

**Mercy and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition Symposium
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Building Bridges of Mercy:

An exploration of the role which mercy in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition can have in building interreligious dialogue with Islam.

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Introduction

In any exercise involving bridge-building, the venture must be an enterprise involving at least two sides and both sides must be willing to cooperate, so the first question which needs to be asked about interreligious dialogue between the Catholic intellectual tradition and Islam involves the extent to which both sides can listen to each other. The rich history of fruitful debate and mutual enrichment between Islam and Christianity is one which would fill many papers, books and libraries, and I will be able to touch on only a fraction of it here by way of illustration, but any scholar speaking to an American-based audience in 2015 cannot avoid the 14 year old elephant in the room, the world-changing events of September 2001, which more than any events in recent world history have drawn a veil of mutual confusion and incomprehensibility over the relationship between the Muslim and the non-Muslim. Neither can anyone forget the barely four-month old trauma of the murder of the young American aid worker, Peter Kassig, also known as Abdul Rahman Kassig, by the group ISIS, the brutal killings of James Foley and Steven Sotloff just before that, and the very recent killing of Kayla Mueller, apparently the last of the Western hostages held by ISIS, who was killed in still disputed circumstances just a few weeks ago. As Americans, in particular, awaken to news of the murder of young, idealistic and altruistic fellow-countrymen and women, it is hard for them to imagine Islam as a merciful faith. The Islam of Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, of Shi'a Iran and of fascist and nihilist ISIS often speaks of an intolerance which could not possibly learn from bridge-building and dialogue. The much discussed merciful face of Islam, particularly of early Islam, is lost among the faces of the international brigades of murderous fanatics we see in the cinematic and high-quality videos posted in cyberspace by ISIS. The openness of ISIS to any kind of interaction with the world outside of its own ideological boundaries seems to be limited to proving the international appeal of its attempts to create a new, world-wide Caliphate, an appeal which it advertises to the world by recruiting and displaying militants from various nationalities. This is not a nationalistic, Arab Islam, but one which evidences catholicity,

universality, as long as, of course, you are the right kind of Muslim. In the Islam espoused by ISIS, mercy is, of all human and divine qualities, most noticeable by its absence. Where, then, are the faces of mercy within Islam and what dialogue can occur between those in Islam and Christianity who embrace mercy as a quality born of the very heart of God, one which can enable mutual respect, mutual learning and even mutual love?

There is considerable dispute amongst scholars of Islam, Islamic scholars themselves, ordinary Muslims and ordinary non-Muslims regarding the pluralist credentials of Islam as a whole. To enter this debate today would necessitate a whole conference just on this topic alone, but it is important to address it at some level, because, after all, without a pluralist perspective, Islam could not appreciate the truth or value of the discourse about mercy in another religious tradition. For the purposes of this paper, then, I will interact with the approach which maintains that Islam has a strongly pluralist history, which has been obscured or even at times almost obliterated. My intention is to demonstrate that *even if* Islam may not be considered *unmistakably* pluralist, there is within the religion enough evidence of engagement with pluralist perspectives on Islam's relationships with those of other faiths and none, to merit dialogue on areas of commonality. Those who champion Islam's pluralist beginnings, point mainly to the person of Muhammad himself and the Qur'an, claiming that Muhammad and his revelation were remarkably tolerant in tone and practice- intolerance and forced conversion coming only later when religious and pluralist elements were superseded by the demands of politics and empire. My discussion of Islam and pluralism will form a backdrop to my discussion of Islam, mercy and the Catholic intellectual tradition.

Boston College's document on the Catholic intellectual tradition, published in 2010 by its 'The Church in the 21st Century Center' frames the CIT firmly within the realm of dialogue, and, in particular, interreligious dialogue. In its opening remarks, under the sub-title of 'A 2,000-Year-Long Conversation,' this dialogue between faith and culture is also concerned with "questions of ultimacy that invite faith responses."

(<http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/top/church21/pdf/cit.pdf> p.6). The document then goes on to give examples of ways in which the CIT has engaged with non-Christian religions, which also, of course, are concerned with issues of ultimacy. Referencing Aquinas and his engagement with Aristotle, at a time when such engagement might be viewed with suspicion, the authors write that he chose "also to enter into dialogue with Muslim and Jewish thinkers, such as Averroes and Maimonides. Aquinas' passionate engagement with the intellectual pluralism of his times enriched and strengthened the Catholic intellectual tradition" (ibid, p.7). Interestingly, the document also refers to the Logos, the term which John, in his Gospel, chooses to refer to Jesus, the Word, and carrying with it the Greek notion of 'reason.' Throughout its history, Logos theology has been strongly linked to a survey of the ways in which the divine has implanted itself in the world, through the 'Logos Spermatikos,' so the Catholic intellectual tradition is intimately concerned with understanding and dialoguing with revelation in all of its manifestations, with the results of the search for ultimacy, for the truth, a truth

which has been planted in the very world in which we live and which shows itself, sometimes fleetingly and often partially, in human cultural endeavor, including religion. In the era of interreligious dialogue, Logos theology has begun to emerge as a model of interpretation, largely re-discovered from the early church and readily suited to building a new paradigm within which a fresh approach to non-Christian faiths could be developed. The model appeals strongly to both Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, with the former's view of paganism as "a mixture of gloom and vice" but also containing within it "discernible streaks of light" as a basis for a policy of engagement and dialogue rather than exclusivist rejection. The latter spoke of "gleams of truth which the Christian Church ought to be ready to accept as evidence of the diffused energy of the divine Logos" (Yates, 1994: 95, 96). Boston College's view of the CIT reflects the approach of Logos theologians that the Christian faith needs to always be in dialogue since it is always seeking the divine presence in the world: "The Catholic intellectual tradition is neither static nor complete. It is a dynamic conversation over time with a highly diverse range of dialectical partners: a conversation made of variant strands and a range of positions." (ibid, p.10). Logos theology is of particular use in discerning points of commonality between Christianity and the non-Christian faiths. Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* (1965), reflecting some of the language of Logos theology and particularly drawing on the 'light' imagery of Clement Alexandria and Justin Martyr states:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965: 2).

In his excellent book, *Islam and Christianity: Theological Themes in Comparative Perspective* (2011), John Renard, a Jesuit scholar of Medieval Islam at St Louis University, identifies four main "historical models of Christian theological engagement with Islam...The four are the polemical, the Scholastic, the Christian inclusivist, and the dialogical " (Renard, 2011: xvii). The polemical approach is explored through the thought of John of Damascus (c. 655-750), whose highly skeptical approach to Islam as a system of beliefs is tempered by his more pragmatic approach towards a phenomenon he, nevertheless, knows he must engage with in order to understand it and counter its claims. In his discussion of John, Renard makes reference to a number of surprisingly sympathetic profiles of Muhammad and Islam by a range of Christian sources writing in the seventh and eighth centuries, including the Armenian bishop, Sebeos, whose *History of Heraclius*, written around 661 "is remarkably generous, attributing to Muhammad a thorough knowledge of Mosaic law and acknowledging a general uprightness in his teaching "(ibid: xviii). Mona Siddiqui in her *Christians, Muslims and Jesus* (2013) provides a more sober assessment of Sebeos' view of Muhammad, noting that he calls Muhammad "the great ally of Antichrist" (Siddiqui, 2013: 61) in the same breath in which he praises him for

teaching “people to know God and to turn to the Living God” (ibid). Siddiqui notes that such an attitude reflects the conflict felt by Christian scholars of the period, in that they lauded the monotheistic nature of Islam, but had, understandably, severe problems with its view of the divinity of Jesus (ibid: 62). Renard cites other positive assessments, while also acknowledging many negative assessments of Islam from the same period, but argues “...it will come as a surprise that as late as the twelfth-century generally positive assessments of Islam by Middle Eastern Christian theologians seem to outnumber the blanket condemnations” (Renard, 2011: xviii). In spite of John of Damascus’ antipathy towards Islam, his familial connections with the Ummayyad caliph in Damascus (his family served in government administration) provided him with an unrivalled knowledge of Islam for a Christian of the period (ibid). One work, which may be John’s, presents a dialogue between a Muslim and a Christian around so many topics of mutual interest to both faiths that Renard notes “These themes prompt further intriguing questions about the degree to which Muslim and Christian thought had already begun to interpenetrate in shaping divergent views of parties within both communities” (ibid: xix-xx). For Renard, John of Damascus’ chief merit is that he both understands, and presents an accurate picture of, Islam. There is no attempt to distort Islam, in spite of his doctrinal differences.

Aquinas’ Scholastic approach subjected the intellectual credibility of Islamic thought to some criticism and his view of Muhammad is overtly hostile, however he engaged Muslim thinkers in rational debate, taking seriously their intellectual contributions to human knowledge. For Renard, Thomas’ contribution to Muslim-Christian interaction lies “in the seriousness with which he views his adversaries’ positions” (ibid: xxii-xxiii).

The Christian-inclusivist model, as espoused by Hans Kung, “begins with Christian doctrine as the standard of truth, but debate over who is right must be replaced by the conviction that understanding is preferable to dominance” (ibid: xxiii). The fourth model identified by Renard is that exemplified in the work of the Anglican bishop Kenneth Cragg, which looks for “theological cross-references” between Christianity and Islam (ibid: xxv) which are conceptual in nature.

Engagement with Islam, then, has been continuous and multifaceted since the seventh century in both the Catholic intellectual tradition and the wider Christian faith community. Paul VI’s *Nostra Aetate*, his Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (1965) states:

“The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all- powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the Day of Judgment when God will render their reward to all those who have been raised up

from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom” (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965: 3).

There is a remarkable similarity between Paul VI’s statement above and that of Gregory VII (r. 1073-1085), who, writing to a Muslim ruler in Algeria, and thanking him for releasing some Christian prisoners, writes: “In truth, such charity we and you owe more particularly to our own than to the remaining peoples, for we believe and confess, albeit in a different way, the one God and each day we praise and honor him as the creator of the ages and the ruler of this world...For God knows that we love you sincerely to the honor of God and that we desire your own welfare and honor both in the present life and that which is to come; and with heart and lips we beseech that God himself will bring you, after the long continuance of this life, into the blessedness of the bosom of the most holy patriarch, Abraham “ (Lyons, 2012:43,48). Gregory’s letter was written in 1076 and within twenty years of that date, the First and Second Crusades would begin, and a very different chapter in Muslim-Christian relations would begin.

It is always difficult to speak of one Islam; it takes many forms and it is impossible to portray Islam in a monolithic fashion. Perspectives on Islam as a religion of peace are strongly polarized, but those Muslims who make a strong case for its peaceful, tolerant and pluralist nature, appeal, as I said earlier, to Muhammad and the Qur’an, rather to later Islamic history where they believe political ambitions muddled the pure waters of early Islam. Mahmoud Ayoub (1935-), a Lebanese-born scholar who converted from Islam to Christianity and then back to Islam again, outlines an interesting argument for Muslim toleration, which encompasses the more typical elements of the wider discourse on pluralism, but also introduces some emphases of his own. Sura 21: 107, Ayoub says, shows God telling Muhammad “We have not sent you except as a mercy for all human beings.” Paralleling this, the Qur’an has God order Muhammad “Say, ‘O humankind, I am the messenger of God to you all’” (Sura 7: 158). Muhammad, then, is a universal prophet (Ayoub, 2000)¹. Central to Ayoub’s argument on Islamic pluralism is the Qur’an’s teaching on human diversity:

“Humankind was all one community. Then God sent prophets as bearers of good tidings and warners. He sent down with them the Book with the truth in order that it may judge among

¹ <http://www.worlddialogue.org/content.php?id=58>

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‘Islam and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism’ by Mahmoud Ayoub

men concerning that in which they differ. But none differ concerning it, save those who were given the scriptures after manifest signs had come to them, being envious of one another. God guides aright by his permission those who have faith to the truth, concerning which they differed. God guides whom he wills to the straight way” (Sura 2: 213).

Islam is not strictly a religion, Ayoub argues, and the Qur’an does not claim that it is, but it is an attitude of submissiveness towards God. As an attitude towards God, it is open to all:

“*Islam* is not, according to the Qur’an and early Prophetic tradition, the name of a religion. Rather, it signifies the attitude of the entire creation before God. The term *Islam* in this sense applies to the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, to humankind and to everything that God created. This is the first and universal plane of the meaning of the term *Islam*. On another plane, *Islam* applies to any human beings or human communities which profess faith in the one God and seek to obey God in all that they do and say. It is in this sense that the Qur’an speaks of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus and his disciples as Muslims” (Ayoub, 2000).

“The Quranic assertion ‘Anyone who desires a faith other than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him; and in the hereafter he shall be among the losers’ expresses an exclusivist view of religion, but only if the term *Islam* is taken narrowly to refer to Islam as an institutionalized religion. If, however, it is taken to signify a human attitude of total submission (*Islam*) to God, then we are talking not about religious institutions, but about an ideal relationship between God and human beings that transcends all religions, including Islam” (Ayoub, 2007).²

Sura 2: 256 teaches that there should be no compulsion in religion and Sura 4: 94 teaches Muslims that they should not deny that another Muslim is not of their faith- “Do not say to one who offers a salutation of peace you are not a believer.” Sura 2: 62 states “Surely the believers and the Jews, Christians and Sabians, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and whoever does right, shall have his reward with his Lord and will neither have fear nor regret.”

Christians and Jews are known as Ahl al-Kitab, the People of the Book, however the final covenant made by God is that between God, Muhammad and the Muslim community. The soteriological details of the fate of Christians, Jews and others in Islamic salvific history are complex and lengthy and subject to intense disagreement, but there is certainly much evidence of a strong, pluralist strain of thought within Islam which is not considered to be a recent innovation, but which appeals back through Muhammad to Abraham. Many Qur’anic verses speak of diversity in revelation, of the diversity of creation itself and it being God’s will that such

²<http://iiit.org/Research/ScholarsSummerInstitute/TableofContents/ReligiousPluralismAndTheQuran/tabid/244/Default.aspx>

‘Religious Pluralism and the Qur’an’ by Mahmoud Ayoub (2007).

diversity exists, even between peoples and their religions. Abdullah Saeed summarizes Islam's sometimes ambivalent attitude to other religions thus:

At times, it appears harshly critical of the failure of older religious communities (such as Jews and Christians) to accept the prophethood of Muhammad and the new guidance given by God. At other times, it affirms the righteous among other faiths...The Qur'an sanctions religious exclusion, but also acknowledges a purpose in the diversity of religions (Saeed, 2007: 23).

Speaking to humankind in one quite extraordinary verse, the Qur'an says:

If Allah wanted He could have made all of you a single nation. But He willed otherwise in order to test you in what He has given you; therefore try to excel one another in good deeds. Ultimately you all shall return to Allah; then He will show you the truth of those matters in which you dispute (Sura 5: 48).

The strong implication here is that different religions exist to spur on their adherents to outdo each other in doing good.

Having therefore established some groundwork for the history and the possibility of dialogue between Islam and Christianity, we now move on to the role of mercy itself as a bridge-building concept and shared quality between the two largest faiths in the world. I have often wondered why mercy is so central to Islam and it has always been difficult to get a definitive answer; however, since its inception, the charism of mercy is at its very core. Pre-Islamic Arabian society was certainly one in which mercy was not a central concern; numerous studies of the society describe a city in which the dominant tribe of Mecca, the Quraysh, grew richer and richer as a result of the trade in goods and in religion. The disparity between rich and poor grew wider and it was the widows and orphans, who were dear to Muhammad's heart because he himself was an orphan by the age of six years old, who bore the brunt of financial injustice. In such a merciless society, mercy must have taken on a particularly potent value. When I listen to the rhetoric flowing from the unspeakably cruel North Korean regime today, the word 'merciless' is actually used extensively in its own internal political and military discourse. It constantly threatens 'merciless' responses to what it perceives to be provocations from outside forces. Mercy is in very short supply in the society itself and in the penal system, in particular. In a world where mercy is scarce, it must take on a precious value. Another observation which I would make is that the word mercy is actually used little in our own society. One does not hear it very often even within religious circles, never mind outside. The very first section of Cardinal Walter Kasper's *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* is entitled 'Mercy- A Crucially Relevant, but Forgotten Topic.' On the profile which mercy has in Christian theology itself, Kasper writes:

“...we make the astounding, in fact shocking, realization that this topic, which is so central for the Bible and so relevant for the present experience of reality, appears at best in the margins of the lexica and handbooks of dogmatic theology. In the traditional as well as in the more recent dogmatic handbooks, God’s mercy is treated as one of God’s attributes among others. Most often it is treated only briefly and then only after the attributes that derive from God’s metaphysical essence...In the more recent handbooks, mercy is often completely absent and, if it appears at all, then more likely incidentally. Exceptions prove the rule; they cannot, however, fundamentally change the general finding. One cannot characterize these findings in any way other than as disappointing, even catastrophic” (Kasper, 2014: 9, 10).

Within Islam, however, the word is to be found throughout not only the Qur’an itself, but throughout the daily discourse of prayer. The mercy of God is referenced several times a day during the five daily prayers. The first chapter of the Qur’an is recited:

“In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds. Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Master of the Day of Judgment. Thee (alone) we worship and Thee (alone) we ask for help. Show us the straight path. The path of those whom Thou hast favoured; Not the (path) of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who go astray” (Sura 1:1-1:7).

Almost every chapter of the Qur’an begins with the formula “In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful.” The distinction between ‘All-Merciful’ and ‘Ever-Merciful’ is not cosmetic or superficial. This is not mere repetition, but has been the subject of intense debate by Islamic scholars over many centuries. God, the Ar-Rahman, the All-Merciful is the God who bestows his mercy on the whole universe. God, who is Ar-Rahman, is the God who seats himself on the throne over the entire universe, according to Sura 20:5. Mercy, then, flows from the Sovereign God, it is intimately associated with his sovereignty and majesty. The following two verses state “To him belongs what is in the heavens and what is on the earth and what is between them and under the soil. And if you speak aloud, then indeed he knows the secret and what is even more hidden.” (Sura 20: 6, 7). Existence depends on mercy, on the universal mercy of Ar-Rahman, but, Ar-Rahim, the Ever-Merciful, is the God who bestows his mercy into particular situations in the lives of human beings. Sura 17 says “Call upon Allah or call upon the All-Merciful.” All-Merciful, then, is associated with the very name of God. This is the same God who says in Sura 7 “My mercy embraces all things.” The Sufi mystic, Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi (1207-74) “identified mercy (*rahma*) with *wujud*, which in this sense of the term denotes both Being, or the absolute Reality of God” (Murata, 1992: 206). *Rahma* and *wujud* interact in that without

Rahma, wujud would simply be 'existence,' however, when mercy is added to the mix, then existence is able to enjoy a relationship with the Creator. Being and mercy are inseparable. Existence comes into being because of mercy (ibid). The bounty of the mercy of God is inexhaustible. The hadith, the traditions of Muhammad, which are separate texts from the Qur'an state:

"God created a hundred mercies on the day He created the heavens and the earth, each mercy of which would fill what is between the heaven and the earth. Of these, he placed one mercy in the earth. Through it, the mother inclines towards her child, and the birds and animals incline towards each other. When the Day of Resurrection comes, He will complete those mercies with His mercy" (ibid: 207)

Sura 6 tells Muhammad "Say 'Limitless is your Lord in His mercy..."

Now, to return for a moment to Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi's identification of *Rahma*, mercy, with *wujud*, Being; Cardinal Kasper argues with regard to the Church and its theology that a concept of the mercy of God traditionally has been derived from contemplating the historical self-revelation of God and not the metaphysical essence of God. Because of the problem of a suffering God, dogmatic theology 'has difficulty speaking of a compassionate God" (Kasper, 2014: 11). However, Kasper argues, outside of the realms of academic theology, "God's mercy, however, is the attribute, in God's self-revelation in the history of salvation that assumes first place" (ibid: 88). Kasper asserts that mercy 'cannot be subordinated to the attributes that derive from the metaphysical essence of God..." (ibid). Mercy, he says "expresses God's essence" (ibid). Therefore, "it stands in an indissoluble inner connection with God's other attributes" (ibid). Drawing on Pius XII's encyclical of 1956, *Haurietis Aqua*, Kasper argues for 'The God who Mercifully Suffers with Us,' a suffering based not on God's imperfection but on God's omnipotence (ibid: 118,119). In both Islamic and Catholic theology, we have then a God who intimately immerses himself in the world of suffering and whose very essence is mercy. As Ar-Rahman, God is that metaphysical being whose very nature is mercy, curiously both transcendent and immanent, but it is primarily with God as Ar-Rahim, the Ever-Merciful, the God who is active in daily lives, that both Christians and Muslims can connect in a practical display of mutual co-operation. For Christians, God as mercy has most fully been expressed in the person of Christ and, in spite of the prominent role of the figure of Jesus in Islam, the differences in how he is viewed as a divine and salvific figure present, of course, major stumbling blocks. Having said that, however, it is around the shared notions of God as All-Merciful and Ever-Merciful, in whatever way they are theologically and soteriologically expressed, that Christians and Muslims can unite, agreeing that mercy is not just an attribute of God, but an imperative from God as to how human beings should live with each other. There may be disagreement around how God functions as Ar-Rahim, but as Ar-Rahman, he is the universal dispenser of mercy to the whole world- to Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus –all faiths and none.

John Paul II's encyclical of 1980, very early on in his pontificate, entitled *Dives in Misericordia* or *Rich in Mercy* may seem to be far removed in time and space from the writings of the Sufi mystic, Abu Bakr Ibn al-Arabi, who was born in 1165 and died in 1240. Ibn-Arabi wrote much on mercy and developed a hermeneutic by which mercy could be understood. In a world in which extremists in Islam are looking back to more militant times and attempting to recreate them for a new kind of Islam, it is vitally important that pluralist and gentle voices, such as that of Ibn-Arabi are brought to the fore and that Christians also discover these voices and interact with them, so that a different version of Islam than that promulgated by ISIS and others becomes the basis for interreligious understanding. He was born in Andalusian Spain at a time of extraordinary cross-fertilization between Christian, Muslim and Jewish thought and the flowering of science and literature. A consideration of John Paul's very insightful encyclical and the writings of Ibn-Arabi enable us to tease out some common themes which can provide for very fruitful cooperation between the Catholic intellectual tradition and contemporary Islam. John Paul notes "The present day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact seems to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy" (John Paul II, 1980). The Pope attributes this partly to a dominionist perspective over the world, based on confidence in science and technology, which often excludes mercy. Interestingly, several times in the document, the Pope uses the words 'unease' or 'uneasiness' to describe the condition felt by human beings in a world in which they feel overwhelmed by fears and existential doubts. The amount of times the word is used is actually quite startling and I think that the Pope describes well the conflicts felt by modern humanity in a world in which absolutely nothing is certain. Even the Church, he says, shares the uneasiness. It is only an awareness and experience of mercy that can quiet this unease, mercy which flows from God and offers assurance of forgiveness and reconciliation and peace. Mercy, is "an indispensable element for shaping mutual relations between people, in a spirit of deepest respect for what is human, and in a spirit of mutual brotherhood" (ibid). Both John Paul II and later, Cardinal Kasper, make strong efforts in their writing to free mercy from any abstract theological straitjacket in which it may have become bound and emphasize its immanent and practical rather than transcendent and abstract qualities.

Ibn al-Arabi too, according to William Chittick, sought to free the notion of God's mercy from the jurists, the Kalam experts, the dogmatic theologians who were concerned with more rational interpretation of the Qur'an and as a Sufi "claimed to know firsthand that God's fundamental reality is mercy and compassion" (Chittick, 2000: 153). What is striking about the work of Ibn-Arabi is his reliance on the Qur'an itself as a source for his theology of mercy, his insight being based on inspiration of spirit rather than rational investigation (ibid: 154). In a revolutionary and controversial passage in his *al-Futuh al-Makkiya*, his *Meccan Illuminations*, a book written over a twenty year period and focusing on cosmology and metaphysics, Al-Arabi identifies his own calling to mediate mercy with that of Muhammad, who the Qur'an claims God sent as a mercy. Al-Arabi writes of himself "God created me as a mercy, and He made me an heir to the mercy of

him to whom He said ‘We sent thee only as a mercy to the worlds’” (ibid: 156). As in the thought of Qunawi, the cosmos is created by mercy and depends on mercy for its being.

Al-Arabi’s interpretation of one verse of the Qur’an gives illuminating insight into his thinking and could even be said to ascribe to mercy that salvific role which Christians ascribe to Christ. Sura 29:4 states “Those that do ugly deeds, do they reckon that they will precede Us?” The term ‘precede’ means, in general Qur’anic interpretation, “to outstrip or surpass, to come first in a race” (Chittick, 2000: 159). Basically, the meaning seems to be that no one can outrun God and escape his justice. Al-Arabi re-interprets it as follows:

When people disobey, they expose themselves to vengeance and affliction. They are running in a race to vengeance for what has occurred from them. But God races against them in this racetrack in respect of the fact that he is ever forgiving, pardoning, overlooking, compassionate and clement. Through acts of disobedience and ugly deeds, the servants race the Real to vengeance and the Real precedes them. So, He will have preceded them when they arrive at vengeance through ugly deeds...When the servants reach the end of the race, they find vengeance, but the ever-forgiving has preceded them and has come between them and their acts of disobedience. They had been judging that they would reach it before this. This is indicated by God’s words, “Do they reckon, those that do ugly deeds, that they will precede Us?” [29:4], that is, that they will precede my forgiveness and the envelopment of my mercy through their ugly deeds? On the contrary, precedence belongs to God through mercy towards them. This is the ultimate limit of generosity” (ibid).

Like Al-Arabi, Pope John Paul II too roots mercy in the scriptures, but also in the incarnation, in the Old and New Testaments and, particularly, in the story of the prodigal, whose God also was there, as Al-Arabi’s God of mercy, when he expected wrath but met forgiveness.

On the field of mercy, then, Islam and Christianity can meet, with a shared vision of the need for mercy in a world which is so often blind to, even ignorant of, the love and compassion of God. Two faiths, which lie so far apart on matters of salvation and doctrine can, nevertheless, build bridges of mercy, where hearts can be joined in compassion for each other as human beings created by a merciful God whose intent was for us to mirror that mercy to each other. That Pope Francis has published *The Church of Mercy*, is, I would argue, providential in our time, strengthening, alongside Cardinal Kasper’s book, the emergence of a charism which has remained dormant for too long in the church’s discourse and practice. What better theme could possibly provide the foundation for dialogue between the Catholic intellectual tradition and Islam than that which focuses on God, Al-Rahman, Al-Rahim, the All-merciful and Ever-merciful.

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