

A Christian Inter-Human Ethics with Two Pillars: Mercy and Justice

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Introduction

Our aim is to elucidate on the double inter-human passion of a contemporary moral theology, namely the passion for mercy and justice.¹ At the same time, we intend to demonstrate how both need each other in a balanced theological ethics. Since this concerns the main features of an inter-human theological ethics, we shall begin with the anchoring of that double passion in the heart of the Christian faith itself, namely Jesus' proclamation of the Reign of God.

From Jesus' proclamation of a passionate God

Jesus' teaching about God is never neutral but shows us a God involved with humans. He never speaks about God per se, as a kind of indifferent 'fact of being', but constantly links God with the idea

¹ This focus implies that the ecological perspective is for the moment bracketed, although for an integral moral theology it is just as essential as the inter-human perspective. Moreover, the treatment of this perspective requires a wholly different paradigm, namely that of creation.

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of kingship and lordship ('Reign of God').² He ascribes to this lordship, however, a paradoxical meaning by turning it around, as it were, and linking it to an approach to people that serves and liberates. By means of this ethical 'Umwertung' or 'reversal' of the power category 'lordship' Jesus proclaims not an exalted, majestic and almighty God who arbitrarily 'sets his foot on the world', but rather a God who comes near and who precisely rids Himself of His 'tremendous majesty' and binds Himself with 'the poor, the weeping, the hungry, the crushed' (cfr. the Beatitudes). Thus Jesus proclaims a passionate God. It is apparent from the gospel, however, that Jesus did not only proclaim this passionate God but that he likewise 'expressed' such a God: before anything else he acted, and by means of his words he made clear what his actions and deeds meant. The proclamation and realisation of the Reign of God can thus simply be called the great passion of Jesus. This involvement with humans, whereby God's lordship becomes real, is the only and total object of his endeavours and his life.

Jesus speaks time and again about God in terms of 'ethical excellence', and not in merely descriptive, distant and abstract terms. God is not formulated by Jesus in terms of theoretical and 'metaphysical' categories or principles of explanation; God is always Someone, a Thou, a 'person', who is understood as loving. He is moved by and is sensitive to what happens to people and what concerns them. The God that Jesus presents to us (and of whom we can state that he has also 'embodied' Him) is not just an 'unknown, transcendent' God, but is always a sensitive God, characterised by His ethically qualified involvement in the world of humans.

In biblical language God is never presented as an 'unmoved mover' (Aristotle), or as an outsider that observes how the clock, which he himself has started in motion, continues to tick and function without his further having to be concerned about it. In the Bible, on the contrary, God is presented as someone who is essentially involved in what happens to humans in the world. We can thereby better call Him a 'moved mover'. And of course we can only express this involvement of God in imperfect terms. But it is crucial to note that the biblical God is no static but a dynamic God, who 'is moved' precisely because He is touched and affected by what happens to people, literally by their 'history'. He is no unapproachable and indifferent being, but vulnerable in what people undergo. When

² H. Merklein, *Die Gottesherrschaft als Handlungsprinzip. Untersuchungen zur Ethik Jesu*, Würzburg, Echter Verlag, 1981 (2nd ed.), 17-45.

Christian revelation says that God is love, then it does not say that He is an inaccessible absolute principle – a conclusion to one or the other ingenious reasoning – but rather that He is an utterly involved One, with a ‘heart of flesh’, who is moved in his ‘entrails’ by all that happens to His people (and the whole of His creation).

Precisely out of this idea of a ‘sensitive’ and involved God, we gain insight into the foundation and inspiration of a Christian inspired inter-human ethics. Insofar as such an ethics identifies itself as Christian, it finds a direct starting point in faith itself, namely in the way Christians confess and experience God as a moved (and affected) God, who never abandons people but endeavours to put to right their affliction and search for meaning. If God would only be a neutral philosophical principle, then people could readily be believers in God without commitment to people. But if God essentially implies an ethically qualified involvement with humans, as this is revealed in the biblical tradition and, in an eminent manner, in Jesus, then one can only acknowledge and confirm God by professing and authenticating in oneself God’s ‘love’. This confession of a passionate God is the alpha and the omega of a christian-inspired inter-human ethics, otherwise it contradicts its foundation and inspiration.

Passion for mercy

After this fundamental statement on the essential anchoring of a Christian inter-human ethics in the profession of faith in an ethically qualified God, the prevailing tones of this ethics can now be made to resonate from closer by.

A bodily ethics

In and through all the actions, words and stories of Jesus, it is clearly apparent how a gospel inspired ethics can only be a ‘sensitive ethics’, meaning to say an ethics that has everything to do with being moved by the joys and sorrows of people and by what touches them in their ‘heart’. With this we meet a very different accent of the ethical passion than the active and intentional drivenness towards the object of our own endeavours. The word ‘drivenness’ should here rather be understood literally as being driven by the ‘other than myself’. I am moved by the epiphany of the other, whereby I am put in motion, in spite of myself. Even before we actively take on our commitment for the other, we are moved and put in motion particularly by the other’s vulnerability and affliction; we are literally affected (‘ad-fected’). This passion forms the primary ethical foundation of every Christian being, speaking and acting.

A Christian inspired ethics does not consist of reasoning first, is not a 'moral catechism' that proclaims grand principles out of which everything else is deduced. Perhaps we have reduced ethics, in the wake of western rationalist modernity, too much to the reason that reflects on principles and procedures, and that then applies them. Even though a Christian inspired ethics must surely develop in a second instance into reasoning and reflection, it still cannot be reduced to that in its origin and in its finality.

Christian inter-human action on the contrary, finds its first, existential starting point in one's own body that, in its vulnerability, is sensitive to what befalls other people. Christian relational and social ethics is, in the first place, concerned with 'being moved' and 'being touched' by the fate of the other, as we find illustrated in the story of the Good Samaritan – the foundational story of every Christian inspired inter-human action.³ The suffering that afflicts the other, who is abandoned "half-dead" and 'bereft' along the path, does not touch us 'spiritually', in spite of our body, but precisely in and through our body and its sensitivity. By means of entering into the 'need' of the other – whatever the nature of this 'need' may be – our 'sensitivity' acquires an ethical significance in the full sense of the word.

This 'sensitivity' needs to be understood strictly as 'vulnerability' in the passive sense of the word, and not primarily as an active positioning or even less as an attitude of openness for the other. After all, the openness for the 'need' of the other is not evident, since spontaneously we would rather react negatively to the problems of the other, precisely because this disturbs our self-concern. Likewise here is the narrative of the Good Samaritan illustrative: when the priest and the Levite are confronted with the emergency situation of the bereft man along the path, they turn away their gaze because – in their own travel plans or life projects – they prefer not to get involved in this 'problem'. The openness for the other can then likewise be only the result of a fundamental choice, stronger still of a 'conversion', taken up time and again. Now, what is meant by sensitivity – preceding this choice – is an essential being 'touchable' and 'affectable' that forms part of our very own bodily condition. We are touched by the need of the other because we are touchable, and we are touchable because we are bodily through and through. This sensitivity is not a

³ For a systematic reading of the narrative, see: R. Burggraeve, *Each Other's Keeper? Essays on Ethics and the Biblical Wisdom of Love*, Thrissur: Marymatha Publications, 2009, 50-99.

merit but a condition of existence whereby we are ethical, non-indifferent beings appealed by the other and the other's existence.

That this sensibility is a source and fertile ground for a Christian inspired inter-human ethics does not only have an anthropological but also a theological basis. After all, it directly refers back to the being of Jesus, who as the 'Christ of God' is the source and model for all Christian ethics. The evangelist John indeed says: "the Word is made flesh" (Jn 1,14). If we thus want to know something about the 'Word', about God and the 'spirit', then we must look to the 'flesh'. The bodily being of the earthly Jesus – whom everyone could see with their own eyes, could experience and taste – was God's very own incarnation or embodiment. Jesus' 'body and flesh' thus revealed the Spirit of God, without both being equated with each other. Not only was Jesus God's Spirit, he was just as essentially the body of God's heart. In Christianity the 'flesh' is both the place – the sacrament – of revelation as well as the mediator for every intersubjective and social ethics.

Ethical passion for the unique other

This sensibility by and for the other should not be understood, however, in an abstract way as being involved in 'humanity' in general or as a whole. Rather, this sensibility has everything to do with getting involved with very concrete people in well-defined circumstances. Every Christian inspired inter-human ethics begins as a careful proximity with the other. Jesus was no philosopher who dedicated abstract reflections to humanity, or to the 'human' in every person, just as Plato or the Stoics in fact did. He was someone who went about in Palestine and thus saw people live and suffer, in all sorts of forms. With his own eyes he saw very touchable and fragile people who were in the grip of all kinds of ailments, diseases and forms of exclusion.

Concretely, this means that the basis for a Christian inspired inter-human ethics lies in a careful responsibility for other.⁴ In our tendency to walk on by, we are thus appealed to restrain ourselves and to direct ourselves to the other. This means that this ethics of responsibility begins as an act of 'restraint', an act of 'non-indifference': not reducing the other to the same, that means not instrumentalizing the other, nor intimidating and manipulating the other by all sorts of means.

⁴ W. Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999 (3d ed.), 213-227.

An authentic Christian inspired inter-human ethics begins, in other words, with a form of scruple, precisely because one is concerned not to do violence to the other. This leads to a reversal of the usual order: where we spontaneously proceed from our own autonomy as mastership, we withdraw back to ourself – an ethical kenosis or anachoresis – in order to create space for the other as other. A Christian ethics can only be authentic if it respects the other in the other's dignity and acknowledges and values the other's uniqueness. The autonomous I is no longer the master but the other becomes radically the master, who teaches the I about the other's own joys and sorrows. The first and ultimate basic ethical attitude of the responsible and caring I is a fundamental choice for obedience and thus for a readiness to listen, so that the other can finally be given the chance to be present by her or his own unique life story. And this doing justice to the other is completed further in all sorts of forms of 'assistance', finding its fulfilment in the choice not to abandon the other in her or his 'suffering unto death'. The purest form of proximity consists in holding on to the hand of the other when one becomes powerless before the ultimate enemy, death: that is the radical ethical asymmetry in which all ethical care is rooted. With Levinas, we would like to formulate a radical criterion to discover the quality of ethical care, namely "the order not to let the other alone, be it in the face of the inexorable" or "You shall not let anyone die alone!"⁵

This attention to the vulnerable other likewise implies the challenge to develop an 'ethics of mercy' for people who, in their concrete, at times difficult social context and life situation, develop a behaviour that does not comply with the Christian ethical ideals and norms as expounded by the Church. In our opinion, such an ethics of mercy must – going beyond deculpabilization – make itself concrete in and through an 'ethics of growth'.⁶ Such an 'accompanying' ethics – one that is involved with people – is faced with the challenge to further develop the idea of John Paul II on the 'law of gradualness', without at the same time degrading itself into the gradualness of the law,

⁵ E. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985, 118-119.

⁶ For further exploration, see: R. Burggraeve, *Meaningful Living and Acting. An ethical and Educational-Pastoral Model in Christian Perspective*, in: *Louvain Studies*, 13(1988), first part: nr. 1, Spring, pp. 3-26; second part: nr. 2, Summer, 137-160; ID., *Une éthique de miséricorde*, in: *Lumen Vitae. Revue internationale de catéchèse et de pastorale*, 49(1994), nr. 3, September, 281-296; ID., *From 'Lesser Evil' to 'Lesser Good': Christian Ethics as an Ethics of Salvation*, in: *Hekima Review. Journal of Hekima College, the Jesuit School of Theology (Nairobi)*, 2002, nr. 28, December, 8-25.

meaning to say without taking anything away from the radical character of the Christian *agapè* and the forms and styles of life that give it expression in the most qualitative manner possible.

Consistent personalism

The ethical passion for the concrete, unique person in the totality of one's dimensions has, in the Christian tradition, led to a strong delineation of the 'personal value' of every person. Ensuing from the belief that every person is created by God is the tenet that every individual person, irreducible to one or the other totality, has a divine, unconditional and unassailable value. Insofar as this value is also affected by a miserable nakedness and vulnerability, it likewise implies an appeal, a categorical imperative – to put it along with Kant – 'not to kill'. Or, to put it positively, a categorical imperative for unconditional respect. This value of the human to be respected is expressed by means of saying that every human being is a 'person', independent of the moment of one's existence, thus starting from one's very beginnings up to the one's end, and independent of one's status, achievements or qualities. This leads to a radical and at the same time logical – consistent – personalist ethics that deems every human as worthy of protection, whether born or unborn, handicapped or not, sick or healthy, in the fullness of youth or in old age, deteriorating and dying. Here lies a challenging appeal to Christians not only to stand up for unborn life and to go against abortion (which, out of a centuries old tradition, Christians easily do), and in the same line also protest against certain artificial procreation techniques insofar as these instrumentalise the human embryo. But it is a challenge also to stand up radically for born life (which Christians do not as easily do), and this not only towards the end of life, as resistance against euthanasia, but also along life's way, for instance when people become the victims of economic, social, sexual, legal or political abuse or oppression. Whoever stands up passionately for unborn life is faced with the challenge to stand up just as radically and passionately for born life, and thus resist against all forms of injustice – at this point we already commence the following stage of our argument.

Passion for justice

The attention of a Christian inspired inter-human ethics to concrete, vulnerable persons, can be qualified as the principle of mercy. It cannot be denied that Christianity, throughout its entire history, in all possible places and in a diversity of cultures, has always given testimony to this mercy. The sensitivity for the concrete, unique other person is up till today the most obvious expression of the faith in God by individual

Christians and Christian communities, so much so even that Christianity is and remains recognisable in its best and clearest manner through that sensitivity.

Beyond cheap compassion

With this, however, not everything has been said about a Christian inter-human ethics. Indeed, there is a risk in the emphasis on mercy with all its projects of care for the materially, socially, ethically and spiritually poor and suffering other. Not because something would be wrong with this, but rather because easily a certain one-sidedness can be ushered along with it, which can undermine the passion of mercy itself or reduce it to 'good works' and cheap altruism, without much being done structurally to the situations that cause suffering and calamity.

The priority of the suffering other, who touches us bodily and emotionally, has its reverse-side. Even though a sensitive ethics of compassion and care for the other is simply to be called positive, it indeed runs the risk of forgetting that the 'suffering' of the other can find its origin in the moral evil of fellow humans, both persons as well as structures. This is the case in the story of the Good Samaritan, from which we drew inspiration in our sketch of the ethical passion for mercy. In this story all attention is paid to the confrontation with the suffering other, to the appeal that ensues from his epiphany to the three passers-by (the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan) and to the mercy shown by the Samaritan. Nonetheless, the starting point of the story lies in the fact that the man is the victim of a crime committed by others who have attacked him, robbed him, hit him half-dead and abandon him along the way. This is all mentioned in the narrative, but it is not considered further, so that all attention goes to the 'care' for the victim of the crime. One must not only reflect on how victims of crime should be received and cared for, but it is of equal importance to reflect on the causes and circumstances wherein people become victim of the immoral acts of others, so that something can be done about them and ways can be sought to prevent others in the future from becoming victims. And this has to be achieved not only by installing more preventive and sanctioning measures but also by an adequate assistance of people who through all sorts of circumstances and conditioning seem more easily predestined to lapsing into crime.

Ethical contrast experience

That is why it is extremely important, or rather utterly necessary, for a Christian inspired inter-human ethics, to link the compassionate

responsibility for the other with the 'visceral' resistance against the evil that people inflict on each other, whereby people precisely end up in 'need' and then require care and mercy. After all, there are not only people who through the imperfection of nature, through disease or an accident, that means through 'ontic evil', end up in need and suffering. There are just as many people who through the evil that they have had to undergo because of others, that means through 'moral evil', will need assistance and liberation. There is violation, destruction, exploitation, abuse of power, and all that we can call, along with Paul Ricoeur, 'the intolerable': racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, genocide, sexual abuse of children and minors (paedophilia), sexual exploitation of children with an aim to commercial pornography and prostitution, traffic in women, mutilation, physical and mental torture, psychological terror, arbitrary arrests, deportations, slavery, inhuman working conditions, child labour, and all other forms of evil committed by people against other people.⁷

With this, we discover an important, often mistrusted dimension of ethical passion, namely the passion of wrath that enrages itself over inflicted evil and injustice, and that not only exposes this injustice as intolerable but also - in a driven manner - strives to undo it. In this regard, I would like to point out the importance of what Edward Schillebeeckx has called the 'negative contrast experience',⁸ namely the moral indignation concerning factual situations, realisations, modes of operation, structures in a given historical, socio-economic, cultural, political and religious context. The contrast experience is always contextual; it always arises as a protest against the factually given, limited level of humanising, and against the actual forms of dehumanising. That is why contrast experience always appears as a negative experience, although in its soul a positive sense of value lies hidden, coupled with a strong urgency. It rises up as the condemnation of and the protest against the concrete situation here and now: this is unacceptable. Dorothee Sölle rightly qualifies the contrast experience as the great anger in the belly: 'This cannot go on further! This is unheard of! This cries out to heaven!' Fundamental values and possibilities address us most strongly in the context of their being threatened.

⁷ P. Ricoeur, "Tolérance, intolérance, intolérable," in: ID., *Lectures 1. Autour du politique*, Paris: Seuil, 1991, 294-311. See also the Vatican II Council Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), nr. 27, par. 3; also cited by the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, nr. 80.

⁸ E. Schillebeeckx, "The Magisterium and the World of Politics," *Concilium*, 36 (1968) 28-36.

Holy anger

That is why, aside from the track of mercy, we must also develop the track of justice. And we do so from the core of the Christian message, namely from the profession of faith in a passionate God just as we have begun our contribution. Concretely speaking, we are faced with the challenge not only to link Jesus' ethically qualified confession of God, with the compassionate dedication to the suffering other, but also with the moral indignation about evil whereby the other becomes the victim of his fellow humans.

This, however, is an aspect that is rather forgotten, namely that Jesus' proclamation of God's love likewise implies that God is not only a 'good' God, but also an 'angry' God, that means a God who becomes angry about evil. However evangelical the presentation of God as love may be (cf. 1 Jn 4,8) it can indeed derail into one-sidedness. Simply stated thus it evokes the image of a mild, kind God, who empathises with the human person in suffering, but from whom all hardness and irritation about the evil that people inflict on each other has disappeared. The image of a 'recalcitrant' God who becomes angry about inflicted evil, however, is also part of the biblical revelation of the loving God. The God who chooses the side of the vulnerable, excluded or alienated person is at the same time a God who is enraged about evil. If indeed according to Jesus' proclamation God can only be qualified as 'love', then He cannot endure any hate nor anything that contradicts this love. In other words, love is not only patience or 'tolerance', in the sense that it 'bears all things' as Paul says (1 Cor 13,7a); it is at the same time a form of intolerance against all that contradicts love. Love is the highest form of non-indifference, which implies that the God of Jesus is the non-indifferent one par excellence, who is equally moved by the scandal of moral evil, inflicting suffering to people. As 'nothing but love' God cannot endure any injustice – however small or hidden – and thus He indicts injustice and He wants justice be done to the perpetrator and restoration to the victim of that injustice. Consequently, it is no coincidence that the Christian tradition speaks of the 'holy anger' of God: the Bible teaches us, in other words, how the unconditional – and thus holy – love of God likewise implies a holy anger: not a vice but a virtue, a noble passion!

Structural incarnation of justice

Christian inter-human ethics should therefore not only be understood as a merciful attention to vulnerable and afflicted others, but at the same time as a getting angry about evil that is inflicted on those others.

Christian inter-human ethics has two sides or dimensions that need each other: two sides as each other's reverse-side. It is precisely because love, as sensitivity for the integral well-being of concrete people, makes up a core of the Christian calling and mission, that a believer must become agitated by inflicted injustice. The indignation, which in an emotional-ethical manner translates the intolerance towards inflicted evil, both prompts to doing good to the other (as in the story of the Good Samaritan, where the victim finds tangible care and is healed) as well as creates the conditions for doing this good, among others by unmasking inflicted evil as injustice and by proposing ways to remedy it or to prevent it in the future. An eminent example thereof is obviously liberation theology, which precisely on the basis of a critical analysis of social and cultural reality pronounces judgement on that which is not in agreement with the Biblical message of integral liberation and on what at best should change in order to substantiate this liberation for people in concrete historical circumstances, and this in a feasible manner, without, however, losing sight of the utopia of the Reign of God.

This implies that a Christian inspired inter-human ethics can only deserve the label 'Christian' when it does not remain stuck in mercy, but likewise develops justice. That is why it must go further than the assistance in the 'face-à-face' of the one person to the other. An integral inter-human ethics must likewise think structurally, namely about the causes and reasons for calamities and problems where people end up in. The universal and at the same time concrete love of neighbour, which we discussed above, is in other words not only applicable on an inter-individual level, but needs organisational and institutional extensions. Without these mediations the integral care for everyone cannot be realised effectively. Structural 'mediation' is not only a factual necessity but also an ethical task in order to realise integral well-being for all people, here and now, far away and tomorrow. In a balanced Christian inter-human ethics, there is need for a courageous and 'astute' passion for justice that does not only look at the 'symptoms' or expressions of problems amongst concrete people, but also is alert to the causes, in order to realise through the policy in the organisations, institutions or structures the necessary changes and humanising efforts.

Mercy as the leverage in an ethics of justice

More, however, is needed than the structural and institutional shaping of the integral ethical responsibility for people. Every form of social organisation easily tends to elevate itself into a self-sufficient system or

a 'definitive regime' that not only reinforces itself but also acts as if it has a monopoly in solving the problems of people adequately. On the basis of its objective, anonymising, administrative-technical and thus distant character, a social 'system' or organisation – large or small – relegates people under a generalising denominator, whereby the uniqueness of the concrete person can easily be ignored. 'Functionaries' of institutions only look at the other from an 'elevated' standpoint, that means from broader, more abstract categories whereby the concrete other is then classified as a 'case' or an 'application' of a 'clinical picture' or problem situation, so that they never get to see 'the hidden tears of the unique other'. We can call this a form of 'structural violence', a violence that is attached to all social-institutional forms out of their own structural nature, however necessary they may be in order to realise justice, human dignity and well-being for people in need.

This means that justice needs mercy. The basic principle of ethical passion for the unique other must be introduced as a principle of leverage within organised justice. The ethics of justice should not be played out against the ethics of mercy, as if they would be each other's radical opposites. After all, it is apparent how mercy within the systems that are based on justice can play an indispensable role of humanisation. Structures, organisations and institutions should not become ends in themselves. They should not have the final word about the good, however ethically inspired in origin they may be. Only through the attention for every human person a social system (in whatever large or small shape) can become an open system, that is both moved and surpassed by the ethically option for the unique other.

A culture of participation and 'warm solidarity'

This implies the ethical passion for the concrete, unique other in every organisation, structure and institution receives an indispensable critical function. After all, is it not only important to pose the unique other above every structure and organisation and, subsequently, make the other the central 'object' of concern. The concrete other, who is always 'exceptional', in the sense that the other can never be identified with a system, likewise deserves to be promoted to a 'subject' of responsibility within the social, economic, cultural and political system. In that way, the ethics of mercy, with its attention to the singular person, constitutes an integral part of the ethics of justice, which concerns itself in the first place with structural justice. We can describe this in a synthetic manner as the challenge to choose resolutely for a 'culture of participation' that strives for involvement in solidarity and shared responsibility, and this on the various levels of community and society.

That is likewise the reason why a Christian inter-human ethics, that is inspired not only by mercy but also by justice, will – as a kind of preferential option – offer resistance against any prior exclusion of the weak from social, economic and public life. This implies a resistance against the suppression of the weak and the poor and their poverty out of the public sphere. Even the small and the vulnerable other deserves to be ‘seen’ in society (and in the church!), so that they are not forgotten (when something is no longer ‘seen’ in public, it is easy to think it no longer ‘exists’ as well).

This ethical option for a culture of participation requires, at the same time, a dynamic-progressive application of the principle of subsidiarity in society. Concretely speaking, this means that over and against the distant and hierarchically vertical structures in society, which institute rather objective, technical-professional and organisational forms of cold solidarity, a counter-balance of warm solidarity is created whereby the involvement of concrete people with each other takes central stage. This counter-balance does not destroy the necessarily rational-organisational forms of solidarity but rather surpasses them by descending ‘to the grassroots’ as much as possible, so that an orientation towards the nearby surroundings where people concretely live becomes possible and tangible forms of warm solidarity can be created.

Small goodness

This continuous surpassing of social, economic and political structures, systems and organisations also requires what Levinas calls the ‘small goodness’.⁹ This goodness is small because it moves in the here and now from the one towards the unique other. It is likewise small because it is partial, without revolutionary or totalitarian pretences, that means without the pretence to change the system immediately and totally. It does what no single system, however well-organised, is capable of doing, namely to be near the other face-to-face, even though nothing more can be done for the other. Small goodness takes place without a noise and without ‘sermonising’ or ‘public manifestation’ and triumphalism. It is a goodness without witnesses. It evades all ideology. It is located outside of every system, or rather it reveals the impossibility of goodness as a regime, as an organised system, as a social institution. But even though it does not aspire for radical structural revolutions, in an organisation or social system it can indeed be the leverage that in spite of itself can produce a small crisis whereby in the system itself things are brought in motion.

⁹ See also: R. Burggraeve, *Proximity with the Other. A Multidimensional Ethic of Responsibility in Levinas*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2009, 105-110.

Beyond every system the small goodness incarnates utter gratuitousness. However, it does not have much power: it is vulnerable like the morning dew. It does not conquer, but neither is it conquered. It is indestructible and thus eternal, never to be subdued. It is not accomplished by the powerful – by those who are powerful in and through the system – but it are the powerless and the vulnerable who defend it. It is and remains possible thanks to ‘small prophets’, who are prophets in spite of themselves but thanks to their crazy, small goodness.

Conclusion: Christian inter-humanity runs on two legs

This brings us to the conclusion that our confession of God, as well as the inter-human – relational and social – ethics that flows forth from it, particularly in an Asian context, should not get stuck in one-sidedness. Even though mercy is accorded the first and last word in our confession of God, still this should not be detached from the profession of God as the Just One. A balanced christian inter-human ethics must guard itself against a one-sided focus on mercy, at the cost of justice. This is a real challenge for an Asian moral theology, familiar with an ethics of mercy and compassion. But an authentic Asian moral theology must equally guard itself against a one-sided option for justice, at the cost of mercy. Unfortunately, both are often played out against each other as if one would exclude the other, whereas we tried to demonstrate how they have to be inter-related. An equilibrated inter-human christian ethics thinks and acts both out of mercy as well as out of justice and it lets itself be moved and inspired by a God who is at the same time the compassionate and righteous One. A balanced Christian inter-human ethics in Asian context, in other words, is challenged to run on two legs. Never should it stand still, but should be constantly in motion. At one moment its steps have to go in the direction of mercy, and then again in the direction of justice, without excluding or absolutising one or the other. A christian inspired inter-human ethics in the particular Asian context should avoid all cheap, spineless mercy and all fanatic, violent justice that – at the cost of everything – intends to reach its goal. Mercy encompasses justice without stifling it, just as justice takes on mercy in itself without reducing it to nothing. The existence and the practice of christians is a tense existence, based on the dynamic mutuality and tension between mercy and justice. To define how this interactive bidimensional christian ethics of mercy and justice can be developed concretely in the cultural and social contexts of Asia cannot be the pretension of a western moral theologian, - that would be an unacceptable ‘theological colonialism’ - but is entirely the challenging, ongoing mission of Asian christians and theologians themselves, taking serious the particularity of the situations in which they have to incarnate their faith in the merciful and just One.