



## **A Theology of Mercy in Islam by Cheryl Camp rsm**

### **Introduction**

In this Jubilee Year of Mercy declared by Pope Francis, Catholics are invited to explore the meaning and experience of mercy. One way of exploring mercy is by looking at what it means to people of different faith traditions. Their scriptures and beliefs can enrich our own understandings.

To examine a theology of mercy in Islam may seem somewhat strange in today's context of what could be called a plague of terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalists against both Muslims and non-Muslims in many parts of the world. However, their interpretation of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad - which forms the religious rationale for their political and military movements – does not represent the vast majority of Muslims. It could therefore be helpful to take a brief look at a different interpretation, mindful that this 'look' is from a non-Muslim.

### **Mercy Theology in Islam**

What is the theological understanding of Mercy in Islam? This can be found in the two primary sources of revelation, the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The Qur'an is the sacred scripture written in Arabic, and the Sunnah includes sayings, teachings, habits, practices and silent approvals of the Prophet Muhammad. These were verbally transmitted until later collected and recorded in writings known as Hadiths.

#### *The Meaning of Mercy in Islam*

Mercy in Islam is seen as having two manifestations – internally: a kind heart and compassionate soul, and externally: “pardoning those who slip, forgiving those who are mistaken, helping those in trouble, assisting the weak, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, tending to the sick, and consoling the grieved...as well as many other things”.<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Bismillah*

The importance of the concept of mercy in Islam is seen in its use in the Qur'an. The Arabic invocation بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ (Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim) appears at the beginning of all but one of the 114 Suras (chapters). Translated, *bismillah* (or *Basmala*) means “In the name of God (Allah)”. It is also used by Muslims at the beginning of any activity and is therefore an essential element of their identity. The second part lists two of God's names or attributes, *rahman* and *rahim*, which are derived from the Semitic root r-h-m. These two terms are

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<sup>1</sup> Abu Bakr Jabir al-Jaza'iry, *The Muslim is Merciful*. <http://sunnahonline.com/library/purification-of-the-soul/233-muslim-is-merciful-the>.

often translated into English as “The Compassionate (or Gracious or Beneficent) and The Merciful”.

Both words, *rahman* and *rahim*, are derived from the same word, *rahmah* meaning ‘mercy’. *Rahim* (*raham* or *rahm*) is also the word for ‘womb’. In the Hadith collection of Al-Tirmidhi, the Prophet reports that “Allah the Exalted said: I am Ar-Rahman. I created the Raham”. In this saying, *Raham* is related to the Arabic word *rahm* (womb).<sup>2</sup> Veronica Lawson, in her book *The Blessing of Mercy*, explains the Hebrew use of words in the Bible relating to mercy and ‘womb-compassion’: “The noun *raḥamîm*, the verb *raḥam*, to mercy or to show womb-compassion, and the adjective *raḥûm*, merciful or womb-compassionate, are all related to the Hebrew word for womb, *reḥem*”.<sup>3</sup> The close relationship between these concepts in Islam and Judaism and their similar use in Greek in the Christian New Testament, offers great potential for dialogue and shared commitment to mercy between these three Abrahamic religions.

This womb-compassion of God is reported in another Islamic Hadith:

The Messenger of Allah [Prophet Muhammad]...said: “Those who are merciful will be shown mercy by the most Merciful. Be merciful to those on the earth and the One above the heavens will have mercy upon you. The womb is derived from the Most Merciful, thus whoever keeps relations with [their] family then Allah will keep relations with [them], and whoever abandons [their] family then Allah will abandon [them]. (Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith no. 1924).

Wahiduddin (Richard Shelquist) sums up this idea of womb-compassion:

...the phrase *ir rahman ir rahim* is a recognition and honouring of the very source of all existence, the source of all blessings, the source of all compassion, the source of all mercy who gives endlessly to us and who also responds according to our moral integrity, our harmony with all of creation and our love of Allah.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Prophet Muhammad*

In the Qur’an, God is revealed as having mercy on believers: “[God] is ever merciful (*Rahim*) to the believers” (Sura 33:43). ‘Believers’ in this context refers to those who believe in God and have accepted Muhammad as the Messenger of God, i.e. Muslims (Sura 4:136). The Prophet Muhammad was sent as a messenger of this divine mercy to his followers: “Surely, a Messenger has come to you from among yourselves; ...ardently desirous is he of your welfare; compassionate and merciful towards the believers” (Sura 9:128).

His mission also extended beyond ‘the believers’ to all: “(O Muhammad!) We have only sent you as a mercy for all worlds’ (Sura 21:107). The Turkish scholar, Cafer Yaran, concludes: “Therefore, it is possible to conclude that mercy is one of the most essential Islamic virtues and anything which conflicts with mercy does not coincide with the Prophet’s mission”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Saed Abdul-Rahman, *The Meaning and Explanation of the Glorious Qur’an* (Vol 1) 2nd Edition. London: MSA Publication Limited, 2009, 29-30.

<sup>3</sup> Veronica Lawson, *The Blessing of Mercy*. Northcote, Vic: Morning Star Publishing, 2015, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Shelquist (Wahiduddin), *Bismillah al rahman al rahim*. <https://wahiduddin.net/words/bismillah.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Cafer Yaran, *Understanding Islam*. Edinburgh, UK: Dunedin Academic Press, 2007, 46.

When asked to pray against idolaters, Muhammad is reported as replying: “Verily I was not sent to invoke curses, but rather as mercy” (Muslim, Hadith no. 2599).

### *Muslims and Mercy*

Muslims, as well as receiving the mercy of God, are required to extend mercy to others. The Prophet said “Allah will not be merciful to those who are not merciful to the people” (Bukhari, Hadith no. 6941 and Muslim, Hadith no. 2319). Being merciful is basic to being Muslim.

### **Conclusion**

This brief exploration of a theology of mercy reveals an aspect of Islam that is very important to millions of Muslims. Following various terrorist attacks, many Muslim leaders make public statements condemning the actions and motivations of the perpetrators, and their message is: “They do not represent us”. Muslims in general hold strongly to their belief that Islam is a religion of peace, and being merciful is an essential element of being a good Muslim.

Being merciful is also an essential element of being Christian. This common ground between Muslims and Christians is an invitation for mutual exploration. May this Year of Mercy help us to receive and share the mercy of God, The Compassionate, The Merciful.

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