

The logo for 'Just So' is rendered in a 3D, blocky font. The letters are white with a dark grey shadow underneath, giving it a three-dimensional appearance. The background of the cover is a photograph of a stone wall with a large crack, and a blue and yellow border frames the image.

Just So

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How is a compassionate society sustained in a market place?

Michael Taylor

Just So
stories and critical comment
on social justice themes

HOW IS A COMPASSIONATE SOCIETY SUSTAINED IN A MARKET PLACE?

Introduction

The following article is a slightly amended version of a paper I was asked to contribute to a conference on 'Religion and secularism: a dynamic balance?' at Cumberland Lodge, a conference centre in Windsor Great Park, early in 2008.

Cumberland Lodge is an independent organisation, with a broadly Christian ethos, which aims to promote fresh debate and cross-sector cooperation on a range of matters affecting the development of society. On this occasion it brought together participants from the churches and other religious groups with members of secular and humanist organisations, representatives of the public and private sectors, the media, universities and civil society. The conference dealt with a range of topics including the limits of tolerance, secular and religious morality, religion and politics and faith schools.

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HOW IS A COMPASSIONATE SOCIETY SUSTAINED IN A MARKET PLACE?

A brief paper does not allow me to go into detail or be over careful in what I say, so let me make five relatively brief remarks. They are made from a particular perspective. For the last 20 years at least, including my time as Director of Christian Aid, much of my attention has been focused on world poverty and development issues; so the 'society' referred to in the title of this paper is likely to be as much international as national, and the 'market', the market we associate with globalisation.

1. My first remark has to do with definitions. 'A market place' need not necessarily refer to a so-called free-market capitalist economy, but for present purposes I am going to assume that it does. The phrase 'a compassionate society' needs a little more thought. We can use it in a fairly loose and general way to refer to a humane society which protects its most vulnerable members, including the poor, the mentally and physically disabled, the old and the very young. We can remind ourselves of its more intense and literal meaning which is 'to suffer with those who suffer', which the self-

giving 'agape' love of the Christian tradition could well lead us to do. Realism suggests however that that may not be a very fruitful line to pursue. Sympathy with those who suffer and attempts to alleviate their sufferings may well be practical goals in a compassionate society but not, I think, persuading those who are not suffering to take on the sufferings of those who are.

There is however another idea associated with 'compassion' in at least three religious traditions that I know of, and it may be of more relevance. In the Christian tradition it is encapsulated in the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan where the Samaritan is not only distinguished by his practical and constructive sympathy for the traveller who has been robbed and left for dead by the roadside but by his willingness to cross the boundary between two social and religious groups: Samaritans and Jews, whose relationships were strained to say the least. It suggests that compassion is not to be limited to family and friends, to those of our own religion or social or national group, to those we like or who are not seen as a threat, to those who are neighbours only in the sense of close proximity, to the familiar or those whose needs we readily understand. For the Jew it was not to be

limited to fellow Jews or even 'the stranger within our gates' but extend to foreigners and Gentiles.

Compassion is not just an easily recognised fellow-feeling. It challenges us to stretch its limits even to the point, to quote another Gospel image, of loving our enemies, or those we fear the most. A similar idea can be found in Buddhism, I believe, where compassion is to extend beyond the human to the whole created order. Where pity has its boundaries the true nature of compassion may not have been understood.

So 'the market place' in what follows is the 'free' market of global capitalism, and 'compassion' has to do with a positive, practical and understanding response to those who suffer and are vulnerable together with a readiness to be challenged as to where such compassion should begin and end.

2. My second remark has to do with the prejudice that could lie within the question: How is a compassionate society sustained in a market place? It implies that the one is intrinsically at odds with the other and that in a free-market economy compassion will struggle to survive. That prejudice has been very much

alive and well in the development world I come from where non-governmental organisations have often regarded the World Bank, for example, set up to promote development and pursuing certain economic policies, as an opponent rather than an ally in creating a more humane or compassionate world. The prejudice was nicely brought home to me towards the end of last year when I was in India and met up with an India theologian who had just returned from study leave in Birmingham UK. He presented me with a copy of his recent book. It is called: 'Jesus and Mother Economy'. It is highly critical of global capitalism and argues that it is a far cry from any economic order in line with the teaching of Jesus. It can certainly not be described as a 'Mother' economy with all the overtones of caring and compassion that go with ideals of motherhood. He concludes that it needs to be replaced.

Western Christianity has of course largely aligned itself with free-market capitalism ever since the days when, unlike Islam, it finally abandoned its stand against usury. It has its critics in both North and South. They see it as being at odds with 'compassion' in at least two different ways: one has to do with structures

and policies and the other with values and attitudes.

On the structural and policy side my Indian theologian friend was much exercised on the day we met about 'call centres': the often difficult-to-understand sources of information when we need help with our train timetables, or bank accounts, or computers. Whilst we might regard them as job opportunities increasingly outsourced by the West to the Indian subcontinent, he regarded them as the latest example of the exploitative nature of capitalism by which the strong take advantage of the weak and profit from cheap labour and cheap raw materials. Indian call-centres do not strike me, as I told him, as straightforward examples, but you do not have to go far in the so-called Third World, to the sweat shops of S-E Asia and the working conditions and rates of pay which the Fair-trade movement tries to eradicate, to feel you have found them.

On a bigger scale, global terms of trade, often dictated by the more powerful trading nations and companies, are still unequal allowing the big players to protect themselves and subsidise their industries whilst imposing open markets on poorer countries: policies from which the strong rather than the weak are likely to benefit. Some of these measures,

along with a distaste for public services delivered by governments and a preference for privatisation, have been among the so-called 'Structural Adjustment Policies' pursued by International Financial Institutions in the name of development.

Two other areas of criticism, where global capitalism is criticised for its lack of care and compassion, fall into this broad category of structures and policies. One is the way in which the global economy often seems to be more interested in buying, selling and making money than in using money to create goods and services that benefit ordinary people. The number of transactions now devoted to trading money is said to far outweigh those devoted to production. The other has to do with international debt. Many poorer countries became indebted for reasons which were not altogether their fault and certainly not the fault of the extremely poor citizens of those countries who suffered the consequences when things went badly wrong. Unable to sustain their debts, unlike wealthier countries, poor indebted countries were forced to choose between paying off the interest on their loans and providing basic health care, education and even nourishment for their people. In

demanding their pound of flesh the creditors were hardly cast in a compassionate light.

This inhuman face of the global market economy recently revealed an even uglier side. A great deal of effort has gone into alleviating the international debt crisis and significant progress has been made. Agreements have been entered into through the so-called HIPC (Highly Indebted Poor Countries) process whereby debts have been cancelled altogether or reduced to a more sustainable level. It now transpires however that these debts can be bought in the market place and, entirely legally, the purchaser can then demand something like the full amount for which the debtor country was originally liable. This ugly behaviour seems a far cry from a 'Mother Economy' or a compassionate society and the companies involved have rightly been dubbed 'Vulture Funds'.

To turn from structures and policies, free market capitalism has also been criticised for the kind of values and attitudes it fosters or indeed it needs to foster in order to keep going. The list is familiar enough and includes greed, materialism, selfishness, consumerism, the required mobility which breaks up settled and caring communities, cut-throat efficiency and environmental exploitation. Oliver James

in his recent book: *The Selfish Capitalist*, suggests that the high value it places on a surfeit of money and possessions breeds relative need and misery and leads to a high rate of mental illness. Another unwelcome feature frequently mentioned is the highly competitive spirit engendered in the market place. It subverts co-operation, promotes individualism and contradicts the truth that we are meant to work together and help one another rather than outdo each other as rivals at every possible turn. A society where profits come before people in a ruthless, grasping market place will have difficulty in sustaining a compassionate reputation.

If these criticisms refer largely to the international arena and the development debate, they easily resonate with some of the issues and attitudes we face at the national and local level such as growing indebtedness, sub-prime mortgages, commodification, consumerism and the push for lower prices. A hard-nosed, asset-stripping, money-grabbing economy will find it hard to be compassionate.

These criticisms however, if they cannot be entirely countered, can be counterbalanced and have been, frequently, in my hearing. The global market economy, it is said, has raised more people out of poverty than any other

economic system we know, and if that is not compassionate then what is? If the benefits have long been confined to the North they are now being increasingly enjoyed in the South as the economies of China and India for example rapidly grow. It can be argued, as the World Bank and G8 finance ministers and others have often argued, that the surest, long-term route out of poverty is not less of the market economy but more, and that poorer countries, though they may pay dearly for their initial membership, would be foolish not to join the club.

Given space, we could pick our way through a number of other criticisms. The market itself is the most effective mechanism that we know to ensure that people get what they need and want at prices they can afford to pay. It increases liberty and choice. The significance of fleeting transactions on the money markets of the world, compared with trade deals, can be overplayed. Competition is often grossly misunderstood. It is a spur to efficiency and high standards of provision and service. The opposite of competition is monopoly which does no-one very much good except those who grab it and try to keep it. And, far from co-operation being anti-pathetic to market practices, it is essential at all sorts of levels to

their success, from the shop floor to the building site to the board room.

Added to all of this, despite the widespread view of a world and a society that does not care, there is plenty of evidence that it does. Compassion is alive and well. On the large scale of global issues, take the entirely voluntary forces that rallied round to fight against apartheid (defeating it ironically enough with mainly economic weapons) and which now combine to put pressure on the regime in Burma. Or take the generous response to constant appeals for emergency aid, or the Jubilee Debt Campaign, which brought people of all faiths together in their thousands not only in Europe and America but in Southern countries as well; and that outstanding example represents only a small part of a vast network of voluntary, civil society organisations at home and abroad committed, not to bettering themselves and their members, but to improving the lot of the more vulnerable members of our society. Nor is compassion confined to the voluntary sector or the considerable support which families and friends and neighbours still give to one another but can be found in many an institutional setting including schools, hospitals and businesses.

The mindset therefore which simply assumes that a market economy and a compassionate society are wholly incompatible has to be treated with caution. Careful analysis and evaluation will help us here more than prejudice. That does not mean of course that there is a surfeit of compassion or that the market place we all live in is beyond improvement. It may be good at creating wealth for example but it is still not good at distributing it and the gap between rich and poor continues to be far too wide.

3. The question however is how we might improve a situation which, as I have to tell myself from time to time, may not be a total disaster, and it brings me to my third set of remarks.

It is frequently said, by religious groups (Christian evangelicals and Buddhists among them) and others, that you will not change society without changing the people who make it up or, to put it more positively, if you want to change society then change the people who live in it. Somehow we have to convert individuals, especially the young, if not to a different religion, then certainly to a different set of values. We have to socialise them into a

very different culture and way of life. A compassionate society can only be made up of compassionate individuals. So our thoughts turn to all sorts of strategies by which this might be achieved such as strengthening the voluntary sector, training in citizenship, national community service, moral education in schools, training for parenthood, role models and so on. Faith communities have, potentially, a very important role to play here especially where, unlike many Christian communities in the West these days, they are powerful and influential forces in their communities. Unfortunately they are quite capable of narrowing the horizons of compassion, becoming judgmental and encouraging religious sectarianism. At their best however they can draw on deep wells of spirituality where, as we have mentioned, religious faith inspires and challenges us to include rather than exclude ever-increasing numbers of strangers and outcasts within our attempts to sympathise and alleviate suffering.

I would not wish for one moment to be anything but supportive of this approach. You sustain a compassionate society by enlarging the boundaries of compassion and increasing the numbers of compassionate individuals through teaching and example. But if religion,

and certainly my Christian religion, encourages such an approach it is equally clear that it is not enough, so that an over-reliance on it may end up being not-so-very-compassionate after all.

Forming compassionate people in order to sustain a compassionate society is an acceptable strategy because it brings some admirable and necessary values like sympathy, generosity, caring and selflessness to the forefront, and also because, in the understanding of most world religions, men and women are capable of achieving them. This is what Islam understands by the essential goodness of human nature and what Christianity and Islam refer to when they talk about men and women made in the image of God. Human behaviour can successfully aspire to divine behaviour as it were, and can reflect the divine pity and generosity.

But one of the strengths of Christianity as I understand it is what I refer to as its 'realism'. If there is a promising side to human nature there is a dark side as well. It is stubborn and persistent. It is referred to as 'original sin' in the religious vocabulary. There is much talk of it being redeemed but there is no convincing evidence that any religion has had a great deal of success in doing so. Religious and non-

religious traditions, politically and otherwise, endlessly look forward to new societies, radical changes for the better and improved world orders, but fail to turn their hopes and promises into stable achievements.

Because, I think, of our basic insecurity as human beings there is an eradicable tendency within us to make the choices which we believe will add to our own safety and, if need be, at the expense of the safety of others. It is not capitalism or a free market economy that makes us self-regarding, hungry for our own advantage, possessive, competitive when it comes to my advantage over yours, impatient with the burdens and sufferings of those who have little immediate connection with our lives or who threaten to intrude on them in unhelpful ways. These behavioural patterns are not the children of the free market (though some of them can contribute to its success and its woes). They are the children of our existential insecurity which drives us to think first of the greater safety of number one; and no amount of preaching or persuasion or education or socialisation is going to remove them as a major force with which we need to reckon if we are to foster a more compassionate society. We certainly need compassionate individuals to oil the wheels of our life together. We can be

thankful that there are quite a lot of them around. We should do everything we can to increase their number. But such an individualistic and voluntaristic approach by itself is not enough. It is utopian and unhelpful to imagine we can ever have a society stocked full of people guaranteed to be compassionate for most of the time.

4. My fourth remark therefore returns to the world of structures and policies in order to underline that if we want to create and sustain a compassionate society we shall have to structure it in a more compassionate way. Charles Elliott, my predecessor as Director of Christian Aid, caught the point in a book he published just after his departure. He called it 'Comfortable Compassion'. In the world of international development he pointed the finger at those who were prepared to donate money and time to charitable organisations, such as aid agencies, in order to alleviate poverty, but were not prepared to get involved in the political and social struggles without which there was little hope of lasting improvement. They may have felt compassionate but in the long run they were not being compassionate. They tended to comfort themselves and ease their conscience more than comforting the

destitute. In other words, compassion may be better guaranteed by somewhat impersonal structures than by compassionate people.

A rather different way of making the point is to be clear about the connection between compassion and power. In a world where most of us have a strong tendency to look after number one, the more power we have (through money, position, personality or whatever) the more successful we shall be in our own defence. Those who need our compassion are often those with little if any power which therefore makes them far more vulnerable. True compassion here has less to do with kindly disposed people lending a sympathetic ear or a helping hand or making a charitable donation, leaving the balance of power entirely untouched. It has much more to do with putting structures in place which strengthen the hands of the weak to look after themselves as successfully as we do, whether we feel compassionate towards them or not.

What such structural measures should be is by no means easy to decide. It requires of us hard work, learning from experience and making good use of all kinds of relevant disciplines from the religious and moral, through the social and political, to the economic and technical. Arguments however about World Trade

Agreements, Solidarity movements, Human Rights, International Law, Debt-free economies, Jubilee mechanisms, progressive taxation, wealth creation and distribution at least offer us a relevant agenda.

A collection of essays, by Samuel Brittan the economist and journalist, called: 'Against the Flow' (Atlantic Books 2005), written by what I judge to be a passionate individual, serves as a valuable antidote to my own tendency to be (perhaps) over critical and suspicious of the free market economy. With its emphasis on liberty, it made one reader feel he was venturing into slightly more right of centre territory than usual. But the book is also valuable in that it wrestles in a well-informed rather than sentimental way with structural measures which might contribute to the making and sustaining of a more compassionate society. I myself was attracted to them for a number of reasons. They touched on issues of power. They were not economically naïve, even if controversial, and they even resonated with that deeper religious and spiritual insight which understands how compassion seeks to push back the boundaries of human sympathy: beyond the so-called 'genuine' asylum seekers for example to the economic migrants.

To take two of Brittan's suggestions, the first was fairly familiar to me since I have often advocated it myself. In the global economy money and capital can move easily across borders swiftly and without constraints: at the flick of a computer switch for that matter, whilst people seeking jobs or labour in general cannot. The power of the one to seek and find opportunities to prosper compared to that of the other is enormous. Visas, passports, permits, quotas, immigration rules, border controls, security considerations all stand in its way. A good example of a structural move towards a more compassionate society, according to Brittan, would be the free movement of labour to match the free movement of capital. The second example, which I had heard of but not really considered, is to radically increase the number of people with access to private capital, recognised assets and investment income, a modest version of which may be the recently introduced 'Child Trust Fund'. In addition Brittan wants to push beyond arguments about a minimum wage to arguments about a guaranteed, universal, unearned, basic income. Insofar as such measures ease the vulnerability of the vulnerable they are exercises in compassion. I do not refer to them

however because I am capable of arguing their merits but because they are excellent examples of the structural approach which I favour.

It can be objected of course that if we are to have a compassionate society by structuring it along compassionate lines, ensuring adequate care and security for all, we shall still need selfless, compassionate people with wide sympathies to advocate and implement the necessary structural measures, and reasonably compassionate people to vote for them. It can also be argued that structural measures can never go far enough. It is not difficult to imagine an old or disabled person, for example, who is financially secure, reasonably fed, has the freedom to make choices and for whom adequate institutional provision has been made who nevertheless remains isolated and lonely and starved of friendship. We can only re-iterate the basic point. We should do everything in our power to nurture deeply compassionate people and a culture of compassion, but, given our human nature, it is an insufficient strategy taken by itself, where the perfect so easily becomes the enemy of the good.

5. My fifth and final remark is merely to note two clusters of words which we should avoid making over discrete. The first includes words like: personal, private, voluntary, charitable, religious, spiritual and small scale. In the second are words like: structural, systemic, public, secular, legislative, coercive and large scale.

Compassion probably sits more easily in the popular mind with the first cluster than the second. I have argued in this paper that unless it is firmly linked with the second it runs the risk of not being compassion at all and of running away into the sands of sentimentality where we feel good but do not do much good.

The wider theme of the conference at Cumberland Lodge had to do with religion and secularism. I have already referred to some of the links between compassion and religious traditions and the way in which faith-based communities might be expected to inculcate compassion in their members and constantly challenge them to push back its boundaries to include more and more of their fellow human beings within it. But if religion is to be serious about a compassionate society it too must be careful not to lock itself into my first cluster of words along with the personal, private, voluntary and small-scale.

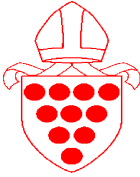
In Western society there are two well-known reasons why it is easy for it do so. The first is the whole history of secularisation. It did not and will not spell the end of religion. But it has been fairly successful in putting religion in its place, often aided and abetted by religious believers themselves. Secularisation brought down the mighty ecclesiastical authorities from their thrones, where they had ruled over almost all the affairs of men, and sought to confine their influence to the personal and private. Secularisation did not kill off religion. It released areas of life from religious control. It privatised religion, separating church and state and promulgating familiar ideas such as: 'religion is a personal matter between an individual and his or her God' or 'religion should keep out of politics' or 'religion and politics don't mix'.

The second reason why it is easy for religion to confine itself to the personal, private, voluntary and small-scale is the widespread perception that some religious traditions are now venturing outside of those limited spheres in highly unfortunate ways. The America neo-con supporters of President Bush and so-called Islamic militants are the two obvious examples. If this is what happens when religion goes public better it stays put where it now is.

I have argued however that if religion is serious about compassion it cannot possibly restrict its attentions to the private and personal but must play its part in establishing compassionate structures. It must be active in the public, political and legislative realms.

The question is not whether religion should go public but how. According to my understanding, first, it should contribute its own insights to the formation of public opinion and policy as energetically and persuasively as it can: in this case at least challenging the boundaries of compassion and maintaining a clear-eyed realism. How else does it show that it cares about sustaining a compassionate society and its commitment to achieving it in the best way possible? Second, any religious tradition must respect the fact that it is fallible and not the only source of wisdom. There are other religious traditions, also fallible, which have their own insights to bring to the table, and there are other disciplines from social science and anthropology to economics, fallible again, without which, when it comes to policy making, religion is liable to talk as much nonsense as sense. And, third, although religion must contribute vigorously to public debate, in this case about the structures of a compassionate society, it must not attempt to

dictate the outcome as if it had overriding authority. The outcome can only be arrived at by inclusive, democratic processes which search for consensus. In that sense the outcome is 'secular' not 'religious'. Religion discredits itself if it absolves itself from the all-important task of embedding compassion in the social order by retreating to the sole task of nurturing compassionate individuals. But religion over-reaches itself if, having contributed to public debate and policy making, it insists that its views should prevail, rather than the negotiated views of the plural communities of which it is a part.



Just So is meant to be read and studied by a wide range of people, both within the faith communities and in wider society. It is being circulated to churches and other faith groups, voluntary and community agencies, statutory organisations and local authority departments.

If you have any comments about the contents or want further copies, please contact John Paxton, Worcester Diocesan Social Responsibility Officer, at The Old Palace, Deansway, Worcester, WR1 2JE or by email jpaxton@cofe-worcester.org.uk.

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