

Mercy to All the Worlds (Qur'an 21:107): A Psychological, Philosophical, and Theological Commentary

Abstract:

Qur'an 21:107 – “We have not sent you (O Muhammad) but as a mercy to all the worlds” – encapsulates the Islamic emphasis on **compassion** as a guiding principle. This verse portrays Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as *Rahmatan lil-'Alamin*, a universal mercy, setting a theological foundation for compassionate living. This commentary explores the verse from **theological, philosophical, and psychological** perspectives, highlighting how it nurtures empathy, altruism, and **tolerance**. Theologically, mercy emerges as a core divine attribute and prophetic mission, reinforced by numerous Qur'anic verses and Prophetic sayings. Philosophically, the call to mercy aligns with the **Golden Rule** and universal ethics of reciprocity, fostering pluralism and respect for all humanity. Psychologically, practicing compassion – as exemplified by the Prophet – yields individual and social benefits, creating cohesive communities bound by empathy. Taken together, these dimensions of 21:107 inspire Muslims to embody mercy in all dealings, promoting **interpersonal kindness, interfaith harmony, and pluralistic coexistence**. This paper concludes that understanding and living by the merciful ethos of 21:107 can bridge divides and cultivate a more tolerant, compassionate world.

Introduction

The Prophet's Mosque in Medina (Al-Masjid an-Nabawī), originally built by Prophet Muhammad, became the nucleus of a compassionate community. From this sacred space, the message of mercy and unity was disseminated to diverse peoples. The Qur'anic verse 21:107 declares that God sent Prophet Muhammad “**only as a mercy for all the worlds.**” In Arabic, the phrase is *rahmatan lil-'ālamīn*, indicating a divinely ordained **mercy** embracing all peoples and realms of existence. This powerful verse is a cornerstone of Islamic thought, understood by Muslims to mean that the Prophet's life and teachings were meant to exemplify **benevolence, compassion, and care** for everyone – Muslim and non-Muslim, human and even animal. It sets a tone of universal goodwill that permeates Islamic ethics. The Prophet's **character of mercy** is repeatedly emphasized in scripture: “*It is out of Allah's mercy that you (O Prophet) have been lenient with them. Had you been harsh or hard-hearted, they would have certainly dispersed*”¹. In other words, gentleness and empathy were the glue of the early Muslim community.

This commentary will examine Qur'an 21:107 through three lenses – **theological, philosophical, and psychological** – to understand how this verse leads Muslims toward compassionate living, as well as **pluralism and interfaith tolerance**. We will integrate relevant Qur'anic verses and **Hadith** (Prophet Muhammad's sayings) that echo the same themes of mercy. In doing so, we will see that compassion in Islam is not merely an optional virtue but a fundamental paradigm that shapes Muslims' interactions within their own community and with others. Ultimately, the message “*mercy to all the worlds*” serves as a guiding light for Muslims to be kind, just, and tolerant, embodying the very mercy they hope to receive from God.

Theological Reflections: Mercy as the Core of the Prophet's Mission

In Islamic theology, **mercy (rahmah)** is at the heart of God's attributes and the mission of His Prophet. Qur'an 21:107 addresses the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ directly, affirming that his very purpose is to be a *manifestation of God's mercy* to humanity. Classical and modern Quranic commentators note that this emphasis on mercy is not isolated – the root *R-H-M* (mercy, compassion) appears **over 300 times** in the Qur'an, underscoring that mercy is "the dominant theme of God's message" ². In fact, nearly every chapter of the Qur'an begins with the phrase *"In the name of Allah, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful,"* indicating that divine revelation is immersed in mercy from the outset. The Qur'an even says of God, **"My mercy encompasses all things"** (7:156) and **"He has decreed upon Himself mercy"** (6:12), highlighting mercy as a guiding rule of God's dealing with creation.

Within this theological context, Prophet Muhammad is described as **"a mercy to all the worlds"** ³, meaning his role is a divine gift of compassion to *everyone* and *everything*. Notably, the verse does not limit this mercy to Muslims alone; "all the worlds" (*al-'ālamīn*) implies all peoples, nations, and even creatures. This universal scope has profound implications. It means that from a theological perspective, Muslims believe their Prophet's teachings were meant to benefit **all of humanity**, bringing justice, ethics, and compassion that anyone can appreciate. Islamic tradition relates that the Prophet himself said, *"I am but a bestowed mercy"* (reported in Hadith), underlining that his identity is intertwined with **rahmah**. Furthermore, he taught that God's mercy to His servants is conditional on their showing mercy to others: *"He who does not show mercy will not be shown mercy (by God)"* ³. This famous hadith (also narrated in Bukhari and Muslim) urges human beings to **mirror the divine attribute** of mercy in their own lives. In another narration, the Prophet stated succinctly: *"Allah has no mercy on him who has no mercy for others"* ⁴. Theologically, therefore, extending compassion and kindness is not just an ethical choice but a **spiritual imperative** in Islam – it is a way to earn God's pleasure and mercy.

The Qur'an and Hadith also illustrate God's compassion through vivid examples that believers are asked to emulate. The Prophet's merciful conduct was so encompassing that it even extended to those who opposed him. The Qur'an reminds Muhammad of a specific instance of divine mercy shaping his behavior: *"It is by God's mercy that you were gentle with them. If you had been harsh and hard-hearted, they would have fled from around you"* ¹. This verse (3:159) revealed after a battle underscores that the Prophet's success in guiding people lay in his **gentleness and forgiveness**, even under trying circumstances. God instructs him immediately after to *"pardon them and seek forgiveness for them"* ¹ – a directive to respond with compassion rather than anger. Such verses cement the theological understanding that **leniency, forgiveness, and empathy are divinely mandated qualities** of leadership. It also affirms that the Prophet's compassion was not due to weakness, but a *mercy emanating from God's own mercy*.

In sum, from a theological viewpoint, Qur'an 21:107 establishes **mercy as the ethos of the Islamic message**. Allah's Messenger is sent as a mercy, the Qur'an is suffused with mercy, and Allah loves those who are merciful. This foundation compels Muslims to see acts of compassion – feeding the hungry, comforting the sick, forgiving faults – as *sacred acts of worship*. Worship is not limited to ritual; it is deeply connected with how one treats creation. A hadith qudsī (a saying of God reported by the Prophet) dramatically illustrates this on the Day of Judgment: God will say, *"O son of Adam, I was hungry and you did not feed Me... Did you not know that My servant was hungry and you did not feed him? Had you fed him, you would have found (the reward) with Me..."* ⁵, equating serving those in need with serving God. Theologically, therefore, compassionate living is a **reflection of divine mercy** and a requirement of faith – a concept that naturally extends to how Muslims should regard all human beings in a pluralistic world.

Philosophical Perspectives: Universal Compassion and Ethical Humanism

Beyond its theological significance, “*mercy to all the worlds*” carries profound **philosophical and ethical implications**. It presents compassion as a universal value that transcends religious boundaries – an idea that resonates with philosophies of **humanism and virtue ethics** around the world. The verse invites Muslims to contemplate the worth of every person and creature, fostering an ethical outlook where **empathy and benevolence** guide our interactions. In essence, Qur’an 21:107 is a Qur’anic expression of the **Golden Rule** in practice: treat others with the kindness and concern you would wish for yourself. The Prophet Muhammad articulated this moral principle explicitly: “*None of you truly believes until he desires for his brother what he desires for himself*” (Hadith in Bukhari and Muslim) ⁶. Although the hadith says “brother,” commentators explain it means one’s fellow humans in general, as other narrations clarify: “*Do unto all people as you would wish to have done unto you*” ⁷. This **ethic of reciprocity** is a cornerstone not only in Islamic teachings but in many philosophical and religious systems globally.

Islamic scholarship has long recognized that such teachings can be understood from multiple perspectives. One modern Muslim author notes: “*This Golden Rule can be explained from the perspective of psychology, philosophy, sociology and religion. Psychologically, it involves a person empathizing with others. Philosophically, it involves a person perceiving their neighbor as also an ‘I’ or ‘self’... Sociologically, this principle is applicable between individuals and groups.*” ⁸. Philosophically, seeing the “Other” as a self breaks the barriers of ego and tribe, encouraging a form of **moral universalism**. If the Prophet is a mercy to *all*, Muslims are to practice mercy toward *all*. This naturally leads to **pluralism**: an acknowledgement of the common humanity and dignity shared by everyone, regardless of creed or background. In fact, the Qur’an explicitly addresses humanity at large, appealing to our shared origin and values: “*O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you. God is All-Knowing, All-Aware.*” ⁹. This verse (49:13) provides a philosophical basis for human equality and diversity: differences of ethnicity or culture are meant for **mutual recognition and learning**, not supremacy. True honor, it asserts, comes from moral excellence (*taqwā*, God-consciousness), which is accessible to anyone. Thus, in a philosophical sense, Islam posits a **universal moral community** bound by pursuit of virtue and mutual respect.

The concept of *rahmatan lil-‘ālamīn* (mercy to all worlds) also aligns with what we might call an Islamic **humanitarian philosophy**. It implies that to be righteous, one must care for the well-being of others beyond one’s in-group. We see this in numerous sayings of the Prophet that praise altruism and altruistic characters. For example, he said, “*The best of people are those who are most beneficial to people*” (reported in various Hadith compilations). Such statements mirror a humanist philosophy: measuring goodness by one’s contribution to others’ welfare. The **inclusiveness** of the Prophet’s mercy – extending to strangers, enemies, and even animals – anticipates modern ethical discussions on human rights and animal welfare. Long before the Geneva Conventions or animal rights movements, the Prophet emphasized mercy in all domains: “*The compassionate are shown mercy by the All-Merciful. Be merciful to those on earth, and the One above the heavens will have mercy upon you,*” he taught (hadith in Tirmidhi). This creates a **philosophical link** between earthly ethics and ultimate accountability. Even an animal was not outside the scope of moral concern. In one account, the Prophet chastised a man who had branded his camel’s face, saying: “*Have you not heard that I have cursed those who brand animals on the face?*” and in another he spoke of a man forgiven by God for the simple act of giving water to a thirsty dog ¹⁰ ¹¹. When asked if kindness to animals was

rewarded, the Prophet replied, *“There is a reward in doing good to every living being.”*¹². Such teachings elevate compassion to a **universal ethic** – every life matters and kindness is never wasted.

In summary, the philosophical message inherent in Qur’an 21:107 is that **compassion is the highest moral virtue**, one that is universally applicable. It bridges the gap between self and other, fostering a worldview in which *all creatures are under God’s care* and thus worthy of our care. This outlook naturally combats tribalism, racism, or religious chauvinism, paving the way for a pluralistic ethos. The “mercy to all the worlds” verse, coupled with the Golden Rule and similar teachings, encourages Muslims to engage with the world through a lens of **empathy and ethical humanism**. It suggests that true wisdom (*ḥikmah*) and philosophy in Islam lead a person to appreciate the *interconnectedness of all people* – a concept that modern philosophy and human rights discourse also echo. In a world rife with conflict, such an orientation is profoundly needed: it is an Islamic answer to the question of how we ought to live together despite our differences – the answer being, in a word, **mercifully**.

Psychological Insights: Compassionate Living and Community Well-Being

From a psychological perspective, the ethos of mercy in Qur’an 21:107 can transform both individual character and social dynamics. Being taught to embody mercy and compassion has deep implications for **mental well-being, emotional intelligence, and community harmony**. Modern psychology highlights the benefits of empathy and altruism – such as reduced stress, higher happiness, and stronger social bonds – and Islamic teachings anticipated these benefits by strongly encouraging compassionate behavior. The Prophet Muhammad’s life offers many examples of **practical empathy** that contemporary readers can recognize as models of emotional intelligence. He was attuned to the feelings of those around him: the Qur’an notes how he would even shorten congregational prayers upon hearing a baby cry, out of concern for the infant’s mother’s distress¹³. This gentle responsiveness illustrates an understanding of others’ emotional states, something psychologists today would call **empathic concern**. Indeed, the Prophet said, *“If you hear a baby cry while praying, shorten the prayer for the sake of the mother”*¹³ – a remarkable accommodation of human emotion in a religious ritual. Such sensitivity likely made people feel valued and emotionally secure in his presence.

The **collective psychology** of the Muslim community (ummah) is also addressed directly by the Prophet’s teachings on compassion. He famously said, *“The believers, in their mutual love, kindness, and compassion, are like a single body: if one limb suffers, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever.”*¹⁴. This metaphor powerfully portrays the ideal of **shared empathy**: a community where people feel each other’s pain and respond to alleviate it. Psychologically, this kind of social cohesion – feeling “as one body” – promotes resilience and unity. When individuals know that others care for them and will come to their aid in hardship, it reduces anxiety and fosters trust. The hadith also implicitly encourages each member to be proactive in helping others, as an injury to one is an injury to all. Modern terms like *social support networks* and *collective resilience* capture a similar idea: communities bound by compassion can better withstand stress and crises. We see echoes of this prophetic psychology in how Muslim communities are encouraged to respond to disasters or personal tragedies – with communal efforts, charity, and emotional support, reflecting the principle that **no one suffers alone**.

Furthermore, being merciful and forgiving has personal psychological benefits. Holding onto anger and vengeance is often described by psychologists as harmful to one’s mental health, whereas forgiveness and

compassion can be freeing. The Qur'an frequently urges forgiveness of others' faults as an act of kindness (*ihsān*) and promises God's reward for it (e.g. Qur'an 24:22). The Prophet's exemplary forgiveness – of enemies who had persecuted him, for instance – set a norm that helps individuals overcome the toxic cycle of resentment. When the verse 21:107 frames the Prophet as *mercy to all*, it implicitly encourages believers to **adopt a merciful attitude** in daily life: to be patient, gentle, and understanding rather than judgmental or cruel. Psychologically, this can lead to a more positive outlook and better relationships. A person who internalizes *rahmah* (mercy) develops traits of empathy, generosity, and patience – qualities that modern positive psychology links to life satisfaction.

Another psychological insight is how compassion can be **contagious** and shape group behavior. The merciful conduct of Prophet Muhammad often elicited kindness in return, even from those who were initially unfriendly. For example, there are accounts of a tribal Bedouin who once pulled harshly at the Prophet's cloak, demanding charity; instead of anger, the Prophet smiled and gave him something, which moved the man to soften his tone. The Prophet's companions, seeing such examples, learned to emulate his calm and merciful responses. In psychological terms, he was modeling high **emotional intelligence** – managing his own emotions and positively influencing others'. The Qur'an (3:159) actually alludes to this leadership skill: had the Prophet been hot-tempered, people would have "abandoned" him, but his mercy kept them united ¹. Thus, a compassionate approach proved far more effective in maintaining loyalty and harmony than fear or aggression would have. This holds a lesson in conflict resolution and leadership even today: **kindness and empathy often achieve what force cannot** – namely, sincere cooperation and heartfelt loyalty.

In conclusion, the psychological dimension of "*mercy to all the worlds*" reveals that compassionate living is not only spiritually rewarding but also vital for healthy minds and communities. By encouraging empathy and altruism, Islam's merciful teachings contribute to what we now recognize as emotional well-being and social cohesion. A Muslim who strives to be merciful is likely to cultivate **better self-awareness, healthier relationships, and a more supportive community** around them. The Prophet's Sunnah (way of life) shows that warmth and kindness create an atmosphere where faith and humanity flourish together. In a very real sense, kindness in Islam is therapeutic: it heals hearts, builds trust, and defuses hatred – outcomes that any psychologist would commend.

Mercy Beyond Borders: Pluralism and Interfaith Tolerance

Crucially, Qur'an 21:107's concept of mercy is **inclusive**, extending beyond the Muslim community to encompass all people and even all creation. This universality lays the groundwork for **pluralism and interfaith tolerance** in Islam. If the Prophet was sent as a mercy to *all*, then Muslims, as his followers, are meant to be a mercy to their neighbors – *regardless of religion*. History records many instances of Prophet Muhammad's compassion toward non-Muslims. He established the **Charter of Madinah** – a social contract in which Muslim, Jewish, and pagan tribes in Medina formed a mutual alliance – securing freedom of religion and safety for all citizens. The ethos behind this was mercy and justice. In one striking incident, a Jewish funeral procession passed by and the Prophet stood up out of respect. When someone remarked that the deceased was not a Muslim, the Prophet replied, "*Was he not a human soul?*" ¹⁵. This profound response highlights the sanctity of *every* human life in his eyes. Another narration of the same incident quotes the Prophet saying, "*Whenever you see a funeral, you should stand up (out of respect)*" – demonstrating an ethic of respect across faith lines. Such examples from the Prophet's life illustrate that **dignity and compassion are due to all human beings**, not just one's co-religionists.

The Qur'an explicitly encourages fair and kind dealings with people of other faiths, especially those who live in peace with Muslims. It states: *"Allah does not forbid you from dealing kindly and fairly with those who have not fought you for your religion or driven you out of your homes. Indeed, Allah loves those who are just."* ¹⁶ . This verse (60:8) makes clear that non-Muslims who pose no hostility should be treated with **birr (kindness, benevolence)** and **qist (justice)** – terms that denote positive goodness, not merely toleration. In fact, *birr* is the same word used for one's duty of kindness to parents, implying genuine goodwill. Thus, the Qur'an commands Muslims to extend the hand of friendship and fairness to those of other faiths as a religious duty. Moreover, Islam forbids forced conversion or coercion in matters of faith, as famously stated: *"There shall be no compulsion in religion: truth has become distinct from error."* ¹⁷ . This verse (2:256) enshrines **freedom of belief** as a Quranic principle, centuries before modern human rights charters. It acknowledges that faith by its nature must be a free choice, thereby encouraging Muslims to coexist with plurality of beliefs without pressure or persecution. The combination of these teachings – enjoining kindness and forbidding compulsion – provides a strong scriptural basis for **religious tolerance** and harmonious pluralism in Islamic thought.

Importantly, Muslim scholars throughout history have cited Qur'an 21:107 as a reminder that any interpretation of Islam that leads to cruelty or injustice contradicts the very mission of the Prophet. Contemporary commentators call it *"the best pluralistic message"* that Muslims must never lose sight of ¹⁸ . It asserts that *mercy* is the ultimate purpose, which should never be made secondary to other aims. When misunderstandings arise that paint Islam as harsh or violent, scholars point back to 21:107 to **"catapult our understanding"** back to mercy and compassion ¹⁸ . This verse, read in context with the Quranic verses on justice and kindness, challenges Muslims to approach interfaith relations with magnanimity. For instance, the Qur'an advises debating with People of the Book (Jews and Christians) in *"the most courteous manner"* (Qur'an 29:46) and urges Muslims to say, *"Our God and your God is one, and to Him we submit"* (42:15), emphasizing common ground. Even where Muslims disagree with others, the Quranic ethos is to "argue with them in a way that is best" (16:125) – that is, with reason and good manners, never with abuse. The Prophet's own interactions exemplified this Quranic courtesy: he visited his sick Jewish neighbor, welcomed Christian delegations to discuss theology in his mosque, and upheld treaties with polytheist tribes. Such conduct underlines that **Islamic mercy manifests as respect for diversity and commitment to justice for all**.

It is true that Islamic history, like the history of all societies, has had episodes of conflict. But the guiding ideals have always been those of **compassion and justice**, and these ideals often prevailed in how Islamic civilizations treated religious minorities. Many non-Muslim communities (Christians, Jews, Hindus, etc.) lived and flourished under Muslim rule for centuries, their places of worship protected by law. The Prophet, as *rahmatan lil-'ālamīn*, set the precedent by granting protection covenants to monks, Christians, and others. One such covenant to the monks of St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai explicitly guarantees the safety of their persons, churches, and freedom of worship. This spirit can be traced back directly to the Qur'anic call of mercy and the Prophetic example. In essence, *mercy beyond borders* means the Muslim's compassion is not confined by religious or ethnic identity – it flows outward to **embrace everyone in the circle of care**.

Thus, Qur'an 21:107 inspires a vision of **pluralism rooted in compassion**. It teaches Muslims to see non-Muslims not as adversaries by default, but as fellow recipients of God's mercy and potential partners in good. In a globalized world with increasing interfaith contact, this principle is ever more relevant. It encourages Muslims to engage in **interfaith dialogue, cooperation, and solidarity** on common humanitarian goals, all while respecting each other's differences. The verse calls Muslims to be ambassadors of mercy, so that others, in encountering a Muslim, experience through them a glimmer of

the mercy that the Prophet was sent with. Indeed, when a Muslim shows kindness to a neighbor of another faith, or stands up for the rights of a persecuted minority (Muslim or not), or simply smiles and greets a stranger, these small acts answer the Quranic injunction to *spread mercy on earth*. This is how pluralism and mercy intertwine in Islam: by recognizing the divine spark in every soul and responding to it with **rahmah**, Muslims fulfill their duty as followers of the Prophet of Mercy.

Epilogue

In Qur'an 21:107, "*We have not sent you but as a mercy to all the worlds,*" we discover a timeless call to compassionate living – a call that echoes in the heart of every Muslim conscience. This single verse serves as a **lodestar**, guiding Muslims toward love, kindness, and understanding in all aspects of life. Psychologically, it nurtures empathy and altruism; philosophically, it affirms the unity of humankind; theologically, it reflects the infinite mercy of the Divine. In a world often divided by prejudice and pain, the Prophet's example shines as a beacon of hope – urging us to replace hatred with sympathy and indifference with service. As one hadith reminds us: "*The believers are like one body*" ¹⁴, and by extension, all of humanity is like one family. Our moral success will be measured not by conquest or conversion, but by **the amount of healing and hope we bring into others' lives**. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, *Rahmatan lil-Alamin*, showed that strength lies in forgiveness, that greatness lies in humility, and that hearts are won not by force but by **gentle character**.

In closing, the legacy of 21:107 is a challenge and an inspiration to Muslims today: Will we carry forth that mercy to *our* world – in our homes, our neighborhoods, and our global community? The answer must be a resounding yes. We honor the Prophet of Mercy not merely by praising him, but by **emulating him** – by feeding the hungry, tending the sick, comforting the oppressed, and embracing our neighbors of every creed with open arms. The Qur'an assures us that acts of goodness are never lost: "*Is the reward for goodness anything but goodness?*" (55:60). And the Prophet promised that compassion breeds divine compassion: "*Allah will not show mercy to him who does not show mercy to others*" ¹⁹. To live by mercy is to live by the very spirit of Islam, a spirit that can transform our pluralistic societies into communities of mutual respect and kindness. In the end, the message of Qur'an 21:107 is as relevant as ever – a reminder that through **compassionate living**, we manifest the true beauty of Islam and fulfill our role as conduits of God's mercy in a world that needs it more than ever.

Sources:

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3. *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim* – Prophetic hadiths on compassion (Golden Rule, mercy to others, community as one body) ⁸ ¹⁴ ¹⁹
4. *The Glorious Quran and Science* – "Forty Hadiths... about Compassionate Living," compiled by Zia Shah (examples of the Prophet's compassion) ²⁰ ²¹
5. Quran 3:159 – God's mercy made the Prophet gentle ¹
6. Quran 49:13 – Human equality and purpose of diversity ⁹
7. Quran 60:8 – Kindness and justice toward peaceful others ¹⁶
8. Quran 2:256 – No compulsion in religion ¹⁷
9. *Sahih Bukhari* 1312 – Prophet Muhammad stands for a Jewish funeral out of respect for a human soul ¹⁵
10. *The Arabic Roots of Al-Rahman and Al-Raheem* – Analysis of mercy as a dominant Quranic theme ²

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