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Mercy of the Womb

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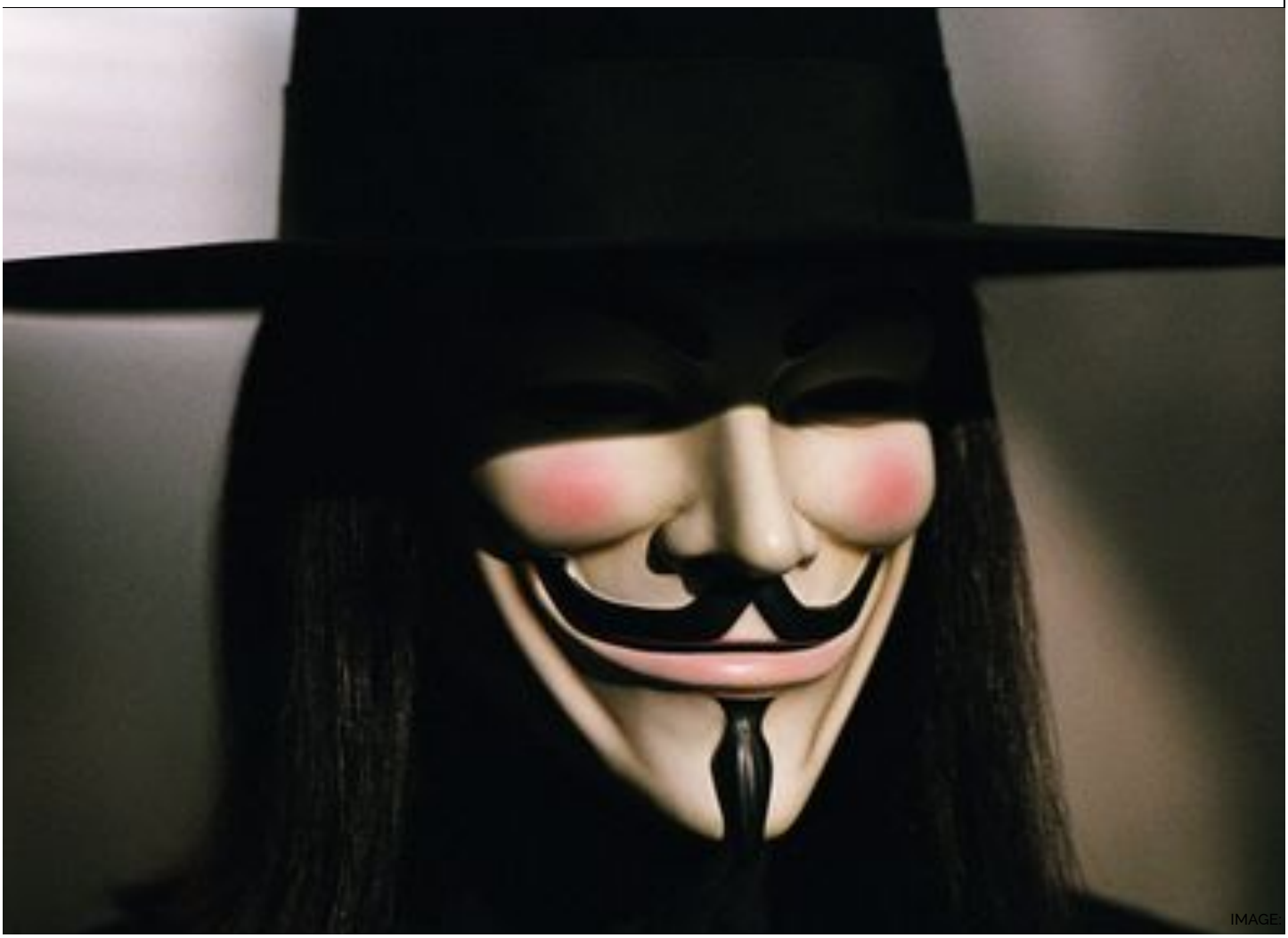

OVER RADIO SURVEILLANCE, TWO GOVERNMENT SECURITY personnel hear a choked plea: "Oh please, have mercy!" In a whisper, a second voice rejoins, "Oh, not tonight Bishop…not tonight!"

These lines are taken from the movie *V for Vendetta* (2005), shortly before the execution of yet another of V's targets, Bishop Lilliman. Bishop Lilliman, in addition to being a lascivious and hypocritical cleric, was, like all the rest of V's victims, damningly complicit in the human medical testing and state sanctioned mass murder of which V was both part

and product. In this tense and thematically important scene, reprisal for Bishop Lilliman's past and present sins came at last in the form of the masked vigilante, V. With the aid of a potent intravenous toxin, V delivered Bishop Lilliman's lethal penalty and subsequently vanished into the shadows from whence he came, a bloodless execution paid in retribution for the bishop's long, debauched life.

Now a movie titled *V for Vendetta* and a scene of such dark and vindictive reprisal must seem like an unlikely place to begin a discussion of Christian mercy; indeed, it is precisely the mercy asked for by Bishop Lilliman that V does not provide. But I believe it is in a situation exactly as this that our cultural presuppositions regarding mercy are most acutely focused. Because we know what V is doing in the Bishop Lilliman scene: he is rejecting the bishop's supplication on the grounds of just recompense. Implicitly, V is telling the bishop that the situation demands something graver than mercy; it demands justice. Instinctively – and especially given the reprehensible conditions of the bishop's capture (he was meeting a girl whom he believed to be a prostitute) – the viewer agrees: mercy, bishop? No, not tonight.

Yet this is not to say our instincts are entirely misplaced, for it seems to the viewer the same as it seems to V – the bishop is waving a "get out of jail free card," hoping that V will spare him reprisal for his misdeeds. To acquiesce would not be justice, and if it is mercy, then what kind of mercy lets a man simply get away with murder (in this case, literally)? The short answer, and the aim of this essay is: not the kind in which Christians believe. But, before we get ahead of ourselves, we should first ask: why do Christians care about mercy in the first place?

The importance of mercy in Church tradition cannot be understated. In the English translation of the Bible, a quick search indicates that the word "mercy" appears approximately 261 times, absent in only 16 of the 66 books. Confirming the significance of the concept, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus explicitly exhorts his followers to "be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful."[1] This scriptural imperative has manifested itself in various ways throughout Church history: Psalm 51, often known simply as "The Miserere," is one of the greatest and most oft repeated psalms, in frequent use by Christians around the world for centuries; indeed, the Psalm was a favorite of St. Francis of Assisi who could be heard repeating it daily. The Psalm begins, as the Latin name suggests, "Have mercy upon me O God, according to thy loving-kindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies, blot out my transgressions."[2] "The Miserere" is a won-

deful prayer of mercy and love to God, the psalmist beseeching the Lord for spiritual healing and compassion. But perhaps there is no better historical example of the Church's mercy tradition than that of the Jesus Prayer, long held as one of the most profound expressions of Christian wisdom and repeated particularly by the Church's Orthodox for over a millennium: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner. A simple but entirely profound prayer for mercy borne of the proverbial tax collector's humble and contrite plea.[3]

Yet if antiquated tradition were not enough for the 21st century reader, we may now turn to the 2013 interview with Pope Francis reviewed earlier in these pages ("A Papal Perspective on Community," Fall 2013). In it, Pope Francis avers: "the ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all…[priests have a tendency to be] either too much of a rigorist or too lax. Neither is merciful, because neither of them really takes responsibility for the person […]. In pastoral ministry, we must accompany people, and we must heal their wounds."[4] Mercy is central to Pope Francis' theology as it was for St. Francis of Assisi before him and as it has been for the Church throughout history. For Francis, mercy is the location of human responsibility, spiritual healing, and growth, all undoubtedly essential aspects of a Christian's spiritual and social life.

And now we are perhaps prepared to address the first question of this essay: what is mercy and, by extension, why is it so overwhelmingly important to Christians? As we observed earlier, justice at times seems a more appropriate response to this sinful world than mercy and, given its robust biblical foundation in over 500 passages of the King James Bible, we must ask what exactly *is* it that the Church is defending when she puts such a strong emphasis on mercy even at, some might argue, the expense of justice?[5] For this analysis, we will turn to roots, and specifically that of the word translated in the Bible as "mercy."

There are many words in the Greek and Hebrew Bible that are translated as mercy when the original text is converted into English. Some of these words are alternately translated as kindness, loving-kindness, goodness, favor, compassion, and pity. Already from this array of translations, some of the depth of the concept is brought out; mercy, it seems, is a virtue with strong ties all the way back to the greatest virtue of all, love.6 But there is something else that comes to mind when we think of mercy, and it is the aspect alluded to in our discussion of V: the feeling of being "let off the hook." This aspect of mercy lends itself to a power dynamic of high and low, as in that of the knowing father conde-

scending to a misbehaving son. A cursory glance at the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of "mercy" confirms all of our intuitions thus far, defining the term as "compassionate forbearance," "kindness," "divine favor," or the "discretionary power of the judge to pardon or mitigate punishment." But what I would like to argue is that this is not the mercy of the Old Testament. When Mary sings to Elizabeth in "The Magnificat," "and [God's] mercy is on them who fear him from generation unto generation," she is not referring to a mercy which speaks down but a mercy which lifts up; one that "regards the lowly estate of his handmaiden" and causes that from "henceforth all generations will call [her] blessed."[7] What, then, is this mercy? For this we must return to the Hebrew Bible, where the Magnificat and all its theology of mercy, favor and faithfulness find their beginnings.[8]

Of all the words translated as "mercy" in the English Bible, I wish to focus first on the Hebrew word *racham* (רחמים). This same word appears in Arabic, a related Semitic language, as *raHma* (رحمة). As a testimony to *racham*'s spiritual significance to all the Semitic faiths, we need only look to the Qur'an where the name *arraHeem* (الرحيم) precedes every chapter (*sura*) and functions above all other names as the most glorified ninety-ninth name of God, The Merciful.[9] Next in our Semitic root-finding exercise, we will draw up on an apparently unrelated word: womb. In Hebrew, the word for womb is *rechem* (רחם) and in Arabic it is *raHim* (رحم). Strange that these two apparently disparate terms look and sound quite similar – this similarity is not coincidence. Both Hebrew and Arabic are rooted languages, which means that words in these languages consist of certain key letters that impart meaning, these letters being collectively referred to as the word's "root." For example, in Arabic, words typically contain a three-consonant root. These three consonants confer to the word, regardless of what other consonants and vowels may intervene, the basic idea for which the word is a lingual representation. Roughly the same is true of Hebrew and so the lexicographical similarity of "womb" and "mercy" in the Jewish script suggests a continuity in meaning. Thus, to ask for the meaning of mercy – the greatest attribute of God and one of the most cherished Christian virtues – demands the surprising question: what does it mean to be in or of the mother's womb?

Firstly, to be in the womb is to be *within*. The child in the mother's womb is entirely contained within the womb of his or her mother. From the spirit to the flesh, the infant is subsumed by the one in which he or she coinheres. Likewise, the mother is the world of the child; the child knows no existence outside of the mother and the mother cannot, even if she wanted to, voluntarily and independently extricate the child from her womb.

The womb is the ground of the child's being and from it life flows. The mother cannot help but sustain the child and the child cannot help but remain in the womb. She, the infant, is subsumed entirely and the mother subsumes her.

But to be in the womb means more than to be merely surrounded – it means to be utterly dependent, and in dependence, to be in a constant state of transformation. What the mother eats, the child eats; what the mother drinks, the child drinks. In the womb, the substance of the mother is formed and transformed into the substance of the child. It is in the nature of the child to be absolutely dependent on the mother; at no moment, so long as the child remains in the womb, can the child be considered independent of his or her mother. Without the mother, the child would die – it would be reabsorbed by or expelled from the womb. Yet it is not only the child who is transformed: as the extensive debate over family planning has made eminently clear, the mother too has something at stake. The mother is made vulnerable and is forced to sacrifice parts of herself. Just as the child is formed by her mother but not so defined, the mother is formed and transformed by her child while all the while retaining her motherhood. The mother loves her child not because she loves her father nor because she knows her future, but she loves her child – the child whom she does not know and who cannot know her – because the child is her own, bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh.[10]

Thus, to say God is merciful means far more than to say God is compassionate or God is pitying or God is kind. To say God is merciful is to say God loves us like a mother loves a child in her womb, or, rather, like the relationship of a child to the womb. The philosopher Ivan Illich describes this concept of mercy – *racham* – as "the womb in the state of love."[11] But it is important that, unlike the mercy of the judge for the defendant, *racham* is two-way. *Racham* is a love that gives itself unconditionally without asking for anything in return. It is gratuitous, undeserved, and committed.

It gives excessively because this love cannot help but give itself entirely – it is the nature of being a mother and the essence of being a child; a Creative Love whose love overflows into the act of creation and not the other way around. It is perhaps for this reason that the prophet Hosea wrote, speaking for God, "For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings."[12] Justice would require sacrifice, and burnt offerings, though a form of worship and praise, are also a means for reparation – a repayment for debts and an offering for gifts received. What God desires is something greater than justice and is itself a form of worship: *racham*. And we are fortunate that

God is, as it is written in the Qur'an, the All-Compassionate, the All-Merciful (*arraHmaan arraHeem*) because it is only out of unconditional love that we humans – in all our sin – could be loved by God, and only out of gratuitous love that God would take "upon Him[self] the form of a servant" and humble Himself even unto death on the cross – to become as in Genesis bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh.[13] Our fortune is no better put than in the book of Lamentations when the prophet writes, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning, great is thy faithfulness."[14]

For Christians, the implications of this mercy stretch out across modern political and social discourse. What does it mean to have this mercy that is the womb in the state of love? For the government? For the family? But perhaps we should return to the circumstance with which we began – V and Bishop Lilliman. There we were presented with V's demands of justice and Christianity's mysterious and apparently inappropriate claims of mercy. To love Bishop Lilliman despite his disturbing depravity seems nearly impossible and to respond to his plea for mercy seems a misapprehension of a man whose moral authority had been decimated by iniquity years ago. But is it not the same for V? To ask a just man consumed by revenge to accept into his womb a wicked man consumed by fear is no less than outlandish, isn't it? Bishop Lilliman wanted to be let off the hook, but neither V nor Christianity would allow it. Justice may have required death, but for a Christian, something more demanding was asked of both victim and vigilante – to be not let off the hook, but pruned by it until what was left was nothing like what was there before. A consummation and a completion in which the product could not be the same as its beginning, the womb in the state of love: mercy.

Endnotes

1. Lk. 6:36 (KJV)
2. Ps. 51:1 (KJV)
3. cf. Lk. 18:13
4. Antonio Spadero, "A Big Heart Open to God," *America Magazine*, September 30th, 2013. Accessed January 6th, 2014 at http://www.americamagazine.org/popeinterview.
5. This count is actually a catalogue of two words, "justice" and "righteous." This approximation significantly underestimates the actual prevalence of this concept considering other words such as "upright," "fair," "equal," and "just"

may also contribute in some instances to the entire conceptual word count.
6. cf. I Cor. 13:13
7. Lk. 1:48–50 (KVJ)
8. The Magnificat appears to be based on the Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10) and other Old Testament passages.
9. Indeed, William Chittick and Sachiko Murata write in The Vision of Islam (1994) on page 76: "The Prophet reported that God has written upon his Throne, 'My mercy takes precedence over My wrath.'"cf. Gn. 2:23
10. Ivan Illich, Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley, ed. David Cayley (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Inc., 2005), 184.
11. Hs. 6:6 (KJV)
12. Phil. 2:7–8 (KJV)
13. Lam. 3:22–23 (KJV)

Erin is from Wausau, Wisconsin and is majoring in Biology and Religion. He is currently studying abroad in Morocco, but will return in the fall for more good times at Swat.

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