

Merci, mother of Peace

The word "mercy" comes originally from the latin *merces*, with the secondary meaning of "that which is deserved (hence, later "that which is earned", i.e. payment). It later in Christian Latin meant "pity", and thus became identified with the latin *miseriordia*, "compassion, pity." Misericordia, with a capital M, was the goddess of Mercy or Compassion.

I believe to fully understand the subtle semantic changes, we should relate to yet another key term, namely "Charity". This word derives from the Latin *Caritas*, meaning "love, affection", but also "esteem (for people or things)". In a similar fashion, the Greek *agapē* means both "love" and "charity" or "alms".

Now these are not merely philological developments, and a series of semantic transformations. They are primarily psycholinguistic developments. For clearly, one who loves another, holds him in esteem, and wishes the best for him/her, to succour in any and every way. Pitying, treating with compassion and acts of charity are the logical corollaries of such a relationship.

What, then, generates pity and compassion? What moves a person to charity? Surely, it is the awareness of a degree of lacking on the part of the other, a lacking which is distressful and the cause of suffering. Love, compassion, and charity seek to emend and rectify this deficiency, and since all deficiency or insufficiency is ultimately a measure of a comparison of situations, the rectification of which posits some kind of adjustment, a move towards a greater degree of equalization to offset and diminish the "gap", be it social, economic, psychological or theological. Lack of such adjustment leads to conflict, while equitable adjustment, often through mediation, is a basic requirement for peace. Let it be clear, peace is not synonyms with equality, but it does demand respect and esteem.

Interreligious dialogue is an exercise to discover the theological justification for mutual respect. It seeks to reevaluate those differences which constituted the reasons for conflict and hatred. It strives uncover the positive in the other, while admitting the negative in oneself, thus leading towards a new readjusted balance between those opposing forces. It stresses similarities, while not denying differences. It demands mutual respect for the differing, and self-realization of the commonality, thus narrowing the divide.

Since all monotheistic religions share a joint belief that humans are created in the image of God, and have in them a spark of divinity, as a theological directive they must be esteemed. And if the love of God be a fundamental religious principle, the love of humans must, of necessity, derive therefrom. Conflict clearly is negative, and the attendant suffering of the other must be confronted as a challenge to be overcome.

The process of healing such ills is, in Hebrew, called *tikkun olam*, "repairing the universe", diminishing deficiencies, bringing things closer to completeness. The Hebrew *Shalom*, Peace, derives from the word *shalem*, wholeness, perfection, completeness. Thus *Shalom* may be brought about by

evening out the gap of deficiency that is the root of all conflict. This is achieved through charity and compassion – and often through compromise - which are the pathways to harmony and peace.

The thirteen attributes of God listed in *Exodus* 34:6 begin with the words "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious..." The Rabbis of old, according to the principle of *imitatio dei* ruled, that "Just as He is merciful, so must you be merciful."

If we carry out this basic directive, then shall we be blessed by the Almighty who will lift His countenance upon us (cf. *Numbers* 6:26), and spread the tabernacle of Peace over us and indeed over all Mankind. May we join together in prayer, one with the other, that this truly be our avowed goal.

Let me end by reading the *Prayer for Peace* by the great century Jewish spiritual leader, Rabbi Nahman of Braeslav:

May it be Thy will, Our God and God of our fathers that you do away with all wars and bloodshed and spread great and wonderful peace throughout all the world, so that "nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (*Isaiah* 2:4). Rather shall all dwellers on this earth recognize and know the real truth, that we have not come to this world for strife and contention, God forbid, neither for hatred, jealousy complaint and bloodshed, but only to recognize and know You, may You be blessed for all eternity. And thus may the biblical verse be fulfilled:

"And I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid: and I will rid evil beasts out of the land, neither shall the sword go through your land" (*Leviticus* 26:6).

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