CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

EMBODIED RAḤMATOLOGY:

"UNDERSTANDING GOD AS THE MOST COMPASSIONATE AND MOST MERCIFUL THROUGH EMBODIED COMPASSION"

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ABSTRACT

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Through an overview of quranic verses, lesser known ḥadīth, interviews with Muslim compassion practitioners, the main argument of this paper is that reviving the prophetic practice (*sunna*) of *raḥma* (compassion) is urgently needed in a world that is increasingly self-centered and still impacted by white supremacy, racism, inhumane capitalism, and more inequities plaguing the world. Revisiting quranic verses and learning about the Prophet Muḥammad's life (peace be upon him), are necessary but not sufficient ways for Muslims to live out more compassion in their lives. This paper also draws inspiration from other faith traditions, in addition to examining the originality (or not) of the *basmala*, the invocatory prayer beginning every quranic chapter except one.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Most Merciful

The Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, said, “The person who does not thank people has not thanked God.”[1] First and foremost, I thank God, Allāh, the Most Majestically Glorified, for giving me the opportunity to study with Bayan Islamic Graduate School at Chicago Theological Seminary. I am also thankful for the scholarship I received to pursue the study of the Islamic sciences from 2021 to 2024 in pursuit of the MA in Islamic Studies.

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[1] Sunan Abī Dāwūd, 4811.

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I dedicate this thesis to the people of Gaza, who have taught me and the entire world, what it means to act prophetically in the cruel face of oppression. May God give them swift justice and liberation and may He liberate all the oppressed people the world over. *Amīn*.

INTRODUCTION

Islam is often described as a religion of peace, especially when it is explained (or defended) to people outside of the faith. Indeed, people say, the root word of Islam, *s-l-m*, has the same root as *salām*, meaning peace. The Arabic greeting that Muslims give to one another, *Asalamū ʻalaykum*, Peace be with you, indicates the primacy of peace. However, scholars like ʻUmar Faruq Abd-Allah opine that Islam should be called "the religion of mercy."[2] Certainly, peace and mercy are complementary to one another and yet, there is something about the repetition of *raḥma* in the Qur'an, over 300 times, that explains its centrality. There is much scholarship on the meanings of *raḥma* from a Qur'anic lens, yet there is a lacuna in how *raḥma* is to be lived and practiced, especially in the lives of modern-day Muslims.

What I intend to do in this thesis is explain what embodied *raḥma* may look like. How do Muslims practice *raḥma* in their lives? If the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, was called a mercy to all the worlds (*raḥmatun lil- ʻālimīn* per Qur'an 21:107), what does an explication of this look like? Is the Qur'an, sunna and our understanding of prophetic history (*sīra*) enough to help people with embodied *rahma*? Are there other tools that can be used to develop embodied *rahma*? I argue that using additional modern-day tools can enhance the foundational Islamic tradition of compassion. My paper will explore how

[2] Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, *Mercy: The Stamp of Creation* (Chicago: Nawawi Foundation, 2004), 1, https://www.theoasisinitiative.org/nawawi-mercy.

Muslims can take inspiration from other faith traditions' teachings and practice of compassion, too.

Embodying compassion is not theoretical – it is practical and urgently needed. Inhumane capitalism, white supremacy, sexism, patriarchy, and anti-blackness are several oppressions that directly impact the population of the United States of America. Unfortunately, these issues are global, but I approach this work in the context of someone living in the United States. It is important to state from the beginning of this research that embodying compassion does not mean being weak or being walked "over." It does not imply that people with less power must kowtow to their oppressors. While the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was indeed merciful to his enemies (as will be examined later in this paper), he made sure to seek justice for those most in need of it, as he could do within his capabilities. For example, when he conquered Mecca after years of being forbidden from returning to it due to his enemies preventing him from residing in Mecca, he did grant a general pardon to the people of Mecca who fought against him in battles which occurred between the Quraysh tribe and the Muslims. Adil Salahi, an expert in prophetic biography, is worth quoting in full about the details regarding the pardoning done by the Prophet:

> Before entering Makkah, the Prophet (peace be upon him) had given special orders to the commanders of all four divisions of his army that certain people, whom he named, were to be killed, even if they were found hiding under the coverings of the Ka'bah itself. It is well known that the Ka'bah has a special sanctity which means that any human being or animal is not to be harmed with its precincts. Hence, for the Prophet (peace be upon him), *to issue such orders meant that those people had committed certain crimes which could not be pardoned*. Indeed, not even the sanctity of the Ka'bah was a reason for delaying the administration of their punishment. However, every one of them who had a Muslim relative or friend pleading his or her case was pardoned. Even the ones

> who came to the Prophet (peace be upon him) by themselves, seeking his pardon were granted that.[3]

Even as the Prophet was on his way to conquer Mecca, one of his companions said, 'Today is the day of war, the day that the forbidden is made permitted [spilling blood within the sanctuary], the day God humiliates the Quraysh. Upon hearing about this, the Prophet responded, 'Today is the day of mercy (*yawmu al-marḥama*), the day God honours the Quraysh."[4] What one companion saw as an opportunity for vengeance, the Prophet Muḥammad understood taking other humans' lives (who oppressed him and his Muslims) as within God's divine mercy, not part of tribal revenge.

As we will explore in more detail later in this research, the Prophet's ability to have compassion was not a sign of weakness, but a sign of wisdom and a command from God. Divine mercy is larger than divine justice. For example, in Muslim belief, God's bringing about the Day of Judgment is presented as a form of God's mercy, and "…the primary purpose of the occurrence of the Day of Judgment is not to punish the evil but to reward the good people, the punishment of the veil being only a necessary corollary of rewarding the good…"[5] Evil is part of this world, and while Muslim theologians have many rich interpretations on why evil exists, the Qur'anic concept of this world being a test, a *balā'*, is a helpful approach. The purpose of these tests, suffering and trials, is to give human

[3] Adil Salahi, "Compassion: The Most Prominent Characteristic of Muḥammad (peace be upon him)" *Insights* 2, no. 2/3 (2009/2010): 16.

[4] Ramon Harvey, "The Revelation of Mercy in Light of Islamic Theology," *Islamochristiana* 42 (2016): 17.

[5] Mustansir Mir, "The Concept of Divine Mercy in the Qur'an" *Islamochristiana* 42 (2016): 48.

beings "an opportunity to succeed on the test and thereby regain paradise, the former abode of their ancestors, Adam and Eve."[6]

Mercy and justice are paired concepts that appear in not only the Qur'an, but in biblical and other sacred texts as an ideal that a society should reach, balancing both. The ideal condition of societal justice, per the Qur'an, is built on mercy. "The Arabic word *'adl* means balance and can be transcended by mercy, but *qiṣṭ* signifies an ideal condition of societal justice, which is already built on mercy."[7]

I will also attempt to show how fields like theology (*kalām*) and Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) did not arise objectively, in a vacuum throughout Islamicate history. Rather, individuals (mostly men), were products of their cultural times who did their best to approach the words of God with their understandings.[8] Indeed, Walid A. Saleh writes,

> Each Qur'an commentary was embedded within its historical moment and responded to challenges that it was attempting to overcome; each work was shaped far less by a defined script of a codified genre than by the cultural function of *tafsīr*. *Tafsīr* was never bound by a method or confined by certain features; it was rather bound by a function: to resolve the profound contradictions that faced each Islamic current and to offer a solution that would appear to emanate from the Qur'an. This was also the case for every Islamic period; modernity is not the only destabilizing and disorienting force in human history. This is the reason behind the ever-changing face of *tafsīr* as a genre: beyond the basic text of the Qur'an, one could never be certain what one would find in a *tafsīr* work.[9]

[6] Mir, "The Concept of Divine Mercy in the Qur'an," 49.

[7] Harvey, "The Revelation of Mercy in Light of Islamic Theology," 11.

[8] Walid A. Saleh, "Medieval Exegesis: The Golden Age of Tafsir," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies* eds. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019), 666 – 681.

[9] Saleh, "Medieval Exegesis: The Golden Age of Tafsir," 670-71.

While this paper does not focus on *tafsīr,* my suggestions of a new approach to theology (see below), which have been also suggested my others, is not a foreign concept to the Islamic sciences (‘*ulūm*).

Not only was the genre of *tafsīr* dominated by men, so too in jurisprudence (*fiqh*), there are examples of how social hierarchy influenced the interpretation of Islamic and quranic principles. For example, in the study of *ṣalāt* in fiqh books, one comes with the assumption that all sane, adult individuals are “equally responsible before God for fulfilling core obligations of belief and practice, including the performance of *ṣalāt*.”[10] However, legal texts mark people in a gendered function, according to Aisha Gessinger. Her research on Umm al-Dardā’, a Muslim female Companion and wife of one of the Prophet’s Companions, Abū al-Dardā’, is about her physical markedness in prayer. Al-Bukhārī, one of the six canonized Sunnī ḥadīth compilers, has a chapter on prayer and the section of reciting the *tashahhud,* the statement a believer makes during prayer declaring God’s oneness. Al-Bukhārī wrote, “Umm al-Dardā’ used to sit in prayer as a man sits, and she was a *faqīha*.”[11] What Aisha’s research concluded was that free, adult males are seen as normative worshippers, even in something as egalitarian like the ritual act of prayer, in many legal texts. While a woman’s prayer position may not relate directly to the concept of compassion, I argue that the lacuna of more women’s voices in the *tafsīr*

[10] Aisha Gessinger, “Umm al-Darda' Sat in Tashahhud Like a Man:' Towards the Historical Contextualization of a Portrayal of Female Religious Authority" in *The Muslim World* 103, no.3 (July 2013): 310.

[11] Muḥammad b. Ismā’īl b. al-Mughīra al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Arabic-English), trans. Muḥammad Mushin Khan, 9 vols (Medina: Dār al-Fikr, 1979), i. 438 (*Ahwab Ṣifāṭ al-ṣalāṭ*). Cf. Aisha Geissenger, “‘Umm al-Dardā’ Sat in *Tashahhud* Like a Man”: Towards the Historical Contextualization of a Portrayal of Female Religious Authority, *Muslim World* vol. 103 (July 2013): 305.

and *fiqh* sciences behooves one to uncover more about compassion in Islam, especially when one considers that the root word for compassion, *r-ḥ-m*, is the same as a woman's womb.[12]

[12] I certainly do not mean to imply that women are automatically more compassionate than men. I also am not disparaging men at all. I am, however, noting that there is something to be said about more men than women compiling exegeses and *fiqh* books. Women were jurisprudents and further research can look at a woman jurisprudent's compilation and whether one can detect more interpretations of compassion.

CHAPTER 1.

RAḤMATOLOGY AS AN APPROACH TO THEOLOGY

Aref Ali Nayed, a Libyan Islamic Studies scholar, explains in his article, "Compassion and Understanding in Islam" that Islamic theology normatively focuses on the creedal formula, the *shahādah*, testifying that there is no god but God.[1] Indeed, Islamic rational theology is an approach to theology, and its approach is for the theologian to ground their doctrinal claims in knowledge to prove the oneness of God. Islamic theology has been a systematic discourse about God carried out by Muslim scholars over the centuries. The discussions usually center around what orients one to the Divine. Theology's purpose is for the believer to come to know God (*ma'rifāt Allāh*). Individually, theology gives the believer knowledge of God and proper creedal beliefs. Communally, it provides clarification for the community, dispels obfuscations[2] and is meant to proselytize.[3]

Taking rahmatology a step further, I am inspired by practical theology. The term "practical theology," is not necessarily indigenous to the Islamic tradition. Rather, "…its primary focus has been to acquire insights regarding Christian concerns."[4] According to John Deschner, a faculty member at a Christian seminary, practical theology is the "church's theologically disciplined self-criticism and projection concerning how it

[1] Aref Ali Nayed, "Compassion and Understanding in Islam," *Encounter* 40, no. 3 (2015): 9.

[2] The term in Arabic for what was translated as obfuscation is *shubh* (pl). *shubhāt*. As it is used in *kalām*, it is a false doctrine(s) that has/have obscured the correct one.

[3] Fouad Elgohari, "An Introduction to Islamic Rational Theology," TEB 454H: Islamic Rational Theology – The Classical Period (class lecture, Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL, September 14, 2023).

[4] Dejan Ažđajic, "Theology in Action: Gaining Interdisciplinary Insights From a Sufi Perspective," *Practical Theology* 13, no. 5 (2020): 452.

understands, manifests, orders and inter-relates the congregation's contemporary life of worship, fellowship and service in the local context of the whole People of God."[5] It is a theology of action. According to Deschner, it is the study of how the gospel is interpreted in action. This branch of theology can speak to current situations impacting Christians, requiring a theology to support them and interpret what is happening from a religious lens. An 18th century German theologian and philosopher, Friedrich Schleiermacher, refereed to practical theology as the crown of the theological sciences. Indeed, all other biblical sciences aim at strengthening practical theology.[6] Practical theology is not only concerned with the actions of the congregation but focuses on suffering – of people who have been overlooked in the ministerial environment. For example, writes Deschner, "the congregation *needs* the ministry and presence of its disabled, its sick, its suffering, its experts at receiving grace, as much as—, no even more than — the ministry of its able, its well, its active."[7] This type of theology reckons with so-called passive members of society, who may lack less agency than others. Insights must be drawn from the gospel to live a more just life. This is another goal of practical theology.

How can this theology be used with Islam if some scholars see practical theology as a primarily Christian discipline? This theology can be considered a lived practice of Islamic theological studies.[8] In Islam, practical theology can be akin to *sulūk,* spiritual

[5] John Deschner, "What Does Practical Theology Study?" *Perkins Journal* 35, no. 3 (1982): 16.
[6] Deschner, "What Does Practical Theology Study?" 10.
[7] Deschner, "What Does Practical Theology Study?" 11.
[8] Nazila Isgandarova "Practical Theology and Its Importance for Islamic Theological Studies," *Ilahyiat Studies* 5, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2014): 218.

sojourning, such as Ibn ‘Atā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī’s, *Ḥikam*, known in English as *The Aphorisms*. A jurist in the Mālīkī school of law, al-Iskandarī’s book is about application of Islamic principles and the simultaneous cultivation of prophetic character.[9] Practical theology examines the lived experiences of Muslims and “provides tools to put Islamic theological concepts into practice.”[10] This type of theological practice helps Muslims connect their everyday life experiences in their communities, societies and in interactions with the larger world. We can take a step back in Islamicate history to see that the integration of the intellect, body, and soul in Islamic approaches to issues was not bifurcated in the pre-modern and pre-colonial Islamicate world. Nazila Isgandarova, writes that,

> …Islamic education became more dependent on *naqlī* knowledge (acquired knowledge based on the ‘religious sources,’ especially the Qur’ān and the prophetic tradition) and lacked lessons on *'aqlī* knowledge (acquired by human efforts); thus, religious education transformed Qur’ānic principles into formalized legal and moral codes and rituals, creating a dichotomy in Islamic thinking.[11]

This thesis will not analyze the history of Islamic theology in the *madrasa* system. However, it helpful to understand why more embodied compassion may not be taught as much or practiced as much due to colonial effects on educating the Muslim citizenry, bifurcating the Islamic educational system, as indicated by Isgandarova above. An additional factor was sectarianism in Islamic schools and ideological influences on the curriculum.

[9] Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ‘Atā Allah, *Ḥikam* (The Book of Wisdom), trans. Victor Dannel (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

[10] Isgandarova “Practical Theology and Its Importance for Islamic Theological Studies,” 218.

[11] Isgandarova “Practical Theology and Its Importance for Islamic Theological Studies,” 222.

Practical theology, including Islamic practical theology, can also be a useful approach in learning about embodied compassion because it relies on field research activities, uncovering the everyday lived experiences of the Muslim community and any community. Additionally, this field gives voice to marginalized members of the global Muslim community (*umma*) and addresses everyday parts of a person's faith and life together. Practical theology also uses terms indigenous to the Islamic tradition. It is a "way of doing theology concerned with the *embodiment* of religious beliefs in the day-to-day lives of individuals and communities" that moves beyond the Scripture and religious texts."[12] As will be demonstrated in this thesis, hearing from Muslim compassion practitioners who want to revive the prophetic practice of *raḥma* is one example of lived experience. Practical theology's use of embodiment also is also a beneficial way to implement the teachings of compassion that will be described later in this thesis.

It is also my hope that this work demonstrates how Islam teaches one about compassion with many detailed ways. However, human beings are prone to forgetfulness. Thus, new tools that do not contradict the teachings of Islam can be used to help Muslims re-connect to the primacy of Islam, embodying the compassion of God in their lives with the lived examples from Prophet Muḥammad.

Moving from practical theology to theology (*kalām*), we can get a better understanding of what this field this and how practical theology develops from it. According to Asad Tarsin, the author of *Being Muslim: A Practical Guide,* "…Islamic

[12] Isgandarova "Practical Theology and Its Importance for Islamic Theological Studies," emphasis added, 228.

theology is a rational discipline utilizing logical proofs to serve as the foundation for believing those things we can only know from revelation."[13] There are thirteen to twenty necessary attributes that a Muslim must know about God.[14] There are positive and negative attributes. The attributes of negation are that God has no beginning (*qidam*), no end (*baq'ā'*), no similarity to contingent things (*mukhālafat lil-ḥawādith*), no physical needs (*al-qiyām bi-l-nafs*) and lacks multiplicity, thus being one (*waḥdāniyya*). Asad Tarsin discusses necessary attributes in his book, *Being Muslim: A Practical Guide*, as the following:

1. Being is essential to God, and His Being is both pre-eternal (has no beginning) and perpetual (has no end).
2. God has life and is Living, incapable of dying.
3. God is absolutely independent, not in need of anything else to exist.
4. God is unique from and absolutely dissimilar to His creation.
5. There is a oneness in His attributes, acts and essence – God does not have parts or divisions.
6. God has omniscience and is the Omniscient; nothing escapes His knowledge.
7. God has omnipotence and is the Omnipotent; He is capable of and justified in doing anything He wills.
8. God has hearing and is the All-Hearing, has sight and is the All-Seeing, and has the attribute of speech and indeed speaks.

[13] Asad Tarsin, *Being Muslim: A Practical Guide* (Berkeley, CA: Sandala, Inc, 2015), 20.

[14] Fouad Elgohari, "An Introduction to Islamic Rational Theology," TEB 454H: Islamic Rational Theology – The Classical Period (class lecture, Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL, October 9, 2023).

9. God has volition and is Willing; whatever He wills is, and whatever He does not will, is not.
10. The lack or opposite of any of these attributes is inconceivable of God.[15]

Tarsin explains that while these attributes of God have been important in the field of theology, the ninety names of God can serve as another example of God's attributes. The Ninety-Nine names of God "…help us, as God's servants, to more fully know our Lord and Creator."[16]

While Sunni theology (the Ash'arī and Māturīdī schools) stresses divine names of God that are associated with the attributes of Knowledge, Will and Life, Arif Ali Nayed reminds us that theologians never had a monopoly on the deeper grounding of Islamic preaching and understanding of God. Nayed's proposal is to center theology on the *basmala*, "In the Name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate." He calls this rahmatology and I am indebted to him for this term. It is with this introductory framework of rahmatology that this paper will build upon.

Describing God as Ar-Raḥmān Ar-Raḥīm from a Kalāmī Standpoint

One of the purposes of Islamic rational theology is to use reason to establish proper knowledge of God. In theology, establishing the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) and having correct knowledge of it is one of the primary goals. Indeed, one of the names for rational theology is *'ilm al-tawḥīd*, the science of God's oneness. God's oneness includes the

[15] Tarsin, *Being Muslim*, 21 – 22.
[16] Tarsin, *Being Muslim*, 23.

attributes and names of God. Thus, in this section, I will be exploring how to understand one of the names of God, such as *ar-Raḥmān* and *ar-Raḥīm*, from a theological perspective. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah gives a theological reflection on Islam and mercy: "Theologically, Islamic tradition defines mercy as the intent to bring good to others and cause them benefit. As such, being merciful implies to the desire to avert evil and harm."[17] Abd-Allah identifies proactive and retroactive mercy in this definition. Retroactive mercy is after the fact and relates to pardoning and forgiveness. Proactive mercy is before something happens and seeks good intentions and new beginnings. Abd-Allah expands on this concept of both types of mercy in the Prophet Muḥammad's life:

> The thread of proactive mercy ran throughout the fabric of the Prophet's life and was the key to his phenomenal, hard-earned, and lasting success. The loyalty and love of his followers and the awe and respect he evoked among his enemies were the fruits of such magnanimity. He said: "The closest of you on the Day of Judgment will be the best of you in character.[18]

Moving from some descriptions of the Prophetic embodiment of mercy to God's description of mercy, what do we mean when we classify God as the Most Compassionate and the Most Merciful? I will attempt to explain what this means by looking at primary source material from theologians like Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī and Abū-l-Ḥasan al- 'Ash'arī, in addition to secondary sources from Orientalists Montgomery Watt and Richard McCarthy. Furthermore, an Arabic poem and introductory commentary on theology, by Ahmed al-Dardīr, The *Glimmering Pearl*, is another source written in the

[17] Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, "Mercy: The Stamp of Creation" (Nawawi Foundation, 2004), 3,https://www.theoasisinitiative.org/nawawi-mercy.

[18] Abd-Allah, "Mercy," 3, https://www.theoasisinitiative.org/nawawi-mercy.

nineteenth century whose exposition on the meaning of the entire *basmala* will be considered.

The first source, a translation of one of al- Māturīdī's works, establishes that following religion, i.e., Islam, based on the practice of other Muslims, is not enough to have a complete belief in God. In an excerpt from al-Māturīdī's *The Book of God's Oneness*, he explains the necessity of understanding and relying upon proofs to come to a correct understanding of God: "It is compulsory upon each individual to choose their faith by themselves and know the truth."[19] Even a person who is born Muslim must understand why they are Muslim. Only using experiences to justify one's understanding of religion is not a sufficient proof.

In Islamic theological history, the Ash'arī and Māturīdī schools focused on God's attributes, whereas the Mu'tazilite schools focused on God's essences. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah explains that in Qur'an 40:7 God says, "Our Lord, you have embraced all things in mercy and knowledge." According to Abd-Allah, "mercy—technically an attribute of act—is given priority of reference over knowledge—an attribute of essence—again emphasizing mercy's predominance in the universal plan."[20]

There are four main differences in the 'Ash'ari and Māturīdī schools, according to Montgomery Watt, in their understanding of belief (*īmān*), fate (*qadar*), the punishment of sins, and God's active attributes. In Ash'arism, *īmān* is word and action. In Māturidism, it is in word only. In terms of *qadar*, the Māturīdīs believe that "human acts

[19] Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī, *The Book of Monotheism* (*Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*) trans. Sulaiman Ahmad (Publication city: Maturidi Institute, 2019), 1.

[20] Abd-Allah, "Mercy, 2.

are created by God and that man has no power to act before he in fact does so—a non-technical way of stating that 'the power is along with the act.'"[21] Imam al-Mātūrīdī focuses on a human's choice. As it relates to sins, the Mātūrīdī position is that a person who commits major sins is still within the fold of *īmān,* and this person cannot be in hell forever. For Imam al-'Ash'arī, "…some grave sinners who are Muslims will be removed from Hell at the intercession of the Prophet, but he emphasizes that the final decision is God's and that he may, if he wills, punish some sinners— eternally, it would seem—in hell."[22] The last point, regarding God's attributes, is as follows for differentiating the two schools: the 'Ash'arī school holds that active attributes of God are not eternal, whereas the Mātūrīdī school contends that all attributes are eternal.[23] According to Nader El-Bizri, "Ash'arism established a refined nuance between attributes of action (*ṣifāṭ al-fi'l*), which come to be when God intends something and acts, and those of essence (*ṣifāṭ al-dhāt* or *ṣifāṭ al-nafs*)."[24] Most Sunnī Muslims today, whether they know it or not, are taught the 'Ash'arī school of theological thought, especially as it relates to God's attributes.

The last text to be reflected upon is by Imam al-Dardīr, a beginner's text in theology. He defines *raḥma* as tenderness of the heart in addition to comfort, ease, and well-being. It entails behavior that treats others kindly and with beautiful character (*iḥsān*). God cannot be described as having a soft heart, and so what al-Dardir says is that *rahma*

[21] Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 315.

[22] Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, 315-16.

[23] Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (University Press: Edinburgh, 1973), 316.

[24] Nader El-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Timothy Winter (City: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 128.

means God's willing a favor and blessing in a particular way. The emphasis is on the relationship in the action – God's willing to bestow mercy. Will is one of the seven positive attributes of God. It is this relationship, the *ta'luq*, that explains how we can define God's mercy and compassion. It is ultimately about the act of God willing or not.

God's willing human beings into existence is an act of mercy. According to Saban Ali Duzgun, "Mercy is an ontological fact of bestowing existence…Existence is thus the overflowing of mercy to all things."[25] Our existence as human beings is constantly reliant on the necessary existent, God.

Qur'anic Understandings

After discussing an introductory understanding of compassion from a theological perspective, we can now move on to some quranic reflections. The idea that quranic verses and words can have a singular meaning with only one definition was not understood by the early community of Muslim believers. This phenomenon seems to be a modern one with inflexibility towards ambiguity. Indeed, one must assert that a polysemic approach to the Qur'an is both logical and necessary, and indeed, was used for the majority of Islamicate history. In this section, I will look specifically at the twelfth verse from Suūa al-'An'ām: "Say, 'To whom (belongs) what (is) in the heavens and the earth?' Say, 'To Allah.' He has decreed upon Himself the Mercy. Surely He will assemble you on (the) Day (of) the Resurrection, (there is) no doubt about it. Those who

[25] Saban Ali Duzgun, "The Nature of Mercy/*Raḥma* and its Manifestations in the Qur'an," *Kader* 15, no. 3 (2017): 566.

have lost themselves, then they (do) not believe." In detail, I am looking at the section, "He has decreed upon Himself the Mercy (*raḥma*)," seeking to understand the different ways this concept of God's decreeing compassion to Himself has been interpreted by various exegetes along with its implications. One of my main arguments it that defining a word with the same meaning is incomplete as it relates to the Qur'an. The conclusion will address further research, questions, and implications this potentially has for how people approach the Qur'an and practice compassion in their lives.

Qur'an 6:12

In this section, I will look at Q 6:12 because of its importance of one's understanding of how God characterizes Himself as merciful. The verse reads, "Say, 'Unto whom belongs whatsoever is in the heavens and on the earth?' Say, 'Unto God. He has prescribed Mercy for Himself (*kataba 'alā nafsihi raḥma*). He will surely gather you on the Day of Resurrection, in which there is no doubt. Those who have lost their souls, they do not believe.'"[26]

The verse in question appears in Sūra Al-An̄am. This sūra, meaning Livestock, in Arabic, has several themes. First, God establishes Himself as the Supreme creator and speaks of His acts in human history. The pagan responses are compared to the Prophetic responses. The pagans will eventually feel regret. Second, God explains His revelations in various ways by appeals through variant methods, such as alluding to subtle signs in

[26] Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., *The Study Qur'an: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015).

the environment, reminding people of historical moments, and addressing human anxieties and insecurities. Third, Abraham's rejection of paganism is central. We see Abraham as a *ḥanīf* who uses his reasoning with the pagans. Fourth, God is the creator, and He shows how associating partners with God (*shirk*) is unjustified. Fifth, God illustrates the irrationality the paganism induces by talking about the shares of livestock and how they make up lies against God. God lists the prohibitions of the types of meat. Sixth, the Scripture has been revealed not giving anyone an excuse to say they could not believe. God reminds people that Prophet Muḥammad has nothing to do with sectarian divisions.[27]

If one looks at *The Study Qur'an* and the commentary for this verse, one of the commentators explains that God doesn't immediately bring about punishment on the disbelievers because of His Mercy. Additionally, God's writing upon Himself mercy means that He wants His creation to be guided towards his Oneness.[28] Nicole Sinai explains the notion of God writing mercy upon Himself that, "This may mean that the deity freely wills to deal with humans in a compassionate fashion rather than being constrained to do so by some irresistible characterial disposition. The Qur'anic God is, after all, eminently capable of wrath (→ *ghaḍab*), too."[29] Mercy is the only attribute that God explicitly prescribed or wrote for Himself. Furthermore, in a different verse (17:110), God equates His name *Allāh* with *Al-Raḥmān*, "Say, 'Call upon *Allāh* or *Al-*

[27] Muhammad Nizami, "Ramadan Qur'anic Overview," Institute of Abrahamic Studies, April 10, 2021, https://courses.nizami.co.uk.

[28] Nasr et al., *The Study Qur'an.*

[29] Nicole Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an: A Critical Dictionary* (Princeton University Press, 2023), 335.

Raḥmān – whomever you call upon, to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names.'"

According to Umar Faruq AbdAllah, God's ordaining mercy upon himself "…emphasizes [sic] that mercy is a universal law (*sunna*), the dominant theme of the cosmos, and the fundamental purpose of the creative act."[30]

Daniel Madigan, in his book *The Qur'ān's Self Image*, explains that the root *k-t-b* in Q 6:12 means that God writes to determine an obligation for Himself. Madigan further explains an important theological point about this verse, worth quoting in full,

> What can it mean, however, for God to impose an obligation on himself? In another place (Q 28:75), the Qur'an says *al-ḥaqq li-llāh* – the truth is on God's side; God is always the creditor rather than the debtor. So perhaps we should understand God's imposing the obligation of mercy upon himself as implying that mercy of obligation is freely chosen. That is to say, no one forces God to act out of mercy. Human action cannot lay claim to it as something God owes them. God's determination that he will act out of mercy is an exercise of his own freedom, so divine sovereignty thereby remains paramount.[31]

Qur'an 6:155 uses the noun, *kitāb*, to refer to it as a blessed book with mercy: "And this too is a *kitāb* that We have sent down. It is blessed so follow it and be God-fearing so that perhaps you may find mercy."[32] We could see this as an example of intertextuality and repetition – God wrote upon/prescribed upon Himself mercy, and the book itself is blessed with mercy. Revelation and mercy are intertwined here in verses 12 and 155 in the same *sūra*.

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[30] Abd-Allah, *Mercy*, 2.

[31] Daniel A Madigan. *The Qur'ān's Self Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 110.

[32] Translation from Daniel Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self Image*, 133.

Now that we have a summary of the *sūra* and hopefully more context of this verse, let us turn to the linguistic tool of polysemy in helping us to understand the meaning more fully.

The Field of Polysemy

Polysemy, called *wujūh* or *nazā'ir*, in Arabic, is the concept of the same word having different, *related* (emphasis added) meanings depending on the context. Another definition is "the ability of a word to have separate but related meaning, as in (paint) as a noun and (paint) as a verb, (wood) meaning lumber and (wood) meaning (group of trees)."[33] In Jalāl al-Dīn al-Ṣuyūtī's thirty ninth chapter of *al-Itqān*, he writes about ten quranic words which have different meanings. The word, *al-raḥma*, has fourteen different meanings, according to al-Ṣuyūtī. As it relates to the verse in question, al-Ṣuyūtī argues that it means forgiveness, so God has written forgiveness (*maghfira*) upon Himself. Other meanings, or senses, as he calls them of *raḥma*, include Islam, faith, paradise, rain, favor, prophethood, the Qur'an, provision, support and victory, wellbeing, affection, generosity, and protection. Clearly, all of these are not synonymous with compassion if one looks upon them in a cursory manner, but that is the beauty of polysemy and being able to be comfortable with ambiguity in meaning.

The term *al-rahman* occurs in the Qur'an fifty-seven times.[34] Even if one excludes the introductory formula to quranic suras, the *basmala*, the root word *r-ḥ-m* occurs over three

[33] Mohammad M. AlHarbi, "On Quranic Lexical Semantics," *Quranica, International Journal of Qur'anic Research* 10, no. 2 (December 2018): 21.

[34] Muhammad Abdel Haleem, "Presenting the Qur'an out of Context," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, eds. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Oxford University Press, 2020), 569.

hundred times in the Qur'an, "making mercy and compassion one of the most common theological notions in the Qur'an."[35] According to the entry on "compassion" in the *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, mercy means "forbearance from inflicting harmful punishment on an adversary or offender; disposition to exercise compassion or forgiveness."[36] Mercy is synonymous with forgiveness (its root being *gh-f-r*). That the writer for the entry of mercy in the EQ defines *raḥma* with forgiveness is telling, especially since al-Ṣuyūtī's explains that *raḥma* in Q 6:12 means forgiveness. Unfortunately, al-Ṣuyūtī does not cite where he derived the definition for compassion meaning forgiveness in Q 6:12, but it is assumed that he compiled this from many books of *tafsīr*. As relates to *tafsīr*, Walid Saleh's chapter, "Medieval Exegesis: The Golden Age of Tafsīr," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, explains how a *tafsīr* was authored in a sectarian environment.[37] Saleh also writes the function of exegesis was largely about resolving contradictions: "…its function…was to resolve the profound contradictions that faced each Islamic current and to offer a solution that would appear to emanate from the Qur'an."[38] Saleh even cites Al-Ṣuyūṭī's exegeses, which would completely and exclusively equate the Qur'an with the Sunna.[39] I mention this here because as one will note, all the scholars I cited are male exegetes. What would a woman's exegesis of *raḥma* be like? Would it be like her male companions? Would the

[35] Nicole Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an: A Critical Dictionary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 335. The root word occurs 337 times total.

[36] Daniel C. Peterson, "Mercy," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an,* ed. Jane Dammen Radcliffe, vol.3 (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2003), 377.

[37] Walid A. Saleh, "Medieval Exegesis: The Golden Age of Tafsir," in *The Oxford Handbook of Quranic Studies,* eds. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Oxford University Press, 2020), 674.

[38] Saleh, "Medieval Exegesis," 670 – 71.

[39] Saleh, "Medieval Exegesis," 678.

sectarian environment also be reflected in her exegesis? This is why the Qur'an must be understood as a living document.[40]

In addition to the scholars mentioned above who explain polysemy, another scholar who looks at this phenomenon in the Qur'an is Mohammad M. Alharbi. In his article, "On Quranic Lexical Semantics," he argues that the placement of words in the Qur'an is not haphazard, but rather, corresponding to their linguistic behavior and cultural context. Alharbi emphasizes understanding the context of a situation and the culture in figuring out what a word may mean. He looked at several quranic passages to study the "grammatical, semantic, morphological and pragmatic functions they serve in the text…"[41] Alharbi also contends that the *sunna* is not the same as the Qur'an's polysemic meanings. This last statement is different from what Saleh's article described as Sunnism's hermeneutical paradigm of equating Qur'an and sunna.

It would be appropriate to discuss here the difference between sunna and sīra. According to Yousef Wahb, defining these terms depends on the field in question. In ḥadīth studies, everything reported from the Prophet (sayings, actions, tacit approvals and even his physical features), is sunna. Sīra became a discipline which differentiated *sunna* because the former described the Prophet's daily life actions and situations in addition to the wars and expeditions, defined as *maghāzī,* which is a separate subfield in *sīra.* While not wanting to go into too much detail about the differences in these fields, there are

[40] We know about Umm al-Dardā', 'Ā'ishah bint Abī Bakr and a Sufi woman, 'Ā'ishah al-Bā'ūniyyah, the latter whose book, *The Principles of Sufism*: A masterpiece on mysticism by one of Islam's greatest female scholars, is not an exegesis, but she writes about four stations on the mystical path: repentance, sincerity, remembrance, and love. See Ā'ishah al-Bā'ūniyyah, *The Principles of Sufism* ed. and trans. Th. Emil Homerin (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

[41] Mohammad M. AlHarbi, "On Quranic Lexical Semantics," 15.

important implications for how one approaches the Qur'an through the lens of the Prophet Muhammad.

Different Types of Polysemy

The field of polysemy is vast and can be technical in the field of linguistics. Juan Cole classifies different types of polysemy: logical and idiosyncratic polysemy as he assesses the meaning of *kafara* in the Qur'an.[42] Logical polysemy in deverbal nouns is their development in coming to denote distinct but related meanings. Idiosyncratic polysemy occurs when deverbal nouns develop semantically, through historical accidental or other processes. This understanding requires linguistic background. What I understood this to mean is related to what Al-Ṣuyūṭī writes about in the thirty eighth chapter of his *Itqān*, "Non-Arabic Words in the Qur'an." There was scholarly disagreement if the Qur'an had non-Arabic words.

According to Anika Munshi, "Arabic scholars of language and rhetoric collected polysemic words and analyzed stylistic instruments of ambiguity."[43] This led to words in the Qur'an having a multiplicity of meanings. The Qur'an is multilayered, multileveled, and timeless. Anika Munshi, author of the article "Cultivating Qur'ānic Ambiguity," gives a diachronic understanding that Western colonization of Muslim majority countries hindered Muslims from interpreting the Qur'an in a polysemic manner. Munshi writes, "Whereas previous societies cultivated ambiguity to serve social and cultural purpose, *the*

[42] Juan Cole, "Infidel or Paganus? The Polysemy of *kafara* in the Quran," in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 140, no. 3 (2020): 618.

[43] Anika Munshi, "Cultivating Qur'anic Ambiguity," (paper, The Islamic Seminary of America, 2022), 2. https://www.academia.edu/98350343/Cultivating_Qurānic_Ambiguity.

Age of Enlightenment dreamt of a precision to the knowledge of truth and rendered error almost impossible."[44]

Importance of Context

Muhammad Abdel Haleem's thirty-seventh chapter, "Presenting the Qur'an Out of Context" in his book, *Exploring the Qur'an: Context and Impact*, illustrates the importance of both context (*siyāq*) and even rhetoric (*balāgha*). The Qur'an uses textual and situational context. To give an example of textual context, Abdel Haleem explains an important rhetorical point: the use of affective sentences "…in which it orders, persuades, prohibits, and questions its audience rather than introducing detached general instructions that might go over their head."[45] As it relates to our topic of polysemy or *wujūh,* Abdel Haleem explains why context and polysemy must be interrelated in the study of quranic words. Abdel Haleem mentions a quote from Imam 'Alī, which was also quoted in Al-Ṣuyūṭī's *Al-Itqān*, whereby Imam 'Alī envisioned that people could use the Qur'ān for their preconceived notions. In Al-Ṣuyūṭī's *Al-Itqān,* he quotes 'Alī as responding to a companion that the Qur'an has multiple meanings, "You are right; but the Qur'an is multivalent (*ḥammāl*) and multifaceted."[46] One can also translate the Arabic (*ḥammāl dhū wujūh*) as "it is capable of being interpreted in different ways," so do not argue with them.[47] A quranic scholar must be knowledgeable of multiple meanings when approaching the Qur'an. Abdel Haleem gives an example of six different words which,

[44] Munshi, "Cultivating Qur'anic Ambiguity," emphasis added.
[45] Abdel Haleem, "Presenting the Qur'an out of Context," 566.
[46] Jalāl al-dīn al-Ṣuyūṭī, *Select Chapters of Itqān on the Language of the Qur'an: Being the Second Quarter of the Famed Compendium of Quranic Sciences, "Al-Itqān Fī 'ulūm Al-Qur'ān,* ed. Sohaib Saeed (City: Ibn Ashuyr Centre for Quranic Studies, 2023).
[47] Abdel Haleem, "Presenting the Qur'an Out of Context," 568.

depending on their context, change the meaning. One of the words he looks at is *al-Raḥmān,* which he argues cannot be always translated as The Most Merciful without looking at context. In Qur'an 21:42, for example, at least two translators use the All-Merciful: "Who shall keep you safe from the All-Merciful by night or by day?" Abdel Haleem expounds that this is contradictory – why would one seek protection from God's mercy? Instead, he translates al-Raḥmān as the 'Lord of Mercy.' He cites a scholar, Tammām Ḥassān, who defines *al-raḥmān* as power and sovereignty. Interestingly, this definition of one of the polysemic meanings of *rahma* was not provided by al-Ṣuyūṭī in his *Itqān.*[48]

Juan Cole quotes Walid Saleh in his article on the different meanings of *kafara* in the Qur'an and agrees with Saleh that knowledge of a word's etymology and cognates without context is not sufficient to understanding exact meaning. Historical linguistics is useful, nevertheless, contends Cole via Saleh's assertion.[49]

Qur'an 6: 12 Conclusion

This section of the thesis has sought to demonstrate that assuming a word in the Qur'an means something without considering its polysemic meaning does injustice to its multiplicity in fully understanding a concept. Context, sunna and sīra are additional ways to understand a word or concept. During the last online lecture for the course, The Qur'an: Its History and Composition taught as a Bayan course at Chicago Theological

[48] See Al- Ṣuyūṭī *Select Chapters of Itqān on the Language of the Qur'an: Being the Second Quarter of the Famed Compendium of Quranic Sciences,* 71 – 72.

[49] Cole, "Infidel or Paganus?, 618.

Seminary[50], one classmate said a comprehensive understanding of polysemy illustrates that the Quran can be a guide for some, while potentially misleading for others. The statement from the classmate and ‘Alī’s response to a companion of the Prophet impacts how today’s Muslim leaders and educators teach their community members about approaching the Qur’an. Additional research can be approached from more of a linguistic analysis. Indeed, it is often emphasized that the Qur’an is a linguistic miracle, rather than a scientific or mathematical one. Research for this thesis has helped me to understand on a deeper level why it is a linguistic miracle. There are theological implications, as well, for understanding the multiplicity of meanings, so a *kalāmī* perspective must be included, too (and several notions of it were alluded to earlier, but not fully fleshed out). Finally, as Abdel Haleem laments in much of his research, more attention must be paid to the field of rhetoric (*balāgha*)[51] to have a deeper and more accurate understanding of the Qur’an. The field of *tafsīr* is a deep ocean to probe and comprehend the Qur’an’s multiple meanings. It seems we must also reckon with modernity’s insistence on reducing meanings to a singular perspective, as Munshi alluded to. Reminding people of the Qur’an’s inexhaustibility is part of a pedagogy that must be adopted, “for when Muslims annihilate ambiguity, they limit creativity in problem-solving. Certain situations may require a Muslim to seek unity, and at other times, stand out and assert their religious identity. Such inquiry into the relativity of truth can lead to

[50] Yousef Wahb, “Non-Arabic Words in the Qur’an,” RHB 481H: The Qur’an: Composition, Collection and Teachings (class lecture, Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL, December 6, 2023.

[51] Muhammad Abdel Haleem, “Rhetorical Devices and Stylistic Features of Qur’anic Grammar,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur’anic Studies*, eds. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (City: Oxford University Press, 2020), 328.

polysemous expressions of faith." [52] This dynamic approach to polysemy as it relates to the Qur'an must be understood, studied, and applied to fully understand the speech of God.

[52] Munshi, "Cultivating Qur'anic Ambiguity," 17

CHAPTER 2.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF COMPASSION

Al-Ṣuyūṭī, the Quranic scholar who was discussed in the previous section about the Qur'an and polysemy, defined *rahma* with fourteen definitions: Islam, faith, paradise, rain, favor, prophethood, the Qur'an, provision, support and victory, wellbeing, affection, generosity, and protection. This list is expansive and there could be more definitions included. If that is the case, how can compassion be approached in a holistic quranic understanding?

God's Compassion

In a hadith qudsī[1], God says: "I am Allah, and I am *ar-Raḥmān* (the Most Merciful) who created the *raḥim* (womb), so whoever stays connected with it (i.e., womb relations), I will connect him [to My mercy], and whoever severs ties with it, I will disconnect him [from My mercy]."[2] In Islamic seminaries like the prestigious Al-Azhar University in

[1] "A ḥadīth qudsī is a narration (hadith) which, from the perspective of its meaning, is from Allah, the Exalted, and from the perspective of its wording, from the Messenger of God (Allah bless him and give him peace) … This is contrary to the remaining narrations (hadith) as the Messenger of God (Allah bless him and give him peace) would not attribute them to His Lord, nor relate them from Him" Cf. Tabraze Azam, "What is the Difference Between a Regular Hadith and a Hadith Qudsi?" https://seekersguidance.org/answers/general-counsel/what-is-the-difference-between-a-regular-hadith-and-a-hadith-qudsi/.

[2] Collected by Abu Dawud (1694), al-Tirmidhi (1/348), Aḥmad (1/194), Ibn Hibban (2033), al-Bukhārī in *al-Adab al-Mufrad* (53) and al-Albani in *al-Ṣiḥaḥ al-Ṣaḥīḥa* (2/36: 520).

Cairo, Egypt, whenever scholars begin their studies there, the first teaching they learn is the above hadith.[3]

Q 39:53 reads, "Say, "O My servants who have been prodigal to the detriment of their own souls! Despair not of God's Mercy. Truly God forgives all sins. Truly He is the Forgiving, the Merciful." We also read about God's mercy in Q 7:156 – 57:

> God said, "My punishment I bring on whomever I will, but My mercy embraces all things. I shall ordain My mercy for those who are conscious of God and pay the prescribed alms: who believe in Our Revelations; who follow the Messenger – the unlettered prophet they find described in the Torah that is with them, and in the Gospel – who commands them to do right and forbids them to do wrong, who makes good things lawful to them and bad things unlawful, and relieves them of their burdens and the iron collars that were on them. So it is those who believe him[4], honor and help him, and follow the light which has been sent down with him, who will succeed.

Examples of Compassion in the Life of Prophet Muḥammad

The Prophet Muḥammad is known as the mercy to the worlds (*raḥmatun lil- ʻālimīn*), according to Q 21:107. Additionally, we read in Qur'an 9:128, "There certainly has come to you a messenger from among yourselves. He is concerned by your suffering, anxious for your well-being, and gracious (*raʾūf*) and merciful (*raḥīm*) to the believers." We also read in Quran 3:159 "It is out of Allah's mercy that you ˹O Prophet˺ have been lenient with them. Had you been cruel or hard-hearted, they would have certainly abandoned you. So pardon them, ask Allah's forgiveness for them, and consult with them in

[3] This ḥadīth is the first one taught at Islamic seminaries, not only at Al-Azhar. Yousef Wahb, an Azharī graduate, confirmed with me in a telephone conversation that it is common practice to teach this ḥadīth first to emphasize the primary of mercy (Yousef Wahb, telephone communication, March 5, 2024).

[4] The him now refers to the Prophet Muḥammad.

˹conducting˺ matters. Once you decide, put your trust in Allah. Surely Allah loves those who trust in Him."

The Prophet Muḥammad said in an authoritative narration, "In certainty, I was not sent to bring down curses; I was only sent as a special mercy (*raḥmatan*)."[5] In an online ḥadīth database called *Muflihun,* the word *raḥma* occurs 433 times in various prophetic hadith.[6] In the Qur'an, *raḥma* occurs most frequently only after the roots for fear, *w-q-y, kh-w-f*, and *kh-sh-y*. Fear and its roots occur 337 times, and the root *r-ḥ-m* occurs 327 times.

If we know how compassionate the Prophet Muḥammad was, why is it so hard for some people to emulate such compassion? Chaplain Sondos Kholaki opines in her book, *Musings of a Muslim Chaplain*, that she seeks to "revive the *sunnah* (prophetic teachings) of compassion…"[7] For example, she writes,

> The prophetic way of seeing people, then, is to have a good opinion of others and see their potential for growth, and, by extension, to have a good opinion of God. The Prophet had this wisdom with people; he was tuned into their humanity, their dignity, and their worth in the eyes of God.[8]

This is my hope as well, to revive compassion in our lives through embodied rahmatology.

There are countless books written on the life of the Prophet Muhammad compiled under the category as *sīra* literature, which shares extensive biographical information

[5] Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, "Mercy: The Stamp of Creation" (Nawawi Foundation, 2004), https://www.theoasisinitiative.org/nawawi-mercy, 3.

[6] Muflihun.com is a web platform for Qur'an and Hadith. Online hadith collections include Sahih Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Malik's Muwatta, Jami' at-Tirmidhi, Sunan Ibn Majah, Sunan an-Nasa'i, Sunan Abi Dawood, Riyad as-Saliheen, at-Tirmidhi's Shama'il, 20 Hadith Nawawi, 40 Hadith Qudsi.

[7] Sondos Kholaki, *Musings of a Muslim Chaplain* (Independently Published, 2020), 17 – 18.

[8] Kholaki, *Musings of a Muslim Chaplain* ([San Bernardino, CA]: Sondos Kholaki, 2020), xxii.

about his life. Depending on the Islamic sciences field, scholars use the term *sunna* to refer to everything about the Prophet Muḥammad's life whereas *hadith* refers to the sayings, actions, tacit approvals, and physical features of the Prophet Muhammad. The *sīra* literature became a discipline, which includes the subcategory of *maghāzi*, reporting on the Prophet's wars and expeditions.

Adil Salahi is a well-known Islamic scholar and writer of prophetic biography based in the United Kingdom. He published the book, *Muhammad: His Character and Conduct*, [9] a thoroughly researched book with verified narrations about prophetic characteristics. He firmly and confidently concluded that compassion was the most prominent characteristic of the Prophet Muḥammad. Salahi writes: "The Prophet's compassion poured out towards everyone. The more vulnerable a person was, the stronger the Prophet's feelings were towards him and the greater the compassion he showed towards them."[10] This is a profound statement that can be contemplated on with much reflection and application. One notices that the compassion was not limited to a Muslim or someone from the Prophet's tribe. The Prophet showed compassion to everyone, including non-human creatures. The scope of this paper is not wide enough to quote every narration centering on prophetic compassion. Certainly, more of this aspect of the Prophet's *sīra* should be taught. I will focus on a handful of examples of prophetic compassion towards children, his relatives, his enemies, and non-Muslims.

Prophetic compassion towards children

[9] Adil Salahi, *Muhammad: His Character and Conduct* (New York: The Islamic Foundation, 2010).

[10] Adil Salahi, "Compassion: The Most Prominent Characteristic of Muḥammad (peace be upon him)" *Insights* 2, no. 2/3 (2009/2010): 26.

Many examples of compassion can be understood in the life of the Prophet Muḥammad. In the book, *Children Around the Prophet* by Hesham al-Awadi, we see how the most powerful adjective that symbolizes the Prophet around the young companions was compassion. One of the Prophet's companions, who was a young boy when the Prophet was alive, 'Anas ibn Mālik, said "I never saw anyone who was more compassionate towards children than the Prophet."[11] Anas b. Mālik was a servant for the Prophet for ten years and he also reported on how justly the Prophet Muḥammad treated him: "I stayed ten years in the Prophet's service, but I was not in all situations as he would have liked. Yet he never uttered a word of dissatisfaction with what I did. Never did he ask me the reason for doing or failing to do anything I did or omitted."[12]

When the Prophet Muḥammad's son, Ibrahīm, died as an infant, he cried for the death of his son. 'Anas ibn Mālik reported: We entered the house of Abu Sayf along with the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, who was the husband of Ibrahīm's wet-nurse, upon him be peace. The Prophet took hold of Ibrahīm, kissed him, and smelled him. Then, we entered after that as Ibrahīm was breathing his last breaths. It made the eyes of the Prophet shed tears. Abdur Raḥmān ibn 'Awf said, "Even you, O Messenger of Allah?" The Prophet said, "O Ibn Awf, this is mercy." Then, the Prophet wept some more, and he said, "Verily, the eyes shed tears and the heart is grieved, but we will not say anything except what is pleasing to our Lord. We are saddened by your departure, O Ibrahīm."[13]

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[11] Hesham al-Awadi, *Children Around the Prophet: How Muhammad Raised the Young Companions*, (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018), 5.

[12] Salahi, "Compassion," 26.

[13] Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 1241, xiii.

The Prophet Muḥammad's cousin, son-in-law, and ward, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, is a highly respected scholarly and spiritual figure in Islam, for both Sunnis and Shi'is. Several sayings on mercy have been attributed to him, compiled in *A Treasury of Virtues: Sayings, Sermons and Teachings of 'Alī.* Rowan Williams, in the book's introduction, writes that Alī "…understands the life of the faithful as one of constant entry into the depths of created identity, confronting the selfish and idle habits that keep us from the truth and turning repeatedly towards the revelation of unbounded divine compassion and forgiveness."[14] What are some of the sayings centered around compassion from 'Ali? They are, "Compassion is the pinnacle of knowledge; harshness is its scourge." "Do not let unwarranted distrust deprive you of a compassionate friend." Ali offers counsel, prescriptions, and proscriptions in some of these sayings. There are additional sayings centered on compassion that are much longer, and portray 'Alī as someone exuding wisdom, knowledge and promoting a balanced approach in life.

Prophetic compassion towards enemies

The Prophet Muḥammad's primary task was to save people from the "subjugation of false deities."[15] He focused on acts of kindness towards his enemies since he knew they may not always be his enemy/-ies and could one day become Muslim.

One example of an enemy who was hostile to Muḥammad was a man named Fuḍālah b. 'Umayr. One day, Fuḍālah saw Muḥammad making circumambulation (*ṭawāf*) around the Ka'bāh in Mecca with the intention to murder the Prophet. Fuḍālah walked right

[14] al-Qāḍī al-Quḍāʿī, *A Treasury of Virtues*: *Sayings, Sermons, and Teachings of 'Ali, with the One Hundred Proverbs Attributed to Al-Jahiz* trans. Tahera Qutbuddin (New York: NYU Press, 2016), xiii.

[15] Salahi, "Compassion," 17.

behind the Prophet and suddenly, the Prophet turned to Fuḍālah and greeted him with his name. Apparently, Fuḍālah was speaking to himself, wishing to kill Muhammad, and uttering such words of hate towards the Prophet. That is when Muhammad said to him, "What you have been saying to yourself?" Fuḍālah answered: "Nothing. I was only praising Allah." The Prophet laughed and said, "Seek God's forgiveness." The Prophet put his hand on Fuḍālah's chest and pressed it a little until Fuḍālah calmed down. Fuḍālah used to say later: "I swear by Allah, when he lifted his hand off my chest, there was no one on earth dearer to me than he was."[16]

The Prophet held no hostility toward Fuḍālah, even as the former sensed that Fuḍālah wanted to murder him. The Prophet erased bad feelings towards him, and thus, "it was only a matter of hours or days before [the Quraysh tribe] started to declare their acceptance of Islam."[17] The Prophet embodied compassion and mercy, even with harsh members of his fellow Quraysh tribe who fought against him and sought to kill him.

[16] Salahi, "Compassion," 17.
[17] Salahi, "Compassion," 17.

CHAPTER 3.

MODERN DAY COMPASSION PRACTICTIONERS

In this section, I will transition from scriptural and extra-scriptural sources (see previous section) to modern day Muslim compassion practitioners who put into practice the quranic and prophetic teachings on compassion.

Mohamed Dewji

I interviewed two Muslim compassion practitioners, Dr. Rose Aslan, and Mohamed Dewji. Mohamed Dewji is a trained Compassionate Integrity Training Facilitator through Life University. Dewji teaches the ten-week Compassion Training program offered through the Canada-based Rahma Foundation[1], which helps support vulnerable populations including newcomers to Canada seeking refugee status, women fleeing abusive relationships and those facing economic hardships and homelessness.

Mohamed started facilitating compassion training in 2019 after he took the training when it was offered through the Charter for Compassion[2], finding Compassionate Integrity training to be so impactful. The program he attended in 2019 was based on a secular ethics model, and while it was in line with and not at all against Islamic teachings,

[1] Raḥma means Compassion and so the foundation means, "Compassion" Foundation.

[2] The Charter for Compassion was officially launched on November 12, 2008, by religious scholar and author, Karen Armstrong. She was the recipient of a TED talks award on compassion and used the proceeds of the award to start the Charter. Individuals, groups, and cities can sign on to the Charter and make a commitment to live with compassion. Dewji was introduced to Compassionate Integrity Training through the Charter of Compassion. See www.charterforcompassion.org.

it lacked specific references to the Qur'an, ḥadīth literature, and examples from the lives of the Prophets. He has tried to incorporate some of these into the program he now offers through the Rahma Foundation.

Dewji's course explores self-compassion, compassion toward others, and compassion in systems presented from a Muslim perspective and based on latest developments in psychology, neuroscience, and trauma-informed care. Dewji sees this course as a small step towards a peaceful society where we all humans treat this world and those inhabiting it with compassion and where others receive compassion from others. Dewji's goal is threefold. First, he wants participants to gain skills for self-regulating so that they can be compassionate towards themselves. Second, they will acquire practices to help them treat others with kindness and compassion. Third, they will learn strategies to discern compassionate actions when dealing in larger systems that impact more than themselves and those immediately around them. Dewji also wants course participants to appreciate that living a compassionate lifestyle is part and parcel of being Muslim.

Compassion, according to Dewji, means alleviating the suffering of another person, and as it relates to self-compassion, relieving one's own suffering. Embodied compassion is when one does not have to consciously think about practicing compassion, but being compassionate becomes part of one's character and who one is. When compassion is embodied, it becomes effortless, a fact that is consistent with Dewji's training that the Prophet Muḥammad was a "mercy unto the creation."[3] Dewji is inspired by

[3] Dewji is referring to Q 21:107 "And We only sent you as a mercy for all the worlds." See Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., *The Study Qur'an: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015).

Muhammad's compassion towards all, including those that were different from him, those that did not even accept his message, the animals and even the environment. Mohamed Dewji strives to emulate the Prophet Muhammad's life.

I asked Dewji about the meaning of the *basmala*, the epithet that begins every Qur'anic chapter except for one. The *basmala* holds different meanings for him. Firstly, it is a reminder of God's mercy and compassion on everything He has created. It is an acknowledgment that these two attributes (or names of His) have some sort of precedence over all His other attributes, as these are the ones Muslims are taught to repeatedly call upon. The *basmala* also gives Dewji hope. When he starts any task in His Name emphasizing His Compassion and Mercy, Dewji knows that God will have compassion on him and make that task easier for him. And finally, Dewji reminds himself that all human beings and creation are from God. God breathed part of His spirit into creation. God's rahma is contained in this spirit, so at some level, Dewji describes himself as a "godly" creative and can work to manifest these godly attributes of mercy and compassion in his own life.

Dewji believes that ways to bring more compassion in the world include being God-conscious and mindful of one's words and actions; having concern for the less fortunate and those experiencing suffering by practicing charity; appreciating that all creatures are from God and to Him is everyone's ultimate return and by understanding people's common humanity – that we all have similar needs, wants and fears. Additionally, he believes that following the example of the life of the Prophet and along with his righteous family and companions illustrate examples of how compassion was central to their

actions, even with their enemies and at times of war. Finally, he believes there must be more study on quranic injunctions of compassionate living.[4]

I was a participant in Dewji's ten-week course, and at the beginning of the course, there were both men and women who attended it. Yet, as the course went on, only women remained in it. Dewji told me that while men may not be in the course, both men and women need compassion. Most of his participants in the twenty cohorts he has taught so far have been women (and he advertises the course to both women and men). I asked Dewji why the gender attendance is not balanced. He said, "The reason for this, I think, is that compassion is often seen as a weakness in men because it is misdefined as "giving in" to everything, or "giving up" one's rights, or "being walked over." [5] However, one of his goals in Rahma Compassion Training is presenting compassion as a strength and defining it correctly so it is not seen as just giving in or being walked all over.

Dewji believes compassionate living can transform the world through the following:

> We live in societies and not in isolation. We survive by continuous interaction, and we are all totally interdependent. Our interactions are based on reciprocity, so compassion can be contagious. When I treat someone with compassion, I almost always get compassion back. If I have experienced charity coming my way, I will one day (when I am able) be more likely to pay it forward to others. If I respond to hurtful words with kindness instead of hurtful words back, I am less likely to confront more hurtful words from the same person. Compassion is contagious and transformative.
>
> I once had a participant who shared that he worked in a very toxic work environment which was a huge challenge for him. In taking the compassion training, practicing
> some of the strategies and skills and adjusting to how he responded to that toxicity, the whole work environment changed over time. Even though he was

[4] Mohamed Dewji, email correspondence with author, February 3, 2024
[5] Mohamed Dewji, email correspondence with author, February 3, 2024.

> really trying to just help himself, he helped everyone else around him and quite possibly the business as well. This was a true success story."[6]

Rose Aslan

The second Muslim compassion coach I spoke with was Rose Aslan, a former Islamic Studies professor, who now resides in Istanbul, Turkey, working as a compassion coach and breathwork teacher. Her company, Compassion Flow,[7] specifically works with women to revive their connection with God through focusing on self-compassion and compassion for others with an Islamic foundation in her teaching. She describes herself as a transformational life coach, breathwork teacher, and scholar of religion who supports helpers, rebels, misfits, marginalized and spiritually curious folks.[8] On her website, Aslan is open about her long-term struggles with her lack of self-compassion, and how she addresses it today as a compassion coach, working primarily, but not exclusively, with Muslim women. Aslan does individual and group coaching.

Aslan teaches her clients how to bring more compassion into their lives with concrete tools, thought patterns, breathing techniques, and gentle reminders of how to (re)-connect with God. One lesson that she teaches participants involves the importance of a calm nervous system through breathwork, and how to reconnect in *ṣalaṭ,* for example, by breathing fully and deeply. Aslan wants her clients to learn how to live beyond their minds, reconnecting with their hearts and bodies. She describes her approach as a quiet

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[6] Mohamed Dewji, email correspondence with author, February 3, 2024.

[7] One can learn more about Rose Aslan's approach through her website. Rose Aslan, "Compassion Flow Coaching," last modified 2023. http://www.compassionflow.com.

[8] Rose Aslan, "Compassion Flow Coaching," last modified 2023. http://www.compassionflow.com.

revolutionary path of healing. Embodied religion, per Aslan, means recognizing that the needs of the body are as important as the mind. She will ask people in sessions with her, "How is your body doing? What sensations are coming from your body?" "What colors do you see?" Her approach integrates the body, mind, and soul.

I asked Rose more about embodied religion. It means trusting oneself, meeting oneself where one is at in their life, and living in peace with whatever stage, ability, and capacity they are at currently. Rose's mission is to bring more compassion into peoples' lives, to manifest the names of Allah, *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*. She helps people identify their inner critic, who may cause them to be overly critical of oneself to the point of deprecation. Rose explained to me that, "if we are always cruel to ourselves and speak to ourselves harshly, we may violate our boundaries."[9] Many of the Muslims she works with were raised in households where shame was used to teach people about God. Rose uses her academic training as a professor of Islamic Studies in helping people re-think, re-assess and revise their theology about God. Rose wants everyone to draw closer to God, and one unique way she assists people in this is asking what brings them joy. So many Muslims are serving the people around them yet forgetting to serve and take care of themselves.

Aslan also shared with me how compassionate living can transform the world: "If people start to work on themselves, know themselves, and understand who they are – including their needs and how they function in the world – this is a path leading in the direction of compassion." She is firm on helping people identify, maintain, and enforce

[9] Rose Aslan, email correspondence with author, January 23, 2024.

boundaries. Rose believes that when people respective themselves, they interact differently with more emotional intelligence and compassion. “The people part of this community[10] on the healing path treat each other well and respect one another’s needs. The more that people work on healing and breaking the cycle of individual and generational trauma and abuse, the more hope there is in the world.”[11]

In addition to her compassion coach vocation, Rose is also the host of the podcast, Rahma with Rose, where she invites female-identifying religious scholars, mental health professionals, healers, public speakers, authors, and more, to share how they connect Islam with compassion. Her guests have included Dr. amina wadud[12], aka the Lady Imam, Edina Lekovic, A. Helwa, Dr. Rosina-Fawzia al-Razi, Shazia Imam, and many other women.[13]

Rose’s podcast offers a bold space of warmth, understanding and pluralism in a world that is polarizing, chaotic and judgmental. She reassures her listeners that they are not alone in seeking to connect to the Divine in a more compassionate way. In her episode with Dr. amina wadud, titled, “Walking the Spiritual Path as a Scholar-Activist,” wadud shares with Rose her behind the scenes spiritual journey, as someone who was raised by a Methodist minister, then became Buddhist and eventually found Islam. Wadud was taught the importance of love in her Christian upbringing and the awareness of self in her Buddhist meditation sessions. amina does not believe in distinguishing between religion

[10] Rose is referring to her clients whom she has worked with closely in multiple coaching sessions. Her community is mostly virtual through the Rahma Collective: https://rahmacollective.net.

[11] Rose Aslan, email correspondence with author, DATE(s).

[12] Dr. amina wadud spells her name with lowercase letters.

[13] The Rahma with Rose podcast is accessible on Apple Podcasts.

and spirituality because this is disembodied. wadud also openly shared her own growth the faith of Islam, and that it has come in phases, never existing in a static way. Something I appreciated about Rose's guests, such as wadud[14], is that they always begin in the *basmala*, and in the episode with wadud, the latter translated the *basmala* as "In the Name of Allah, whose grace I seek in this and all other matters." wadud spoke about the importance of integrity in her relationship to God. She said that she would rather love God because she really loves God instead of being obligated to do so. amina also shared that connecting with integrity is an ongoing struggle, and bringing more compassion through her spiritual practices can help heal her.

Michaela Dunbar

Michaela Dunbar, a clinical psychologist, and wellness coach based in the United Kingdom, is the founder of Frozen to Fearless[15], a company and website that helps women with high functioning anxiety and imposter syndrome to let go of their fear and become confident in themselves. Dunbar's approach is that somatic work releases traumas trapped inside of people to bring balance to dysregulated nervous systems. She offers master classes with healers from various expertise areas to teach women how to bring connection between the mind and body.[16] She describes her own journey, as a therapist with a doctoral degree in psychology, working with clients and getting results for them, yet struggling herself with high functioning anxiety. Her focus is helping highly

[14] Dunbar is not a Muslim and is a therapist who serves women from all backgrounds in a virtual setting.

[15] www.frozentofearless.com cite website.

[16] Frozen to Fearless website: https://frozentofearless.com/lessons/welcome-to-frozen-to-fearless/.

sensitive women to understand themselves more and make peace with their personalities. A useful part of her program is providing a community space on Facebook for members to share their struggles, successes, and questions with one another. Aslan and Dewji's spaces also offer vibrant community spaces when learning about compassion.

While Dunbar's approach is secular, one of the master classes she offered titled, "How to Develop Self-Compassion So You Can offer Yourself Loving Support and Move Forward with Increased Confidence" resonates with the embodied Islamic approach to cultivating more compassion. In June 2023, she offered this master class with compassion trainer, Catherine Kell. They provided participants, via the Frozen to Fearless portal, a fifteen-page PDF with definitions of self-compassion (and a definition of what it is not), benefits of self-compassion, ways to practice it, and three pages of blank journal space for students to write about what occurred to them during the master class. The three elements Kell taught students were mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness. Kell led participants through this three-part process. First, when someone is struggling, overwhelmed, stressed, or overthinking, they should give themselves the "self-compassion break." One should stop and acknowledge how they feel without any judgment. She recommends phrases to say like, "I'm hurting right now," or "This is a struggle for me." Second, one should take deep breaths and remind oneself that suffering is part of life, and others experience struggle, too. Kell suggests placing a hand on one's heart as one is saying these statements. Third, one says to oneself, "May I be kind to myself," or "May I be accepting of myself." Then, one asks, "What words to I need to

hear right now to show myself kindness?" "What is it that I really need right now?" This three-step process can be used by anyone from any faith or non-faith tradition.

Michaela Dunbar's approach is not religious per se.[17] However, when one studies the approach described above, it sounds like the Buddhist notion of understanding suffering in the world. Catherine Kell wrote that she adapted some of her material from Tara Brach, a researcher who focuses on self-compassion and is explicit about the Buddhist foundation. Granted, Dunbar's *Frozen to Fearless* offers more than courses on self-compassion. She offers trauma informed yoga and breathwork classes to help women recalibrate their nervous systems. Muslims can certainly benefit from Dunbar's work, but for those who want to integrate Islam with embodied compassion, I find Dewji and Aslan as excellent models to work closely with and look forward to learning about more compassion coaches/teachers that I am currently unaware of.

Examples of Embodiment in Islam

Five times a day, Muslims have an opportunity to connect with God and to rewire our nervous systems from being in sympathetic to parasympathetic modes. Prayer can create physical safety in the body through the repetitive movements. More research has been published about the connection between the body and the mind.[18] For example, during the physical acts of bowing (*rukū'*) and prostrating (*sajda*), then standing up again during

[17] I made multiple attempts to contact her and interview her about her work, but she did not respond to me. I wanted to learn more about her clients, for example, if they come from certain faith traditions.

[18] See Bessel A. Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (London: Penguin Books, 2015) and Philip A. Mellor and Chris Shilling, "Body Pedagogics and the Religious Habitus: A New Direction for the Sociological Study of Religion," *Religion* 40 (2010): 27 – 38.

the ritual act of prayer (*ṣalah*), if a worshipper is breathing and being mindful of prayer, the long, smooth breaths with the movement of the spine connects with the brain. When the brain is in a distressed state full of overwhelming thoughts, spinal work is beneficial.[19] During prayer, the spinal cord is used in all the postures.

Other examples of embodiment including doing *dhikr*, the act of remembering God with one's fingers, tongue and/or in the heart. The quranic verse, "Those who believe and whose hearts are at peace in the remembrance of God. Are not hearts at peace in the remembrance (*dhikr*) God?" illustrates how remembering God can be a form of healing.[20] This verse has served as a gateway to the various practices of doing *dhikr*. In early times, even during the Prophet's lifetime, *dhikr* could consist of the picturing of God in the mind and of thinking of Him…[21] Furthermore, "in the language of spiritual alchemy, the remembrance of God is described as an elixir that eventually turns the lead or base metal of the soul into pure gold."[22] Thus, the remembrance of God has a metaphysical dimension, too.

A quranic example of embodiment in the remembrance of God can be interpreted in Q 3:191 - 192: "In the creation of the heavens and the earth and the variation of the night and the day are signs for the possessors of intellect, who remember God *standing, sitting, and lying upon their sides,* and reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth, "Our Lord, Thou hast not created this in vain. Glory be to Thee! Shield us from the

[19] Yoga With Adrienne, "Yoga for Anxiety and Stress," YouTube video, 27:54, Dec. 23, 2015. See minute 6:40-6:52.

[20] Qur'an 13:28.

[21] L. Massington, *et al* "Taṣawwuf," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), 314.

[22] *The Study Qur'an*, 623. Footnote to verse 13:28.

punishment of the Fire" (emphasis added). Remembering and mentioning God can happen in various physical forms, not just with the formalized prayer. One is remembering God not only using the mind, but the body as well in the different sitting positions described above. Interpretations of this verse focus on the act of remembering God in all positions. This is true. However, not many speak about the wisdom of God saying to remember Him in these positions: it requires movement and embodiment.

A prophetic hadith gives us an example of embodiment using water: when one is feeling very angry, it is recommended to make ritual ablution (*wuḍu'*) to calm down. In the Māliki school of law, there is a requirement to *rub* the body parts when making ablution. This physical act of connecting one's mind with the body via the act of rubbing is a beautiful example of embodiment and cultivation of presence in a ritual act.

CHAPTER 4.

INSPIRATION FROM OTHER FAITH TRADITIONS

The above section focused primarily on the Islamic tradition's vast tradition of compassion. Qur'anic verses, prophetic sayings, and interviews with Muslim compassion coaches are examples of illustrating how compassion is being lived out in the lives of Muslims.

Theological Reflection

In my work as the interfaith chaplain at Dominican University, a Catholic, Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) based in River Forest, Illinois, I have learned other tools and approaches in spiritual development from the Catholic tradition that I have grown in appreciation towards. Some of the tools can help refine my own understanding of embodied compassion in Islam. One of the spiritual transformational methods I learned about in Catholicism is called Theological Reflection (TR). Every week, I teach students how to process their placement in a religious site part of the Faith for Change Fellows program, with a curriculum based in theological reflection.[1] According to John Trokan in

[1] Dominican University's Faith for Change fellowship mobilizes the students of Dominican University to be leaders who become social change agents for a pluralistic society. Students work with faith-based communities and organizations in a religious tradition different from their own faith or non-faith tradition to learn and practice civic engagement skills at the intersection of faith and activism while engaging in interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Students will commit nine hours each week to work in teams collaborating and coordinating programming, creating and staffing events, and identifying ways to build interfaith relationships between their partners and Dominican University. The tenth hour of each weekly

his article "Models of Theological Reflection: Theory and Praxis" published in the *Journal of Catholic Education*, Theological Reflection serves the purpose of enabling "students systematically to explore life's experiences, to reflect critically upon their meaning, and to theologize explicitly about the God event in their lives."[2] In other words, Theological Reflection is for the purpose of connecting our beliefs with the lives we lead and the world around us that we experience. The theory includes three important premises:

1. Humans discover their identities in relationship to others: to God, other humans, and nature.
2. Our experiences of lived theology weave together the theory and practice of belief.
3. "Theology is an activity of people who experience God within our history (action) and together in time recognize, retell, and celebrate (reflection) this presence together."[3]

In addition to learning about theological reflection, some Muslim scholars have opined that Islamic theology could benefit from a comparative theological approach. Mouhanad Khorchide and Ufuk Topkara propose that Islamic comparative theology can contribute further to Islamic thought, especially in the modern world. Khorchide and Topkara write, "A theology of mercy could help us shift the gravity of Islamic theology, and

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commitment is spent brainstorming, processing, and reflecting on their work with their respective community partners with their cohort of Faith for Change fellows at Dominican University.

[2] John Trokan, "Models of Theological Reflection: Theory and Praxis," *Journal of Catholic Education* 1, no. 2 (1997): 144.

[3] John Trokan, "Models of Theological Reflection: Theory and Praxis," *Journal of Catholic Education* 1, no. 2 (1997): 144.

consequently, enable Muslims to investigate a relatively unexplored field of theological reasoning, comparative theology."[4]

Biblical Influence?

In doing research on *rahmatology*, I reflected on the oft repeated concept of God's grace in Catholicism, said often by my colleagues, as something they strive to live with in their lives. What does the Bible, then say, about mercy? We read, for example, in the biblical chapter of Exodus 34:6,

> "The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: The Lord! The Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He does remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations."[5]

This verse comes after Moses receives the two tablets of stone (the Ten Commandments/Decalogue), in the wilderness in Mount Sinai. Moses had broken the previous tablets that God had commanded him to write upon due to his anger at seeing the Children of Israel worshipping a golden calf when he was gone from his people, whilst communicating with his Lord and receiving revelation.[6] The above statement in Exodus, including God's mercy, is found not only in that biblical chapter, but also in Numbers, the Psalms and Nehemiah. Dominik Markl, a professor of the Hebrew Bible,

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[4] Mouhanad Khorchide and Ufuk Topkara, "A Contribution to Comparative Theology: Probing the Depth of Islamic Thought," *Religions* 4 (2013): 67 – 76.

[5] Exodus 34: 6. Translation from *The Jewish Study Bible* eds. Marc Zvi Brettler and Adele Berlin, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 174.

[6] See Exodus 32 – 34. Translation from *The Jewish Study Bible* eds. Marc Zvi Brettler and Adele Berlin, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2014), 174 – 182.

has shared fascinating research on the concept of divine mercy in the ancient Near East and in the Bible. Mercy, as a motif, is present in many Mesopotamian texts and the Hebrew Bible uses similar literary forms and adapts mercy as a theological construct.[7]

Markl shows how Semitic languages like Akkadian, Eblaitic, Ugaritic and Aramaic, the cognate *rēmu* means both womb and mercy. Mercy is attributed to many Sumerian gods, too. One Sumerian hymn describes the moon-good Nanna as "the compassionate king, the merciful god."[8] The womb was literally illustrated in Mesopotamian art, and scholars interpret it as referring to both fertility and possibly divine mercy.

Markl also demonstrates a theme in ancient Near Eastern traditions of destruction and reconstruction through the characterization of an angry and merciful God. Cities and temples get destroyed, but then rebuilt by the merciful gods. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem due to God's anger towards the people of Israel. However, God's mercy restored Jerusalem. Some of the Pslams praise God's mercy: "You, O Lord, are a God merciful (*raḥūm*) and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."[9] Markl writes how divine mercy, from a Christian understanding, applies especially to sinners. His conclusive remarks are as follows:

> Yahweh, the god of Israel, was originally one of thousands of gods in the ancient Near East, and even a relatively small and unimportant deity. In the course of centuries, Israelites and Judeans attributed to this god a great wealth of motifs common to ancient Near Eastern religious traditions, until he emerged as the highest, universal and eventually even the only God of the universe. Biblical theology of mercy evolved from the religious world of the ancient Near East….

[7] Dominik Markl, "Divine Mercy in the Ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Bible," *Islamochristiana* 42 (2016): 39.

[8] Markl, "Divine Mercy in the Ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Bible, 44.

[9] Psalm 85:15.

> this motif was radicalized, universalized and sublimely transformed by biblical authors.[10]

More could be said on the adaptation of pre-biblical themes to the Bible. What is important to emphasize is that the concept of divine mercy is one that has been part of human understanding for centuries, not only with the Abrahamic scriptures. Indeed, John C. Collins[11], the author of *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible,* a textbook used in courses for an introductory study of the Hebrew Bible, writes about the portrayal of God as a merciful one in the pre-biblical world. Collins writes that "this biblical portrayal of God is not unique to the ancient world. A Babylonian warrior to Marduk addresses him as "warrior Marduk, whose anger is the deluge, whose relenting is that of the merciful father."[12] As we see, a polytheistic god was understood to have the characteristic of mercy.

Originality of the Basmala?

Do other scriptures, especially the Abrahamic scriptures, the Hebrew Bible, and Christian Gospel, have a similar epithet like the *basmala* (*bi'smillāh ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥim*) "in the Name of God, the Compassionate, Most Merciful?" When I started to do this research, I wondered if this introductory prayer in the Qur'an was unique to Islam. I also wondered if the concept of compassion and mercy was more prevalent in the Qur'an than in the Hebrew Bible. The previous section discussed compassion, mercy, and grace

[10] Markl, "Divine Mercy in the Ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Bible, 44.
[11] Collins is a Professor of Old Testament Criticism and Interpretation.
[12] John C. Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible,* 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 83.

in the Hebrew Bible, but is the *basmala* an original formulation? In *The Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*'s entry on the *basmala*, William A. Graham provides an overview of the *basmala*'s occurrence in the Qur'an and how it was used in the life of pre-Islamic Arabs and how it is used in the life of Muslims today. The *basmala* is also known as the *tasmiya*, which means naming/uttering God's name.[13] Pre-Islamic Arabs used the phrase, "in the name of al-Lāt or al-Uzza." Grammatically, the *basmala* is used as an oath, but spiritually speaking, it has been used as an invocation. Reciting a sūra in the name of God means "to recite it as a sūra coming from him, not from you."[14]

Grammatically, the meaning of the *basmala* is not agreed upon by Muslim scholars, including those who lived in the time shortly after the Prophet Muḥammad's death. The *basmala* could mean the following: a) Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate b) The Merciful and Compassionate God or c) God, the merciful Lord of Mercy. In addition to these grammatical differences, the meanings of *raḥmān* and *raḥīm* differ. *Raḥmān* can refer to God's mercy in this world and the next for all creatures, whereas *raḥīm* is limited to the next world or only to faithful believers.[15]

As it relates to orthography, there is difference of opinion in Muslim scholars' interpretation of whether the *basmala* was part of *āya* (an actual verse) or a divider between the sūras.

[13] William A. Graham, "Basmala," in *The Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 207.
[14] Graham, "Basmala," 208.
[15] Graham, "Basmala," 208.

Womanism

Womanism is another way to approach texts that can be helpful when seeking to live with more Islamic based compassion. Islamic theology has developed internally by its own scholars and has also been influenced and in dialogue with other faiths, including Greek philosophy. As shared in the section on theology earlier in this paper, traditional theology is based on the testimony of faith that there is no god but God and that Muḥammad is His messenger (known as the *shāhādah*). How can the concept of womanism help us elucidate further embodied compassion in Islam? Wilda C. Gafney's book, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, uses womanism, an intersectional black woman centered theory and practice with rabbinic exegesis and interpretation (*midrash*) of the Torah and other Jewish holy scriptures. Womanist midrash pays particular attention to marginalized, non-Israelite figures in the Hebrew Bible. Womanism is black women feminism, that does not center white, upper class women. Gafney explains that feminism asks different questions about biblical text than womanism does. For example, "the voice and perspective of the whole community is sought and valued."[16] In order to create a society of more compassionate people, the emphasis on the group is such an important one.

Gafney further explicates how womanism uses embodiment: "Privileging the crossroads between our Afro-diasporic identity (embodiment and experience) and our gender (performance and identity), we ask questions about power, authority, voice,

[16] Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 7.

agency, hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion. *The readings enrich all readers from any perspective*."[17] Her last sentence on how readers from any perspective can benefit certainly applies to me as a Muslim woman reader. Gafney inspires me to ask how Islamic spaces, interpreted texts and lived out community experiences have been devoid of compassion. More research can be done on the gendered dynamic, i.e., if women have more compassion than men. However, this is a generalized statement, and besides, for Muslims, the greatest human being whose model of compassion is to be sought was a man, the Prophet Muḥammad. Nevertheless, Gafney's approach sounds like Nazila Isgandarova, who was discussed in the introduction, in her explanation of an Islamic practical theology that makes sure to make room for the most marginalized members of the Muslim community, the *umma.*

Womb Theology

The discussion of womanism is an appropriate segue to reflecting on what I call "womb theology." The womb is considered a sacred organ in Islam.[18] As noted in this thesis multiple times, the root of *raḥma* (*r-ḥ-m*) compassion, is the same root for the womb in Arabic, *raḥim* or *riḥm*. Marcia Hermansen's entry on "womb" in the *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* gives a brief, one page overview of the womb's meaning in the Qur'an. In this section, I will briefly write about the concept of womb theology and

[17] Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 7, emphasis added.
[18] Asad Tarsin, *Being Muslim: A Practical Guide* (Berkeley, CA: Sandala, Inc, 2015), 93.

wish to posit that embodied compassion can be understood more and lived out more fully with a reflection on the womb, biologically, metaphysically, and scripturally.

Hamza Yusuf, a scholar of Islam and founder of Zaytuna College, an Islamic college based in California, writes about the womb and its connection to the Divine, offering a metaphysical perspective:

> The Arabic word for "womb" (*raḥim*) has an etymological relation to the word for "sanctity" (*ḥurmah*) in what Arabic linguists call "the greater deviation." The womb has a divine sanctity. God created it as the sacred space where the greatest creative act of the divine occurs: the creation of a sentient and sapiential being with the potential to know the divine.[19]

Yusuf's statement is written in the context in an article on an Islamic understanding of abortion from the Mālikī school of law. Yusuf reminds readers that Qur'an 23:13 calls the womb a "protected space "(*qarrarin makīn*). He argues that this means God is its protector, and thus, "any act of aggression on that sacred space aggresses on a place made sacred by the Creator of life itself."[20] While the topic of abortion is one that deserves due attention, the statement made by Yusuf is profound, not only about abortion, but about any aggression on the womb, which could also be interpreted as aggression towards women, and also, the notion of compassion, i.e., not acting with compassion, but with cruelty.

Womb theology can help us to think about compassion with further application. Just as the womb expands and contracts, so too could compassion entail limits, boundaries,

[19] Hamza Yusuf, "When does a Human Fetus Become Human?" *Renavatio: The Journal of Zaytuna College* 2, no. 1 (2018): 21.

[20] Hamza Yusuf, "When does a Human Fetus Become Human?" 21.

rules, discipline, and of course, justice. Indeed, the quranic description of the womb's preparedness for nurturing a baby are descriptive:

> The reference to the womb's shrinking and swelling, or to its gestation periods (Q 13:8), conveys but one aspect of a complex qur'anic embryology, including the mention of a "sperm-drop" (*nutfa*, Q 23:13), "a hanging element" (*muḍgha, 'alaq* Q 23:14), and a "chewed lump" (*'muḍgha*, Q 23:14) during the early phases of conception.[21]

The womb shrinks, swells, contracts, and expands. Medical professionals with much more knowledge than me on the womb's biology could offer further descriptions of the womb. Suffice to say, what would more reflection on this sacred organ's functions and the metaphysical dimension entail as it relates to *raḥmatology*?

Embodied spirituality model from The Association of Muslim Chaplains (AMC) Conference

In addition to womb theology, I would like to take a step back and reflect on an institution that has trained chaplains in the United States and whose mission is one that seeks to empower Muslim chaplains to provide compassionate care to the people they serve. The Association of Muslim Chaplains (AMC), one of the oldest United States Muslim-based chaplaincy organizations, provides community, resources, and networking for Muslim chaplains in different fields.[22] The AMC 2024 Conference theme was Integrating Faith and Practice. The conference was held virtually from January 12 – 14,

[21] Marcia Hermansen, "Womb," *The Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 593.

[22] See https://www.associationofmuslimchaplains.org/. There may be other older organizations that preceded AMC, but which I am unaware of.

2024 and the keynote address was delivered by a Christian practical theologian from Boston University School of Theology, Professor Shelly Rambo.

The keynote theme was about caring for communities in times of crisis with a trauma-informed approach. Rambo presented an embodied spirituality model[23]on how chaplains can respond to their community in times of trauma. This model was developed by a social worker, psychologist and theologian who identified trauma work as being reactive in their research. That was a problem for many communities who needed responsive approaches. So, instead of being *reactive* to trauma, Rambo argued that the embodied spirituality model teaches chaplains to be *responsive* to trauma, which means building in practices before an event happens. What resonated with me during this keynote address was the repetition of the words "embodied" and "integrated." Clearly, more research is showing that effective pedagogy is not only in teaching someone intellectually, but in helping them to process that with their bodies, as the work of *rahmatology* intends to do.

Rambo invited the chaplain conference participants to ask themselves about their social location and positionality when supporting their communities. Trauma work cannot be done alone but must be done in community. I argue that compassionate living is not the same as trauma – informed living, per se, but a compassionate informed and

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[23] Shelly Rambo adapted the model from Laura Captari, who at the time of the conference, had not published the model. However, Captari's work is now published. See Laura Captari, "Embodied Spirituality and Health Amidst Place Confinement and Disruptions During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Critical Analysis of the Literature and Development of a Conceptual Framework" in *Place, Spirituality, and Well-Being Religion, Spirituality and Health: A Social Scientific Approach* September 2023: 121 – 141.

lived (*rahmatological*) life would support trauma – impacted communities. That kind of work requires people to sit and bear witness to others' horror and grief.

After Rambo asked participants to remind themselves of an actual situation with trauma, she introduced the embodied spirituality model, sharing in detail how it was developed and how it can be used by chaplains. The four areas of trauma's impact – identifying how trauma appears – are somatic, agency, meaning, and relationships. Trauma never happens in a vacuum but is affected by a person's and/or a community's environment. An ecosystem of trauma is also impacted by broader locations of communities both regionally and internationally. People respond to trauma in four different ways.

The first area of trauma focuses on the body. The most research that has shifted the field in thinking about trauma is how it impacts people physically and bodily. The somatic area, i.e., our body's response to automatic threat responses, targets our fight or flight response. This work helps to explain how physical sensations result in bodily responses from trauma. The body communicates a sense of threat primarily and there are limits to what people can say or narrate what happens to them. Nevertheless, trauma does stay lodged in the body as memories.

Rambo lamented that in all her training as a seminarian and spiritual care leader, she did not receive any trauma response education. Most people, including chaplains, are not trained to acknowledge, understand, and recognize body trauma responses. Rambo emphasized the importance of breath regulation for chaplains and the people they support in this area of trauma.

The second area of trauma response work is agency. Many people lose agency and power from trauma. People experience a lack of safety and control post trauma. Once people are grounded and feel safe, this can help one to slowly move past trauma and healing. She repeated the importance of breath regulation, shifting people to a non-reactive state. When trauma impacts a group, communities may already be feeling a sense of powerlessness. This intensification of powerlessness is a compounded sense due to trauma. Rambo used the term, "a lack of felt sense of safety and control" because many communities never had safety and control before trauma. The idea that they "lose" it assumes they once had it in their institution.

Many groups do not have access to resources for justice or a sense of agency and action.

The third impacted area is meaning. Meaning is affected. There are shifts in meaning in one's sense of beliefs about oneself, others and God. This may change significantly in response to trauma. Religious leaders see their work often only in this area. In response to trauma, the work of spiritual care touches on all these areas. A spiritual care provider is not only about restoring meaning. We often like to jump too quickly to meaning making and explanation. If we know how trauma is processed in our bodies, meaning making is later and secondary work. People often do not find a sense of meaning again if they are experiencing threats and fight/flight responses.

The fourth area is about relationship. This is identified as a lack of trust, that one loses the ability to trust relationships with oneself or others. The loss of trust is a primary definition of trauma. Trauma isolates people and it can be hard to stay connected with others. Rambo describes this as a sense of not trusting previous relationships or

recognizing that (current) relationships are unhealthy or harmful. It is important for understanding group behavior and how it can play out in potentially troubling ways. The experience of trauma can bind groups together in good ways, but unhealthy trauma bonds/alliances can also form. Groups that are under threat may move to overcome cycles of humiliation and shame in the form of violence.[24]

Rambo's presentation and work on Islamic compassion have many overlapping areas. The most important is that the work must respect an embodied approach. Additionally, just like Rose Aslan, the compassion coach, spoke about helping her clients with their breath, so too did Rambo suggest that chaplains and spiritual care providers ground themselves and their communities in breathwork as a form of trauma response.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show that reviving the prophetic practice of compassion is not only in re-learning about it intellectually through transmitted narratives via *ḥadīth* and knowing the ample quranic verses about compassion, but by embodying it – by living it out daily. There could be more reflection upon the names of God as *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*. We discussed the meanings briefly under the subtitle about the *basmala*, and a whole other paper could be written on living out these two attributes of God.

The introduction discussed the urgency of how compassionate based living can be a way to prevent racism, tribalism, nationalism, bullying, and domestic violence, amongst

[24] Shelly Rambo, "Caring for Communities in Times of Trauma" (lecture, Association of Muslim Chaplains, January 12, 2024, virtual).

other -*isms* we humans suffer from. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah writes about the practical implications of people embodying more compassion: "From the individual, concentric rings of mercy extend outward, taking in parents, spouse, children, family, neighbors, community, and the world. Part of being merciful toward others is having a good opinion of them, defending their good name, and doing whatever makes their lives better and averts harm."[25] Thus, living a prophetic based compassionate life can literally save society.

Research has also shown how hearts and breathing are in sync in group religious gatherings like *dhikr* (remembering God). This was also something indirectly mentioned with Rose Aslan's breathwork. What would such gatherings look like with more direct intention on compassion?

Is living a compassionate life one that can be done by cultivating an innate trait and/or must it be done through a model of compassionate living? Many prophetic reports mention a mother's compassion for her child – a biologically given one after giving birth. Both women and men are prone to lack of compassion, and indeed, cruelty. This is not a gender-based attribute. If it were, then the Prophet Muḥammad would have been commanded explicitly to only teach it to men or women, but he is commanded to be both compassionate and to teach compassion to the worlds (*ʿālimīn*).

Imagine if Islamic full-time schools, weekend schools and other early Islamic education institutions used a compassion-based prophetic approach in their pedagogy. Let

[25] Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, "Mercy: The Stamp of Creation" (Nawawi Foundation, 2004), https://www.theoasisinitiative.org/nawawi-mercy, 5.

us revive the *sunna* of compassion, via *raḥmatology*, with the foundation that has been given to us and use other avenues that do not contradict Islamic teachings, but make them even more applicable for the fractured, stress-based modern world that many of us live in.

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