²³ 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.”²⁴ 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 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.”²⁷ Whatever the biblical author had originally intended, a biblical passage that was not conducive to love must be interpreted figuratively:

²³ Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Jergensmeyer, eds, *Buddhist Warfare* (Oxford, 2010); Michael K. Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (Oxford, 2011).

²⁴ B. Qedoshim 49b.

²⁵ 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), 22-32.

²⁶ B. Sanhedrin 99b.

²⁷ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson (Indianapolis, 1958), 30.

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.”²⁸

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.²⁹ Traditionally, Muslims have used this warning to deter a “hasty” interpretation of the 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:

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Qur’an 20:114; 75:16-18.

“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.”³⁰ 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.³¹ 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 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.

³⁰ B. Shabbat 31a.

³¹ B. Sanhedrin 99b.



POST-FORUM: 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 tend 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.

During the meetings of the working group, we found that there was still a great deal of confusion about the meaning of the word “compassion.” Some of the members still conceived it as “pity” or associated it with sentimental kindness. It became clear to us that basic work on this among clergy and congregants was essential. We discussed two issues: First, *What would a compassionate synagogue, mosque, or church look like*, and second, *what would an international council of compassionate religious leaders look like?* We were also influenced in our discussions by the other issues being discussed in the Forum, such as issues of religious freedom, Is-

lamophobia, and the position of women, and it’s clear that even though these were complex socio-political issues, they were all fundamentally due to a lack of compassion—of failing to treat all others, whoever they are, at all times, as we would wish to be treated ourselves. This habit of disciplined altruism, which had been regarded as central by so many of the great sages of the past, had clearly not been sufficiently stressed. If we consistently—“all day and every day” (Confucius)—looked into our own lives, into our past, and into the past of our own traditions or nations, recalled what had caused us distress, and then determined not to inflict this pain on anybody else—even upon the “stranger” or the “enemy”—the harassment of religious minorities or the oppression of women would become problematic from a religious perspective. So it had become clearer than ever that to meet the test of our time—the creation of a peaceful, just, and sustainable world—it was essential to restore compassion to its rightful place in the religious consciousness.

Our discussions had revealed that there was a hunger for compassion but that we need to find a way of making it accessible and comprehensible, as a practical and realistic objective. But it was also clear that we must proceed gradually, not attempting anything too ambitious before we had carefully laid the groundwork and that, given the widespread misunderstandings about compassion, it was necessary to work from the grassroots upward.

PLAN OF ACTION

1. As a first step, we would like to set up a small working group to define the essential criteria for a compassionate synagogue, church, or mosque. The members of this group should be team players, ready to participate actively in the creation of this framework, and the group should include both religious theorists and people who are able to think strategically. The working group would not simply be a talking shop or debating club. Members should regard it as a *project*, so the discussions should have definite deadlines. The group should include people of different religious traditions and different regions. It emerged during our discussions that the compassionate imperative must be contextualised: a compassionate mosque in Afghanistan or Pakistan, for example, will have very different challenges from a mosque in Washington, DC or New York.
2. At the end of this first phase, the group should produce a simple, concise handbook to provide clear guidelines about what a compassionate religious congregation should look like and how it should function. This manual should not be complicated or lengthy: it should be written in a compelling and attractive way so that anybody can pick it up and understand it quickly and easily.
3. Next, the Charter could be put into practice in a small selection of synagogues, churches, and mosques throughout the world, with the help of the handbook and with input from the working group. This will enable us to discover the pitfalls, challenges, and problems that are bound to occur. The congregations will keep in regular touch with the working group to discuss progress and find out what works and what does not. This would be a pilot phase which will enable us to perfect the project and establish a brand. It is important to note that we are *learning*. We do not have all the answers yet. During this pioneering phase, we hope to establish “centers of excellence,” which will attract other congregations in their vicinity. This is what has happened with our Compassionate Schools Network in Pakistan: others hear about what is happening and want to join in. Again, this phase would last only for a limited period. The congregations will be attempting, among other things, some of the following:
 - a. Read scripture in a compassionate manner (i.e., making scripture speak compassionately to local, national, and international conditions),
 - b. Think compassionately and dispassionately about the “stranger” or the “enemy,”
 - c. Learn about the uncompassionate episodes in the history of their *own* traditions,
 - d. Conduct disputes within the congregation and outside it in a consistently respectful, “Socratic” manner,
 - e. Learn how to listen,
 - f. Relate to other congregations in the town, city, or village and make a positive, compassionate contribution to local crises—making the compassionate ethos a reality in their immediate environment, and
 - g. Manage gender issues in a balanced, respectful manner
4. During this phase, the pioneering congregations should be in contact with one another, exchanging news, problems, and stories of success, so that they acquire a sense of belonging to a compassionate global network.
5. At the end of this phase, the group may find it necessary to revise the handbook in collaboration with the congregations. We can then invite others to join the network.

6. Once we have established a worldwide network of compassionate congregations and have acquired experience and expertise, we can think of establishing an international Compassionate Council.

There is an urgent need for the religious traditions to make the compassionate ethos audible in our

stridently divided world. There can be no shortcuts. We need to lay deep, careful foundations, but our experience in implementing the Charter during the last three years has convinced us that it is possible to revivify the compassionate ethos.

APPENDIX

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, Dept. of Religion, Chautauqua Institution*

Sadhvi Chaitanya, *Spiritual Director of Arsha Vijnan 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*

About the Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World

The Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World is a major research program housed within the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The project conducts high-quality public policy research, and convenes policy makers and opinion leaders on the major issues surrounding the relationship between the United States and the Muslim world. The Project seeks to engage and inform policymakers, practitioners, and the broader public on developments in Muslim countries and communities, and the nature of their relationship with the United States. Together with the affiliated Brookings Doha Center in Qatar, it sponsors a range of events, initiatives, research projects, and publications designed to educate, encourage frank dialogue, and build positive partnerships between the United States and the Muslim world. The Project has several interlocking components:

- The U.S.-Islamic World Forum, which brings together key leaders in the fields of politics, business, media, academia, and civil society from across the Muslim world and the United States, for much needed discussion and dialogue;
- A Visiting Fellows program, for scholars and journalists from the Muslim world to spend time researching and writing at Brookings in order to inform U.S. policy makers on key issues facing Muslim states and communities;
- A series of Brookings Analysis Papers and Monographs that provide needed analysis of the vital issues of joint concern between the U.S. and the Muslim world;
- An Arts and Culture Initiative, which seeks to develop a better understanding of how arts and cultural leaders and organizations can increase understanding between the United States and the global Muslim community;
- A Science and Technology Initiative, which examines the role cooperative science and technology programs involving the U.S. and Muslim world can play in responding to regional development and education needs, as well as fostering positive relations;
- A Faith Leaders Initiative which brings together representatives of the major Abrahamic faiths from the United States and the Muslim world to discuss actionable programs for bridging the religious divide;
- A Brookings Institution Press Book Series, which aims to synthesize the project's findings for public dissemination.

The underlying goal of the Project is to continue the Brookings Institution's original mandate to serve as a bridge between scholarship and public policy. It seeks to bring new knowledge to the attention of decision-makers and opinion-leaders, as well as afford scholars, analysts, and the public a better insight into policy issues. The Project is supported through the generosity of a range of sponsors including the Government of the State of Qatar, The Ford Foundation, The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation.

The Project Conveners are Stephen R. Grand, Fellow and Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World; Martin Indyk, Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy Studies; Tamara Cofman Wittes, Senior Fellow in and Director of the Saban Center; Kenneth Pollack, Senior Fellow in the Saban Center; Bruce Riedel, Senior Fellow in the Saban Center; Shibley Telhami, Nonresident Senior Fellow in the Saban Center and Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland; and Salman Shaikh, Fellow in and Director of the Brookings Doha Center.

About the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings

THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY was established on May 13, 2002 with an inaugural address by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The creation of the Saban Center reflects the Brookings Institution's commitment to expand dramatically its research and analysis of Middle East policy issues at a time when the region has come to dominate the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

The Saban Center provides Washington policymakers with balanced, objective, in-depth and timely research and policy analysis from experienced and knowledgeable scholars who can bring fresh perspectives to bear on the critical problems of the Middle East. The center upholds the Brookings tradition of being open to a broad range of views. The Saban Center's central objective is to advance understanding of developments in the Middle East through policy-relevant scholarship and debate.

The center's foundation was made possible by a generous grant from Haim and Cheryl Saban of Los Angeles. Ambassador Martin S. Indyk, Vice President of Foreign Policy at Brookings, was the founding Director of the Saban Center. Tamara Cofman Wittes is the center's Director. Within the Saban Center is a core group of Middle East experts who conduct original research and develop innovative programs to promote a better understanding of the policy choices facing American decision makers. They include Daniel Byman, a Middle East terrorism expert from Georgetown University, who

is the center's Director of Research; Kenneth M. Pollack, an expert on national security, military affairs and the Persian Gulf; Bruce Riedel, a specialist on counterterrorism; Suzanne Maloney who focuses on Iran and economic development; Michael Doran, a specialist in Middle East security issues; Khaled Elgindy, an expert on the Arab-Israeli conflict; Natan Sachs, an expert on Israeli domestic politics and the Arab-Israeli conflict; Stephen R. Grand, Fellow and Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World; Salman Shaikh, Fellow and Director of the Brookings Doha Center; Ibrahim Sharqieh, Fellow and Deputy Director of the Brookings Doha Center; Shadi Hamid, Fellow and Director of Research of the Brookings Doha Center; and Shibley Telhami, who holds the Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland. The center is located in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at Brookings.

The Saban Center is undertaking path breaking research in five areas: the implications of regime change in Iraq, including post-war nation-building and Gulf security; the dynamics of Iranian domestic politics and the threat of nuclear proliferation; mechanisms and requirements for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; policy for the war against terrorism, including the continuing challenge of state sponsorship of terrorism; and political and economic change in the Arab world, and the methods required to promote democratization.

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