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[...] 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 being 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 afterword will I dare to formulate some questions regarding the Muslim understanding.

I will start with some linguistic observations. They are necessary because the English noun, mercy, has a connotation which is very 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*, what means "thank you". Mercy indicates in the direction of gratitude for an unmerited gift and unmerited grace, in the Hebrew language *chesed*, which in the Bible also can be used for what in English means mercy.

But 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 seat 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 conquers the evil as much as possible. The example of mercy is the Good Samaritan who felt compassion, then descended in the dirt of the street, treated the wounds of the poor, who fell in 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 and Biblical language the seat of emotion is not only the heart but the *viscera*, in Hebrew the *rachamim*, which in the Bible means misericordia/mercy. This term *rachamim* is related to the noun *rechem*, 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, never can forget them, suffers with them when they are suffering and whose house and table is always open for them (Sal 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 for 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.

What is evident already by a linguistic analysis becomes confirmed when we cast a quick glance toward 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 and invited to life, God didn't condemn them to death but in his mercy he gave them garments of skin so that they could resist to the adversities of whether, to the heat and the cold (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 (Sap 11,26).

In the revelation of God in the burning bush Moses asked for God's name. God's answer: "I Am who Am" (Ex 3,14), in Hebrew language doesn't mean as the Hellenistic Septuagint translated: "I am the being", but rather "I am 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). On a further revelation God tells Moses: "Yahweh, Yahweh 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 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). [...]

With the phrase "God is love" we reached therefore the decisive point of the Christian understanding of mercy. "God is love" means, God is not an angry, condemning, punishing, revenging God, as God sometimes was portrayed. On the 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. [...]