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## A Bridge between Traditions: The Virgin Mary in Christianity and Islam

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## A Bridge between Traditions: The Virgin Mary in Christianity and Islam

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Simply turning on the television leads to a bombardment of sights and sounds from around world. The various channels dedicated to news, such as CNN, NBC, BBC, and so on, have allowed people see even the most remote areas of the globe right from their sofas. In an era when such information is heaped onto the public, sorting through the pile is often made a difficult task. When the population is exposed to constant sound bites of Arabs calling for the downfall of disbelievers or of U.S. criticism aimed at Muslim nations, a mindset of confusion results. Images of pastors calling for the burning of the Qur'an mirror the images of Muslim clerics calling for the burning of Western nations. At the center of it all is the public, stuck in a pile of animosity, unable to see above and beyond the hateful rhetoric of two supposedly opposite sides: Islam and Christianity. In this atmosphere of tension, stepping onto common ground is the most effective way to ease strained relations. Through their rich stories and accounts of history, Christianity and Islam can be shown to be intimately connected in many ways. The comparative stories of Mary in both traditions, for instance, offer a stark contrast to the conflicting portrayal of Islam and Christianity generated by the media. By focusing on Mary and her significance to both faiths, one can immediately see her as a much needed bridge between the two sides, one that calls not towards animosity, but towards love and mutual understanding."

\*\* Prize provided by



*M. Husain Bawany*



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## **\*\*A Bridge between Traditions: The Virgin Mary in Christianity and Islam**

Simply turning on the television leads to a bombardment of sights and sounds from around the world. The various channels dedicated to news, such as CNN, NBC, BBC, and so on, have allowed people to see even the most remote areas of the globe right from their sofas. In an era when such information is heaped onto the public, sorting through the pile is often made a difficult task. When the population is exposed to constant sound bites of Arabs calling for the downfall of disbelievers or of U.S. criticism aimed at Muslim nations, a mindset of confusion results. Images of pastors calling for the burning of the Qur'an mirror the images of Muslim clerics calling for the burning of Western nations. At the center of it all is the public, stuck in a pile of animosity, unable to see above and beyond the hateful rhetoric of two supposedly opposite sides: Islam and Christianity. In this atmosphere of tension, stepping onto common ground is the most effective way to ease strained relations. Through their rich stories and accounts of history, Christianity and Islam can be shown to be intimately connected in many ways. The comparative stories of Mary in both traditions, for instance, offer a stark contrast to the conflicting portrayal of Islam and Christianity generated by the media. By focusing on Mary and her significance to both faiths, one can immediately see her as a much needed bridge between the two sides, one that calls not towards animosity, but towards love and mutual understanding.

As Heather Abraham mentions in her article "Mary: A Bridge between Islam and Christianity," the regular path taken by those wishing to engage in Muslim-Christian dialogue is to "begin this discussion with the familiar patriarchs whose stories are told in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an... Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, or Jesus." <sup>1</sup> Choosing a comparative discussion of Mary, however, is surprisingly a path less trodden.

While Muslims understand the importance of Mary in Christianity, they often don't grasp her true significance and centrality to the faith. At the same time, many Christian ears would be shocked to hear of Mary's elevated status in Islam; her position is not just as one of the best humans, but as one of the most perfect creations, according to Islamic tradition. Her role in shaping both Christianity and Islam on so many levels, whether they are regarding personal dealings or devout beliefs in the miracles of God, is so great that it often goes unmentioned.

The perfection of Mary can be cited throughout classical literature and within the holy books, the Qur'an and the New Testament, but it is of little use to simply cite characteristics without acting to implement them in our own lives. When considering a study of Islam and Christianity, if the goal is to implement peace and unity, Mary is the perfect figure for both traditions to emulate and rally around.

Though reference to Mary serves as one way of bringing the two traditions together, it must be noted that a brief historical examination of Muslim-Christian relations also highlights the other side of the coin. Although ancient struggles such as the crusades and the Spanish inquisition have long passed, they have left a scar in both Muslim and Christian bodies. According to some sources, the crusades cost Europe over five million young men. Casualties on the Muslim side were equally distressing and the stories of atrocities experienced by both groups are used as rallying points by those looking to reopen sealed wounds. For instance, details of the now legendary first fall of Jerusalem in 1099 paint a gruesome picture of how hostile the groups have been to one another. According to the eye witness *Gesta Franco rum*, "the slaughter was so great that our men waded in blood up to their ankles." <sup>2</sup> The siege ended with the capturing of Jerusalem, but also with the massacre of 70,000 Muslims. <sup>3</sup>

The numerous verses on maintaining peace and righteousness in both the Qur'an and the Bible seem to have been forgotten during the mass killings in the Crusades. Whereas Psalm 34:14 instructs Christians to "[t]urn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it," <sup>4</sup> and verse 53 in chapter 17 of the Qur'an advises Muslims to "speak in a most kindly manner (unto those who do not share their beliefs)," <sup>5</sup> the joint actions of both groups at times in history have gone counter to the shared respect that should be prevalent between them.

On the other hand, recorded events also convey a direct picture of Muslims and Christians embodying the teachings of their holy books. The actions of Negus, for instance, clearly demonstrate the execution of biblical teachings even in precarious situations. As king of Ethiopia around 615 C.E., Negus was the first man to grant emigrating Muslims asylum from their persecutors. Muhammad, peace be upon him, knowing that Negus was a good Christian and a just ruler, allowed his followers to seek asylum in his lands. When the Meccans heard that a possible safe haven for

Muslims may have developed, they sent their own envoys to Ethiopia in order to demand the return of the asylum seekers. “The envoys had taken with them valuable gifts and had won over some of his clergy, they claimed that those Muslim living in the kingdom should be handed over to them because they had abandoned the religion of their forefathers, and their leader was preaching a religion different from their own and of that of the king”. **6** By telling Negus that these new men had already caused trouble in their own land, they were attempting to instill fear in his heart that they might cause turmoil in Ethiopia as well.

When Negus requested that the Muslims recite something from their book, Ja’far, the cousin of the Prophet, chose verses from the chapter on Mary:

After hearing these words, Negus decided to not only let the Muslims stay in Ethiopia, but vowed to protect them as well.

While Ja’far’s reference to those select verses may have been strategically motivated, the similarities between the verses of the Qur’an and the Gospel of Luke on the status of Mary are hard to ignore. It is evident that Mary was chosen by God right from the outset when God mentions in the Qur’an, “We sent unto her Our Spirit.” **7** It is well established that no human is bestowed this honor unless he or she has some extraordinary qualities. As the Gospel of Luke maintains, “the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.” **8** Though these verses clearly indicate that Mary had acquired an elevated status, they also beg the question as to how she achieved such a status. Upon further reading, it becomes apparent that the Mary of both the Bible and the Qur’an had one quality that God loved; total dedication and obedience to his word.

When the birth of Jesus is foretold to Mary in the Gospel of Luke, Mary displays an innately human quality and questions the logic of what has been told to her. When the angel tells her, “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end,” Mary responds by asking, “‘How will this be,’ [Mary asked the angel,] ‘since I am a virgin?’” **9**

Her initial questioning turns quickly into trust when she is told “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.” **10** At this point, Mary’s true nature and the

reason why she is chosen become apparent. She responds by saying “Let it be to me according to your word.” **11** Mary displays complete trust in God, and, as some would say, submission to God’s will.

The idea of submission should strike a note with all practicing Muslims. Etymologically, in fact, a Muslim is one who submits. The word “Muslim” is derived from the Arabic root as lama or “one who resigns” him or herself to God. **12** Mary’s submission to God, as noted in the Bible, has the potential to serve as a lesson for the many Muslims and Christians that doubt. Whether they doubt their own capabilities, their blessings, or their God, they should rest assured that they can lay all uncertainties to rest.

When the Bible mentions “for with God nothing will be impossible,” it is not only a direct message to Mary, but to the generations of people following her, to us. What is it that causes us to lose trust in God, to turn away from our accepting faiths and towards violence? As Mary initially demonstrates, it is our very nature. Unlike Mary, many of us, Muslim and Christian, have not been able to submit to God. Though Mary questions the logic of being given a son while remaining a virgin, she decides to cast aside her doubts and believe in the word of God. We, however, cling to our doubts and are consequently never able to let ourselves fall into God’s trusted hands.

In addition to trust in God, both Islam and Christianity highlight the importance of chastity through the story of Mary. In the Qur’an, God says, “And (God sets forth the example for those who Believe) of Mary, the daughter of Heli, who guarded her chastity, so We blew into it through Our Angel (i.e., Gabriel), and she believed in the words of her Lord and His Scriptures and was of the devoutly obedient.” **13** Though obedience is highlighted in these verses, the mention of Mary’s chastity must also be duly noted. Mary’s example must be taken as a whole for Muslims; while she was obedient, she was also pure.

Whether it is purity of faith or body, the Qur’an addresses this important statute for Muslims in verses such as these. In recognition of the difficulties of remaining chaste, God indicates that the value of this quality, if maintained, is essential for devoutness. Today, we are faced with the crisis of amorality and loose behavior. Contrary to what these verses have highlighted, both Christian and Muslim faiths are being challenged by a new generation that is lax when it comes to keeping one’s mind and body in a state of virtue. Although Muslims have been presented with these verses, they often overlook them. By constantly reminding not only their own faith members, but also those of other faiths, Muslims can invite their human brothers and sisters toward a common path of righteousness.

Often with imagery similar to that found in the Bible, the Qur’an goes on to portray the childhood of Mary.

According to Qur’anic verses, Mary was born to the family of Heli. Mary’s mother, Hannah, who was barren and

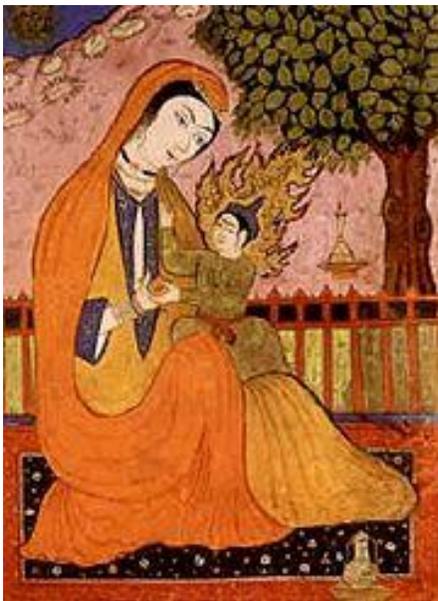
longed for a child, made a vow to God that she would offer her child into the service of God. When God answered her invocation and she conceived, she was disappointed that her child was a female. God rebuked her and he then chose her daughter, Mary, to be amongst the greatest of all creations. Hannah invoked God to protect her child from Satan, and God accepted. From the outset, Mary was chosen by God for greatness and purity.

As narrated in one of the authentic compilations of prophetic sayings, the Prophet Muhammad mentioned, “None are born except that Satan touches them upon their birth, due to which it comes out screaming from its touch, except Mary and her son (Jesus)”. **14** This, among other sayings, showcases how revered Mary is in the Muslim tradition. Although the Prophet’s heart had been purified by God, neither he nor other previous prophets were exempt from satanic touch. Mary, however, was the epitome of purity even as a child. From Qur’anic narrations, as Mary grew, her status remained just as elevated in God’s eyes.

As a testament to her status with God, the Bible and Qur’an both make mention of Mary’s angelic visitors and the miracles that were performed around her. At the time when Mary was told of her pregnancy, she received the news from the archangel Gabriel. As mentioned in the Gospel of Luke, the angel greeted her with the words “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you” (1:28). Similarly, the Qur’an notes how, as a child, Mary always seemed to have a source of food. “Whenever Zachary entered the chamber, he found her provided with sustenance. He said, ‘O Mary! From where did you get this?’ She replied, ‘It is from God.’ Surely God bestows sustenance upon whom He pleases without measure.” **15** The greatest miracle of Mary, as noted in both books, is the fact that she conceived Jesus while remaining a virgin. While Muslims and Christians may disagree over the aforementioned details of Mary’s childhood and adolescent life, this latter fact is undisputed within and amongst both traditions. As the Qur’an and Bible both mention, Mary was visited by the Angel to reveal that she would conceive. After initially questioning, she accepted the heavenly message, thereby not only cementing her place as one of the greatest creations of God, but setting the precedent of submitting to God even in times of unease.

Religious differences are frequently used to justify the propagation of violence and hatred. To lessen the divide, religious similarities can be openly addressed and promoted. When it comes to Islam and Christianity, nothing unites the traditions more than their complementing outlooks on Mary. As the mother of Jesus, a central figure to both religions, Mary is an obvious choice to focus dialogue on. Mary, however, is such an encompassing individual that she can stand alone when it comes to interfaith introspection. She is the outline of the major tenets of both faiths: submission, patience, piety, and so on. Even when she is enduring the pains of labor, she embodies the firm belief

that both faiths stress must be placed in God. Moreover, Mary's story shares many common details among both traditions. While differences must be acknowledged, the similarities provide a plentiful amount of opportunities to connect with one another on a religious level. At the same time, applying the values that she identified with will allow us to connect on a human level. Just as Mary submitted to God, we must also submit to our common sense of humanity. By using her as a bridge between two faiths, we will finally be able to see the other side, see that it's not Islam versus Christianity, it is Islam *and* Christianity.



Mary and Jesus in a Persian Miniature



Virgin Mary nurtured by a palm tree,  
as described in the Qur'an

## Notes

1. Abraham, Heather. "Mary: A Bridge between Islam and Christianity." ReligionNerd.com.

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3. "Deaths in the Crusades." Twentieth Century Atlas - Death Tolls.

Web 20 Nov. 2011. <<http://necrometrics.com/pre1700a.htm>>.

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7. Qur'an 19:16-21

8. Luke 1:30

9. Luke 1:34

10. Luke 1:35-37

11. Luke 1:38

12. "Muslim etymology." Online Etymology Dictionary.

Web 22 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=Muslim>>.

13. Qur'an 66:12

14. "Mary in Islam (All Parts)." The Religion of Islam.

Web 22 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/25/viewall/>>.

15. Qur'an 3:37

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The Holy Qur'an            <http://www.quranexplorer.com/quran/>

The New Testament        <<http://www.biblegateway.com>>