

A Religious Perspective on the Relationship of Love and Justice

Two of the most deeply embedded values in Jewish and Christian thought and practice are justice and love. But they are hardly exclusive to these religious traditions.

Justice and love, in some form or other, appear to be near-universal values in human society. No society could long exist without practices and behaviors that are expressions of them. Think of a society in which parents did not love their children, or one in which nobody had regard for how others or even they themselves were treated. It's hard to imagine!

In Western thought there have been various definitions of both love and justice. The Greeks had several different words for love – *eros*, *agape*, *philia*, and *storge*, for example. There are also different understandings of justice – retributive, distributive, restorative, fairness or equity, and so on. Among the various forms of love, Christian thought, at least, has emphasized *agape*, a kind of self-less love. However, there does not seem to be a very clear notion of how justice should be understood.

For many Christians, love and justice are not altogether compatible. I once had a parishioner who was fond of saying, “I want mercy, not justice.” By “mercy” he meant something like divine love, including forgiveness. Justice meant something like “just deserts.” The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr viewed justice much more positively, but he also tended to see a contrast or tension between it and love. For him justice was the ideal to be pursued in public life, while love demanded a level of self-sacrifice that one could only aspire to in interpersonal relationships.

A favorite biblical text, one of the most notable in the Hebrew scriptures, comes from the prophet Micah. It expresses God's call for us to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly” with our God. Here justice and love are clearly brought together, not seen as incompatible. When I was serving as a Presbyterian minister, I participated in ordination services where elders or ministers pledged themselves to practice “the love and justice of Jesus Christ.” Again, no incompatibility but a congruence of love and justice.

Perhaps you've heard the words of Cornel West, public intellectual, Harvard professor, and professing Christian, who says that “Justice is what love looks like in public.” In my own study of religious ethics I considered another way to relate these two values: “Justice is the form of love, and love is the content of justice.”

For Christians, at least, and probably also for many persons of other religious faiths, the form of justice we are called to practice must be an embodiment of love. It must not be punitive or retributive. And because it is an embodiment of love, it is not optional. That is to say, we must act to make it real. We must “do justice,” as Micah proclaims.

Both in our interpersonal relationships and in our roles as citizens and members of society, we are called upon to engage in those practices and create those social structures that enhance the lives of others. It's hardly enough to “live and let live.” It's wrong to neglect those in need, those disadvantaged by the way things are, those who lack the resources or opportunities to

flourish as human beings. This is not the work of charity. It is the work of justice, or perhaps even more fundamentally, of a just love. There is no way we can achieve a perfect society, because we are not perfect. But we can and must make a better society, one that understands justice to be the form and structure for loving our “neighbors” – whoever they are – as ourselves.

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