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## MERCY IN THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

SUMMARY: Mercy holds a central place in the Biblical witness since God is moved by human fate. In the history of salvation, mercy is the expression of God's essence as love. Saint Thomas sees God's mercy as his fundamental attribute, his self-communication, the primary revelation of his omnipotence, preceding his justice; indeed, Aquinas understands God's work in salvation as greater than his work in creation. The call to human mercy is equally fundamental, all the way to Christ's command to love the enemy. This brings Christianity and Islam close together but also allows for an open utterance of differences and *desiderata*: condemnation of violence and of discrimination in the name of religion, freedom of religion, and the healing of memories in view of a fruitful co-existence and co-operation.

It is a good sign, and one of the most hopeful, that the discussion about mercy has increased and a serious dialogue between cultures and religions on mercy has started over time, while violence is spreading all over the world and every day we are confronted with news of terrible and unimaginable violence<sup>1</sup>.

## I.

Welcome are such discussions especially between Christians and Muslims, two religions which for centuries considered themselves as arch-enemies. The Muslim expansion in the eighth century, the sea battles in early modern times, the two sieges of Vienna on the one side and the crusades and the *reconquista* in Spain on the other, for long centuries forged the perception of one another. In modern times things have

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<sup>1</sup> In what follows I refer especially to W. Kasper, *Mercy. The Essence of the Gospel and the Key of Christian Life*, Paulist Press, Mahwah (NJ) 2014; M. Khorchide, *Islam ist Barmherzigkeit. Grundzüge einer modernen Religion*, Herder, Freiburg i. Br. 2012 (Eng. Trans.: *Islam is Mercy. Essential Features of a Modern Religion*, Herder, Freiburg i. Br. 2014).

changed. In the humanistic period philosophers and theologians like Nicolaus Cusanus opened up a more positive view of the Koran<sup>2</sup>, in classic European poetry Islamic culture and wisdom became famous (in Germany, e.g. through Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Wolfgang Goethe)<sup>3</sup>, and finally the historical and cultural research on Arabic culture and Islam of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, brought upon a more objective historical understanding.

In this context I want to mention especially the name of Louis Massignon (1853-1962)<sup>4</sup>, famous scholar of Islam, pioneer of Christian-Muslim mutual understanding and friend of blessed Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916), for whom the encounter and the friendship with Muslims was a source of inspiration for his own deeper understanding of Christian faith, practice and spirituality<sup>5</sup>. Brother Charles was beatified by Benedict XVI in 2005. This not only academic but spiritual approach paved the way for the Second Vatican Council, which more than half a century ago in the third chapter of its Declaration *Nostra aetate* “On the relations of the Church to the non-Christian religions” opened a new page in Christian-Muslim-relations.

The Council after having expressed, in spite of all differences, its high appreciation for Muslim belief continued by saying: “Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values”<sup>6</sup>.

Nevertheless, in the depth of the souls in the West remained prejudice and fear, often distrust and open or hidden xenophobia, whereas within the Islamic world, especially in the last decades after the end of the colonial era, suspicion, disdain as well as hatred against the West, often falsely identified with Christianity, grew up and exploded in a violent political Islamist ideology, which caused immeasurable suffering for many people, and today plays a decisive role in what challenges the peace not only of the Middle East but also of Europe, Africa and Asia and more or less the whole world.

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<sup>2</sup> Nicolaus Cusanus, *Opera Omnia*, Bd. 7: *De pace fidei, cum epistula ad Ioannem de Segobia*, R. Klibansky und H. Bascour (ed.), Hamburg 1959; Bd. 8: *Cribratio Alkorani*, L. Hagemann (ed.), Hamburg 1986.

<sup>3</sup> G.E. Lessing, *Nathan der Weise* (1779); J.W. Goethe, *West-östlicher Divan* (1819.1827).

<sup>4</sup> L. Massignon, *Les trois prières d'Abraham*, in *Opera minora*, Paris 1963, 804-816. Cfr. K.-J. Kuschel, *Streit um Abraham. Was Juden, Christen und Muslime trennt - und was sie eint*, Piper, München-Zürich 1994.

<sup>5</sup> J. F. Six, *Charles de Foucauld, Bruder aller Menschen*, Herder, Freiburg i. Br. 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Second Vatican Council, Declaration *Nostra aetate*, 3. The moment of mercy was highlighted already by Pope John XXIII in his inaugural speech to the Second Vatican Council (1962), then by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Dives in misericordia* (1980) and finally by Pope Francis in his programmatic Apostolic Letter *Evangelii gaudium* (2013) and in the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy *Misericordiae vultus* (2015).

So it is time to take up anew the wise admonishment of the Council and to deepen and to concretize it by a dialogue on mercy. For mercy can be the medicine for the wounds of the past, the answer to the outburst of violence in our days and the only way to overcome the danger of war, chaos and immeasurable human suffering. Only mercy can heal the wounds of the past and open up a new future for the benefit of the whole of mankind.

## II.

But what does mercy mean? The term mercy is present and fundamental in the Bible and in the Koran as well. Both holy books talk of God almighty and merciful. For the moment, it can be left open whether the same term, mercy, has the same meaning in the Bible and in the Koran. I myself am not at all an expert of the Koran, whose original Arabic language I don't know. Therefore I limit myself to explain the Biblical and Christian understanding of mercy and only afterwards will I dare to formulate some questions regarding the Muslim understanding.

I will start with some linguistic observations<sup>7</sup>. They are necessary because the English noun, mercy, has a connotation which is quite different from the Latin (the Italian and Spanish) *misericordia* and the German *Barmherzigkeit*, which is derived from the Latin *misericordia*, whereas "mercy" is derived from the French *merci*, meaning "thank you". Mercy hints at gratitude for an unmerited gift and unmerited grace, in the Hebrew language *hesed*, which in the Bible also can be used for what in English means mercy.

The Latin *misericordia* has a deeper emotional meaning than a feeling of compassion. It says: to have a heart (in Latin, *cor*) for the *miseri*, for those who are in misery and therefore are miserable. In Biblical and in Christian Augustinian language the heart (*cor*) is the center of the human person and the place not only of the emotions, but of conscience, determination and responsibility.

Thus *misericordia* is not only passive emotional compassion but acceptance of active responsibility for the miserable; it touches with the heart and also with the hands, opens them to help and moves the legs to be present where help actually is needed. *Misericordia* does not only lament the evil but seeks to overcome and to conquer the evil as much as possible. The quintessential example of mercy is the Good Samaritan, who felt compassion, then descended into the dirt of the street, treated the wounds of the poor, who fell into the hands of robbers, brought him to an inn and paid what the innkeeper had to spend for him (Luke 10,25-35).

In Hebrew, the place of emotion is not only the heart but the *viscera*, in Hebrew the *rahāmîm*, which in the Bible means *misericordia*/mercy. This term *rahāmîm* is re-

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<sup>7</sup> *ThWNT* Bd. 2 (1935, 474-483; Bd. 5 (1954) 161-163; Bd. 7 (1964) 548-559; *TRE* Bd. 5 (1980) 215-228; E. Jenni-C. Westermann, *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Bd. 2, München 1979, 761-768; *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament*, L. Coenen (ed.), Bd. 1, Wuppertal, 52-59.

lated to the noun *reḥem*, which is the womb. Mercy expresses therefore a typical feminine and motherly relation of love and tenderness, which gives the sense of security and warmth. To talk of God's mercy means therefore that God is like a mother who takes care of her children, who loves them, can never forget them, suffer with them when they are suffering and whose house and table is always open for them (cfr. Ps 27,10).

To say that God is merciful is to say that God is no reality somewhere above the clouds, happy in himself, unmoved by the human fate and careless about the destiny of the world as the Greek gods were; the Biblical God is the living God. He is relational and isn't far from us and our needs; he is touched by our destiny and is present in all situations, ready to comfort, ready to forgive and to help.

### III.

What is evident already by a linguistic analysis is confirmed when we cast a quick glance at salvation history as the Bible tells it. God is the creator of heaven and earth, i.e., of the whole world. He created human beings because he is love, and wants to communicate and to share his happiness and his beauty. But when Adam and Eve, which means mankind, said no to him and lost the paradise to which they were called by God, he didn't condemn them to death but in his mercy gave them garments of skin so that they could preserve their dignity before each other and resist the adversities of weather (Gen 3,21). God doesn't want the wicked to die but rather that they turn their ways and live (Ez 33,11). He always gives a chance for a new beginning. He is a friend of life (Wis 11,26).

At the burning bush, Moses asked for God's name. God's answer "I am who am" (Ex 3,14), in Hebrew doesn't mean what the Hellenistic Septuagint translated: "I am the being", but rather "I am the one who is there", who is present and who is with you and for you, who accompanies you on your way. I am your God and you are my people" (Ex 6,7; Jer 11,4; 30,22; Ez 36,28). In a further revelation God tells Moses: "YHWH, YHWH is a God full of pity and mercy, slow to anger and abounding in truth and loving kindness" (Ex 34,6). This phrase became the fundamental revelation in the Old Testament; it is often repeated in the Old Testament especially in the Psalms, which can be called the praise of God's mercy.

This thesis that the mercy of God is the fundamental revelation in the Old Testament may be a surprise. For there are no few statements in the Old Testament which speak of God's anger, and of violent bloody actions and massacres in God's name. Therefore the God of the Old Testament was seen often as an angry and violent God. In Christian understanding, the Old Testament was seen as an imperfect preparation, or as the Greek Fathers called it, a patient *paideia* to the fullness in the New Testament so that the Old Testament has to be interpreted in the light of the New Testament, in the light of Jesus Christ.

When we come to Jesus, there cannot be any violence in the name of God. In the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, he called happy the gentle, the merciful, the

peacemakers; not the persecutors but those who are persecuted (Matt 5,1-11). Jesus goes so far as to command to love also enemies, not to get one's own revenge but to forgive, and this not only once, not seven but seventy-seven times (Matt 5,21-26; 38-48; 18,22; Luke 6,27-36). When Peter, upon the arrest of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, grasped the sword, he was told: "Put your sword back, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matt 26,52). Still from the cross, Jesus prayed: "Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23,24).

In these texts we find a radicalism of nonviolence and of readiness to forgive, which according to my knowledge cannot be found in the Koran. Why and from where this radical position? The answer is clear. Jesus tells his disciples: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate" (Luke 6,36). This tells us: Christian mercy has to imitate God's merciful compassion.

Jesus speaks in a new way of God as the Father (*abba*) and tells the moving parables of the lost sheep, the lost drachma and especially of the Lost son, a parable which would be better called: the parable of the merciful father, who already expects the returning son, hugs him, restores to him all his rights as son and prepares a great feast for him (Luke 15,1-32). God in his mercy is seeking, searching and expecting the lost son.

This is true also for the lost daughters. Women were treated by Jesus with particular mercy. Violence against women has no space in Jesus' teaching and behavior (Luke 7,36-50; John 4,7-26; 8,2-11). They were respected in their full and equal personal dignity, as becomes clear in Jesus' personal relation with Maria of Magdala, who rightly was called *apostola apostolorum*, the apostle for the apostles (Luke 8,2f; Mk 16,1-5; John 20,1.11-18). Christians in their history didn't always follow Jesus. But the difference between Jesus' teaching and behavior to the Koran seems clear.

Already according to the prophet Hosea, God stepped down from his fierce anger, because he is God and not man (Hos 11,9). Mercy therefore is an expression of God's otherness with regard to all human behavior; it is expression of his transcendence, his sovereignty in love. The New Testament summarizes: God is rich in mercy (Eph 2,4), God is love (1John 4,8.16). With these affirmations, the New Testament summarizes all we have found in our short overview of salvation history and can turn now to a more systematic reflection.

#### IV.

With the sentence "God is love" we have reached therefore the decisive point of the Christian understanding of mercy<sup>8</sup>. "God is love" means, God is not an angry, condemning, punishing, revenging God, as God sometimes was portrayed. On the

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. W. Kasper, *Mercy*, part 5; id., "Mercy - The Name of Our God", *Louvain Studies* 39 (2015-16) 205-217. A comprehensive exposition: D. Ansoerge, *Gerechtigkeit und Barmherzigkeit Gottes. Die Dramatik von Vergebung und Versöhnung in bibeltheologischer, theologiegeschichtlicher und philosophiegeschichtlicher Perspektive*, Herder, Freiburg i. Br. 2009.

contrary, mercy is the revelation and expression of God's essence as love: mercy therefore has to be the very heart of Christian talk about God. In recent theology this was often forgotten. But in every liturgy Christians pray or sing: "Kyrie eleison", "Lord, have mercy" and "Lamb of God, have mercy upon us". So in the liturgy, in popular piety and in spiritual teaching as well, mercy has always been present.

In this context I can only give some hints at the theology of mercy, following the thought of Thomas Aquinas, who in Catholic theology is considered to be the *doctor communis*. For Thomas, God is goodness and love<sup>9</sup>. Love finally doesn't give something, love gives itself, love is self-communication. First of all, God is self-communicating love in himself. God doesn't need human beings in order to be love; a God who would need human beings for his own fulfillment would no longer be God. God is love in himself. That's the deep meaning of our Christian understanding of the Trinity. It is only because God is love in himself that his self-communication to us is free and gracious. Thus mercy is not the essence of God, but the highest expression of his being love. Mercy is the fundamental, first attribute of God in his revelation and has the precedence over justice<sup>10</sup>.

The highpoint of this merciful self-communicating is the incarnation, God's logos becomes *sarx*, i.e. a weak and mortal human flesh (John 1,14; 1John 4,9). In becoming human, God emptied himself to assume our condition of a slave, and being as all human beings are, he humbled himself even to accepting death, death on a cross (Phil 2,7f). God's omnipotence was revealed not in violence but paradoxically in impotence. Therefore we pray in our liturgy: "God, who reveals your omnipotence mainly by mercy and forgiveness"<sup>11</sup>. Aquinas quoted this prayer several times<sup>12</sup>. Here the Catholic understanding meets Martin Luther's theology of the cross as the ultimate point of God's self-revelation<sup>13</sup>. According to Saint Thomas, the justification of the sinner and forgiveness constitute the greater work than that of the creation of heaven or on earth<sup>14</sup>.

Considering all that has been said, it is meaningless to put mercy in contraposition with truth and justice. Because by his works of mercy God shows us who he is, by his mercy he lets us look into his heart and into his inscrutable hidden mystery. Thus mercy is the truth about God, the name of God (Pope Francis). Because in mercy he is faithful to himself; in mercy he does not correspond to our human rules of justice, he corresponds to himself, mercy therefore is God's justice. God doesn't have to match our hu-

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<sup>9</sup> A good synthesis by Y. Congar, "La miséricorde. Attribut souverain de Dieu", *Vie spirituelle* 106 (1962) 380-395.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I q. 21 a. 3f.

<sup>11</sup> Collect of the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

<sup>12</sup> e.g. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I q. 25 a. 3 ad 3.

<sup>13</sup> M. Luther, *Heidelberger Disputation* (1518), in: WA 1 353f, 362. Cfr. O.H. Pesch, *Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin. Versuch eines systematisch-theologischen Dialogs*, M. Grünewald, Mainz 1967.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* VIII q. 113 a. 9.

man concepts of justice. On the contrary, our justice has its measure in God's justice, i.e. in God's mercy. Mercy is the very Christian justice, which does not underbid human justice but outbids and surpasses it (cfr. Matt 5,20). Mercy, according to Aquinas, is the summary of Christian religion in what regards the exterior works<sup>15</sup>.

These are only some hints at the theology of mercy which can be found in the work of Thomas Aquinas. I think, already these few and short indications make clear, that the Christian understanding of mercy goes far beyond the understanding of mercy in the Koran. For the Trinitarian understanding of God, the incarnation and the cross have no place in the Koran. On the contrary, as I read the Koran, they are principally rejected, denied and excluded. Thus we have in the Bible and in the Christian understanding of mercy a radicalism regarding God's mercy and of the Christian mercy for one another, which goes all the way to forgiveness and even love for one's enemies and excludes violence (cfr. Matt 5,38-48).

This doesn't mean that Christians have always realized the full meaning of mercy. Evidently they didn't, and they need to scrutinize their conscience and repent for many bad deeds in their history. But they are convinced to have in Jesus Christ the perfect criterion and their ultimate judge of their merciful or not merciful behavior. In the Last Judgment, mercy will be the only criterion for our entry into the kingdom of heaven (cfr. Matt 25,31-46). The question whether this can be said also about Mohammed and the Koran brings me to some concluding questions concerning the relation between Christian and Muslim understandings of mercy.

## V.

The relations between Christianity and Islam are too complex to be exposed in this context. I will limit myself to four short points related to the question of mercy.

*First:* Both the Bible and the Koran speak about mercy. The Koran takes up some Biblical aspects, which were present in the Arab context of the sixth century. For the Golden Rule, which can be found in all cultures and all religions of humankind, is valid also in the Biblical Sermon of the Mount (Matt 7,12; Luke 6,31) and in the Koran (not textually but similarly Sura 24,22; 83,1-3). "Do nothing to your neighbor that you do not want him to do to you". Or in the positive form: "Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do so to them". The Golden Rule, which according to Saint Augustin God has written in the heart of every person (*In Ps 57,1*), is a rule of compassion, empathy and sympathy (*sympathein*) and an imperative for active cooperation and support, and in this sense an imperative for justice and mercy. Thus we have in this rule a common basis: a basis for dialogue, for mutual tolerance, mutual respect and for cooperation between Muslims and Christians for the good of justice and peace in the world, and hopefully in the future, more and more for common resistance against all violence in the name of religion.

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II/II q. 30 a. 4.

*Second:* Dialogue doesn't mean to construct a syncretistic common super-religion. We cannot obfuscate the different identities of Christianity and Islam, differences which aren't accidental but are essential for each of us. Christianity is convinced to encounter in Jesus Christ the definitive revelation which cannot be surpassed within history. For God cannot go beyond his radical self-communication in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is and will be the *Eschaton*, the definitive truth about God. He is for Christians "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14,7).

Whereas Mohammed claims to surpass Jesus Christ in being the definitive prophet whose proclamation corrects Christian faith from its errors and brings it to its full perfection, Christians on the contrary believe that Islam underbids Christianity especially in its understanding of mercy. For Mohammed himself didn't exclude violence but committed violence not only against Christians but also against the Jews he expelled from Medina, and some Koranic traditions and their interpretations instruct the believers to conquer the so-called unbelievers. Thus my question whether it is accidental that presently in Muslim countries Christians often are discriminated against, oppressed or even persecuted, whereas the same cannot be said presently about Muslims in countries of Christian tradition and majority. This point has to be clarified when we talk about mercy.

*Third:* Such fundamental differences don't exclude a common basis and must not exclude peaceful coexistence and cooperation. Both Christians and Muslims speak of God as merciful and call for merciful human behavior. There is a basis not only for mutual tolerance but also for mutual respect. Our dissents should be tackled not with weapons but in dialogue with arguments and with the contest of a convincing religious life and social, merciful deeds. The main request Christians express is the desire that Islam should find ways to concede freedom of religion, which is the fundamental human right and the basis of peaceful coexistence, of mutual tolerance and respect and the basis for cooperation for the common good of humankind, for the benefit of harmony and peace, for liberty, social justice and moral values in the world and for the preservation of creation.

*Fourth:* Only in mercy we could and should overcome enmities, forgive one another evil deeds and heal the memories and the wounds of the past. Only by healing the memories in mercy we will be able, as the Second Vatican Council told us, to cooperate for a better, for a more just and for a more merciful world and to resist all kind of violence in the name of God. I think there is nothing that is more needed than this in our situation.

So I hope and wish, that this symposium can be a helpful, future-oriented contribution for good and respectful relations, peaceful cohabitation and constructive cooperation of Christians and Muslims in our world today and that mercy in the future will prevail in all our mutual relations.

## RÉSUMÉ

La miséricorde tient une place centrale dans le témoignage biblique, puisque Dieu est concerné par le destin de l'humanité. Dans l'histoire du salut, la miséricorde est l'expression de l'essence de Dieu en tant qu'amour. Saint Thomas considère la miséricorde de Dieu comme son attribut fondamental, sa communication même et la révélation primordiale de sa toute-puissance qui précède sa justice ; certes, le *doctor angelicus* comprend l'action divine salvatrice comme étant plus importante que son œuvre créatrice. Le rappel de la miséricorde humaine est également fondamental de par le commandement du Christ d'aimer les ennemis. Cela rapproche christianisme et islam, mais permet aussi d'exprimer ouvertement des différences et des désirs : condamnation de la violence et de la discrimination au nom de la religion, liberté religieuse et guérison de la mémoire en vue d'une coexistence et d'une coopération fructueuses.

