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Mary in Islam

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Mary in Islam

Abstract and Keywords

In the Qur'an, Mary has a unique place. As the only woman mentioned by name, the mother of Jesus, and a pious servant of God, she has inspired Muslim men and women since the beginning of Islam. In this chapter, there will first be a short overview of Mary's place in the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet, that is, Hadith. Following this, the importance of Mary in Islamic theology and spirituality generally as well as Mary's historical place within Islam will be outlined. The views of important Muslim mystics, theologians, and various other scholars will be examined. There will be a discussion of Mary's importance for Christian-Muslim dialogue. Of particular note, the chapter will look at how recent and contemporary scholars have understood Mary's role and how Mary can be an important figure for inter-faith cooperation.

Keywords: Mary, Jesus Qur'an, Hadith, theology, spirituality, inter-faith, Christian-Muslim dialogue

Mary in the Qur'an

FOR many Muslims, Mary is considered the most important woman to have ever lived. The Qur'an, the Holy Book of Islam, gives paramount importance to her and her story is one of the central narratives in it. Mary is the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'an. The Qur'an describes her as chosen and purified and elevated above all women of the worlds (Q 3:42). Her own life, her relationship with Jesus, and that with her mother are key elements in the Islamic understanding of what it means to be virtuous and her story has been used as an example for Muslims, both men and women, since the beginning of Islam. The story of Mary can be found in various places in the Qur'an, but most prominently in chapters 3 and 19, the latter of which is named 'Maryam', the Arabic name for Mary.

The Qur'anic story of Mary can be divided roughly into three parts: her family and mother up to her birth, her early life, and her adulthood which includes the story of her giving birth to Jesus. The first part consists of three stages. The first stage is a Divine choice of

her family. Mary is known to come from the family of 'Imran. 'Al 'Imran', the second longest chapter in the Qur'an, is named after the family. Alongside Adam, Noah, and the family of Abraham, the family of Imran, is chosen by God according to the Qur'an (Q 3:33). According to the fourteenth-century Qur'an commentator Ibn Kathir, Imran here is referring to Mary's father. 'The family of Imran is chosen and what is meant by this Imran is the father of Mary, the mother of Jesus' (Ibn Kathir 1999: 2.33). The second stage is about the wife of Imran, who is known in the Islamic tradition as Hannah. In the Qur'an she prays to God: 'My Lord, surely I have vowed unto You that which is in my belly and consecrated it [to You]. Accept it from me. Surely You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing' (Q 3:35). This is generally regarded as pointing to the birth of Mary. Interestingly, there are no stories of midwives which occur in some infancy gospels such as the Gospel of James. Apparently, she was expecting a boy, but she gave birth to a girl and she was astonished. The third stage is the naming of the child. Mary is (p. 94) born, but who will name her? What should be the name of this child? Again the Qur'an gives an important role to her mother. Her mother is the one who gave Mary her name. She is not just giving Mary her name though; she is concerned about her future and her offspring. Mary's devout mother asks God to protect Mary and her offspring from Satan. On the surface, it seems that as Mary's mother was expecting a boy and she gave birth to a girl, her prayer was not accepted; however, as the Qur'an states, her prayer was accepted in the most beautiful way. God accepted her earlier prayer when Mary was born and her later prayer after Mary was born. Thus, both she and her offspring were protected from the touch of Satan. The Qur'anic verse says: 'when she gave birth to her she said, "My Lord, I have given birth to her, a female". And God knows better about what she had given birth to. "The male is not as the female. And I have named her Mary, and I surely seek refuge in You for her and her offspring, to protect them from Satan, the cursed one"' (Q 3:36).

The story continues into the early life of Mary. The Qur'an describes Zachariah's care for her. Here, the Qur'an does not mention how it became Zachariah's job to take care of her, although in a later verse it recounts a story suggesting that potential caretakers were casting their pens—similar to the story found in the Gospel of James which describes these lots as pens. In any event, it is clear that it was the pious servant of God, Zachariah, who became her guardian. Whenever Zachariah entered the sanctuary where she was, he would find food with her. With great surprise he said: 'O Mary! Where did this (food) come from? She answered: It is from God. Surely God provides sustenance without measure to those He wants to bless' (Q 3:37). With this verse, the Qur'an responds to a possible question about Mary's food. She is alone and she needs food but how will this food come to her? The verse is clear that although Zachariah will perfectly take care of her and bring food to her, she was blessed by God by receiving her food miraculously from God. Also, the verse shows Mary's great trust in God. She believes in God and she believes that if God wants to bless someone God will provide food and sustenance without measure.

At this point in the story, Mary is grown up and angels visit her and inform her of her status. 'And remember when angels said: "O Mary! Surely God has chosen you and purified you, and has preferred you over the women of the worlds"' (Q 3:42). Now she is chosen;

she is no longer a regular woman. She is elevated above the women of all nations. She is also purified by God. This purification is known as the quality of the pious and in the Qur'anic language God loves those who are purified (Q 2:222). In other words, Mary is purified and God loves her because she is purified. As indicated in this verse, being chosen does not mean to be exempt from worshipping God. Even the most chosen person in Islam, the Prophet of Islam, one of whose names is Mustafa, that is 'the chosen one', would still worship God. In the next verse, God distinctly addresses Mary and says: 'O Mary! Obey to your Lord. Prostrate and bow down with those who bow down before God' (i.e. worship God with the worshippers) (Q 3:43).

The Qur'anic narrative suggests that Mary encountered angels several times. It seems that the above visit is about her status. There was also an apparently separate visit to give Mary good news about her pregnancy. The Qur'an says: 'Remember when angels said to Mary: "O Mary! Surely God gives you good news with a word from Him whose name is (p. 95) the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in this world and in the Hereafter. And he is among those who are close to God"' (Q 3:45). The angels are giving Mary further information about the child who will be born. According to the Qur'an, the birth of this child itself is a miracle since Mary was not touched by any human being and he will be the recipient of more miracles after he is born. One of his miracles will be his speech from his cradle. In fact, this episode in her life can be considered a miracle of both Jesus and Mary. When this new born child speaks miraculously, he speaks on his mother's cue. It is as if Mary says to her new born baby, 'speak and declare my innocence'. Jesus speaks with a powerful statement. It is evident that Mary is both frustrated and confident because angels told her what would happen to her. The Qur'an says: 'He will speak to people in his cradle and when he is grown up, and he is among the wholesome' (Q 3:46). It is interesting to compare this to the Gospel of Luke which suggests that Jesus showed a miracle when he was in the womb of his mother: 'When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit' (Luke 1:41). When the angel gave her good news that she would become pregnant, she found it incredible and a marvel because she was chaste and not touched by any human being. Mary said: "My Lord, how can I have a child while no man has touched me?" God said, "Even so, God creates whatever He wants. When He decrees a thing, He just says to it: Be! and it becomes"' (Q 3:47).

This then leads up to the third episode of Mary's life as narrated by the Qur'an, her giving birth to Jesus. In chapter 3, there are no negative reactions to Mary's pregnancy. It is in chapters 4 and 19 where we find most of this portion of the story of Mary. In chapter 4 we first see that her people slandered her by accusing her of a great calumny (4:156). The Qur'an also says here that Mary received a Word from God, that is, Jesus. But unlike the Holy Scriptures that prophets received which were 'revealed', the Word received by Mary was planted or more literally, 'God threw [it] to Mary' (Q 4:171). Thus it is clear that this Word is not like the scriptures directly, but it is also clear that Mary did receive this Word. This is important because it makes a distinction between Jesus and the scriptures.

There is no doubt that the most elaborate version of the story of Mary as an adult is mentioned in Surah Maryam, chapter 19 of the Qur'an. The full story is fascinating, and tellingly shows Mary's frustrations because something unusual occurs to her. According to the Qur'anic story, she isolated herself from her people to the eastern part of the chamber. Here God sent her 'His spirit', that is, the angel Gabriel in a full human form (Q 19:16-17). In the story, spirit is used in the singular not in the plural. In this situation, Mary takes refuge in God from anyone who would have bad intentions (Q 19:18). In other words, when Gabriel appears to Mary in the form of a human being, Mary says to him, 'If you are pious, you will not harm me. I take refuge in God from such a person that could harm me'. In his commentary on this verse, one important commentator Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210) says: 'Sending angel Gabriel to her was an honour for Mary' (al-Razi 1420H: 1.522). In this episode, we see a remarkable conversation between Mary and the angel Gabriel. Mary is afraid but Gabriel calms her, by giving her Divine good news that the purpose of his presence is to give her a boy that is pure (*zaky*) (Q 19:19).

(p. 96) It is here that the Qur'an begins to describe the birth of Jesus. While the Qur'an does not give details related to her pregnancy, her relationship with Zachariah, his wife or her family, some of these can be found in other sources, such as the Infancy Gospel of James and it seems as if the Qur'an assumes that the audience will know the details from these sources. One element the Qur'an does describe is Mary's frustration. After conceiving and retiring, Mary says 'I wish I had died before this and that I would be totally forgotten' (Q 19:23). Her frustration is understandable. This is a woman of chastity and honour and such a woman with such an important place in her society is now facing a social dilemma. She is unable to explain her situation, a situation which had never before happened. This is why the Qur'an speaks of her grievance and as commentators have pointed out, Mary is perplexed. She is searching for Divine guidance, yet God never left her alone.

While describing Mary's pregnancy, the Qur'an again relates the miraculous nature of food that sustained her while she was in seclusion. God asked her just to shake a palm tree near where she was resting. This tree would provide her with fresh dates (Q 19:25). This again shows how, throughout her life, Mary was under Divine protection. Then God says to her, 'Eat and drink and let your eyes become happy [with your new child.] If you ever see a human being say, "I have vowed to the Most-Merciful a fast. I will not speak to any human being today"' (Q 19:26). According to Qur'anic commentators, during this time of frustration she was hearing the voice of angels giving her good tidings for the birth of Jesus. In fact, not only angels, but Jesus himself talked to her. With this she became confident that this was a Divine intervention and all of this was through the Divine order (al-Tabari 2000: 18.185).

Commentators likewise note that when Mary brought her child to her community, she had already received a faithful confidence that God would help her. In fact, she even received a revelation that she should not speak verbally, but only through signals such as pointing. This is why, when she came to her people and the child was in his cradle, the people said, 'Mary this is a terrible thing you have brought to us'. Relating her to Aaron who was be-

lieved to be one of the pious people of her society they said: 'O sister of Aaron! Your father was not a wicked person nor was your mother an adulteress' (Q 19:28). Through this, people were suggesting that her father and mother were honest and kind people and how could such a thing happen to a woman who was raised in this pious family. Mary who is filled with confidence now did not respond. Mary had been instructed by God to remain silent and not respond to any accusation. So in this case, when they accused her of such a sinful action, asking her where she got the baby from, Mary pointed at the baby Jesus as if she said: 'Don't ask me, ask the baby'. We see again in the Qur'an the puzzlement of her people when they ask her, 'How can we talk to one who is in the cradle, a young boy?' (Q 19:29). It is at this point that the baby Jesus starts speaking:

Surely, I am the servant of God. He gave me the Book [the Gospel] and appointed me a prophet, and He has made me blessed wherever I am, and He has commanded me to pray and give charity so long as I live, and He [has commanded me] to honour my (p. 97) mother, and He did not make me arrogant and disobedient. Peace be upon me on the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I shall be resurrected alive.

(Q 19:30-33)

It is here where we see the first miracle of Jesus; just eleven days old, he speaks and declares the innocence of his mother.

Mary is beloved by God but she should be considered neither a deity nor an object of worship. Despite the Qur'anic verses which praise Mary and her elevated status, she is still a human being and not divine. To indicate this, the Qur'an presents a theoretical possibility by saying that 'If God wanted to destroy Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and even all the people on earth, who could prevent God from doing so?' (Q 5:17). This is to indicate that God is the owner of everything and there is no deity other than God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Neither Mary nor anyone on earth can be a partner of God and it is only God who can be worshipped.

Along the same line, while these theoretical possibilities are presented, Mary is also described as the righteous one or *siddiqa*, a title that is given in its masculine form to Abu Bakr the first caliph and the highest Muslim in rank after the Prophet in the Sunni tradition of Islam. Despite this piety and high spiritual level of Mary, she and her son, according to the Qur'an were 'eating food' (Q 5:75). This is to indicate that eating food is a human need and anyone who eats cannot be God. God is exalted from any need.

Mary in Islamic Theology and Spirituality

The story of Mary has been used in popular Islamic culture, especially among mystics. Because the Qur'an frequently presents her as an example of piety for male and female believers, Muslims would name their children after her in anticipation that they would live a life like Mary, one in piety and trust in God. Also some would take a lesson from the moth-

er of Mary and dedicate their children to the life of God. In a sense, a free person is already free and cannot be physically free again, but spiritually one can be freed from the bondages of worldly life. As Mary was dedicated by her mother to the service of the Temple, some mystics would have similar dedications. One Qur'an commentator in his commentary on this verse about Mary narrates the story of a Sufi who said to his mother: 'O mother! Dedicate me to God so that I will worship Him and learn knowledge'. His mother agrees to dedicate him. After sometime away he returns home and he knocks on the door; when his mother asks who it is, he responds that her son has returned, but his mother was so dedicated in her promise to God she said, 'We left you for God and we will not take you back' (al-Qurtubi 1964: 4.66). Further, in the mystical tradition dreams may have important implications. A famous dream interpreter known in the Islamic tradition as Ibn Sirin (d. 729) recorded that if someone sees Mary in his or her dream, surely that person will receive a high position and all his or her needs will be (p. 98) fulfilled. He continues and says that, if a woman who is pregnant sees Mary in her dream, she will give birth to a wise child. If she is accused of calumny, she will be free from these accusations and God will show her innocence (Ibn Sirin 1940: 1.55-6).

In popular Islam, especially among those who draw inspiration from the spiritual and mystical tradition of Islam, Mary's piety plays an important role as a model for all people, not just women, to follow. In this tradition, Mary and Mary's piety are often closely connected to that of the Prophet of Islam's first wife, Khadija. She was older than the Prophet and the first convert to Islam. She bore all but one of the Prophet's children, and while he would take other wives later, this only occurred after Khadija died. Khadija is considered the most important woman in Islam and is often compared to Mary. Similarly, Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, is an exemplary personality in the Islamic tradition. The Prophet says that Fatima is the highest of all women of Paradise except Mary. Umm Salama, the wife of the Prophet and step-mother of Fatima, narrates that the Prophet called his daughter Fatima and told her something and she cried. Then he told her something and she laughed. Umm Salama says after the Prophet's death, she asked Fatima why she cried and then laughed. Fatima responded: 'The Messenger of God told me that he would die and I cried. Then he said: "You are the master of all women of Paradise except Maryam, the daughter of 'Imran". Then I laughed' (al-Tirmithi 1975: nos. 3873, 3893). During the ascension of the Prophet, the *Mir'aj*, the Prophet saw many personalities and one of these was Mary. The Prophet said, 'I saw Mary in Paradise that God has given her seventy palaces made of pearls. And also I saw the palaces of the mother of Moses, seventy palaces made of diamond. And also I saw the seventy palaces of Asiya the wife of Pharaoh made of precious coral. And also saw seventy palaces of my daughter Fatima made of green emerald' (al-Saffuri 1283H: 2.108). While this is not among the major hadith sources, it is widely recited in public performances in the mystical tradition as its name, meaning roughly *Joy of Gatherings*, indicates. A similar story is about Khubayb, one of the companions of the Prophet who submitted himself to God and became a Muslim before being captured and chained by the pagan tribe, al-Harith. One day a girl from the tribe enters when he is captive and she sees a bunch of grapes in his hand and he is eating them. Since he was chained it would have been impossible for him to go and get

these and his captors would not give him such food; indeed, there was not even this type of grape in Mecca where he was captured. When the narrator speaks of this story, he says that he has no doubt that this was Divine sustenance that God gave him. 'Yes God gives to a pious servant of Him what He had earlier given to Mary when she needed it as the Qur'an describes'. When people asked Abdullah Ibn Abbas, one of the youngest of the companions of the Prophet about fasting, he describes a number of dignitaries' fasts. Among those who fasted, he describes the fast of Mary showing how her fasting could be imitated as a form of piety. He said of her fast, 'Mary would fast a day and then break her fast for two days' (Ibn Kathir 1968: 2.279). Another famous story found in the hadith sources having to do with Mary's piety notes that, while Satan touches all children when they are born, causing them to cry, for two people this did not occur: Mary and Jesus. They were spared this because of the prayer of Mary's mother seeking refuge in God for her and her offspring (Q 3:36) (al-Bukhari 1422H: 4.164, no. 3431).

(p. 99) Given Mary's piety and her status as the mother of Jesus, it should come as no surprise that there is a large body of literature on Mary in the Islamic tradition in which she is considered the highest of women both in this world and in Paradise. Literature in this vein includes both popular work as well as more scholarly and theoretical treatises (see e.g. Ozak 1991; Schleifer 2008). Various elements of Mary's life are often discussed including her birth, her worship of God, her prayer life, her chastity, and even her miracles. While there is certainly an element of mythology or perhaps a projection of wider Islamic values onto Mary in some of this, much of it is based on the Qur'anic narratives, as well as the hadith sources and early Qur'anic commentators. In any event, Mary's importance as a spiritual figure and as a woman to be emulated by all people cannot be minimized.

Because of Mary's and Khadija's importance in the Islamic tradition, it is suggested that Mary is the best of her time and Khadija is likewise the best of her time, this despite Fatima being considered to be of higher spiritual rank than Khadija. It is also debated among Muslim theologians as to whether Mary was or was not a prophet. If she is a prophet, then axiomatically she is higher because prophets are higher than non-prophets. Along the same lines, she would be higher than any male who is not a prophet.

In the Islamic tradition, it is generally understood that Mary did not have a husband and thus was not married to Joseph. Indeed, Joseph is not mentioned in the Qur'an, although certain commentaries do mention him. In these, he is described as a pious person who helped to take care of her. There is, however, at least one source which does narrate that Mary married Joseph. Notably though, even in this source, Joseph married her only to accompany her and Jesus to Egypt. According to Ismail Haqqi bin Mustafa al-Khalwati (d. 1127H): 'As for Mary, it has been said that she married her cousin Joseph the carpenter, but Joseph never approached her. He married her only to accompany her to Egypt when she wanted to go to Egypt with her son Jesus, peace be upon him' (Haqqi n.d.: 6.386). After twelve years in Egypt, they returned to Damascus and eventually settled in Nazareth. It is notable though that even in this account Joseph, who is described as her cousin, does not touch Mary and only acts as her helper and protector.

Another commentary which describes Joseph says that both Mary and Joseph were servants in the same temple and that they were the most hard working and pious people of their time. According to this source, when Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy, he was at first angry and wanted to accuse her for this. On reflection though, he remembers her piety and that they were together almost all the time. He then says to her: 'Something about your situation came to my heart and I was afraid of it. I wanted to keep it in myself and not disclose it, but I could not. I thought that speaking about it would be much healthier for my heart'. Mary responded: 'Then say a beautiful word'. Joseph said: 'I was not going to tell you except with beautiful words. Tell me, can grass grow without a seed?' Mary said yes. Joseph said: 'Can a tree grow without the touch of rain?' Mary said yes. Joseph said: 'Can a child be born without the male?' Mary said yes and she continued by saying: 'Don't you know that God, blessed is He and Almighty, grew the grass when he created it without any seed. And the seed on that day came from the grass that God planted without seed. Also, don't you know that God through His power grew the tree (p. 100) without rain? And He made, with the same power, rain as the life of that tree after He created both the rain and the tree separately'. She then continued: 'Do you believe that God does not have power to grow the tree without getting help from water and if there is no water he cannot make it grow?' Joseph said to her: 'I am not saying this. And I know that God, blessed is He and Almighty, is powerful over everything and when He says "Be!" over something it happens'. Mary said: 'Don't you know that God, blessed is He and Almighty, created Adam and his wife without female and male'. Joseph said yes. After hearing this from Mary, it occurred to Joseph that what was happening with Mary is something from God and it is not up to him to question her about it. Joseph continues his service to the temple and helps Mary with any of the work that she used to perform. Later, according to this commentator, God revealed to Mary that Joseph would take her from the land of her people and Joseph took her to Egypt on a donkey (al-Tabari 2000: 18.169-70). Although some commentators such as Ibn 'Atiyya (d. 1151) have seen the details in this story as weak, the story has a strong theological argument between Joseph and Mary which in fact inspires Muslim commentators to argue for Mary with the same arguments that Mary uses when Joseph has hesitations.

In Islamic literature, one of Mary's titles is *al-Batul*. This is a title which means literally 'the Virgin' or 'the Chaste' and alludes to the fact that Mary dedicated herself to God. This title is given to Mary because she had no connection to men. No man touched her and she remained forever chaste. The same title is also given to Fatima the daughter of the Prophet of Islam. In her case, even though she was married to Ali, she was called *al-Batul* because she was unique among the women of her time and in the history of Islam there is no woman who would be compared to her in honour. Therefore, the title that is given to both of them has a connotation of purity, chastity, and honour.

In the mystical tradition of Islam there is something called *karama* (pl. *karamat*). These are certain types of extraordinary acts of the Divine given as a favour to His servants based on their need. These acts occur for saints, whereas most miracles are only performed by prophets. Often Mary is given as an example of *karamat*. One important mystic al-Mutawalli (d. 1086) describes Mary's relationship to *karamat* in the following way: 'The

evidence for the truthfulness of *karamat* of saints [*al-Awliya*] is the story of Mary, peace be upon her. She was privileged with some *karamat*. Of them was that Zachariah would find with her in winter the fruit of summer and in summer the fruit of winter. To the extent that he said: "From where is this coming to you?" And she said: "It is from God" (al-Mutawalli 1987: 152). It shows that when God wants, He gives sustenance to those who need it. Often verse 3:37 in the Qur'an is used as textual support for the mystical ideal of Divine favouring of His servants.

Not only is Mary herself considered pure, but her family and lineage are considered pure as well. She was from a line of prophets and exemplary individuals of the children of Israel who are examples of purity and kindness. As the commentator Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) describes her, 'She grew up among the Children of Israel, with the best of upbringings. She was one of the worshippers and the devotees, famous for her great adoration, asceticism, and persistence' (Ibn Kathir 1999: 5.219).

(p. 101) Among later scholars and those outside the tradition, there has been some question of the association of Mary with Aaron in Qur'an 19:28. It is true that there are two Mary binti Imrans, Mary and Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. However, there is a hadith which discusses this and shows that in fact the reason why Mary is called the sister of Aaron here is not because of confusion, but instead due to the naming practices of Mary's people. When a companion of the Prophet was sent to a group of Christians, they asked him about this and he was unable to answer them. He then returned to the Prophet and told him of this at which point the Prophet responded: 'Didn't you tell them that they were naming with the name of their prophets and their pious people before them' (quoted in Ibn Kathir 1999: 5.227-9).

According to the *tafsir* of Abdullah bin Abbas, one of the earliest commentators of the Qur'an and a cousin of the Prophet, as compiled by the lexicographer Firuzabadi sometime in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, as well as in other important commentators, like Ibn Kathir, Mary is the niece of Zachariah's wife. In his commentary of the verse in which Zachariah says, 'My Lord, surely my bones have weakened, and my head has become grey with age, and never have I been disobedient in my prayer to You, my Lord and I am afraid of [a lack of] inheritors after me [because my wife is barren] grant me from your presence a child' (Q 19:4), he describes Zachariah's wife as Hannah who is the sister of the mother of Mary (al-Firuzabadi 1992: 254). This is parallel with the story found in the Gospel of Luke.

Elsewhere in the mystical tradition of Islam, Mary is given as an example and someone to be emulated. In this regard we find the story of the early Muslim saint Ibrahim bin Adham (d. c.782). It is narrated that he had some companions who stayed with him for two months and they had nothing to eat. Once, Ibrahim asked them to enter a garden, where-in they found a tree with peaches on it. One of the companions filled his container with peaches and Ibrahim asked him what he had and told him, 'O you of little faith. If you were patient enough, you would have seen fresh dates coming to you as Mary received fresh dates' (Ibn Kathir 1988: 10.147). The idea here is that Muslim mystics have to have

a strong faith in God similar to that of Mary. Thus Ibrahim is suggesting that if they have enough faith, they will receive sustenance just as Mary received it. Thus Mary is being held up as an example of piety and faithfulness.

Mary and Inter-Faith Dialogue

When Muslims and Christians look to figures who can be a point of dialogue, Mary is, rightly, often seen as such a figure. As has been mentioned above, from an Islamic perspective she is not a deity and therefore cannot be worshipped, but she is the woman of highest rank in human history. It can be argued that despite the points of difference on Mary, Muslims and Christians have many commonalities in regards to their understandings of the virtues of Mary and her miraculous pregnancy. For Muslims and Catholic (p. 102) Christians, despite the largely historical arguments by elements within Catholicism that Muslims dishonour Mary by not considering her the mother of God, recent dialogue efforts are more focused on commonalities rather than differences. While Mary is a critical figure in dialogue between Catholics and Muslims, in Muslim-Protestant dialogue Mary generally plays a less important role. While Muslims and Protestants might have more agreement regarding that non-deific status of Mary, on the whole, Muslims give much more reverence to Mary and her concomitance in the realm of spirituality is probably greater than that of most Protestants.

In less sophisticated dialogue efforts, Mary is sometimes thought of as a stepping stone or a bridge. Theologically speaking, Mary is not a stepping stone, but a common value that is shared by both Muslims and Christians. The idea of a bridge or stepping stone has been useful, but in Islam, Mary is not a tool. She is eternally valued and revered. Yes, Mary in Islam is not the mother of God. However, she is the mother of the miracle of God since in the Qur'an Jesus's birth is presented as a Divine miracle. As the *Nostra Aetate* document from Vatican II rightly emphasizes, 'Muslims venerate ... his virgin mother, Mary' (para. 3). It is no doubt that, with her devotion and prayers, Mary is a model for believers, both Muslims and Christians. In other words, the spirituality of Mary can play a significant role in Muslim-Christian dialogue. Dialogue based on Mary can be used to not only increase the spiritual well-being of various communities, but it can also be used as a means of improving the quality of life for those at the margins of society and to rescue and comfort the oppressed. By focusing dialogue efforts on the personality of Mary, Christians and Muslims will be better positioned to know each other and to bring enrichment to the lives of all those who believe.

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