

## PREFACE

### RAḤMA: MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN STUDIES IN MERCY ORIGIN AND ORIGINALITY OF A SCHOLARLY EXPERIENCE

From the very first Sunday of his pontificate, it was clear that Pope Francis wanted our interactions to be shaped by mercy: on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2013, just before the noon Angelus, he revealed to the people gathered on St. Peter's Square – and to the millions united with them through the media – that he had just read Walter Kasper's book on mercy. Francis famously hastened to add “but do not think I am promoting my cardinals' books!” The pontiff's point was: mercy changes the world.

It was along those lines that two years later he announced an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, to be opened on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2015. In the Bull of the Jubilee, the pope unfolded his theology of mercy. Francis did not look at Christianity only. Rather, he envisaged “an aspect of mercy that goes beyond the confines of the Church. It relates us to Judaism and Islam, both of which consider mercy to be one of God's most important attributes”. Pope Francis ended the Bull by expressing a confident hope: that the “Jubilee year celebrating the mercy of God will foster an encounter with these religions” (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 23).

His hope would not remain unfulfilled. A number of Muslim and Christian theologians were invited to participate in a conference entitled “*Raḥma*: Muslim and Christian Studies in Mercy” to be held on the campus of the Pontifical Urbaniana University in Rome from 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> October 2016. The title of the conference evoked not only the theme to be discussed, but also the atmosphere that the organizers hoped for the encounter itself.

The idea of organizing such a meeting sprang up in Jerusalem, while some of us – Mouhanad Khorchide, Angelika Neuwirth, and Felix Körner – were teaching at the Dormition Abbey. We thought that the right venue for such an event would be the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) in Rome; indeed, the PISAI's rector, Valentino Cottini, and its academic dean, Diego Sarrió Cucarella, welcomed the suggestion with joy, and contributed themselves with numerous helpful suggestions. Together with the staff of PISAI, they saw the whole event through with a professional competence, a healthy combination of energy, patience and sense of humour, and astonishing generosity.

Such virtues in fact proved crucial on the way, since – as may be normal in interreligious academic endeavours – several disappointments had to be faced. Not all the invited speakers were as reliable as those who delivered their talks, and not all Roman institutions proved as cooperative as those which in the end transformed the proposal into a successful event. Those that need to be mentioned are the PISAI, the Pontifical Urbaniana University, the Holy See's Congregation for Catholic Educa-

tion and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Another institution, not a Roman one, that contributed to the success of the conference by providing excellent speakers and by its long experience in the field should also be mentioned with gratitude: Georgetown University.

Among the objectives of the Studies in Mercy conference was to bring together leading Christian and Muslim theologians. We invited paired presentations on each theme, with a Muslim and a Christian presenting on the same topic. This formula has been practiced since 2002 by the 'Building Bridges Seminar', a now renowned dialogue process launched by Lambeth Palace after the events of 11<sup>th</sup> September and sponsored by Georgetown University since 2014. Five other features were adopted for *Studies in Mercy*: 'the key notes', 'the interdisciplinary spectrum', 'the personal testimonies', 'the bridge respondents' and 'the next generation'.

The first particularity was its solemn opening session. After the welcoming addresses of five ecclesiastical authorities, Cardinal W. Kasper (Rome) and Prof. M. Khorchide (Münster) opened the academic exchange with two keynote lectures. Why these two speakers? As mentioned, Cardinal Kasper is the author of the book on the Christian theology of mercy made famous by Pope Francis's Angelus address. Almost simultaneously with the publication of Kasper's study of mercy, Khorchide published a book under the title *Islam is Mercy*. Both authors later admitted they were not aware of the other's work. Each of them could now be perceived as their own tradition's most obvious mercy theologian and so they were excellent choices to start the conference.

Secondly, the conference explicitly sought to give voice to scholars coming from quite a wide range of theological disciplines: scriptural research in both history and hermeneutics, the study of mystical figures and contemporary impact, in systematics but also in social ethics. This explains the evolving of the theme through different paradigms in the present volume: Dominic Markl (Pontifical Biblical Institute) uncovered various mercy imageries in Mesopotamia, thus contextualising the Old Testament's theologies of mercy. Angelika Neuwirth (Potsdam/Jerusalem) and Mustansir Mir (Youngstown, Ohio) presented Koranic studies on the topic, studies of philological finesse and theological relevance. Marianne Heimbach-Steins (Münster) and Mouez Khalfaoui (Tübingen) showed how in the social teachings of Catholic Christianity and Sunni Islam, the concept and intuition of mercy plays a seminal role. Julia Lamm (Georgetown) offered insights into the character of Julian of Norwich's mysticism of mercy in a merciless time, and Erdal Toprakyaran (Tübingen) provided a survey of how mercy echoes in various Islamic mystical traditions. Dirk Ansorge (Frankfurt, Sankt Georgen) and Şaban Ali Düzgün (Ankara University) unravelled the systematic intricacies of a theology of mercy. Finally, James Corkery (Gregorian University) concluded the series of talks by tackling the question of whether the belief that God is merciful and calls for merciful action have actually affected Christian culture beyond the realm of preaching. Thirdly, each study day of the conference would start with two personal testimonies, one from a Muslim

speaker and one from a Christian. We had invited four persons with profound interreligious experience to share a lesson they learned from it. The question we had asked them was deliberately open: “How did you discover mercy in the face of the other?” Naturally, such testimonies were not meant to be scholarly contributions, but to stay on the level of experience. With their immediacy, however, the testimonies were able to contextualise the researchers’ work for each day. Those testimonies that we received in writing are being published along with the scholarly papers here because they were part of the conference’s structure. They might serve as a model for others in the future.

Fourthly, after each pair of lectures by a Muslim and a Christian scholar and before opening the public debate, another speaker was invited to react, thus in some way structuring what was to follow. Each respondent was a scholar familiar with Islamic as well as Christian thought, who had read beforehand the two talks to be discussed and who often made a substantial contribution in his or her own right to the study of the topic in question, as the reader will see in the following pages.

A final distinctive feature of the Roman Studies in Mercy layout was that we encouraged the speakers to bring along some of their students, and that we were able to subsidise their participation through the generosity of our benefactors. The point was that the next generation of scholars from different Christian and Muslim schools should come to know each other; and the pleasant result was that the number of young listeners remained constant for the duration of the conference.

What is the result of the conference? What did we learn? What should we keep in mind for the future? On the level of form, we have experienced that organizing a scholarly event with internationally recognised speakers from different Islamic and Christian theological schools is hard work but extremely rewarding. We made it possible in Rome, with English as *lingua franca*, and in a sober – and for that matter, merciful – atmosphere, in responsible collaboration with the next generation of scholars. On the level of content, thought-provoking insights into the dynamics of mercy in Christianity and Islam, in the past as well as in the present, were shared. We consider these insights important and we would like to offer them for further discussion. It is for this reason that we think this book should be published – and read.

*The Editors*