Compassion and conflict:
Religious roots and contemporary policy

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Human suffering remains pervasive in society. Although it may take different forms in various historical and societal contexts, there are always elements of suffering even in the most advanced and prosperous societies. Also pervasive are various individual, group, organizational, and societal efforts to addressing suffering. In particular, organized religions and secular governments have initiated, and are often held responsible for, efforts to relieve human suffering.

This paper examines the virtue of compassion as a response to human suffering through an examination of its religious roots and its application in contemporary U.S. policy. The paper is organized as follows: (1) a description of the intersection of religion and policy; (2) a description of the virtue of compassion; (3) an examination of the concept of compassion within religious (primarily Christian) belief; and (4) a summary of compassion within formal U.S. public policy. The discussion then focuses on the interface of religion and public policy in terms of the compassionate response to suffering.

Religion and Public Policy

In some eras and contexts religious authority has been the predominant force in setting public policy (e.g., medieval Catholic Europe, contemporary Islamic states). In other times and settings religion is nearly non-existent as a factor in public policy (e.g., communist regimes). In contemporary, industrialized Western nations the relationship is more nuanced than either of these extremes. Collins and Garlington (2011) have suggested three major means by which religion and policy interact in modern industrialized societies.
First, has been the gradual shift of responsibility from social welfare that was initially met informally by families and communities, often operating within religious context, to the secular state (e.g., programs of Social Security for example). Social welfare policy literature, describes the way industrialization necessitated creating government structures to assist individuals as family and community structures changed (Skocpol, 1995; Wilensky & Lebeaux, 1958; Garfinkel, Rainwater, & Smeeding, 2010). Industrialization involved major economic and social changes such as geographic mobility, decreased family size, and new structures of work. With increased tax revenues, the wealth of the state allowed government to assume responsibility for some of the needs previously met within the community: “the state could address the needs of individuals who could no longer rely on extended family and community networks for assistance” (Collins, Garlington, & Cooney, 2011).

The second identified intersection of religion and public policy includes the range of instances in which religion falls under the control of public policy. This can take many forms, including the regulation of religious congregations through tax policy, rules made about religious practices in public settings, and government funding of religious groups to address social needs. One major area of intersection, particularly relevant to compassion, is the provision of social welfare services by religious organizations contracted by government. In some areas, the state has taken responsibility by creating public policy that incorporates religious and community groups as primary actors. In these instances, religion is both regulated by public policy and a key part of public policy implementation.
Finally, religion contributes to the development of public policy concretely as an actor in policy formation as well as more implicitly through promotion of certain social values that influence policy choices. Major religious groups in the U.S. have paid lobbyists just like any interest group. Social values, such as individualism or communitarianism, shape public policy and the level of responsibility the government takes for regulation or social welfare (Lipset, 1996). Religion is not a single variable in the linear causation of values but part of the “recursive processes” in which religion interacts with other factors (such as state structures or economic changes) to influence policy (Collins, Garlington, Cooney, 2011; Morgan, 2002; van Kersbergen & Manow, 2009).

**Virtue of Compassion**

Compassion is a well-known but misunderstood virtue among the populace. Compassion may be confused with related, but distinct, virtues such as charity, altruism, or mercy. Distinguishing compassion from similar virtues is: “to be with in suffering” and it involves the “simultaneous interplay of cognitive, affective and volitional dimensions (Davies, 2001, p.232).

Comte-Sponville (2001: 106) explains that compassion is a form of sympathy; it is sympathy in pain or sadness – in other words, participation in the suffering of others. Suffering “…is always morally regrettable” as it suggests that society is not operating at its best level. Compassion, therefore, is a virtuous act as it demonstrates regret for the existence of suffering. Furthermore, all suffering deserves compassion -- “[S]haring in the suffering of another does not mean that one approves of him or shares whatever
good or bad reasons he has for suffering; it means that one refuses to regard any suffering as a matter of indifference or any living being as a thing. This is why compassion is universal in its principle and the more moral for not being concerned with the morality of its objects... (Comte-Sponville, 2001: 106).”

Philosophers have long debated the merits of compassion. Comte-Sponville (2001), Nussbaum (2001), and Davies (2001) have articulated the history of the various pro-compassion and anti-compassion arguments. In his historical review Davies (2001) suggests the deep division is between those who have argued that compassion is essentially a “feeling” and therefore irrational versus those who have argued it contains a cognitive dimension and is a form of reason. Moreover, Davies (2001) explains there are two “classes” of the words meaning “compassion” that have been used over the years. The first are terms that basically mean “fellow-suffering” or “suffering with”. The Latin *commiseratio* and the German *mitleid* are of this type. The other class of words does not carry the exact meaning of “suffering with”; nonetheless these have been used as synonyms for compassion. Such words include the Latin *clementia*, *misericorđa*, *humanitas*; the English “mercy” and “pity” and the French *pitié*. Despite their use as synonyms for compassion they lack the specific element of suffering-with that is the essence of compassion. Collins, Cooney, & Garlington (*in press*) have discussed the detriment this confusion of meanings causes in public debate and public policy.

**Compassion and Religion**

Religious treatments of compassion often address beliefs regarding the nature of evil and resultant human suffering, the role of “deservedness” among the suffering,
understanding of the “other” (those outside of the group) and whether they are eligible for compassion, and specific methods to cultivate compassion. In this section, I first discuss compassion within the Judeo-Christian Bible but later provide more general comment on compassion within other religion traditions.

In addition to his concise history of the philosophical treatment of compassion, Davies (2001) also engages in linguistic analysis of the Bible to identify the source of compassion in the Old and New Testaments. Primarily this resides with the presence of YHWH with his people and as God’s compassionate actions for Israel (Old Testament) and that Jesus is to be understood as the incarnate compassion of God (New Testament). In comparison to philosophical thinking about compassion which engaged with the problem of cognition and affectivity in compassionate acts, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, “compassion takes on a new priority since it is intimately linked with the action of God for his people, with his own self-naming and with the life of the saints who follow God’s ways (p.240).”

In the Old Testament the theme of compassion “is substantially governed by passages from Exodus … which combine reference to the compassionate acts of God, who liberates his people from slavery in Egypt, with divine theophany of the Name (Davies, 2001, p.240).” Davies (2001) conducts further linguistic analysis of passages from Exodus identifying numerous references to God’s active presence “with” and “for” Israel and an active “loving-kindness”, an assurance of God’s “unfailing benevolence.” Reflecting concerns about the role of compassion in public policy, Davies (2001, p.246) acknowledges that it is not possible to legislate individuals to undertake compassionate action, but recognizes that the legal texts of Deuteronomy are clear regarding the
obligations to take care of “widows and orphans” and “resident aliens”, because they are disadvantaged by their lack of familial support. O’Connell (2009) also draws from the Old Testament in making the argument that the great prophets of Israel (Jeremiah, Isaiah, Hosea) speak of Yahweh’s continued compassion for those who repent. God’s actions of mercy and forgiveness depend on a willingness to return to a relationship with Yahweh. Thus, compassion benefits not only the disadvantaged (widows, orphans, aliens) but also is focused on restorative justice for the renewal of the community (O’Connell, 2009).

Continuing in the New Testament, Davies (2001) notes the development of terminology that adds a more positively affective dimension regarding mercy and actions toward others. “Compassion” is to be the preferred translation of these terms rather than the more legal-oriented “mercy.” For Christians it is Jesus who embodies the compassionate liberating actions of Yahweh, and he is with God one God.

Davies (2001) also articulates an “ethics of naming”; “the ways in which we choose to speak of God will legitimate or prioritize particular principles of action in the world, which acknowledges the intimate relations between the way in which we speak of God and our own highest ideals and values (p.251).” God declares himself to be “gracious and compassionate” in Exodus; Deuteronomy emphasizes the responsibility to show compassion towards “widows and orphans” and to the “stranger”; Paul articulates the need for Christians to exercise the ‘compassion of Christ’ (p.251). Each of these reflects the ideal of compassion in slightly different forms.
O’Connell (2009) emphasizes the communal force of compassion in the New Testament. A common theme of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ compassionate actions is that many of the commonly held attitudes toward those suffering precluded these people from participating in the wider community. Thus, the message is not only one of compassionate response to individual suffering but the repair of relationship of the excluded with the larger community. The story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33) may be the most well recognized description of compassionate response in the Bible. Numerous discussions and interpretations of this story, alone, have led to extensive debate about lessons of compassion. Perkins (1982, cited in O’Connell, 2009) argues there are no boundaries on who should receive this love, and it becomes a cornerstone for Jesus’ call for a liberated humanity. Perkins’ (1982) interpretation also offers three crucial points: 1) the parable is directed toward the wealthy (as symbolized by the character of the Samaritan); 2) in it, Jesus suggests we “miss the point” if we focus on a moral or economic calculus to determine what we owe our neighbor; 3) given the historically contentious relationship between Jews and Samaritans, the Samaritan’s act of compassion, and compassionate acts more broadly, are counter-cultural. O’Connell (2009) summarizes that compassion, in this Gospel lesson, “… overrides social, cultural, racial, economic, and religious boundaries”. Very clearly, there is no “other” in this perspective of compassion.

Compassion, of course, is not limited to Judeo-Christian beliefs and traditions. It is a core element in other major religions (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism). Examples provided by Vieten, Amorak, and Schlitz (2006) include the Sanskrit seva (in Sikh and Hindu-derived traditions) which refers to being of selfless service to the needs of others
and in some Buddhist traditions *metta* in Pali or *maitri* in Sanskrit is used to refer to both a quality and a practice of unconditional and unattached loving-kindness. Buddhism has a particular emphasis on compassion. Whereas compassion is considered a virtue in most religious traditions it is considered the defining virtue in Buddhism. Yet, similarities across religions abound; “one finds rough equivalents of the ideal of divine Unlimited Love across the major spiritual and religious traditions” (Post, 2003, p. 140, cited in Vieten, et al., 2006). Barad (2007) specifically compares the writings of the Dalai Lama and St. Thomas Aquinas regarding compassion, identifying some differences but concluding they are essentially writing about the same thing. In both traditions, compassion requires acting to relieve distress as well as having sympathetic feelings about it.

Religious and spiritual traditions have developed methods of encouraging virtuous behavior. The cultivation of “other-regarding virtues”, like compassion, has implications at personal, societal, and “perhaps global” levels (Vieten, et al., 2006, p.916). These authors list some of the ways in which religious and spiritual communities have encouraged virtuous behavior: moral education; formal precepts or vows that advocate an ethical lifestyle; opportunities to express compassion or perform acts of community service or social advocacy; peer influence; philanthropic rituals or structures such as the collection plate or tithing; community-supported initiation-like activities such as the Mormon mission; and poems, scriptures, slogans, songs, and symbols that may serve to assist one in internalizing moral goals (Vieten, et al., 2006). These external influences are, in themselves, rarely enough to lead individuals in virtuous other-focused behaviors; individuals must internalize these moral orders
through personal transformative experiences; “It may be that the most exemplary altruism is often associated with the agent’s personal experience of the utter enormity of the Transcendent, including a sense of overwhelming awe. Overawed, the deeply humbled self is transformed through something like an ego-death to a new self of profound humility, empathy, and regard for all human and other life (Post, 2002, cited in Vieten et al. 2006).”

Compassion and Public Policy

I now turn to an empirical description of compassion as observed in stated U.S. public policies. Although methods of policy analysis include a variety of perspectives and tools, economic models of rational decision-making have been the primary conceptual lens for addressing questions of policy. But the reality is that much of policy-making is values-based. These types of broad values-based frameworks do not lend themselves to typical technically-oriented policy analyses. Questions and analyses related to values and virtues are more relevant to structure debate and discussion at this broader societal and political level. More specific than values, virtues require behavior. This focus on behavior makes virtues more visible than values. The idea of moral character within a discussion of policy may partially capture what might be called national culture. Within these discussions there are often assumptions regarding parameters of the policy options that would be legitimately under considerations versus those outside the mainstream. Although values-oriented analyses are infrequent compared to technical, particularly quantitative, approaches, “[V]irtue is actually a strong component in policy discourse, though it may be masked as other things (Lejano, 2006, p.141).”
Collins, Cooney, and Garlington (in press) have provided a more extensive review of the strengths and risks of compassion-focused virtue approaches to policy and Collins, Garlington, and Cooney (2011) conducted an analysis of three U.S. policies from the vantage of compassion frameworks. That study used examples of fairly unambiguous suffering to assess a policy response to suffering. Consistent with a definition of suffering regarding “the loss of truly basic goods” (Nussbaum, 2001) the analysis focused on the loss of: life (terminal illness), safety (domestic violence), and home/community (community disaster). The selected appropriate U.S. policies that addressed these losses included: the Medicare hospice benefit, the Violence Against Women Act, and the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act.

This earlier examination of compassion in policy examined only the legislation regarding the purpose of policy, its intended beneficiaries, eligibility requirements, the type of assistance provided, and the administrative structure for service delivery. It did not conduct an examination of the implementation of policy. Like all policies, stated intent and results may be very different; processes of policy implementation are highly complex, especially when involving service delivery (Elmore, 1979; Lipsky, 1983). Nonetheless, this analysis was able to identify some of the characteristics and manifestations of an organized policy-based approach to compassionate assistance as identified in current formal U.S. policies.

The description of compassionate delivery of aid was found within each of these three policy areas, but in each case it was a small part of a much larger policy. This was particularly the case for hospice (which exists within the large Medicare program) and disaster management (in which service to victims is one of several core
operations). This observation is less true in the case of domestic violence. Services to victims of violence are central to the intent of VAWA.

The definitional element of compassion, “to be with in suffering” requires nearness to the sufferer and the essential element of human contact. Each of these policy domains included providing some type of interpersonal connection, but utilized differing means of providing this connection. Each provided for interpersonal contact with sufferers both through professional intervention and the use of volunteers. This is particularly important because the common and casual use of the term compassion often does not recognize the necessity of the interpersonal relationship required to “be with in suffering.” A truly compassionate response will require interpersonal contact to allow for shared suffering.

Furthermore, coordination was central in each domain but the mechanisms of coordination and the relevant parties involved in coordination were sources of variation. For example, hospice care requires case coordination at the individual level, domestic violence assistance requires community collaboration, and disaster management requires collaboration at multiple levels (federal, state, local) and numerous entities (Red Cross as a prominent NGO). Thus, coordination was a key element of each of these policies. Each required a coordinated response, yet there was variation in the extent and intricacy of the mechanisms of coordination.

“To be with in suffering” provides no indication regarding the appropriate time period for engaging in compassionate action. In circumstances where suffering is of a long-term nature an otherwise caring response that is too brief may not fit with an
understanding of “to be with in suffering.” The hospice care benefit is unique regarding the time horizon. Thus while terminal illness has qualities of both pain and fear of death that deem it worthy of compassion, the benefit is explicitly limited to cases in which death is determined to occur within six months. This quality imposes a short-term need for compassionate response that likely contributes to its comparatively strong political support.

Other types of suffering may have far longer time horizons. Domestic violence victims often make several efforts to end abusive relationships before they are able to fully gain their independence (Arias & Pape, 1999; Humphreys & Thiara, 2003).

Responses to community disasters also have a complicated time horizon. The distinction between emergency response and later efforts at rebuilding are relevant. Scenes of devastation are generally effective at eliciting a response that is a combination of concrete aid and emotional support. But public attention, and consequent support, often wanes as the effort for rebuilding becomes more complicated.

Although brief, I summarized some characteristics of compassion within specific U.S. policies. As noted, these policies reflect legislative intent rather than on-the-ground reality. Certainly, there are limitations to compassionate response within these three policies but undoubtedly some terminally ill individuals, battered women, and those displaced in community disasters have found some eased suffering due to these policy efforts.
Intersection of Religion and Public Policy via Compassion

Having reviewed some religious antecedents and public policies regarding compassion, I now address the potential intersection of religion and public policy. Earlier I identified three general means by which religion and government have interacted regarding social welfare: the expansion of government in providing social welfare, government funding of religious organizations to provide social services, and the role of religion as a force in politics through both advocacy for certain positions and through moral discourse. I now return to these three points in a discussion of compassion specifically.

*Government and religious communities in addressing social need.* Collins, Cooney, & Garlington (*in press*) articulated the need for sustained infrastructure in order to provide a compassionate response to suffering. Thus, in contrast to the position of “compassionate conservativism” (Olasky, 2000; Norman & Ganesh, 2006), compassionate policy cannot be primarily a devolution of responsibility to local faith-based communities. The infrastructure of the modern industrial social welfare systems must remain in order to provide a compassionate response. Furthermore, it must be strengthened in order to reflect compassion.

Collins, Cooney, and Garlington (*in press*) provided some guidance on this. The appropriate understanding of “shared suffering” from a policy perspective has three elements. First, there needs to be administrative infrastructure to support the interpersonal element of shared suffering. Community-based collaborative networks involving professionals, paraprofessionals and volunteers are needed to do this work.
Second, there needs to be formal policy recognition that suffering does occur and that those suffering have a right to the alleviation of suffering as a component of justice. Policy history has numerous examples of widespread suffering that remains unacknowledged. Injustices related to race, ethnicity, social class, and other characteristics remain rampant across the globe but are often neglected by the policy spotlight. Third, there needs to be sustained funding to allow continuity of assistance throughout the period of suffering. In many circumstances suffering occurs over a long period of time. Episodic bursts of funding to provide limited assistance are unlikely to provide the level of compassion needed to address the suffering that occurs.

*Religion under the control of government.* Although this can take many forms (e.g., control of religious practice, tax policies) in regard to compassion it is primarily relevant regarding government contracting with faith-based organizations to provide services to those who are suffering. I have rejected the notion that government can devolve responsibility for compassion to religious organizations without providing the sustained infrastructure necessary for compassionate response. Religious congregations and other organized entities may be closer to the community than government services but even in circumstances of authentic commitment to compassionate action they may lack the resources for sustained involvement (Steensland, 2002; Bane, Coffin, & Thiemann, 2000). Principles of subsidiarity may be utilized to guide the provision of services at the local level. This values the knowledge and skill of local communities in addressing social needs but does not require the removal of governmental infrastructure to support these efforts (O’Connell, 2009).
Professionals are necessary; they have the advanced training to handle the suffering ("trauma") through "mature empathy", to secure other needed resources, and to negotiate complex systems (e.g., medical settings, courts, immigration offices, etc.). Given the seriousness of suffering that comes with loss of basic goods, the response suggests intense engagement over potentially long periods of time. In addition to a professional role, there is likely to be a need and appropriate opportunities for paraprofessional staff and volunteers. These individuals often come from the same community, share characteristics with the individuals requiring compassion, and are involved in ongoing and reciprocal relationships within the community context. The role of volunteers is vital to compassionate reaction. Religious faith and motivation is often a central component to this volunteer work. But it cannot be a replacement for the role of trained professionals, who, of course, might also be motivated by religious faith.

Government contracting with faith-based organizations, therefore, can provide a reasonable intersection of policy and faith in the provision of compassionate assistance. But this is not to be a devolvement of responsibility. Rather both entities bring their separate "missions" to the provision of aid.

Religion as a contributor to shaping public policy. When religion emphasizes "community", calls for a more engaged political presence come to the forefront. Gordon (2009), for example, emphasizes both "solitude" and "solidarity". Solitude focuses on interiority, the withdrawal from social life to journey within in pursuit of wisdom, contemplation and creativity. The "vocation" of solidarity "is to sensitize and conscienticize human persons to the horizontal reality of suffering in the human community" (p.65). As O'Connell (2009) has noted, Old Testament treatments of
compassion are community-focused resulting in restoration of membership in the community and New Testament treatments of compassion identify that Christ heals social isolation as well as physical suffering. Perspectives such as these, which focus on community, shift the religious sentiment away from a solely individualized orientation between self and God.

The treatment of compassion as a virtue also places it within the context of the discussion of “virtue theory” in politics. Virtue theorists debate regarding the qualities of virtue that lead to human flourishing. Virtues can be categorized as liberal or conservative within political discussion; conservative versions highlight individual virtues (e.g., self-discipline) whereas liberal versions highlight social virtues (e.g., fairness) (Sabl, 2005). Theories of virtue often contain both a core and an ideal; those that are necessary for societies and those that make it ideal (Sabl, 2005). Whereas justice is typically identified as a core virtue, some theorists would likely categorize compassion as an “ideal”. But Hursthouse (1999) offers a unique perspective; she questions the taken-for-granted assumption that justice is the key virtue in discussions of political morality. This argument opens the door to the possibility that other virtues – perhaps compassion – might receive more centrality in discussion of political theory.

From a religion perspective, O’Connell (2009), among others, has articulated numerous ideas of “political theology”. There are several sources of this, including feminist theology (e.g., Farley, 1990) and liberation theology (e.g., Gutiérrez, 1988) which overtly link religious commandments to engagement in political processes for transformation of unjust social structures. Building on religious ideas about the role of compassion in restoring community, these ideas about faith and commandment very
explicitly identify the need to engage in political processes to reform systems that lead to human suffering. Although religion’s role in the political realm is not new, within mainstream discourse religion has not continuously voiced ideals of compassion.

Conclusion

In this paper I have analyzed the concept of compassion from both religious and public policy perspectives and have suggested some ways in which religion and public policy might interact regarding compassion. Religion has long addressed the concept of compassion, although the reality of practicing compassion at both individual and institutional levels remains a challenge. To a lesser extent public policy has also incorporated the concept of compassion, although often with political intonations overriding the centrality of compassion. Despite the difficulty of acting with compassion in a habitual manner, it remains a core concept to religion and potentially an episodic and “ideal” virtue in policy.

Accuracy regarding the meaning of compassion is needed to help craft an appropriate response to alleviate human suffering. In this, religion has a more accurate understanding of the realities of suffering, and, consequently, compassion. Conversely, the politics of public policy can distort the meaning of the term to suit political objectives. Religion, therefore, may have a more pronounced role in advancing the compassionate society by enhancing the range of actions as a political force. The various methods of cultivating compassion have largely relied in individual and congregational level actions. Broadening the repertoire of cultivation mechanisms to include efforts within the larger society may be part of the role of religion.


