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"The Two Names of Mercy"

Author: Martin Lings

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# The Two Names of Mercy\*

MARTIN LINGS

The Qur'ān, the Revelation on which Islam is based, begins with the words *Bismi Llāhi r-Raḥmāni r-Raḥīm*, words which, all things considered, can perhaps best be translated *In the Name of God, the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful*. The religion of Islam may thus be said to offer itself to mankind with the utterance of the Divine Names, *Allāh, ar-Raḥmān* and *ar-Raḥīm*. Let us consider the two last of these.

Arabic is rich in means of intensifying words, and both these Names are intensified forms of *raḥīm*, merciful, the present participle of the verb *raḥima* which signifies having mercy, being merciful. The simplest words formed from this same consonantal triad are the synonyms *riḥm* and *raḥim*, womb, and by extension blood-kindred; and in a synthetic language like Arabic the impact of words is felt to be increased, consciously or subconsciously, by their relationship with other words formed from the same basic letters. Thus to say 'womb' is to whisper 'mercy', and to say 'mercy' is to whisper 'womb'.

It is in the Name *ar-Raḥmān* that the letters *rā*, *ḥā* and *mīm* are given their most intensified form, to express the Supreme Reality of Mercy as it is in the Divine Essence which transcends, in its Absolute Oneness, all duality; and since all mercy has its roots in the Infinite Goodness of God, and since the word 'merciful' implies a certain duality, that is, a direct object as well as a subject, *ar-Raḥmān* is here translated as the Infinitely Good.

There is a saying (*ḥadīth*) in which God speaks directly on the tongue of the Prophet: 'I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known, and so I created the world'. The Hidden Treasure is the Sovereign Good, *ar-Raḥmān*, and from this 'womb' is born the created universe, which is nothing other than the Treasure's manifesting Itself. That Love (I

\* This essay was contributed to a project, initially proposed by the late Ramchandra Gandhi, to compile an anthology of writings on the sacred words of the world's spiritual traditions. The project never reached completion, but it has been decided to publish some of the individual pieces in *TAR*. Contributions by H. H. the Dalai Lama, by John Michell, and by Hilary Armstrong have already appeared. The editors are grateful to Dr Lings's literary executor for permission to publish this piece here.

loved to be known') is also *ar-Rahmān*; but Its Radiation is expressed by the name *ar-Rahīm*, the All-Merciful, whose Mercy, in one of Its Aspects, is God's outpouring of His Hidden Riches. The very substance of the created universe is Mercy; and it is *ar-Rahīm* who radiates forth that manifestation of Goodness, and who draws it back again to Its Infinite Source. For man on earth *ar-Rahīm* is thus as the Hand of God, held out from Heaven to pull him back to the Supreme Beatitude from which he originated. Religion, which is the grasp of that Hand, is thereby an aspect of *ar-Rahīm*; and this is why *Rahīm* (without the definite article) is one of the Names of the Prophet, whereas *ar-Rahmān* cannot be given any such extension.

As light is beamed forth from the sun, without any loss or detriment to the sun itself, so all good is radiated from the Sovereign Good, *ar-Rahmān*. What then, it may be asked, of evil? Despite appearances, evil is at an incomparably lower degree of reality than good, for all that is good here-below has the relative reality of being radiated from Absolute Reality, whereas evil is merely an excess of distance from God, an excess of radiation which is inevitable after a certain boundary has been passed, that is, after this lower world has been reached. But that distance is an illusion: 'We are far from Him; He is Near to us' said the Sufi Farīd ad-Dīn al-ʿAṭṭār. The distance is forever being bridged by *ar-Rahīm*, and ultimately it is eliminated when He draws all things back to their Source in *ar-Rahmān*. As a saying of the Prophet tells us, the Divine Throne is inscribed with the words: 'My Mercy taketh precedence over My Wrath'; and another saying affirms, as regards the worst sinners at the bottom of Hell for whom no Angel, Prophet or Saint will intercede, that God will finally take them out and throw them into the River of Life at the entrance to the Gates of Paradise, for, as he says, 'I am *Arḥam ar-rāḥimīn*, the Most Merciful of the merciful'. This superlative phrase is often used as a Divine Name, especially in the prayer: 'O Most Merciful of the merciful, have mercy upon us'. And it will be understood, from all that has been said, that this prayer is addressed directly to *ar-Rahīm*, and indirectly to *ar-Rahmān*.