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The Virgin Mary: Bridging Muslims and Catholics

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This article reflects on Maryam of Islam, and what she may say to the Virgin Mary of Christianity through our sacred scriptures.¹ Beginning with the Qur'an, the focus is on key verses that are relevant to her birth and early life (Q 3:33-37a), the annunciation of 'Isa (Jesus) (Q 19: 17b-21; 3:45-51), and the birth of 'Isa (Q 19:22-26). Likewise, there is a brief consideration of the Qur'an regarding Maryam's submission to God. The scripture traditions of the Qur'an and Bible together underline convergence as well as divergence in their distinctive journeys of faith and how they see the Virgin as a model and inspiration. This brief comparative study opens us up to the profound mystery of God that transcends the boundaries of both of our faiths. Parts of this essay reflect the author's theological reflections on the Virgin Mary.

Introduction

"O mankind, indeed, we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted." Qur'an 49:13²

Friends and guests filed into our hall at Our Lady of Fatima Shrine in Holliston, Massachusetts one evening with curiosity and anticipation. Catholics and others who come to the shrine as a spiritual pilgrimage were invited to join friends from our local mosque, the Islamic Center of Framingham, many of them leaders, women, and youth. Interestingly, *Fatima* also was the name of the daughter of the Prophet Mohammad, and town of Fatima in Portugal, where the Virgin Mary allegedly appeared, was named after a Muslim princess. Catholics and Muslims gathered to reflect together on the place of the Virgin Mary in Islam and what that may mean to their faith relationship with each other through shared devotion to this Hebrew woman who has impacted so many. The evening was filled with conversations in which many found surprising links to each other. Mary, in this sense, was our bridge to one another in some seminal way.

In the numerous interfaith dialogues I participate in, I find it an extraordinary experience to learn from the faith of others. In significant ways, I have developed my own faith as a Catholic interfaith leader, in part through this astonishing multifaith journey that reveals the expansive mystery of God both within and beyond my own faith tradition. The central reason for this is my friendships with Muslims, and the bridge we are to each other, while we acknowledge our differences, which we hold as a holy mystery. The distinctiveness of Mary as mother of Jesus in the Qur'an resonates deeply with Catholics, both in eastern and western traditions, along with the differences we also embrace. As Jaroslav Pelikan wrote: "One of the most profound and most persistent roles of the Virgin Mary in history has been her function as a bridge builder to other traditions, other cultures, and other religions" (Pelikan, 1996, p. 67; see also Armajani, 2017).

In this essay I will discuss how both Muslims and Christians understand the Virgin Mary through their sacred scriptures, the Qur'an, and the Bible. The inspiration and model of faith both Muslims and Christians find in this woman is not only an opportunity to find common ground in the fundamentals of their faiths, but an opportunity to connect with each other in many other ways. In

the essay I will highlight the birth and early life of the Mary as depicted in the Muslim and Christian scriptures, as well as the annunciation and the birth of Jesus. I will touch upon some theological themes that show both similarities and differences between the Christian and Muslim understanding of the Virgin Mary.

Mary's Birth and Early Life

In the Qur'an we find this description of Mary's birth and early life:

BEHOLD, God raised Adam, and Noah, and the House of Abraham, and the House of 'Imran above all mankind, in one line of descent. And God was all-hearing, all-knowing when a woman of [the House of] 'Imran prayed: "O my Sustainer! Behold, unto Thee do I vow [the child] that is in, my womb, to be devoted to Thy service. Accept it, then, from me: verily, Thou alone art all-hearing, all-knowing!" But when she had given birth to the child, she said: "O my Sustainer! Behold, I have given birth to a female" - the while God had been fully aware of what she would give birth to, and [fully aware] that no male child [she might have hoped for] could ever have been like this female" and I have named her Mary. And, verily, I seek Thy protection for her and her offspring against Satan, the accursed." And thereupon her Sustainer accepted the girl-child with goodly acceptance, and caused her to grow up in goodly growth, and placed her in the care of Zachariah (Q 19:33-37a).

In Catholic doctrine, which is only implicit in the New Testament, Mary is conceived without original sin and remains completely free of sin throughout her life. This doctrine is the result of a series of beliefs, doctrinal developments, study of early church writers, and the interpretation of scriptural passages. According to the tradition from apocryphal texts (the proto gospel of James) Mary's parents are named Joachim and Anna (Hannah). They are elderly and shamed by barrenness; hence, Mary's conception is understood as miraculous. After she is six months old, Anna dedicates her to the Temple. At three, she is given to the Temple, where she receives food miraculously from an angel's hand (Buby, 1997).

In both the Muslim and Catholic traditions, the miraculous birth of those especially chosen by God runs through Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. In the unfurling of revelation, God makes careful preparations across generations as he brings into history significant people who are exemplars of holiness and piety, such as prophets and messengers, and in this case, through the miraculous birth of Mary. In the Christian tradition narratives of Mary, even though they characterize her life and role in a special way, are really about her role in the coming of Jesus. Ultimately, the focus is on Jesus through the lens of Mary. In the Qur'an, Mary too is given significant status in her role as the mother of Jesus, the last of the prophets before Muhammad, and the definitive expression of God's power through humanity (Heardon, 2004). One Qur'anic theme that underlines the "chosenness" of Mary is striking:

AND LO! The angels said: "O Mary! Behold, God has elected thee and made thee pure, and raised thee above all the women of the world. O Mary! Remain thou truly devout unto thy Sustainer, and prostrate thyself in worship, and bow down with those who bow down [before Him]" (Q 3:42).

The Annunciation of Jesus/‘Isa in the Qur’an and the New Testament

The Qur’an provides the following description of the annunciation of Jesus:

Lo! She withdrew from her family to an eastern place and kept herself in seclusion from them, whereupon We sent unto her Our angel of revelation, who appeared to her in the shape of a well-made human being. She exclaimed: “Verily, ‘I seek refuge from thee with the Most Gracious! [Approach me not] if thou art conscious of Him!’” [The angel] answered: “I am but a messenger of thy Sustainer, [who says,] ‘I shall bestow upon thee the gift of a son endowed with purity.’” “How can I have a son when no man has ever touched me? – for, never have I been a loose woman!” [The angel] answered: “Thus it is; [but] thy Sustainer says, ‘This is easy for Me; and [thou shalt have a son,] so that We might make him a symbol unto mankind and an act of grace from Us. (Q 19:17b-21)

I summarize here the related New Testament passages, in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke: Mary, living in Nazareth in Galilee, is greeted by the angel Gabriel, who speaks the perplexing words, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you,” and tells her she will bear a son whom she is to name Jesus. He will be called the Son of the Highest and will reign from the throne of David over the house of Jacob forever. Mary asks how this could be, since she is a virgin, and the angel tells her that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and that her child will be the Son of God. Then the angel informs her that Elizabeth miraculously conceived John the Baptist and assures Mary that nothing is impossible with God; Mary gives her assent in faith, that is, her fiat. (Paraphrased: Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:26-38)

In the Qur’an, the annunciation shows the Virgin Mary as the obedient and sinless believer who is sent a divine message by God, so that others might also hear and believe and thereby attain salvation. The focus is on the sovereign power of God and one’s responsibility to submit (Heardon, 2004). In the gospel perspective of the annunciation, there is a difference in emphasis from the one in the Qur’an, even though the annunciation stories are quite similar. The submission of Mary initiates her role in the establishment of a new community that continues the salvific work of Christ. The events of Mary are tied to Jesus, escalating forward toward the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the icon of the Church. The gospels pointedly show continuity from the Judaic roots of ancient Christians through the House of David. The submission of Mary then is in her devoutness and steadfastness in prayer that leads to good deeds. In Islam, Ibn Kathir cites *Mujahid* when he says that Mary stood in prayer until her ankles became swollen. Al-‘Uza’I observes that Mary was tranquil in her Mihrab kneeling, prostrating, and standing until perspiration poured from her feet. She is *al-qunut*, humble, pious obedient to God, and surrenders to God’s will (Schleifer, 1997).

In the Gospel of Luke, Mary travels to meet her cousin Elizabeth. It is there that Elizabeth confirms the wonders of God that lie within her womb. That revelation prompts Mary to pray a prayer of praise traditionally called the *Magnificat*, which is based on the Song of Hannah, as well as other sources in the Hebrew scriptures that emphasize the compassion of God for the poorest (see Luke 1:67-80; The Song of Hannah is 1 Samuel 2:1-10). In this sense, submission to God implies shaping the world around the justice and peace of God. In the Qur’an, the witness of Maryam to prayer also leads to good works: “True piety does not consist in turning your faces towards the east or the west - but truly pious is he who believes in God, and the Last Day; and the angels, and

revelation, and the prophets; and spends his substance - however much he himself may cherish it - upon his near of kin, and the orphans, and the needy..." (Q 2:177).

The birth of Jesus in the Qur'an and the New Testament

There are some important differences in the descriptions of the birth of Jesus in the Qur'an and the New Testament, though lessons to be learned from them are similar. The Qur'an provides the following description of the birth of Jesus:

And it was a thing decreed [by God]:and in time she conceived him, and then she withdrew with him to a far-off place. And [when] the throes of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree, she exclaimed: "Oh, would that I had died ere this, and had become a thing forgotten, utterly forgotten!" Thereupon [a voice] called out to her from beneath that [palm-tree]: "Grieve not! Thy Sustainer has provided a rivulet [running] beneath thee; and shake the trunk of the palm tree towards thee: it will drop fresh, ripe dates upon thee. Eat, then, and drink, and let thine eye be gladdened! And if thou shouldst see any human being, convey this unto him: 'Behold, abstinence from speech have I vowed unto the Most Gracious; hence, I may not speak today to any mortal'" (Q 19:22-26).

I paraphrase here the description of the birth of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke: Joseph takes Mary for his wife without having marital relations. Responding to the Emperor's call for a census, Mary, and Joseph journey to Bethlehem (the city of David) where she gives birth to Jesus and lays him in a manger for want of an inn. An angel announces the birth of the Messiah to nearby shepherds and is joined by the heavenly host, praising God. The shepherds visit the holy family and make the birth known to all who will hear them. (see Matthew 1:24-25; Luke 2:1-20)

The Muslim scholar Aliah Schleifer asserts that the labor pains of Mary drove her to a palm tree, somewhere near Jerusalem, where she gave birth to Jesus. Other Muslim scholars say this birth took place in Nazareth (al-Nasira), rather than Bethlehem as Christians and some Muslim scholars contend (Schleifer, 1997) That said, the extraordinary difficulty in the birth is underscored in the Muslim text. The Gospel of Luke does not speak of the pain of the birth, but her difficulty in finding shelter for the birth. In the Qur'an, despite the difficulties, God was there to protect Maryam with food and drink; in Luke, God provided shelter from the night.

In the Qur'an it is stated: "And in time she returned to her people, carrying the child with her. They said: "O Mary! Thou hast indeed done an amazing thing" (Q 19:27). Compare that to the Christian perspective immediately following the birth of Jesus: An angel announces the birth of the Messiah to nearby shepherds and is joined by the heavenly host, praising God. The shepherds visit the holy family and make the birth known to all who will hear them. This momentous event for both Muslims and Christians ushers in a new era of God's providence and power, God's divine desire to reveal his will and remind humanity of its obligation to God. This is an occasion of joy and hope for the future.

The Virgin Mary's Submission to God in the Qur'an and the New Testament.

We find important similarities in the Qur'an and the New Testament regarding the Virgin Mary's submission to God. According to the Qur'an:

And [We have propounded yet another parable of God-consciousness in the story of] Mary, the daughter of Imran, who guarded her chastity, whereupon We breathed of Our spirit into

that [which was in her womb], and who accepted the truth of her Sustainer's words - and [thus,] of His revelations - and was one of the truly devout (Q 66:12).

According to the Gospel of Luke:

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord (Luke 1:39-45).

In this portion of the Qur'an, "Our spirit into that which was in her womb, and who accepted the truth of her Sustainer's words..." shows Mary as an example for Muslim believers because of her chastity, obedience, and faith. Believers contemplate the living image of a human embodiment of the traits which they strive to achieve. They pray to be endowed with the faith of the Virgin and to be recipients of similar blessings (Schleifer, 1997).

Maura Hearden writes:

The ideal degree of dedication to worship is represented by Maryam's virginity—an extension of her purity—in that to be a virgin, male or female, is to give oneself entirely to God, living Truth. Maryam's life is one of seclusion. She lives in her Temple (*mihrab*), visited only by Zechariah, abstaining from marriage and all otherworldly distractions that she might be free to concentrate her entire being on God. The importance of seclusion is reiterated in the fact that she retires to a 'far off place' to give birth to her child (Q 19:22). Mary personifies freedom from worldly distractions required for proper worship (Hearden, 2004, p. 33).

In the Catholic tradition, both east and west, the ascetic quality of Maryam is not as pronounced as it is in Islam. However, Mary's witness has a variant different from the Muslim perspective. Like faithful Muslims, Catholics are required to surrender one's entire being to the all-powerful God. Mary is raised from a servant *passively* accepting God's will to an active "partner" (not meaning equal), who freely operates with God for the sake of humanity. Mary agreed to be the mother of Christ, consenting through her obedience and fidelity to God. Mary's cooperation is greater than that of any other human being, and thus we are all called to emulate her cooperation. What God wants to do *for* us he only does *with* us. We are to emulate Mary's fiat, making ourselves "wholly God's because he is wholly ours" and in doing so, we become inextricably linked with each other because of this union with God (Heardon, 2004, p. 35).

Some Conclusions

This brief survey in the Qur'an is one way to understand the inimitable role of Mary in Islam and the meaning of her life for faithful Muslims. The comparison to Christian sources about Mary shows some fascinating convergence, not on doctrinal grounds necessarily, but on Mary's meaning in contemporary spirituality for all those who find her inspirational. Mary is the unique bearer of the "Word" of God for both Muslims and Christians.³ For Orthodox Christians she is the *Theotokos* through whom God enters human history.⁴

For Muslims, Mary and her son are signs of the manifestation of God's might and wisdom. She is also a model of discipleship and her life affords us the opportunity to understand more deeply the mystery of God revealed to us constantly. Mary is exalted by both Muslims and Christians because of the great things that God has done for her. The mutual relationship Catholics and Muslims have with Mary can be seen in their common beliefs about her: the virgin birth and preservation from sin (though interpreted differently), and their praise of Mary as a symbol of faith. A bridge between Muslims and Catholics lies in how Mary leads them to *divine mystery*. "How can these things be" Mary asks in both texts. Her assent to that mystery is in the conception of Jesus (Holness, 2016).

In both Muslim and Catholic views of Mary, although their interpretations of God's gifts differ, their mutual understanding of each other on the virgin birth and her sinlessness, raise their hearts to the same God who shows mercy and compassion. Her total submission to God's will is a model for everyone to not only be deeply aware of a Merciful God, but how that mercy is revealed through their shared effort to shape their communities and cultures around the values of their faiths.

That witness of God's mercy and compassion is needed now more than ever in the brokenness we invariably feel in these troubled times we live in. Political and cultural forces have skewed our moral vision to one of fear, a renewed overt racism and anti-Semitism, and a proclivity to local community and global isolationism. The phenomena of Islamophobia is inflicted to some degree by people, who have in some part, distorted the relevancy and vibrancy of the Christian faith.

It is in these times that bridges need building. Was it not God, who found that when people forgot what their responsibility to the divine will was, brought forth new prophets at the right time? In Islam, Mary ushered a new era of prophecy in the person of Jesus. For Christians, we have been formed into the "body of Christ" in order to create cultures of justice and compassion, modeled first by Mary's submission, and the vision of a renewed world in her *Magnificat*.

Muslims and Christians for the most part are ordinary people who hold their faith in very imperfect ways. Bridgebuilding is about our curiosity and our trust in each other, how we help each other understand our obligations to each other, as with all peoples, in part because of the witness of Mary and the life of faith she shows us all. We are intimately tied to each other in profound ways in God's mysterious love:

O ye who believe! stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety: and fear Allah. For Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do (Q 5:8).

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty (Luke 1:53-55, excerpt from the Magnificat or Song of Mary).

Endnotes

¹ Maryam refers to the Virgin Mary in Arabic. Throughout the essay the name Virgin Mary or Mary will be used as it is a name many Muslims address Mary.

² The Qur'anic verses used in this article are from: Asad, Muhammad. (2003). *The Message of the Qur'an*. The Book Foundation.

³ It must be noted that, while "Word" for Christians refers to God become human in Jesus Christ, "Word" for Muslims refers to a human personification of God's message to God's people. Jesus is not divine, but a great prophet sent to call humankind to the true worship of the one God.

⁴ The title of Mary as "Theotokos" is where Muslims and Christians parted in our understanding of Mary, and even more importantly, our understanding of Jesus. Ancient Christianity struggled to understand the nature of Jesus as both human and divine. The sanctioning of Mary's title in the eastern tradition occurred at the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE. The title first appeared in what may be the oldest prayer to Mary in the third century, *Sub Tuum Praesidium*. All About Mary: Meaning of "Theotokos". (International Marian Research Institute). Retrieved June 15, 2019, from <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/t/theotokos-meaning-of.php>

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