



MERCY
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Theological Imaginings: Faith Traditions and Mercy

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Introduction

Sometimes, we are so familiar with our own faith tradition that we take it for granted and cannot see it as outsiders might. Studying and interacting with other faith traditions can provide insight into our home tradition or ‘house faith’, as Catherine Cornille (2019) calls it, and as a result we often see and hear things differently. Each Sister of Mercy belongs to a particular ‘house of faith’ which is influenced and shaped by cultural experiences across the world. From within our ‘house of faith’ we are encouraged to reach out in order to intentionally and sympathetically interact with other systems of theological belief. If we do so, we open up the possibility of a richer appreciation of our own house of faith.

Inter-religious empathy or entering into another’s worldview is a developing area within the study of religions and takes us to another level beyond simply studying the key beliefs and practices of other faith traditions. Inter-religious empathy involves a delicate balance between deep commitment to one’s own faith tradition and an openness to the ‘religious other’.

In order to explore faith traditions and mercy, I have chosen to focus on the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and then to touch briefly on the Eastern traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Judaism and the Mercy of God

We are all very familiar with the dramatic story of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt to eventual prosperity in the Promised Land and each of us has a particular memory, either from scripture, artworks or Cecil B de Mille’s film, of the Ten Commandments when the people formally enter into a covenant with God.

We remember how, no sooner had the people received the covenant, than they through their worship of false gods represented by a golden calf, break their side of the covenant. God is said to be disappointed and refers to them as a “stiff-necked people” (Ex 32:9). This section of the story concludes with Moses shattering the tablets of the covenant: everything seems to be lost. Later, we read that Moses intercedes on behalf of the people asking God for mercy reminding God of the promise made earlier, “Let me see your countenance” (Ex 33:18) he says, and God responds “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy [*rah’mim*] on whom I will show mercy” (Ex 33:19).

We learn much about God's mercy when, despite the people's infidelity and stiff-neckedness, God enacts mercy giving the people another chance. We read more of the mercy and fidelity of God in Exodus chapter 34, 6-7 when God says to Moses:

'The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

For Jews, this declaration from Exodus 34 is known as the Thirteen Attributes of God's Mercy. The thirteen attributes of Mercy (translated from Hebrew) are:

1. Lord, the Lord
2. God
3. merciful and
4. gracious
5. long-suffering,
6. abundant in
7. goodness
8. abundant in truth
9. keeping mercy unto the
10. thousandth generation (forever)
11. forgiving iniquity
12. forgiving transgression
13. forgiving sin

According to Maimonides, a famous Jewish Rabbi and philosopher of the Middle Ages, the thirteen attributes of God are not just a description of God, but they are the 'way' of God - in other words, how God operates within the world.

Today, Jews across the world sing the Thirteen Attributes on every holy day when the Torah is taken out from the Ark (except Shabbat). The attributes are recited in penitential prayers, especially those on the days of fasting between New Year and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), and they are repeated in the morning service of Yom Kippur.

Torah commentary explains that although the Thirteen Attributes embody divine mercy, the recitation of these alone is inadequate. Rather, people need to make sure that the attributes are reflected in their actions and lifestyle. For example, the Talmud says that if you are patient

with others, then God will be patient with you. You can only ask that God employ all these attributes if you apply them in your own relationships.

Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament)

The mercy of God is fundamental to our reading and understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures and so it is helpful for us to understand a few Hebrew words.

In Hebrew, the word 'mercy', *rah'mim*, is derived from the Hebrew root word *rhm* meaning 'womb'.

- the noun *rehem* (singular) means 'womb' or 'uterus';
- the plural, *rah'mim*, extends to the abstractions of mercy, compassion and love;
- the verb *rhm* means 'to show mercy'; and
- the adjective *raham* means 'merciful'.

Consequently, *rah'mim* speaks of a particular kind of mercy, the kind that generates in the womb. Sometimes, *rah'mim* is also translated as compassion, so mercy and compassion are often used as a pair.

Let us explore the idea of *rah'min* mercy and compassion as it is expressed in a familiar story in the First Book of Kings 3:16-28.

¹⁶ Later, two women who were prostitutes [an identification not a judgment – Tribble (1989)] came to the king and stood before him. ¹⁷One woman said, 'Please, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house. ¹⁸Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We were together; there was no one else with us in the house, only the two of us were in the house. ¹⁹Then this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. ²⁰She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. ²¹When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne.' ²²But the other woman said, 'No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours.' The first said, 'No, the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine.' So they argued before the king.

The king does not judge the two women nor does not take sides in the struggle for possession. Instead, he repeats what the women have said to show that no solution is possible.

23 Then the king said, ‘One says, “This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead”; while the other says, “Not so! Your son is dead, and my son is the living one.” ’

At this point in the story, the king moves to break the dualistic thinking of ‘mine’ versus ‘yours’, saying:

... ‘Bring me a sword’, ... ‘Divide the living boy in two; then give half to one, and half to the other.’

The king’s shocking statement forces the truth to be disclosed.

²⁶But the woman whose son was alive said to the king—because compassion for her son burned within her—‘Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!’ The other said, ‘It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it.’

After the women reveal who they are, the king delivers his verdict:

‘Give the first woman the living boy; do not kill him. She is his mother.’

Throughout most of the story the characters provide all the words, except in one section, verse 26, where the storyteller highlights the motivation of the woman who offers to relinquish her child in order to save the child (Trible 1989).

²⁶But the woman whose son was alive said to the king—***because compassion for her son burned within her ...***

In Hebrew it says: “...because her *rah’mim* [mercy/compassion] grew warm, grew tender”. In other words, she yearned for her son. Motivated by *rah’mim*, the woman forgoes justice for the sake of the life of her child and demonstrates ‘womb love’ (Trible 1989, p.33). In a reversal of the opening phrase, where the women are identified as prostitutes, we read in verse 27:

‘Give the first woman the living boy; do not kill him. She is his mother.’

This ancient story from the Book of Kings helps us to understand a biblical metaphor: the movement from a physical organ of the female body (the womb) to a way of being and living in the world; a way of interacting with the people around us. The presence of ‘womb love’ expresses the tender aspect of God’s love.

Even though the womb is a unique female organ, this biblical metaphor is also applied to men (Trible 1989). Let us recall the scene of Joseph and his brothers in the book of Genesis. In this story, Joseph is thrown into a well by his brothers and then sold into slavery. Years later, after

Joseph has become an advisor to the Pharaoh, the story moves to the scene where Joseph sees for the first time his brother Benjamin. Overcome, he looks for a place to weep because “his *rah’mim* yearned for his brother” (Gen 43:30).

The Hebrew scriptures use *rah’mim* to describe the mercy that moves God to be compassionate to the people. The text from the Book of Kings shows us how mercy moves within women while the Joseph text demonstrates that men too can be moved by mercy and compassion.

Christianity and Mercy

The New Testament, which uses Greek terms to express the concept of mercy, provides additional expressions of God’s mercy for a people living in different times. The opening of the Gospel of Luke, sometimes referred to as ‘the Gospel of mercy’, presents two parallel announcement stories: the first is the announcement to the elderly couple Elizabeth and Zechariah, the second announcement is to the very young girl, Mary. Mary’s reaction (Luke 1:46-55), presented in poetic form, speaks profoundly of the mercy of God. Mary’s response ties mercy to God’s intervention and saving action in the world. The hymn announces the reversal of human fortunes: God casting down the mighty and lifting up the lowly. It praises God whose “mercy is...from generation to generation” and who always helps Israel “in remembrance of God’s mercy”. This provocative poem sets forth themes that appear throughout the Lukan narrative, especially God’s merciful outreach and salvation.

When the story returns to Elizabeth and Zechariah, we are told that friends and relatives “heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her” (Luke 1:58) and Zechariah, after confirming his son’s name as John, has his tongue loosened and he speaks again. Zachariah blesses God in the hymn the Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79) which also draws attention to God’s mercy. It affirms that God looked “favourably on the people and redeemed them” and bestowed salvation and redemption showing mercy as God had promised their ancestors. Zechariah proclaims the “tender mercy of God” for bringing light into the darkness and for rescuing the people from their enemies. The text reinforces the perspective originally announced by Mary in the Magnificat and affirms God’s merciful saving actions in the world showing that God’s mercy accomplishes “great things”.

Throughout the Bible, the teachings on mercy are numerous and the vocabulary of mercy is broad and deep. Mercy is quintessentially an aspect or attribute of God, a quality that shows the uniqueness of God. Mercy too is an essential characteristic of the teaching of Jesus who is the ‘face of God’s mercy’. Mercy demands of us the characteristics of divine identity: it is not an option but rather an obligation and it goes hand-in-hand with justice. Mercy has a reciprocal dimension: those who receive mercy from God are called to emulate it. Mercy in Judaism and Christianity, therefore, is not only a divine quality or attribute but also a human virtue to be fostered through human interaction.

Christianity draws on Judaism for its understanding of mercy. Any differences in perception of God’s mercy would require a lengthier discussion that this task allows.

Islam and Mercy

Islam, the religion of people who follow the teachings of Muhammad, has existed since 610 CE when Muhammad is reported to have received his first revelation from Allah in a cave at Hira (ancient Iraq). The word Islam means submission or committing oneself to Allah and central to Islam and all Muslims is the absolute supremacy of God (Allah). The Qur'an, the sacred text of Islam, reveals the will of Allah to all Muslims and is considered by Muslims as the final word of guidance given by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Hibra'ail (Gabriel). While the Qur'an does not contain a discussion on 'mercy' it nevertheless uses the word 'mercy' frequently.

The *Qur'an* begins:

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, **the Merciful.**

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds

The Beneficent, **the Merciful.**

Master of the Day of Judgement.

Thee do we serve and Thee do we beseech for help.

Keep us on the right path.

The path of those upon whom Thou has bestowed favours.

Not (the path) of those upon whom Thy wrath is brought down, nor of those who go astray.

Again, it is helpful to have some elementary understanding of the Arabic word *rahma* from the root *r-h-m* which is linked to other Semitic words including *rahm*, the womb.

Of all the attributes of God in the Qur'an, that of mercy (*rahma*) is paramount. Words formed from the root *r-h-m* occur frequently in the Qur'an and they include phrases such as: the Most Compassionate (*al-rahman al-rahim*), the Possessor of Mercy (Q6:133; 18:58), and the Most Merciful of all the Merciful (Q7:151). The common Qur'anic phrase, the Merciful, the Compassionate (*al-rahman al-rahim*) has caused some commentators to speculate that the combination is related to emphasis, something like the phrase 'pitch dark' lends emphasis to 'dark'.

Each chapter (*sura*) of the Qur'an, except for the ninth, begins with the phrase: 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate' (*bi-smi-llahi al-rahman al-rahim*). In addition, the first of the ninety-nine names of Allah, *Ar-Rahmaan*, means the Most Merciful and describes an attribute of God where Allah bestows mercy (*rahma*) upon all the creatures in the universe.

For Muslims, it is a given that Allah is merciful, and that Allah's mercy is absolute.

Qur'an 6:54 tells us that "your Lord as prescribed for Himself mercy". Theologically, the attribute of mercy is understood as the will of the Creator when it benefits the servant. Some schools within Sunni Islam regard *rahma* to be Allah's action and as such it is affirmed as an

eternal quality of the Divine. This means that Allah is essentially merciful, just as Allah is essentially powerful and knowledgeable.

If the Qur'an reveals the nature of Allah as mercy, it does so through the means of the Prophet Muhammad. In Qur'an 21:107 we read: "We did not send you except as a mercy for all the worlds". Sufis use this text as a proof that the Merciful begins by creating His beloved and from him forms the entire universe as a manifestation of mercy. Revelation, therefore, becomes a manifestation of divine mercy and the mirroring of this quality at the level of human morality is central to the teachings of the prophet. Muslims scholars believe that the first hadith the Prophet Muhammad taught to his students was the hadith of Mercy: "The merciful are given mercy by the All-Merciful. Have mercy on those on earth, so that one in the heavens will have mercy on you".

The Qur'an frequently cites two or more attributes of Allah without using the conjunction 'and' (*waw*). This feature signifies that the divine attributes in the Qur'an qualify and permeate one another. The attribute of *al Rahman* serves as a bridge between the proper name of God, Allah, and God's other attributes. Therefore, Allah's mercy is likened to a hub from which radiates the many spokes of Allah's other attributes. Like the foundations of a house which are invisible but hold up the entire house, mercy is foundational to the Qur'anic worldview and to Qur'anic thought.

A common thread throughout the Abrahamic traditions is that mercy is an attribute of God. Likewise, God who is mercy and merciful wants human beings to be merciful also and to conduct themselves mercifully in their lives.

Eastern Traditions: Hinduism and Buddhism

The Eastern traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism differ from the monotheistic Abrahamic traditions in a number of ways including interpretations of mercy. Hinduism, (sometimes known as Hinduisms), includes a diverse collection of religious schools whose beliefs range from polytheism, monism, pantheism to monotheism. Buddhism, described by many scholars as a non-theistic belief system and a philosophy, has as its primary aim the elimination of desire which is seen as the cause of suffering.

In Hinduism and Buddhism, compassion is the focus more than mercy and compassion is seen as an action of an individual rather than an attribute of God. In the Vedas, one of the earliest sacred texts of Hinduism, compassion is rarely mentioned but it does appear later in the Upanishads where its meaning is closer to non-harm, charity and service than what we understand as mercy.

Compassion and help of others in need is important within contemporary Hinduism and is considered part of dharma (duty) and a way of earning merit (punya). The Padma Purana sacred texts state: "those who feed the crippled, the blind, children, the old, the ill, those helpless and pinched by penury, will enjoy bliss in heaven". Another sacred text, the Bhagavad

Gita popular with members of all the castes, encourages people to value generosity and charity and to give without any contempt towards the beneficiary.

While dharma is one side of the coin, karma is the other. The law of karma focuses more on personal behaviour and personal destiny. Hindus relate right acts to good diet, exercise, adequate sleep, and avoiding psychological stress. Just as Hindus strive for harmony in society, nature and the cosmos, they strive for harmony in the physical, psychological, social, ethical and spiritual dimensions of life: past karma, diet, season, personal habits, temperament, caste, age, occupations and even astrological signs all contribute to personal harmony.

Unlike members of the Abrahamic traditions, Buddhists neither believe in a personal god nor in a soul. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is the elimination of the independent self and traditionally Buddhists have focused on perfecting the individual through cultivating right behaviour, meditation, and personal insight rather than on reforming society.

Central to most lineages of Buddhism is compassion. The Tibetan word for compassion, *nying je*, connotes love, affection, kindness, gentleness, generosity of spirit and warm-heartedness. So, for a Buddhist the appropriate response to suffering is compassion. There are three stages or levels of compassion. The first level is when a person has compassionate motivation understood in terms of empathy; the second stage is when a person puts his/her motivation into practice because immoral actions bring suffering; and the third level is when the person is fully engaged in the welfare of others, trying to bring an end to all suffering of all sentient beings using what is called 'skillful means'.

So, while term compassion is evident in modern Hinduism and Buddhism the concept is grounded in dharma and karma rather being an attribute of a divine being. This difference in the concept arises from the very nature of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Conclusion

Catherine Cornille (2019) invites us to engage in 'comparative theology' where one might look for and compare themes in various religions such as 'suffering', 'the human condition' and, as we have attempted, 'mercy'. Comparative theology cannot be reduced to the scientific study and comparison of religions. In some way, comparative theology attempts to deconstruct false dichotomies that have served to shape or reinforce the identity of one faith tradition over against others. She goes even further suggesting that 'comparative confessional theology' is a process of engaging in theological reflection with other religions from within the religious framework of one's 'house tradition'. The reflection on the faith and practice of a religious community is done at the service of that community and the doing of it can change our self-understanding in unpredictable ways.

By engaging with the distinctive characteristics of mercy from within our own theological sources and then engaging with other faith traditions we pay renewed attention to certain

texts, teachings or practices within our home tradition. The home tradition provides the hermeneutical lens for understanding the other tradition with the ultimate goal of expanding one's hermeneutical horizon and eventually not just learning about another faith tradition but learning from the other tradition and ultimately deepening our understanding of the home tradition.

So, after this brief encounter with mercy in faith traditions, let us take time to reflect and ponder:

- What was familiar?
- What was new or different?
- What feels comfortable?
- What feels uncomfortable?
- What insights did I gain about other faith traditions?
- What insights did I gain about my 'house tradition'?

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