

Michael Welker

How to Counter Religious, Moral, and Political Hate-Preaching: A Culture of Mercy and Freedom against the Barbarism of Hate

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After the horrors of the Nazi dictatorship, countless murders of innocent people and two devastating World Wars, Germany tried to regain trust and recognition among the peoples of the world by establishing itself as “*Rechtsstaat*” and “*Sozialstaat*,” a state of law and a welfare state. This was a good move, deeply rooted in the value-systems of ancient oriental cultures and, later, in both the Jewish and the Christian biblical law and moral traditions. It is the intrinsic connection of *justice, mercy and freedom* that has to be emphasized here. This connection of justice, mercy and freedom exhibits deep religious and moral logics and transformative powers. It has been formative for the Western ethos and has become one of the most important impulses in the positive shaping of societies, freedom-loving civil societies and their ethos in the West.

I. Discerning and Strengthening the Spirit of Justice, Mercy, Love and Freedom

As early as around 2,400 BCE, the Sumerian Emperor Urukagina claims to have “established freedom” and to have “protected the orphans and the widows”¹ in Lagash, one of the oldest cities of the Ancient Near East, northwest of the junction of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. The protection of the weak in general, and of widows and orphans in particular, and the establishment of freedom go hand in

¹ Anton Moortgat and Alexander Scharff, *Ägypten und Vorderasien im Altertum* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1950), 243 (my trans.).

hand. The king thus does not only set a great example of mercy, compassion and care, he does not only promise to provide relief for people in situations of poverty and need. He also offers relief for the strong and the healthy with respect to their fear for their beloved ones should they themselves die or become in other ways helpless in the future. He also comforts their souls at least to some degree, and recursively wins their loyalty and trust. All this contributes to generating a climate of freedom, solidarity and harmony. Thus the establishment of freedom through the protection of the orphans and widows does not simply mean feeding the poor and the hungry so that they and their environments remain somehow satisfied and silent. Rather, the establishment of freedom happens when a good spirit, a spirit of trust and hope, a spirit of philanthropy and care is evoked and promoted. Memories and imaginations, attitudes and practices are shaped by the example of the emperor.

A network of memories and imaginations, attitudes and practices constitutes a spirit and is recursively sustained and animated by this spirit. Impressed by Aristotelian and related thought and metaphysics, Western cultures associated spirit with self-referential reflexivity and rationality. Other traditions of thought regarded the spirit just as a numinous vague and fleeting power. The interconnection of reliable care for the helpless and the weak and the generation of societal freedom challenges us to focus on another type of spirit, a spirit which was and has been an enormous shaping power in Mesopotamian and Western religion, culture, ethos and history.

This spirit cannot adequately be grasped by bipolar relations, be it simple notions of reflexivity or interpersonal communication. It is very well expressed by the biblical notion of the “outpouring of the Spirit,” namely the beneficial constitution of a polyphonic constellation, of a network of interdependent mutually

strengthening relations.² This impressive spiritual power was already grasped and expressed in important ancient Mesopotamian law codes.

In the laws of Ur-Nammu, King of Ur, the oldest existing law code from around 2,100 BCE, the special protection of orphans, widows and the poor is already proclaimed in the prologue.³ The *Codex Hammurabi*, the emblem of Mesopotamian civilization, established in the 18th century BCE, is the most important legal compendium of the ancient Near East, even of antiquity in general. The prologue says that prince Hammurabi, “who feared God,” is elected “to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land ... so that the strong should not harm the weak.” And the epilogue repeats that this law code is put on the memorial stone so “that the strong might not injure the weak, in order to protect the widows and orphans.”⁴

The topic of the protection of the weak and of the widows and orphans in particular becomes a most important and normatively shaping topic in the biblical traditions, the “holy scriptures” of both Judaism and Christianity. God “executes justice for the fatherless and the widow” (5th book of Moses [Deuteronomy] 10:18) and expects similar attitudes, also to be adopted towards strangers, from His people (Deuteronomy 14:29; 16:11.14; 24:19f.; 26:12f.; Psalms 68:6; 146:9; Isaiah 1:17; 9:16; Jeremiah 7:6; 49:11; Zechariah 7:10; Sirach 4:10; 1. Timothy 5:3; James 1:27 and more often). The topic is not only essential for the biblical law traditions, but also for the central commandment to love one another. I have proposed to speak of the “mercy code of the biblical law” and to acknowledge the tremendous political, moral, and religious power of the connection between

² See Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John Hoffmeyer (Philadelphia: 1994; new printing Eugene/OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 134-47, 228-39.

³ F. Ch. Fensham, “Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (JNES) 21 (1962): 129-39; cf. Jan Assmann, *Ma’at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1990), 246-47.

⁴ Leonard William King, trans., *The Code of Hammurabi* (1910) (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), Epilogue.

justice and mercy. I have also proposed to define mercy as “the free, creative self-withdrawal in favor of [another person] or in favor of others.”⁵

Many people assume that mercy is a natural tendency of life. This, however, is highly questionable, at least without further strong qualifications. For all natural life lives at the cost and expense of other life. Even if we are vegetarians, we have to destroy an enormous amount of natural life to sustain ourselves. As Alfred North Whitehead, mathematician, scientist and philosopher, states, “... (natural M.W.) life is robbery.”⁶ Mercy, however, is not just self-limitation in the midst of this natural predatory tendency of life to sustain itself at the expense of others. Mercy is a *creative, supporting and freeing activity in favor of the frail, the weak, the poor, the person in need.*

The activity of mercy is essential for family life. No baby, no child could be raised without massive free and creative self-withdrawal in their favor. The solidarity between the generations is also expressed in mercy for the sick, the frail, the old and the dying. In family life and in contexts of friendship, mercy is often blessed by love and then often turns into a *joyful* free and creative self-withdrawal in favor of others. The experience of receiving and giving mercy and love and the acknowledgment that we are all in need of mercy at least in specific phases of our life leads to a differentiated and subtle self-experience. Human beings are thus

⁵ Michael Welker, “The Power of Mercy in Biblical Law,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 29/2 (2014): 234. In the following, I refer to some ideas of this text.

⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York, 1929), *Corrected Edition*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York and London: The Free Press, 1978), 105. The context of this statement reads: All living individuals and “all societies require interplay with their environment; and in the case of living societies this interplay takes the form of robbery. The living society may, or may not, be a higher type of organism than the food which it disintegrates. But whether or no it be for the general good, life is robbery. It is at this point that with life morals become acute. The robber requires justification” (105).

enabled to see themselves as weak and strong, as frail and healthy, as vulnerable and protected at the same time.⁷

The biblical traditions very often cultivate such a self-experience by using most impressive duals, rooted in paradigmatic historical experiences. One of the most famous duals is the double identity of the Israelites, that is, to have been slaves in Egypt and to have become free persons who live in the blessed land. What is known as the “motive clause” of the Old Testament traditions argues for the practice of mercy with the poor and the stranger “*because you know how it feels to be a stranger and because you are grateful to God who has freed you from slavery in Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm.*”⁸ Basic human experiences rooted in family life are thus moved into the broad social realm and gain moral, political and even legal and religious importance and weight.

The mercy laws in favor of widows and orphans, the poor and the weak, not only in one’s own family and among close friends, but in one’s whole social environment, gain an enormous normative shaping power. The normativity of the law reaches beyond the capacity of conflict solution into the capacity of social transformation. This becomes particularly clear in what is known as the “slave laws” which require the freeing of slaves, at least of Hebrew slaves, after six years of slavery (2nd book of Moses [Exodus], Ex. 21:2ff.): “When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing.” This is a revolution in antiquity, a period in history in which all societies were self-evidently slaveholder societies.

⁷ Cf. Alisa Carse, “Vulnerability, Agency and Human Flourishing,” in *Health and Human Flourishing: Religion, Medicine, and Moral Anthropology*, ed. C. Taylor and R. Dell’Oro (Washington/DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 33-52; Kristine Culp, *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010); Heike Springhart, *Der verwundbare Mensch: Sterben, Tod und Endlichkeit im Horizont einer realistischen Anthropologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 203-16.

⁸ 2nd book of Moses (Exodus) 22:20 (my italics); 23:9; cf. 3rd book of Moses (Leviticus) 19:34; 5th book of Moses (Deuteronomy) 10:19; 23:8; 26:5.

The mercy code of the law makes it clear that slaves are no longer just “speaking tools,” but that they are potentially free human beings. The mercy code thus organizes processes of social transformation in the direction of enhanced freedom and towards a more harmonious society. The legal routinizing of almsgiving and tithing in favor of the poor and needy, especially widows and orphans, points in the same direction (Deuteronomy 14:28f.; 26:12-13). The laws of mercy become instruments for creative and freeing social transformation. Not only the king, but rather society as a whole should participate in the cultivation of justice and mercy, thus enjoying and spreading a spirit of freedom.

The mercy laws do not only learn from family ethos, they recursively strengthen this ethos and the radiating power of family life and love. They also strengthen the legal culture and the religious symbolisms and practices. With respect to the juridical law, the laws of mercy both strengthen and challenge its competence. On the one hand, no case can fall outside the purview of the law, no person, however weak, poor and miserable can fall beyond the reach of the law. On the other hand, the systematic orientation of the law towards mercy and compassion demands the continual refinement of the legal culture and its progression towards humanization. In addition, the mercy code of the law enables human societies to deal with a strange paradox that plagues all moral and legal evolution. Many human societies have the desire to improve the juridical law and to develop the quality of their moral matrices. However, how can this transformation be done without destroying the binding forces of law and morals, their capacity to provide normative “security of expectations”⁹? The mercy code of the law allows for transformation of the law and human morals without relativization. It allows for the balancing of normative stability and creative innovation.

Mercy laws finally connect the moral and legal attempts to strive for justice and to care for the weak with a creative religious orientation. In the religious

⁹ Michael Welker, “Security of Expectations: Reformulating the Theology of Law and Gospel,” *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986): 237.

perspective on the just and merciful God, the biblical traditions encourage the development of a subtle individual and communal identity. They also open broad historical horizons. Not only in the celebration in cultic contexts, the grateful memory of God's freeing and saving acts of mercy in the midst of God's people becomes nourished and sustained. Precious shared memories and expectations of liberation are established and extended over vast historical time-spans.

Here again we can speak of the fact that a spirit is at work, a spirit which gives history direction and meaning. Educational, moral, legal, political and religious mentalities, habits and practices are connected and intertwined. In serving the common good in justice-, mercy-, love-, truth- and salvation-seeking communities, they mutually strengthen each other. This interconnection strengthens concrete moral, legal, educational, political and religious orientations. It guides the human minds through phases of trial and error and even normative failure. As the history of God with his people reveals and teaches: The just and righteous God will deal with human beings in time-spans that reach far beyond the imagination of human courts or of concrete individual and communal moral memory.

Again, we see a recursive strengthening of the religious, legal and moral imagination and communication. The parental mercy, the care for justice and love provide an understanding of the powers of the divine, of powers which can deal with the very sobering insight that natural life has to live at the expense of other life, that experiences of violence and death are sad factors of all natural existence.¹⁰ Above all, enormous counterforces to this latter fact are discovered and set free that shape a mutually supportive and humane culture. Sensitivities for grave social distortions (the areas of sin, trespasses, temptations and evil) and for moral refinement (the areas of love, forgiveness and ennoblement in many forms)

¹⁰ Michael Welker, "Gottes Gerechtigkeit," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 56/4 (2014): 412.

are cultivated, can become taught and can shape many areas of individual and communal lives.

Not only the practice of justice, mercy and love, but also its teaching – the moral, legal, and religious education – becomes essential for all of society and its culture. The cultivation of memories and expectations becomes part of the value system. Truth-, justice- and salvation-seeking communities are established in many forms. Schooled work and wisdom and general education spread the insights gained into the normative and freeing powers of the law into the general public and into future generations. Not only political, religious and legal leaders, but in principle every person in a society should participate in cultivating the freeing normative moods and forms of behavior and action.

II. Working Against the Evil Spirit of Hate and Unfreedom

In order to grasp the good spirit of love in all its glory and the evil spirit of hate in all its horror, it is advisable to consider not only to the dramatic forms of love and hate, but also their inconspicuous appearances. Although the bipolar romantic love, igniting joy and excitement between “an I and a Thou,” is often seen as the exemplary form of love, at least in contemporary Western cultures, it covers only a small spectrum of the spirit and the reality of love. Similarly, the sacrificial and kenotic love - a most important and moving topic in religious and morally edifying experiences and narratives - is only a boundary phenomenon in the vast realm of love. In family affairs, in parental relations, in good constellations among relatives and friends, what is known as covenantal love, a faithful love that goes “through thick and thin,” is the dominant phenomenon.¹¹ Beyond that, the cool and inconspicuous love in many forms of philanthropy and humanitarianism should

¹¹ See Michael Welker, “Romantic Love, Covenantal Love, Kenotic Love,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids and London: William B. Eerdmans and SPCK, 2001), 133-36.

be acknowledged and respected as a tremendous blessing for humankind. This is the general “love of the neighbor,” a love of which Paul says: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. ... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:8.10).

In a similar way, we should look at the evil spirit of hate. By “hate” we should not only think of aggressive anger and acts of violence, persecution, curses and attacks. The field of meaning of “hate,” particularly in the biblical languages, is significantly broader than these extreme examples. It includes the broader sense of “not being able to love” and “not wanting to love.” And here again, we should not just think about romantic, covenantal and kenotic forms of love. Hate therefore does not just mean animosity, loathing, bitterness and aggression, but also: no longer willing to endure, to neglect, to underestimate the other person, persons or groups. Hate stands for finding someone or others unpleasant, having little interest in or care for someone, not wanting anything to do with someone, not being able to suffer someone, and not liking others.¹² The famous Heidelberg Catechism¹³ displays a strong sensitivity to the broad field of the meaning of “hate.” It expresses the human “misery” in the words of the answer to Question 5: that I am unable to keep the twin commands to love God and my neighbor. In a stifling way, the Catechism states: “I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbor.” This sounds strange and totally unconvincing if we do not see the broad spectrum of hot and cool forms of hate. For the Heidelberg Catechism, hate includes, for example, “being silent bystanders” in the discussion of blasphemy (Question 99). When discussing love for our neighbor, the Catechism urges its

¹² See article “hassen,” in *Duden: Sinn- und sachverwandte Wörter*, ed. Wolfgang Müller (Mannheim: Bibliographisches Institut, 1997), 321.

¹³ *The Heidelberg Catechism: 450th Anniversary Edition* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013).

readers to promote their neighbor's honor (Question 112) and calls on us "to do good even to our enemies" (Question 107).

It will be important to develop "short sharp views" on the roots of the barbarisms of hate in many parts of the world in order to not only develop a counter-narrative against religious, political and moral violence, but to show that a counter-narrative and a healthy counter-normativity and counter-praxis have been present in our history and have been operative in many beneficial and blessing ways over millennia: the culture of mercy, love and humane justice - its documents and its many experiences and achievements in individual lives and in social and institutionalized forms. But this does not spare us from asking the pressing question: How can we deal with the most extreme forms of hate that have caused so much suffering in our contemporary environments? And how can we deal with instrumentalized religious pretensions which support the exercise of moral, political and physical violence?

In his most impressive book *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*¹⁴ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers a chapter on "Letting Go of Hate."¹⁵ He brilliantly shows that hate is an expression of enslavement, even of self-enslavement. "To be free, you have to let go of hate."¹⁶ He points out that the famous motive-clause: "Love the strangers for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19) and the "very counter-intuitive command": "Do not hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land" (Deuteronomy 23:7) are messages and commands which intended to promote freedom in the minds of the Israelites, in their memories, their imaginations, and executed social actions.

Rabbi Sacks underlines this powerful message in reports about encounters with Holocaust survivors.¹⁷ But he also signals how hard the processes are in which

¹⁴ (New York: Schocken Books, 2015).

¹⁵ Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, 238-251.

¹⁶ Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, 238, cf. 239.

¹⁷ Cf. Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, 242-43.

inclinations to hate, to seek blame und revenge and even violent retaliation can be overcome. An important religious contribution in these processes is the “affirmation of God’s vengeance,” the affirmation of “the belief that God will avenge wrongs spares human beings from having to do so.”¹⁸ He also sees the potentials of monotheism to encourage people to move out of a “blame culture into a penitential culture,”¹⁹ to resist and counter in non-violent ways, and, if possible, to flee and escape “conditions of oppression, corruption, economic stagnation and educational underachievement”²⁰ which bind suffering peoples in the barbaric cycles of hate and self-hate. The darkest expression of this state of mind is the suicidal murdering of innocent people.

In my view, the great wisdom of Jonathan Sacks’s book is the message that only examples of merciful caring and forgiving, invitations and encouragements to move out of enslaving and self-enslaving cycles of blaming, hate and violence and to search for and practice individual and communal freedom²¹ will protect us from religiously motivated moral, political and physical violence. This does not only require a passion for freedom and peace. It will be quite easy to win most people for abstract moral, political and religious declarations: “I am and we all are for freedom and peace - individually and among all humankind.” If we want to exorcise the evil spirit of hate and unfreedom, it will be most important to control, to restrict and try to avoid all strategies of blaming and shaming. Our moral communication in all areas of life needs our attention and care.²²

¹⁸ Sacks, *Not in God’s Name*, 246; cf. Henri Atlan, “Founding Violence and Divine Referent,” in *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard*, ed. Paul Dumouchel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 198-208.

¹⁹ Sacks, *Not in God’s Name*, 248.

²⁰ Sacks, *Not in God’s Name*, 250.

²¹ Cf. also the results of a multi-year international and interdisciplinary research project: Michael Welker, ed., *Quests for Freedom: Biblical – Historical – Contemporary* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2015).

²² See Niklas Luhmann, “Soziologie der Moral,” in *Theorietechnik und Moral*, ed. N. Luhmann and St. Pfürtnner (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), 43-63; Michael Welker, “God’s Power and Powerlessness: Biblical Theology and the Search for

All moral communication, and it starts with the education of infants, communicates respect, that is it gives or withdraws respect, promises respect or threatens to withdraw it. (“If you do this or that, mom will be happy! If you don’t do this, grandpa will be sad.”) Respect in moral communication comes in many forms, reaching from a sharp short view to enthusiastic admiration. All interpersonal relations, small or large, are - latently or overtly - morally coded and loaded. Since moral communication is unavoidable in interpersonal relations and since it steers human action and behavior, it usually is associated with the predicate “good.” Sadly, reality presents a different picture. It depends very much on the governing values, on the guiding spirit whether the moral communication directs human beings toward the good or the evil. All too often we see the development of robber-morals which spread and reinforce the evil spirit of hate.

To counter the spirit of hate, to exorcise it without entering the vicious cycles of shaming and blaming, we need gigantic educational enterprises. They have to start in family life and have to continue in early childhood and in school education. Civil societal, political and religious communication, and above all mass media communication have to develop the responsibility to identify, to name and clean mentalities and utterances of hate in the different spheres of individual and communal life. It will be crucial to develop processes of gaining political loyalty and media resonance without seeking support through the rhetoric of shaming, blaming and hate. Even the areas of law and religion, not to mention the defense systems, will be have to control inclinations to use or at least to tolerate strategies of hate in order to specify and justify their tasks. It will be important to acknowledge that as a rule all reactive activities which try to deal with the evil spirit of hate have a very limited capacity. Rather, it is the proactive spirit of love

a World Ethos in a Time of Short-lived Moral Markets,“ in: *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine*, ed. Cynthia L. Rigby, (Atlanta: Atlanta Scholars Press, 1997), 40-43.

that creates a climate of freedom and peace in which the energies of hate can vanish and dry out.

III. Summary

The project “Confronting religious violence with a counter-narrative” cannot just mean: telling impressive stories of non-violent reactions to violent behavior in the religious orbit and beyond. Neither will it suffice to invest such stories in more or less empathetic moral appeals to specific individuals, groups or general publics. And even joyful talk about the moral and political overcoming of religious violence, stories of forgiving and healing is possibly not strong enough for a helpful confrontation of religious violence, because the success stories of the past may easily just generate melancholy and skepticism in present times.

This contribution tries to identify powerful spirits of love and hate that have permeated human history and have shaped not only impressive narratives and normative codifications, but also moral, political, educational and religious practices. It reflects on the inner logics of the connection of justice and mercy with the creation of a climate of social harmony, freedom and peace. It sees examples of such logics and normative binding powers and witnesses to them in Mesopotamia as early as 2400 BCE, and follows further instances through the biblical law traditions up to attempts in modern and late modern societies to regain and preserve a humane ethos.

Although rooted in the family ethos of love and care, the spirit of justice, mercy, love and freedom generates educational, moral, legal, political and religious mentalities, habits and practices which are connected and intertwined and which strengthen each other. The contribution argues that it will be most important not to focus exclusively on dramatic appearances and forms of love and hate, but to center as well on their inconspicuous, “cool” appearances. In order to identify and then to counter the evil spirits of hate, one should not only think of aggressive

anger and acts of violence, persecution and attack. As shocking as the darkest barbaric cycles of hate and self-hate in the suicidal murdering of innocent people are - a convincing counter-development should give them nothing but a short sharp view. Moral, political and religious communication and education should concentrate on the many cool forms of hate grasped in the expressions “no longer willing to endure, to neglect, to underestimate the other person, persons or groups ... finding someone or others unpleasant, having little interest in or care for someone, not wanting anything to do with someone, not liking others ...” And it should teach appreciation, support and even admiration for the many cool forms of love that have permeated moral, legal, educational, political and religious thoughts, habits and practices under the guidance of the spirit of justice, mercy, love and freedom.

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Key words for the Index

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