

THE CHARTER FOR COMPASSION

At a time of year that we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, the world continues to be anything but peaceful. Sadly, although we'd like to expect otherwise, people of faith are often a part of the problem. How often do we hear of acts done in the name of Christianity and the world's other great religions that seem to promote just the opposite? Haven't we all shuddered at hateful, polarizing, or violent words and actions that are couched in religious terms or justified in the name of religious beliefs? Don't we expect something more from ourselves and our brothers and sisters?

According to author Karen Armstrong, "All too often the voices of extremism seem to drown those that speak of kindness, forbearance and mutual respect. Yet the founders of every single one of the great traditions recoiled from the violence of their time and tried to replace it with an ethic of compassion." In response to this, Karen Armstrong started a process of collaboration among spiritual leaders (from Bishop Desmond Tutu to the Dalai Lama) and believers of all faiths to compose a "Charter of Compassion", with the goal of restoring compassion to the center of religious, moral and political life.

Over the past 2 years, thousands of people have contributed ideas, and through several conferences a final draft was composed. In November of this year the final draft of the charter was released and a campaign begun to gain affirmation from people throughout the world. According to Armstrong, "The Charter for Compassion is not simply a statement of principle. It is above all a summons to creative, practical and sustained action to meet the political, moral, religious, social and cultural problems of our time."

These are the words to consider:

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

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

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

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

The Charter for Compassion is being promoted through their website, <http://charterforcompassion.org/>. On the site, there is much more information on the history of the process, contributing leaders and organizations, stories of people putting compassion into action, and an opportunity to “sign” the charter and add one’s name to the list of thousands, as well as information on how organizations can enroll as “partners” in the mission. There is also a very moving video showing a cross-section of God’s children speaking the words of the charter. Again, the Charter for Compassion is meant to be more than just words. Maybe it can be a catalyst for a shift in awareness and action for us and our brothers and sisters of all faiths.