

الرَّحْمَةُ

Mercy The Stamp of Creation

A NAWAWI FOUNDATION PAPER
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The explicit link between the Arabic words *Islām*, literally “entering into peace,” and *salām*, “peace” or “perfect peace,” has been frequently highlighted of late. It is mainly because of this etymological connection that many Muslims and others advance the claim that Islam is a religion of peace, just as Christianity is customarily called a religion of love. Certainly, in terms of their creed and the historical record, Muslims are no less justified in equating Islam with peace than Christians are in identifying their faith with love. From a theological perspective, however, it would be more precise to describe Islam as the religion of mercy. Islamic revelation designates the Prophet Muḥammad as “the prophet of mercy,” and Islam’s scriptural sources stress that mercy—above other divine attributions—is God’s hallmark in creation and constitutes his primary relation to the world from its inception through eternity, in this world and the next. Islam enjoins its followers to be merciful to themselves, to others, and the whole of creation, teaching a karma-like law of universal reciprocity by which God shows mercy to the merciful and withholds it from those who hold it back from others.

The Prophet Muḥammad said: “People who show mercy to others will be shown mercy by the All-Merciful. Be merciful to those on earth, and he who is in heaven will be merciful to you.”¹ Because these words epitomize Islam’s fundamental ethos, it was called “the Tradition of Primacy” and, for generations of Classical Muslim teachers, constituted the first text that many of them handed down to their students and required them to commit to memory with a full chain of transmitters going back to the Prophet Muḥammad.²



God: The All-Merciful

In Arabic, God is called by many names, but his primary and most beautiful name, embracing all others, is *Allāh* (God, the true God). *Allāh* is a derivative of the same Semitic root as the Biblical *Elōhîm* (God) and *hā-Elōh* (the true God) of Moses and the Hebrew prophets or the Aramaic *Alāhā* (God, the true God) of Jesus and John the Baptist. The formula “In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Mercy-Giving” (*bismi-Llāhi ‘r-Raḥmāni ‘r-Raḥîm*), occurs one hundred and fourteen times in the Qur’ān—Islam’s holy book—at the beginning of all but one chapter and twice in another. The phrase is central to Islamic ritual. In Islam, the All-Merciful (*ar-Raḥmān*) and the Mercy-Giving (*ar-Raḥîm*) may be said to be the greatest names of God after *Allāh*. Of all his names, they are most descriptive of his relation to the world and emphasize his will in salvation history and throughout eternity to benefit creation and ultimately bring about the triumph of supreme good over evil.

The Qur’ān states: “It is the All-Merciful who assumed the Throne,”³ meaning that God designs the

world and rules the universe in his aspect as the All-Merciful. Consequently, mercy is the stamp of creation and the ontological thread that runs through everything. All that transpires—even temporal deprivation, harm, and evil—will, in due course, fall under the rubric of cosmic mercy. One Islamic luminary maintained: “If God had revealed instead that ‘the Overpowering (*al-Jabbār*) [another of God’s ninety-nine principal names] had assumed the throne,’ creation would melt.” Another verse reads: “God ordained mercy upon himself,”⁴ again emphasizing that mercy is a universal law (*sunna*), the dominant theme of the cosmos, and the fundamental purpose of the creative act. Two prophetic Traditions reveal God as saying: “My mercy has vanquished my wrath” and, in the second: “My mercy takes precedence over my wrath.”⁵ Because we live in a universe bearing mercy’s imprint, harmony and beauty permeate all things: “Our Lord, you have embraced all things in mercy and knowledge.”⁶ In the verse, mercy—technically an attribute of act—is given priority of reference over knowledge—an attribute of essence—again emphasizing mercy’s predominance in the universal plan.

The Prophet of Mercy

According to Islamic revelation, Muḥammad was the last and greatest of God’s messengers, fulfilling the legacy of the Biblical and extra-Biblical prophets and confirming the teachings of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. As the All-Merciful’s chief emissary, he was fittingly called the “prophet of mercy” (*nabîy ar-raḥma*). The Qur’ān says of him: “We did not send you but as a special mercy to all the worlds.”⁷ The Prophet stated: “In certainty, I was

not sent to bring down curses; I was only sent as a special mercy.”⁸

As in English, “mercy” in Arabic is tied to compassion and closely linked with the act of forgiveness and pardon. Theologically, Islamic tradition defines mercy as the intent to bring good to others and cause them benefit. As such, being merciful implies the desire to avert evil and harm. When associated with acts of pardon and forgiveness, mercy is retroactive and after the fact. But as it relates to the intent to bring about good or avert evil, mercy assumes an elemental and proactive dimension and is often before the fact, evincing a forward-looking quality that seeks to set things right, make a break with the past, and foster new beginnings where goodness and benefit can thrive.

The thread of proactive mercy ran throughout the fabric of the Prophet’s life and was the key to his phenomenal, hard-earned, and lasting success. The loyalty and love of his followers and the awe and respect he evoked among his enemies were the fruits of such magnanimity. He said: “The closest of you to me on the Day of Judgment will be the best of you in character.”

Muḥammad jested with children, showed a kindly humor toward adults, and even gave his followers friendly nicknames. He visited the sick, inquired after the welfare of neighbors, friends, followers, and even those who disbelieved in him. He was a warm egalitarian and shared everything with those around him, including their poverty. He was always willing to forgive, rarely chastising those who disobeyed him. He did not restrict his mercy to his followers. One day in Medina, he was sitting with his Companions, who later related: “A funeral procession passed us by, and the Prophet, may God



bless and keep him, stood up so we all stood up because he had. Then we said: ‘O Messenger of God, it is only the funeral procession of a Jew.’ He replied: ‘Was he not a human being?’”⁹

Like Moses and other Biblical prophets, Muḥammad took part in battle. He was victorious but not a “world-conqueror.” Although he engaged in war, he waged peace, and his inclination toward

amnesty and diplomatic solutions is unmistakable. Above all it was the attitude of perpetual mercy that enabled him ultimately to forge for the first time in history a *pax islamica* in the Arabian Peninsula. That same attitude combined with masterly statesmanship enabled him not only to rescue the city of Medina—which had invited him for that purpose—from generations of civil war between its feuding clans but to create an island of stability in a sea of chaos and then extend that island gradually until it claimed the sea.

Those who died in the Prophet’s battles were relatively few, and, according to some estimates, numbered around two hundred on both sides. He laid down rules of engagement and parameters of war that became a central part of Islamic law, forbidding the predation of civilian populations, the wanton destruction of lands and livestock, and the use of fire, flooding, and poisons that kill indiscriminately. The Prophet accepted people at their word and forgave them easily. He harbored no desire for vengeance and rejected the pagan custom of blood feuds and revenge. There was nothing mindless or fanatic about his piety. He was never intransigent or bent on war. Men who had been numbered among his most relentless and unforgiving enemies—like Abū Sufyān ibn Ḥarb, ‘Ikrima ibn Abī Jahl, and Ṣafwān ibn Umayya—ultimately came not only to accept and follow the Prophet but, during the last

years of their lives, devoted themselves heroically to his mission with a passion surpassing the enmity that had driven them before.

Even in the midst of bitter war, the Prophet inclined toward peaceful solutions. The Armistice of Ḥudaybiyya exemplified this spirit and his desire for the ultimate welfare of his enemies, in this case the pagans of Mecca. It was reached at a time when Muslim strength was reaching a high point and the power of the Prophet's pagan opponents—now in irreversible decline—was vulnerable and could have been ruthlessly crushed. Yet Muḥammad accepted without hesitation conciliatory concessions which initially appeared so humiliating that they bewildered his followers. The Qur'ānic revelation proclaimed the armistice a “manifest victory,” and within weeks it was clear that it had set the stage for winning the hearts of the Prophet's harshest enemies and opening doors of reconciliation, which for years had been stubbornly shut.

In due course, the Prophet “conquered” Mecca peacefully. As he approached the city with the largest army ever assembled on the Arabian Peninsula till that time, he noticed a wild dog on the roadside nursing her litter and posted one of his Companions, Ju'ayl aḍ-Ḍamarī, to stand guard near her so that the entire contingent could pass without disturbing her or the pups.

After years of bitter conflict, some of the Prophet's Companions—in keeping with the ancient Arabian code of revenge—were sure that the day they took Mecca would be the hour of vengeance. One of Medina's tribal chieftains, Sa'd ibn 'Ubāda, noticed Abū Sufyān ibn Ḥarb, former leader of pagan Mecca, standing near the Prophet and told Abū



Sufyān ominously: “This will be a day of slaughter.” Sa'd was proudly bearing his tribal banner. The Prophet took it from him, handed it to Sa'd's son, and declared: “What Sa'd has said is wrong. No, this will be the day that God glorifies his House (the temple of Abraham in Mecca) and decorates it with a new covering.”

By any measure, it was a day of mercy. In Mecca, the Prophet gathered his former enemies at the House of Abraham and asked them: “What do you think I am about to do with you?” They replied: “You are a magnanimous brother, the son of a magnanimous brother.” He answered: “Go to your houses. You have been set free.” It was this merciful and forgiving nature that finally established the Prophet's authority in Mecca after its peaceful conquest, fostered mutual understanding, and forged new bonds. In the end, it was above all this proactive mercy that spelled the death of idolatry and paganism in Mecca and throughout Arabia and prepared the way for Islam's unparalleled triumph in the world beyond.

The Command to Be Merciful

In imitation of the Prophet, Muslims are expected to be merciful, to bring good, and to seek the benefit of others—all others—not wish them harm or rejoice in the evil that befalls them. Indeed, the Tradition of Primacy promotes a doctrine of universal, all-embracing mercy. Commentators emphasize this point, clarifying that the mercy Muslims are commanded to show is not exclusively for themselves or the righteous amongst them. It extends to all human beings: Jews, Christians, the believing and unbelieving, the upright and the immoral, and it goes beyond the human family to include both the

animate and inanimate: birds and animals, even plants and trees. In English, “be merciful to those on earth” tends to imply human beings. Translated here as “those,” the Arabic word *man* is broad and inclusive. Its primary reference is to rational beings, but it includes, by secondary reference, non-rational ones also: animals, plants, and, by extension, what today would be termed the environment.

The Prophet told an anecdote of a sinful man suffering from thirst one oppressively hot day who came across a well. He went down into it—(Middle Eastern wells are often open and with deep, winding staircases)—drew water, and drank.¹⁰ When he came back up, he noticed a dog, panting from thirst and eating the clay around the well for moisture. The man said to himself: “This dog is suffering from thirst like I was.” He went down into the well a second time, filled his shoe with water, and let the dog drink. God loved the man’s humane act, showed him mercy, and forgave all his sins. When Muḥammad’s Companions heard the story, they asked: “O Messenger of God, will we be rewarded for being good to animals?” He answered: “Yes, there is reward in showing good to every living creature.” In another Tradition, the Prophet emphasized the atrociousness of merciless behavior in God’s eyes and told of a woman condemned to hell for intentionally starving a cat to death.

Mercy begins with the individual by taking care of the self physically, emotionally, and spiritually and includes exercise and diet, pursuing education, and keeping good company. It also means having a good opinion of oneself—without being arrogant or blind to one’s faults—living in constant anticipation of God’s help and mercy along with other Islamic



corollaries of behavior like the categorical prohibition of suicide and despair. From the individual, concentric rings of mercy extend outward, taking in parents, spouse, children, family, neighbors, community, and the world. Part of being merciful toward others is having a good opinion of them, defending their good name, and doing whatever makes their lives better and averts harm.

The Qur’ān looks upon marital life as a primary locus of mercy and, consequently, exalts the institution of marriage as one of creation’s marvels and chief proofs of God, next to the creation of the heavens and the earth and of humankind itself. Marriage is not just the basic mode of human generation, manifesting the biological continuity of divine creation, but forms the primary social nucleus of love: “Among God’s signs is his creating for you partners in marriage from yourselves so that you find happiness in them and his putting between you bonds of affection and mercy. Certainly in that there are signs for people who think.”¹¹

The Arabic words for “affection” and “mercy” in the verse are *mawadda* and *rahma*. Matrimonial “mercy” means that both husband and wife seek to make each other happy, desiring what is good, prosperous, and beneficial for each. It implies that each spouse treat the other honorably and that neither be content with evil or harm as the other’s lot.

Mawadda—translated above as “affection” but more frequently as “love”—precedes *rahma* in the verse, implying that love is mercy’s spiritual bedrock. While Arabic has many words for love, *mawadda* represents a special type. One of the ninety-nine principal names of God in Arabic—*al-Wadūd*, “the Loving”—is derived from the same linguistic root. *Mawadda* does not refer to physi-

cal love but to an active, emotive love that is direct and personal, involving affectionate care and abiding attention to others' needs. With regard to God, *al-Wadūd* ("the Loving"), *mawadda* refers to his providential care for creation and the personal bounty and protection that he grants those he loves. With regard to human interaction, both in a general and marital context—as in the above-quoted verse—*mawadda* refers to loving involvement in the life of another, not simply through care or concern for that person's well-being but also by personal faithfulness, emotional support, good counsel, and a general regard for that person's interests.



The Law of Universal Reciprocity

As discussed at the beginning of this essay and as the Traditions above concerning kindness to animals indicate, mercy—God's signature in creation—is linked to a law of universal reciprocity: Mercy will be shown to the merciful, and it will be withdrawn from the merciless. The positive side of this universal law is reflected in the words of the Tradition of Primacy: "Be merciful to those on earth, and he who is in heaven will be merciful to you," a lesson often repeated in the Islamic scriptures. The Prophet taught: "Truly, God only shows mercy to those of his servants who are themselves merciful."¹² Here the complementary side of the law of mercy is clarified. The Prophet said elsewhere: "Whoever shows no mercy will be shown no mercy."¹³ In the same authoritative collections, we find: "God will show no mercy to those who show no mercy to humankind."¹⁴ The Prophet warned his community: "Being merciful is only stripped away from the damned,"¹⁵ implying that mercy is the natural

condition of the human soul and is only stripped away and exchanged for mercilessness in people with callous, unnatural hearts that can no longer receive it. A heart that no longer has the capacity to feel mercy cannot be a receptacle of salvation either or a container of true faith; to become ruthless and void of compassion is to carry the mark of divine wrath and bear the brand of damnation and is the sure sign of an evil end.

Thus, the reciprocity inherent in the universal law of mercy embodies another dimension: the fact that mercy is linked with faith and opens the door of salvation, while mercilessness is linked with the rejection of God and invites damnation. Classical commentators explain that mercy springs from a healthy heart, one that is spiritually alive and suitable for sincere faith. Utter lack of mercy, on the other hand, reflects a heart that is spiritually dead. The implications are profound: Mercy and true belief do not cohabit hearts where hatred and the utter disregard for others reign.

Conclusion

The imperative to be merciful—to bring benefit to the world and avert harm—must underlie a Muslim's understanding of reality and attitude toward society. Islam was not intended to create a chosen people, fostering exclusive claims for themselves, while looking down upon the rest of humanity like a sea of untouchables or regarding the animate and inanimate worlds around them as fields readied for wanton exploitation. Wherever Muslims find themselves, they are called upon to be actively and positively engaged as vanguards of mercy, welfare, and well-being.

Islam's call to mercy should not render Muslims

incapable of a wise and measured response to transgression, oppression, or injustice, which in some cases can only be checked by force. Islam is not a pacifist religion, although it commands its followers to incline toward merciful solutions and seek peace, while always remaining within dignified bounds and proper parameters consistent with Islam’s overarching doctrine of mercy. In a faith like Islam, which teaches that a person may be condemned to hell for starving a cat, it goes without saying that acts of ruthless barbarity must be rejected and never given the aura of religious sanctity.



The merciless heart abides in the spirit of the damned, while the healthy heart is instinctively humane and comprehends the pricelessness of mercy. It is to people who are not “damaged goods” but humanly intact and spiritually alive that the Prophet directed his admonition: “Take an informed opinion (literally, *fatwā*) from your heart. What is good puts your self and your heart at

rest. What is wrong is never fully acceptable to your self and wavers in your heart, even if people give you a different opinion (*fatwā*) and keep on giving it to you.”¹⁶

Notes

1. “*Ar-rāḥimīna yarḥamuhumu ‘r-raḥmānu: irḥamū man fī ‘l-‘arḍi yarḥam(u)kum man fī ‘s-samā’.*” The Tradition is transmitted in the collection of Tirmidhī and classified as *ṣaḥīḥ* (authoritative).
2. In Arabic, it is called *al-ḥadīth al-musalsal bi-‘l-awwalīyya*, literally, “the Tradition with continuous chain of primacy,” with the implication that in each generation masters had related it to their students in an unbroken chain in which each transmitter heard it first from the previous teacher.
3. “*Ar-Raḥmānu ‘alā ‘l-‘arshi’ ‘stawā*” (Qur’ān 20:5).
4. “*Kataba ‘alā nafsibi ‘r-raḥma*” (Qur’ān 6:12).
5. Both Traditions are in Bukhārī and Muslim, Islam’s most rigorously authenticated *ḥadīth* collections. The first reads: “*Ghalabat raḥmatī ghaḍabī,*” and the second states: “*Sabaqat raḥmatī ghaḍabī.*”
6. “*Rabbanā wasī‘ta kulla shay’in raḥmatan wa ‘ilman*” (Qur’ān 40:7).
7. “*Wa mā arsalnāka illā raḥmatan li-‘l-‘ālamīn*” (Qur’ān 21:71). *Raḥma* here and elsewhere may be rendered “special mercy” because of its indefinite form, implying that it is greater than the mercy we customarily know.
8. The Tradition is authoritatively transmitted in Muslim and reads: “*Innī lam ub’ath la‘ānan wa innamā bu‘ithtu raḥmatan.*”
9. This Tradition is in Bukhārī and Muslim.
10. The Tradition is in Bukhārī.
11. Qur’ān 30:21.
12. Bukhārī and Muslim. The text reads: “*Wa innamā yarḥamu ‘Llāhu min ‘ibādīhi ‘r-ruḥamā’.*”
13. Bukhārī and Muslim: “*Man lā yarḥam lā yurḥam.*”
14. “*Lā yarḥamu ‘Llāhu man lā yarḥamu ‘n-nās.*”
15. “*Lā tunza‘u ‘r-raḥmatu illā min shaqī.*” This Tradition is found in Tirmidhī and is classified as “acceptable” (*ḥasan*) in isolation but strong in conjunction with similar well-authenticated Traditions such as those cited above.
16. “*Istafti qalbaka: Al-Birru mā-‘ṭma’annat ilayhi ‘n-nafsu wa-‘ṭma’anna ilayhi ‘l-qalbu. Wa ‘l-ithmu mā ḥāka fī ‘n-nafsi wa taradda fī ‘ṣ-ṣadri, wa in aftāka ‘n-nāsu wa aftawk.*” The Tradition is transmitted in Aḥmad, Ṭabarānī, and Dārimī and, by Classical standards, is generally evaluated as “acceptable” (*ḥasan*), although some categorize it as “authoritative” (*ṣaḥīḥ*).