Professor Mouhanad Khorchide

[...] 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 raḥmatan 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-raḥmāni l-raḥūm, “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-raḥmā, “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-raftan lā’ū kullā 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 raḥmatan 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-raḥmāna ayyan mā tad’ū fa-lahu l-asmā’u l-ḥusnā, “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 raḥma means ‘gentleness of the heart’ (riqqa), sympathy/compassion (ta’āṭṭuf) and goodness (iḥsān). Related to raḥma is the word raḥīm, 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-raḥmān” and “ar-raḥīm”.

If the Qur’an is speaking about God’s Mercy, it uses either “ar-raḥmān” or “ar-raḥīm”. Both titles are deduced from the term raḥma (mercy).

There is an important qualitative difference between “ar-raḥmān” and “ar-raḥīm”. On the one hand, ar-Raḥīm (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-Raḥīm). On the other hand, ar-Raḥmān (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-Raḥmān is absolute – as God Himself – that means mercy has no opposition and for this reason mercy is an essential characteristic. Therefore, ar-Raḥmān is wider and more fundamental than ar-Raḥīm.
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-Rahmān* means.