

# Mary: A Bridge Between Islam and Catholicism

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*H*ence, let not anyone who does not believe in its coming and follows [but] his own desires divert thee from [belief in] it, lest thou perish! "Now, what is this in thy right hand, O Moses?" He answered: "It is my staff; I lean on it; and with it I beat down leaves for my sheep; and [many] other uses have I for it." Said He: "Throw it down, O Moses!" So, he threw it - and lo! it was a snake, moving rapidly. Said He: "Take hold of it, and fear not: We shall restore it to its former state. "Now place thy hand within thy armpit: it will come forth [shining] white, without blemish, as another sign [of Our grace], so that We might make thee aware of some of Our greatest wonders. (Qur'an, Maryam 16-21)<sup>1</sup>

I have had numerous opportunities in interfaith dialogue to learn from the faith of others. In significant ways, I have evolved in my own faith as a Catholic Christian leader, in part through this extraordinary interfaith journey that opens the expansive mystery of God beyond my own faith journey and tradition. One important reason for this is my friendships with Muslims and a study of the Qur'an. The distinctiveness of Maryam in the Qur'an resonates deeply with Catholics, both eastern and western traditions. Jaroslav Pelikan states: "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."<sup>2</sup>

I therefore would like to reflect on the Maryam of Islam, and what it may say to the Mary of Christianity through our sacred scriptures. Beginning with the Qur'an, I will focus specifically on key verses that are pertinent to her *birth and early life* (Al-Imram 33-37a), *The annunciation of 'Isa* (Maryam 17b-21; Al-Imran 45-51), and *the birth of 'Isa* (Maryam 22-26). I also would like to briefly reflect on the Qur'an regarding her *submission to God*. I will also compare Christian sources of Mary in the scriptures and in our post-biblical Church tradition. Scripture and Church tradition are the two important sources of revelation for Catholic Christians. Both faith traditions together underline convergence as well as divergence in our distinctive journeys of faith. In doing so, their comparison may open one to the profound mystery of God that transcends all things.

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Asad (translated and explained), *The Message of the Qur'an*. (London: The Book Foundation, 2003). Excerpts from this version of the Qur'an will be used in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University, 1996), p. 67.

## Maryam'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. (Al-Imran 33-37a)*

*Mary is conceived without original sin and remains completely free of sin throughout her life. This dogma of the Catholic faith is only implicit in Scripture. Its definition is the result of a series of beliefs, doctrinal developments, patristic study, and the interpretation of scriptural passages. Tradition from apocryphal texts (Proto-gospel of James) names Mary's parents Joachim and Anna (Hannah). They are elderly and shamed by barrenness; hence, Mary's conception is 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.<sup>3</sup>*

In both the Qur'anic and Christian traditions, the miraculous birth of those especially chosen by God run through both Islam and Christianity. What is striking is the careful preparation God makes across generations as he brings into history significant people who are exemplars of holiness and piety, such as prophets and messengers in the continuous unfurling of revelation, and in this case, through the miraculous birth of Mary. In the Christian tradition narratives of Mary, even though they distinguish her life and role in a special way, are more poignantly about her role in the coming of Jesus. Ultimately, the focus is on Jesus through the lens of Mary. Maryam too is given significant status in her role as the mother of 'Isa, the last of the prophets before Muhammad, and the marvelous expression of God's power through humanity. One Qur'anic theme that underlines the "chosenness" of Maryam strikes me: *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]."* (Al-Imran 42).

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<sup>3</sup> Bertrand Buby, *Mary of Galilee: The Marian Heritage of the Early Church*, vol. 3 (New York: Alba House, Society of St. Paul, 1997), pp. 37-42.

## The Annunciation of 'Isa

*Lo! She withdrew from her family to an eastern place and kept herself in seclusion from them,<sup>13</sup> 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. (Maryam 17b-21)*

*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 Maryam as the obedient and sinless believer who is sent a divine message by God, so that others might also hear and believe, and attain salvation. The focus is on the sovereign power of God and one's responsibility to submit.<sup>4</sup> In the gospel perspective of the annunciation, there is a difference in emphasis, 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. Pains are shown in the gospels to show continuity from their Judaic roots of ancient Christians through the House of David. The submission of Mary then is in her devout-ness and steadfastness in prayer that leads to good deeds. *Ibn Kathir* cites *Mujahid* when he says that Mary stood in prayer until her ankles became swollen. Al- 'Uza'I observes that she was tranquil in her Mihrab kneeling, prostrating, and standing until perspiration poured from her feet. She is *al-qunut*, humble, pious obedience to God, and surrenders to His will.<sup>5</sup>

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*. It is based on the Song of

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<sup>4</sup> Maura Hearnden, *Ambassador for the Word: Mary as a Bridge for Dialogue between Catholicism and Islam*. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 41:1, Winter 2004, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Aliah Schleifer, *Mary the Blessed Virgin of Islam*. (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1997) 56.

Hannah, as well as other *Tanakh* (Old Testament) sources that emphasize the compassion of God for the poorest.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, submission to God implies shaping the world around the justice and peace of God. 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... (Al Baqara 177)*

## Birth of 'Isa

*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.'" (Maryam 22-26)*

*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. (Paraphrased: Matthew 1:24-25; Luke 2:1-20)*

The late Aliah Schleifer asserts that the labor pains of Mary drove her to a palm tree, somewhere near Jerusalem, where she gave birth to Jesus. Some scholars say this birth took place in Nazareth (al-Nasira), rather than Bethlehem as Christians and some Muslim scholars contend.<sup>7</sup> That said, the extraordinary difficulty in the birth is underscored in the Muslim and Christian text. The gospel of Luke however does not speak of the pain of the birth, but her difficulty in finding shelter for the birth. At the same time, despite the difficulties, God was there to protect Maryam with food and drink, and in Luke, shelter from the night.

In the 27<sup>th</sup> verse of Maryam 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."* Compare that to the Christian perspective immediately following the birth of 'Isa: *An angel announces the birth of the Messiah to nearby shepherds and is joined by the*

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:67-80. The Song of Hannah is 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

<sup>7</sup> Schleifer, pp. 33-34.

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 to remind humanity of its obligation to God. This is an occasion of joy and hope for the future.

## Maryam's Submission to God

*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. (Al Tahrīm 12)*

*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 Maryam 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 Maryam and to be recipients of similar blessings.<sup>8</sup> Maura Hearden states: "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 mihrāb, 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 (19:22). Maryam personifies the freedom from worldly distractions required for proper worship."<sup>9</sup>

In the Catholic tradition, the ascetic quality of Maryam is not as pronounced as it is in Islam. However, Mary's witness has a different variant than 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.

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<sup>8</sup> Schleifer, pp. 96-97.

<sup>9</sup> Hearden, 33.

Mary agreed to be the mother of Christ, cooperating 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 linked with each other because of this union with God.

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## Conclusion

This brief survey in the Qur'an is one way to understand the inimitable role of Maryam in Islam and the meaning of her life for faithful Muslims. The comparison to Christian sources of Mary shows some fascinating convergence, not on doctrinal grounds necessarily, but on Maryam's meaning in contemporary spirituality for all those who find her inspirational. Maryam is the unique bearer of the "Word" of God for both Muslims and Christians.<sup>11</sup> For Orthodox Christians she is the "Theotokos" through whom God enters into human history. For Muslims, she 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. Our mutual relationship with Mary can be seen in our common beliefs about her: the virgin birth and preservation from sin (though interpreted differently), and our praise of Mary as a symbol of faith. A bridge between us lies here.<sup>12</sup>

In both views of Maryam, although our interpretation of God's gifts different, our mutual understanding of each other on the virgin birth and her sinlessness, raise our hearts to God who shows mercy and compassion. Her total submission to God's will is a model for us all to not only be deeply aware of a Merciful God, but how that mercy is revealed through our shared effort to shape our communities and cultures around the values of our 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. The political and cultural forces that have skewed our moral vision to one of fear of religious and cultural minorities, a renewed overt racism and anti-Semitism, and a proclivity to global isolationism. The phenomena of Islamophobia, inflicted by people who have in some part, distorted the relevancy and vibrancy of the Christian faith into a conservative, neo-nationalist spirituality. 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

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> Hearden, pp. 19-20.

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*.

In my view, Muslims and Christians have obligations to each other, as with all peoples, in part because of the witness of Maryam and the life of faith she shows us all. In turn, we both also have obligations to each other, and all of creation. We are inextricably tied to each other in profound ways in God’s mysterious love. I conclude with some additional verses that reverberate in both Muslim and Christian hearts.

*“O mankind, we have created you from a male and a female, and made you into races and tribes, so that you may identify one another. Surely the noblest of you, in Allah’s sight, is the one who is most pious of you. Surely Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.” (49:13)*

*“O you who believe, be upholders of justice – witnesses for Allah, even though against (the interest of) your selves or the parents and kinsmen.” (4:135)*

*“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.” (5:8)*