

Apathy in caregiving – intoxication of the human mind and the inflation of compassion within the cool, “Zombie-culture” of “Not-giving-a-f*ck”

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Abstract

Over the years little attention has been given to a practical theology of compassion. Even in the discussion on theopaschitic theology, and the implication of a theology of the cross for theory formation in practical theology and the praxis of ministry, the emphasis was mainly on reconciliation, forgiveness, and the notion of restorative justice. Ethical and moral issues dominated the discourse. In the meantime, it seems that people in their quest for a humane society, social justice and human dignity are exposed to a gradual inflation of compassion. The migrant crisis has become a crisis of replacement and apathy; xenophobia represents and antipathy of local communities towards strangers. The emphasis on wealth and importance in affluent societies create carelessness, insensitivity and even antipathy against the demands of strangers and poor people. Zygmunt Bauman (2013) refers to “moral blindness and the loss of sensitivity in liquid modernity”. At the same time, disillusionment breeds a kind of antipathetic anger, captured in a very poignant and harsh expression: “F*ck you” (Manson 2016). This phenomenon of antipathy and indifferentism had already been identified as a huge stumbling block for ministry in medieval times and life in monasteries. Sloth had been earmarked as one of the seven deadly sins. How then should a theology of compassion and the praxis of pastoral caregiving respond to these very challenging phenomena of apathy, indifferentism, sloth, and life fatigue?

Keywords

*sloth; apathy; theology of compassion; theopaschitic theology; the antipathetic anger of not-giving-a-f*ck; sacrificial exchange*

Introduction

At the gate of hell (the inferno), Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, describes the predicament of our being human. He found himself caught between two dreadful realities. Coming from life there is the threat of apathy: I don't care anymore. Here, as he understands from Virgil, those were punished who had passed their time in a state of apathy and indifference both to good and evil. The past of indifference intoxicates memory. The huge predicament before the gates of hell is that life suddenly becomes insignificant. Facing the inferno, he was overwhelmed by another predicament: the loss of hope. As soon as he arrived at the river Acheron and was taken by the ferryman Charon to arrive at the opposite shore, he is seized with terror and fell into a trance. The in-between between apathy (wasted time) and hopelessness (insignificant living) is filled with dread and anxiety.

“Through me you pass into the city of woe:
 Through me you pass into eternal pain:
 Through me among the people lost for aye.
 Justice the founder of my fabric moved:
 To rear me was the task of Power divine,
 Supreme Wisdom, and primeval Love.
 Before me things create were none, save things
 Eternal, and eternal I endure.
 All hope abandon, ye who enter here.” (Dante, 1909, Canto III, 5).

It becomes quite clear why Søren Kierkegaard describes the predicament of life without compassion, as dread; dread as a kind of state of being that can be called “antipathy” (Kierkegaard 1967:38). Dread becomes related to a kind of helplessness and state of non-hope because one is overwhelmed by and related “to something which is nothing” (Kierkegaard 1967:39). This predicament can only be described within the ambiguity of a paradox: “Dread is a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy” (Kierkegaard 1967:38). Antipathy becomes an extreme mode of apathy, namely a resistance to all forms of pathos with the tendency to withdraw and to deliberately deny the realm of kindness, charity, and comfort. It is in this sense that humans start to operate like “zombies”; i.e. the pretention of a kind of apathy that projects the image of carelessness, even a lifeless sort of mindlessness that does not want to be bothered by intriguing life

issues; a nonchalant attitude of not being disturbed by any appealing event; a blasé external mask of coolness and blunt casualness: The subtle art of “not-giving-a-f*ck”.

Coolness and casualness can even point to a more unarticulated mode of resisting anger antipathetic conspiracy; a kind of societal *cri du coeur* against the wall of liquid forms of social alienation and rejection (Bauman and Donskins 2013:121).

In terms of the previous mentioned Kierkegaardian paradox, apathy is about a state of antipathy that anticipates sympathy but being immediately overwhelmed by dread and existential doubt and failure so that compassion becomes a skewed form of “antipathetic sympathy”. Encapsulated between fear and trembling, apathy leads to “the sickness in the inner being of the spirit” (Kierkegaard 1954:146); it creates a kind of despair that tries to neutralise the fear of death, but unfortunately all attempts are in vain. The point is, apathy creates a state of mind and being that are void of significant compassion and, thus, leads to the intoxication of the human soul – spiritual sickness; carelessness as a pathological habitus of depressing non-sensitivity; a state of dispassionate response mixed with anger and anxiety. This is a variant of what Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskins (2013) call: moral blindness and the loss of sensitivity in liquid modernity.

It is indeed true that we are living in an era not only of monetary inflation, but also of the inflation – hence devaluation – of concepts and values (Bauman and Donskins 2013:122). It is my contention that this is exactly the case in caregiving where too many exposures to inhumane oppression, brutal violence and undeserved suffering contribute to the inflation of compassion. On the other hand, our affluent society with the emphasis on prestige, wealth, importance, and achievement also contribute to the devaluation of caring engagements. Instrumentalization and massification turn human beings into *apathetic zombies*.

To become insensitive to the need and suffering of the other, can indeed hamper the effectivity and legitimacy of the Christian mission and witness. In this regard, selfish motives, and the danger to abuse the gospel for personal gain and egoistic achievement, weaken the impact of caregiving. Hypocritical self-righteousness and self-centredness bring about an arrogant attitude of indifferentism – “I don’t care”. The phrase “nobody

cares about you” sounds like a cruel verdict tantamount to proof that one becomes a non-person or non-entity (Bauman and Donskins 2013:120). Polite indifference breeds cruel and brutal anger. In a world of desperate attention-seeking, indifference and apathy become a failure. Failure in our affluent society and the arduous emphasis on competition are viewed as loss, valueless and sheer nothingness. In fact, within a spiritual assessment of life, all the striving for prestige and social status do not guarantee happiness and success, only the disillusionment of disgusting, apathetic malediction.

To crack the armour of indifference and try to get attention, the hysteria of filthy language and the vulgar of expletive grammar are used “to break the ice of silence and get the attention of the world” (Bauman and Donskins 2013:121). Words that express the strongest sense of disgust become a kind of *cri du coeur* (cry of the heart). And this is exactly what the title of Manson’s book wants to convey.

Malediction: The filthy ugliness of damned aesthetics – “F*ck!”

In Philippians 3:7–8, Paul wants to express his disgust in terms of his hypocritical, legalistic and even violent, aggressive religiosity. He argues that all the former things (circumcision, Jewish initiation ceremonies, national descent) that might have been gains to him, should strongly be disdained, and counted as sheer loss. Paul recounts all his own privileges, both inherited and acquired, his conduct in life and his faithful adherence to the law, as hampering factors in spiritual devotion. All moral advantages which had been his “gain” (*kerdos*), had become, for the sake of Christ, total loss (*zēmia*), because they were bound by the law of reputation and achievement (Siede 1978:137). In verse 8 he strengthens his argument by using the concept of rubbish (*σκύβαλα*) so that he might gain Christ. *Skúbalon* is indeed expressing a very pregnant resistance against all forms of hypocritical religious performances and achievements, namely, to render them as dung or filth (Liddle and Scott 1968:735).

Zēmia refers in a very strong and resisting way to detriment as a disadvantage - detritus - rubble, debris, and ruin. In Latin, *zēmia* refers to *damnum* (Liddell and Scott 1968:344). In fact, what Paul is saying to all moral and

prestigious self-gain that defines the value of life and dictates self-righteous achievements and the smugness of social status: “Damn you”! All these things are “good-for-nothing” (Liddell and Scott 1968:344) and should be classified under the title of Dante’s radical abandonment of apathetic debris. The damnation of demanding, legalistic religiosity, fall under Mark Manson’s expression of vulgar anger: “F*ck!” When your life is ruined by the debris of worthless demands that robs one from integrity, identity, and true sensitivity, the vulgar of raw anger and compassionate bluntness take over. This kind of anger implies more than merely a moral dilemma of visual blindness (Bauman 2013). The resisting anger that breeds apathetic aggressiveness (you want to inflict pain to the possible aggressor) and the “foolishness of non-sense”, can be captured by the phrase: “The ugliness of damned aesthetics.”

What Dante and Manson want to articulate is that apathy leads to the bottom line of what they call demonic and evil indifference: Nothing counts anymore in life; everything is in vain and sheer folly. “So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (Eccl. 2:17).

Apathy as connected to a mindset of utter meaninglessness and raw disgust intoxicate the soulfulness of life.

Apathetic indifference (detachment): The toxic attitude of indifferentism

Apathy is closely linked to indifference and to what Socrates called a sense of neutrality, being without interest (Scott 2007:61). Indifference suggests detachment (Scott 2007:60). The senses of indifference that are generally operative in discussions on apathy, are those of equivalence, neutrality (or unbiased disposition), unconcern, lack of differentiation (indetermination) and an attitude of remote detachment. Indifference is a kind of fear of being different in the occurrences of differences, i.e. being “not different without action or inaction” (Scott 2007:6). Apathy as indifferent insensibility, projects to a large extent a global mindset that nothing that gets to us, scares us, or shocks us and leaves us wanting to do something about the fragments, detachments, and chances of living. A lifestyle of not giving

or caring a f*ck, suits the secularised mentality of metropolitans in their attempt to survive within a cultural of multiple plurality and the overload of choices projected by advertisements and the mass media. Apathy as a mode of negation becomes a philosophical mindset of being “not different” (Scott 2007:3). “Its pervasive sense of ‘undifferentiated’ may be nuanced by an implication of neutrality and impartiality, by an absence of interest, care, or intention. It might describe a lack of connection or importance: an indifferent matter or quality, for example. It can suggest neutrality regarding good and evil, or lack of an active quality” (Scott 2007:3).

The positive side of indifference (*differre*) is that, despite the fact that the phenomenon of “indifferent presence” and “lack of connection” suggest an absence of pathos, it suggests at the same time the possibility of change and action: the movement toward unspecified differentiation. The latter opens up new avenues for reflection on for example the unique perspective of a Christian mode of caring as compassionate solidarity and being-with the different and even foreign or strange other; a Christian understanding of xenophilia as the overcoming of xenophobic detachment. In this sense, a Christian understanding of pathos, compassion and sympathy should be differentiated from a stoic understanding of pathos.

Within the traditional understanding of Stoicism, it seems as if they promoted apathy as a kind of ascetic flight from all emotional connections in life (detachment from detoxicating, unnecessary desires) (Brown 2017:118–128); a kind of apathetic indifference. However, an ascetic lifestyle does not imply withdrawal and denial of life, but a kind of reframing of life goals in order to focus on what really counts in life (constructive virtues). On the other hand, compassion in a Christian understanding implies more than the reframing of indifference and detachment.

With reference to Stoicism, non-attachment, a skewed variant of pathos, namely, the maintenance of toxic desires, leads to the intoxication of the human soul.

An example of this kind of intoxication, is the obsession of wealth and gain within the lifestyle of the consumerism of a market driven economy. In this regard, I want to refer to a very bold statement made by George Bush, one of the previous presidents of the United States. “... helping the people of Africa fight disease, advances both our interests and our ideals”

(Bush 2015:22). “When societies abroad are healthier and prosperous, they are more stable and secure. They become markets for our producers, not exporters of danger or sources of humanitarian crisis” (Bush 2015:22).

The commodification of compassion develops simultaneously with a mass commodification of human suffering. “And yet the idea that migrants could provide a long-term economic boon is hotly challenged by populist politicians across Europe trying to score with electorates that have become more nationalistic in the wake of financial crisis” (Forohaar 2015:60).

This sickness of commodified attachment leading to the toxicities of dispassionate, impassive apathy, eroded compassion, and thus, the inflation of compassion in our daily existence. It also leads to the phenomenon of “unsympathetic antipathy”; compassion neutralised to the level of becoming resistant to all forms of demands that appeal to an existential mode of feeling and being-with “the other”; it creates a kind of insensitive numbness; the artificial pretention of carelessness and the nonchalant façade of being quite “cool”; being trendy and looking calm and unemotional, especially in difficult situations. Synonyms are: *impudence* (rudely disrespectful), *audacity* (defying boldness), *insolence* (being contemptuous – in disregard of all rules and regulations) as indication of the fact that I-am-obvious-so-in-control, that nothing disturb my affections even up to the level that disobedience and disregard become the virtue of “moral blindness” (Bauman and Donskis (2013).

Impolite apathy (external coolness) is expressed in an attitude of blasé indifference. It represents a lifestyle with the impressions that noting disturbs us and affect being. “The tsunami of information, opinions, suggestions, recommendations, advice and insinuation that inevitably overwhelms us on our meandering itineraries of life results in the “blasé attitude” towards “knowledge, work and lifestyle” (indeed towards life as such and everything it contains) already noted by Georg Simmel at the start of the last century as surfacing first among residents of the “metropolis” – the big and crowded city” (Bauman and Donskis 2013:42).

Apathetic indifference and cool unresponsiveness within the rude disguise of “not-giving-a-f*ck”, could, thus, be described as a mode of survival (global strategy of coping – metropolitan coping mechanism in urbanisation) within the metropolitan cacophony of amoral bluntness –

being unconcerned. The meaning and differing values of things, and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial and could thus be rendered with disregard: nothing counts anymore. They (things and the suffering of human beings) appear to the blasé person in an “evenly flat and grey tone; no one object deserves preference over any other ...” (Bauman and Donskins 2013:42).

Moral blindness can closely be connected to “the catastrophe of indifference” (Stephan Grosz in Bauman and Donskis 2013:120). Indifference leads to failure within the disguise of desperate attention-seeking. “As the phrase “nobody cares about you” sounds like a cruel verdict tantamount to proof that we are a non-person or non-entity, we have only one tool at hand to actualize and fulfil ourselves as those who matter in the world – namely, to convince the world around us that we deserve to be a target group or that we qualify for an object of conspiracy/desire to destroy us” (Bauman and Donskis 2013:120).

Since compassion can be rendered as of one of the cornerstones of the Christian understanding of comfort and care, the question arises: how does apathy and its extreme mode of impassive antipathy impact the pastoral ministry? Thus, the research questions: How should apathy be addressed in pastoral theology? What, therefore, shapes compassion as a kind of sacrificial engagement, diaconic solidarity and substitutional exchange (replacement)?

Is it possible that the notion of the *passio Dei* can transform apathy into an existential mode of compassionate being-with? How can the notion of divine suffering in a theopaschitic theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) contribute to the spiritual healing of apathy in pastoral ministry? Can a theological approach counteract the inflation of compassion in caregiving and pose an alternative to the carelessness of “not giving a f*ck”? (Manson 2016), and the neutralising blasé attitude of indifferentism: lackadaisical remoteness?

The subtle art of filthy disgust: The zero-line of apathetic antipathy

For many centuries the concept of *f*ck* remained a taboo in English. Its origin is unsure. Possibly it has Germanistic connections from an Indo-European root meaning “strike”, shared by; the Latin *pugnus* “fist”. In casual communication it has always been associated with vulgar (being ill-mannered and in bad taste). As a concept, *f*ck* functions as slang expressing vulgar and disgust. Within the context of sexual intercourse, the expression indicates mostly a very harsh mode of subjecting the other to a mode of sensual manipulation or overwhelming powerful display of often sheer “masculine and patriarchal” authority. It operates on a thin line between the expression of orgasmic euphory and permissive seizure.

As an exclamation mark, it functions in various phrases to express annoyance, contempt, or impatience (Hornby, Cowie and Gimson 1985:384). Within the realm of the affective, *f*ck* is used to express anger, irritation especially when one feels that everything is spoiled and become ruined, (*I f*cked up*). It is even associated with foolish behaviour that indicates meaninglessness. And it is in this sense that *f*ck* describes the zero-line of disrespectful behaviour and psychological anger or resistance, i.e. of always being treated as a failure. *F*ck* then represents apathetic resilience due to having constantly been exposed to social and relational humiliation.

Apathetic *f*ck* is a many layered concept within different contexts. It varies from vulgar disgust to selfish manipulation, to masked disillusionment and to self-defensive resilience.

It can be viewed as an indication of insensitiveness and destructive callousness that expresses existential disgust (*nausea*) (Sartre 1943). It pretends to be “tough” and is a masked form of resistance and habitual protest. At the same time, it can be used to indicate a constructive repulsion towards the constant demands of an affluent society. It becomes an expression of negating the demands of “the more” in achievement ethics. Negation is then a form of resistance to the “hedonic treadmill” in an affluent society (Brown 2017:59). “It refers to the cycle of desire-fulfilment ('hedonic' means 'the pursuit of pleasure'): we want something, we perhaps

get it, we feel good for a while and then return to whatever default level of happiness or sadness we enjoyed before.” “Nothing really changes” (Brown 2017:59). Apathy then becomes the tragedy of unhappiness, sadness, and disillusioned disappointment. The only option is then to pretend that nothing really matters at all anymore: *f*ck* the whole of society with their superficial facade of wealth, status and importance and the often-deterministic approach to life events. The expression is then an indication that one deliberately refuse to accept that one is merely a failure; it becomes a very furious expression of the fact that one does not anymore want to be part of the deterministic causation trap, namely that behind every event is a possible predictable reason and clarification (the fate of “because”) (Taleb 2010:63); the experience that life is pushed into the quadrant of always being a victim.

*F*ck* is not necessarily a destructive expression. In his book *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck*, Mark Manson (2016:1-14), uses the notion of *f*ck* to inflict change and transformation. He argues therefore that apathy about always feeling a loser can help people to accept failure in life and perhaps create a new kind of meaningful resilience.

One needs a kind of aggressive apathy that helps one to regain energy and strength. “F*ck” equals a disposition of always becoming a loser. And too many “f*cks” are bad for your mental health (Manson 2016:5). “It causes you to become overly attached to the superficial and fake, to dedicate your life to chasing a mirage of happiness and satisfaction” (Manson 2016:5). *F*ck* in this regard, is about the apathy of not feeling guilty about how guilty you’re feeling. To be anxious about feeling anxious and to be a victim of always being a loser, leads to what Manson (2016:6–7) calls the “Feedback Loop from Hell”. “The Feedback Loop from Hell has become a borderline epidemic, making many of us overly stressed, overly neurotic, and overly self-loathing” (Manson 2016:7). The carelessness of not giving a *f*ck* therefore does not mean being indifferent; it means being comfortable with being different (Manson 2016:14).

This apathetic stance towards always being trapped in the treadmill of achievement ethics, leads to the self-defence mechanism of “looking cool”. The prevailing belief and projected image through the social media are that to be cool, you have to be distant, remote, mysterious, and impossible

to fathom. One pretends to look relaxed and easy; it represents an anti-authoritarian stance with an undertone of a lackadaisical apathy and easy-going attitude to life. In a very subtle way, both the lifestyle of “not-giving-a-f*ck” and lackadaisical remoteness, lead inevitable to what can be called the “inflation of compassion”.

The danger of depletion: Compassion fatigue – the risk of affective overexposure

The inflation of compassion should be viewed as a side-effect of people forced to live under the spell of wanting; the striving for more-and-more; the demand achieve-and-perform; the illusion that the satisfying of desires creates instant happiness; working harder guarantees success. People are trapped in the vicious circle of desire-fulfilment: We want something, we perhaps get it, we feel good for a while and then return to whatever default level of satisfaction, but nothing really has changed (Brown 2017:59). In the meantime, the energy that was needed to satisfy mostly materialistic needs makes human beings victims and captives of desires. They become spiritually exhausted and emotionally totally depleted.

Donald Capps (1993) calls the zero-position of the depleted self: Sin in a narcissistic age. The depleted self is described in the following words: “We slug through some days in the throes of apathy – when the idealizing self is in charge - while, other days – when the grandiose self, staggering but still on its feet, takes charge – we are fuelled by inner rage” (Capps 1993:128). The depleted self-starts to suffer eventually from a Jonah complex: apathy – flight – complain – self-blame and exploding against God. (Capps 1993:147-157). The depleted person develops an apathetic or callous attitude towards life, reflected in an indifference toward the needs and aspirations of others (Capps 1993:50). This kind of attitude leads to sloth.

The “deadly” sin of sloth (*akedia*) –The psychological predicament of depletion and soulful implosion (aversion to effort)

Sloth is related to spiritual and ministerial laziness. Matthew 25:26 refers to the servant who hid his talent as being wicked (πονηρός – bad and

toilsome) and lazy (όκνηρός – slothful, hesitating, being backward). In this sense, slothfulness points to an unwillingness to act and to participate; it describes an unambitious person and being disinterested.

Sloth is described as one of the seven deadly sins. The Latin word is *accidia*. “Accidia was spiritual torpor – an aversion to religious exercises, which, on account of it, were discharged perhaps with mechanical regularity, but without zeal or joy” (Stalker 1901: 116-117). Sloth leads to irregularity and carelessness (Stalker 1901:126).

Due to apathy, sloth represents a kind of “life fatigue” (O’Neal 1988:15). In the pastoral ministry, life fatigue is currently being called “compassion fatigue” – the cost of caring (Figley 1955). Caregivers start to suffer from an over-exposure to trauma. They become emotionally traumatised by helping suffering people in harm’s way as well as by being in harm’s way themselves (Figley 2002:3). Compassion fatigue describes then a kind of spiritual exhaustion; it describes fundamentally the *barrier of spiritual exhaustion and depleted hope*; it is about a kind of normal acknowledgement of personal limitation, helplessness and hopelessness within the realm of commitment, motivation and meaning. Compassion fatigue, burnout and vicarious suffering have in common that they are all related to the affective component in caring and represent an apathetic stance towards caring engagements (Louw 2016:358–373).

Suffering from spiritual burnup and becoming a victim of an overexposure to the suffering of others (compassion fatigue) contribute to the inflation of compassion. Not being affected, and the blunting of sensitivity and concern, point to a total inflation of pathetic caregiving. It infiltrates the realm of pastoral ministry and the diaconic outreach to people. It even impacts of the professional identity of ministers and caregivers.

Compassion as a Christian virtue and expression of our new identity in Christ, presupposes a paradigm shift from merely being an emotion on the level of the affective, to an indication of a new mode of living (*habitus*) and state of being (*ontic dimension*). Compassion should thus be interpreted in terms of the vicarious suffering of Christ in order to overcome ministerial sloth and an apathetic stance that leads to indifference and the trauma of compassion fatigue.

Sacrificial exchange: The priestly dimension of compassionate being-with, being-for, being-in-the place-of

The current obsession with the pursuit of happiness, can lead to a kind of “preferred indifference” in order to free human beings of the burden of achievement ethics and to purify toxic desires (Brown 2017: 214–218). Having said this, the following question arises: but what are options in terms of a pastoral approach to the aggressive indifference of *f*ck*?

Preferred indifference: The Stoic option?

Apathy within the Stoic paradigm and Epicureanism centres around the “absence of pain”, specifically when pain becomes a stumbling block in terms of life fulfilment (happiness). One should therefore limit our desires and reduce affections that hampers sound judgement (Brown 2017:121). It proclaims a form of detachment (apathy) that cripples the human soul. Apathetic detachment can be summed up by the following directives for detecting apathetic soulfulness:

- *The art of non-attachment* (Brown 2017:214) – the attempt to reassess out attachment to things in the world. Indifference then means to feel differently about things that cause anxiety and severe distress. Epicurus, thus, recommends a change in emotional experiences. Blunt desires are unhealthy so that attachment to unnecessary objects should be reduced to the level of apathy.
- *Detachment as the detoxication of the human soul*. One should therefore distance oneself from the levelling demands of society, rampant consumerism, and the emphasis on the capacity to perform.
- *Preferred indifference* – the attempt to balance apathy towards unnecessary “externals” or “indifferents” (Brown 2017:218). One has therefore to keep a check on our relationship to external goods and prefer to distance oneself from emotional manipulation in order to foster change in lifestyles.
- *Living happily, implies to take responsibility for emotions*. Stepping back from the immediacy of the turmoil of the affective dimension of life, implies a kind of apathetic responsibility – to control the harmful effect of dread on decision-making. The risk of empathetic responses resides in the danger of reinforcing hurt feelings.

- *Stoic apathy is about a therapeutic mode of reframing* – the reinterpretation of a negative event as something positive (Brown 2017:190). The argument is that venting does not solve emotional problems. Rather than merely to suppress or to vent, apathetic distancing fosters “reprogramming”. Apathetic remoteness makes space for the art of “Let-it-go”.
- *Stoic apathy is about the minimising of spiritual pain* – the pain of being a failure. Its aim is to promote the courage to be, patience, and endurance. “Stoicism has proved enduring, and today many movements exist to encourage people to think deeply about it and apply it to our lives” (Brown 2017:123).

The previous directives do have advantages in the attempt to promote spiritual wholeness and human well-being. However, they do have limitations as well. Apathetic detachment operates on the existential level of wants, desires and emotional needs and expectations. But what about the transcendent level of belief systems, religious commitments, dominant world views, schemata of interpretation, paradigmatic frameworks (patterns of thinking), ideologies and undergirding philosophies of life that determine the quality of meaningful life fulfilment?

The further argument is that to probe into the realm of human vulnerability, the helplessness of dread and despair, the disgust of “not-giving-a-f*ck”, we need to move from the realm of doing functions and emotional functions into the realm of ontic and being functions; i.e. the level of spiritual convictions that can reframe human habitus and the basic attitude towards suffering, mortality, death and dying. It is in this regard that the notion of compassion comes into play. Compassion not merely as an affect or empathetic response; not primarily about intention and motivation (the conative dimension) but compassion as virtue and *habitus*.

My presupposition is that compassion is connected to the telic dimension of life (meaningful existence) and an ontic dimension: character and identity. Compassion in pastoral theology describe a new stance in life and new mode of being, being-with (solidarity, companionship and friendship); being for (intimacy and commitment), and being in-the-place-of (transformative exchange).

Virtuous, vicarious compassion: the theopaschitic option?

Moral blindness, apathetic indifference, lackadaisical remoteness, the lifestyle of “not-giving-a-f*ck”, impolite apathy (the blasé attitude of external coolness); *impudence*, *audacity*, insolence – all of these categories express different levels of uncompassionate carelessness. Thus, the challenge to rediscover the Christian meaning of compassionate being-with, within the desperate cry (*cri du coeur*) for a sense of belongingness, intimate connectedness and tender caring and comfort.

Apathy reopens the debate and dialogue on “the possibility of a rediscovery of the sense of belonging as a viable alternative to fragmentation, atomization, and the resulting loss of sensitivity” (Bauman and Donskis 2013:12). The malfunction of pathos and moral insensitivity point to a callous, compassionless, and heartless kind of behaviour; to an indifferent posture epitomised by Pontius Pilate’s “hand-washing” gesture. As Elisabeth Vasko (2015:240) aptly remarks: “Apathy is contrary to Christian identity. As the Gospel writers testify, Jesus lived a life of compassionate involvement in the world, evidenced in his ministry with the marginalized and outcast and in his critique of hegemonic forces of his day” (Vasko 2015:240). Therefore, the thesis: the way beyond apathy is not easy. “It involves a willingness to enter into compassionate solidarity” with those who suffer and being tagged in a very discriminating way as the outcasts of society (Vasko 2015:240).

One of the core arguments in the debate regarding the suffering of God and its connection to the cross of Christ, is the argument that the Christian understanding of God differs fundamentally from the interpretation of gods within the Roman culture and Hellenistic paradigm as related to the *apatheia* of Zeus on the Olympic mountain. In fact, Jürgen Moltmann’s theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) (1972) is based on the theological premise that within the theological framework of the *passio Dei*, the only appropriate paradigm for identifying the unique understanding of the Christian God, resides in the bold statement of Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:25: He proclaims the crucified Christ as a display of the power and wisdom of God. God’s power differs from the “omnipotence” of powerful deities in the sense that the *pantokrator* of other deities resides in their remoteness from pathos.

Moltmann (1972:256) builds his argument on the fact that early Christianity used the notion of the impassibility of God to defend an “apathetic God”, remote from suffering. *Apatheia* is for Moltmann a metaphysical axiom that describes in terms of Platonian philosophy a metaphysical and ethical perfectionism. With reference to the metaphysics of Aristotle, the fundamental statement about the character and essence of God is: Divine apatheism (θεός ἀπαθής) (Moltmann 1972:257), and, thus, the notion of a static deity. An autocratic and impassable God cannot suffer and act like a militant Caesar. However, the pathos of God (a pathetic God), demonstrates the power of compassionate being-with through and within sympathetic weakness, caring vulnerability, and divine co-suffering (Moltmann 1972:259-263).

As Fretheim in his book *The Suffering of God* (1984:139) pointed out: the suffering of God is not foreign to the Old Testament. He suffers because of the people’s rejection of him as Lord; He suffers with the people in the desert; He suffers for them due to the fact that in the sacrifices of the Old Testament, God gives of himself to make forgiveness possible. Thus, the empathetic presence of God (Louw 2000:66) as expressed in a theopaschitic approach to a hermeneutics of the cross (Louw 2016:243-380). The compassion of a suffering God should fundamentally be linked to the “foolishness of God” (μωρόν του Θεού) as expressed in a *theologia crucis*: The weakness of God (ἀσθενέσ του Θεού) that is stronger than man’s strength (1 Cor 1:25).

The *mōron* (foolishness) and *astheneia* (weakness) of God describes a strange kind of pathos: Pathos as absolute divine absence and *apatheia*, namely the forsakenness (*derelictio*) of God the Son by God the Father: my God, my God why has you forsaken me? (Matt. 27:46). Neglect, abandonment, negligence became theological categories of outmost “divine indifference”. And in this indifference (apathy), compassion (*pathos*) is defined as the paradox of remote, indifferent apathy, demonstrating virtuous suffering (*pathos*); pathos as foolish loss of all sentimental emotions and the shock of absolute rejection and protest against oppressive manipulation (the disgust about radical dereliction expressed within the subtle, painful art of “not-giving-a-f*ck”); pathos as apathetic resistance (non-attachment; preferred indifference) and negating demonstration against all forms of forced authority and autocratic empathetic abuse (oppressive and violent force); pathos as vicarious suffering- the pain of exchange, replacement

and sacrifice. In this respect, compassion becomes an ontic feature of our new being in Christ as displayed in pity, grace, and unconditional love; compassion as boldness of being and speech (*parrhesia*).

Compassion is a heuristic expression of what Martin Luther called the *Anfechtung* of God. The German term *Anfechtung* describes a state of hopelessness and helplessness which has strong affinities with the concept “anxiety” (Angst). The terms which Luther uses when discussing *Anfechtung* (see McGrath 1985:170), illuminates the various aspects of the concept as related to substitution, exchange, and replacement. The suffering of God is therefore a form of temptation (*tentatio*), which takes place through an assault upon human beings (*impugnatio*) and is intended to put them to the test (*probatio*). When believers recognize God’s merciful intention which underlies *Anfechtung*, they rejoice in such assaults, seeing in them the means by which God indirectly effects and ensures our salvation. For this reason, Luther is able to refer to *Anfechtung* as a “delicious despair” due to the marvellous exchange which took place in the death of Christ (McGrath 1985:171). Between our suffering (*Anfechtung*) and Christ’s suffering (*Anfechtung*) there is a very special link: the compassionate being-with of vicarious suffering which Luther calls “marvellous exchange” (*commercium admirabile*).

Conclusion

It is perhaps necessary in religious circles to use harsh, even bad, vulgar, and filthy language to promote radical change in traditional formula, confessions, dogmatic presuppositions that became “zombie categories” in theologising and preaching. People become so accustomed to theological grandiloquence from pulpits and “correct language” within the discourse of synodal meetings, that they cannot hear the voice of the gospel clearly. This is more or less what Paul had in mind when he referred to legalistic righteousness, to hypocritical talk and nationalistic formulated categories stemming from the Jewish cult in order to express his resistance to artificial religiosity. His choice was to use concepts stemming from filthiness, human excrement, and vulgarity to develop a radical and critical stance: total loss (*zēmia*); filthy rubbish or dung (σκύβαλα). Manson (2017) found it necessary to refer to the subtle art of “not-giving-a-f*ck”. In order to

move from indifference, created by the pressure of treadmill competition (Manson) and the artificiality of legalistic religiosity (Paul), to the pathos of vicarious suffering, sewerage language is needed to promote radical change.

It seems that a younger generation became so disillusioned with traditional and denominational God-talk, that they lost interest in religious paradigms. To my mind that is specifically the case in, for example, many reformed circles in South Africa. The way in which religion was used to justify the policy of apartheid; how passages from scripture had been used to condemn sensitive issues like homosexuality leading to blunt homophobic indifference; ecclesial exclusivity within multiculturalism creating xenophobia, raises the question about radical language to express spiritual anger and disgust (*nausea*).

The point is: zombie categories can hamper the development of a compassionate stance in caregiving. Ministry is inevitably exposed to the inflation of compassion, to antipathetic distancing and compassion fatigue. What is most needed is a theology of compassion with the emphasis on vicarious suffering-with, suffering for and suffering in-the-place -of-the-other (substitution) as illustration of the pathos of sacrificial love. “All great love is above pity; for it wants – to create what is loved! “I offer myself to my love, and my neighbour as myself” – that is the language of all creators.” (Nietzsche 1961:114).

Compassion as an illustration and exemplification of theopaschitic suffering (Davies 2000) describes what is meant in the New Testament with *ta splanchna* – the pity of God. One can say that bowel categories display in divine pathos a theology of the intestines (*esplanchnizomai*). The idea behind all God-human encounters is compassion – kenotic love as exemplification of *promissio*, *epangelia*, *eschaton*, *parrhesia*, *ta splanchna*, *rh̄m*, and *h̄nn*. Bowel categories in a theology of the intestines are used to describe the sincerity and the seriousness of God’s compassionate faithfulness. They refer to vicarious modalities and to the how of God’s being-with (Louw 2016:570).

Zygmunt Bauman (1995:50-51) warns against the fact that in our very fragmented society, compassion within cultural diversity can easily become discriminating *being-aside* – the strange other just flickers at

the periphery of vision and vanish or are glossed over as soon as his/her position has been plotted, rarely stopping for enough time to command a share of attention. The latter leads to indifference and the resisting anger of “not-giving-a-f*ck”. Bauman (1995:50) opts for a modality of being-with (engagement and encounter) and being-for – bearing responsibility for the other (Bauman 1995:63). “Being-for is the act of transcendence of being-with” (Baumont 1995:52).

In order to summarise, one can say that a theology of compassion can thus be described as the modality of compassionate caring, enfleshed in terms of:

- *Being-with* – solidarity, togetherness, companionship, sense of belongingness, friendship. Friendship as the virtue of cohabitating together in the new community of *koinonia* – “Christians see God in Christ as “befriending” humans” (Hauerwas and Pinches 1997:46). In this sense, compassion can be called a virtue in Christian spirituality (De Marco 1996:34)¹.
- *Being-for* – intimacy, commitment, unconditional love, embracement, advocacy (the comfort, *paraklesis* of voicing the voiceless).
- *Being-in-the-place-of* – substitution, vicarious suffering, exchange, spiritual wholeness, and healing.

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1 It is quite remarkable that Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches in their publication *Christians Among the Virtues* (1997:113-148) refer to the fact that Christian virtues are shaped by the suffering of Christ (1997:126), without mentioning compassion as a Christian virtue.

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