Ray Gaston is an Anglican priest and an authorised minister in the Methodist Church who currently works as inter faith studies tutor and enabler at The Queen’s Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education and the Birmingham District of the Methodist Church. Ray is the author of A Heart Broken Open (Wild Goose Publications, 2009) and is interested in Christian theologies of dialogue.

The roots of our understanding of compassion lie within the Bible’s understanding of the nature of God. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is spoken of as El Rachum - God the compassionate.

“But because the Lord your God is a merciful [compassionate] God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them.”

Deuteronomy 4:31 (NRSV)

God’s compassion is God’s love for God’s people and in the Psalms this is a recurring theme.

“The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.”

Psalm 145:8-9 (NRSV)

Here, God is not only El Rachum – the compassionate one – but also El Malai Rachamim – the one full of mercy. As with the Islamic tradition and the closely related language of Arabic, in which two of the principle names of God are Rahman and Rahim, these words are closely related to the word for womb. In Islamic Tradition many of the Surahs (chapters) of the Qur’an begin with the words Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim – translated by one scholar as ‘in the name of God merciful to all, compassionate to each’. God’s nature in Jewish tradition and Islamic tradition could be seen as being womb-like, nurturing and holding, as a mother’s womb nurtures and holds the growing child within her, giving of herself.

We also learn in Scripture that God is compassionate over all creatures, full of mercy and abounding in “steadfast love”, ‘Chesed’ in Hebrew – a love that is steadfast, loyal, is never lost and can never be taken away. God remains compassionate and loves God’s own people steadfastly even when they turn away.

This concept of ‘Chesed’ is central to the beautiful understandings of God’s love and compassion outlined in the prophet Hosea where the people are portrayed as turning their back on God, but God refuses to deny them.

“How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.”

Hosea 11:8 (NRSV)

It is this warm and compassionate love of God that we see taught in the Jewish tradition of Jesus’ time, in the works of the School of Hillel who was at his peak around the time of Jesus. Hillel was renowned for his compassionate and open interpretation of the Torah. It was Hillel who taught, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it” (Talmud, Shabbath 31a).

This is echoed by Jesus: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12) (NRSV).

This teaching, also found in other religions, has become known as ‘the Golden Rule’ and is seen by many as the core for the development of compassionate practice in all the major religions.

But the Golden Rule is only the beginning of the challenge to live compassionately. In Christianity we see in Jesus the depth of the compassion (previously outlined in the Hebrew Scriptures) of a God who has a mother-like, self-sacrificial nature. Christ takes the violence of the world upon himself on the cross to model the possibility of the practice of compassionate self-sacrifice, truly opening the way for real healing and transformation.
Both the medieval theologian Anselm of Canterbury and the mystic Julian of Norwich acknowledged this in prayer and reflection.

“Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you:
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children;
often you weep over our sins and our pride;
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement.
You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds:
in sickness you nurse us and with pure milk you feed us.”

(Preface to the Proslogion, Anselm of Canterbury)

“Our mothers bear us for pain and for death,
our true mother, Jesus,
bears us for joy and endless life.
Christ carried us within him in love and travail,
until the full time of his passion.
And when all was completed and he had carried us so for joy,
still all this could not satisfy
the power of his wonderful love.”

(Julian of Norwich)

Conclusion

Central to an understanding of God’s nature is compassion and this is perhaps best expressed in images relating to mothering.

Jesus calls us in the Gospels to follow him into living out compassion: ‘Be compassionate as God is compassionate’ (Luke 6:36) (NRSV).

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