

Globethics Repository



Islam, a Religion of Love and Mercy

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Bagir, Haidar
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-09-11 08:54:19
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/176479

ISLAM, A RELIGION OF LOVE AND MERCY

Dr. Haidar Bagir, MA
(Harvard University, Universitas Indonesia)

Let me open this short piece by quoting a remark made by the late Prof. Annemerie Schimmel in one of his lectures at Harvard University in 2002: “Islam is usually treated rather badly or briefly because most historians of religion and most people in general think that it is a rather primitive religion with very little interest. But, I think, if you approach it from a different angle, it can yield highly interesting results. And the fact that put me on this track many, many years ago was when I was teaching in Ankara, at the Faculty of Islamic Theology. I was at great pain to explain to my students the theories of Rudolph Otto about the Numinous as the *Mysterium Tremendum* and the *Mysterium Fascinans*,¹ when one of my students got up and said, “*But this is very simple, we have had that in Islam for centuries and centuries. We have always spoken about God’s Jalal, his tremendous Majesty, and his Jamal, his fascinating Beauty.*”²

Indeed, in the Islamic tradition, Divine Qualities are divided into two groups *Jalal* (*tremendum*, majesty) and *Jamal* (*fascinans*, beauty) and these two unite in Him as *Kamal* or perfection. Majesty is rigorous and severe, conjoining the qualities of wrath, arrogance, harshness, and the like. Beauty on the other hand is the synthesis of mercy, generosity, compassion, and other such kind qualities. *Jalal* is the “masculine aspect” of God, the Overpowering – that makes humans obey and abide by “His” law -- while *Jamal* is the feminine aspect, the Attractive – that makes humans fascinated and fall in love with “Her”. These *Jalal* and *Jamal* (Majesty and Beauty) qualities are also called the names of ‘*Adl* and *Fadhl* (Justice and Bounty) or *Ghadab* and *Rahmah* (Wrath and Mercy) or *Qahr* and *Lutf* (Severity and Gentleness). According to Ibn ‘Arabi : “No divine saying related through transmitters from Allah Most High contains anything indicative of Majesty without its being accompanied by something of Beauty to counter it. It is the same way in all revealed scriptures, and in everything.”³

¹ Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford University Press, 1958

² See her *Deciphering the Signs of God*, State University of New York Press, 1994

³ See *Kitâb Al-Jalâl wa al-Jamâl*, translated by Rabia Terri Harris, <http://read.kitabklasik.co.cc/2009/10/al-jalal-wal-jamal-muhyiddin-ibnu.html>.

Islam, in the context of the aforementioned, is essentially a religion of Mercy, of love – a single and encompassing Love that manifests in God's love for man, man's love for God and man's love for man and the entire creation. Love is indeed universal basis, *in omnibus*, as well as the goal of Islam, like in all genuinely spiritual religions. This understanding of Islam has been mainly echoed by the mystics of Islam – the Sufis of all ages⁴.

Quoting famous a phenomenologist of religions, i.e. van der Leuw⁵, Schimmel further reveals the prevalent mistake that has been made by the scholars and laymen alike in grouping Islam into the *nomos*/law oriented religion. Actually, scholars would almost naturally group this religion, together with Judaism, in this manner instead of grouping it into the *eros*/love oriented religion together with Christianity. In fact, all religions, Judaism not excluded, should be understood as love oriented should one's understanding not be limited to its exoteric aspect only.⁶

The Qur'an begins by calling God *Rahman* and *Rahim* (generally translated in English as The Most Beneficent and The Most Merciful). But, the word *Rahmah* in Arabic, from which both these words are derived, has a very comprehensive connotation comprising love, mercy, blessing and many another cognate meanings. In this principle of Love, the entire faith of Islam and its way of life are summed up.

One of the words that the Qur'an uses to denote love is *Wudd*, which, in Arabic means highest form of love, and is mentioned in the Quran:

“Lo! Those who believe and do good works, the Beneficent will appoint for them love” (19:96).

Here *Rahma* (mercy) and *Wudd* (love) are used together. In another place in the Qur'an, *Wudd* (love) and *Ghufran* (forgiveness) are mentioned together :

“And He is the Forgiving and the Loving” (Al-Quran 85:14).

Rahm (mercy) and *Wudd* (love) are mentioned together in this ayat :

⁴ See, for examples, Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, Cambridge University Press, England, 1021; Tor Andre, *In The Garden of the Myrtles*, State University of New York, Albany, 1987; Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1096; William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1983

⁵ Gerardus van der Leuw, *The Essence and Manifestations of Religion. A Study in Phenomenology*, Torchbook Edition edition, 1963

⁶ Schimmel, *Loc cit*, p 249-256

“Ask pardon of your Lord and then turn unto Him (repentant). Lo! My Lord is Merciful, Loving.”

Al-Wadud is one of the Beautiful Names of Allah meaning a source of Love. He has endowed the human beings with an unlimited capacity to develop love. *Hubb* is another word used in the Qur'an that also means love, as stated in:

“... God will bring people whom He loves and who Love Him” (5: 54).

In fact, love is the quintessential principle of God. He emphasizes in the Qur'an that: “My Mercy encompasses everything” (7:156) while and again: “Surely my Lord is The Most Beneficent, The Most Merciful.” (11 :80). Further, in several *hadith* narrated by the Prophet Muhammad, God reveals unequivocally that “My Mercy dominates My Wrath”. We find further that in the Qur'an He reveals himself through the names that belong to the group of His Fascinating Beautiful Qualities (*Jamal*) in verses numbering five times as much as the number of verses in which He reveals Himself through His Tremendous Majestic Qualities (*Jalal*).⁷ In the same line, His Vengeful Quality appears only once in the Book and it does not occur as such except in a verbal form, while the opposite quality – The Forgiving – recurs about one hundred times.

God created the universe in the first place out of His Love. According to a famous Sacred Tradition : “I was a Hidden Treasure. I loved to be known (that is, to be loved) so that I created the universe in order that I become known.” This is how God describes the reason of creation of the universe. Love is the principle of creation, *ab initio*. And it is this love that drives every creature on earth to strive to (re)-unite with God by living a good life that would please Him.

Indeed, one of Allah's names, one of His attributes, is *Al Wajid*. This word has several meanings. Apart from having the meaning of intense, existential love, the word also means to bring into existence. Reflecting upon this divine name, we can see that there is a very close relationship between love and creation. Reflecting upon the Sacred Tradition we can see that God's love to be known is the primary reason for creation. We are alive today because of His Love, the whole Universe is here because of His love.

⁷ The names of God (Allah) is traditionally believed to be 99 in number, divided into the Majestic (masculine) and the Fascinating (feminine). His qualities, such as The Harsh (*Al-Qahhar*), The Compeller (*Al-Jabbar*), The Arrogant (*Al-Mutakabbir*) and The Vengeful (*Dzu'ntiqam*), are grouped into the former while the others, such as The Beneficent (*Al-Rahman*), The Merciful (*Al-Rahim*), The Lover (*Al-Wadud*), The Subtle (*Al-Latif*), The Forgiver (*Al-Ghaffar*) are grouped into the latter.

These what have made the Prophet said in a Tradition : “God is Beautiful and loves beauty”, and still at another time exclaimed : “I saw my Lord in the Most beautiful form!”

However, as stated by Ibn ‘Arabi quoted above, the fact that love and mercy are the principles of God does not nullify the other fact that He is not devoid of wrath and justice. He is a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a coincidence of the opposites. Wrath and strict application of justice are certainly His actions. However, they are the manifestations of the same principle of love and mercy. It is His love and mercy towards human beings that make Him exert justice and enforce the law. That is, as part of His Nurturing (*Rububiyah*) Quality. In the final analysis, even the existence of Hell is a manifestation of His Love and it operates under the same principle of Heaven. God, in fact, created Heaven, and Heaven alone. The fact that some people suffered from sickness of the soul has made the intrinsic nature of Heaven as a source of pleasure and enjoyment is then perceived in such a way that it becomes a source of suffering, a Hell.⁸ Even in this context, not only punishment in this world, chastisement in the hereafter should also be seen as a manifestation of His Love, as an “educational” measure, i.e. to make humans return to his good primordial nature and live accordingly. In this way their souls will once again be purified – as when they were born -- to allow him them to return to God. Return to the last abode of every human being, the real Paradise that is the eventual and ultimate destiny of each and every one of them. In another words, however bad a person had been, notwithstanding the fact that he or she was an unbeliever, he or she will finally enter the Heaven and embraced by God’s unlimited Love and Mercy.

From the Loving God, nothing originates except goodness. Even things that are apparently evil are in reality functional towards the creation of a greater good, thus manifesting His Love to the universe. Again, His (apparent) Wrath – referring to the

⁸ Certain Sufis maintain that after death – as before death – God reveals Himself to man primarily in the mode of Mercy, but the infidel’s corrupted nature perceives that Mercy as Wrath. In Niffari’s word : “That through which He blesses in the garden is the same as that through which He chastises in the Fire. To quote Ibn ‘Arabi again : “Chastisement occurs through the very things that causes bliss ..., just as man of cold temperament enjoys the heat of the sun, while a man of hot temperament is tortured by it. In the last analysis, the very thing that causes bliss causes pain.” The writer of this article would give the example of the sensation felt by a man suffered from fever of cold water. Originally, cold water makes a fresh drink as well as a fresh bath. For a man suffered from fever, the cold water will give a very unpleasant feeling. In parallel with this, the Arabic word ‘*adzab*’ used by the Qur’an to denote the torture of hell is actually formed from the root word *a-zh-b* that is also the root of the word *adzb* that means “sweetness” (pleasure).

Sacred tradition quoted above – is in reality another face of His Mercy. Below are among many verses in the Qur'an in which it is stated that the universe and human beings are made in the best make-up, that everything from Him is good and that anything evil or bad is actually man-made or, more accurately, distortion or corruption of that Divine Goodness.

“Verily. We create man in the best conformation ...”(95:4), and

“(Blessed be) He who created seven heavens in full harmony with one another, no fault will you see in the creation of the Most Gracious. And turn your vision (upon it) once more : can you see any flaw? Yes, turn your vision (upon it) again and yet again : (and every time) your vision will fall back upon you, dazzled and truly defeated ... (67:3-4)

God would not in anyway wrong men but it is men who wrong themselves by committing corruptions, on themselves and on the world.

“Whatever good happens to you is from God and whatever evil befalls you is from yourself” (4:79)

“Verily, Allah will never wrong anyone but it is men who wrong themselves.” (10::44).

In another clear verse He would say :

“... God will never change the pleasure He has bestowed upon a group of people except when they themselves change what are in themselves” (8:53).

In the Prophetic Tradition, love is frequently mentioned as the foundation of Prophet's Muhammad's personality and teaching too. "Love is my foundation," said the Prophet. In another Prophetic tradition it is said that “God is Love”. Anywhere in the Qur'an, Allah would attribute love and compassion to God and creation to the character traits of this messenger of His. In the Qur'an God says of the Prophet as someone “soft hearted”, “not rude and hard-hearted” (3:159), “very concerned towards people and would always hope for he their best, and to the believers he is giving and merciful” (9:138). This is certainly has everything to do with the role and mission that God had assigned to him as a prophet, that is to spread mercy to the entire universe. This is only parallel with what God ordained to Moses and Harun to speak a gentle speech to the tyrant Pharaoh(20:24). If there is anything at all that can give the impression of harshness

in the personality of the Prophet it has to be understood exactly as the way we have to understand God's Wrath as described above. The harshness which is attributed to the Prophet has to be put in the context of his intrinsic love, that -- like in God's case -- it is a measure of educating people so that they would purify themselves from evildoings and to live a good life for the sake of them attaining the ultimate happiness in this world and after.⁹

Reading all these, many people would almost automatically be reminded of how this world is, in fact, full of evils -- an issue that has engaged the best minds in the history of human's thought and that has given birth to a special discourse called theodicy : the justice or the justification of God. That is, how does the existence of evils fit into the whole picture of a Loving, Beneficent and Merciful Creator? How can one explain away evils, including the outburst of huge disasters that would cost the lives of thousands, even hundreds of thousand people including innocent children, and the birth of badly disabled children, etc.? In this short piece it suffices to say that this God-created-world, that includes evils, is -- what the philosophers of religion would call -- "the best of all possible worlds". Without evils, without deaths and disasters this world would not be best suited to the purpose of its creation.¹⁰

Another thing that would immediately cross the mind of anyone who reads this piece would be the question as to why Islam, The Qur'an, justifies war and the use of violence. Is it not in itself a violation of the supposedly love-orientation of Islam? This question implies that war and the use of violence are things that are bad in themselves. In reality, humanity accepts war and violence -- certainly the legitimate ones -- as measures necessary taken in a particular situation. They are justified only as a defense against oppression and transgression of one's rights and as a force to halt any wrongdoing that could not be resolved through peaceful means. This exactly is the reason why Islam

⁹ See, for examples, Annemerie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1985 and another book, albeit more critical, by Tor Andrae, *Muhammad : The Man and His Faith*, Dover Edition, New York, 2000,

¹⁰ For elaborate discussion about this perennial issue in Islam, see, among others, *The Problem of Evil: Ibn Sina's Theodicy*, Shams Constantine Inati,, Global Publications, 2000 ; Lenn Evan Goodman, "Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute Over Al-Ghazali's 'Best of All Possible Worlds'". *Journal of the History of Philosophy* ,25 (1987), Ibrahim Kalin, "Why Do Animals Eat Other Animals? Mulla Sadra on the Best of All Possible Worlds" *Turkish Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 12 2004

sanctions war and the use of violence. Moreover, in Islam, war and violence is legitimate only as long as the transgression and the wrongdoing remain. As soon as a peaceful venue is made available, the justification immediately ceases to exist. War and violence, however legitimate, are the last resort. That is, when all peaceful means have been explored and exhausted. And as soon as the oppressive or the transgressor, forcefully or voluntarily, agrees to resolve the conflict through peaceful means, one has to return to the principle of Love, Mercy, and Peace. This is what the Qur'an teaches:

“ ... if two groups fall into fighting, make peace between them; but then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment(i.e. to maintain peace between people); and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably between them; for verily, God loves those who act equitably.” (49 :9)¹¹

Unfortunately, the understanding of some of the masses within the followers of Islam, and many outside observers too, would be fixated towards the exoteric or legal-formal aspect of religion, to the Majestic aspect of God as well as the legal-formalistic role of the Prophet. But, as the Swedish Lutheran Bishop Tor Andrae (d.1948) a leading Islamologist, wrote in his biography of Prophet Muhammad: "A religious faith has the same right as every other spiritual movement to be judged according to what it really

¹¹ For the interpretation of the frequently quoted, but wrongly understood, verses of the Qur'an to show its violent and intolerant teachings see a concise but very clear response of peaceful Muslim's perspective to the manipulative accusations made by Gertz Wilder by Quraish Shihab, *The Fitna Verses*, Lentera Hati and Mizan, 2008. In this book the author elaborates, among others, the correct interpretation of verse 39 of the Eighth chapter of the Qur'an, i.e. that warfare was the very last option Muslims could take, "should they find no other way to avoid oppression or ensure security". Even if Muslims must become involved in a war, they must obey rules such as not attacking women or children, not cutting down trees and not destroying the environment. With regard to the accusation that Islam teaches terrorism, this book explains the meaning of verse 60 of the Chapter 8 of the Qur'an, usually taken out-of-context, by pointing to the fact that it refers to attitudes when facing battle, not daily life. "Strike terror", the expression used by the Qur'an in this verse, was intended to prevent enemies in a battle from attacking, which could therefore prevent the battle itself, as battle was not always inevitable when defending oneself or one's territory, religion or nation. Such self-defense in battle is different from terrorism. And the word "enemies" referred to those who violated treaties, hence provoking war.

intends and not according to how human weakness and contemptibleness have stained this ideal"¹²

In conclusion, what a Muslim needs to do is to refresh his or her understanding of religion by always bearing in mind that religion is not just legal matters, but is principally a matter of nurturing love within our selves: love towards everything, toward all members of this universe without exception. Indeed, Muslims are taught to “inculcate within yourselves the traits of God” (*takhallaqu bi akhlaq Allah*). God, above everything, is the Most Loving, The Most Merciful and The Most Beneficent towards His creations. Therefore, we have to be loving and compassionate towards our fellow creations. Moreover, Muslims are taught to follow the example of the loving and compassionate Prophet, about whom God says is “the best example” (33:21) owing to the fact that he “indeed possesses a lofty character”. And this Prophet, in turn, has taught his followers that the love of God can only be achieved through the love towards fellow humans:

“If you love what is on earth, you will be loved by Who Is in Heaven.”

This is the true meaning of Islam as a mercy to the universe (*rahmatan lil ‘alamin*) that the followers of this religion have to understand and embrace.

¹² Tor Andrae, *Mohammed : The Man and His Faith*, Dover Edition, New York, 2000, p.11