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Compassion in the World's Religions

Envisioning Human Solidarity




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12. Chapter

Compassion and solidarity in international relations

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IN A WORLD CHARACTERIZED not only by cruel conflicts, but also by an often violent rediscovery of ethnic identities it seems utopian and naive even to suggest that relations between human groups and between nation states can factor in considerations and policies inspired by human compassion and solidarity. Both the extremist ideologues of warring fundamentalisms and self-styled realist theoreticians - in reality mere ideologues, and often of an extremist kind - invite us to take stock of the irreconcilable nature of hostilities and clashes of material interest and cultural and religious orientations. Solidarity, and in general ethics, should be confined, they maintain, to the realm pious religious meekness or philosophical abstraction.

In international relations, the followers of the realist school (by and large the dominating school, especially among professionals in the field) have traditionally been allergic to ethical issues, postulating instead the functioning of a system composed of intrinsically amoral subjects (nation-states) engaged in the disembodied pursuit of rational goals. What is singular is that this apparently Machiavellian approach eludes the explicitly ethical focus of Machiavelli's entire theoretical construction, a focus that has been analyzed with definitive clarity by Isaiah Berlin.

Realists in international relations, in other words, have the tendency to hide their own ethical preference in favor of the nation-state (their own brand of partial ethics) under a supposedly neutral "extraethical" cover.

The time has come to challenge this view and show, instead, that compassion and solidarity are not only as real a component of human beings

as violence, but that they are an imperative, and not an option, if we want to avoid devastating and permanent conflict.

International relations cannot be made ethics-free, neither in theory nor in practice. In the first place, even the most radical defenders of national interest in theory and practice (i.e. not only American neocons, but also traditional conservatives) couch their international behavior in moral terms: the enemy is not only an opponent or contender in terms of power or resources, but is evil.

Secondly, the power of nation-states is not only military or economic, but is also hegemony (Gramsci) or "soft power" (Nye), i.e. is based on the capacity not only to impose, but to convince.

Having said that even "realists" are obliged to deal with an ethical discourse, it is important to see why an ethical discourse is, by itself of no guarantee of compassion and solidarity.

The key aspect here is the mechanism of inclusion/exclusion. Apart from sociopaths (those that positivist XIX century criminologists defined as affected by "moral madness") no individual lives without accepting a circle within which he recognizes the duty to take into account the rights of other individuals as well as solidarity towards them. Family, clan, nation, race, religion, political party or at times even a soccer club or a criminal gang mark the perimeters within which not only material obligations, but also moral duties, are accepted and abided by.

The problem arises when one of these circles, any of them, is taken as the only relevant one. When only one identity, that is (be it national, religious, party) is taken as a final moral perimeter. Thus we see individuals who are angels in the family and devils outside ("amoral familism"), others who are pious and compassionate within their religious community and kill "infidels" with no qualms, others who are inspired by lofty humanist goals but decree with nonchalance the elimination of the "class enemy", others who are sensitive to culture and spirituality and can run an extermination camp for an "inferior race".

In this post-Cold War, beginning-of-the-Millennium disorienting and disoriented historical phase it is fashionable to talk about the irrepressible urge of groups - having not only to cope with the destructuring of the previous international system, but also the disturbing prospects of globalization - to find solace and reassurance in a strengthened identity as a prerequisite not only of psychic health but also of survival itself and of

effective common action. At the same time, not so long ago we have witnessed the horrors perpetrated by the violent pursuers of identity, from ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia to genocide in Rwanda while other such horrors are looming in many parts of the world. What are we then to think, in both political and ethical terms, about identity? Is it bad or "good"? Or perhaps – as many nationalists will tell you – are we just facing excesses, exaggerations (practiced by people who are for one reason or the other "savage") in something that is essentially good?

Actually the problem is not a quantitative, but a qualitative one. Not all identity is conflict generating. On the contrary, identity is the prerequisite even of altruism and love and, in group terms, of all kinds of positive interaction in terms of exchange and solidarity. What is conflict generating is not identity per se, it is what can be called "narcissistic identity" the kind of identity whose affirmation, pursuit, and defense form an integral part of the essence of nationalism (and of its lesser but not less potentially murderous counterparts, communalism and tribalism).

Why is this so? In the first place, because at the root of group identity lies ...a lie, or – put in less blunt terms – a cultural artifact, an intellectual construct produced by elites that have been very aptly defined by Pierre Bourdieu "as professional producers of subjective visions of the social world". It is commonly believed (especially by nondemocratic political leaders) that in order to maintain the cohesion of a group it is not enough to define its identity in objective terms: all those born on the same territory, all those sharing the same religion, all those speaking the same language. To be fair, finding objective criteria for group identity is indeed problematic. If we go hunting for what have been defined as "crucial markers of identity" and take for instance language, we see that on that basis no identity of post-Yugoslav entities would have been possible, since they all spoke Serbo-Croatian. The same is true in the case of Rwandan Tutsis and Hutus, all speaking the same language: in this case, not even the "crucial marker" of religion would work, since both Hutus and Tutsis are mainly Catholic. More than hypothetical racial differences, or no longer intact social ones, often the deadly "crucial marker" – as in the case of the 1994 genocide of Tutsis – ends up being the most bureaucratic of all artifacts: a mention of ethnicity on identity cards. For this reason, there must be what has been called "the invention of tradition", there must be the creation of "imagined communities", there has to be a "founding myth". The group must have

in all cases noble, ancient origins (divine, if possible); it must bask in the past glories of invincible ancestors or it must brood over the historical injustice visited upon it by a military defeat or an alien invasion depriving it of previous power and well-being. The point is that such an artificial, ideological path to identity is inherently conflict generating: in the first place, because by abandoning factual, falsifiable criteria it opens the door to controversy that has no possible solution but force; in the second place, because myths are by definition not objects of possible compromise, especially when your neighbors hold about the same territory and the same history incompatible myths of their own; in the third place, because the positive self-stereotyping that is an essential component of this narcissistic identity inevitably requires a negative stereotyping of the Other, of the neighbor. But, most of all, because narcissist group identity, by making one's own group's value incomparably higher qualitatively incommensurable with that of any other group, ends up denying the ethical relevance of the Other, i.e., expels the other from the scope of applicability of moral rules. Thus, when real or perceived conflicts of interests, real or perceived threats originate from another group, the human individual, who as a rule, as the Romans said, *abhorret a sanguine* (refrains from blood), reacts together with the group in ways that are totally detached from the ethical standards that her or she would uphold as an individual without seeing, as a rule, any contradiction between being "a good person" and a ferocious soldier for the group (be it the nation state or the tribe).

The theme of human solidarity, and of its importance as a dimension of international relations, is a very vast one, and it would be overly ambitious to try to embrace its full scope in the limited space of a short talk. I will instead limit myself to examining three aspects of the question that I believe deserve our attention.

I. Are Compassion and Solidarity "Un-natural"?

Self-styled realists, both in the held of anthropology/sociology and in that of international relations, try to convince us that human nature is basically aggressive, and that compassion and solidarity are the artificial and superficial products of moral indoctrination, a precarious and thin layer that is cast off as soon as real interests and real passions take over. In this we find the traces of a superficial interpretation of Darwinism, with its vulgar

version of "the survival of the fittest". In reality instead of scientific Darwinism what is at play here is *social Darwinism*, a XIX century ideological construct in which there is more Spencer than Darwin.

It is interesting here to quote Adam Smith, a thinker that is considered one of the founders of individualist, free-enterprise liberalism. In his book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* he wrote: "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature which interest him in the future of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it."¹

True science tells us something completely different from the pseudo realism of *homo homini lupus*, i.e. that solidarity and compassion are as "natural" as violence, and that, indeed, the individual without compassion is the most unnatural of human beings, a sociopath.

Com-*passion*, sym-*pathy* mean sharing the other's pain, mean recognizing the other's common humanity and affinity. It means, quoting Emmanuel Levinas, recognizing the face of the Other.

This is so true that those who want to promote the killing of the enemy engage in a systematic action aiming at erasing the concrete face of the Other: "We have a natural inclination not to kill our own kind, and therefore we have to make them horribly unlike us before we can overcome our instinctual compassion and kill them"². I am convinced that ethics is supported not only by psychology and anthropology, but also by advanced biology. Isn't advanced biology, with its discovery of "mirror cells" telling us exactly the same thing on empathy? Thus, before culture there is also nature to prove that solidarity is not an artificial construct, an ideological preference, if not the product of wishful thinking.

Coexistence of different groups is indeed problematic and fragile, but at the root of violent group conflict (not simple tensions, not simple divergences, not simple controversies) we almost inevitably find the conscious, systematic, intellectually dishonest endeavor of political leaders aimed at convincing the group of: (a) its own uniqueness and nobility, (b) the despicable, treacherous nature of the rival group, stereotyped in abstract terms

¹ Quoted in Alfie Kohn, *The Brighter Side of Human Nature*, Basic Books, New York 1990, p. 44.

² Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy. Reflections on the Hostile Imagination* also quoted in the Kohn book, p. 48.

that leave no space for individual difference and exception; (c) the objective nature of certain group interests defined as unavoidable goals combined with the denial that there are always choices and that they are also determined by subjective values and not only by objective interests; and (d) the absolutely “zero-sum” nature of the rivalry often to the point of mutually exclusive survival (*mors tua, vita mea*). According to such terrorist technique, all issues (the use of a name or a flag, a few square miles of territory, the bank of a river or the top of a mountain) are presented as “vital” to the very survival of the group. To use Thomas Nagel’s simile, “the last éclair on the dessert tray” is always described, in nationalist propaganda, as “the last life jacket for your own child”.

With this last point we reach a very crucial aspect of the ethical discourse the incompatibility of ethics – any ethics – with the absolutization of a primordial striving for survival, what Spinoza calls *conatus essendi*.

Here we are not just facing a variant of possible ethical options but something much more radical. In fact, whereas ethics is by definition exclusively human, *conatus essendi* (i.e., the striving for the preservation of being) is, according to Spinoza a property of “things” in general, i.e. a naturalistic law on a par with the laws of thermodynamics. Thus, when it becomes the only or the absolutely overwhelming guiding principle for action (both individual and group) we are in a dimension where only causality reigns. Actions may not be traced back to the subject accomplishing them by the process of “imputation”, the necessary connection to responsibility. This evidently makes all ethics – and also legality – inconceivable.

The tension between causality and agency, or imputation (i.e., between necessity and freedom) is another essential element for the definition of the field of ethics. One could say that, just as in the pre-modern world even causation of natural events tends to be interpreted in terms of imputation, of human responsibility (magic and witchcraft), in the postmodern world human action tends to be “naturalized” and read in terms of causality. In the former instance the ethical discourse is distorted by hallucination, absurdity, and arbitrary assignation of guilt; in the latter, the universalization of causality to cover human action means the end of responsibility, in other words, of the very-possibility of ethics. Only a never-resolved tension between causality (creating the framework, the limits and the conditioning of human action) and imputation (allowing the attribution of responsibility)

can leave space for a complex ethical discourse in which causality justifies compassion, but imputation legitimizes judgment.

Opting for an ethical approach means, in essence, opting for Humanity against mere Being. Emmanuel Levinas states this point with great clarity:

“Ontology – that is, the intelligibility of being – only becomes possible when ethics, the origin of all meaning, is taken as the starting point. Humanity must irrupt into Being: behind the perseverance, in being, of the beings or worlds – of men, too, insofar as they are themselves simple worlds – behind their *conatus essendi* or their identity, affirming its own ego or egoism, there must figure, somewhere, in some form or other, the responsibility of *the one for the others*.”³

Having said that ethics (ethics that inhibits the recourse to group violence) requires cognizing and recognizing the face of the Other, making the Other concrete and not abstract – we should be very much aware of the fact that there are some faces we will never see. The problem of the use of group violence, in other words, is not only limited to the violence used literally against the neighbor, but also the violence visited upon distant peoples by our own group.

How do we deal with the anonymous, distant other? The ethical premise of our refraining from using or condoning violence can remain the same. Yet it will not take us far enough, and risks establishing a perverse proportionality between the geographical and cultural remoteness of a specific Other, the possibility to really *regarder son visage* and the degree of applicability of ethical standards (colonial violence was a clear example of this proportionality.)

For an orientation in the solution of this problem we can find interesting guidance in Levinas:

“Indeed, if there were only two of us in the world, I and one other, there would be no problem. The other would be completely my responsibility. But in the real world there are many others. When others enter, each of them external to myself, problems arise. Who is closest to me? Who is the Other? Perhaps something has already occurred between them. We must investigate carefully. Legal justice is required. There is need for a state.”⁴

Thus the relevant pronouns are not only “I” and “Thou,” but also “They”. For a complete ethical cosmos, one needs to start from preservation and

³ “Priere sans demande”, *Etudes philosophiques*, 38, 1984, p.157.

⁴ “Ideology and Idealism”, in S. Hand, ed., *The Levinas Reader*, Blackwell, Cambridge, MA, 1989, p. 247.

the freedom of the Self (an essential prerequisite of all moral action), but then move on to a respect of the "Thou" based on recognition and leading to solidarity. But there is a third component, "Them", those who are inevitably third parties. Since they do not concretely come into contact with us, we have to apply rules, we have to be guided by justice. All law, including international law, belongs to this level.

What is important is that these three levels be constantly interconnected. Let us reflect, to prove this point, on the possible consequences of their disconnectedness. What is freedom of the Self without respect of the Other or justice? It is very significant, here, to see that the most radical defenders of extreme, nihilistic individualism – from Nietzsche to Bataille – utilize a term that is characteristic of the discourse on international affairs: *sovereignty*. Like the sovereign state, the sovereign individual is self-referential even in the realm of ethics. Like the sovereign state, the sovereign individual claims the right to kill in order to pursue specific ends.

But what is the recognition of the Other without justice? Here we have to go back to the essential concept of impartiality. The Other that cannot be the object of a direct relationship, that cannot be "individualized," risks being relegated to the outskirts of moral responsibility. Risks being treated unfairly vis-à-vis the more immediate, more concrete Other. Only justice can be a sort of moral safety net allowing for the inevitable limitations of concrete experience, for the objective difficulties we encounter in the search for the face of the Other.

But, also: what is justice without the freedom of the "I", if not ethically precarious submission to rulers? And what is it without the concrete "Thou"? Justice without solidarity, and without compassion, turns into the opposite of ethics. Since the writing and the application of the rule require a system, specifically a nation-state, then abstract justice, the abstract rule, can be (has been, historically) the path leading to violence against those who are "outside the rule." If not checked, relativized by the "I" and the "Thou," the rule embodied in the state is indeed one of the mainsprings of group violence: violence that is abolished internally by the application of the rule and that is discharged externally, since the applicability of the rule (and of the justice that the rule is supposed to apply) is only valid within the legal system that is, to the state. In this respect it would be of course absolutely absurd to maintain that German philosophy and political science

(from Hegel to Schmitt, i.e., from the absolutization of the state to the centrality of the friend/enemy dichotomy) "produced" the Nazi phenomenon: but we can say that that philosophy and that political science were fully compatible with it.

II. Solidarity and rights

It is very important to clarify a necessary distinction between solidarity and rights. There is the danger, as a matter of fact, that proponents of a compassionate view of human relations (including international relations) will focus their discourse only on the moral quality of our behavior towards others, considering that behavior as noble but optional, and the product of free individual choice.

Solidarity, on the contrary, should be conceived as the moving force behind norms and institutions that give structure and content to human society. The international discourse on human rights is very clear on this point. Rights mean entitlement, duty of recognition, mechanisms of implementation.

This is why when we talk of human rights the objection voiced by so called realists on the basis of a relativist approach to moral principles is totally irrelevant. Solidarity and compassion identify a moral issue, usually thanks to the passion and commitment of individuals who are ahead of their time, and are considered dreamers or radicals. One example will suffice: slavery. A millenarian institution, practiced in all cultures and condoned by all religions (usually in glaring contradiction with their basic tenets) was first challenged by isolated, visionary individuals on the basis of human compassion, but later it turned into norms, both national and international.

Abolitionism was a minority moral cause before becoming a universal norm. The same can be said, though we are still in a transitional stage, about the extension of the concept and norms of human rights from civil and political rights only to embrace socio-economic and cultural rights.

Compassion tells us that it is not very consistent to maintain that there is a right to publish a dissident newspaper but not the right to feed your family. The Italian Constitution, in its article 36, says: "Workers have the right to a salary which is proportionate to the quantity and quality of their work, and in any case sufficient to guarantee to them and to their fami-

lies a free and dignified existence". It is interesting, though the actual enforcement of the rule is of course problematic, that there have been some judicial decisions on the matter in cases of glaring "disproportion" and of gross "insufficiency" of retributions. As both jurists and political scientists agree, we are still very far from turning the whole range of socio-economic and cultural rights into enforceable norms. Yet, we are clearly no longer within the confines of mere human solidarity, without the possibility of referring to rights and formulating claims.

III. Victimhood and Compassion

Recognizing the plight of the victim is central to setting in motion the process that from compassion to active solidarity can bring about human action – and can create a more humane system of norms and institutions. Victimhood, on the other hand, is a concept that has to be handled with care. The recognition of the status of victim has turned into a proliferation of claims to victimhood, and often to reparations, that is rife with controversy and sometimes entails insoluble political problems.

The central difficulty in a sort of universal competition for recognized victimhood is that victims of historical wrongs and horrors tend first, to pretend to be a sort of "ontological victims" independently from present-day action and circumstances and, second, they tend to be deaf to the often equally justified claim to victimhood of others.

Granting ourselves the status of victims tends to go together with a justificatory mechanism allowing us, *qua* victims, to exert violence – including the most horrendous, the most lawless and inhumane – on those whom we identify as victimizers. Unscrupulous and militaristic leaders are usually very skillful in playing the victim game.

The rationale of terrorist action, as can be clearly seen by reading the statements of the authors of terrorist acts, almost inevitably includes the claim of victimhood. The same can be said of torture, recently linked to the claim of being victims of terrorism. Even in the case of genocide victimhood has played a role. Rwandan Hutus, the collective perpetrators of the 1994 genocide, were seeing themselves as the victims of century-old feudal exploitation by the Tutsis as well as the imminent victims of an impending genocide launched by them.

Historical wrongs and horrors should not be covered by denial, but the recognition of victimhood should be mutual and, especially, not considered a blanket authorization for illegal and immoral action.

To conclude, human compassion, the foundation of active solidarity, is not only ethically, but also psychologically, anthropologically and even biologically grounded. Not as an inevitable and invariable trait of humanity, since it can be overruled by passion or ideology (as well as by psychic disorder). Yet it is at least as real as the possibility of hostility and violence. This is also true in international relations, since the global dimension of human civilization is rendering less and less credible and sustainable the ancient drawing of limited circles of human recognition and ethical inclusion, and since the objective interconnectedness of human destiny on a global scale (from economic crises to environmental disasters, from terrorism to pandemic diseases) is pointing toward the need to extend our compassion and solidarity, thus our capacity to work together for survival and growth, from a restricted circle - the family, the tribe, our party, our race, our religious community - to humanity as such.

Not only a moral imperative, but an objective, "realist" need.