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# REDISCOVERING CIVIL ‘RELIGIOUS VIRTUES’ IN THE AGE OF EXTREMISM

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## **Abstract**

In our contemporary culture, it seems to be not only a matter of responsible academic interest, but also a civic duty to try to find an Archimedean point from which it is possible to construe some virtues related to the ‘transcendent’ which can help as moderators for the tendency to rationalize violence by strong religious certitudes. Arguably such virtues can be, for example, gratitude or thankfulness towards the transcendent object of one’s ‘spiritual urges’ and compassion for other human beings. The premise of an endeavour to identify more civil ‘religious virtues’ than the ones exhibited by religious fundamentalists needs not necessarily be theist, if we assume that there is, in human beings, a widely diffused ‘restless drive’ towards something perfect, which seems to be a mark of an ‘universal’ characteristic of the human spirit. However, the question remains how could such restlessness be ‘directed’ so as to yield socially beneficial virtues, instead of motivating religious fanaticism and stark terrorist actions. Perhaps responsible religious leadership which encourages the practice of civil ‘religious virtues’ can contribute to that outcome.

*Keywords:* transcendent, religious virtues, resentment, social benevolence, pluralist society

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## **1. Introduction**

There is a constant philosophical interest for the issue of ‘human restlessness’, whose classic occurrences can be found in the works of Augustine, Pascal and Kierkegaard. This ‘restless drive’ is connected by these authors with a more or less conscious urge to reach something more, or with a continuous drive to transcend oneself. Although it is difficult, from the sceptical point of view of an analytic philosopher, to move from these ‘longings’ to their supposed ‘object’ which is seen as inhabiting outside the natural world [J. Cottingham, *Human Nature and the Transcendent*, <http://www.johncottingham.co.uk/resources/Human-Nature-and-the-Transcendent.pdf>, accessed February 20, 2015], it is reasonable however to treat them as a motivational force for sustaining certain moral, aesthetic, and metaphysical values. This paper will not

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go as far as exploring the ontological soundness of postulating the real existence of such a 'transcendent object' that is commonly named God. However, the empirical evidence that such an 'object' is taken seriously by many human beings, who may revere or worship it more or less formally, should be considered.

Likewise, it is obvious that the attitude toward such 'transcendent object', which can be formalized through a normative code by theologians or religious ideologues, may also motivate one's behaviour towards other human beings. For example, if one's religion or ideological interpretation of it justifies revenge instead of forgiveness and compassion, it is plain that it may ground a rationalization of vindictive (possibly violent) actions.

Is it possible to 'filter' to some extent the religious virtues recommended by theologians or religious ideologues through the criterion of *social benevolence*? Arguably, this criterion is not merely extrinsic and instrumental, since one may also support it within a rationally coherent theological mindset. For example, for theistic-minded people it could be rationally obvious that if the Being called God is supposed to have created the universe in a generous way, such Being could hardly be conceived as willing an action against the life and welfare of his own creatures. If there were indeed in history some 'battles' whose goals were explained as being in accordance with the will of God, such as the ones of the Biblical Israelites against other nations, the notion of 'just war' is still traditionally confined (by theologians as well) to wars of defence. This remains valid even if the stakes of a war were expressed in terms of a confrontation of idolatries by the faith in Yahweh. It is recorded by the Biblical books that the prophet Elijah, for example, gave a hard lesson to the people who worshipped the Canaanite god Baal (which he considered an idol) in order to defend the worship of Yahweh (1 Kings 18.19-40). Obviously, his aim was to convert the 'idolaters' to the worship of the 'true God'. Yet, neither Elijah nor other Biblical prophets staged ambitious crusades against those whom they considered misguided. Cruelty or display of power 'on God's behalf' was never part of sound religious morality, in either Judaism, Christianity or Islam. To be sure, the Spanish Inquisitors or the modern Islamists have invoked God in very cruel circumstances. And yet, it remains deeply inconsistent to believe in a merciful Creator who wants to vengefully destroy a part of his own creation. Indeed, the use of force against non-believers by invoking a prophetic figure, which occurs for example in the devastating scenarios of the Islamist terrorists, cannot be accounted for in a theistic language, given its disproportionate, destructive and irrational character. Even within an apocalyptic frame of reference today's most aggressive religiously oriented or millenarian groups can hardly provide sensible theological and ethical reasons for their attempts to inflict as many casualties as possible.

So, we may safely suppose that a merciful Creator would wish to encourage benevolent social virtues rather than destructiveness – even when the harmful violent actions are supposed to be done on behalf of his own 'truth'. Religious fundamentalists tend to invest God with an irrational destructive will.

Yet, this seems to be an arbitrary ideological move, which is not grounded in a coherent theological perspective.

Even for those who are not willing to accept any theistic presuppositions at all, it could be rationally evident however that the 'restless drive' that seems to impel human beings to transcend themselves could hardly be seen as supporting violence and destructiveness. A rational demand of morality, such as the Kantian one, could follow from taking God as a standard of morality [1]. Of course, this does not necessarily entail a natural theology that argues for God's existence. The fact that human beings are endowed not only with 'transcendent longings', but also with an intrinsic rational sense of morality should naturally restrain immoralism (of course, if one does not endorse Nietzsche's exaltation of the latter). There is no logical relation between non-theistic presuppositions and immoralism or ethical nihilism.

Besides, human aesthetic experience can be complex enough to allow, for example, some 'poetic visions' which may transfigure reality by integrating it into a pattern of meaning. This kind of experience is not properly speaking religious, i.e. it is not necessarily related to a particular cult or creed. Poetic and religious language can sometimes be united, as it occurred for example in the classic Greek poetry [2]. A 'poetic experience' that is by no means linked to the profession of a formal religious creed may arise a sense of joy and gratitude which can trigger compassion and love for other fellow human beings. Thus, virtues like thankfulness, compassion, and love are not only related to narrow 'religious contexts'. But we may speak of them, however, as of 'religious virtues' in the sense that they involve a transcendent move from one's own self, and so they fit into a larger meaning of 'transcendence'. So, it seems to be possible to speak in a larger sense of 'religious virtues' without necessarily assuming the commitment to a denomination or a more or less explicit theistic standpoint.

Are there, in this broad sense of the terms, some *civil* 'religious virtues' which should be responsibly encouraged nowadays in order to counterbalance the uncivil moral ideology of religious extremists? Which are those virtues and why are they more likely to be socially beneficial than others?

## **2. The misfortunes of cultural resentment**

Before we start to investigate a possible 'list' of such socially beneficial virtues, we should first explore the misfortunes of the cultural resentment which seems to nurture the moral ideology of many religious extremists.

There is a noticeable psychological dimension related to the complex of the enclave culture which is already uncovered by the research of fundamentalist movements. From the Catholic Lefebvre movement to the haredi and Shi'ite fundamentalists, the same kind of marginalized and separatist culture which is trying to reshape the tradition on a local level, by rejecting not only the mainstream religion, but also the whole project of modernity, pervades ultra-traditionalist and extremist religious groups [3].

The authority of religious leaders in such communities is helped by the structure of the enclave, which is organized on the basis of insiders-outsiders principles [3, p. 83]. The group is usually fashioned as a counter society, though one that embodies some social ideal that is to be implemented later on in the society at large. This strategy of cultural isolation in order to reshape the tradition on a small scale, that is typical to many fundamentalist movements, should not however hide the fact that many such anti-modernist projects are actually motivated by the resentment of marginal groups towards the majority, as it is illustrated in the case of the ultra-Orthodox Jews who perceive themselves as being ‘in exile among Jews’. An obvious example is the extreme separatist group *Neturei Karta* [3, p. 44]. The feelings of resentment may explain why the members of such enclaves are reluctant to dialogue with their modernized coreligionists or with other people from the same ethnic group who have different values and social commitments.

Even if such groups are not always violent and do not invariably design militant agendas, the misfortunes of their collective resentment are apparent if we consider the tensions which they usually breed with respect to larger social or political communities or in relation to complete strangers. More often than not, such tensions are fostered by an intolerant ideology that is formed through picking from the legacy of religious teaching some norms which are narrowly interpreted so as to serve their immediate purposes. Although we may not have reasons to claim that intolerance is inherent to fundamentalist movements, there is a very strong tendency of most fundamentalist groups to protect their own religious identity by describing their ‘purity’ and uniformity of belief and practice as a moral and spiritual excellence [3, p. 17]. This is a dimension through which they normally compete with other religious groups and with secular institutions. They usually define themselves in opposition to such ‘unclean’ alternative groups or institutions. Reluctance to conform with the religious identity of a fundamentalist group may easily lead to dissent and exclusion.

This in-group resistance to diversity already suggests that the capability of most members of a fundamentalist group to adhere to the tenets of a pluralist society is usually underdeveloped. Strong religious identities fortified by resentment and ‘spiritual rivalry’ do not favour dialogue, democracy, and pluralism. Even if, on the other hand, every religion has its own claims to some ‘truths’ embodied in its doctrine, and the underlying metaphysical or theological ‘truths’ are not supposed to be subject to the approval or disapproval of a democratic majority, it is not socially beneficial (let alone charitable) to rely on those ‘truths’ in order to build impenetrable religious identities whose only terms with the surrounding society are confrontational. Religious groups have of course their own right to refuse to succumb to the ‘anything goes’, hedonistic society around them, but a harsh self-righteous emphasis on their purity and asceticism, as opposed to the perceived ‘decadent outside’ culture, amounts to pride and arrogance – which are, according to most religious moral doctrines, cardinal sins.

If the religious group is not successful in negotiating a social network outside of its own confessional walls, the temptation of the resentful enclave culture is hard to avoid. Although, in fact extremist separatist groups refuse contacts with the surrounding society also because they fear a 'dangerous feedback relationship', that would be encouraged by an increased empathy towards it [3, p. 44]. Not in the least, this fear is fed by the apprehension of the leaders of such fundamentalist movements that they might lose their status as a result of 'contamination' to the easy-going values of the modern world.

In the fundamentalist logic, the members of the religious community are holier if they do not have any commerce with the 'impure' and prevent any weakening of the inside-outside border. Thus, most members of fundamentalist groups may be unaware that their strong identity built along these lines is basically fostered by resentment and fear. The official interpretation of the 'holiness' of their own group can be overwhelming. As long as they avoid the 'infidel society' (in Arabic *al-mujtama' al-kafir*) or the 'evil kingdom' (in Hebrew *malchut ha-resha' a be-Yisrael shultanut zola*) they remain 'separated', that is allowed to inhabit a sacred realm, and protected from the "the darkness that covers the whole Earth" [3, p. 44].

Despite this fundamentalist rhetoric, it is fairly obvious that the stark Manichaean opposition between 'pure insiders' and 'sinful outsiders' on which religious extremist groups construe their identities is not only oversimplifying and morally problematic, but also potentially disruptive of the social order. It is of course unrealistic to hope that there could be a fairy-tale harmony between people with religious values-systems and secular hedonists, for example. On the other hand, it is simply untrue to say that religious actors or communities are always in the right with regard to moral issues, whereas secular groups or non-believers are invariably in the wrong. For example, when Catholic clinics in poor Sub-Saharan African countries refused to provide condoms to married couples in which one partner was infected with HIV and who subsequently died leaving many orphans in the street (the disease being in many cases transmitted in monogamous marriages) they were clearly taking erroneous decisions – and so did of course the African Roman Catholic bishops who claimed that condoms are "the heart of evil" [4]. Such "judgemental, rather than compassionate gospel" [4, p. 23] was offered by most Catholic leaders who also made the problematic claim that condoms are ineffective in preventing a disease like HIV, which kills, in African countries, 2 million people a year, and proposed instead the more unrealistic alternative to educate people for abstinence. The public health officials and AIDS activists who criticized Church's stance during the condom controversy, especially during the pontificate of John Paul II, had of course more ethical, scientific, and pragmatic arguments in their favour. Even if some Catholic bishops dissented with the official (Vatican) position, by considering the use of condoms acceptable if one partner had HIV, the attitude of Catholic health care workers in African countries conformed, generally speaking, to the indiscriminating ban on condoms in all cases. And although the Catholic Church as a whole cannot of course be described as a fundamentalist

community, this particular stance unfortunately has reflected an extremist-like inflexibility which has not been usually exhibited either by the Catholic leadership, or by Catholic health and social workers.

### **3. The social virtue of thankfulness**

We will examine now socially beneficial ‘religious virtues’ which should be responsibly encouraged as a counterbalance to the current fundamentalist epidemic of intolerance, unforgiveness, and vindictiveness.

In Cicero’s speech *Pro Plancio*, gratitude is called ‘the parent of all virtues’ and the greatest of all. Thomas Aquinas preserves the Roman special status of this virtue, quoting from Cicero’s assertion from *De Inventione* that thankfulness is a special part of justice [5].

Let us have a look at the main religious approaches to gratitude. In Judaism, no act of worship could dispense with the expression of gratitude, since according to the Hebrew worldview God is the origin of all things. Besides, in Judaism there is also an important emphasis on gratitude for acts of human goodness and kindness. Indeed, the religious literature of Judaism connects the gratitude to God to the interpersonal gratitude manifested in human relationships [6].

In Christianity, gratitude is seen as the basic attitude of the believer whose whole existence is supposed to come from a personal God. Christians are therefore encouraged to praise and give thanks to their own Creator. This is seen as an acknowledgement of God’s generosity, and, as Aquinas explains by borrowing from Cicero, as a special part of justice – that is, as a kind of ‘debt’ that we owe God, or our parents, or our benefactors, although in different degrees [5]. Gratitude is not seen by Christian theologians as a sentimental feeling, but as a virtue.

Likewise, Islam encourages the followers to praise God with gratefulness in every circumstance, motivating them with the saying that those who do so will be the first summoned to paradise. In Islam, the purpose of fasting and prayers is basically to put the believer in a state of gratitude towards God’s goodness.

Empirical studies in recent years have shown that people who are more grateful than others have a higher level of psychological well-being [7] and are more altruistic-oriented [8]. The latter effect of a thankful attitude is obviously more socially sensitive than the former, and it supports the assertion that the virtue of gratitude satisfies the criterion of *social benevolence* which we have chosen as an Ariadne-thread at the beginning of this paper.

In considering religious people, we may say that even if thankfulness is not so much expressed in relation to human benefactors, and is primarily directed to the transcendent ‘object’ of their devotion, it may trigger however altruism and benevolence to other fellow creatures. For less explicitly religious people or for non-believers, the virtue of gratitude can be felt exclusively in immanent terms (for example, I may be grateful to the scientists who made

possible the invention of aircrafts each time I travel by plane, or to the genius who found a medical remedy for a condition each time I find alleviation through it), or in more 'aesthetic' or loosely 'metaphysical' terms, towards the author of a work of art which allows me to have access to a transfigured reality or to an unexpected pattern of meaning.

If the capability for empathy and generosity is increased by such expressions of gratefulness, it seems to be less significant, from an ethical and a sociological point of view, if this derives or not from a formal religious commitment. On the other hand, it seems to be socially responsible for religious leaders to encourage the faithful to focus on gratitude and thankfulness, rather than cultural resentment or oversimplifying inside-outside patterns. It is debatable whether gratefulness is primarily a social or a 'religious' virtue, not necessarily in the narrowest sense of the term. Nevertheless, in an age in which religious terrorists resentfully resort to force and violence to punish the 'unfaithful', or less faithful, or differently faithful, religious leaders should cultivate, by encouraging the virtue of gratitude, a more sensitive 'social conscience' as part of their responsibilities towards people in general, whether religious or not.

Gratitude was discussed, in 'psychological' approaches of ethics, as being in a striking symmetry with resentment and anger [9]. Thus, the harms created by resentment are structurally replaced by psychologists with the benefits of gratitude, as if they were mirror opposites to one another [7, p. 66-67]. This can be, of course, a scientific reason why thankfulness should be cultivated as a key-virtue, in order to diminish the harmful social and psychological effects of resentment.

#### **4. The virtue of compassion**

Another crucial 'religious virtue' that is often recognized as highly beneficial for society is the virtue of compassion. Compassion is usually related to suffering. Etymologically, it means an active disposition for 'co-suffering' (from the Latin *cum-passion*) which is based on empathy, and breeds an active desire to alleviate suffering. Many philosophers treat compassion as a great virtue, and all the major religions rank it amongst the most important virtues. In some of them, *compassion* is closely linked to *charity*, to which it provides meaning and content. Compassion is also a 'democratic' virtue, and is often seen as having the potential to shape, in pluralistic societies, a coexistence that is based on sympathy rather than indifference (the Rawlsian *modus vivendi*) or, even worse, parochial enclosure and hostility towards strangers.

Since all major religions of the world share as a value the priority of *compassion*, and the psychologists, on the other hand, provide evidence that this social emotion increases the motivation to relieve the suffering of others, there seem to be enough reasons for this socially beneficial virtue to be cultivated by religious leaders and by individuals who make sense of themselves in terms of their being in relation to something 'transcendent'. Psychological studies of what

triggers compassion show however that a mere rational exhortation that is based on cognitive persuasion and motivational appeal for maximizing compassion and minimizing cruelty is usually unsuccessful. They recommend instead, among other 'means' to maximize compassion, "engaging with social institutions like religion" [10]. The influence of religion on behavioural compassion is not merely ideological. It seems that a behaviour could be reinforced more effectively by religious or spiritual meditation on love and kindness or through prayer (possibly also through meditating on the effects that the prayers of other persons have had on one's own life or well-being) [11]. At the same time, since people are normally more likely to engage in behaviours they consider valuable and virtuous, the fact that most religions see compassion as a highly valued virtue can be an effective social source for individuals to be stimulated to behave more compassionately. Usually, religions offer a ground on which other virtues connected with compassion, such as empathy, sympathy, humility, loyalty, and love are also emphasized [10]. A religious value-system may also influence the faithful into believing that the goals related to compassion take precedence over more competitive goals or even over some self-protective concerns. Let us see now how the virtue of compassion is contemplated by major religions.

In Judaism, God is invoked as the Father of Compassion. He is often depicted as showing his mercy in view of the sufferer's helplessness and as forgiving his transgressions. He is compared to a forbearing mother who consoles his young offspring whenever it is in distress. Compassion is also seen by the Jewish tradition as the basis of the Golden Rule, which is formulated in the *Talmud* as follows: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah." [*Babylonian Talmud*, tractate Shabbat 31a]

The same Judaic tradition of representing God as "the Father of Compassion" is reiterated by the apostle Paul (Saul) (2 Corinthians 1.3-7), who was at first educated as a Pharisee in Jewish schools. For Christians, Jesus embodies the essence of the charitable compassion of God. According to his preaching, a person who acts with compassion becomes a model for the Christian conduct, as for example in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus also preaches the extension of compassion to everyone, regardless of their allegiance to the Christian faith or to their moral 'goodness'. Thus, the ideal Christian compassion embraces even one's enemies, not just one's friends or allies.

In Islam, God's attributes of compassion and mercy are frequently reminded to the faithful. Actually, most chapters of the Quran begin with the verse "In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful". The pious Muslim should begin each prayer and every important action by appealing to Allah the merciful and compassionate. Family ties of Muslims should also reflect God's attribute of compassion. Islam is often described as a religion of peace and compassion, and indeed some Islamic movements, like the Ahmadyya Muslim Jama'at, focus on the very practice of universal compassion. Nevertheless, there are some verses in the Quran according to which it is not recommended to show compassion to non-Muslims, people who commit



adultery or fornication, apostates or infidels. If taken literally (and many Islamic fundamentalists do take them literally) they may look like an advice to the Muslim community to chastise such disbelievers (Quran 16:88). Since such people disobey the will of Allah, they are described as undeserving of compassion (Quran 24:2). Of course, there can be many theological interpretations of these quotes, and the Quran is not singular in containing literal exhortations to 'punishment', as everyone who has ever read the Book of Psalms knows. The Quran also contains verses like "My Mercy encompasses all things" (Quran 7:156) which leave room for more universalistic applications of the virtue of compassion.

For example, a politics of relative religious tolerance, if not compassion, had actually existed within the hybrid culture of the Ottoman Empire, which notoriously tolerated Sephardic Jews expelled from Catholic Spain in Thessaloniki, as well as Christians who practiced their faith, like the Greek monks who settled in the out-of-the-way Meteora monasteries. Surely the relatively tolerant leaders of the Ottoman Empire observed the recommendations of the Quran with regard to non-Muslims, but were inclined to read them through accommodating and protective lenses. The intolerance exhibited by some contemporary Islamist groups is in obvious contrast to the pluralist spirit that has characterized the Islamic Ottoman leadership.

In Buddhism, compassion is seen as the most appropriate response to the basic 'truth of suffering' and it should encompass all living beings. The ultimate wish of the archetypal Buddha is to relieve every suffering which comes from pain, fear and sorrow and affects all living creatures. Compassion for others should be however preceded and made possible by the compassion for oneself. According to the Buddhist tradition, only compassion for one's own suffering can allow someone to manifest effective compassion for the suffering of others. Since compassion begins by sharing deeply the interiority of others, and by recognizing in them the wish to be free from suffering that is known through the exploration of one's own interiority, it should proceed from the experience of appreciating one's own suffering and, consequently, from being compassionate to oneself [12].

The Hindu tradition also praises compassion as a virtue that should be manifested for all creatures, along with sympathy [13]. According to the ethics of Tulsidas, compassion should be contrasted with arrogance, the former being a source of virtue (*dharmic* life, or right way of living), while the latter is a source of sin [14]. In Hinduism there is, however, a distinction between compassion (*daya*) and pity (*kriya*). Compassion means a unity of feeling with the sufferer, whereas pity means feeling sorry for the sufferer in a way that leaves room for a condescending 'looking down' on him or her. The Hindu tradition further distinguishes between a compassion that should be manifested for innocent and for guilty sufferers. Although absolute compassion applies to both, in the second case it should be balanced by justice (as in the case of convicted murderers, for example).

The canon of the more ascetic tradition of Jainism, from which Mahatma Gandhi borrowed important elements, emphasizes even more than Hinduism the compassion for all life, both human and non-human. This religious tradition has also required that both monks and laity be completely vegetarian. The Jain traditional stance of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) goes of course far beyond vegetarianism. According to the Jain worldview, nonviolence relies on the belief that all beings, including animals, possess a spark of the divine energy [15]. Consequently, harming any of them is the equivalent of harming oneself. Such a commitment to ‘causing no injury’ (*ahimsa*) is in fact debated in the classical literature of Hinduism (in *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*) in cases of war and in circumstances which require self-defence.

To sum up, major religions seem to emphasize the virtue of compassion, although the limits to which its practice is recommended and the nature of its legitimate objects may differ. Compassion is seen by most religious and spiritual traditions as a key-practice that can contribute to peace, in a both social and political sense. Its practice logically diminishes the inter-cultural or inter-religious tensions which may foster intolerance and violence.

It is reasonable to acknowledge, on the other hand, that in the real world the compassionate and the non-violent should always face the dilemma of the ‘clean hands policy’ against brutal antagonists – the dilemma of pacifism as opposed to realism. In politics, if nonviolence takes the form of ‘civil disobedience’, the fate of the pacifist may depend on the civility of those to whom he or she chooses to resist by non-violence. Thus, if both Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. succeeded in their non-violent protests, one against the colonialism of the British Empire and the other against the racist policies of the United States, the explanation for their success is, according to Michael Walzer, that both the British and the Americans have had some scruples. So, they were not only reluctant to crush the non-violent protesters, but were also moved by their idealism [16]. Presumably a tyrant like Hitler would have interpreted such non-violent resistance as weakness, and would have had no hesitation to put it down with force, the same way as Communist dictators have put down any form of non-violent dissent, even under the form of non-aligned opinions.

If the pragmatic success of a political ‘non-violent defence’ may depend on the circumstances and on the scruples of political leaders, social compassion seems to be nonetheless a key-virtue of pluralistic democratic societies which fully satisfies the criterion of *social benevolence*. Therefore, on the grounds of social reason, religious leaders may play a crucial role in pluralistic societies and on the global stage by promoting a peaceful coexistence based on sympathy through valuing highly the practice of this virtue. Furthermore, people who are not members of Churches or religious communities can also find worthwhile the practice of this ‘religious virtue’. In spite of its being ranked as a special virtue in every religious *magna charta virtorum*, compassion is first and foremost a *humane* virtue, which does not necessarily depend on a religious mindset. On the contrary, as we have seen, some religious texts can restrain, if taken literally, its normative application to one’s own religious community.

But a more serious reason of concern is whenever such limits of compassion are further interpreted as a justification for intolerance towards strangers or people with different beliefs or sexual orientations. This does not occur, of course, only when intolerance is married with violence, as in the case of terrorists. We can also adduce the case of American conservative Protestants who practice hate-speech against Muslims or sexual minorities. Most of this intolerant discourse comes from ideological interpretations of the Christian faith which fail to recall the universal range of compassion recommended by Jesus. The importance of emphasizing compassion seems to have been, on the other hand, actively put forward through the religious leadership of people like Dalai Lama, Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, and Pope Francis. Responsible religious leadership is not only morally required, but also feasible.

## **5. Conclusions**

This paper was meant to argue for socially responsible religious leadership in a world that is marred by extremism and violence 'on God's behalf'. This is a pluralistic world in which it seems to be inadequate to rely only on firm, and often one-sided, interpretations of one's doctrinal *corpus*. Some doctrinal 'truths' are of course indisputable for the dogmatists of each religion, but the extent to which the allegiance to the dogmas impact upon a peaceful coexistence with others needs to be subject to further agreements and negotiations. A peaceful coexistence in a pluralist society does not necessarily entail compromising one's basic set of religious principles. Yet it means to accept that others may have different cultural presuppositions or may rely on different principles. On a more active moral level, the awareness to the pluralistic challenges of the contemporary world should encourage religious leaders to responsibly support the practice of social 'religious virtues' which can benefit a peaceful democratic life and may prevent the faithful's falling into the traps of cultural resentment, intolerance and violence.

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