



**Pulling Us Back From The Brink –
Economics? Science? Religion?**

Crisis, Conflict, Creativity and Compassion

Dr. Val Webb



Dr. Val Webb is an Australian theologian who has taught religious studies at universities in the United States and Australia. She has written nine books, including *In Defence of Doubt: an Invitation to Adventure* (Chalice Press, USA), *Florence Nightingale: the making of a radical theologian* (Chalice), *Like Catching Water in a Net: human attempts to describe the Divine* (Continuum New York & London, winner of general religion category of USA Best Books 2007 Awards). and *Stepping out with the Sacred: human attempts to engage the Divine* (Continuum 2010). Her website is www.val.webb.com.au.

As the person assigned to suggesting how *religion* can or cannot pull us back from the brink, it is not at all strange that I begin with a parable.

Once upon a time, the gods gave a stream to the people, telling them that, if they drank, they would find peace and happiness. The people drank, then gathered to share their experiences. They told the next village and others came to drink. The community grew. Some were appointed to build steps down to the stream, help with foot traffic and roster peoples' time at the stream. One man took charge (for the good of the whole, of course) and gathered a group around him to study why people felt good after drinking, how the water came to be there and what was the best way to drink. Only the chosen could be in this discussion -- and no women, for some reason. The group soon argued about *true* meanings and formed different camps. The dominant camp pooh-poohed all other stories and began to regulate who was eligible to drink, according to correct belief and purity of heart and body. They also declared that they could drink on behalf of those *not* eligible. Trouble brewed between strict letter-of-the-lawyers and pragmatic compassionates, the former regularly blocking the steps against the latter, often with violence. Of course, claims from passing travellers of similar streams in *other* places were dismissed as false or inferior. After a long time, the old people began to talk, out of earshot of leaders, about when the gods first gave them the stream. Some even looked into a dusty file in the archives recording the event. They discovered, to their surprise, that, in the beginning, *everyone* could drink freely and equally by divine order and that the rules and explanations constructed over time were not in the file. They challenged the leaders -- to no avail or with limited concessions granted. Some simply trudged further upstream where the banks were not patrolled and knelt to drink together, passing cups of water to the too young or too old. Downstream, their relatives continued to take turns on the steps and obey the rules. Thus ends the parable.

Which part of this parable is *religion*? Is it the encounter with the Gods, drinking together at the stream, sharing experiences, the administrative institution, the ordained ones, the rules and doctrines,



or serving water to those in need? We use the term "religion" as if there is some homogenous shape that allows for general statements. It is like making general statements about science, as if treating an aggressive melanoma is the same as designing nuclear warheads or remote-controlled landmines. Religion has been called both the root of all evil and the ground of all hope and goodness. Believers have been labelled delusional and enlightened. God has been declared the Universal One and a fantasy. Religion has fuelled explosive conflicts in the world, been a creative force for change, and the heart of compassion for a hurting world. In order to speak, therefore, about the role of religion in pulling us back from the brink, we need to either identify some commonality across religions that might achieve such a feat, or else deal with specific aspects of different religions that hold potential for transformation.

Those who know my writing will be aware that I return again and again to human beings in religions, rather than competing belief systems. Human beings share desires, hopes, tragedies and fears. Despite all the grandeur, complexity and imagination of religious beliefs and their supernatural claims and moments of revelation, they all began, and continue on, because human beings have wondered about meaning and their place in the universe. Wonder, both as breathtaking awe before mystery and wondering *about* that mystery, is the source of all art, philosophy, science, and religion. Albert Einstein famously said:

To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself to us as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms -- this knowledge, this feeling is at the centre of all true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of devoutly religious men. ⁱ

We have not been good at focussing on our humanity when it comes to religion, unless it has been to denigrate it as sinful and depraved. We have striven instead to become *spiritual* beings, to shift from *our* plane of reality into another sphere, the sphere of the Gods, creating that great duality of sacred and secular, human and Divine. The goal has been to leave our humanness behind for something better, whether a place in heaven, Enlightenment, or absorbed into oblivion in the Divine. Yet we are, first and foremost, earth-beings, part of the natural world. As Sir Lloyd Geering wrote in his book *Coming Back to Earth: from gods, to God, to Gaia*:

- **We came from the earth**
- **We remain creatures of the earth**
- **The hope of our species for a viable future depends on our mystical re-union with the earth** ⁱⁱ

There are different ways of being in the world – seeing it as a landscape or a maze. ⁱⁱⁱ We can stand on a hill as spectators, looking at the panorama as artists capture a scene on canvas, controlling our involvement with it. Or we can experience the world as a maze with us in the middle of it. We no longer select our view of the world, but are part of this multidimensional experience and organized by



it -- one of its many details scurrying around to find our way. And we are not the centre of this maze. Each tree is the centre of its own universe, drawing nutrient from earth and absorbing carbon dioxide, regardless of our presence. The bushes around me hide a myriad of animals, organizing their own world and sharing my oxygen. There are people I will never meet, yet their activities impact mine, changing my life while unaware of me. I am irrevocably part of this maze, like everything else on the planet -- and perhaps God.

When people search for Something More, the question surfaces -- what do humans *want*? One does not search without having something for which one is searching, and this differs according to human personalities, cultural mores, history and circumstances. In a Peanuts cartoon, Lucy and Charlie Brown are engaged in a deep conversation about the meaning of life. The ever-wise Lucy says, "Life is like a deckchair. Some people place it so they can easily see where they are going. Some people place it so they can see where they have been. And some people place it so they can see where they are now." Charlie Brown thinks for a while and then replies, "I can't even get mine unfolded." This cartoon reflects Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs -- we need basic physical things such food, clothing, housing, safety, love and a sense of belonging before we can concentrate on esteem, self-actualization and self-transcendence. Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay, in his latest book *What makes us Tick*, lists ten desires common to human beings -- the desire to be taken seriously; the desire for 'my place;' the desire for something to believe in; the desire to connect; the desire to be useful; the desire to belong; the desire for more; the desire for something to happen; and the desire for love. When "what do humans want" becomes as *religious* question, however, the focus is on what is *wrong* with humanity, to which different religions offer solutions, whether forgiveness of sins and reunion with God in the Abrahamic tradition; the discovery of the essentially real or our true nature in Asian religions like Buddhism and Hinduism; or the restoration of harmony and natural balance within self, family, nature and society in the Chinese traditions of Confucianism and Taoism.

Rather than dealing with Divine revelations and truth claims, therefore, to bring us back from the brink, is there a commonality amongst *human beings* who espouse religions that might be important? We would find many, but there is one thing that founders of faith traditions across the world stumbled on as the key to life, peace and well-being -- *compassion* -- or, in the words of the Golden Rule, "do to others as you would like them to do to you." In a religious column in our small-town newspaper, the Presbyterian pastor, noting Richard Dawkins' tour around Australia, assured readers that Dawkins' claims about the terrible things done by religion was simply not true. By contrast, he linked holocausts by Hitler, Pol Pot and Idi Amin to *atheistic* thought. "As *Christians*," he said, "We believe that all people are made in the image of God ... and this is why we should respect and esteem one another Remove this *Christian* principle and all sorts of philosophies emerge which proclaim the supremacy of one group of humans over another." ^{iv} This common assumption that the Golden Rule is of *Christian* revelation and origin simply shows isolation and ignorance -- Christianity was the late-comer. Let me quote from the ancient wisdom of Sumatra, "Let all your undertakings be pleasing to you, as well as others. If that is not possible, at least do not harm anyone." ^v From Zoroastrianism,



“That nature alone is good, which refrains from doing unto another whatsoever is not good for itself.”^{vi} From a Hindu Vedic text, “This is the sum of duty. Do nothing unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.”^{vii} From Confucius, “What one does not wish for oneself, one ought not to do to anyone else; what one recognizes as desirable for oneself, one ought to be willing to grant to others.”^{viii} From Plato, “May I do to others as I would that they should do to me.”^{ix} From the Jewish Talmud, “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow human being: this is the whole Torah: while the rest is the commentary thereof . . .”^x From Buddhism, “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”^{xi} When we hear these – and there are more -- the words ascribed to Jesus in Matthew, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” seem strangely less unique. Jesus acknowledged this, adding that this “sums up all of the Law and of the prophets.”^{xii} And compassion is not restricted to *religious* people -- we can think of people who have reflected compassion in their lives without espousing any religious faith. Human beings have recognized the centrality of compassion and some have codified it within their various religious traditions. According to the Dalai Lama, “Religion is a kind of luxury. If you have religion, that is good. But it is clear than even without religion we can manage. However, without these basic human qualities, [compassion for the earth and all beings], we cannot survive.”^{xiii}

Suggesting that compassion can bring us back from the brink might sound awfully airy-fairy and feel-good rather than practical, given the crises and conflicts around the globe and the uncertainties close to home, but we can talk endlessly about political and religious causes for conflict and weigh up different solutions in the media from our armchairs, without ever moving to a heart response that makes us get up and do something in our small sphere of influence. If we think compassion-talk is light-weight, we have not scratched the first shallow depths of the word. Compassion does not mean feeling sorry for someone, or having pity, or decrying violence on our TV screens. The root meaning of compassion is “to suffer with” or the “endure something with another.” Anyone who has sat with their child as they struggled for their last breath, or carried a mutilated body from a marketplace after a terrorist bomb, or seen the despair on an African mother's face as her baby frantically sucks an empty breast, knows that compassion surges up from within in response to such injustice and pain. Compassion is also the intentional act, the Golden Rule says, of identifying what gives pain to ourselves so as to refuse to impose such pain on another. In the history of religions, there have been moments of tremendous compassion and unimaginable cruelty, and all points in between. “We can either emphasize those aspects of our traditions, religious or secular, that speak of hatred, exclusion, and suspicion,” religion scholar Karen Armstrong says, “or work with those that stress the interdependence and equality of all human beings. The choice is ours.”^{xiv}

In 2007, Karen Armstrong won a TED award (Technology, Entertainment, Design), given to people who have made a difference and will do even greater things for a better world with this money. Armstrong's hope is for a global community where all people live together in mutual respect. While religions should be in the forefront of this, many focus instead on secondary issues such as sexual practices and obtuse doctrinal definitions as the criteria for faith. Global conflicts that are basically



fuelled by greed, power, hatred, envy and ambition have become *holy* wars defending a kind of God perfectly capable of self-defence and spawning terrorist attacks or hate crimes against those whose beliefs or lifestyles are deemed wrong. Armstrong has initiated the Charter for Compassion written by leaders across religions, calling for a restoration of compassion, the Golden Rule, to the *heart* of religions to counter voices of extremism, intolerance and hatred.^{xv} The Charter says:

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 ... 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.^{xvi}

When compassion is spelled out in these terms, no one has to point out how we have failed miserably as individuals, nations and global citizens. Yet the goals sounds impractical, impossible and perhaps inadvisable to many who also interpret Jesus' "turn the other cheek" nonsense as metaphorical exaggeration. There is too much self-interest and self-preservation required in our world to take such words seriously. Yet when we think of examples of goodness and nobility in our world, we name the Mother Teresa's, the Florence Nightingale's, the Gandhi's and the Martin Luther King's rather than CEO's, sports heroes and politicians -- people who took their compassion for the oppressed and outcast seriously enough to fight for their dignity against all odds.

The Charter of Compassion reads:

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**^{xvii}

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world [the Charter says]. 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. ^{xviii}

Over 76,000 have added their names to this Charter, translated into thirty languages. But adding a name is not all. On the Charter website, people are asked to post a specific commitment to an act of compassion in their area.

So how does compassion manifest itself in action? The Charter calls for *respect* for each other, the central human desire also argued by Mackay. Respect means to take others seriously, not overlooking or belittling them. I remember a mentally challenged teenager in a Youth Group I once coordinated in another country, who was avoided by others in the group. She found me twenty years later when I was visiting her country to tell me how important it had been to her that I always talked with her -- it gave her hope to keep on. On a much larger scale, the apology by then Prime Minister Rudd to Australia's indigenous people and apologies from the Catholic Church for sexual abuse of men, women and children by priests, while not ignoring the physical trauma, eased the psychological trauma by recognizing the worth, rights and personhood of the victims. As Mackay points out, minorities thrive and grow stronger on persecution because it indicates that at least they are being taken seriously. ^{xix} The history of colonization, rationalized as "for the others' good," whether the taking of lands or extinguishing religious traditions, stands as a prime example of lack of respect for the other. Respect withheld, however, to an individual, group or nation, can lead to violence, as we have seen when nations refuse to listen to the perspectives of another, or refuse to consider how their own actions might impoverish or disempower others. A recent Australian TV program on immigration pointed out that, at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference after the First World War, opposition from Britain and Australia to include Japan's racial equality proposal in the Covenant of the League of Nations influenced Japan's rejection of the West and move to more nationalistic politics that led to the atrocities in World War II. People denied respect can also repeat the cycle by failing to respect those who come after them; and oppressed nations become oppressors. The Puritans left England for religious freedom, but killed Quakers on the Boston Common in America, refusing to give *them* religious freedom.

Compassion is about true listening. That someone cares enough to listen means that someone cares about what I think. Not really listening or feeling with the other, the core of compassion, means we do not hear what they are saying behind the words that serve as a front, and also signals that the other is not worth listening to. Good dialogue means listening, not for an opening to argue, teach or correct, but with genuine hunger to learn from an equal. When we *do* talk, compassion does not condemn, judge or manipulate the conversation, but invites further revelations. I will never forget sitting on a mountain in central India with a Hindu friend. I said to him, "Just talk to me about God while I listen." As he talked of his experiences as a human being in search of God, I could feel with everything he said. Our views might be couched in different language and conceptual forms, but our struggles as human beings were similar and we learn techniques for survival and flourishing from



other human beings. We are not really listening if we listen through the filter of our particular beliefs and agenda. What if compassionate listening had been in play when children reported sexual abuse by relatives, family friends or the revered parish priest? Instead, they were ignored or punished. What if unfiltered listening had been done about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq? According to Mackay:

Listening is a form of therapy we can all offer each other, if we choose to. In fact, if I had to identify one way to make the world a better place, I'd say: Listen more attentively and sympathetically to each other. ^{xx}

Compassionate listening leads into compassionate speaking. No doubt in this country your political parties speak to each other with respect, but in Australia at present, the insults and attacks being flung around Parliament House beggars belief, regardless of which side you are on. Things are said purely to defeat or discredit the other, rather than engage in any sort of empathetic dialogue or, heaven preserve us, the changing of one's mind by attentive listening or learning. When someone said something mean to us as children, we chanted one of the earliest lies taught to us, "Sticks and stones may break by bones but words will never hurt me." Of *course* words hurt and some people carry those hurts of early verbal abuse far into adulthood. Do to others what you would have them do to you means speaking to others as you would have others speak to you. Bullying has blossomed today with the ability, on Internet and Face book, to trash other people without the deterrent of eye contact or physical presence, leading in some tragic cases to suicide. As for today's media, we are shaped by sound-bites and shock journalism that incite controversy, rather than nuanced arguments and fair presentation of issues. My son-in-law is an executive for the newspaper of an Australian city noted for religious conservatism in its church leaders, Anglican and Catholic. Whenever a religious issue comes up, one or other is asked to respond. I have pleaded with him for more moderate and balanced religious voices, but he says with a shrug, "Controversy, not moderation, sells papers." I have been angered to learn from Muslim academic colleagues that their articles submitted to major newspapers on Australian Muslims are not published and, when phoned for a comment about an issue, they are ignored in preference to a Muslim who will make provocative or exclusivist claims. The fear of the other is thus cultivated, playing on deep currents within us, whether we admit it or not -- that fear of difference that someone or something might "take over," whether religious, social, ideological or physical. It's all very well to say, "I embrace people of all faiths and cultures and countries without reserve," but even as we say it, submerged prejudices percolate rebelliously up in us however hard we try to squelch them. On the positive side, my local high school hosted the Government supported *Together for Humanity* Foundation. Three very articulate and fun people from different religions helped students, through discussion and game-playing, to confront their stereotypes and fears about people from different religions. They then invited students to ask questions about these religions, handling the questions in an easy, non-defensive way. Few students would have left the hall still clinging to their stereotypes.

Compassion to the religious "other" means opening ourselves to them to feel deeply with them, not to convert them, but to learn from them. As the new Atheists claim, so much conflict and tragedy in the



world has been caused by people defending their God and their truth. Yet, as a famous theologian once said, “To know only one religion is to know none.” It’s like saying oranges are my favourite fruit when I haven’t tasted any other. This has been the stance of exclusivist faith traditions for centuries, important enough to erect fences, conduct heresy trials, murder unbelievers or pronounce all other religions false. Exclusivist attitudes were passed on with breast-milk and embellished with Sunday School stories of missionaries going to “dark” places to bring “light” to “pagan” children. Only in the 20th century did “other religions” arrive in sufficient numbers on Australian soil to initiate any dialogue beyond Catholic versus Protestant. Fortunately today, Exclusivist attitudes of “Jesus as the only way, truth and life” (John 14: 6) are giving way to inclusivist attitudes of seeing some truth in other religions and to pluralist ideas that different religions are many paths to the Divine. This has allowed us a freedom to show interest in what people from different religions -- our school teachers, doctors, workmates and friends -- actually think. Interfaith dialogue has also become important because of religion’s overt or hidden role in political debate and global conflict. Whether we like it or not, politicians make decisions about ethical and moral issues with considerable pressure from religious lobby groups, whether it be stem cell research, regulations surrounding abortion, funding for religious-based social services, or legislation for same sex couples.

And what of violence, war and conflict? Despite the Golden Rule's centrality for religious traditions, it has rarely been painted on the Divine Warrior's standard carried into battle against the enemy. Yahweh did not shrink from violence and destruction, destroying “by the edge of the sword,” the Bible says, “all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and donkeys” (Joshua 6: 21). Such imagery has justified violence in God's name down the centuries and created a culture of violence around the name of God, as if this is the norm. We grew up marching in God’s army, singing “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus, going on before.” Some Christians dismiss the violence in the Hebrew Bible by contrasting it with a loving New Testament God, yet the traditional Christian explanation of Jesus’ death features a loving Father affronted by disobedient human beings and demanding the cruel, demeaning death of an innocent Son to satisfy this affront. The Divine warrior is not unique to the Abrahamic traditions. The Hindu *Bhagavad-Gita* features warrior Arjuna shrinking from war against family and friends. “What is this crime I am planning?” he asks Divine Krishna. “Murder most hateful, murder of brothers! Am I indeed so greedy for greatness?”^{xxi} Lord Krishna dismisses Arjuna’s hesitancy as mere “scruples and fancies, weakness and cowardice,” since death is a given and all will be reborn.

There was a Hebrew dream of a day when this culture of violence would come to an end and compassion would reign. Micah talked of nations beating swords into ploughshares" (4: 1 - 3) and Jesus extended the command against killing to not being *angry* with each another, (Matt. 5: 22) turn the other cheek and pray for your enemies (Matt. 5: 9). Prior to the Fourth Century, many church fathers were pacifists, even refusing to serve in the Roman army. However, once the warrior emperor Constantine became head of the church, pacifism was marginalized. Yet peace is what we ask for every Christmas and we seem quite unperturbed that our prayers are never answered. The Hebrew word translated as peace, *shalom*, meant more than the absence of war -- it meant comprehensive



well-being, wholeness, completeness and harmonious relationships with yourself, within yourself, with others, with God. The Biblical vision of peace is the wolf living with the lamb, the cow with the bear and the toddler playing with the adder (Isa. 11: 6 - 9). By extension, an Israeli soldier will embrace a Palestinian freedom fighter and a fundamentalist Christian will listen to another's truth claim. Powerful nations will lay down their nuclear arms, as they command others to do. The Qur'an says, "It may be that Allah will ordain love between you and those of them with whom ye are at enmity. Allah is Mighty, and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (Surah 60: 7).

Yet "the rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug," Chris Hedges, a journalist who has covered many wars, says. Its addictive qualities include excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above one's small station in life and a bizarre, fantastic universe it creates with grotesque and dark beauty. War "dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language and infects everything around it." It "exposes the capacity for evil that lurks not far below the surface within all of us" by empowering tendencies towards racism and murder with an ideological veneer making violence permissible. Hedges, whose background is also in theological studies, says of war:

Once we embrace a theological or ideological belief system that defines itself as the embodiment of goodness and light, it is only a matter of *how* we will carry out murder.^{xxii}

According to Chalmers Johnson, September 11 "produced a dangerous change in the thinking of some of America's leaders, who began to see their republic as a genuine empire, a new Rome, the greatest colossus in history, no longer bound by international law, the concern of allies, or any constraints on its use of military force."^{xxiii} Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan agrees. Ancient Rome spoke of itself in transcendental terms as an empire divinely mandated to rule without limits of time and space. Its language was theological and its Caesars divine sons of God, saviours of the people. Jesus must be read, Crossan says, as a Jew within Judaism within this Roman Empire. By describing him as a son of God like Roman emperors, Jesus was proclaiming an alternate empire or Kingdom of God, one of non-violence, compassion, justice and peace. Unfortunately, Crossan says, the apocalyptic book of Revelations contained images of God's empire brought in by Divine *violence*.

To turn the non-violent resistance of the slaughtered Jesus into the violent warfare of the slaughtering Jesus is, for me as a Christian, to libel the body of Jesus and to blaspheme the soul of Christ ... It is the radicality of God's justice and not the normalcy of civilization's injustice that ... I find incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth ... the good news, as ... seen from Jesus and Paul, is that the violent normalcy of human civilization is *not* the inevitable destiny of human nature. Christian faith and human evolution agree on that point. Since we invented civilization some six thousand years ago along the irrigated floodplains of great rivers, we can also un-invent it and we can create its alternative ... to imagine it, and to enjoy it on a transfigured earth.^{xxiv}



Violence, as opposed to compassion, is not limited to war and battles. Liberation Theology raised its voice against violence to the personhood of the South American poor suffering inhumane conditions. Christian Feminist theology raised its voice against violence towards women, sanctioned by patriarchal biblical texts; and Muslim Feminist theologians are challenging violence against, and subordination of women, claimed to come from the Qur'an. Church hierarchies are being condemned for centuries of sexual violence against men, women and children by church leaders hidden behind walls of authority that claim to mirror the Divine character. Racial discrimination, validated for centuries by Bible verses, still infects the warp and woof of our society, despite legislation against it. Many contemporary school children are asked to switch off their minds in Christian schools and believe the Bible is a science textbook for all times. Many churches outspokenly condemn gay-lesbian-bisexual and transgender people with righteous indignation fuelled by Levitical laws that also condemn eating winged insects that walk on all fours, except, of *course*, locusts, crickets and grasshoppers which have jointed legs above their feet (Lev. 11: 20 - 23). The creation God called good has been subjected to pollution and destruction by humans claiming domination rights from the Bible. Violence in *any* form is inevitably linked with power -- who has it, how is it named and used, and for what reasons. Institutional violence results from such power being used to construct systems that, by their very structure, do violence to subsets of people, or creation itself. As Florence Nightingale discovered, the British class system was held in place by a theology that claimed God ordained some to be rich and some poor, so don't mess with this by initiating reform.^{xxv} Compassion -- feeling with the systemically poor and oppressed -- demands that we challenge such structures and address gross inequities in society; that we feel anger *about* this, enough to overcome inertia and apathy and *act*. While everyone is not born with equal opportunities, a culture of compassion and justice requires us to share each other's load and care for those deprived of justice, even when, and especially when, injustice and violence finds support in religion.

Compassion for the earth is a new experience for the West. We are discovering the growing threat to the planet's survival from the way we are treating it. Indigenous peoples have known this, but *we* need to see the world as our home, not a motel room where we use everything provided and leave our rubbish for someone else to clean up. Australia's Professor Norman Habel in his book *An Inconvenient Truth: is a green reading of the Bible possible*, points out the many grey, rather than green texts, in the Bible -- a flood that destroyed innocent earth creatures and land as collateral damage for human sin; the mighty acts of deliverance in the Exodus that came about through plagues and poisoned rivers that destroyed crops and animals. Instead of simply accepting, or not accepting, these stories, we should listen for the cry of the Earth through them. Compassion for the earth takes on an even bigger dimension with the contemporary move to see the Divine, not as an external Being intervening in the world, sending floods on some and finding parking spots for the faithful, but within everything in the universe, the initial aim of every event, the Mind of the Cosmos, the source of Love -- whatever metaphorical imagery makes sense in a universe where the Milky Way, with its 100-400 billion stars is only one of billion of galaxies in the observable universe. We can no longer bury our



heads in the sand and talk about God in ways that contradict what we learn about the universe from science. American physicist Lawrence Krauss, who personally does not hold to an idea of God says;

While nothing in biology, chemistry, physics, geology, astronomy, or cosmology has ever provided direct evidence of purpose in nature, science can never unambiguously prove that there is no such purpose. As Carl Sagan said in another context, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. ^{xxvi}

What we need, perhaps more than ever, are new ways to think and talk about the Sacred that don't ask us to leave our minds at the door or, like the Queen in Alice in Wonderland, believe six impossible things before breakfast.

Jesus identified the greatest commandment as loving God and our neighbour as *ourselves* and the Golden Rule asks us to treat others as *we* would want to be treated. Compassion, therefore, begins very close to home -- compassion for *ourselves*. The Abrahamic traditions have focussed on human sins and shortcomings, such that we have not dared to think well of ourselves. I grew up on a diet of confessing sins in hope for heaven but, in the restricted religious world in which I lived, I had a hard time finding big enough personal sins that made it necessary for Jesus to die for them -- pinching my sister or telling a white lie did not do it. Being a positive person with a great enthusiasm for life, this instruction to berate myself didn't fit. In our driven success-oriented world, we spend our time denigrating ourselves for not achieving, not keeping up, not getting high enough grades, not being thin enough, strong enough or beautiful enough. Compassion for the *loser*, as society describes him or her, seems counter-cultural. The colonized people of the past were told that they were inferior; and nationalism that demands one country to be #1 assigns other nations to #2, #3 or #50. Learning to love ourselves, to have compassion on ourselves, also affects the way we deal with others. If we are not gentle with ourselves, we can project this hatred of ourselves as hatred of others. If we don't feel we have worth, we may not see the worth of others. If we have low self-esteem, we are often unable to reach out to others, fearing rejection -- why would someone be interested in us? Taking time for compassion to ourselves helps us identify how to treat others as we like to be treated.

So much more to say on compassion, but we are out of time. Perhaps our topic needs to be turned around the other way. How can we pull *religion* back from the brink, whether that brink is extinction, fundamentalism or irrelevance? Each of the great founders of religions stumbled upon compassion as the heart of their message in contexts where violence and oppression required a solution. As Armstrong says, "We do not need a new religion. We know what we have to do. We have a choice: We can either allow those aggressive doctrines and practices that exist in all faiths to come to the fore; or we choose to implement those that speak of justice, respect for human dignity, and peace to become a dynamic force for good in our troubled world." ^{xxvii} Perhaps we need to begin again with the human value of compassion, as if centuries of religious overlay had never happened, letting this message from Buddha, Confucius, the prophets of Israel, Jesus and Muhammad come fresh to us in our



contemporary society where, like them, we strive to make the best possible world. Only then can the religions they inspired be described in Ursula King's words as:

... a rich revelation of an inexhaustible divine ocean of love, of compassion and mercy, and of the possibility of human dignity and wholeness beyond all brokenness and wounds. ^{xxviii}

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- ⁱⁱ Lloyd Geering, *Coming Back to Earth: from gods, to God, to Gaia* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2009) 218
- ⁱⁱⁱ Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: how we should love nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 67
- ^{iv} Pastor Simon Chen, "In Defence of Faith," *Mudgee Guardian*, Friday March 19, 2010, 13.
- ^v Quoted in Anand Krishna, *One Earth, One Sky, One Humankind: celebration of unity in diversity* (Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama Publishing) 113
- ^{vi} Quoted in Krishna, *One Earth*, 19
- ^{vii} Quoted in Krishna, *One Earth*, 57
- ^{viii} Quoted in Krishna, *One Earth*, 99
- ^{ix} Quoted in Krishna, *One Earth*, 117
- ^x Quoted in Krishna, *One Earth*, 35
- ^{xi} Quoted in Krishna, *One Earth*, 107
- ^{xii} Matthew 7:12
- ^{xiii} Dalai Lama, "A Policy of Kindness," in Lucinda Vardey, *God in all Worlds: An anthology of contemporary spiritual writing* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1995), 432
- ^{xiv} Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011) 22.
- ^{xv} Armstrong, *Twelve Steps*, 6
- ^{xvi} Armstrong, *Twelve Steps*, 7
- ^{xvii} Armstrong, *Twelve Steps*, 7
- ^{xviii} Armstrong, *Twelve Steps*, 8
- ^{xix} Hugh Mackay, *What make us Tick: the ten desires that drive us* (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2010) 16
- ^{xx} Mackay, *What makes us Tick*, 31
- ^{xxi} Swami Prabhavananda & Christopher Isherwood, trans., *Bhagavad-Gita: The Song of God*, (New York: Mentor Book, 1972), I: 34.
- ^{xxii} Quoted in Barbara Wendland, "Thinking about War," www.connectionsonline.org 187, May 2008.
- ^{xxiii} Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004) 3
- ^{xxiv} John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus against Rome, then and now* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007) 224, 238, 241 - 2.
- ^{xxv} In discussion is pursued in Val Webb, *Florence Nightingale: the making of a radical theologian* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002)
- ^{xxvi} Val Webb, *Stepping out with the Sacred: human attempts to engage the Divine* (New York & London: Continuum, 2010), 8
- ^{xxvii} Karen Armstrong, "Time for Religion to be a Force for Good," Washington Post, September 8, 2011
- ^{xxviii} Ursula King, *The Search for Spirituality: Our global quest for a spiritual life* (New York: BlueBridge, 2008), 65