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A CATHOLIC-MUSLIM MARIOLOGY*

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In 1989, a mosque in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), was named *Masjid Maryam Umm ʿEisā* (Mary, Mother of Jesus Mosque [مسجد مريم أم عيسى]). The initiative to name it after Maryam is to exemplify the value of co-existence among religions in the UAE. Maryam is the most prominent female figure in the Qur'ān as she is the only one identified by name in Chapter 19 as Surah Maryam. The name Maryam is mentioned in the Qur'ān more than it is in the New Testament. Overall, there are 70 verses that refer to her and she is named specifically in 34 verses. It is through Mary that Muslims and Catholics are sisters and brothers in the spirit of Pope Francis's *Fratelli Tutti* (*Lahat Magkapatid*/*Mag-Igsoon Tanan*). She is the bridge that strengthens their bond of kinship.

A Mariology fits well in Muslim-Catholic relations as Maryam is accepted with great respect in both traditions. For instance, while Muslims accept and wholeheartedly embrace the same immaculate nature of Mary, non-Catholic Christians outrightly reject the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, although early Protestant theologians like Martin Luther embraced it. The following Maryam

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theological convergences in this paper serve as bases for a shared Muslim-Catholic Mariology.

I. The Qur'ān as Extra-Biblical Source

The Qur'ān was revealed in a milieu where Christianity faced heresies and excesses in religious practices such as that of Collyridianism, a Christian heretical movement in pre-Islamic Arabia whose adherents worshipped Mary as a goddess (Surah 5:116). Even though there may be differences in revealed Scriptures, close readings of specific Qur'ānic passages can still be interpreted in the light of Judeo-Christian tradition.

T. O'Shaughnessy, S.J., writes that

> truths found also in Christ's teaching can arise outside the Church (*Nostra Aetate*, 2–3).… If this is true of world religions in general, it is even more valid for Islam, which arose in surroundings already influenced for centuries by Judaism and Christianity … [thus] the Qur'ān does not set itself in opposition to any Biblical teaching.[1]

As a Catholic reading the Qur'ān, this author will allow the Qur'ān to speak for Himself (Allāh) without interpreters disrupting Qur'ānic revelation. It is notable that the Qur'ān was revealed more than 600 years after the Annunciation and Incarnation events as documented in the Gospels, thereby making the Qur'ān itself to be the most authoritative source of interpretation. Employing other Qur'ānic references to explain other verses is reliable because of the close interrelatedness of the verses with one another. Except in some legal matters, the Qur'ān does not contradict Himself.

The Qur'ān confirms in general what is found in the Gospels. However, what the Qur'ān has are mostly brief reminiscences of the Gospel stories. The style of the Qur'ān is to reveal again what has already been revealed six to seven centuries earlier in the Gospels.

[1]T. O'Shaughnessy, *Word of God in the Qur'ān*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1984), foreword.

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Allāh alludes to earlier revelations which the audience is apparently familiar with or knows about. Compared to the Gospels, Qur'ānic revelation has less details but uses familiar Gospel accounts to teach. Yet, there are revelations that are unique to the Qur'ān and entirely new to a Christian listener, such as, e.g., the infant Jesus speaking to the religious leaders in defense of his mother.

The good thing about the Qur'ān as an extra-Biblical source is that it gives clarity to Gospel accounts. A case in point is the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The Qur'ān highlights that Allāh has made Maryam pure and immaculate, stating with clarity and certitude that Mary, indeed, is the immaculate one. As Catholics, one of the best ways to change one's attitude toward Muslims is to appreciate how the Qur'ān narrates the story of Maryam, which for some reason is downplayed by early Muslim interpreters (*mufassirun*/ exegetes) whose body of work only appeared a century or two after the Qur'ān was canonized as one single *kitab* (book).

II. The Annunciation is "Virgin Birth" for Muslims

Hail Mary, full of grace. The first part of the Catholic prayer "Hail Mary" encapsulates Islamic Mariology. The prayer is based on the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary: "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you" (Lk. 1:28); the greeting of Elizabeth (*Ilisabat*), the mother of John (*Yahya*), to Mary: "Blessed are you among women" (Lk. 1:42b); and Mary's song, the Magnificat: "For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (Lk. 1:48b).[2] Six centuries later, the same narrative revealed again to the Arabs in the Qur'ān is known to Muslims as the "Virgin Birth."

The narratives of the Annunciation in Luke 1:26–38 and Qur'ān 3:42–47 are identical in affirming God's choice of Mary and her

[2]The scriptural citations are taken from the Revised Standard Version (1971).

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elevation "above all women." In Q. 3:42–47, Gabriel (*Jibril*)[3] is not mentioned; instead, the angels (plural) announce the good news to Mary: "O Mary, Allāh has chosen you and made you pure, and chosen you above all women of the world" (Q. 3:42). In Luke, Mary's election and elevation are expressed in Elisabeth's greeting to her: "Blessed are you among women…" (Lk. 1:42) and in Mary's Magnificat: "For behold, henceforth on all generations will call me blessed" (Lk. 1:48b).

Maryam's being made pure by Allāh corresponds to the Catholic teaching that Mary was immaculately conceived and exalted among all women to be the mother of Jesus (*Eisa* who is "Word from God" and Messiah in Q. 3:45, 19:19). This is consistent with what Gabriel said to Mary: "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you" (Lk. 1:28). According to Christian tradition, Mary enjoys the fullness of God's grace (*gratia plena*).

III. The Immaculate Conception: Made Pure and Chosen (Q. 3:42)

Mary as immaculate is a shared belief of Muslims and Catholics. In the Qur'ān, the angels greeted Maryam: "*Yaa-Maryamu inn Allāhas-tafaaki wa tahharaki wastafaaki 'alaa nisaaa-'il-'aalamiin*" (O Mary, God has chosen you and *made you pure*, and chosen you above all women of the world) (Q. 3:42, emphasis added). The Catholic Church based its dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary on Luke 1 and tradition. The Qur'ān helps elucidate the dogma. The Qur'ān says: "'The angels said, 'O Mary! Allāh has chosen you and made you pure—chosen you above the women of all nations'" (Q. 3:42–43; see also Q. 66:12).

[3]The angel Gabriel (*Jibril*), the bearer of Allāh's revelation to the prophets (including Muhammad), is mentioned by name in the Qur'ān only a few times (Q. 2:97, 98; 66:4). He is often referred to only as "the angel." He is also commonly identified with the spirit (*rūh*) mentioned in Q. 19:17. However, this identification is disputed by some. Although Q. 3:42 refers to "the angels" (plural), Muslims take this to mean Gabriel or that one of them is Gabriel.

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In Qur'ān 19:16–26, the spirit/angel (Gabriel), as agent of Allāh's revelation, announced the message to Maryam that she had been chosen to be the mother of Eisa. One of the titles given to Maryam is *Tāhirah*, which means "she who was made pure." Integral to God's act of choosing Maryam is the act of making her pure (made pure). They are not two separate acts but instantaneous, not one act preceding the other. *Mustafia* means "she who was chosen" and *Tāhirah* means "she who was made pure." Qurtubī's[4] exegesis (*tafsir*) explains that God elected (chose) Mary twice. He says, "The word '*chosen*' is repeated because the first time it means chosen for worship and the second chosen to bear 'Īsā."[5] This was seconded by Zamakhsharī who interprets Mary's election as thus:

> God chose you first when He accepted you from your mother (*Hannah*), nurtured you, and bestowed upon you great favors.… [Secondly,] God chose you finally in that He granted you Jesus without a father. This favor was not attained by any other woman.[6]

Like Zamakhsharī, Razi interprets the second election thus: "that God granted her Jesus without a father."[7] One can observe that the early Muslim commentators were consistent in their interpretation that the miracle of the "Virgin Birth" rests in Maryam being chosen to be the mother of Eisa—a privilege granted unto her, raising her above all women of all nations of the world.

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[4]Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Abu Bakr al-Ansari al-Qurtubi is a renowned medieval Islamic scholar and *muhaddith* from Cordoba, Andalusia. After Cordoba fell to the Christians in 1236, he left for Alexandria, Egypt where he studied *hadith* and *tafshir*. He then went to Cairo and settled in Munya Abi'l-Khusavb where he spent the rest of his life. He died in 1273.

[5]Qurtubī, *Tafshīr al-Qurtubi*, Vol. 3, trans. A. Bewley (Bradford, UK: Diwan Press, 2019), 299.

[6]Abu al-Qasim Jar Allāh Mahmud ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *Al Kashaf 'an Haqa'iq al-Tanzil wa 'Uyun al-Aqawil fi Wujuhb al-Tawil*, Vol. 1 (Cairo, 1966), 361–362.

[7]M. Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, Vol. 2: *The House of 'Imran* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 126.

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Maryam's election was exemplified by her purity from the time she was conceived by her mother Hannah. Tabari[8] attributes Allāh's choice of Maryam to Hannah's vow to dedicate the child in her womb to the service of God. Maryam's purity was there from the very moment of her conception in the womb of her mother Hannah, who prayed,

> "My Lord, I have dedicated what is in my womb entirely to You; so accept this from me. For You are the One who hears and knows all." When she gave birth, she said, "My Lord! I have given birth to a girl." God knew best whom she had given birth to: "the male is not like the female. And I have named her Mary, and I commend her and her offspring to Your protection from the rejected Satan." Her Lord graciously accepted her and made her grow in goodness, and made her grow up beautifully.… (Q. 3:35–37a)

Maryam was then entrusted to the care of Zechariah who protected her from the stain of sin and kept her undefiled.

The Qur'ān is clear that Allāh made Maryam pure, immaculate (*mutahhar*), without sin. Her purity and fullness of grace made her will perfectly aligned with the will of God. In this regard, Maryam must be sinless and immaculate (Latin *immaculata*, i.e., "unstained or spotless") because she will be the mother of the child that the Qur'ān calls *Kalimatullah*—"a Word (*kalima*) from Allāh" (Q. 3:45). Maryam is "made pure" by Allāh (Q. 3:42) to be the perfect receptacle of the "Word" who is Jesus, the Christ. "*Yaa Maryamu inn Allahas-tafaaki wa taharaki*" (Mary, God has chosen you, and made you pure) (Q. 3:42).

The reference to Allāh making Maryam pure and choosing her above all women encapsulates the Catholic dogma that Maryam was immaculately conceived—*tahara* means clean, pure, chaste, unblemished, blameless; she was chosen amongst all women to be the mother of Eisa (Jesus عِيسَى), the Word and the Messiah (Q. 3:45; 19:19), just as the angel Gabriel announced in the Gospel of Luke. Maryam must be sinless and immaculate to be the perfect receptacle as mother

[8]Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr ibn Yazīd al-Tabarī, also known as Al-Tabari or Tabari (839–923 CE), is an influential commentator of the Qur'ān and Islamic historiographer from Tabaristan, Iran.

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of *Eisa al-Masih* whom the Qur'ān also calls *Kalimatullah*—"Word from Allāh" (Q. 3:45).[9]

IV. Maryam as *Mathal* (Model): Her Purity is Her Perfect Submission to Allāh's Will

The word Islam ٱلْإِسْلَامُ (*al-silm*) means "submission". It is derived from the verbal root سلم (*slm*): "to submit or surrender." In a religious context, it means "total surrender to God's will."

God's act of making Mary pure (made pure) entails submission to his will. Thus, the angels command her: "O Mary, be devoutly obedient to your Lord" (Q. 3:43a): "*Ya Maryamu uq-nutii li-Rabbiki* (يَـٰمَرْيَمُ ٱقْنُتِى لِرَبِّكِ)." In Islam, Maryam's purity reflects her obedience. It is the effect of her being made pure. Mary is called *Qānitah* which means "devoutly obedient" (Q. 66:12). This Arabic term implies not only constant submission to God but also absorption in prayer. This is consistent with Islamic tradition that Maryam spent her childhood in the temple where she grew in a contemplative prayer life.

According to the 12th-century scholar Tabarsi (1073–1153),[10] God purified Mary "with faith from rejection of faith and with obedience from disobedience, as related on the authority of Hasan al-Basri and Sa'id ibn Jubayr."[11] This is supported by Razi (1150–1210), the Sultan of Theologians, who wrote, "The first is that God purified her from the rejection of faith and disobedience."[12] Tabari interprets the meaning "and purified you" as "He (Allāh) purified your faith from all doubts

[9]H. Gibb & J. Kramers, eds., *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 173.

[10]Abu Ali Fadhl ibn Hasan Tabresi, popularly called Shaykh Tabarsi, was a 12th-century Persian Shia scholar from the region of Tabaristan, Iran. His *tafsir* of the Qur'ān enjoys wide acceptance even among non-Shi'ite theologians.

[11]Ayoub, *The House of 'Imran*, 128.

[12]Ayoub, *The House of 'Imran*, 126.

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and impurities which are in the faith of all women.…" Tabari reports this tradition on the authority of ʻAli.[13]

The Qur'ān aligns purity with submission to Allāh's will. Integral to Mary's call to be the mother of *Eisa al-Masih* was her *purity*. That was the purpose and meaning why Allāh made her pure (Q. 3:42)—so she could be the perfect receptacle of the Word (*Kalima*) from God. In Catholicism, Mary's pure submission to God's will is reflected in her *fiat* in Luke: "Let it be with me according to your word" (Lk. 1:38). These words of submission are an ideal and define who is a Muslim. This is reminiscent of the prayer of Jesus: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done" (see Mt. 6:10). However, there is no Mary's "fiat" in the Qur'ān. Islamic interpreters assert that there is no need for one since Maryam is seen as *mathal*, a model of submission, as one exemplary Muslim who even as a child was predisposed to surrender to the will of God.

In a Hadith, Abu Huraira reported that the Prophet Muhammad said, "No babe is born but upon *fitrah*. It is [the child's] parents who make [the child] a Jew or a Christian or a polytheist."[14] The Arabic word *fitrah* (فطرة) means "primordial human nature" or "original state of innocence." Muhammad's saying is interpreted to mean that all children born into the world, regardless of their religion, have a predisposition to submit to God, and hence all of them are "muslims" (the Arabic word *muslim* [مُسْلِم] literally means "someone who submits"). "Muslim" here does not mean belonging to a particular religion. It is the family background or the socio-cultural upbringing of the children that makes them Jews or Christians or polytheists (i.e., "socializes" them into various religions).

[13]Ayoub, *The House of ʻImran*, 123.

[14]Sahih Muslim, *The Book of Destiny* - كتاب القدر, Book 033, Number 2643–2664 (available at https://sunnah.com/muslim/46).

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V. *Rūḥ al-qudus* (روح القدس "Holy Spirit") in the Annunciation

Most revealing is in Surah 19, where the Holy Spirit appears as a Person and dialogues with Maryam, which leads to her submission to Allāh's will in Luke 1:38. The Holy Spirit blows instantaneously into her generative part and the "Word" named Messiah becomes flesh. A dialogue between Him and Mary ensues, leading to the Spirit breathing into Maryam's womb (Q. 66:12 and 21:91) to conceive the eternal Word named Christ (Q. 3:45).

1. *Rūḥ al-qudus* (روح القدس "Holy Spirit") is not the Angel Gabriel

> And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" (Jn. 1:32–33)

In the baptism of Jesus as narrated in the four Gospels, the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Holy Trinity, appears as a dove. In the Qur'ān, on the other hand, the Spirit appears as a perfect man—"We sent to [Maryam] Our spirit and it assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man" (Q. 19:17). He speaks to her and she in turn responds.

Muslim scholar F. Rahman argues that the term "angel," strictly speaking, is not quite accurate for the Spirit. For him, the Spirit is not an angel (i.e., Gabriel) as traditionally understood by Muslims.[15] The Spirit is never an angel but is the Spirit of Revelation who revealed the Qur'ān directly to Muhammad without the need for an intermediary. "Those Hadīth stories, then, where the angel Gabriel is depicted as

[15]F. Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Biblioteca Islamica, 1980), 97. This book is a systematic theology of the Qur'ān. The author arranged it into eight major themes in eight chapters: God, Man (Individual and in Society), Nature, Prophethood and Revelation, Eschatology, Satan and Evil, and Emergence of the Muslim Community.

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a public figure conversing with the Prophet whose companions saw him, must be regarded as later fictions."[16]

F. Rahman reiterates that the Spirit is a person for the Qur'ān describes the Spirit's physical appearance as

> one of mighty powers (who) has taught him (Muhammad), one vigorous; and he grew clear to view when he was on the uppermost horizon. Then he drew near and came down till he was (distant) two bows' length or even nearer. (Q. 53:5–9)

Rahman paraphrases the above as "The one of powerful *sinews and strong muscles* [the agent of Revelation] taught him [Muhammad]." Muhammad closely observed the Spirit established on the highest horizon. The Spirit then "drew near and descended so that he was at [most only] two bow-lengths [from the Prophet]." Rahman describes the Spirit as one who is muscular and possesses "extraordinary, almost suppressive strength."[17]

The use of the "We" in Q. 21:91 and 66:12 manifests that God Himself breathed of His Spirit into Mary.[18] The role of Gabriel is to announce (Q. 3:42, 45–46) the conception of the Word by the Spirit of Holiness.[19] It is solely God who acts, without intermediaries, as it was ordained that the Holy Spirit shall grant her the pure son when He said, "I am only a messenger of your Lord (*Rasuulu Rabbiki*) that I may give you a pure son" (Q. 19:19). For Catholics, He is the Holy Spirit who came down from heaven after Gabriel announced to Mary the good news: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk. 1:35).

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[16]Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 67.

[17]Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 64 (emphasis added).

[18]Q. 21:91—"We breathed into her of Our spirit, and made her and her son a Sign to the whole world." / Q. 66:12—"And she who guarded well her chastity [lit. generative organ], and thus We breathed into her of our Spirit.…"

[19]T. O'Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran* (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1953), 54.

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A dialogue between Him and Mary ensues, leading to the Spirit breathing into Maryam's womb (Q. 66:12 and 21:91) to conceive the eternal Word named the Messiah (Q. 3:45). Upon realizing that the Spirit is of God, Mary repeated the question "How can this be, for I have not been with any man?" (Q. 3:47). She stressed a virtue she held so dear to her, which is her chastity, for she said: "I have not been unchaste" (Q. 19:20b). Yet, she was willing to give it up in submission to God's will and design.

Mary's dialogue with the Holy Spirit in Surah 19 is akin to Moses arguing with *Yahweh*—how could he be the one to convince Pharaoh to free the Israelites from Egypt, for he was not eloquent? For Mary, it is that she has not been with any man. Like Yahweh of old, the Spirit in the Qur'ān speaks to Mary with authority and intervenes into her being—"And she who guarded well her chastity [lit. generative organ], and thus We breathed into her of our Spirit" (Q. 66:12; 21:91), and in Surah 19:21: "[The Holy Spirit] said: 'So shall it be.… Your Lord says, it is easy for Me.… And it is a matter [already] decided' (Q. 19:21) and [thus] Maryam conceived Jesus, the eternal Word."[20]

2. "And We Breathed Our Spirit into Her Womb" (Q. 66:12, 21:91)

Christians believe that "by the Holy Spirit [Jesus Christ] was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man" (4th-century Nicene Creed). This is confirmed in the Qur'ān which says, "We [Allāh] breathed into her [Mary] from [of] Our Spirit [*min Ruhina*]" (Q. 21:91; also 66:12). However, some Muslim commentators, in order to avoid downright anthropomorphism, make Gabriel instead of the Spirit, who is part of Allāh, breathe into Mary (Q. 21:91; 66:12). The true teaching of the Qur'ān is that the creative inbreathing came directly from Allāh.[21] The Spirit breathed out by Allāh is part of Allāh or is Allāh Himself. The statement "We sent to her 'Our Spirit…'" in Q. 19:17 also implies

[20]Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 66.

[21]O'Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran*, 63.

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that the Spirit is part of God as God Himself. The commentators who insist that the Spirit is Gabriel end up assigning to Gabriel the authority of giving Maryam a "pure boy" (Q. 19:19).[22]

The Spirit is called holy—*Ruh al-Qudus* (Spirit of Holiness or Holy Spirit)—four times in the Qur'ān, three of which (Q. 2:87, 2:253, and 5:110) describe Allāh strengthening Jesus Christ through the Spirit and once (16:102) strengthening faithful Muslims.[23] The Spirit has His own essence distinct from Eisa's (Jesus) who is also eternal as the Word of God.

The Qur'ān depiction of Allah's Spirit (*Ruh*) blowing into Maryam's womb (*ahsanat farjahaa fanafakhna fihi min ruhinaa* [Q. 21:91]) is consistent with the angel's explanation in Luke: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you [Mary], and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk. 1:35a). Mary's obedience to the will of God (Lk. 1:38) instantaneously inaugurated God's divine plan of salvation when she conceived Jesus Christ. Thus, in both Islam and Christian faiths, the Spirit is the creative agent or power of God. Moreover, the angels' announcement—"O Maryam! Allāh gives you glad tidings of a 'Word (*kalima*) from Him'; his name will be Jesus" (Q. 3:45; also 4:171)—resonates with the Johannine prologue: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn. 1:1) … "the Word became flesh" (Jn. 1:14). Like Christians, Muslims believe that the Word of God has always existed in heaven. While they argue that all prophets received the Word of God, only Jesus is called "Word of Allāh" (*kalimatullah*) and "Spirit of Allāh" (Q. 4:171).

3. The Spirit in Mainstream Islam

The identity of the Spirit in Surah 19, according to Rahman and O'Shaughnessy, is contrary to what is taught in mainstream Islam,

[22]O'Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran*, 64.

[23]O'Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran*, 44; Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 96.

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namely, that the Spirit and the angel Gabriel are one and the same. Angels are created beings but not the Spirit who proceeds directly from Allāh, is the breath of Allāh, and is eternal and inseparable from Allāh. In both the Gospel and the Qur'ān, it is God, not an angel, who manifests His power directly in the conception and birth of Jesus. Allāh intervenes directly in the conception of the Word as the Messiah by blowing His Spirit into Mary's generative organ.

The Prophet Muhammad is aware that the Spirit is not of the same category as the angels. All seven verses (*ayatun*) cited here are revealed in Mecca at the beginning of the Prophet Muhammad's preaching and reception of Qur'ānic revelation. The Spirit, however, has a distinct personality from angels. Here are four Qur'ānic verses that dispel the "Spirit = Gabriel" claim; they clearly distinguish the Spirit as different in category from angels, and that includes Gabriel: 1) 70:4 (angels and the Spirit, 1st Meccan period); 2) 78:38 (angels and the Spirit, 1st Meccan period); 3) 97:4 (angels and the Spirit, 1st Meccan period); and 4) 16:2 (angels with the Spirit, 3rd Meccan period). In verses 16:2 and 97:4, the Spirit and the angels are ascending and descending. In five verses (16:2; 97:4; 7:85-Mecca; 40:5-Mecca; 42:52-Mecca), the Spirit is mentioned as descending or bringing something down. In these verses, "the Spirit is a definite person and plays, with the angels, an active part, 'standing', 'descending', and 'ascending'."[24] They are all revealed in Mecca in the early period of Muhammad's preaching.

During this early Meccan period, the first four years of Muhammad's preaching, it is improbable that Muhammad identified the Spirit with Gabriel. Accordingly, this identification was not made even as late as the third Meccan period, which is the seventh year up to Hijra.[25] The Spirit as Gabriel evolved through the Prophet or was taught to him in connection with the Annunciation story that was heard from Christians. According to O'Shaughnessy, the Prophet Muhammad learned of the angel Gabriel from Christians only after Surah 3 was

[24]O'Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran*, 17.

[25]O'Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran*, 23, footnote 48.

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revealed in Medina.[26] Only after hearing the details of the Annunciation story at Medina would the Prophet have made the connection between Gabriel and the Spirit. This confused association brought to him by his ill-instructed informants led Muhammad to link together Gabriel, the Spirit, and Jesus. By then, the commentators were unanimous in seeing Gabriel as a synonym for the Spirit.[27]

These interpretations were eventually integrated by the early commentators despite Surah 3:42, 45 clearly stating that it was the *malaaaikatu* (pl. angels) who spoke to Maryam. It does not even mention the name Gabriel. Muhammad makes no explicit mention of Gabriel in both Surahs 3 and 19. Even though Gabriel's name is not mentioned in Surah 3, Muhammad alludes to him by shifting from a plurality of angels to a singular angel (Q. 3:40). Indeed, the six *ruh* verses revealed in Medina make it impossible to substitute Gabriel for the Spirit, e.g., "we breathed into them [generative parts] some of our Spirit (66:12, 21:91)."[28]

The Prophet Muhammad could have settled the issue of the identity of the Spirit once and for all when he was questioned by disbelievers (Quraish as incited by the Jews) in Mecca. Muhammad bluntly rebuked the disbelievers from such inquiry for they knew little. He said, "They asked you concerning the Spirit. Say, *ar-Ruh* [the Spirit] is of the command [domain] of my Lord; so desist from probing for you have been given little knowledge about it" (Q. 17:85, 3rd Meccan period). Does this imply that Muhammad, too, has no knowledge of the identity of the Spirit? But if he knew, it would have been the opportune time to end all doubts about the identity of the Spirit by stating once and for all that the Spirit is Gabriel. Yet Muhammad did not. Muhammad himself does not know the identity of the Spirit. So, for any Muslim to claim with certitude that the Spirit is Gabriel is to

[26]O'Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran*, 53 and 62.

[27]O'Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran*, 54 and 57.

[28]O'Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran*, 53.

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imply that they know more than their Prophet who clearly said that we do not know much of the Spirit.

A further problem is the argument that the angel Gabriel is the Spirit who "impregnated"[29] Maryam—an assertion that makes Gabriel a creative agent. If Gabriel is not the Spirit, who, then, is the Spirit? It is a dilemma for Muslims, but for Christians, it is easy for them to believe that the Spirit in Q. 19:17 is the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Holy Trinity. However, this would not be easy for Muslims because it compromises the Tawhid, the Unity and Oneness of God. For them, it is blasphemous or *shirk*, a grave sin in Islam, to worship gods or anything else other than Allāh. O'Shaughnessy puts the blame on the early commentators who were behind the push to equate the Spirit with Gabriel.

VI. The Word from Allāh Whose Name is Messiah (Q. 3:45)

> The angels said, "O Mary verily Allāh announces to you of a Word '*Bi-kalimat-in min-hu*' (of a Word from Him [Allāh])—*ismu-hul Masiihu 'Eisa-ibnu-Maryama* (whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary)." (Q. 3:45)

This Qur'ānic verse that says Jesus is the "Word from Allāh" (*Kalimatulla*) affirms somehow the Christian teaching that the Word (*Logos*) who was with God in the beginning became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn. 1:1, 14). He is Jesus Christ, the Son of Mary. This shared affirmation that Jesus is God's Eternal Word is also in the preface of the Holy Mass: "Jesus Christ, your Word through whom you made all things."[30] However, on

> the meaning of the designation of Jesus as "a word" from God, Tabari reports … on the authority of Qatādah: The word to which God refers

[29]Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 66.

[30]Preface of Eucharistic Prayer II. See also Jn. 1:10; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15–17; Heb. 1:2.

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> as "a word from Him" is His word "Be." God thus called Jesus His word because he came into being through God's word.[31]

Muslim commentators interpret the "word" (*kalima*) in "a word from Him" (Q. 3:45 *bi-kalimat-in min-hu*) as Allāh's creative command "Be!" (*kun*) in Q. 3:47—the command to create Jesus. But if Jesus Himself is the "Word from Allāh" (*Kalimatullah*), how can the Word create Himself? The Coptic priest Abu 'al-Barakat al-Ri'āsa Ibn Kabar mentions Muslim repugnance to the idea that the Word of God is found in the womb of a woman. They disliked the notion of Jesus being created in the womb.[32] But when informants of the Prophet suggested that the Word of God penetrated into Mary by her ears, they misconstrued St. Ephraem's metaphor "he entered the womb through the ear"[33] as if God's Word were a seed that was planted into Mary's ears. They took the metaphor literally, and they believed in this erroneous interpretation.[34]

A Muslim interpretation aligned with Christian theology is that of Tabarsi following the authority of Qatādah. He designates Jesus as "a Word from Him [Allāh]" (Q. 3:45). He is part of Allāh—inseparable. This is seconded by Ibn Abbas who declares that "Jesus is the Word of God," implying that Jesus did not come into being through God's *kun*.[35] The word *kun* was used in response to Maryam's question: "My Lord, how will I have a child when no man has touched me?"

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[31]Ayoub, *The House of 'Imran*, 131.

[32]O'Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran*, 60; "Livre de la lampe des ténèbres et de l'exposition (lumineuse) du service (de l'église)," par Abû`l-Barakât connu sous le nom d'Ibn Kabar; texte arabe édité et traduit L. Villecourt, Mgr Tisserant, G. Wiet; *Patrologia Orientalis* 20 (1929): 663.

[33]A poem attributed to St. Ephraem: "Just as the bush on Horeb bore God in the flame, so did Mary bear Christ in her virginity. Perfectly God, he entered the womb through the ear; in all purity the God-Man came forth from the womb into Creation" (*Harp of the Spirit*).

[34]O'Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran*, 61.

[35]Ayoub, *The House of 'Imran*, 131.

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He said, "Such is Allah; He creates what He wills. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it, 'Be!' (*kun*), and it is" (Q. 3:47).[36] Muslim commentators have invested in the word *kun* a mystical creative power. In the Genesis creation story, God says "Let there be…" (*yehî*…) and things are created (Gen. 1:3, 6, 14). But the *Logos* in John 1:1 was with God from the very beginning. Hence, it is uncreated.

Irenaeus of Lyon (ca. 130–202), a student of the Apostle John's disciple Polycarp, identifies the Logos incarnate with Jesus by whom all things were made. He based it on John's Prologue:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. (Jn. 1:1–3)
>
> *And the Word became flesh* and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (Jn. 1:14; emphasis added)

"In the beginning" in John 1:1 is an allusion to Genesis 1:1 as John wants to show that Jesus, the Logos, is truly the creative Word of God who was already existing at the beginning of time.[37] The Word conceals His Glory in becoming flesh. John has definitely reached the climax of his introduction in speaking of the Word become flesh in Jesus Christ. The Word who was there from the very beginning is made finite and human in Jesus. Christ is not created since He is the incarnate Word who is with God in the beginning.

As the Word of God, the Logos is co-eternal with God. The Logos is uncreated in the same way that Muslims believe that the Qur'ān is uncreated. Likewise, the Qur'ān places Jesus as Allāh's Word on a similar status as the Qur'ān as *Kalimatullah*, Word of Allāh. Muslims believe that

[36]Q. 36:82: "Surely His Command, when He wills a thing, is only to say to it: Be! [*kun*] and it is!" See also Q. 2:117.

[37]P. Perkins, "The Gospel According to John," in R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer, & R. Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 951.

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the Qur'ān is uncreated and has always existed in heaven. Allāh then sent it down to Muhammad as a revelation. The eternal *Kalimatullah* from heaven became the Arabic Qur'ān on earth for humankind. For Christians, the eternal Logos did not become a book but it became flesh, i.e., a human person: Jesus Christ, whom the Qur'ān also calls Messiah. The Word becoming flesh in the Messiah is that tremendous mystery of the Incarnation.

Irenaeus writes that there is one Almighty God who made all things, both visible and invisible, by His Word, showing, at the same time, that it is by the Word through whom God made the creation.[38] Card. J. Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) elucidates the Logos as the Creator Spirit. It is the "Creator Spiritus" from whom proceeds everything that exists.[39] This is the reason why Benedict XVI referred to Christianity in 2005 as the religion of the Logos.[40]

Yahya (John the Baptist) as witness to the Word. From within the same pericope of Surah 3 Al Imran (a Medinan surah), the angels who greeted Maryam—"Allāh gives you the good news of a Word from Him [Allāh] whose name is Messiah" (Q. 3:45)—also revealed to Zechariah—"Allāh gives you the good news of Yahya [John the Baptist] as a Witness of a Word [Jesus] of Allāh" (Q. 3:39). It is noteworthy that the Johannine Prologue also reveals that John the Baptist "came as a witness to testify to the light [Jesus]…" (Jn. 1:6f). See also Jn. 1:15–34; Mt. 3:11–12; Mk. 1:7; Lk. 3:15–18.

The role of Jesus as savior may differ from that in Islam, but Surah 3's depiction of the Word, conceived in Maryam and witnessed by *Yahya* (John), has a strong parallelism with the Gospel according to

[38]Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, 3.11.1, available at https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103311.htm.

[39]Benedict XVI, general audience (Rome: February 6, 2013), available at https://bit.ly/3pKCUA9 (accessed January 5, 2019).

[40]J. Ratzinger, "On Europe's Crisis of Culture" [lecture], Catholic Education Resource Center (Subiaco, Italy: April 1, 2005), available at https://bit.ly/3ClKSF9 (accessed January 5, 2019).

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John, Chapter 1, which reveals the incarnation of the Word becoming flesh. "Tabari interprets the phrase 'confirming a word of God' to refer to Jesus, the son of Mary. He reports that al-Dahhak said, 'John was the first to assent to Jesus and to bear witness that he was a word of God.'"[41] It first happened, as Ibn Kathir reports on the authority of Ibn Abbas, when "John's mother (Elisabat) used to say to Mary, 'I feel the child in my womb bowing down in reverence to the child in your womb.' This was the manner in which John confirmed Jesus while still in the womb."[42] "Tabarsi argues that John was obligated by God to be a witness to the fact that Jesus was in truth the word of God and His spirit."[43] John had credibility and integrity such that people believed John's word because of his veracity and asceticism. Instead of testifying that Jesus is the Lamb of God (Jn. 1:29, 36), the Qur'ān says that Yahya testified that the Word of God is Jesus the Messiah.

VII. Our Mother of Perpetual Help: *Eisa ibn Maryam*

The popular icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help portrays a close bond between Mary and her child. Likewise, the Qur'ān depicts Maryam inseparably united with her son—a relationship expressed by the title *Eisa ibn Maryam*. Yet there is a tendency among some Catholics and Muslims to focus solely on Mary and deemphasize Jesus. Early Muslim exegetes, for example, regard *Eisa ibn Maryam* as an honorific title given to Jesus because of the high status that the Qur'ān ascribes to Mary.[44] But should it not be the other way around? A Muslim-Catholic Mariology that does not point to or culminate in her son, Jesus (*Eisa al-Masih*), is deficient. An adequate Mariology is possible

[41]Ayoub, *The House of 'Imran*, 108.

[42]Ayoub, *The House of 'Imran*, 108.

[43]Ayoub, *The House of 'Imran*, 109.

[44]N. Robinson, "Jesus," in J. McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, Vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 11.

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only if Muslims and Catholics give a higher status to Jesus, for Mary herself says, "Do whatever he [Jesus] tells you" (Jn. 2:5).

It is about Jesus, not Mary. The Qur'ān is clear that Allāh made Maryam pure and without sin not just for her own sake but for someone greater than herself. She was made pure because she was chosen by Allāh to be the mother of Eisa, a great prophet for Muslims and Son of the living God for Christians (Mt. 16:16).

In this regard, Maryam must be kept sinless and immaculate because she will be the mother of the child whom the Qur'ān calls *Kalimatullah*—"a Word from Allāh" (Q. 3:45).[45] Allāh kept her undefiled (Q. 3:42) to make her a worthy receptacle of the "Word" who is Jesus (Q. 3:42). The angel Gabriel further announced that Mary shall be the mother of Eisa the Messiah (Q. 3:45; 19:19). This is consistent with the Christian tradition of the Annunciation of Gabriel to Mary in the Gospel according to Luke (Lk. 1:26–38).

The title *Eisa ibn Maryam* is the perfect expression of the intimacy between the mother and her child. Such intimacy is the ideal relationship that Mary's devotees—whether Christians or Muslims—must develop with Jesus, her son. Catholics are reminded that devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary must lead to Christ. By adapting the Catholic dictum "to Jesus through Mary," Muslims and Catholics will eventually converge in her son.

VIII. Deliver Us from the Evil One

As a mother, Mary is there to defend her children from the evil one through her son Jesus (Eisa). "Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 12:17). In the end, "she will crush your [the serpent's] head" proclaims the Benedictus antiphon sang on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. The Rosary, which Pope Francis requested

[45]Gibb & Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 173.

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all Catholics pray each day, is "to protect the church from the devil, who is always looking to divide us from God and from one another."[46]

Likewise, the Qur'ān exhorts the faithful to wage a spiritual warfare against Satan: "Say, 'I take refuge with the Lord of humankind … from the evil of the whispering tempter who whispers in people's hearts…'" (Q. 114:1–5). It is one of the earliest Meccan surahs that commentators agree on is not a revelation like most surahs but a prayer similar to Surahs 1 and 113. It is a prayer to Allāh for deliverance (*a'udhu bi llah*) from the snares of the Devil or *Shaytan* (Satan).

Classical interpreters (*mufassirun*), however, misrepresented the "whisperer" as the ego-self (*nafs*), thus putting the blame on humanity's pride, envy, and other faults.[47] But the "the evil" or "insidious suggestion" (Q. 114:4 *al waswaas*) comes from outside of the human person, from someone who whispers, who tempts. The whisperer is the personification of the Shaytan, the evil one. He works with his demons (*jinn*) and evil persons (Q. 114:6).[48] In Islam, the Evil One is identified with *ash-Shaitan* ("the Devil"), often known by the epithet *ar-Rajim* ("the Accursed"). Shaytān incites humans to sin by whispering (*yuwaswisu*) to the hearts or breasts (*sudoorin*) of humankind. Qur'ān 114:6 reveals that there is a whisperer who insinuates to the hearts of human persons, tempting them to sin and do evil. If humankind is weak spiritually, they will easily succumb to temptation. So, when humankind prays to Allāh for deliverance from the Evil One, it is not to be saved from oneself but to be saved from the cunning whisperer.

Catholic tradition teaches that each of the faithful has a guardian angel to guide and defend them from the tempter. Ironically, there is a tradition in Islam that teaches that every Muslim has an assigned

[46]G. O'Connell, "Pope calls on Catholics to pray 'to protect the church from the devil'," *America* (September 29, 2018), available at https://bit.ly/3i8Yryr.

[47]M. Sells, *Approaching the Qur'án: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999), 141.

[48]T. Cleary, *The Essential Koran* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 202.

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demon to test his/her faith and steadfastness.[49] The Qur'ānic prayer "I take refuge in the Lord of humankind … from the evil of the whispering slinker [cunning secretive devil] who whispers in the hearts of [humankind]…" mirrors the prayer taught by Jesus Christ: "rescue us from the Evil One" (Mt. 6:13b).

Conclusion

Gabriel greeted Maryam with God's strange plan that baffled the young virgin from Nazareth. The virgin birth certainly changed the life of the lowly maiden. Yet it was not a passive submission—it was an act of faith, a deed of courage to cooperate actively with God's plan. One must take into account the valor of the young maiden, her audacity to say "yes" to Allāh's will despite the risk of being judged as an adulteress which was punishable by stoning. She asked Allāh's messenger Gabriel: "How can I have a son when no man has ever touched me? I have not been unchaste" (Q. 19:21). Her total submission to God's will was exemplified in the Gospel of Luke when she said, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Lk. 1:38). Mary accepted wholeheartedly God's plan.

Maryam inaugurated Allāh's divine plan when she was chosen to be the mother of the child whom the Qur'ān refers to as the "Word from Allāh" (Q. 3:45) and "Allāh's Word" (Q. 4:171).[50] According to Muslim interpreters, Mary was chosen twice in Q. 3:42 ("O Mary, indeed Allāh *has chosen you* [*stafaaki*] and purified you *and chosen you* [*wastakaaki*] above the women of the worlds" [emphasis added]). The first election was intrinsic, i.e., Allāh chose the virgin in herself and for herself. She was chosen and made pure in view of her consecration to serve Allāh (Q. 3:35–37). For the second election, Allāh chose her with regard to the *divine plan*. She was chosen and raised above other women to be the mother of the Messiah (Q. 3:42–47; see also Q. 19:16–27).

[49]M. Ayoub, *The Awesome News: Interpretation of Juz 'Amma, the last part of the Qur'ān* (Iowa, 1997), 166.

[50]Gibb & Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 173.

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The Qur'ān states that Maryam is to be the mother of the Word and that both the child and the mother will be a sign (*ayatun*) from Allāh (Q. 21:91; also Q. 19:21). Accordingly, Muslim commentators say that Maryam was chosen for a divine plan. Yet they did not specify what Allāh's divine plan is.

If one reflects on God's unique intervention in human history, the question one might ask should be "Why did God choose Mary and for what purpose?" It was not just that Maryam was chosen by Allāh but that she was chosen for something bigger than herself.

The tendency of classical Muslim exegetes was to "praise" Maryam and then stop there, remaining silent about the mission of Eisa that would explain Allāh's divine plan. After all, Allāh's plan was dramatically inaugurated with the virgin birth and subsequent entry of Eisa (Jesus) into human history. There is not much in the current Qur'ān, however, that elaborates what happened to the child who became an adult and realized Allāh's divine plan.

The task in developing a Mariology in Islam is not just to point to her but also to her son—*Eisa ibn Maryam*. It is because of Jesus that Allāh chose Mary and made her pure (Q. 3:42). The honored status of Mary is her being chosen by Allāh to be the mother of Eisa as affirmed by Tabarsi.[51] But who is Eisa that his mother was given such a high privilege?

Muslims and Christians may disagree on the role and identity of Eisa (Jesus) but they converge in agreement that Maryam is Allāh's chosen above all women from all nations and generations. Given Allāh's unique intervention in human history, the call of Maryam is a miracle *par excellence*. Maryam is identified inseparably with her son, thus the title *Eisa ibn Maryam*. In the icon of Mary and the child Jesus, we hear the voice of the mother: "Do whatever he [Jesus] tells you" (Jn. 2:5). Maryam is the *mother* not only of Jesus but of all humanity. ❧

[51]Abu 'Ali al-Fadl b. al-Hasan al-Tabarsi, *Majma' al Bayan fir Tafsir al-Qur'an*, 6 vols. (Beirut: 1961).

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