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# KAREN ARMSTRONG'S CHARTER FOR COMPASSION

## Implication for Inter-Religious Efforts in Singapore

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**A**bstract: The religious scholar Karen Armstrong advocates a conception of religion that is at odds with many contemporary views on faith. Armstrong insists that true religiosity is not about faith in any articles of belief, but is instead determined only by the centrality of compassion. This paper analyzes Armstrong's philosophy, particularly focusing on her response to the rise of religious and secular fundamentalism, and the motivations behind the creation of the Charter for Compassion, launched in 2009. Armstrong's ideas are also compared with Singaporean perspectives on the role of compassion in religion, as explicated by civil society leaders who have founded *com. passion. sg*, a Singaporean network inspired by the Charter. This paper argues that Armstrong's ideas on compassion, advanced in her works and manifest in her Charter for Compassion, offer a constructive ideological platform for Singaporean civil society organizations that seek to transcend religious differences and make positive social change. By incorporating material gleaned from personal interviews with the founders of *com. passion. sg*, the paper explores the reasons for their interest in Armstrong's philosophy and how the activities of the network may reflect her ideas. Finally, the paper considers how future developments in the Singaporean inter-religious landscape may be shaped by Armstrong's idea that compassion can function as a unifying ethos to encourage cooperation between different faith communities.

### Introduction

In the last decade, both religious fundamentalist ideas and anti-religious discourses have seen their own growth, gaining traction in an age often characterized by vociferous ideological rhetoric and rigid dogmatism. Yet the religious scholar Karen Armstrong has insisted on treading a middle ground, advocating a conception of religion in opposition to prevalent understandings of the divine promoted by fundamentalist religionists and militant secularists alike. Religion, according to Armstrong, should not be about belief in any particular faith-based doctrines, but should instead involve a whole-hearted devotion to the principle of compassion. In keeping with this conception of religion, Armstrong launched an international campaign called the Charter for Compassion (2009), intended to

promote compassion, mutual respect, and harmony between peoples across the world. Armstrong first expressed her desire to create and propagate the Charter when she won the TED Prize on February 28, 2008 (*Charter for Compassion*). As a document based upon the Golden Rule, the Charter seeks to transcend religious, ideological, and national differences. It was officially unveiled in Washington D.C. on November 12, 2009, receiving the widespread support of leading thinkers, individuals, and organizations from various faith traditions, including the Dalai Lama and the Mufti of Egypt (*Charter for Compassion*).

To understand the background of the Charter, we may consider Armstrong's personal life and career, which reveals her perseverance in the face of adversity, her skill in writing sensitively about religion, and her popular appeal as a campaigner for interfaith harmony. She spent seven years as a Roman Catholic nun in the 1960s, but left her teaching order to read English at St. Anne's College, Oxford, in 1969 (Armstrong, *Spiral Staircase* 11). During the period, she had suffered from hallucinations and anorexia, and it was only years later that she was diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy, though she managed to adjust to life after receiving proper treatment (Armstrong, *Spiral Staircase* 246). Becoming a full-time writer and broadcaster, she visited Jerusalem to film a television documentary, and the experience sparked her interest in the other two Abrahamic faiths – Judaism and Islam (Armstrong, *Spiral Staircase* 257). Her research on these faiths and other religious traditions led to her writing of over fifteen books, including *A History of God* (1993), *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (1996), biographies of Muhammad (1991) and Buddha (2001), as well as two memoirs, *Through the Narrow Gate* (1982) and *The Spiral Staircase* (2004), about her religious life and her experiences after the convent respectively. In recent years, she has also written *A Case for God* (2009) and *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (2010). Today, she remains a best-selling author whose work has been translated into forty languages (Armstrong, *Spiral Staircase* i), writing and lecturing extensively about religious issues and spiritual values, especially compassion (Armstrong, *Twelve Steps* 3).

Given the influence that Armstrong has had, it is surprising that the way Armstrong's philosophy may continue to shape perspectives about religion has hardly been studied. There have been short analyses of Karen Armstrong's individual works, such as the review by Frances Spalding on *The Spiral Staircase*, as well as those by Diarmaid MacCulloch and John Wilson on *The Great Transformation* (2006). *The Economist* provides a succinct review on *The Case for God*, commenting that Armstrong is a "successful ambassador of religion in a generally irreligious age" (n. pag.). Yet there has been little analysis of Armstrong's religious philosophy as a whole, and there has also been almost no research done on her Charter for Compassion. A study of this nature is thus particularly worthwhile, given the growing influence of the Charter, which has been affirmed by more than 90,000 people around the world (*Charter for Compassion*).

We see a convergence of Armstrong's global perspective and the local con-

text of Singapore in the creation of a Singaporean non-governmental network called *com.passion.sg*. By comparing the ideas advocated by Armstrong and those promoted by key civil society leaders who have promoted compassionate action, it is possible to analyze the local impact of Armstrong's ideas among civil society activists in Singapore. This paper argues that Armstrong's ideas on compassion, advanced in her works and manifested in her Charter for Compassion, offer a constructive ideological platform for Singaporean civil society groups that seek to transcend religious differences and make positive social change. The Charter and the ideas behind it thus serve to articulate, reflect, and echo the viewpoints on religion advanced by several Singaporean civil society leaders, suggesting that Armstrong's conceptions of faith may continue to influence the perspectives of interfaith advocates in the city-state.

### Armstrong's Philosophy

Armstrong derives inspiration from earlier religious thinkers who have contributed to the spiritual development of humanity, particularly those from the period that the German philosopher Karl Jaspers has called the Axial Age (Armstrong, *Great Transformation* xii). From about 900 to 200 BCE, in four distinct regions, the majority of the world's religious traditions began laying their roots:<sup>1</sup> Confucianism and Taoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheism in Israel; and philosophical rationalism in Greece.<sup>2</sup> This Axial Age appears to be foundational to her thought: she credits the sages of the period as "spiritual and philosophical geniuses [who] pioneered an entirely new kind of human experience" (*Great Transformation* xii), and she describes the Axial Age as a time of "religious revolution that proved pivotal to the spiritual development of humanity" (*Twelve Steps* 26). According to Armstrong, despite the different historical and cultural circumstances of the period, the Axial sages continue to speak to our current condition, and humanity has never surpassed the insights of the Axial Age (*Great Transformation* xii). These insights may be summarized in three points: first, the ultimate centrality of compassion; second, the firm rejection of fundamentalism; and third, the perception of religion as practice, and not belief.

#### (a) Centrality of Compassion

The word 'compassion' derives from the Latin *compassionem*, which in turn stems from the root words *com* ("with") and *pati* ("suffering") ("compassion", *OED*). Compassion is less about feeling sorry for people, and more about feeling with them; it is about sharing others' sufferings by assisting them in bearing their burdens. Armstrong articulates this understanding of compassion, defining it as "an attitude of principled, consistent altruism" (*Twelve Steps* 6), and she highlights its vital role in the cultivation of spirituality: "Compassion [...] dethrones

the ego from the centre of our lives and puts others there, breaking down the carapace of selfishness that holds us back from an experience of the sacred” (*Spiral Staircase* 331). Armstrong’s conception of compassion is universal and all-encompassing; she suggests that her readers meditate upon an early Buddhist poem: “May our loving thoughts fill the whole world, above, below, across – without limit; our love will know no obstacles – a boundless goodwill toward the whole world, unrestricted, free of hatred or enmity” (Sutta Nipata 118; qtd. in *Twelve Steps* 150). Thus, in the attempt to move beyond the self, individuals can transcend their egotism and selfishness, allowing for an enhanced awareness of spiritual reality. Armstrong notes that while the sense of compassion need not entail feeling “emotional tenderness for everybody” (*Great Transformation* 398), it does demand individuals be helpful, loyal, and willing to render practical support to their neighbours. Since today “everybody on the planet is our neighbour” (*Great Transformation* 398), it remains an imperative to maintain a compassionate spirit towards fellow human beings, particularly in a globalized age.

#### (b) Rejection of Fundamentalism

For Armstrong, ‘fundamentalism’ does not have a perfect definition, but it is a “useful label for movements that, despite their differences, bear a strong family resemblance” (*Battle for God* x-xi). Common traits that characterize religious fundamentalist movements include a tendency to reduce their ideology to specific ‘fundamentals,’ an emphasis on the incompatibility between secular and religious worldviews, and a fear of annihilation in response to perceived threats (Armstrong, *Battle for God* 368). Armstrong criticizes fundamentalists for distorting the Axial traditions by accentuating the aggressive elements that have evolved over the centuries at the expense of those espousing compassion and respect (*Great Transformation* 395). Religious fundamentalists have “turned the *mythos* of their religion into *logos*” (Armstrong, *Battle for God* 366),<sup>3</sup> and they have lost sight of some of the most sacred values of faith either by maintaining that their dogmas can be proven scientifically, or by debasing their inherited complex mythology as a streamlined ideology.

Armstrong similarly disapproves of “secular fundamentalism” (*Case for God* 288), and she indicts the “new atheists” (*Case for God* 290), including Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris, for not being “theologically literate” (*Case for God* 293). The new atheists, according to Armstrong, disregard the religious mainstream when they depict religion simplistically as capable of only evil and bigotry. To her, conflicts and problems are less due to religion than to the greed, hatred and ignorance of people who commit atrocities in the name of faith (*Case for God* 293). Just as religious fundamentalism frequently misrepresents the tradition it claims to defend, the new atheists preach a gospel of godlessness with the same zeal and intolerance as their opponents. Sam Harris, for instance, forcefully asserts that “*Most Muslims are utterly deranged by their*

*religious faith*” (85, his italics). In response to such ardent anti-religious fervour, Armstrong insists that the new atheists present an exaggerated image of faith, neglecting its inclusive and compassionate aspects: their argument “entirely fails to mention the concern for justice and compassion that, despite their undeniable failings, has been espoused by all three of the monotheisms” (*Case for God* 293). The problem with both religious and secular fundamentalists, as Armstrong argues, is that they both believe that “there is only one way of interpreting reality” (*Case for God* 295), which leads them to ignore the fact that “the ‘other’ side may also have merit” (*Case for God* 309). In an embattled and polarized world, any divisive ideology – whether religious or secular – reflects the intellectual myopia of its adherents, given “the complexity and ambiguity of modern experience” (Armstrong, *Case for God* 293).

### (c) Religion as Practice, Not Belief

For Armstrong, the crucial demand that religion should make upon individuals is not on what they believe, but how they behave; it is a transformative experience that changes individuals at a profound level. Armstrong appeals to the Axial Age thinkers to support this understanding of faith, as for the Axial sages, “respect for the sacred rights of all beings – not orthodox belief – was religion” (*Great Transformation* xiv). Religion thus requires orthopraxy, not orthodoxy (Armstrong, *Spiral Staircase* 267); right practice, not right belief. As Armstrong memorably puts it, “Religion is not about accepting twenty impossible propositions before breakfast, but about doing things that change you” (*Spiral Staircase* 304). It is only after ethical behaviour is practised that individuals can encounter the sacred presence within – a presence that, as Armstrong describes, “monotheists call God, but which others have called the Tao, Brahman or Nirvana” (*Spiral Staircase* 328). Religious insight thus emerges on the condition that individuals practise a compassionate lifestyle, enabling them to be liberated from the prison of selfhood.

In addition, Armstrong exhorts individuals to abandon what she describes as the “strident lust for certainty” (*Case for God* 276) which has characterized the modern age, as it is unrealistic and immature to expect religion to provide absolute certainty in their beliefs. The religious sages of the Axial Age, as Armstrong notices, found it “essential to question everything and to test any teaching empirically” (*Great Transformation* xiii) – if a particular religious doctrine made people kinder and more compassionate, it worked; but if it did not, it had to be discarded.<sup>4</sup> Rather than blindly conforming to religious teachings, the Axial sages searched for tried and true methods to live a compassionate life. “Like any skill,” Armstrong maintains, “religion requires perseverance, hard work and discipline” (*Case for God* 4). Just as it is futile and ineffective to learn driving just by studying the Highway Code, individuals must discover religious insights for themselves by translating doctrines into ethical action.

While Armstrong's arguments have received some support, there have also been criticisms of her philosophy, as her ideas have been disparaged as overly idealistic and thus difficult to adopt. The first main counter-argument is that her position of universalism – the belief that the different terms used by the Axial sages, like “God”, ‘Nirvana’, ‘Brahman’, or the ‘Way’” (Armstrong, *Great Transformation* xiii), describe the same sacred reality – involves an oversimplification and essentialization of faith, failing to recognize the diversity and heterogeneity between various religions. Keith Johnson has criticized universalism on the grounds that faiths make “contradictory truth-claims” (77), and an assertion of parity between faiths ignores their essential differences. For instance, Johnson claims that there is a “vast chasm” (78) between monotheistic and polytheistic religions: when Jews declare that there is only one God but Hindus believe that there are many gods, “one of them must be wrong” (79). Armstrong's emphasis on the commonality between faiths thus seems to gloss over their different truth-claims, as the “laws of logic” (Johnson 81) necessitate the conclusion that the validity of a certain religion entails the fallaciousness of others.

Yet Armstrong is fully aware of this criticism: she has anticipated that some readers may regard her emphasis on compassion as a diversion from the essential question about the validity of religious truth claims (*Spiral Staircase* 326). Armstrong insists that her position “is not to say, of course, that all faiths are the same” (*Case for God* 306), and she acknowledges that there are “important differences between Brahman, Nirvana, God and Dao” (*Case for God* 306), but this does not mean that only one particular religious interpretation must be correct. Instead all religious language is necessarily limited in its capacity to articulate the nature of the absolute. Religious thinkers of various traditions, Armstrong observes, have endeavoured to explain that the ultimate “cannot be adequately expressed in any theoretical system, however august, because it lies beyond the reach of words and concepts” (*Case for God* 307). Competing truth-claims are thus merely different linguistic expressions of a Truth that is beyond language, and can be interpreted as contrasting lenses on the same reality. It seems that assigning an objective value to the truth-claims of monotheism or polytheism is beside the point for Armstrong. As she points out, distinguished theologians of various traditions have maintained that the divine is not a mere entity whose nature can be defined in objective terms (*Spiral Staircase* 326). Any attempt to describe the elusive reality of the absolute is merely one out of many possible abstractions that are symbolic of but do not manifest absolute truth.

A response to this argument may be that Armstrong suggests religious relativism, allowing one to adopt any conception of God that suits the individual, but she has another rejoinder. One cannot simply believe what one wants about the divine, because a decisive test for the validity of a religious doctrine is that “it must lead directly to practical compassion” (Armstrong, *Spiral Staircase*



328). Compassion was the “litmus test” (*Spiral Staircase* 328) for the Axial sages, who believed that if a religious belief compelled individuals to develop kindness and empathy, it was valid theology, whereas if a doctrine led believers to become hostile or cruel towards others, it was demonstrably invalid (Armstrong, *Spiral Staircase* 328). Armstrong thus denounces the crusaders who slaughtered Muslims and Jews: they had succumbed to idolatry by imposing “their own fear and loathing on to a deity which they had created in their own image and likeness” (*Spiral Staircase* 328). By contrast, “thoughtful Jews, Christians and Muslims” (Armstrong, *Spiral Staircase* 328) who commit themselves to the practice of compassion, like practitioners of other faiths who do the same, can experience “the transcendence that gives meaning to their lives” (Armstrong, *Case for God* 308). For Armstrong, compassion is the benchmark by which religious believers may be judged, and the particular language used by individuals to describe the divine is less important than the actions they undertake which manifest their beliefs.

The second main argument made against Armstrong is that her call for compassion may be sound rhetoric, but it is too unrealistic given modern geopolitical realities. As articulated in a question raised during a lecture delivered by Armstrong: “Theory is good, compassion is good but if someone keeps killing one of you, and doing injustices against you, is it not quite difficult to be compassionate?” (MUIS). Such sentiments were also reflected by another audience member at the same lecture, who asked, “On compassion, do you think it is possible to succeed in the current world political situation?” (Zakir H4). The concern is that the struggle for justice may demand bloodshed, and compassion might merely be a lofty ideal that can hardly be translated into reality.

Armstrong’s answer is to appeal to a wider perspective by considering the inadequacy of alternative modes of action other than compassion. As Armstrong argues, compassion is in fact “the only thing that will succeed in this modern political context” (qtd. in Zakir H4), as self-interest and short-term goals only lead to greater difficulties. As exemplified by figures such as Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu or Mahatma Gandhi, non-violent campaigns were effective in achieving political reform. In any case, the problem with states or individuals employing non-compassionate approaches is that they result in the betrayal of the values that they are supposed to defend – Armstrong points to Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay as notorious examples of torture and human rights violations (MUIS). Appealing to the Axial sages again to defend compassion, she observes, “The sages of the Axial Age did not create their compassionate ethic in idyllic circumstances. Each tradition developed in societies like our own that were torn apart by violence and warfare as never before” (Armstrong, *Great Transformation* xiv). In other words, the Axial sages were not utopian dreamers who developed their ethics in ivory towers, but were actively responding to the violence of their time, and nevertheless were convinced that compassion was not merely edifying rhetoric, but that it actually worked to transform society for the better. The challenge for religious believers then, according to Armstrong,

is how they can adapt the compassionate ethics of the Axial Age to their own reality, translating them to a new cultural and religious context in a world scarred by injustice and aggression.

### The Charter for Compassion

Armstrong's Charter for Compassion (see Fig. 1) articulates and reflects key aspects of her philosophy, establishing a way for religious discourses to be translated into an action-oriented campaign. Analyzing the text of the Charter, it is evident that several of Armstrong's ideas are neatly encapsulated.<sup>5</sup> According to the Charter, compassion is "at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions" (para. 1), and the Golden Rule is embedded as an underlying rationale. The description of compassion, that it enjoins us to "dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there" (para. 1), directly echoes its definition in Armstrong's *The Spiral Staircase* (331), while her exhortation to "return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate" (para. 3) is a scarcely veiled reference to the Axial sages who preached compassion and respect. Her recognition of "the evils committed in the name of religion" (*Case for God* 292) is further mirrored in the Charter's acknowledgement that "we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion" (para. 2), apparently pre-empting accusations made by the new atheists that believers have ignored the atrocities perpetrated by their co-religionists.

However, as if speaking to both secularists and religionists who have fallen prey to bigotry, Armstrong warns that "to incite hatred by denigrating others — even our enemies — is a denial of our common humanity" (para. 2), suggesting that any attempt to demonize one's adversaries will inevitably betray its own cause. Noticeably, there are no hints of Armstrong's belief in the infallibility of God, and little reference to her conception of religion as practice and not belief. It is likely that by strategically de-emphasising this aspect of her philosophy, Armstrong has couched the Charter in terms that would allow it to gain greater recognition and acceptance, attracting a wider audience. Nonetheless, the Charter includes not merely abstract rhetoric but also specific calls for social action, particularly education "to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures" (para. 3). Such calls echo appeals that have been made by other scholars, such as Charlene Tan's recommendation for students in Singapore schools to be exposed to opportunities to learn more about other faith traditions, in what she calls "Spiritual Education" (333), so that students can "develop an empathetic awareness of and reflective approach towards the various religions" (333). The Charter, in its articulation of specific imperatives and recommendations, thus promises to offer a useful platform on which interfaith leaders can ground their efforts to improve relations between faith communities and foster inter-religious harmony.

## The Development of *com.passion.sg*

Interfaith harmony is particularly crucial for a country like Singapore, which has a diverse number of faith communities. While Buddhism currently has the largest group of adherents (Singapore Department of Statistics), several other religions are practiced like Christianity, Taoism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism, as well as Zoroastrianism, Jainism and Baha'ism (Tham 17). As a city-state influenced by transnational trends such as increasing religiosity and the rise of fundamentalism, Singapore has been alert to how these external pressures may affect social stability and cohesion. Concerns about threats to religious harmony have led the Singapore government to enact legislation such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) in 1990, which gives the state the legal option to prosecute individuals who present a threat to public order due to their religious extremism (E. Tan 65). Yet a reliance on the state to preserve social harmony may not be ideal, given that legislation may not be sustainable or effective in the long run. As Singaporean civil society leaders have pointed out, non-governmental initiatives at the grassroots level to promote interfaith harmony can balance with state intervention to provide a practical and balanced approach (Phua, Hui, and Yap 654).

It is in this context that the movement called *com.passion.sg* was launched by a group of Singaporean civil society leaders inspired by Armstrong's Charter for Compassion. Formed on 14 June 2009, the movement is envisioned as a network of individuals, rather than a new society, and aims to create opportunities to practise compassion through reflection and social action (D. Tan H12). Founding members include San Francisco-based Dr. Tan Chong Kee, who founded the now defunct online forum 'Sintercom'; Alvin Tan, artistic director of Singaporean theatre group 'The Necessary Stage'; and Yap Ching Wi, a corporate trainer (D. Tan H12). According to Yap, who discussed *com.passion.sg* in a personal interview,<sup>6</sup> the idea for the group was triggered by a conflict between members of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), a non-governmental organization in Singapore,<sup>7</sup> as the founding members were particularly concerned about potential religious polarisation in society:

People were galvanized into two camps. We realized that if we were in the other camp's shoes, we would have felt attacked, given the hours of non-stop scrutiny [...] We thought, there must be a better way to do this. Then somebody mentioned that this was what Karen Armstrong was trying to do with the TED Prize, and we all went to check out her compassion website [...] We studied the Compassion Charter a lot more closely, and we realized that we could use their values and principles (Yap).

A major motivation for the choice to employ the Charter as the basis for a new movement seems to have been the nature of Armstrong's discourse. In her principle of compassion, the founders of *com.passion.sg* found a credible platform on which to build their movement. Comparing Armstrong's ideas with the founders' personal perspectives, significant overlaps can be observed between the principles explicated by Armstrong and those promoted by the founders.

The founders' motivations are anchored by compassion, as its universality has an inherently positive appeal. Their testimony validates Armstrong's point that compassion, far from being idealistic and untenable, can be a useful method in rallying support for social causes. As Yap mentions, "Compassion is something that no one can quarrel about, so it's very unifying." Armstrong's call for individuals to develop compassion by removing the "egotism that holds us back from [...] transcendent experience" (*Spiral Staircase* 313) also resonates with founding member Alvin Tan, who reasons that "people who cling to dogmas can be quite egocentric; the thinking is this: if I believe all this, I'll receive salvation – that is ego." In the rejection of egotism, dogmatism, and fundamentalism, the founders maintain that love and compassion surpass doctrine in importance. Tan, speaking from a Catholic background, maintains:

Christ embodies love – love one another as I have loved you. So all the other religions actually practise the same thing; it's all semantics, isn't it? The thing is, what do you practice? [...] There are a lot of things that already divide us in life, and there's no reason why religion should serve to divide, rather than to unite so as to help people who are less fortunate (A. Tan).

The founders thus agree with Armstrong that religion should be less about orthodoxy and more about orthopraxy. Yap, who is Buddhist, affirms, "Religion shouldn't just be seen as a belief, because it's a long process of practice." By emphasising the value of compassion as a common denominator for all people, the founders seek to heed Armstrong's call to promote harmony and mutual respect, adopting the Charter as an ideal platform for advancing the agenda of compassion.

Armstrong's call to translate belief into action is thus manifest in *com.passion.sg*, which has focused mainly on poverty issues in Singapore, assisting the needy regardless of their religion (*com.passion.sg*). Although Singapore has one of the highest levels of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in the world, estimated at around US\$56,532 (S\$70,450) in 2010 (Wealth Report 2012, 11), there are still needy Singaporeans from the bottom 30 per cent of local households who struggle with "relative poverty" (Asher and Nandy 46). It is this underprivileged group that *com.passion.sg* has chosen to target, and the network's stated aim is to "identify and address the gaps in attitudes and policies towards the local poor" (*com.passion.sg*). According to Yap, who is a former social worker,

public assistance is generally available for the poor in Singapore, but these social safety nets are not always sufficiently comprehensive, and some needy families still struggle to stay afloat. Yap's claims are corroborated by accounts provided by other charitable organizations in Singapore, noting that some low-income households are trapped in a poverty cycle due to factors such as health problems or family circumstances (Methodist Welfare Services Singapore n. pag.). The Singapore government has consistently maintained that it cannot adopt a welfare-state system due to the need for 'self-reliance,' which means that non-governmental organizations play an essential role in supporting needy households not eligible for public assistance (Lim n. pag.). In particular, *com.passion.sg* has contributed to this cause by introducing three kinds of programmes, described in their brochure, that have promoted compassion towards the poor through concrete initiatives, categorized as compassion in "action," "expression," and "reflection."

(a) "Compassion in Action (Voluntary Initiatives)"

The main programme advocated involves both first-hand observations of needy households and low-wage earners, as well as fundraising projects for the poor.

- Exposure visits to lower-income neighborhoods such as Jalan Membina (with about 40 persons attending), followed by sharing of reflections and slide-show presentations
- Familiarization tours to districts popular with migrant workers like Little India: such workers, who constitute about 20 per cent of the resident population in Singapore, are usually low-wage earners employed as manual labor in construction, shipyards, sanitation services and manufacturing (TWC2)
- A project called "Neighbours in Need," which has raised more than US\$8185 (S\$10,000) for the Evercare Welfare Centre's Emergency Fund, for distribution to needy households and the poor

The exposure tours and familiarization visits aim to raise awareness about the local poor and inspire compassion for them, alerting individuals to the reality of "the inequality between rich and poor" (Armstrong, *Twelve Steps* 65). The movement also corresponds to Armstrong's call to "translate the Charter into practical, realistic action" (*Twelve Steps* 5) when it directly seeks to alleviate the poverty of low-income households. Yap raises the example of a needy mother with myopia who could not become a hospital attendant unless she had spectacles, which she could not afford, and just US\$65-81 (S\$80-100) provided by *com.passion.sg* for the Evercare Welfare Centre's Emergency Fund allowed her to purchase the spectacles that she needed to secure employment.<sup>8</sup> As Armstrong reminds readers, an act of compassion "need not be a grand, dramatic gesture" (*Twelve Steps* 103), and even a relatively small sum can go a long way in helping

the needy. Thus, the network's efforts reflect the Charter's message that the spirit of compassion obliges individuals to work unstintingly in assisting others in need (para. 1).

(b) "Compassion in Expression (Arts Initiatives)"

Besides poverty alleviation efforts, a series of arts initiatives have been spearheaded by members of the network to raise societal awareness about the plight of the local poor.

- Social dialogues, for instance with artist and arts educator Felicia Low at 8Q SAM, a local museum (17 Oct. 2009)
- Public art installations advocating compassion, such as one displayed in collaboration with Post-Museum and Ngee Ann Polytechnic's Interdisciplinary Studies' conference (4-16 Nov. 2009)
- Short videos on YouTube with compassion as a theme by film-maker Loo Zihan, including a video interview with social worker Alvin Chua entitled "*com.passion.sg* for our Local Poor"<sup>9</sup>
- Photography projects, like "Love Meme" by photographer Tan Ngiap Heng, promoting the idea of love and compassion in Singapore

At first glance, arts initiatives may appear extraneous or peripheral to the promotion of compassion, since there are no direct beneficiaries whose suffering is alleviated by such artworks. But these initiatives are in line with Armstrong's vision about "the role that art can play in expanding our sympathies" (*Twelve Steps* 88). The cultivation of compassion demands that the faculty of imagination has to be developed first, allowing individuals to identify empathetically with others whose experiences differ from their own (Armstrong, *Twelve Steps* 88). Armstrong observes that the pain of fictional characters in films may move viewers to tears as their compassion is aroused, even though they may be aware that their suffering is wholly fictitious (*Twelve Steps* 88). Similarly, it is plausible that the depiction of the actual difficulties experienced by the local poor may encourage affluent Singaporeans to become more sensitive to their needs. If art can "unsettle us and make us question ingrained preconceptions" (Armstrong, *Twelve Steps* 88), the artworks, videos and photographs of *com.passion.sg* may prompt deeper reflection about the reality that poor people do exist in Singapore, despite the country's reputation as a prosperous "Asian financial hub" (Lim n. pag.). Through the arts initiatives of *com.passion.sg*, individuals may be led, in the words of Armstrong's Charter, "to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings" (para. 3).

(c) "Compassion in Reflection (Learning and Discussion Initiatives)"

The final programme involves developing a deeper reflective attitude, emphasizing a consideration of the complex difficulties involved in attempts to tackle poverty.

- The Singapore launch of the Charter, conducted in conjunction with the international launch, involving talks and meetings (12 Nov. 2009)
- Forums, such as “Working with Want,” which provide a platform for discussions about the complexity of poverty and possible strategies to assist the underprivileged
- Round-table discussions with relevant stakeholders, such as government bodies, professionals and philanthropists, with findings and recommendations presented

Armstrong urges her readers, “We must look at our community with compassion, estimate its strengths as well as its weaknesses, and assess its potential for change” (*Twelve Steps* 61). The members of *com.passion.sg* seem to reflect her attitude of careful scrutiny about the ways to advance positive change in society, discussing ideas thoughtfully while avoiding hasty or simplistic approaches, and consistently abiding by compassion as “the common ground on which we negotiate our differences” (*com.passion.sg*). Reflective deliberation and dialogue are thus guided by the essence of the charter. *com.passion.sg*’s declaration states that “compassion, and the Golden Rule of ethics, can guide what we say and do to better understand one another” (*com.passion.sg*) is a direct reference to the first sentence of the Charter, which calls upon all individuals “to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves” (para. 1). With its inclusive ethos, the Charter provides an inspiring message and a firm foundation for *com.passion.sg* activists to stress the importance of compassion for the economically underprivileged, offering them the “justice, equity and respect” (para. 1) that all human beings deserve.

The movement thus has significant potential to mature as an action-based network, encouraging dialogue between individuals of different religious affiliations. As Heather Chi, an early member of *com.passion.sg*, notes, “Its conceptual underpinning has a broad-based appeal, and through engagement with a diverse range of activist and faith groups, it might be able to serve as a neutral platform for debate and discussion.” Growing steadfastly with more than 120 members (Yap), the group is currently sustainable as financial costs are shared amongst members and each contributes their own skills such as graphic design or photography. On-going projects include plans to compile members’ personal experiences of compassion together in a book or a website (Yap). Nevertheless, challenges remain ahead: first, to ensure that there are enough resources to sustain the movement; second, to preserve an apolitical and secular basis so as to maintain neutrality; and third, to develop what Chi describes as “a focused set of programmes that makes

‘practicing compassion’ less abstract and more concrete.” If these challenges are overcome, *com.passion.sg* promises to serve as an enriching organic initiative, creating greater space in civil society to promote interfaith understanding in Singapore.

## Conclusion

By encouraging activists who seek to find common ground with members of other faiths, Karen Armstrong’s Charter for Compassion offers a constructive ideological platform for civil society groups that seek to transcend religious differences and make positive social change. The useful example of *com.passion.sg* demonstrates how local civil society activists may be inspired by global campaigns. Indeed, campaigns like Armstrong’s Charter may have considerable impact in promoting awareness of inter-religious engagement, and most importantly, the value of compassion in faith and spirituality. “Compassion,” as Armstrong notes, “is not a very popular virtue” (qtd. in MUIS). Frequently, religious believers have preferred being right over being kind; self-righteousness often trumps sympathy. Yet there is no need to wait for the state to impose demands for greater civic consciousness which may appear strained and artificial; instead, civil society leaders can initiate movements to uphold compassion, the Golden Rule, and the appreciation of alternative perspectives. As See Guat Kwee recommends, a pool of dedicated interfaith professionals can serve to deepen dialogue and broaden participation by involving not only mainstream religious leaders, but also youths, adults, and the elderly (683). Such professionals can effectively share Armstrong’s insight that there is a core spirit of compassion within religion, though often hidden by secondary factors. In the journey of faith, it is this spirit that demands to be uncovered, unveiling the beauty and power of religion to bring light to a troubled world.

## NOTES

1. Armstrong notes that Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were latter-day flowerings of the original Axial Age, as these three traditions rediscovered the Axial vision and translated it into an idiom that spoke directly to the circumstances of their time (Armstrong, *Great Transformation* xii).
2. The sages of the period included the Buddha, Socrates, Confucius and Jeremiah, as well as Mencius, Euripedes, and the mystics of the Upanishads (Armstrong, *Great Transformation* xii).
3. As Armstrong explains, *mythos* refers to mythological stories that are “not intended to be taken literally” (*Battle for God* xiii) but are concerned with ultimate meaning, while *logos* describes “rational, pragmatic, and scientific thought” (*Battle for God* xiv).



4. For instance, Armstrong details how the religious reformers of India took aggression out of sacrificial rituals (*Great Transformation* 79); Confucius tried to extract the militant egotism that had distorted Chinese rites and ceremonies (*Great Transformation* 302), and early biblical writers took the antagonism and belligerence out of the ancient creation stories, producing a cosmogony in which God blessed all his creatures – including Leviathan, whom He had slaughtered in older narratives (*Great Transformation* 177).
5. The full text of the Charter for Compassion can be found at [www.charterforcompassion.org](http://www.charterforcompassion.org).
6. With the help of Dr. Lai Ah Eng, personal interviews were secured with Ms. Yap Ching Wi and Mr. Alvin Tan. Dr. Tan Chong Kee was unavailable at the time. Hence, for the purposes of this paper, the founders referred to are Yap and A. Tan. Ms. Heather Chi, one of the earliest members, was also interviewed, via e-mail.
7. The Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) is a Singaporean non-governmental organization concerned with promoting gender equality. The women's advocacy group came under the spotlight in 2009 when it was taken over by a group of new members, several of whom belonged to the same church, who claimed that AWARE was promoting homosexuality. This 'new guard' executive committee was later thrown out during an extraordinary general meeting attended by an estimated 3,000 members (D. Tan H12).
8. Public assistance is available for such cases in Singapore, but Yap explains that if the mother had applied to the local Community Development Council for support, the processing time would take three weeks, and she had to report for work before that. Her low-level job meant that the hospital would be unwilling to wait for her to purchase spectacles, as there were several other applicants ready to take up her job, and if she failed to report as required, the hospital would simply hire someone else.
9. The video can be accessed here: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BLU3tkiPAM>>.

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