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Compassionate Response: Intersection of Religious Faith and Public Policy

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Abstract

Much of social work practice is rooted in compassion. Addressing compassion as a virtue, this article examines the possibilities for compassion to be more explicitly and purposefully built into actions at community and policy levels. We discuss the definition of compassion, examine the religious roots of compassion, describe some ways in which religion and policy intersect, and provide contemporary examples of compassion at the interface of religion and policy. In the discussion, we conclude with further thoughts about how compassion might be elevated in our collective societal actions and address the role of social work in these efforts.

Key words: compassion, virtue, policy practice

Of all the ways in which the United States might currently be considered polarized, cruelty versus compassion may be the most fundamental. It is obvious that some forms of suffering continue to exist, and in some cases are widespread, even in our modern and wealthy country. In response to suffering, individual, organizational, and governmental actions can either perpetuate cruelty (through bullying, discrimination, so-called “get-tough” policies) or act to relieve suffering (through kindness, solidarity, social welfare policies). Religion provides a moral force to promote compassionate response in many circumstances. Religion also intersects with public policy in multiple ways that may reinforce compassionate response through governmental and community action.

Social work is deeply engaged in promoting more compassionate response at all levels of practice. Although not required to align with religious tradition, there are many ways in which social work engages with spirituality toward improvement for clients or society (Canda & Furman, 2010) and in which religious organizations are part of the provision of social welfare (Cnaan, Boddie, Wineburg, 1999; Garlington, 2017). With focused intervention efforts at all levels, social work also has a responsibility to understand and act upon how policy and community activities can address suffering through compassionate action. Examining the intersection of religion and public policy through a lens of compassion, thus, helps us to see work already happening as well as to find creative paths for social change. Engagement with religion is not new for social work, but we emphasize the significance of the shared goal of compassion--relieving suffering and furthering social justice.

Addressing compassion as a virtue, this article examines the possibilities for compassion to be more explicitly and purposefully built into actions at community and policy levels (we do not focus on the individual level in this paper) and we examine the potential role of religion in

such efforts. The paper is organized as follows: (1) definition of compassion; (2) the religious roots of compassion; (3) a description of some ways that religion and policy purposefully intersect; and (4) contemporary examples of compassion at the interface of religion and policy. We conclude with further thoughts about how compassion might be elevated in our collective societal actions and the role of social work in these efforts.

Defining the Virtue of Compassion

Although compassion is sometimes alluded to as a feeling, emotion, or attitude, our discussion focuses on compassion as a virtue. Virtues require habits of character as well as action in addition to thoughts and feelings. As a profession, social work frequently articulates “values”, but “virtues” is a more recent concept. Recently, however, social work scholars have begun to examine the use and potential of virtue frameworks (McBeath & Webb, 2002; Banks & Gallagher, 2009; Adams, 2009; Chamiec-Case, 2013; Donaldson & Mayer, 2014). Chamiec-Case (2013) helpfully distinguishes virtues from values. “...values are *beliefs* about what is most important to us, what we consider our priorities, and what we believe has worth. Virtues on the other hand, are the deeply ingrained *traits or dispositions* which form our character-what fundamentally makes us who we are and is manifested in our actions” (p. 259, *italics* in original). Virtues' focus on character is applicable at the larger macro level. Organizational mission, for example, identifies the character of the agency that will impact decisions. Character of a nation might also be observed through enacted policies.

Some authors have highlighted certain virtues and their relationship to social work. Donaldson and Mayer (2014), for example, argue that justice should be considered a core virtue in social work. They argue it is both a personal and social virtue; “it is social in that it is

manifest in one's interactions with self and others, and in how one pursues the arrangements of social institutions and communities" (p.208). In many ways similar to our presentation in this paper, Donaldson and Mayer trace an understanding of justice as a philosophical concept, justice's roots in Christianity, and justice's relevance to social work at all levels of practice. Further, they identify the need to cultivate this virtue in social work education

Compassion is often confused with related, other-focused virtues such as charity, altruism, or mercy. The distinguishing attribute of compassion is the idea of shared suffering and the "simultaneous interplay of cognitive, affective and volitional dimensions" (Davies, 2001, p.232). Further emphasizing the fundamental importance of shared suffering, Comte-Sponville (2001, p. 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. There is a clear moral component involved: "[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.... 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, p. 106).

There have been extensive philosophical debates about 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, misericordia, 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. Zembylas (2013), in particular, raises concerns about the expressions of pity in relation to compassion, identifying that “pity” “denotes the feeling of empathic identification with the sufferer” whereas “compassion” refers to both the feeling but also, and critically, accompanying action (p.507).

The treatment of compassion as a virtue, and our linkage of compassion with public policy, places it within the context of the discussion of virtue theory in politics. Virtue theory is not new; foundations were developed by Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas, among others, with contemporary treatments by scholars such as MacIntyre (1981). Virtue theorists debate regarding the qualities of virtue that lead to human flourishing. Theories of virtue often denote both a core and an ideal; those that are necessary for society and those that make it ideal (Sabl, 2005). Justice is typically identified as a core virtue, often *the* core virtue. It is one of the four cardinal virtues (along with temperance, prudence, and fortitude) recognized in classical antiquity and enduring within later philosophical and religious tradition. Compassion is more likely to be considered as an ideal, but this may open to debate. Several authors discuss the linkage of compassion and justice (Zembylas, 2013; Collins, Cooney, & Garlington, 2012; Porter, 2006). Zembylas (2013) cites Hoggett (2006) stating, “...it is only an intelligent compassion which can feel the pain and think critically about the injustice, thereby fusing an ethic of care with an ethic of justice” (p. 161). We return to this linkage in our discussion.

Zembylas (2013) also identifies the need for a politics of compassion. Zembylas suggested that vulnerability, rather than suffering may be the more appropriate term to ground political applications of compassion. The idea of a common human vulnerability (i.e., not just “them” suffering) allows us “to explore how we might move beyond dichotomies that single out the self or the other as victims”. Moreover, the realization of the common humanity (rather than the suffering of “the other”) leads to “a simultaneous identification and disidentification with the suffering of the other” and “recognition of symmetry and asymmetry with the other removes the arrogance of claiming that we know and feel *their* pain and suffering” (p.513, *italics* original). This may lead to questioning and challenging arguments based on binaries such as us/them, citizen/foreigner, friends/enemies, and good/evil (p. 516). Recognizing asymmetries of suffering raises issues of structural inequalities and can result in collective and civic anger resulting in action at the community level (Zembylas, 2013).

Religious Foundations of Compassion

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. After providing a brief presentation of religious – primarily Christian -- perspectives on these issues related to compassion we hone in more specifically on the understanding of the “other”.

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 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 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, Jesus is to be understood as the incarnate compassion of 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).” For example, Deuteronomy emphasizes the responsibility to show compassion towards “widows and orphans” and to the “stranger”, and, 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; and, 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 (p.70)". Very clearly, there is no "other" in this perspective of compassion.

Compassion, of course, is not limited to Christian beliefs and traditions. It is a core element in other major religions. Several Old Testament passages refer to compassion, including the psalms (e.g., "The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he had made" [Psalm 145:9, New International Version]). In Islam, 'Allah/God' is an ultimate source of compassion and teaches tolerance, love and compassion to individuals. "The Holy Qur'an, Islam's divine book, says 'O people, be compassionate to others so that you may be granted compassion by God.'" (Shahzad, Murad, Kitchlew, & Zia, 2014, p. 170). 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: providing moral education; establishing formal precepts or vows that advocate an ethical lifestyle; furthering opportunities to express compassion or perform acts of community service or social advocacy; encouraging peer influence toward virtuous behavior; engaging in philanthropic rituals or structures (for example, passing the collection plate or tithing); engaging in community-supported initiation-like activities such as the Mormon mission; and creating and reproducing a variety of poems, scriptures, slogans, songs, and symbols that may assist in internalizing moral goals (Vieten, et al., 2006). These religiously structured activities, however, are rarely enough to lead individuals in virtuous other-focused behaviors; individuals must internalize these moral orders through personal transformative experiences; “... 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).

Intersections of Religion and Policy: Compassion for “the Other”

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 present-day, industrialized Western nations the relationship is more nuanced than either of these extremes. Religion, heavily related to culture often provides an underlying ethos to democratic debates and religious organizations are often partners with governments to address social need.

In the U.S., for example, religion and policy have intersected in at least three ways: the gradual historical shift in responsibility of social welfare from private charity organizations (often religious) to public government agencies (Bane, Coffin, & Thiemann, 2000; Martin, 2010), the fit of religion within a constitutional structure and legal framework (e.g., rules about tax exemptions, contracting for services), and the role of religious organizations and actors as interest groups in contributing to and advocating around specific policy issues (Collins, Cooney, & Garlington, 2012).

The discourse around responsibility for social welfare needs, private or public, has certainly shifted towards an emphasis on creating government structures to serve citizens in need over the last 500 years, even more so with the development of the modern welfare state. This has not been a complete shift in any sense. Religious organizations have contracted with government agencies to provide services from the beginning, and we have seen a shift back to an expectation of charity organizations to take more responsibility for meeting community needs. The changing expectation of responsibility is related to the definitions of target populations and deservedness (Schneider & Ingram, 1993), including how we, through policy, define the “other”, what rights the other has to resources, and who is expected to care for the needs of the other. More comprehensive, well-funded social policies generally serve those who are less likely to be

defined as the other, while policies and programs designed to help groups seen as less deserving are more regressive, punitive, and underfunded. Government is responsible for the social welfare of some, but communities (and religious charitable organizations) are more responsible for the undeserving because they are more frequently operating out of compassion and not entitlement.

Religious charitable organizations and congregations also fall under the auspices of federal law through the tax code, for example. Tax exemption brings with it restrictions on political activity (through the Johnson Amendment), such as lobbying for specific political candidates running for election (Stanley, 2011). The constitutionality of the Johnson Amendment has been subject to debate (Stanley, 2011) and there are current efforts to limit it through a Presidential Executive Order and a bill introduced in Congress (Valverde, 2017). While religious organizations' political participation is certainly shaped by this legislative parameter, our discussion of compassionate action is more focused on program and policy advocacy.

Interest group policy advocacy is closely related to our nation's views on social welfare responsibility. For our purpose we focus on how 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. Certainly not all policy advocated by religious organizations would be considered compassionate. For example, adherents of the "prosperity gospel" in which material resources and good health are believed to be granted by God to those with faith (Schieman & Jung, 2012) might be expected to pursue different policies than those with a compassionate foundation. These might include policies focused on individual reward, wealth accumulation, and neglect of the poor. Yet, as we have noted, religious traditions all have some form of imperative to practice compassion. Examining

religious actors as policy advocates provides a unique view of policy through a compassion lens with a specific focus on the “other”.

Our earlier description of religion’s emphasis on compassion also explicitly addresses the “other”. 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. On the other hand, the vocation of solidarity “is to sensitize and conscientize human persons to the horizontal reality of suffering in the human community” (p.65). As O’Connell (2009) has noted, 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. Solidarity itself has a rich history conceptually and practically. We note the significance of solidarity in linking compassion and justice, along with the need to give solidarity a thorough discussion of its own. While beyond the scope of this paper, exploring the relationship between solidarity, compassion, and justice will provide greater insight into our collective responses to social problems.

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 social structures. Building on religious ideas about the role of compassion in restoring community, these ideas very explicitly identify the need to engage in political processes to reform systems that cause human suffering. Although religion’s role in the political realm is not new, within mainstream

discourse religion has not continuously voiced ideals of compassion in this manner. Despite ongoing work to address human needs, there are not uniform views regarding appropriate political approaches, role of government, and locus of responsibility for action.

Explicit Examples of Compassion, Religion, and Public Policy

Collins, Cooney, and Garlington (2012) have provided a more extensive review of the strengths and risks of compassion-focused virtue approaches to policy. They note that 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 the work of compassion. 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. Third, there needs to be sustained funding to allow continuity of assistance throughout the period of suffering. In further work, Collins, Cooney, and Garlington (2015) identified examples of federal policies that had elements of compassionate response and utilized a policy analysis model to identify specific components of policies through which compassion is (or is not) apparent. Consistent with a definition of suffering regarding “the loss of truly basic goods” (Nussbaum, 2001, p.374) the analysis focused on the loss of: life (terminal illness), safety (domestic violence), and home (community disaster) and analyzed relevant public policies (the Medicare hospice benefit, the Violence Against Women Act, and the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act) to determine the role that compassion plays in these governmental responses. Findings suggested that each of these policy domains included providing some type of interpersonal connection, but utilized differing means of doing so. Each provided for interpersonal contact with sufferers both through

professional intervention – including social work -- and the use of volunteers. Coordination was central in each domain but the mechanisms of coordination and the relevant parties involved in coordination were sources of variation. Numerous other policy examples might also be analyzed through the lens of compassion. These might include, anti-trafficking, homelessness, and foster care, for example. Each involves human suffering, is addressed by federal and local policies, and engages religious communities and professional social work in both service provision and advocacy.

Having described religious foundations of compassion and the interface of religion and public policy, in the remainder of this section we provide three additional examples that identify the intersection of religion and compassion to influence policy actions. In particular these examples indicate ways in which religion participates in policy dialogue and can influence communities to assert compassion for the “other.”

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Migration and Refugee Services. The mission statement of the USCCB Committee on Migration (2013) clearly states the centrality of religious belief to the mission, “Grounded by our belief in Jesus Christ and Catholic teaching, Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) fulfills the commitment of the U.S. Catholic bishops to protect the life and dignity of the human person. We serve and advocate for refugees, asylees, migrants, unaccompanied children, and victims of human trafficking.” MRS works with grassroots Catholic networks across the US to promote fair immigration and refugee policies and advocate for the passage of immigration reform. Initiatives aim both to educate Catholics about the Church's teaching on migration and to advocate the positions of the U.S. Catholic bishops within Congress and the President’s administration. The website identifies several different mechanisms by which MRS engages in policy advocacy: (1) the development and distribution of

policy position papers; (2) fact finding trips to regions undergoing a migration related crisis; (3) public statements on issues related to migration and Congressional testimony in support of legislation to protect migrant populations; (4) implementation of a wide range of national educational initiatives to inform and promote the Church's vision on migration; and, (5) involvement in a wide range of coalitions that further protection of migrants.

The USCCB has been a vocal proponent of a humane and compassionate approach to migrants. In preparation for National Migration Week 2017 the USCCB produced and distributed a tool kit. Statements included: “With respect to migrants, too often in our contemporary culture we fail to encounter them as persons, and instead look at them as others or render them invisible. We do not take the time to engage migrants in a meaningful way, as fellow children of God, but remain aloof to their presence and suspicious of their intentions. During this National Migration Week, let us all take the opportunity to engage migrants as community members and neighbors – all of whom are worthy of our attention and support.” The tool kit includes a number of items consistent with advocacy strategies (e.g., fact sheet on migration and refugees, templates for letters to the editor and for letters to senators/representatives, talking points [e.g., “welcoming immigrants is part of the Catholic Social Teaching and reflects the Biblical tradition to welcome the stranger”], social media templates, ideas for community engagement, and for religious services (i.e., homily suggestions, migration-related prayer petitions).

Faith-based organizations and Black Lives Matter: The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and organizing in African American communities historically have had churches and theology at their center. Marsh (2005) provides a detailed history of this relationship between faith and social justice, including a discussion of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating

Committee (SNCC) as “applied religion” (Marsh, 2005, quoting organizer Diane Nash). Much of the revolutionary theology forming the foundation of the movement was based on “celebrating the common grace of women and men, black and white, the privileged and the poor, who found themselves together, miraculously, in the South, working in common cause for a more just and human social order” (Marsh, 2005, p. 89). The current organizing of the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) (also known as Black Lives Matter) has shifted from this history to focus on how current social and political contexts define (and oppress) Black communities as other as a means to transform these contexts to “imagine new ways forward for our liberation” (“M4BL, 2016, About Us”, p. 1).

The presence of religious leaders and language is less dominant in the M4BL writing and speaking than in the Civil Rights Movement, and some writers have identified tensions between traditional African American religious leaders and M4BL leaders (Blumberg & Kuruvilla, 2015; Jennings, 2016). Whether related to generational or strategy differences, the historical religious frame is not a primary tool for the ongoing Movement, though religious organizations including churches are well represented in the list of endorsing organizations (M4BL, 2016, “More Endorsers”, p. 1). One of these endorsing organizations, Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), uses the language of “beloved community” from Martin Luther King, Jr. (King, 1996, p. 136) and includes “engaging the theology of nonviolent resistance” as part of its work (FOR, 2017, “What We Do”, p. 1).

In a range of activities and support for other organizations, FOR focuses on grassroots community building as a foundation for advocacy. Through a framework of nonviolence, their work identifies and supports communities disproportionately impacted by government actions and public policy issues, such as solitary confinement in prisons, climate change, and

international military actions (FOR, 2017, “How We Work”, p. 1). Most recently in response to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, FOR has explicitly identified protecting the rights of marginalized communities as a priority “in a spirit of empathy and learning” (FOR, 2017, “A Public Call to Protect All People”, p. 1).

Programmatic activities include active involvement in coalitions such as the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (FOR, 2017, “How We Work”), providing civil disobedience trainings (FOR, 2017, “What We Do”), providing organizational/movement developmental training and support (FOR, 2017, “What We Do”), and acting as a fiscal sponsor for developing groups (FOR, 2017, “What We Do”). Within the Movement for Black Lives, FOR supported the development of a curriculum by the Deep Abiding Love Project in 2015 (Jean, 2015). This curriculum, “Coming to Ferguson: Building a Nonviolent Movement,” pushes activists to reflect on their role as outsider when working in marginalized communities. While the language of compassion is not explicit, the emphasis is on deep listening, humility, and facilitating leadership from marginalized communities (Jean, 2015). From this specific curriculum to FOR’s general framework of the beloved community as part of the M4BL, compassion with religious roots is a component of the work being done for Black Lives Matter. Compassion, however, is not explicit in the policy agenda and many activists have resisted talk of compassion, empathy, or love as softening the needed confrontational change (see, for example, Smith [2016]).

Interfaith entities and support for Muslims: The organization, Muslim Advocates, focuses on concerns largely experienced by Muslim Americans but is an interfaith-supported organization. The three areas of programming—addressing racial profiling, strengthening charitable giving and organizations, and countering hate—are addressed specifically for Muslim

Americans and also extend to any individual experiencing injustice (Muslim Advocates, 2017, “Mission”). Religious affiliation is a key part of the need for advocacy, but, as with the other examples discussed, it is a motivation as well. Organizational activities are centered on the rights of a specific other, based on religion and sometimes race, and how these civil rights discussions reflect the rights of all Americans. One strategy of Muslim Advocates is to facilitate the development and growth of Muslim non-profits in a political context when donations to Muslim organizations are often suspect just by prejudiced association. This emphasis on charitable giving is framed as both an American and a Muslim value on helping the other: “Charitable giving is an American value, and a religious tradition for many people of faith including Muslims. American Muslim nonprofits and mosques help feed the hungry, aid the sick, and in many important ways better our communities” (Muslim Advocates, 2017, “Charities”). The organization is very active in federal legal challenges and policy advocacy for civil rights.

In the past few years, and particularly in the last few months, numerous interfaith gatherings have occurred particularly aimed at supporting Muslims who may feel targeted and scapegoated based on their religion. In Boston, a crowd of about 2,600 gathered at the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center to “pray, share personal stories, and pledge to stand together against a wave of incivility, hate speech, and violence” following the Presidential election. Members of various faiths gathered as well as political leaders including the Mayor of Boston and U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren (Fox, 2016). A group promoting peace and support for Muslims in America gathered during an interfaith rally at First United Methodist Church on Nov. 12th in an Chicago-area neighborhood (Chicago Tribune, 11/12/16). The Religions for Peace USA Our Muslim Neighbor (OMN) Initiative engages in activities designed to advance understanding of Islam and Muslims in Middle Tennessee, a region identified by the Council on

American-Islamic Relations and the Center for American Progress as arguably one of the most Islamophobic areas in America (Religions for Peace, 2017). Numerous other examples of inter-faith gathering to promote solidarity and justice have occurred in many cities across the U.S. and in other countries. Current debates related to national security and immigration restrictions have led to larger and more pronounced inter-faith efforts in support of Muslim-Americans and refugees from Muslim majority nations.

Conclusion

In this conclusion we consider how compassion might be elevated in our collective societal actions. Compassion is fundamental to religious thought, yet, religions are also quite realistic that practice of compassion at the individual level is a challenge. Religions have developed multiple mechanisms aimed to inculcate compassionate action. 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 on 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.

To a lesser extent public policy has incorporated and reflected specific compassionate action in some cases. Although often not labelled as arguments about virtue in public debate, we agree with Lejano (2006, p. 141) that “virtue is actually a strong component in policy discourse, though it may be masked as other things”. In the case of the virtue of compassion, specifically, there must be a recognition of suffering and a commitment to do something about it. Social work is often central to this effort to articulate the needs of communities and populations to claim resources. 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. This is a failure to act with compassion—to recognize the suffering and act to address it. Again, with an emphasis on social justice and human rights, social work is often in the forefront to rectify these injustices.

One purpose of understanding public policy through a lens of compassion is to remind us that public policy can serve to alleviate suffering and correct injustice. Indeed, “budgets are moral documents”, as articulated by Circle of Protection (2017), a group of Christian leaders committed “to resist budget cuts that undermine the lives, dignity, and rights of poor and vulnerable people (p.1)”. Engaging in policy practice is a central component of the social work profession. Greater familiarity with entities such as the Circle of Protection may aid social work in its policy advocacy efforts.

We have been clear in this paper that compassion does not occur solely on an individual level and it is not simply kindly action toward another. Compassion is related to restorative justice, repairing a community, and recognizing and affirming suffering. These become particularly prominent when the focus of compassion is the “other”. In this way, we also support others scholars (e.g., Zembylas, 2013) who have identified the inter-relationship between compassion and justice. The recent, very large, vocal public demonstrations in support of Muslims provide a concrete example of how compassion and justice are interrelated. These demonstrations are, typically, visible signs of solidarity that also promote action steps related to furthering justice. Understanding the compassionate actions of religious groups helps social workers practicing at community and policy levels see opportunities for “strengthening the social

fabric” and “helping create a more just society” – two Grand Challenges of the social work profession (American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, 2017, p. 1).

Religious organizations intersect in policy spheres in multiple ways. We offered three contemporary examples in which religious groups are highly engaged in compassionate action. Notably, in our democracy, religious organizations can engage in debate and discourse about appropriate policy actions and can formally engage in policy processes like any other interest group. At more local levels, religious groups can engage in social action based in principles of solidarity with the other. Because of a robust commitment to compassion, religious organizations may provide the vehicle for instilling and institutionalizing more compassionate response in public policy. Connecting religious traditions’ compassion and public policy serves to highlight one way we as a society translate personal action and responsibility to the common good into social structures.

Furthermore, public-private partnerships are a common mechanism by which faith-based organizations and professional social work intersect with government (at local, state, national, and international levels) to advocate for and implement compassionate responses. Anti-trafficking initiatives, for example, may involve the USCCB and the State Department as well as Catholic Charities, and internationally, Catholic Relief Services and its partners in other countries. This rich intermix of players is typically needed to address large complex problems causing major suffering. Importantly, the solution is not the devolution of responsibility to faith-based organizations. Faith communities and faith-based organizations typically do not have sufficient resources to address the range and depth of human suffering. Complex partnership models that act on the local and global stage can, however, provide the infrastructure, and shared purpose needed for sustainability.

Compassion is relevant to social work practice at all levels of micro, community, and social policy. In common parlance compassion may be most frequently associated with individual level action, and, in the profession literature, compassion fatigue resulting from prolonged empathic response to human suffering. Our focus has been on the larger macro levels of community and policy practice, where, aside from political rhetoric, an explicit focus on compassion has been less visible. Emphasizing virtue, and with particular attention to the religious foundations of compassion and the role of religion as an actor in policy, we provided some examples of compassionate action in the public sphere. These should be maintained, enhanced, and amplified. Virtue requires habits of character. Hence, efforts to promote compassion at the multiple levels we discussed require ongoing and deep commitment. While acknowledging that differing organizational, community, and policy environments may be either more or less conducive to compassionate action, virtue requires perseverance in pursuing compassionate response. We also recognize that in a complex society no virtue should dominate all policy actions. But certain times may call for certain virtues to rise to the fore. In the current climate compassion seems to be scarce, and thus, more forceful articulation of its place in public policy is particularly warranted. Religious entities and the profession of social work both play critical roles and in many ways are aligned in pursuit of a compassionate and just society.

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