

## WORKSHOP V: *MERCY AS THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM*

DIRK ANSORGE\*

### MERCY AS A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM

**ABSTRACT:** The paper deals with some pivotal questions related to the conception of God's mercy in the perspective of Christian systematic theology. First of all, it is not philosophical reason that justifies calling the principal source of being "merciful". Insofar, it is from revelation Christians are authorized to call God merciful – thereby posing the full range of problems linked with any concept of revelation. In Biblical perspective God's mercy immediately refers to his justice since the Holy Scriptures conceive God's justice being a sort of enabling or liberating action more than doing retributive or retaliating justice. Insofar God's justice is not far from his mercy. However, what is the theological impact of this statement? Referring to human guilt and forgiveness it appears being compulsory to accept mercy in order to realize reconciliation. Without conversion and acceptance of forgiveness, human acting will be bound to a once committed crime forever. This philosophical conception, however, creates crucial theological problems: what if human beings do not accept God's forgiveness – be that the offenders or perpetrators, be that the innocent victims of a crime? Will they not inevitably perceive God's mercy toward the perpetrators being unjust? Here, a somewhat violent dimension of God's mercy appears – a dimension indissolubly linked with the finite reality of creation. Steered by such questions, the paper finally aims at sketching an eschatological hope that according to Christian faith universal reconciliation originates in the triune nature of God.

According to Saint Paul it was a manifestation of God's mercy that Christ was sent to humanity to liberate it from sin (cfr. Rom 11,30-32). Nevertheless, human sin persists even after Christ has risen from the dead – and even among Christians. Just like other human beings, Christians are fallible and become guilty in many ways.

Consequently, from the beginning of Christianity, Christians felt urged to answer some pivotal questions: How will God deal with human sins and debts? Will He offer an opportunity to repent and to convert – and under which conditions will

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\* Dirk Ansorge, Dr. theol. habil., Professor for dogmatic theology, born in 1960 (Germany), advanced studies in philosophy, theology, and physics at state universities in Bochum, Jerusalem, Strasbourg, and Tübingen. 1993 doctorate degree in Catholic Theology (Tübingen), 2008 postdoctoral lecture qualification (Habilitation) in Catholic Theology (Münster). 1993-2009 instructor and lecturer at Catholic Academy of the diocese of Essen. 2009-2010 visiting professor in Vienna. 2010-2011 lecturer at Jesuit Faculty Sankt Georgen (graduate school of philosophy and theology). Since 2011 professor for dogmatic theology, since 2014 vice-rector. Web-address: [www.sankt-georgen.de](http://www.sankt-georgen.de)

He do so? How can we conceive the relationship between God's justice and his mercy? Is God willing to redeem all human beings or only the righteous? What about the evildoers who refuse to repent and convert – will God sentence them to eternal death? What would be the consequences of condemnation for humanity as well as for God himself? And, last but not least: What is the ultimate vanishing point of history – does only a small number of sinners benefit from God's salvific will and his benevolent forgiveness, or does His mercy aim at a sort of universal reconciliation? It is clear that Christians tried – and still try today – to answer these questions in the light of the Gospel and the traditional faith.

With that in mind, my paper will present some reflections on God's mercy based on Christian theology. In order to keep a tight rein on the task, I will not deal here with ethical impacts of mercy. Instead, I will focus on theological issues from a systematic point of view.

In order to fulfil this task I will take six steps: Initially I will deal with God's mercy as a matter of revelation and theological reasoning. The second step will bring to mind some essential quotations of God's mercy and justice in the Holy Scriptures. The following step will point to some limits of God's mercy: the necessary assent of the victims to God's forgiveness and the authority of their suffering. Step four will deal with the necessity of God's forgiveness, whereas step five reveals the violent dimensions of forgiveness. In the last step, I will present some ideas on the relationship between God's mercy and divine trinity.

### 1. *God's Mercy as a Matter of Revelation and Theological Reasoning*

To be sure: when we talk about mercy from a theological point of view, we quickly become aware that a multitude of issues relating to God's mercy is neither clear nor evident.

In order to give just two examples: To talk about God's mercy refers to a certain type of interrelation between God and humanity. This perspective immediately raises the question in what manner God and humanity are interrelated. How does the infinite and eternal God relate to humanity that finds itself extended in time and space? This question is crucial for a theological concept of divine revelation. A clear concept of revelation, however, is a necessary precondition for talking about God's mercy.

Another point is that, with regard to God's mercy, we inevitably have to deal with the straining interrelation between God's mercy and God's justice. The Holy Scriptures attest God's forgiveness as well as His punishment of human offences and sins. Nevertheless, how are divine punishment and forgiveness interrelated? The Bible frequently mentions God's mercy and justice. However, it neither offers nor intends to offer a coherent theory of both attributes and their mutual relationship.

Both given examples refer to the fact that without divine revelation, we would not know anything about God's justice and mercy. From a metaphysical starting point, we would only attain a metaphysical concept of God. Metaphysical approach-

es may attain the divine realm by introducing concepts like “supreme being” (*sum-mum ens* or *summum esse*), “subsisting being” (*ipsum esse subsistens*), “pure actuality” (*actus purus*), or “uncaused cause” (*causa sui*). However, these concepts will not succeed in conceiving God being just or merciful. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa theologiae*, deals with divine justice and mercy after having discussed essential divine attributes like immutability, eternity, and unity<sup>1</sup>.

In his famous *Mémorial*, written in 1654, the French philosopher Blaise Pascal stressed the difference that is at stake here very clearly: “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars”<sup>2</sup>. For Christians, evidently, the hermeneutical key for a deeper understanding of the relationship between God’s justice and mercy is Jesus Christ: His preaching, His life, His suffering, His death on the cross, and His resurrection.

My starting point, therefore, will be the revelation of God as it is attested by the Biblical writings. However, I will not refrain from referring to philosophical reflections when they promote a better understanding of theological issues. For, in spite of Pascal’s invective, talking about God in a metaphysical perspective is by no means useless. Metaphysics supplies a certain “grammar” of God’s reality and the qualities or attributes of his nature. Metaphysics supplies a grammar even of the way he is performing history of salvation. In order to prove God’s reality, however, it needs revelation<sup>3</sup>.

Referring to God’s nature, metaphysics discerns between “essential attributes” and “relational attributes”. “Supreme being”, for instance, is an essential attribute of God, while to conceive God being the “ultimate cause of being” points to a relational attribute. In philosophical terms calling God “ultimate cause” – or “creator” in theological terms obtained from revelation – refers to God inasmuch he is related to the world.

“Merciful”, obviously, is a relational divine attribute. For the moment, I leave the question open if we may call God “merciful” by essence – which means detached from creation and humanity. I will deal with this question at the end of my paper. For the moment, I only point to the fact that talking about God’s mercy presupposes the fact of revelation.

## 2. God’s Mercy and Justice in the Holy Scriptures

Like in the Quran, we find numerous passages in the Bible that deal with God’s mercy. Often human beings praise God’s mercy on them. Others are suppliant for God’s mercy when they feel guilty. Very frequently, the Holy Scriptures refer to

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, qu. 21: De iustitia et misericordia Dei.

<sup>2</sup> B. Pascal, *Pensées and other Writings*, A. Levi (ed.), transl. H. Levi, Oxford University Press, New York 2008, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. First Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Dei Filius*, cap. 2 (Denzinger-Schönmetzer, no. 3004-3005).

God's mercy in favour of the evildoers, the offenders, and the sinners<sup>4</sup>. God's mercy is closely linked to forgiveness. God's forgiveness realizes His mercy and makes it concrete<sup>5</sup>. In the Bible, divine mercy appears to be the source of a multitude of salvific acts of God. Frequently the Scriptures testify that God's forbearing to offenders incites Him to forgive and liberate those who fell in trespasses and sins, and who are not capable of liberating themselves<sup>6</sup>.

Being merciful describes a quality of God that, consequently, is required of God's people as well<sup>7</sup>. God's mercy originates from the persistent allegiance by which he sustains the covenant with his people.

At the same time and repeatedly in the Holy Scriptures, however, we find the idea that God punishes or retaliates<sup>8</sup>. According to the Deuteronomist's view divine retaliation occurs within history: catastrophes like the conquest of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the banishment to exile in Babylon are interpreted as well-grounded acts of God's punishment of the sins of Israel. In the books of the prophets, God's retributive or retaliatory justice occurs linked with the "Day of the Lord"<sup>9</sup>. Particularly in apocalyptic literature, the idea of the Lord's justice frequently refers to punishment and retaliation, retribution and condemnation<sup>10</sup>.

Mercy and justice – how can theologians reconcile these seemingly opposite facets of God's behaviour? It might be helpful to remind that "justice" in the Bible

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Exod 34,9; Lev 4,20-35; 5,10-18; 6,7; 19,22; Num 14,20; 15,25-28; 30,5-12; 1Kgs 8,30-39,50; Ps 25,11; 103,3; Isa 55,7; Dan 9,19; Amos 7,2; ref. particularly to the seven Psalms of Repentance (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143).

<sup>5</sup> According to Merriam-Webster's well-known Dictionary, the term "pardon" usually refers to the official or legal act of refraining from punishment of someone who is guilty of a crime. Differently, the term "forgiveness" refers to the private act of forgiving someone or something to somebody who is morally guilty. The term "mercy" refers to a personal attitude or moral behavior of forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one's power. Obviously, the three meanings overlap.

<sup>6</sup> The biblical notions of the behavior of God are quite anthropomorphic. In the conceptual framework of Metaphysics, notions like "compassion" have to be reconciled with the assumption of God's immutability – to give only one example.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Mic 6-8; Zech 7,9-10. Cfr. the instructions of moral holiness in Lev 19.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. J. Krasovec, *Reward, punishment, and forgiveness. The Thinking and Beliefs of Ancient Israel in the light of Greek and Modern Views* (Suppl. to *Vetus Testamentum* 78), Brill, Leiden 1999, pp. 23-688; J. Unsok Ro, "The theological concept of YHWH's punitive justice in the Hebrew Bible", *Vetus Testamentum* 61 (2011) 406-425.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. J. Barton, "The Day of Yahweh in the Minor Prophets", in C. McCarthy / J.F. Healey (ed.), *Biblical and Near Eastern Essays* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Suppl. 375), London – New York 2004, pp. 68-79; Y. Hoffmann, "The Day of the Lord as a Concept and a Term in the Prophetic Literature", *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93 (1981) 37-50.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. J.J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (The Biblical Resource Series), Eerdmann, Grand Rapids 2016 (third edition), pp. 1-52.

generally has a very specific meaning. Very often, it does not mean distributive justice or retributive justice in an Aristotelian sense. Nor does it mean retaliatory justice. Instead, it refers to God's acting in favour of the poor and deprived people<sup>11</sup>. God reveals Himself being an advocate of the oppressed. Thus, God's justice and His mercy are closely interrelated. In the given sense, they are not mutually exclusive.

Nevertheless, some pivotal questions persist. For the idea of divine punishment is not abandoned in the Bible. Frequently in the Holy Scriptures, one reads that God favours those who are willing to obey His commandments, and punishes those who reject His will. However, are we allowed the interpretation of God's punishment as a consequence of God's all-embracing mercy? Irrespective of Heb 12,6-7 this seems to be an expression of a very old-fashioned pedagogy. And what about the uninvolved – and inasmuch innocent – victims of God's acting in favour of his chosen people?<sup>12</sup> Frequently, God's behaviour is reminiscent of a sort of divine exclusivism at the expense of human beings not belonging to the covenant with Israel<sup>13</sup>.

Even more troubling is the perception that sometimes God by no means favours the righteous and punishes the evildoers. Particularly in the book of Job the problem arises: how can we call a God "just" and "merciful" who afflicts and mistreats the righteous?<sup>14</sup> Does the perception of evil that God effects on righteous people ultimately invalidate the idea that God is reasonable?

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<sup>11</sup> Cfr. B. Janowski, "The One God of the two Testaments. Central Issues in Biblical Theology", *Theology Today* 57 (2000) 297-324; Idem, *Die rettende Gerechtigkeit. Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments*, t. 2, Neukirchner Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Jewish tradition is very sensible for the problem. The Talmud offers a tale referring to the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. When God led his people through the Red Sea and swallowed the Egyptian hordes behind them, the angels around God's throne broke out in raucous celebration until they noticed that God was not joining in but that he was weeping. "Lord," one of the angels said. "Aren't You happy? You saved Your people". The Lord replied, "But did you see how many of My people I had to kill?" (*Babylonian Talmud*, Tract. *Sanhedrin* 39b; cfr. Tract. *Megilla* 10b).

<sup>13</sup> It was German Egyptologist Jan Assmann who about twenty years ago launched a vivid debate on the potential of religions to foster violence introducing the distinction between primary and secondary religions: "The distinction I am concerned with in this book is the distinction between true and false religion that underlies more specific distinctions such as Jews and Gentiles, Christians and pagans, Muslims and unbelievers. [...] Cultural or intellectual distinctions such as these construct a universe that is not only full of meaning, identity, and orientation, but also full of conflict, intolerance, and violence" (*Moses The Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 1997, p. 1. Cfr. Idem, *The Mosaic Distinction or The Price of Monotheism*, transl. by R. Savage, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto 2009).

<sup>14</sup> This observation points to the crucial problem of theodicy. The Literature is vast. Cfr. H. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good people*, Random House, New York 1981; J.F. Kelly, *The Problem of Evil in the Western Tradition. From the Book of Job to Modern Genetics*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville M.N. 2002.

Obviously, I cannot present detailed interpretations of all relevant passages in the Holy Scriptures here. In any case, and reading the Bible as a whole, I would argue that there are good reasons to claim that God does not act arbitrarily. Instead, God shows Himself faithful and loyal to his people and to the covenant. In this context, it should be remembered that the first covenant was not exclusively made with Israel but “between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth” (cfr. Gen 9,13-16).

The book of Exodus, chapter 34,6-7, and its parallels in the Holy Scriptures offer a sort of summary of the biblical view on God’s mercy and justice<sup>15</sup>. According to this verse and its parallels in the Bible, God’s mercy surpasses his anger, revenge, and retribution<sup>16</sup>. Thus, God’s justice in the Bible generally means a sort of advocative or caring effort. In this sense, God’s justice, although not being identical with mercy, is not far from mercy.

Markion, as early as the second century of Christianity, opposed a just and cruel God of the Old Testament with a merciful God of the New Testament. In contrast, theologians like Saint Irénée of Lyon maintained the doctrine of the unity of the history of salvation. The God of Jesus is not at all different from the God of Israel. Moreover, Israel’s God is liable and faithful; he wills the welfare of human beings. Faced with human sins and offences, he reveals Himself as a “compassionate and gracious God” who is more willing to forgive than to punish.

### 3. *Limits of God’s Mercy*

However, one may ask if God’s capability to forgive does encompass every sort of guilt and every sin whatsoever. For there are good reasons to claim that God is free to forgive offences that human beings commit against Him. However, what about those offences and crimes that evildoers do not commit against God but against other human beings?

Frequently the Bible confirms that God acts in favour of innocent victims. In the Psalms, for instance, he is characterized as a sort of advocate of oppressed individuals. Referring to God’s desire to forgive, the question then arises: Is God allowed to forgive offences and crimes that evildoers committed against those innocent victims? Or is God inescapable in need of the victims’ assent?

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<sup>15</sup> “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation”. Transl. *New Revised Standard Version*, Exod 34,6-7 is quoted in Joel 2,13; Jonah 4,2; Ps 86,15; 103,8; 145,8; Neh 9,17. Cfr. similar Exod 33,19; Num 14,18; Neh 9,31s.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. H. Spieckermann, “Barmherzig und gnädig ist der Herr ...”, *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 102 (1990) 1-18.

Jewish tradition is very clear in this respect. In tractate *Mishna Yoma* of the Babylonian Talmud, referring to the liturgy of the Day of Atonement one reads: “The transgressions of man toward God are forgiven him by the Day of Atonement; the transgressions against other people are not forgiven him by the Day of Atonement if he has not first appeased the other person” (*Yoma* 85ab).

In the Gospel of Matthew we find a similar exhortation: “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to him; then come and offer your gift” (Math. 5,23-24).

The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, in an interpretation of the *Mishna*, emphasises the position of the “brother”. For Levinas the face of the other human being reveals the realm of the divine. In spite of God being the other *par excellence*, according to Levinas, when it comes to forgiveness, “my neighbour, my brother, man, infinitely less other than the absolutely other, is in a certain way more other than God: to obtain his forgiveness on the Day of Atonement I must first succeed in appeasing him”<sup>17</sup>.

Levinas clearly rejects the idea that the victim’s assent is irrelevant with respect to God’s will to forgive the evildoers. “No, the offended individual must always be appeased, approached, and consoled individually. God’s forgiveness – or the forgiveness of history – cannot be given if the individual has not been honoured”<sup>18</sup>. The authority of the victim seemingly restricts God’s mercy.

Levinas is fully aware of the possible consequences of his view: “What if he refuses? As soon as two are involved, everything is in danger. The other can refuse forgiveness and leave me forever unpardoned”<sup>19</sup>. Such a refusal, however, has far-reaching consequences. For it obstructs God’s desire to redeem all human beings<sup>20</sup>. However, may we really assume that human beings are capable of obstructing God’s will?

Repentance and conversion are basic acts of human freedom. This applies as well in the situation when human freedom rejects God’s salvific will. According to Saint Augustin God created us without us, but does not want to save us without us<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> E. Levinas, “Toward the Other”, in *Nine Talmudic readings*, A. Aronowicz (ed.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington / Indianapolis 1990, pp. 12-29, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. 1Tim. 2,4.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *Sermo* 169, 11,13: “Qui ergo fecit te sine te, non te iustificat sine te. Ergo fecit nescientem, iustificat volentem” (PL 38,923 / Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina 41Bb, p. 418<sub>374s</sub>). Cfr. *De spiritu et littera* 9,15: “Non itaque iustificati per legem, non iustificati per propriam voluntatem: sed iustificati gratis per gratiam ipsius; non quod sine voluntate nostra fiat, sed voluntas nostra ostenditur infirma per legem, ut sanet gratia voluntatem, et sana voluntas impleat legem non constituta sub lege nec indigens lege” (PL 44,209 / *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 60, p. 168<sub>4,9</sub>; ref. to Rom. 3,24).

The Council of Trent (1545-63) uses the metaphor of a “locking bar” (*obex*) in order to express that human beings are capable of refusing God’s grace<sup>22</sup>. Pinnacled this idea, some Christian theologians today speak of the “risk” God has overtaken when he created the world and human freedom emerged<sup>23</sup>.

Just as it is the case with respect to human freedom<sup>24</sup>, God’s freedom essentially consists in acknowledging human freedom<sup>25</sup>. He did not create human beings to be puppets only. Therefore, I would argue that not even an almighty God will be able to reject human autonomy without contradicting himself. For only an autonomous human person is able to respond gratuitously to God’s unconditioned love<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, the assent of the evildoers and the innocent victims apparently will limit God’s unconditioned mercy.

Nevertheless, Christians firmly hope that at the end of history and in the context of the Last Judgment, nobody will be willing to reject God’s invitation to forgive and to accept forgiveness. It is a pivotal objective of Christian hope that finally all human beings will live in eternal community with their merciful creator<sup>27</sup>.

Admittedly, in an eschatological perspective, one should not require a sort of symmetry between perpetrators and victims. Being the advocate of the poor and deprived people, we may firmly hope that God will be able to console them even when

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. Council of Trento, Decr. *De Sacramentis* [1547], Can. 6 (Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, Definitivum et Declarationum*, no. 1606).

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3: *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco (CA) 1993, p. 328. Cfr. J. Grössl, *Die Freiheit des Menschen als Risiko Gottes. Der Offene Theismus als Konzeption der Vereinbarkeit von göttlicher Allwissenheit und menschlicher Freiheit*, Studien zur systematischen Theologie, Ethik und Philosophie 3, Aschendorff, Münster 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977, p. 120: “They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another”.

<sup>25</sup> According to German philosopher Hermann Krings freedom finds its only adequate objective in freedom (cfr. H. Krings, *System und Freiheit. Gesammelte Aufsätze* [Praktische Philosophie 12], Alber, Freiburg/Br. 1980). Corresponding, God’s absolute freedom requests an objective that is adequate to his essence and nature. This objective is the formally unconditioned freedom of human being (admittedly, formally unconditioned human freedom materialiter – i.e. in time and space – is conditioned in many ways). The theological implications of Krings’ philosophy of freedom are exposed by T. Pröpper, “Freedom – The Philosophical Principle of Theological Hermeneutics”, *Bijdragen* 59 (1998) 20-40.

<sup>26</sup> Love means to acknowledge another person for its own sake – irrespectively of what he or she has ever achieved or performed. Therefore, one might define love being a sort of acting that aims at the autonomy of the beloved person. This applies to God likewise. Cfr. Thomas Aquinas: “[...] ut Deus impleat voluntatem in salvacione alterius” (*Summa theologiae* I/II 114, 6).

<sup>27</sup> From beginning on Christians hold for true that sinners and evildoers will be condemned to eternal punishment. At the present time such an assumption appears to contradict God’s universal will for salvation. By no means has this led to a denial of hell and to teach a sort of “apocastasis panton”. The reason for this is that hope is different from certainty. Moreover, apocastasis is not at all identical with universal reconciliation.

their perpetrators enduringly refuse reconciliation. Even in case of reconciliation, there seemingly will be not equality. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, points to the scenario of the heavenly wedding dinner: “Evildoers, in the end, do not sit at table at the eternal banquet beside their victims without distinction, as though nothing had happened” (Nr. 44).

The Talmudic interpretation of reconciliation challenges God’s capability to forgive instead of the victims. Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his famous novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) even brings this point to the culmination when Ivan, in a conversation with his brother Alyosha, claims that God is *morally forbidden* to replace the victims’ forgiveness<sup>28</sup>. For their suffering confers the innocent victims a moral authority that even God is compelled to acknowledge. Provided God is morally perfect, Ivan argues, he is seemingly obliged to respect the moral authority of every individual, particularly the authority of the innocent victims.

To counter Ivan’s arguing, pious Alyosha, at the end of the moving conversation with his brother, points to the innocent suffering of Jesus. His argument is that because Jesus has suffered so much while being completely innocent, he obtained the moral authority to forgive on behalf of all human beings.

In truth Alyosha is a prime example of the Christian doctrine of soteriology. However, this doctrine covers wide-ranging problems in itself. Particularly it challenges the possibility of vicarious forgiveness. In the realm of philosophy, it was Immanuel Kant who argued that nobody can overtake somebody’s moral identity<sup>29</sup>. Stimulated by Kant, German theologian Karl-Heinz Menke proposed to conceive the Christian idea of “vicarious satisfaction” not being substitution or replacement but enabling<sup>30</sup>. In our context, this means that God by his grace enables the offenders to beg for forgiveness, and enables the victims to accept the request for pardon and forgiveness. Thereby the expression “enabling by grace” points to the encounter of humanity with the everlasting triune love of God as it is revealed in the Holy Scriptures. In any case, Menke’s conception allows one to respect the authority of the victims, the freedom of the evildoers, and God’s sovereignty.

#### 4. *The Necessity of God’s Forgiveness*

In order to clarify the meaning of mercy, modern theology cannot escape dealing with philosophical studies on mercy, pardon, and forgiveness.

<sup>28</sup> F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), Book V, ch. 4.

<sup>29</sup> In his “Religion within the bounds of bare reason” [1793], Kant denied the possibility of vicarious satisfaction. His critique targets a crucial idea of Christian soteriology. Cfr. P.L. Quinn, “Original sin, radical evil, and moral identity”, *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984) 188-202. Idem, “Christian atonement and Kantian justification”, *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986) 440-462.

<sup>30</sup> K.-H. Menke, *Stellvertretung. Schlüsselbegriff christlichen Lebens und theologische Grundkategorie*, Sammlung Horizonte. Neue Folge 29, Johannes-Verlag, Einsiedeln 1991.

With respect to human forgiveness, Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt stressed its necessity: “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever”<sup>31</sup>. According to Arendt, forgiveness sustains the opportunity to act in a manner that is not predetermined by previous acts or circumstances. Forgiveness ensures that innovations in history emerge. It secures the possibility of realizing human freedom. It is an act of deliverance from negatively compelling moral conditions. A somewhat extreme example is the destructive cycle of violence and vengeance. Forgiveness, then, is an essential act and necessary precondition in the realm of morality<sup>32</sup>.

In our context, “forgiveness” means acknowledging the integrity, veracity, reliability of a person who has become guilty in order to give him or her the opportunity to convert and to renew. “God’s mercy” then means his firm commitment to acknowledge human freedom with respect to its capacity to convert and to act henceforth in favour of their fellows and with regard to God. Traditionally this initiative is called “grace”. Thus, grace is the medium of mercy; autonomy is its precondition; love is its fulfilment.

According to Hannah Arendt the act of mercy opens a new future for both parties: the one who forgives, and the one who accepts forgiveness, repents, and converts. Thus, it is human forgiveness as well as God’s mercy that encourages to trust in God’s promise to give humanity “a future and a hope” (cfr. Jer 29,11).

Ultimately, history comprises an eschatological dimension. In eschatological perspective, the infinite number of violently annihilated human beings requires an almighty God: a God who will salvage even “the least ones” (cfr. Matt 25,40.45). According to Jewish and Christian conviction, it is the merciful and almighty God exclusively who is capable of consoling all the innocent victims of history who never had an opportunity to enjoy their life nor to forgive their perpetrators<sup>33</sup>.

### 5. *Violent Dimension of God’s Mercy*

However, forgiveness occurs dialectically. Again, it was Emmanuel Levinas who stressed the point that, unless it is necessary, even compulsory for human beings, forgiveness will not occur without violence. It may be that the victims will consider the renouncement of just retribution an act of injustice. Levinas refers to “the victims of evil, whose flesh feels the formidable price of injustice that has been

<sup>31</sup> H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958, p. 237.

<sup>32</sup> It is essential for human action that it does not depend on natural causes. Immanuel Kant emphasizes the fact that moral acts, although depending on reasoning, come about spontaneously. It is precisely by their formally unconditioned spontaneity that moral acts differ from natural facts.

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. Rev 21,3-4; cfr. Isa 12,1; 49,13; Zech 1,13.17.

pardoned, and the danger of the gracious remission of crime"<sup>34</sup>. On the other hand, Levinas indicates the possibility that at the end of history – the Jewish philosopher relates this moment to the coming of the Messiah – the perpetrators will be sacrificed to the victims. At the most general level, the principle applies: "In the just act there is still a violence that causes suffering. Even when the act is reasonable, when the act is just, it entails violence"<sup>35</sup>. Therefore, neither forgiveness nor retribution can ever be realized void of violence<sup>36</sup>.

Undoubtedly, for many contemporary theologians who are used to stressing that God has revealed himself being love (cfr. 1John 4,16) this might well be a troubling observation. Therefore, the question arises if Christian theology may conceive an act of divine forgiveness that simultaneously is perfect justice and, in addition, avoids any sort of violence.

This question touches the semantic status of theology. Do we apply the term "mercy" with respect to God and humanity in a univocal or in an analogical way? If we conceive the term in an analogical way, we might feasibly claim that God's mercy does not imply any form of violence. However, we run the risk of losing a clear and distinct meaning of "mercy" with regard to God's nature, will, and acting.

I actually doubt if God's merciful acting can ever overcome the violent implications of justice and forgiveness. The reason is that violence is an inherent consequence of the fact that a created universe by definition exists in a finite manner. Inside a finite universe, violence is inescapable – just because of the finite nature of all beings. Levinas interprets Spinoza's "conatus essendi" being the ontological source of inescapable conflicts inside the created order<sup>37</sup>. Therefore, when God relates to finite beings – human beings included –, he obviously cannot avoid violence. This applies even if God's initiative aims at redemption, salvation, and perfection of creation and humanity.

Christians may pose the question if violence will be put to an end in heaven. Supposed that also in heaven the blessed remain finite beings, I presume that some

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<sup>34</sup> E. Levinas, "Messianic Texts", in Idem, *Difficult freedom. Essays on Judaism*, transl. by S. Hand. John Hopkins Jewish Studies, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1990, pp. 59-96, p. 80.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>36</sup> The interrelation between justice, forgiveness, and violence is elaborated particularly by J. Derrida, "On Forgiveness" (2001), in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, transl. by M. Hughes, Routledge, London – New York 2001, pp. 25-60. Derrida as well as Levinas refer to the classical essay of V. Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness* (1967), transl. by A. Kelley, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Spinoza's "conatus essendi" refers to the persistence of the fundamental substance in self-assertion. The substance, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors (conatur) to persevere in its being (*Ethics*, G.H.R. Parkinson (ed. and tr.), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 171). While for Spinoza the "conatus" is an expression of the power of God, Levinas uses the term "conatus essendi" in a more general sense. For him the conatus points to the sheer desire or effort of human beings to exist.

sort of ontological violence will persist<sup>38</sup>. However, one might hope that in heaven the experience of God's infinite love will recompense it entirely. For the perfect communion with the triune God, in which Christians firmly hope, will transcend every sorrowful limitation of human consciousness. At any rate, the intimate link between God's mercy and violence prevents a somewhat "romantic" idea of mercy.

## 6. *God's Mercy and Divine Trinity*

A last "theological problem of mercy": Bearing in mind that philosophical insights for Christians are important with respect to their understanding of the nature of God and his acting, we are now encouraged to ask in what respect we may call God not only *acting* mercifully but also *being* merciful<sup>39</sup>.

The problem already was indicated when we stated that "mercy" is a relational attribute of God. To what does it refer? If we take the Trinitarian God as an integral unity, then to call God merciful presupposes that he is related to a sort of reality that is different from him. In a theological perspective, we call this reality "creation".

If we call God *essentially* merciful, we would have to suppose an objective of His mercy that is different from contingent being. It is obvious that creation fails to fulfil this condition. From a Christian point of view, however, non-contingent relations in God exist – the uncreated and eternal relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

However, one might doubt whether it is appropriate to call the Trinitarian relationships "merciful". For "mercy" necessarily implies a sort of hierarchy. Even if we consider that a certain sort of hierarchy exists in the Trinity, insofar the Father "begets" the Son and both "breathe" the Holy Spirit, it is apparently not appropriate to call this sort of hierarchy merciful. For mercy implies a dimension of defect and accomplishment which one must exclude with reference to the triune God.

In order to propose an alternative I would argue that mercy realizes a certain dimension of mutual love that exists between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Precisely it is a dimension that is directed to a kind of reality that is different from God. Insofar we may call "mercy" the salvific aspect of divine love referring to creation.

This proposal is supported by theological tradition. According to Saint Thomas Aquinas creation of the world is an expression of God's mercy<sup>40</sup>. The Franciscan

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<sup>38</sup> One may compare this sort of ontological violence with the "malum metaphysicum" of Leibniz. Unlike the "malum morale" or even the "malum physicum", this sort of evil can't be avoided if a finite universe exists.

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. F. Gilgenbach, "'Gott ist die Barmherzigkeit'. Analytische Diskussion einer These von Mouhanad Khorchide", *Theologie und Philosophie* 92 (2017), Heft 2 (to be published). The article refers to Mouhanad Khorchide, *Islam is Mercy. Essential Features of a Modern Religion* (eBook Lehmanns).

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 21, art. 4. Resp. "The work of divine justice always presupposes the work of mercy; and is founded thereupon. For nothing is due to creatures [...] So in every work of God, viewed at its primary source, there appears mercy".

tradition refers to God's triune love being the ultimate condition of creation. According to Bonaventure, it is the nature of perfect love that it refrains from self-containment. Inversely, it desires to be shared. Thus, creation shares in the mystery of the generation of the Word from the Father<sup>41</sup>. Blessed Duns Scotus affirmed the triune love in God being the metaphysical precondition of creation<sup>42</sup>. Moreover, the triune love in God is the ultimate reason of the mission of the Son to incarnate and redeem humanity.

On the other hand, one should not call the interior relationships of the Holy Trinity "merciful". Here the term "love" is appropriate. For this term describes a sort of relationship between persons that is void of any hierarchy<sup>43</sup>. Therefore, from a Christian point of view, we may call God being essentially love, but not essentially mercy.

On no account does this mean that God does not act in a merciful way. Quite the opposite is true! Revelation and traditional faith encourage us to recognize that mercy is the salvific aspect of divine love. It directs to every individual human being irrespective of his or her sins and deficiencies<sup>44</sup>. God's mercy aims at enabling human beings assenting to His all-embracing will to save and to heal the wounded (cfr. Ezek 34,26; Hos 6,1). In spite of our shortcomings and poorness, God's mercy attracts human beings efficiently to collaborate in promoting His eternal kingdom.

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<sup>41</sup> Bonaventure frequently uses "emanatio" to capture the notion of creation being born from the womb of the Triune God of love. Cfr. L.J. Bowman, "The Cosmic Exemplarism of Bonaventure", *The Journal of Religion* 55 (1975) 181-198.

<sup>42</sup> Cfr. Duns Scotus, *Reportata Parisiensia*, lib. 3, dist. 7, qu. 4, schol. 2: "God wills most methodically; therefore, He wills thus: first He wills Himself, and everything intrinsic to Himself; more directly, so far as concerns things extrinsic, is the soul of Christ" (ed. Wadding, t. 11. 1, p. 451). Cfr. *Opus Oxoniense* III, dist. 19, qu. 1, n. 6 (ed. Wadding, t. 7, p. 415). Cfr. A. Vos / H. Veldhuis / E. Dekker / N.W. den Bok / A.J. Beck (ed.), *Duns Scotus on Divine Love: Texts and Commentary on Goodness and Freedom, God and Humans*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2003.

<sup>43</sup> Cfr. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, Third Part: Ethical Life 1 The Family, § 158: "Love means in general terms the consciousness of my unity with another, so that I am not in selfish isolation but win my self-consciousness only as the renunciation of my independence and through knowing myself as the unity of myself with another and of the other with me".

<sup>44</sup> Cfr. W. Kasper, *Mercy. The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, Paulist Press, Mahwah (NJ) 2014.