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# A TRINITARIAN PNEUMATOLOGY FOR EVANGELIZATION IN ASIA[1]

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**Abstract.** Asian religions may differ in their belief in the Spirit yet the Spirit is the same Spirit that has been present amongst Asians since creation. In *Redemptoris Missio*, St. John Paul II acknowledges that the Holy Spirit is active in the heart of every person and that the Spirit's activity can also affect "society and history, peoples, cultures and religions."[2] The Spirit of God communicates the Word as the Christ incarnate, the same Word revealed by the Spirit to non-Christians as divine wisdom and guidance. The Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of Christ is the Spirit

[1] The term "evangelization" and not "mission" is used because for centuries the term "mission" has been synonymous with conversions. In the Philippine context, conversions from Islam to Christianity have negative consequences that breed distrust. "There is no compulsion in religion," the Qur'ān reminds us; ideally, all peoples are free to choose their religion. A convert finds God in the new religion which leads them to moral conversion and transformation into a better person.

[2] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 28. This encyclical is a successor to documents of the Second Vatican Council, including *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes*, and to Pope Paul VI's document on evangelism, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. It is also a predecessor to Pope Francis's *Evangelii Gaudium*. *Redemptoris Missio* is an important elaboration on the theme of New Evangelization often cited by John Paul II. The most striking part of the document is the fourth chapter, where John Paul II details what is involved in the mission *ad gentes* to the non-Christian world.

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of God for other faiths. In the 21st century, the Church as the Body of Christ in Asia experiences the Spirit in the following three signs: 1) *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2) the beatification of Matteo Ricci, and 3) the Holy Spirit being present in the ancient religions and cultures of Asia.

**Keywords.** Trinitarian pneumatology; Holy Spirit; Asian religions; Asian cultures; mission in Asia

Asia is home to the ancient religions of Shintoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Hinduism. From South Asia are India's Hinduism and Buddhism; from East Asia, China's Lao-Tzu Taoism and Confucianism. The civilizations of China and India were shaped by Confucianism and Hinduism, respectively, while Thailand, Singapore, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Japan were formed by Buddhism. For the past five centuries, Christians have remained a minority in an Asia dominated by Muslims and Hindus.

In 2021, the Philippines celebrated the 500th anniversary of the first Holy Mass in 1521 at Mazaua Island. Forty-four years after, conversions to Catholicism commenced with the arrival of Miguel López de Legazpi (1502–1572) accompanied by Catholic missionaries. By 2022, 83% of the Philippines' 110 million population is Catholic. East Timor is the other Catholic country in Southeast Asia, yet the Philippines, given its bigger Catholic population and longer history of Christianity, is in the best position to take the lead in the evangelization of Asia, especially now that a Filipino in Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle is a Pro-Prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelization (formerly known as the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples).

## Discerning the Spirit in Asia

> Pope Francis encourages members of the Federation of Asian Bishops gathered in Thailand … to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to them, while maintaining fraternity and embracing the poor, young people, and dialogue.[3]

[3] D. Lubov, "Pope to Asian Bishops: What is the Holy Spirit saying to you?," *Vatican News* (October 12, 2022), available at https://www.vaticannews.va/en/

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In mentioning *dialogue* in the Asian context where Christians are the minority, Francis opens the discernment of the Holy Spirit to believers of other religions in Asia. In the spirit of *Fratelli Tutti*, that we all are *magkakapatid*,[4] Francis's call to discern includes believers of other religions as co-discerners. This affirms the pioneering effort of St. John Paul II who had gone further than any pontiff in history to reach out to non-Christian religions. In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, he acknowledges that the Holy Spirit is active in the heart of every person and that the Spirit's activity can also affect "society and history, peoples, cultures and religions."[5] "The Spirit manifests … in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, [the Spirit's] presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time."[6]

Discernment is always a discernment of spirits. In the Asian context, it is to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to Asians as we co-discern God's will with all believers in Asia. Different religions may differ in their understanding of the Spirit, yet the Spirit is the same Spirit who has continued to guide and inspire religions since the time of creation. Christianity finds affinity with ancient religions given the shared immersion in the Spirit as revealed in Gen. 1:1–2: "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God (*Ruah Elohim*[7]) hovered over the face of the waters."

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pope/news/2022-10/pope-francis-message-fabc-federation-asian-bishops-conferences.html.

[4] The Filipino word *magkapatid* (siblings) is an inclusive term for *fratelli* which Francis uses to define a Christian's relationship with believers of other religions. See also John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, no. 53.

[5] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 28.

[6] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 28; see also John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, no. 53.

[7] *wərûaḥ*: "and [the] ruah," translated as "spirit" or "wind"; *ĕlōhîm*: the Hebrew term for God.

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The Spirit who hovered over chaos at creation remains present today in all religions and cultures.

Before proposing a Trinitarian pneumatology, the faithful must first learn how to relate with the Spirit on a personal level. Experiencing and knowing the Spirit as a person is the start of forming a deep personal relationship with the Spirit.

## The Dove is a Sign—not Symbol—of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit is a misunderstood person in the Holy Trinity. Most people refer to the Spirit as an "it" as they imagine the Spirit as a *dove*, and this has hindered the development of a personal relationship with the Spirit. The vision of a dove in the baptism of Jesus *symbolizes* the Holy Spirit who is unseen, and for John the Baptist it serves as a sign that the Spirit is present and in their midst. At Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles, the signs of the Spirit are the *ruah*, the powerful wind (Acts 2:2), the same image of the Spirit as a wind from God hovering over chaos at creation (Gen. 1:2), and the tongues of fire, which are not the Holy Spirit but serve as gifts of the Spirit and a sign of the Spirit's presence in the midst of the apostles. The wind and the fire ignited the apostles with the Holy Spirit. However, the dove has become the symbol of the Holy Spirit, who is unseen, as a result of the symbolism in the baptism of Jesus. This hinders our personal relationship with the Holy Spirit who, as the *Paraclete* (helper), helps transform our heart and mind to be like Christ.

> And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate, to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows him. But you know Him, because He abides with you, and He shall be in you. (Jn. 14:16–17)

The verse above clearly shows that Jesus is referring to the Spirit as a Person. The love of Jesus and his Father is also a Person—the Holy Spirit—who proceeds from that perfect bond of love. The teaching of the Church that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son is clearly defined. The reception of the Spirit not only by baptized Christians can be enriched if the Spirit is experienced as a person in

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the same way Christians relate to the Father and the Son as persons. The relationship between the Father and Jesus the Son is a model to emulate in developing a personal relationship with the Spirit.

*A Dovelike Descent of the Spirit.* A way to be freed from the fixation on the image of the Holy Spirit as a dove is to emphasize instead the act of God *descending* as Spirit to communicate "You are my beloved Son" and relate the Father's love to His beloved Son. The synoptic Gospels describe the "Spirit descending dovelike: This motif also develops the idea of communication from God; the Spirit comes with a 'dovelike' (adverbial) descent, possibly an allusion to its hovering over the waters at creation [Gen. 1:2]."[8] The Spirit descending dovelike at the baptism of Jesus mirrors what scholar Fazlur Rahman reiterates as the physical appearance of the Spirit in the Qur'ān:

> One of [the] 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 *descended* till he was (distant) two bows' length or even nearer. (Q. 53:7–9, italics added)

## Discerning the Spirit in the Signs of the Times[9]

Although the Spirit cannot be seen, the Spirit's message can be discerned through signs in the same way the *dove* at the baptism of Jesus was a sign. In the 21st century, the Church as the Body of Christ in Asia experiences the Spirit in the following three signs: 1) *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2) the beatification of Matteo Ricci, and 3) the Holy Spirit being present in the ancient religions and cultures in Asia.

### *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013)

Less than four months after his election, Pope Francis completed and issued the encyclical *Lumen Fidei* which Pope Benedict XVI had

[8] D. Harrington, "Mark," in R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer, & R. Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 599.

[9] We can draw some insights regarding the process of communal discernment from *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*, the *Vademecum*

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started. Before the year ended, Francis issued *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel) as his apostolic exhortation to the bishops, clergy, consecrated persons, and lay faithful to proclaim the Gospel in today's world. The mission to evangelize traditionally designated to clergy and religious now extended to the laity:

> In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt. 28:19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are "disciples" and "missionaries", but rather that we are always "missionary disciples".[10]

Francis uses the term ev*angel*ize, from the Greek word *angelos*, a translation from Hebrew meaning "messenger"; to evangelize means

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for the Synod on Synodality (available at https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html). This process, the *Vademecum* explains, entails a listening

> to each other, to our faith tradition, and to the *signs of the times [so that we can] discern what God is saying to all of us*.… This kind of discernment is [an ongoing process and] not only a one-time exercise … ultimately [it is] a way of life, grounded in Christ, following the lead of the Holy Spirit, living for the greater glory of God. (art. 2.2, italics added)

The New Testament Church followed this process so that the apostles could say, with confidence, that the decision taken at the end of the entire process of discernment was a joint decision between the Holy Spirit and themselves (cf. Acts 15:28) (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences [FABC], "Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia" [Bangkok Document] [March 15, 2023], p. 19, no. 70).

[10] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 120.

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to be a bearer of "good news." We see the angel Gabriel as a bearer of "good news" to Mary at the Annunciation. Like Gabriel, every baptized Christian is a bearer of good news to those who have not heard of Christ. Given that the Word (*Logos*) and the Spirit (*Pneuma*) are in all religions, their believers are bearers, too, of good news to humanity from their religious traditions.

The Second Vatican Council reminds us that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person through the "seeds of the Word" found in human initiatives—including religious ones—and in humankind's efforts to attain truth, goodness, and to God in Godself.[11] Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is universally experienced by every person, whether one is a theist, non-theist, or even atheist. This can be seen in the good and great works done by human beings to help humanity, for all good can come only from God through God's Spirit strengthening and inspiring human persons. It is God's Spirit who plants holy desires and inspires so that these holy desires come to fruition. The desire in every person to do what is right and just, and to help those in need, can be traced back to the Spirit, although this is sometimes wrongfully credited solely to the doer.

## Matteo Ricci and Inculturation

On December 17, 2022, the Apostolic See recognized Matteo Ricci's "heroic virtues," thereby bestowing upon him the honorific of "Venerable," and proposed him for beatification by Francis. The works of Ricci in correlating Catholic practices with Chinese tradition are an exemplar of evangelization. By recognizing such, the Catholic Church further affirms that inculturation is a way to bring Christ into the cultures of these ancient civilizations in Asia. Jesuit missionaries worked from 1539–1747, beginning with Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) in Japan; Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), Michele Pompilio Ruggieri (1543–1607), and Sabatino de Ursis (1575–1620) in China; Roberto de

[11] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 29; see also Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, nos. 3, 11, and 15; Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 10–11, 22, 26, 38, 41, 92–93.

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Nobili (1577–1656) and Thomas Stephens (1549–1619) in Southern India; and Constantine Joseph Beschi (November 8, 1680–February 4, 1747) in South India. Mostly Italian missionaries, these *da Vincis* of the missions were, like Leonardo da Vinci, innovators and applied novel methods in their work. Through inculturation, the Italian Jesuits preached a Christ who was comprehensible to the Chinese, Indians, Japanese, Thai, and other peoples of Asia. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) "Bangkok Document" states:

> The Italian Jesuits, Alessandro Valignano and Matteo Ricci, were unique in that they did not just insist on learning the local languages in order to communicate the faith. They also took the local cultures and faiths seriously. They came not just to teach but also to learn by immersing themselves in the worldviews of their host countries. They allowed the Gospel to take root [in] the soil of Asian culture. They realized "that the conquest model of evangelization would be absolutely fruitless in penetrating the ancient civilizations of Japan and China." The same could have been said of Robert De Nobili and his collaborators in India who sought to root the Gospel in the culture of their host countries.[12]

"One might say they lived ahead of their times and were ahead of the FABC's insistence on dialogue with Asian cultures and religions by almost four centuries!"[13] Their creative and innovative missionary efforts via inculturation continue to inspire missionaries today engaged in interfaith and intercultural dialogue with other believers in Asia. Yet despite efforts to inculturate the Gospel beginning in the 16th and 17th centuries, evangelization in Asia today is still in its infancy.

## The Holy Spirit is in Asia's Ancient Religions

The Catholic Church teaches that the Spirit was present before the creation of the universe and that everything was made in Jesus Christ by God the Father as Creator Spirit. Scripture says that God breathed the Spirit (*ruh* or *ruah*) into humankind's nostrils: "And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils

[12] FABC, "Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia," nos. 142–143.

[13] FABC, "Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia," no. 142.

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the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7). The same narrative of the Spirit being breathed into the human being is revealed twice in the Qur'ān. In Islam, the blowing of the Spirit of God into the human person so regarded the human person's excellence that angels were asked to prostrate before humankind as a sign of respect for the pinnacle of God's creation.

> When your Lord said to the angels, "Surely I am going to create a mortal from dust: So when I have made him complete and *breathed into him of My Spirit*, then fall down making obeisance to him." (Q. 38:71–72; italics added)
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> (It is Allah) Who made good everything that He has created, and He began the creation of man from dust. Then He made his progeny of an extract of water held in light estimation. Then He made him complete and *breathed into him of His Spirit*, and made for you the ears and the eyes and the hearts; little is it that you give thanks. (Q. 32:7–9; italics added)

By breathing God's Spirit, God ensouled the human person, thereby giving life to them. The soul which is "the breath of life"[14] is immortal. The Spirit breathed by God's self into the human person distinguishes humankind from other created beings. In this regard, humankind is made, not physiologically but spiritually, in the image and likeness of God. The soul, like the Spirit, is immortal and invisible. It comes from God and shall return to God when the body dies. It is here that the soul is properly linked to the Holy Spirit who is properly linked to the human soul. It is here how we understand that we are made in the image and likeness of God—not in the physiological sense but in the spiritual, for every soul comes from the Spirit of God and ought to return to God eventually after the physical death of the body. It is in the same lacuna within every person that the Spirit enters to sanctify the soul. The soul cannot be sanctified without the Spirit. For Catholics, it is in baptism and confirmation that the Spirit in Christ resides within each person and sanctifies each person's soul. Both Christianity and Islam narrate that Satan, the enemy of God, harbors the evil intent to destroy this relationship between the soul and the Spirit of God.

[14] R. Clifford, "Genesis," in Brown et al., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 12.

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After his resurrection, the Christ breathed unto his disciples in the same way God breathed into the nostrils of Adam, the first human being, in Gen. 2:7. The resurrected Christ's breathing of the Spirit unto his apostles, announcing, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (Jn. 20:23), is the basis of the Nicene Creed's declaration, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son." The Spirit empowered and strengthened the apostles to overcome their fears and emboldened them to witness to and proclaim the risen Christ as savior. The event inaugurates the mission of the Church to evangelize to all nations.

The Spirit "blows where [the Spirit] wills" (cf. Jn. 3:8) and "was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified."[15] The Spirit's presence is discernible in the four theistic religions of Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Despite their differences in their interpretation of who the Spirit is, they mutually affirm that the Spirit is of and from God—a sound starting point, for it establishes a common ground for the four theistic religions. Hinduism, one of the most ancient of religions, teaches that the "old" Spirit who was at creation is the Supreme Spirit known as the *Brahman* who animates the material universe. Hindus believe that the *Brahman* is present in the entire universe, and that each living being has a part of *Brahman* within them. Using their language, the relationship of the Spirit and Soul is defined; the terms are used interchangeably at times. The Sanskrit word *atman* (Spirit or breath) is the life force that gives life to the individual soul (*jiva* or *jiwa*), including the universe. One can see a semblance of this in animism, the religion of indigenous peoples that puts emphasis on the uniqueness of each individual soul. On the other hand, a pantheism identified with Hinduism teaches that individuals do not have a distinct soul as everything shares in the same spiritual essence of *Brahman*. Animism attributes a "soul" (*anima*) to plants and living creatures as well as inanimate objects.

[15] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 29. See also Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, no. 4.

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The pneumatological event when God breathed the Spirit that ensouled humankind happened at creation before the *Word* (Logos) incarnated as Jesus the Messiah and before the formation of any organized religion. This makes the infusion of the Spirit in humankind universal and thereby not exclusive to Christianity and Islam. The gift of Spirit, the gift of life, is universal and extended to all humankind. This affirms that the Holy Spirit is in all peoples and cultures, even those that are not Christian or Muslim. The stories of Jesus in the Holy Scriptures and the Gospels are so powerful that the lives and standards of peoples shall be in accord with Jesus's examples. The Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son shall reveal Jesus to all peoples who will eventually recognize that there is the God Who can be encountered in their culture and community.

What we can learn from the Eastern tradition is that the Holy Spirit is represented in various human forms, such as the three magi or Abraham's three visitors.[16] Unique to the Qur'ān is the Spirit appearing physically to the prophet Muhammad and to Mary. In *Surah Maryam* (19) of the Qur'ān, the Spirit appears as a person in human form before Mary[17] in what Muslims refer to as the Virgin Birth. The Spirit appears to Maryam as a perfect man who speaks and is spoken to. A dialogue between the Spirit and Mary ensues (19:19–22), commencing the Spirit to breathe into Maryam's womb (66:12 and 21:91) and thereby conceiving the eternal *Word* named Jesus the Christ (3:45).

## Nearest in Affection: *Ruh al-Qudus* (Holy Spirit) in Islam

The Qur'ān says, "The nearest in affection to Muslims are those who say 'We are Christians'" (Q. 5:82). A leading source on the Holy

[16] Y. Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* Vol. 1 (New York/London: Seabury Press/G. Chapman, 1983), 26 (endnote 11).

[17] See R. Oliveros, "Thomas O'Shaughnessy, SJ & Fazlur Rahman: The Incarnation in the Qur'ān," *Asia Pacific Mission Studies* 4:2 (2022): 11–12.

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Spirit outside Christianity can be found in Islam, the religion of the Muslims who dominate Southeast Asia. The Islamic interpretation of the Holy Spirit as mentioned in the Qur'ān (Arabic: روح القدس *Ruh al-Qudus*, "the Spirit of Holiness") is generally consistent with other interpretations based upon the Old and New Testaments, that is, that the Spirit acts as an agent of divine communication or revelation.

*Ruh al-Qudus*, where the substantive *qudus* (holiness) is used in combination with *ruh* (Spirit), is mentioned five times in the Qur'ān. In three of these instances (Q. 2:87, 2:253, 5:110), Allah is described as "strengthening" Jesus (Eisa) with the Holy Spirit (Q. 2:87, *bi-ruu-hil-qudus*). In the fourth instance (Q. 58:22), Allah is depicted as "strengthening the faithful (Muslims) with a Spirit (indefinite article) from Himself (Allah)," and in a fifth instance (16:102), as confirming the believers by a revelation (the Qur'ān) which "the Spirit of Holiness has sent down." The verb *ayyad(a)*, "he strengthened," seems to have entered Muhammad's active vocabulary only in Medina, where it is used nine times in all—four times in the (with the) *ruh* texts (QQ. 2:87, 2:253, 5:110, 58:22) and in five other places, and in all of which Allah strengthens the good for victory over their enemies.[18] "Say that the Holy Spirit has brought the Revelation with the Truth from your Lord, to strengthen the believers as guidance and good news to the devout" (Q. 16:102).

The equivalent of "strengthened" (*ayyad*) in the Qur'ān could mean the same as "graced" in Christian theology. The Qur'ān speaks of Jesus being strengthened by the Holy Spirit; this is reminiscent of the Holy Spirit that led Jesus into the desert after his baptism. Jesus faced the temptations of the evil one yet he was graced by the Holy Spirit to overcome the temptations. With the grace of the Holy Spirit, baptized Catholics can heed the call of Francis to be evangelizers even without lengthy training. However, the Church must provide the environment that is formative of a missionary disciple in parishes and Catholic schools. Catholic institutions need to emphasize the

[18] T. O'Shaughnessy, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran* (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1953), 44.

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mission and missionary identity of the laity, and parishes need to be known as mission-parishes to reorient their parishioners to think beyond the Philippines, where 83% of the 110-million population is already Catholic.

## A Maryam Pneumatology

A Maryam dialogue between Muslims and Christians will contribute to the understanding of how the Spirit sanctifies peoples of all religious traditions. It serves as a starting point for believers to know more about Christ (*al-Masih*) as revealed in the Qur'ān and the New Testament. Mary is "full of grace" for her soul received the fullness of the Spirit—"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (Lk. 1:35). "Mary is the first recipient of grace and the first to have been associated with the sovereign action of the Spirit in Christ."[19] In the Annunciation, the Spirit inspired, strengthened, and sanctified the soul of Mary, making her womb the perfect vessel to bear the Word becoming flesh. It is the Holy Spirit overshadowing her and thus sanctifying her soul that made her blameless and without sin.

Mary received the fullness of the Spirit (Lk. 1:26–28). The Annunciation of Gabriel to Mary in Luke 1:28–30 and in Qur'ān 3:42–47 are essentially identical. The Incarnation in the Qur'ān is found in four surahs (Surah 3, 19, 21, and 66). When merged into a single narrative, these surahs provide explicit details and add to the Incarnation that we know of from Luke 1 and John 1. It begins with Luke 1 and Qur'ān 3, and segues to Qur'ān 19 where Maryam submits to Allah's will, the Spirit consequently blows (66:12 and 21:91) into her generative part, and the "Word" named the Messiah is conceived.

[19] Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 164.

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## The Spirit Incarnate (Q. 19:17–18)

> Then We sent to her Our Spirit, and he became incarnate[20] for her as a perfect man.[21] She said, "I seek the protection of the All-beneficent from you, if you fear Him (do not come near)!" (Q. 19:16–18)
>
> He (the Spirit) said, "I am only a messenger[22] of your Lord (*Rasuulu Rabbiki*) that *I may give you a pure son.*"[23] (Q. 19:19)

The Incarnation, defined as the Word becoming flesh and whose name is Messiah, is mentioned in both the Qur'ān (Surah 3) and the Gospels (Luke 2 and John 1). The Qur'ān also applies incarnation to the Spirit who appeared to Mary as a perfect human. This happened right after the angels (pl. *malaaaikatu*) announced to her that she, of all women, had been chosen. Ali Quli Qara'i, a scholar from Iran whose translation of the Qur'ān into English adheres to tradition and equates the Spirit to Gabriel, interestingly used "incarnate" (in human form) to describe the Spirit who appeared to Mary. When this author messaged him on Facebook on April 14, 2021 to ask why he had chosen the word "incarnate" in reference to the appearance of the Spirit, he replied:

> I don't remember what my thoughts were at that time. But when I think about it now, it appears to me that it was somewhat a straightforward choice, as that is how "incarnate" is defined in the dictionary: invested with bodily nature and form; embodied in human form; personified. The idea of embodiment of non-corporeal entities is replete in Shia hadith, and that might have been an influence. "Appeared" seems to me rather vague, while "became incarnate" seems more fitting for a

[20] *The Qur'ān*, trans. A. Qara'i (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies Press, 2005).

[21] F. Rahman describes the Spirit as one with powerful sinews or muscular power and strength (*Major Themes of the Qur'ān* [Minneapolis, MN: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980], 64). *Basharan sawiyya* also means a righteous man.

[22] The Spirit is on a mission to blow into Maryam.

[23] *Gulaaman-Sakiyya* also means an intelligent son, not just a pure one (italics added).

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> spirit. Moreover "personify" and "embody" are also among [the] literal meanings of *tamaththul*.[24]

The Holy Spirit who appeared in bodily form as a person in the Qur'ān portrays an image of strength. This is not so in the Gospels where the Spirit appeared as a dove; the portrayal is not necessarily that of physical strength. Only at Pentecost, in the Acts of the Apostles, did the Spirit make His presence felt amongst the disciples as a powerful wind and tongues of fire. The disadvantage of over-stressing the physicality of the Holy Spirit is that doing so seemingly deprives the Spirit of mobility and transcendence, for the Spirit can be present in any part of the world at any given time. Perhaps the Holy Spirit's use of a physical form is a matter of necessity so humans can witness the Spirit's presence as wind, dove, fire, and, in the Qur'ān, incarnate in a person.

*The Spirit is Not an Angel.* In Islam, the Holy Spirit has been confused with being an angel—more specifically, that the Spirit is the Angel Gabriel. Yet the Holy Spirit being referred to is received by the human soul at baptism and leaves an indelible mark therein, an act which cannot be performed by an angel. Only the Holy Spirit has such power and influence on the human soul. The Spirit is not outside the human being but speaks from within to the conscience and heart of each of the faithful. The Spirit (الروح *al-Ruh*) is described, among other things, as the creative spirit from God by which God the Spirit continues to dwell in the faithful as in 1 Cor. 6:19: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" Both Muslims and Christians rely on the Spirit for strength and enlightenment of the self which is actually the soul.

The angels, on the other hand, are there to defend and protect believers from accidents, dangers, and evil forces. Prominent Muslim scholar Fazlur Rahman argues that the term "angel," strictly speaking, is not quite accurate for denoting the Spirit. For him, the Spirit is never

[24] A. Qara'i, personal communication via Facebook Messenger on July 5, 2021. This appears as the image of a Perfect Man in Q. 19:17.

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an angel (Gabriel) as traditionally understood by Muslims;[25] rather, the Spirit is the Spirit of Revelation who directly revealed the Qur'ān to the Prophet Muhammad without the need for any intermediary. Those hadith stories where the angel Gabriel is depicted as conversing directly with the Prophet and whose companions even saw him must be regarded as later fictions.[26] Rahman reiterates that the Spirit is a Person and describes the physical appearance of the Spirit 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 descended till he was (distant) two bows' length or even nearer. (Q. 53:5–12)

Rahman paraphrases "one vigorous" as "the one of powerful *sinews and strong muscles* (the Spirit) [who] taught him (Muhammad)" or describes the Spirit as one who is muscular and possesses extraordinary, almost suppressive, strength.[27]

In using the "We" form, the Qur'ān manifests that God breathed God's Spirit into Mary (Q. 21:91 and 66:12) and that the role of Gabriel was to announce (Q. 3:42, 45–46) the conception of the *Word* by the Spirit of Holiness.[28] It is solely God who acts, with no intermediaries, as it is ordained that the Holy Spirit shall grant the pure son when the Spirit said, "I am only a messenger of your Lord (*Rasuulu Rabbiki*) that I may give you (Maryam) a pure son" (Q. 19:19). For Catholics, God is the Holy Spirit who came down from heaven after Gabriel announced to Mary the good news that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk. 1:35).

The four *ruh* verses revealed at Medina make it impossible to substitute Gabriel for the Spirit like in this revelation: "We breathed

[25] Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 97.

[26] Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 97.

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

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

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into them [the generative parts] some of our Spirit (66:12, 21:91)."[29] Furthermore, the notion that Gabriel is the Spirit would mean that Gabriel "impregnated"[30] Maryam, making it awkward and problematic. If Gabriel is not the Spirit, who, then, is the Spirit? This is a dilemma for Muslims. For Christians, it is easy to allude that the Spirit in Surah 19 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. The worship of gods or anything else other than Allāh is blasphemous or *shirk* –a grave sin in Islam.

## The Islamic *Logos*: The Word from Allah Whose Name is Messiah (Q. 3:45)

The unraveling of the Word among adherents of faiths other than Christianity is the work of the Spirit. Christian evangelizers are tasked to share the story of Jesus whose life story shall resonate in all religious traditions as they relate with the humanity of Jesus and his universal message as defined in their own salvation history. The Word as the Messiah (Christ) is revealed in John 1:1–12 and in the Qur'ān:

> Behold the angels said, "O Mary verily Allah announces to you of a Word '*Bi-kalimat-in min-hu*' (of a Word from Him [Allah])—*ismu-hul Masiihu* '*Eisa-ibnu-Maryama*' (whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary)." (Q. 3:45–46)

This Qur'ānic verse affirms Christian theology in that the "Word" (*Kalimat*) or the *Logos* that became flesh is named Messiah, the Son of Mary (*Maryam um Eisa*). The confirmation of the shared affirmation of the identity of the "Word" is in the Preface of the Holy Mass: "He [Jesus Christ] is the Word through whom you made the universe." For Christians, *Logos* (Word) is the name of Jesus Christ in John 1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word

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

[30] Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 96 (Q. 66–67).

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was God … And the Word became flesh."[31] The Word who was there from the very beginning of creation is made finite and human in Jesus; the same Word who is not created but became flesh.

A Muslim interpretation aligned with Christian theology is that of Tabarsi, following the authority of Qatādah. Regarding the meaning of the designation of Jesus as a "word" from God, Tabarsi reports on the authority of Qatādah: "The word to which God refers as 'a word from Him' is His word 'Be.'"[32] A "Word" from Allāh means the Word is part of and inseparable from Allāh. This is seconded by Ibn Abbas who declares that "Jesus is the Word of God";[33] in Arabic, "*Bi-kalimat-in min-hu*" (of a Word from Him) (Q. 3:45). God thus called Jesus God's Word because he came into being through God's word. As part of Allah, he is inseparable.

*Logos* is both a proper noun and an imperative verbal command. God created with the Word: "Let there Be." In Biblical theology, "Be!" (*kun*) is God's creative "Word" as can be read in Genesis 1:3 and 6: "God said 'Let there Be' (*allahu sayakūnu hunāka*)."[34] Allah's divine command "*kun*" (Be!) is the response of the angel when Mary asked, "My Lord, how shall I have a son seeing no man has touched me?" Even so, God said, God wills what God wills. "When God decides on something, God simply says to it, *Be* (Kun), and it is" (Q. 3:47).

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

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[31] B. Vawter, "The Gospel According to John," in R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer, & R. Murphy, eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* Vol. 2 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 423.

[32] M. Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters* Vol. 2: *The House of 'Imran* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 131.

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

[34] Ayoub, *The House of 'Imran*, 13.

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> 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)

Irenaeus wrote that there is one Almighty God who made all things, both visible and invisible, by God's Word while showing at the same time through whom God created.[35] "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 already existed at the beginning of time.[36] As *Logos*, Word of God, He is co-eternal with God.

The *Logos* is uncreated in the same way that Muslims believe that the Qur'ān is uncreated. As such, Christ as Allah's Word is considered to be similar in status as the Qur'ān which is *Kalimatullah*, the Word of Allah. Muslims believe that the Qur'ān is uncreated and has always existed in heaven. Allah 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, however, the eternal *Logos* who is Christ did not become a book but became flesh in what Christians call the Incarnation.

There is a need to present a theological position to fill a gap in the theological discourse with other religions while avoiding condescension or imposing one's beliefs upon them. Although they received the Spirit at creation, ancient religions remain limited in their understanding of God's plan due to their sole reliance on scriptural texts which, in and of themselves, cannot fully reveal the plan of God. A deprived understanding will persist without the Holy Spirit revealing the "Word" (*Logos*) who is understood by Christians to be Jesus Christ. The "Word" embedded in scriptural texts must be revealed in God's fullness by the

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

[36] Vawter, "The Gospel According to John," 421.

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Spirit and not rely solely on human philosophical assent. In this light, the Old Testament runs parallel with the ancient religions but is unique in its prophecy of the Word as Christ, particularly in Isaiah, where the virgin birth and crucifixion of Christ are prophesied.

*Logos Spermatikoi in Non-Theistic Religions.* The seed of Christ as *Word* (*Logos*) has been active in history and present in peoples since the beginning, predating even the incarnation of the Word as revealed in John 1. Even without a direct revelation from God, Jesus Christ as *Logos*, the pre-existent second person of the Trinity, has been present in all the religions formed by humankind. We trace this teaching to Justin Martyr (100–165 CE) whose theology on the *Logos Spermatikos* is inseparable from the presence of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who sows the "seeds of the Word" present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ.[37] The seed of the *Logos* was in Asian cultures and religions even before the arrival of Christian missionaries. What earlier evangelizers like Francis Xavier and Matteo Ricci did was plant the seed of the Word into Asian cultures so Christ could be recognized within them (Jn. 1:10). Through baptism, Christians receive the grace of new birth in God the Father through His Son in the Holy Spirit, for those who bear God's Spirit are led to the Word, that is, to the Son, the pre-existent Son identified as the "Word" (*dabar*),[38] the Christ.

Given that the Holy Spirit is inseparable from Christ, the Spirit has been with the Word from the time of the Christ up to the present. It is in the stirring of the Holy Spirit that Christ is known by the various human religions. Only through the Holy Spirit will non-Christian believers get to know Christ. When they hear the stories of Jesus, and presuming they have been graced to hear and understand, they will find a correlation in their scriptures and tradition. This gives missionaries confidence that their proclamation of Christ as the Word is not totally alien to other religions and cultures.

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[37] Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 17; Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, no. 3.

[38] Irenaeus of Lyon, *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching* 7: SCh 62, 41–42.

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