

**Considering Compassion:
Global Ethics, Human Dignity, and the Compassionate God**
Frits de Lange and L Juliana Claassens

1. Introduction

Globalization makes the world bigger than human moral imagination can afford. We do not seem to be prepared for coping very well amidst a world where we are increasingly challenged by the interconnectedness of all to all and everything to everything at this globe: neither economically, politically, socially, ecologically nor religiously. Some decades ago, the German philosopher Günther Anders (1902 – 1992) wrote a book about the “Outdatedness of the Human Race” (“Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen”), asserting that human nature cannot keep pace with the algorithmic speed of the technological revolution.¹ His title also seems applicable for the challenges globalization holds for the planetarization of human consciousness. Living together as humanity on one planet needs to be reinvented in the 21st century. The challenge to create a new, peaceful, just and sustainable world order is vital to the survival of us all.

As theologians who are particularly skilled in doing theology amidst ever changing, and challenging, contexts, we are inclined to ask: What, if anything, can theology contribute? This question has been, already for more than a decade, at the center of the collaboration between The Faculty of Theology of the University Stellenbosch, South Africa, and the Protestant Theological University in the Netherlands, institutions from the Northern and the Southern hemisphere, committing themselves to an ongoing research project on Human Dignity in a globalizing world.²

¹ The two volume work *Outdatedness of Human Beings (Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen)* was first published by C.H. Beck in Munich in 1956. The work has seen several editions in German but has not been translated into English.

² Some of the fruits of this rich collaboration were published in the collection of essays, *Fragile Dignity: Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family, and Violence* (ed. L Juliana Claassens and Klaas Spronk; Semeia; Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2013).

The question is, even for antiglobalists, not if and when we will move towards one, interconnected world, but how. Life styles and cultures that once lived in splendid isolation are exposed to one another not only by the search for economic markets, but also by migration and travel, communication technology and social media. Humankind will have to grow towards a planetary consciousness, and expand the limited scope of our moral imagination beyond the borders of family, tribe, class, religion, nation and culture.

Here theology can play a constructive role. “The Empire” – a capitalist world order based on greed, aggression and power³ – regardless of how powerful and all-encompassing does not necessarily need to be our common fate. The future still depends on choices to be made. The outlooks though are not reassuring. Traditional communities are breaking apart, inequality increases⁴, nations fall apart, and millions of migrants are adrift across and between continents. Religions no longer seem to bind people together, but disperse them in various kinds of fundamentalism. And even more disconcerting, religions worldwide function as a legitimization for worldwide terrorism of extremist groups. On a scale as never seen before, people suffer from the violence of civil wars.

Globalization is creating new winners and losers, privileged and disadvantaged, powerful and vulnerable individuals and communities. It is a question of how one continues to uphold and believe in the ideal of human dignity *for all*? It seems that a more compassionate culture and politics might be of help in the cultivation of a global culture that endorses the equal human rights of all. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum, in particular, is an author committed to the values of compassion and human dignity, both in the academic arena as well as in public debate. In her work on classical and

³ The *Accra Confession*, adopted at the meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Accra, Ghana (2004), inspired by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their book *Empire* (Harvard University Press Cambridge, Mass./ London 2000) defines the Empire as the new global order as “the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests.” (<http://wrc.ch/accra>)

⁴ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press Cambridge Mass./London 2014.

modern moral philosophy, Nussbaum shows the crucial role moral emotions like empathy play in upholding an inclusive morality that does not divide up the world into “us” and “them.” She argues that “[r]espect grounded in the idea of human dignity will prove impotent to include all citizens on terms of equality unless it is nourished by imaginative engagement with the lives of others and by an inner grasp of their full and equal humanity.”⁵

Nussbaum moreover maintains that cultivating compassion both on a personal and an institutional level will contribute to a more just world. Narrow forms of patriotism and nationalism limit compassion to an in-group, excluding those on the outside. What we need in a globalizing world is the promotion and endorsement of what she calls a “compassionate world citizenship.” She argues as follow:

Most of us are brought up to believe that all human beings have equal worth. At least the world’s major religions and most secular philosophies tell us so. But our emotions don’t believe it. We mourn for those we know, not for those we don’t know. And most of us feel deep emotions about America, emotions we don’t feel about India, or Russia, or Rwanda. In and of itself, this narrowness of our emotional lives is probably acceptable and maybe even good. (...) Nonetheless, when we observe how narrow and partisan our compassion usually is, we must ask how it can be educated and extended, so that the equal worth of all human beings becomes a stable psychological reality for us.⁶

According to Nussbaum, it is vital that the education in the commonality of human weakness and vulnerability should become a profound part of the education of all young people. She argues that literature in particular (“stories and dramas, history, film”) is well suited in helping people in what she calls “decoding the suffering of another,” opening up the lives of others near and far so as to foster a greater sense of understanding and insight into what others are experiencing. Rigorous study in global economics

⁵ Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions. Why Love Matters for Justice*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Mass. & London, 2013, 380.

⁶ Dr. Martha C. Nussbaum, Georgetown University, Washington D.C. USA. MAY 16, 2003, on the occasion of receiving an honorary degree.
<http://www.humanity.org/voices/commencements/martha-nussbaum-georgetown-university-speech-2003>

combined with philosophical and religious ethics may further contribute to foster compassion beyond one's narrow circle of concern.⁷

The plea for cultivating compassion with a broader reach is also at the core of the Charter for Compassion, a worldwide movement started in 2009 by the science of religion scholar Karen Armstrong. Individuals, groups, but also institutions and political organizations are all invited to sign and support the charter.⁸ While Nussbaum focuses on education, Armstrong points to religion as the source for a compassionate politics. In her view, the Golden Rule is the ethical core of the great world religions Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism. The conviction that you should treat others as you want to be treated yourself, gives a tangible moral backbone to the flesh of compassion. It turns emotion into a principle. As the Charter of Compassion outlines their objectives:

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.

The Charter of Compassion furthermore admits that religion in the past rightly can be said to have had a bad reputation when it comes to compassion. Religious traditions often functioned as the source and legitimization of interreligious violence and colonial oppression. Therefore, Karen Armstrong contends that we engage in an act of retrieval: compassion has to be restored as the centre of morality and religion, cultural and religious diversity has to be appreciated and encouraged, and an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings, even those regarded as enemies, has to be cultivated. As the Charter of Compassion maintains: "We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized

⁷ idem.

⁸ Seattle, US, became the first city in the world to affirm the charter, followed by many others. In the Netherlands: Leiden, Groningen, Apeldoorn, Rotterdam.

world. (...) Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity.”⁹

In her worldwide movement for the promotion a global interreligious culture of compassion, Karen Armstrong can count on the support of various religious world leaders like His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He travels around the world as a committed ambassador of borderless compassion too. The Dalai Lama defines compassion as “the wish for another being to be free from suffering,” and distinguishes compassion closely associated with a personal attachment from that of genuine compassion. It is quite natural that we want the people we love to be free from suffering. But this can be described as compassion that emerges from personal need. The Dalai Lama rather proposes that “genuine compassion is based not on our own projections and expectations, but rather on the needs of the other: irrespective of whether another person is a close friend or an enemy.”¹⁰ Hence the goal of the Buddhist practitioner is to expand his circle of concern and develop true compassion. The Dalai Lama is convinced that this task is not limited to Buddhist monks or religious believers in general, but that it is part of a new, global ethic. “[G]iven patience and time, it is within our power to develop this kind of universal compassion”.¹¹

A global movement to cultivate and extend compassion beyond the immediate circle of concern may indeed find inspiration from many different religious sources. In Judaism compassion is considered to be one of the central attributes of the divine, and one of the core obligations of humanity. The Hebrew Bible describes God as both compassionate and merciful: “The Lord! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). Israel has to take the Lord as an example for its own ethical behaviour. “Just as God is called compassionate and gracious, so you too must be compassionate and gracious,

⁹ <http://www.charterforcompassion.org>

¹⁰ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Compassionate Life*. Somerville, US: Wisdom Publications, 2012, 17.

¹¹ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Compassionate Life*, 23f.

giving gifts freely.” (Sifre Deuteronomy 49). To “walk in God’s ways” is to respond with compassion to the suffering of others.¹²

Compassion, or *Rahman* and *Rahim* in Arabic, is also at the heart of Islam. Each of the 114 chapters of the Quran, with one exception, begins with the verse, “In the name of Allah the Compassionate, the Merciful”, and a good Muslim starts each day, each prayer and each significant action by invoking Allah the Merciful and Compassionate by reciting *Bism-i-llah a-Rahman-i-Rahim*.

And Christianity is rooted in this biblical story that started with a merciful God who was moved by the suffering cries of the Hebrew people, and culminated in the narrative of Christ as the icon of a compassionate God. The paradigmatic role the story of the Good Samaritan played in Christian spirituality and ethics shows the pivotal role of compassion throughout its history. In Early Christianity the renowned, unselfish care for the poor and destitute organized by churches, moved Julian, Roman emperor from 355 – 363, to the jealous exclamation: “Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as their charity to strangers...the impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours as well.”

The question at the heart of this book that has brought colleagues, who have over the years have become friends, from two universities on two different continents together is the following: Do the religious teachings, the Biblical stories and Christian traditions of compassion still provide us with the sources of moral imagination needed to guide us into the global era? Jonathan Sacks holds that the “central insight of monotheism – that if God is the parent of humanity, then we are all members of a single extended family – has become real in its implications than ever before.” Sacks suggests that Enlightenment concept of universal rights remains a “thin” morality, when it is not fueled with moral imagination. Here the Biblical idea that “those in need are our brothers and sisters and that poverty is something we feel in our bones” is far more powerful. “The great faiths do more than give us abstract expression to our shared humanity; they move us to action and give

¹² <http://what-when-how.com/love-in-world-religions/compassion-in-judaism/>

compelling shape to the claims of others upon us.”¹³ In order to adjust this rather bold assertion, this book critically investigates the Christian legacy. *Can the Christian practice of faith really contribute to a more compassionate world, and how?*

Once we started talking and reflecting and writing, an even more critical question arose and that is whether compassion is really the answer? *Is it true that more compassion is what we need for upholding human dignity in a global world?*

During two stimulating consultations respectively held in Stellenbosch, South Africa and Groningen, Netherlands,¹⁴ colleagues from different theological disciplines reflected on the question of compassion from a variety of angles.

To our mind, a hermeneutics of compassion is an integral element of Christian ethics. Retrieving the meaning of compassion transcends the question of how to define it. Aristotle defined compassion as: “a painful emotion directed at another person’s misfortune or suffering.”¹⁵ Compassion is sorrow *for* and *with* the other, or as Augustine puts it in one place, “on behalf of” the other. But meanings never exist in the abstract, but are embedded in shifting contexts and practices. Other words and concepts are closely related or used sometimes synonymous with compassion, like mercy, pity, neighbour love, *medeleven* (Dutch), *mede-lewe* (Afrikaans), Mitleid, empathy, fellow feeling. The linguistic distinctions made or the affinities uncovered, often do reflect a normative agenda.

The least one can say, however, is that *com-passio* always entails a fellow-feeling: one human being shares the suffering of another and has the desire to alleviate it. But how to understand this phenomenon? Does it belong to our human – or primate – nature and is our brain evolutionary “wired” to be compassionate? Then the question how to expand our human circle of our concern, and how far it can be stretched in the context of global humanity

¹³ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference. How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, London/New York: Continuum 2002, 112.

¹⁴ Held on 6 and 7 May 2015 in Stellenbosch, South Africa; 19 and 20 May, 2016 in Groningen, The Netherlands.

¹⁵ Quoted by Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 306.

becomes of primordial importance, as the work of Nussbaum but also of the Daila Lama shows.

In the first section of this collection of essays, “Rethinking Compassion,” Dion Forster shows in his contribution how contemporary cognitive neuroscience invites to take a naturalistic view on compassion as a common moral emotion, given with human nature. “From the perspective of cognitive neuroscience empathy is that ability within the human person to identify, understand and partially feel or experience the suffering of another person. (...) Empathy, and ultimately compassion, are thus neurological states that can be identified in the brain activity of the individual who witnesses the suffering of the other. These neurological states are coupled with associated behaviours.” Nevertheless, a distinction has to be made between empathy and compassion. While empathy involves the feeling of co-suffering, compassion takes a further step, it moves from experience to action. The capacity for understanding the emotion of another may be hardwired into the brain, as it is activated by shared experience of the pain of another, or by observing their pain. But the decision to act on the pain of the other, however, is, Forster concludes, a cognitive process and implies a voluntary choice. Therefore he embeds his naturalistic understanding of compassion theologically within the framework of a Christian humanism.

That the compassionate act in favour of another’s distress is a conscious affair, is questioned on his turn by Frits de Lange, who takes the perspective of contemporary phenomenology as a starting point for his reflection. He interprets compassion as a contingent event, a phenomenon not a self-evident part of our biological make up, nor in cognitive faculties. We do not consciously decide to become compassionate. As the parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates, compassion is a power that transcends and overcomes us. It starts in our belly, as a kind of gut-feeling¹⁶, rather than in our head. “In the decision to stay and not to flee, a decision often taken pre-reflexively with the body, the “we” of common suffering transforms itself into a responsible I taking care of a unique, irreplaceable Thou. “Me voici”,

¹⁶ The verb used in Luke 10: 33 “...he took pity on him”, *splagchnizomai*, can also be translated as: to be moved in the inward parts.” Cf. Annettye Merz’ contribution in this volume.

“here I am” is the place of birth of the ethical self. “It’s you, and no one else, who should stay with me”, the call summons. Suffering binds us together in a primordial commonality, but suffering also individualizes, in making our presence irreplaceable.”

A non-naturalistic view on compassion is also defended by Pieter Vos, who argues that compassion should not be seen as a, morally indifferent, emotion shared by indistinctively every human being, but as a virtue of love, to be developed and cultivated in concrete educational practices. Compassion as a natural thing should sometimes even be mistrusted. Imaginative empathy, as Nussbaum writes, can also be deployed by sadists. Therefore, as she stipulates normatively, “the type of imaginative engagement society needs (...) is nourished by love.”¹⁷ Vos agrees with Nussbaum in that respect, but in order to overcome Nietzsche’s argument that compassion is rooted in resentment and egoism, he relates compassion out of love first to the joy in another’s well-being. “Not sadness about unfortunate circumstances as such is the driving force of compassion, but love and joy that unite us with our fellow people.”

When compassion is understood within the framework of neighbor love, it becomes a matter of freedom. The hermeneutics of compassion, though informed by the natural sciences, enters the realm of ethics. Compassion is a good thing, but after a moral evaluation not all kinds of compassion are judged as good. From a Christian, ethical point of view, compassion needs to be other-regarding, not solely an expansion of self-love. It should be directed at the concrete alleviation of the other’s suffering, not to the raise of someone’s self-esteem and feelings of moral superiority.

A distinction should be made between good and bad, weak and strong, false and genuine compassion. St. Augustine was the first to make it in theology. He spoke of malevolent compassion, *malivola benevolentia*, remembering himself watching the suffering of actors in the Roman theaters, wallowing in his own tears. The audience of stage-plays enjoys its own pity, though it is aware that it is only put *en scene*.¹⁸ However, Augustine would

¹⁷ Nussbaum, *Public emotions*, 380.

¹⁸ Housset, *L’Intelligence de la pitié*, 24, referring to Augustine, *Confessiones*, III,3.

not agree with Nietzsche's radical disqualification of all compassion as self-indulgent *Mitleid*. He speaks of a "truer mercy", caused by the suffering hardship of others, but without any pleasure or delight. At the contrary, true compassion is, as the fulfilment of the commandment of neighbour love, directed to eliminate the suffering of the other. (Confessions, III.2.2/3) Apparently, compassion needs the discourse of obligation and love as a command in order to be "good".

In the second section, "Retrieving compassion," contributors further delve deeper into the question of the complex nature of compassion in the church's religious traditions. Renée van Riessen questions how contemporary authors Karen Armstrong, Martha Nussbaum and Roman Krznaric present compassion as a natural and politically useful inclination, and *therefore* as good, in an ethical sense. The current philosophical rehabilitation of compassion as a moral emotion after Enlightenment rationalism occludes what is really happening between persons, when they become each other near in suffering. She refers especially to Emmanuel Levinas, who points to the radical strangeness of the other, also and in particular in proximity, in which the taking of responsibility is rooted.

"Being connected to responsibility, the phenomenon of nearness or proximity is not necessarily connected to *Einführung* or empathy. On the contrary: experiencing responsibility or ethical engagement *precedes* empathy. It has its origins rather in a shared vulnerability, a being exposed, as beings of flesh and blood, to the same condition." Alain Badiou's critique on Levinas touches the heart of the matter: is what compassion means only understandable with the help of Greek philosophical sources, or do we have to listen – with Levinas – to biblical, prophetic sources from Judaism? In the discussion of compassion a distinction becomes visible between 'an ethics of the other that cannot but refer to religion as its last horizon of meaning (as Levinas does), and a more general ethics of otherness that stays within the human and therefore *refuses* such reference to the religious.'

As a biblical scholar, Annette Merz takes up that challenge as she focusses in her contribution on the New Testament narratives about the compassionate Jesus against the background of hellenistic Judaism and classical Greek thought. Especially in the gospel of Mark, an explicit

connection between the narratives about Jesus' compassion in his public presence and the coming of the Kingdom of God is made. 'The Kingdom of God becomes present everywhere people experience the nearness of God in Jesus' address, healing and rich table community. In his preaching, healings and invitations to share table with him, Jesus is driven by compassion', as Merz summarizes her findings. Characteristic for Jesus' compassionate practice is its aim to create new kinds of community or to restore damaged relationships with the socially excluded. In the gospels of Luke and Matthew this aspect of Jesus' eschatological mission is even more emphasized. Jesus' programmatic solidarity with the weak can be characterized 'as a subversive political strategy: compassion as an antidote against the common divide et impera.'

Len Hansen explores the etymological background of the concept of compassion in the iconography and theology of the late European Middle Ages. For the term compassion itself originates in that context. The neologism *com-passio* was coined in order to express how Christian believers, in their affective spirituality, shared the suffering of Christ. Medieval art served as a vehicle for expressing but also teaching this compassion. Hansen writes that the depictions and descriptions of the violence which Christ had to endure "were clearly understood as being formative for spiritual growth and moral education. One of the primary emotions to evoke was compassion. On the one hand, it was to evoke compassion *with* the suffering Christ. However, on the other hand, it was to intensify the consciousness *of* the extent of the compassion of the crucified Christ with sinful humanity that was to be experienced, but also to be imitated." As far as the sharing of Christ's compassion for the sick and the poor, no greater example for the medieval believer than Francis of Assisi's embrace of the leper.

But does the sophisticated disentangling of all kind of compassion in the end lead us anywhere? Is it not a misnomer that compassion is the solution for all of our global woes? Do we really need more compassion for enhancing a global culture of human dignity? The lingering questions in this regard were quite evident in the fact that some of the scholars involved in the

two-year research project on “Compassion” suggested that we add a question mark. The complexities of “Enacting Compassion” is evident in the third section of the book when three contributions in this volume centred on the concrete enactment of compassion show that compassion as such may not be enough of a foundation on which to build a global ethic. Three case studies from our respective countries of South Africa and the Netherlands are presented: an analysis of the political struggle against apartheid in South-Africa (Smit); then, after 1994, the development of a democratic society striving for social justice and equality (Bowers-Du Toit), finally the way the Protestant Church in the Netherlands is committed in its diaconate to overcome poverty and social exclusion (Noordegraaf). These practical manifestations of compassion (or at least the lack thereof) show the pitfalls of building morality solely on mercy and moral emotions.

As Dirkie Smit writes in his contribution on political theology in this volume, it is one thing to agree with sociologist Zygmunt Bauman that law alone is not sufficient to help us face the challenges of globalisation, and that we need compassion, but “to understand what that compassion would and could entail, to imagine the necessary practical implementation, and to find the necessary motivation” is another. He reminds of how during the years of the struggle against apartheid, especially Reformed church leaders and theologians raised scepticism against an exclusive focus on compassion as the essential Christian attitude towards oppression. “For many the struggle was not primarily one of morality, ethics, love and compassion, in fact, ideals of reconciliation and forgiveness were often seen as personal virtues focused on inter-personal relationships only and therefore regarded with deep scepticism and even rejected out of hand, for example in the case of the influential *Kairos Document*, but the struggle was rather about questions of structure and power, of law and justice. Love was to be seen in law, compassion had to show the face of justice.” Informed by Calvin’s theology of law, they proposed an alternative reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The spontaneous and self-sacrificing act with which the Samaritan cared for one victim in the ditch, abandoned all the others on this dangerous road to their fate. He would have acted more responsibly if he had approached the local government, influenced public opinion, if necessary

organised protest and public support? “Would the better response not have been to employ and strengthen a police force, secure the lonely road, build hospitals to care for victims, raise taxes to help fund all these public services, create jobs for the poor, curb unemployment, improve education, better integrate the robbers into community life and society?” Compassion is not enough; it can make things even make worse, covering up systemic injustice.

Even in post-apartheid South Africa, as Nadine Bowers -Du Toit then points out in her contribution, compassion continues to have a dubious reputation. “For many years (and still to a large degree today), it is in the mode of compassionate acts of charity that the church in South Africa has largely been operating in response to the challenges of poverty and inequality. However well-meaning this response may be, it is widely recognized that welfare projects which merely attend to the symptoms rather than the root causes of poverty do not and cannot address the nature of systemic disadvantage. (...) Compassionate relief is, therefore, not sufficient to engage the complex nature of poverty and inequality and brings into sharp relief the issue of power (and its intersectionality with race and class) in an unequal and radicalized society.” As the South African participants of our two consultations admitted, most of their colleagues in the ministry don’t like to preach on Sunday about the Good Samaritan in their congregations, because of the colonial burden its exegesis carries with it. The image of white church ladies visiting poor black children on Sunday afternoon kept looming during our sessions on compassion, even though the work of Martha Nussbaum and others confirm the already deep-rooted conviction, already expressed by John Calvin and elaborated by Dirkie Smit in his contribution on political theology, that a just law needs to be acted out in love. Justice then is what we need, more than compassion!

This seems certainly the case at the Southern hemisphere, where most of the people face extreme inequality. But it also applies in more affluent countries in the North, where a neo-liberal social order has increasing poverty and social exclusion as its consequence. Herman Noordegraaf points out in his contribution that the diaconal role of the churches in this context includes both: assisting persons in need, and participating in the public debate by raising awareness for social needs and injustice in the churches and society at large. During centuries, he writes, “the word justice was not used in church

orders, only mercy was taken up as a keyword for the diaconate. It was in the then new church order of the Netherlands Reformed Church of 1951 that the concept of justice was used for the first time, referring to the task of the church to remember, if needed, the government and society to practice according to their calling.”

This became clear to our mind during our last consultation in May 2016 in the Netherlands, when the country was faced with thousands of refugees fleeing the civil war in Syria for a safe haven in Europe. Dutch churches are actively involved in the reception of and care for refugees driven out of their countries. We invited some young refugees into our conference, to share their stories with us. We experienced a valuable moment of mutual understanding and recognition for the distress they, their families and their country, went through. But the encounter also induced a feeling of uneasiness: shouldn't Churches first and for all raise political protest against the dictatorial regimes that may at the origin of these massive migrations? We were reminded again of the word of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that the Church should not only “bandage the victims under the wheel, but to jam a spoke into the wheel itself.”¹⁹ The question mark behind compassion (?) kept intriguing this project until the end, making the participants aware that, in their plea for cultivating and enacting compassion, they should be well aware of not falling down three traps in which fellow feeling with suffering others can result.

Genuine compassion should not be *sentimentalized*. Though it does not go without emotions, it does not depend on them. Victims of injustice are not always touching or moving, they can leave us indifferent because they are too many, or even can raise disgust. This is why the Bible presents neighbor love as a command, an inescapable obligation even when we don't have any warm feelings for our neighbor.

The second trap is *paternalism*, exemplified in many representations of the Good Samaritan, bowing himself from above over the victim. Genuine compassion does not regard the other as an object of benevolence, does not

¹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question” (1933), in: Geoffrey B. Kelly & F. Burton Nelson, *Testament to Freedom. The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Revised Edition. New York: HarperSanFrancisco 1995, 130 – 133, 132.

expect gratitude of the one being cared for. This is why compassion needs justice as equal treatment.

The third pitfall for compassion is *arbitrariness*. Of course, we are attached to our friends, attracted by our partner, and have invested ourselves in our family. Our moral emotions have preferences for people we like in our close neighborhood. The test of genuine compassion therefore is whether it can be expanded to strangers and – in the radicalization Jesus proposed - even to our enemies. Justice needs warm compassion in order to be loving; but compassion needs cold justice as well in order to be good for all.

However, despite all the complexities and the concerns regarding the act of defining and especially enacting compassion, some of us still believe in the importance of at least trying to foster a greater sense of compassion in individuals and in groups.

Guided by these caveats the fourth section of this volume called “Cultivating compassion” opens ample space for exemplary practices of compassion. As Nussbaum points out, circles of concern can be expanded by reading, telling and playing out stories in which compassion is dramatically enacted. How Biblical narratives and spiritual works of art by which the spirituality, the teachings and the liturgy of Christian communities is informed and fecundated, can contribute to the cultivation of compassion is shown by Mirella Klomp, Juliana Claassens and Charlene van der Walt in their contributions.

As an Old Testament scholar, Juliana Claassens, believes that “biblical texts are wonderful tools for forging what Nussbaum calls participatory imagination. Biblical stories, and perhaps specifically the tragic ones, possess the ability to draw the reader in, creating the space for conversation about what is good and what is right. In this encounter between text and context, the individual is bound to look anew not only at the narrative world created in the text, but also at the world in which the reader finds him/herself.” The story told in 1 Samuel 25 about Abigail’s hospitality to David, after her husband Nabal refused to feed him and his 400 men, exemplifies what she means. In a close reading of the story in the context of the violent rivalry between Saul and David, Claassens shows how the gracious act of Abigail not only breaks the circle of violence and revenge

between David and Nabal, but also seems to have a transformative effect on the rivalry between David and Saul. The story raises important questions for readers many centuries later: “Can we respond to the history of others with gentleness? Can we receive their life story into our imagination? May we actively seek to cultivate perceptions and capacities of mercy so that we may live and live well?”

Charlene van der Walt proposes a parallel reading of the Biblical narrative of the prophet Jeremiah and the 2013 film of Terrance Malick, “To the Wonder.” According to Van der Walt, “the world of these connected narratives becomes a safe space for readers to confront complex and painful life realities. In the encounter with those who are isolated within the narrative, interpreters may find a space to dare to reflect on their own experience of isolation.” Compassion shows itself in these narratives only in a negative mode as vulnerability, isolation, the absence of community, a suffering God, expressed in acts of prophetic lament.

As noticed earlier, the very concept of compassion originates in medieval theology and spirituality, where the performance of the passion of Christ served as a model and mirror for the Christian believer (cf. Len Hansen’s contribution). In the Netherlands, the yearly performance of J.S. Bach *Passions* in the time before Easter echoes this practice, though in a thoroughly secularized context. In her contribution, Mirella Klomp analyses her own ambivalent experience of attending a contemporary passion play, *Passio-Compassio*, a piece, created in 2010 which draws from Johann Sebastian Bach, Oriental Early Christian Songs as well as Turkish Sufi Songs (i.e. expressions of Islamic mysticism). In a personal theological reflection she asks how to evaluate the move contemporary artistic expressions of compassion are making, when they turn the Christian passion into a passion that transcends Christianity. Her reflection reads like an existential learning process, a trajectory all Christian theologians have to go through, opening themselves up for the global experience of the many and the manifold, building bridges, crossing borders. “Compassion I now take as the act of connecting with the suffering other—and in that, by that and through that with the love of the suffering Other—reaching out and allowing or even

welcoming her/him with their pain into one' s own life.” Compassion is not a word with a fixed meaning, but a praxis of discovery.

Perhaps this final sentence is an “answer” to the unresolved question of why and how of compassion in our world that by the day seems to be in more desperate need of kindness, gentleness, graciousness, empathy and yes compassion. Ultimately it is in every and each exceedingly complex and messy situation where humans are suffering great need and also injustice up to ordinary men and women to decide, or perhaps even in stronger terms, compelled to act in terms of genuine compassion.