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[...] What is the reason for discussing God's mercy in Islam? Why should Mercy play a central role especially in the last of the three Abrahamic religions, and especially in the Qur'an?

The answer to this question is somewhat self-evident: First of all, I want to say: The category of Mercy is not a mere projection, an exegetical manipulation, expressing my own biased ideas about the Qur'an; I do not misread the Qur'an, but I favour certain possible interpretations over others. In my opinion, Mercy represents the self-claim of Divine revelation; so we read in the Qur'an itself: *wa-mā arsalnāka illā rahmatan li l-'ālamīn*, "And We did not send you except as a Mercy for the entire world" (21:107), hence, the Holy text itself raises Mercy to the status of a major category within the Divine message, representing the very center of the multi-faceted revealed teaching. Especially a holistic, comprehensive reading of the Qur'an supports this theory.

Mercy is the most common attribute of God which can be found in the Qur'an. 113 of the 114 Qur'anic suras start with the phrase *bi-smi llāhi l-rahmāni l-rahīm*, "In the name of God the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful". The only thing to which God has committed Himself in the Qur'an, is Mercy: the 6th sura, verse 12, stipulates: *kataba 'alā nafsihi l-rahmata*, "He has taken it upon Himself to be Merciful". This statement is repeated in the same sura in verse 54. Thus, God has committed himself by free will towards himself and towards the human creation to Mercy.

The Qur'an describes the Mercy of God as absolute: *wa-rahmatī wasi'at kulla shay'in*, "But My mercy encompasses all things" (Q 7:156).

The statement is 'the' central hermeneutical key and the self-claim of the Qur'an: *wa-mā arsalnā illā rahmatan li l-'ālamīn*, "We have sent you forth as a Mercy to all mankind" (Q 21:107). The Qur'an even goes further: it does not only represent the Mercy as a mere quality of God, but as an essential attribute of God, equates it – so to say – with God. So it is said in sura 17, verse 110: *quli d'ū llāha awi d'ū l-rahmāna ayyan mā tad'ū fa-lahu l-asmā'u l-husnā*, "Whether you call on God or on the Merciful One: His are the finest names". Here the word "Allah" is equated with ar-Rahmān.

The Meaning of God's Mercy

Etymologically the Arabic term *rahma* means 'gentleness of the heart' (*riqqa*), sympathy/compassion (*ta'āttuf*) and goodness (*ihsān*). Related to *rahma* is the word *rahīm*, what means "womb". Therefore, the meaning of 'mercy' turns into an emotional connotation of motherly love. There are a lot of words which are connected to the consonants *r-h-m*, but just two nouns became central for Islam: "*ar-rahmān*" and "*ar-rahīm*".

If the Qur'an is speaking about God's Mercy, it uses either "*ar-rahmān*" or "*ar-rahīm*". Both titles are deduced from the term *rahma* (mercy).

There is an important qualitative difference between "*ar-rahmān*" and "*ar-rahīm*". On the one hand, *ar-Rahīm* (Most Gracious/The gracious One) is used in the Qur'an in the context of Grace and Forgiveness, it expresses God's merciful love (e.g. the forgiveness of Adam's sin is described by the title Most Gracious *ar-Rahīm*). On the other hand, *ar-Rahmān* (Most Merciful/The merciful One) expresses both God's willingness and will for unconditional and caring love to all human beings. Mercy in general is like almost every divine attribute relational, but the term *ar-Rahmān* is absolute – as God Himself – that means mercy has no opposition and for this reason mercy is an essential characteristic. Therefore, *ar-Rahmān* is wider and more fundamental than *ar-Rahīm*.

Thus, mercy is not only God's endless willingness to be gracious and forgive human sins. This is expressed by the attribute *ar-Raḥīm*. Furthermore, divine mercy includes God's unconditional attention for mankind and God's election of all human beings. This is what the term *ar-Raḥmān* means.