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DEVOTION TO OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL SUCCOUR
AND ISLAM¹

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1. – *Islam and its Devotion to Mary*

As World War II lurched toward a close of hostilities, US Redemptorist military chaplains crisscrossed the Pacific Ocean. Travelling continuously from one place to another they preached the Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour wherever they could. It took root in Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, India, Australia and New Zealand. The great upsurge in popular piety surprised the missionaries, as if people were meeting their true mother for the first time. What happened opened a new horizon for evangelisation. Centuries before Nestorians had brought Christianity to Asia. They sailed to India and journeyed to China along to the Silk Road. In the Middle Ages the Franciscans returned to China; later Jesuits and other religious orders followed in the wake of the colonial powers. Mary seemed to keep on calling, appealing and stretching out for Asia to embrace her. The Perpetual Novena occupies a special place in this history. It is a devotion invented in the USA in Saint Louis during the Great Depression for people in deep material and spiritual need. It extended the Redemptorists' own practice of hon-

¹ The author would like to thank Prof. Valentino Cottini, Preside of the Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamica, Prof. Michael Fuss of the Gregorian University and Father Ibrahim Seydoo C.Ss.R for their assistance and helpful insights.

ouring God's Mother especially on Saturdays to all people, most of all the poor. The service in the church lasts just thirty minutes including, preaching, hymn singing, litanies the reading of petitions and thanksgivings written by the devotees, and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. At war's end, the Novena brought numerous conversions to Catholicism in overwhelmingly non-Christian lands. This flow has never ceased. The icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour has penetrated deeply into the religious psyche and imagination of these ancient cultures. Their sacred mother and child images, their inherent reverence for women, had been preparing a place of hospitality to welcome Mary and her divine Child for millennia.

2. – *From Wonder to Welcome*

The spontaneous, joyful manner in which Muslims flocked to the Novena rather bewildered the missionaries. Taken by surprise they did not know what to make of it. It soon became clear that perhaps more than other Asian religions Muslims recognised their own mother in this icon. They claimed Mary as their very own, affectionately invoking, "Our Lady" along with Catholics. In fact, they seemed to think she belonged to them more than to any other group. That was a great enigma. Had not their seminary training warned missionaries that Muslims were heretics and that their law punished attempted conversion with death? They were quite ignorant of the treasures of the Aramaic Church Fathers, or of the history of the Church's mission into Central Asia, and more than anything else of Islam. Their "gut-feeling" was that Muslims should not even be in the Church building, suspecting that they doubted Mary's role in salvation in much the way Protestants do.

The pastoral wisdom of Christ's Gospel prevailed for, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mk 9: 40). Consequently, the missionaries welcomed Muslims, and strove never to offend their faith or put anybody's life in danger through proselytism. The Redemptorists proceeded to made foundations in Iraq, Lebanon and Africa, contacting the Tuareg in the Sahara desert. They became aware that, "Jesus is mentioned by name in the Quran more than Muhammad, and that Mary is mentioned more

times in the Quran than in the New Testament. Both Jesus and Mary play important roles not only in the Quran but also in Muslim piety and spirituality”.²

This essay seeks to shed but a little light on this situation, to help in understanding its background without confronting all its important dimensions. The pivotal question would be: how can Catholics and Muslims share devotion for a common mother without a common faith? Further, which Muslim beliefs support such reverent devotion toward Mary?

3. – *Change in Attitude*

The Catholic attitude to Muslims has changed radically. Until the nineteenth century the “magisterial tradition” treated Jews and Muslims not as pagans, idolaters or schismatics, but as heretics who knowing the truth of the Gospel had rejected it. Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* 16, and the Declaration of the Church’s Relationship to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate* 3 formed the turning point in the Church’s attitude. Historically Christians thought that Muslims had drawn upon the Old and New Testaments in order to pervert the truth of the Gospel. The main objection to Muhammad was that he had changed, “the true tradition in the Qur’an to serve his own personal ends”.³

What triggered this transformed attitude? A new approach with a different conception of both Jews and Muslims flowed from a fresh appreciation of the theological category of “invincible ignorance”. Although its application to non-Christian religions has a long tradition behind it, it only entered the Church’s magisterium in 1854 with Pope Pius IX’s allocution *Singulari Quadam*.⁴ It arose from a clear historical sensibility that non-

² John L. ESPOSITO, *The Future of Islam*, Oxford University Press 2010, 40.

³ Gavin D’COSTA, “Vatican II on Muslims and Jews”, in *The Second Vatican Council. Celebrating its Achievements and the Future*, G. D’Costa and E. J. Harris (eds.), Bloomsbury, London 2013, 107. This essay is an enlightening study of the issue.

⁴ See Ilaria MORALI, “Salvation, Religions, and Dialogue in the Roman Magisterium”, in *Catholic Engagement with World Religions*, K.J. Becker and I. Morali (eds.), Orbis, New York, 122-125. For a theological assessment of Is-

Christians were such not because of some wilful rejection of the Christian faith or because they had perverted the truth. This released the category of “non-Christian” from previous limits and restrictions. It was now possible to acknowledge in a positive way the truths that non-Christians held and practiced. This is the attitude that shines through the Council documents. LG 16 teaches: “the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place among these are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind”. Gavin D’Costa notes that N.A 3 adds three new elements to LG. First, esteem for the moral life within Islam. Second, “the importance of the Virgin Mary to Muslims indicates a shared inheritance and spiritual practice. Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet, his virgin mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke.” Third, a clear acknowledgement of the enmity between Christians and Muslims in the past. The Council urged both religions to move forward, to strive for mutual understanding and promote social justice, peace and freedom for all peoples. In his commentary, Roman Siebenrock describes the Council’s position on Islam as “a revolution”, because, for the first time since the seventh century after Christ, it recognised Islam as a form of monotheistic faith. It cites Pope Gregory VII’s letter describing God’s attributes as one, living, existent in himself, merciful and almighty. The Declaration emphasises Muslims’ devotion toward God who has spoken to us. It mentions neither the Quran nor the prophet Muhammad by name.⁵ Calling him a prophet would imply that the Quran was divinely inspired and contained revelation in the strict sense. Therefore, “The Council opens the door to a genuine appreciation of God’s activity in Judaism and Islam”,⁶ providing a platform for dialogue and good relations between the two religions.

lam, see M. BORRMANS, “Islam as It Understands Itself”, *ibid.*, 487-508.

⁵ “Nostra Aetate kommentiert von Roman A. Siebenrock” in *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, Band 3, P. Hünemann and B. J. Hiberath (eds.), Herder, Freiburg 2005, 659-661.

⁶ D’COSTA 112.

For historians the Islamic religion is neither simply a derivation of, nor purely a deviation from Christianity.⁷ As a religion it deserves to be examined and assessed in its own right. It will not be possible to analyse the relationship of Islam and Christianity exhaustively in this essay.⁸ Here, however, are some opinions that illustrate what is at stake, and some complications.

4. – *Christianity and Islam*

The Scottish Episcopalian priest and professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies in the University of Edinburgh, the late William Montgomery Watt, made considerable breakthroughs in our understanding of Islam. He showed that Muhammad was a noble character and no charlatan, never implying that everything he proclaimed was right and correct. Montgomery Watt's major insight was that Muhammad's life fell into two periods according to the offices he exercised. From 610 to 622, he was a prophet in Mecca. Then from the *Hijra* or Migration to Medina until his death in 732 he was a statesman.⁹ This helps explain why the abrogation of earlier Quranic verses in favour of others derives from the situation in which Muhammad found himself. He is weak while the Meccan polytheists are persecuting the first Muslims, and at this period the Quran is favourable and benign toward Jews and Christians. Muhammad came into armed conflict with the local Jewish tribes after founding the first Islamic state in Medina. Later, as Islam spread to the North he fought the Christian tribes also. At the beginning the Quran is tolerant toward Christians and Jews, even welcoming them as members of the same faith, proclaiming freedom of religion. Later it advocates the use of coercion and even violence, and the abolition of every religious differences in Arabia. Muhammad's basic reason

⁷ See Marco SCHÖLLER, "Christentum", in *Kleines Islam-Lexikon*, R. Elger (ed.), C. H. Beck, München 2008, 78. "Christliches Gedankengut ist im Koran nachweisbar; trotzdem scheint die Annahme einer Entstehung des Islam aus dem C. aus heutiger Sicht abwegig".

⁸ For an introduction to Islam, see Terence KENNEDY, *What every Catholic needs to know about Islam*, St Pauls, London 2014.

⁹ William MONTGOMERY WATT, *Muhammad. Prophet and Statesman*, Oxford University Press, London 1974.

for taking this stance was that neither Jews nor Christians could accept his claim to be a prophet.

5. – *Difficulties*¹⁰

This throws light on the Quran's refusal to accept the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity, especially in their relation to Christ and Mary. In polemics with the pagans in Mecca, the Quran numbers Mary among the members of the Trinity.

The God will say: 'Jesus son of Mary did you ever say to the people: worship me and my mother as gods beside God' (Sura 5: 116).

In other places in the Quran, Jesus, Mary and Joseph together form the Trinity. The Arabs were used to imagining a pagan divinity with his family, the sons and daughters he had begotten. Regarding the Incarnation, they could not conceive generation as other than a physical act producing offspring. Objections to the Trinity became explicit at the time of Muhammad's military campaign against the Christian tribes to the North. Muslims never succeeded in grasping what Orthodox Christianity meant by Trinity, three divine persons in one God. They could only picture this doctrine as tritheism, dividing God within Himself. For them the Trinity was heretical because it directly contradicted the Quran's strict monotheism.¹¹

Protestant scholars in Austria have highlighted a further difficulty. Muslims readily associate the title of *Theotókos*, God-bearer or Mother of God, with pagan goddess worship. The Austrian Protestants argued not only that the Arab tribes in Northern Arabia were in contact with heretical Monophysite sects, but also with pagan Copts who had continued to adore ancient Egyptian female divinities. Perhaps that nourished the Islamic

¹⁰ W. MONTGOMERY WATT, *Muslim-Christian Encounters*, Routledge, London 1991, 9-16.

¹¹ Regarding monotheism, Denys TURNER, "Christians, Muslims and the Name of God: Who Owns It, and How Would We Know?", in *Do We Worship the Same God?*, Miroslav Volk (ed.), William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2012, 18-36.

rejection of “the three”.¹² Nevertheless, those who recognise the Quranic “mother of Jesus” in the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help experience no barrier in honouring her and do not identify her with a female divinity.

6. – Abrogation

The principle of abrogation used in interpreting and exegeting the Quran applies to the other revealed “Books” also. The Quran abrogated all previously revealed books: the lost “Book” given to Abraham, Moses’ Torah, David’s Psalms, and Jesus’ Gospel. Muhammad is “the seal of the prophets”, who closed the cycle of these biblical figures. All the revealed books came down with the same message from God. The Muslims claim that Jews corrupted the Torah and Christians the Gospel. Only the Quran is the normatively reliable word of God. They treat it as “God’s speech”, his actually speaking his will in the Arabic text.¹³ Islam is “the religion of the Book” in a sense that the Catholic theology of prophesy never imagined. Therefore, Luke’s Gospel has no validity for them regarding Jesus’ birth and infancy. The Quran admits no antecedents, no history on which it relies.

7. – Knowledge of Christianity in Mecca

What knowledge of Christianity did the people of Mecca actually possess when revelations started coming down to Muhammad? Montgomery Watt sums up wisely:

A Jew or Christian reading the Qur’an, and finding so many Biblical persons referred to, tends to think this shows a wide fa-

¹² See *Christen und Muslims im Gespräch. Eine Verständigung über Kernthemen der Theologie*, S. Heine, Ö. Özsoy, C. Schwöbel, A. Takim (Hrsg.), Gütersloher Verlaghaus, Gütersloh 2014, 75-76.

¹³ Roberto TOTTOLI, *I profeti biblici nella tradizione islamica*, Paedeia, Brescia 1999, p. 33, no. 1, averts us to the tension between faith and reason. Regarding research into the Jewish, Christian and other sources of the Quran, he notes: “Queste ricerche, seppur assai meritevoli per i materiali raccolti e analizzati, hanno spesso avuto il torto di ignorare sistematicamente le caratteristiche specifiche del testo coranico e di dare per scontato che il Corano fosse opera di Muhammad, assunto decisamente blasfemo agli occhi dei musulmani.” A scientific study needs to take the claim of divine revelation seriously and analyse its rationally.

miliarity with the two religions. Careful examination, however, shows that the opposite is the case. Despite the numerous Biblical figures mentioned, the Qur'an shows remarkably little knowledge of the essentials of the Jewish and Christian religions other than belief in God and the Last Judgement.¹⁴

The Arabs possessed no translation of the Bible or of the New Testament.¹⁵ Although in contact with various Christian communities, they were unable to comprehend and much less unravel the fierce Christological and Trinitarian disputes then splitting the Church. We need to acknowledge that Islamic theology completely lacked a notion of redemption and consequently denied that Christ actually died on the Cross. Muslims think that God had to save Jesus from a violent death. They cannot comprehend how Christ could will to suffer death "for us and our salvation". According to William Montgomery Watt, "Again there is nothing in the Qur'an about the primary work of Jesus, whether it is called the inauguration of the Kingdom of God or the redemption of the world or by some other name".¹⁶ The Quran's account of the creation in Genesis lacks any mention of original sin and liberation from evil by expiation.

8. – Arab Objections to Christianity

Historically the Arabs found three notable weaknesses in Christianity that made it unacceptable. 1. Accepting Orthodox Christianity implied submission to Byzantium, something politically impossible. 2. The Greek Church's official teaching was so abstract that it was beyond the grasp of ordinary people, much less non-believers. And 3. The Byzantine rejection of the Copts, the Jacobites and the Nestorians certainly favoured conversions to Islam. Being outside the Roman (Byzantine) Empire the Arabs could never become Orthodox. Montgomery Watt's judgement is most sobering and calls for deep reflection.

¹⁴ William MONTGOMERY WATT, *A Short History*, OneWorld, Oxford 2002, 73.

¹⁵ This topic has recently been examined by Prof. Gabriel Said Reynolds of Notre Dame University, IN in the USA. Among his many contributions see, *The Qur'an and its Biblical Subtext*, Routledge, London 2010.

¹⁶ William MONTGOMERY WATT, *Muslim-Christian Encounters*, Routledge, London 1991, 23-24.

Essentially the decision of the Great Church that these were heretics was a failure to make due provision for cultural diversity among Christians. Christians today should be thinking seriously about the fact that in its homeland their religion has virtually been replaced by Islam, and should be asking whether God has brought this about because of Christian failures.¹⁷

Our author insists that in Christian-Muslim dialogue the relationship between the Bible and the Koran is relevant to understanding the roles of Jesus and Mary in the two faiths.¹⁸

9. – *Opportunities for Dialogue*

Quite a few Christian theologians consider that Sufism, with its mysticism and spirituality, presents the best chance for dialogue with Islam. Karl-Joseph Kuschel from Tübingen has proposed an “abrahamitic ecumenism” between the three great monotheisms.¹⁹ According to Giulio Basetti-Sani, Abraham’s blessing descends in two streams: to the Jews and Christians through Isaac, and to Islam through Ismael. By sharing in God’s election, Islam becomes part of God’s providence for humanity. Others, following Vatican II’s approach to other religions, view Islam as a *praeparatio evangelica* that is hidden secretly in the Gospel. Louis Massignon was famous for his very positive appreciation of Islam. Basing his research on the great Sufi mystics, he discovered that the experience of compassion led them to understand suffering for others as liberating. He began to think of Islam as somehow already participating in the “mystery of Christ”. He believed that Mary, by mediating this experience of compassion, became a bridge for Muslims to Christianity.²⁰ Montgomery Watt points out that, “Massignon and Faucault were both converted

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-8

¹⁸ *A Short History*, 73.

¹⁹ Abraham is seriously the model of faith for Muslims. Awareness of his importance for Arab culture came through Jewish and Christian converts to Islam, zealous to justify their new belief. Previously Abraham had been unknown in Arabia. Giuseppe RIZZARDI, *Liberare il dialogo*, Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, Trapani 2010, 48-49.

²⁰ RIZZARDI, p. 52 says, “il riferimento al ‘mistero di Cristo’, non ancora creduto e professato, grazie al ‘mistero mariano, creduto e professato’”.

to Christianity by the witness of Islam to the one true living God".²¹ Their contact with Islam became not just a way of sanctifying Islam, but a path Christian sainthood for them.

10. – *A Word of Caution*

Before attempting to analyse the Quranic texts on Mary a word of caution on the current state of Islamic studies is relevant. Research into the text of the Quran has made immense progress, especially with the *Corpus Coranicum* project in Germany. Nevertheless, Angelika Neuwirth from the Freie Universität, Berlin, notes that Christian scholars tend to take St. John Damascene's tremendously negative assessment of Islam at face value, especially the claim that Islam was heretical. It is true that the Quran relies on and cites Christian sources that the early Ecumenical Councils of the Church condemned. These Councils laid the foundation of Orthodoxy. Such doctrinal statements, however, are not necessarily a true historical account of what actually happened. Professor Neuwirth, points how little we understand of the Arabian tribes' perception of centuries of strife among Christians. We need a wider knowledge of the total Middle Eastern context at Muhammad's time to do that. Most Arabians could not perceive these disputes through Christian eyes nor from the point of view of Christian faith. To think of the origins of Islam exclusively in terms of heresy is therefore deeply questionable.²²

11. – *The Question of Origins*

Hans Küng has popularised an interpretation of Islam's origins based on earlier German scholarship. The form of Christianity best known to the people of Mecca was that of a small sect of Judeo-Christians who rejected the definitions of Nicaea, Ephesus and Chalcedon. They maintained that Jesus was the Messiah but in no way a divine person. The exegete Joachim

²¹ *Muslim-Christian Encounters*, 29.

²² Consult Professor Neuwirth's three volumes exegesis of the Quran, as well as her talk, about to be published, on the state of Islamic studies at the International Conference *RAHIM. Muslim and Christian Studies on Mercy*, Pontifical Urbaniana University, Rome, October 14th, 2016.

Gnilka examined this issue in terms of the three monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.²³ Islam establishes its superiority not only from chronology, the last born assimilating the good of the others, but also from theology. Islam holds that it alone preserves the original revelation of the true religion made to Adam that Jews and Christians have corrupted. In Muslim thinking and belief the Quran cannot depend on any source other than God. They cannot accept modern critical methods that deconstruct the text in order to reconstruct the history of its composition, both oral and written.

Gnilka has studied the word used in the Acts of the Apostles for a Judeo-Christian group, called Nazarenes in English. The Quran employs this word most often to identify and designate Christians.²⁴ Lacking essential documentation, he was unable to demonstrate a continuous history that unmistakably connected this Judeo-Christians group with the Ebonite heresy and the Nazarenes. Like most experts on early Christianity, Gnilka points to the Quran's plentiful citations alluding to the Pseudo-Gospels and heretical literature regarding Mary. The two suras mentioning Mary at length contain the highest concentration of such references in the Quran.²⁵ The main ones are the Arab Gospel of the Infancy of Christ, the Proto-Gospel of James or simply the Gospel of James (chapters II, III, IV, VII, XI), and the Pseudo-Gospel of Matthew (chapters II, IX, XX) as well as folklore.²⁶

12. – *The Quranic Texts on Mary*²⁷

Two bodies of text in the Quran describes Mary's role in Islam (Sura 19: 16-34, and 3: 35-51). Luke's Gospel resonates

²³ He has two books on our theme. *Die Nazerener und der Koran. Eine Spurensuche*, Herder, Freiburg 2007, and *Bibel und Koran. Was sie verbindet, was sie trennt*, Herder, Freiburg 2004.

²⁴ See *Die Nazerener und der Koran*, chapter 2, "Nazerener – Nazoräer – Christen".

²⁵ Besides authors already cited, see B. PIRONE, *La moschea e l'Islam*, Portalupi editore, Casale Monferrato 2004, 145-177.

²⁶ Maurizio Borrmans, *Islam e Cristianesimo. Le vie del dialogo*, Edizioni Paoline, Milano 1993, 75, note 2.

²⁷ Throughout this article I have used N. J. Dawood's translation, *The Koran*, Penguin Classics, London 2006.

throughout these narratives but the voice of the Apocrypha is much louder. When Christians meditate on the Quran's profile of Mary they find stories woven around five major events in her life²⁸. Her conception and nativity (3: 33-37), and preservation from Satan's touch. Her retreat into the Temple (19: 16-17; 3: 37b, 42-44). The angelic Annunciation of her motherhood, (19: 17b-21; 3: 45-51). The birth of Jesus (19: 23-26). Her defence against an "outrageous calumny" (19: 27-33). Lastly, her destiny to be with her son a "sign" to all humanity.

13. – *The Meccan Text*

According to Adel Theodore Khoury, Muhammad in 615 AD sent eleven families to Abyssinia to escape persecution in Mecca. They won the Christian Negus of Abyssinia's sympathy by reciting the story of Mary from the Quran.²⁹ Mary established the common ground between them. The title, "mother of Jesus" was the proof of Jesus' virginal conception, there being no father.

And you shall recount in the Book the story of Mary: how she left her people and betook herself to a solitary place to the east.

We sent to her Our spirit in the semblance of a full-grown man. And when she saw him she said: 'May the Merciful defend me from you! If you fear the Lord, [leave me and go your way].'

'I am but your Lord's emissary,' he replied, 'and have come to give you a holy son.'

'How shall I bear a child,' she answered, 'when I have neither been touched by any man nor even been unchaste?'

'Thus did your Lord speak' he replied. "That is easy enough for Me. You shall be a sign to mankind and a blessing from Ourself. Our decree shall come to pass.' "

Thereupon she conceived him, and retired to a far-off place. And when she felt the throes of childbirth, she lay down by the trunk of a palm-tree, crying: 'Oh, would that I had died before this and passed into oblivion!'

²⁸ See Marie Farrell, RSM's exegesis, "The Blessed Virgin Mary and the Quran", in *Australasian Catholic Record*, 80 (2003) 4, 439-450.

²⁹ A. T. KHOURY, *Wer war Muhammad?*, Herder, Freiburg 1990, 35. For his exegesis see his, *Der Koran. Arabisch-Deutsch*, 10 vols. Gütersloher Verlaghaus, Gütersloh 1993-1998.

But a voice from below cried out to her: 'Do not despair. Your Lord had provided a brook that runs at your feet, and if you shake the trunk of the palm-tree it will drop fresh ripe dates in your lap. Therefore eat and drink and rejoice; and should you meet any mortal say to him: "I have vowed a fast to the Merciful and will not speak with any man today."

Carrying the child, she came to her people, who said to her: 'Mary, this is indeed a strange thing! Sister of Aaron your father was never a whore-monger, nor was your mother a harlot.'

She made a sign to them, pointing to the child. But they replied: 'How can we speak with a babe in the cradle?'

Whereupon he spoke and said: 'I am the servant of God. He has given me the Book and ordained me a prophet. His blessing is upon me wherever I go, and he has exhorted me to be steadfast in prayer and to give alms as long as I shall live. He has exhorted me to honour my mother and has purged me of vanity and wickedness. Blessed was I on the day I was born, and blessed I shall be on the day of my death and on the day I shall be raised to life.

Such was Jesus the son of Mary. This is the whole truth, which they still doubt. God forbid that He Himself should beget a son! When He decrees a thing He need only say: 'Be' and it is.

14. – *The Medinan Text*

This text is found in the Sura named "Mary". In Medina the title "mother of Jesus" is the proof that Jesus is of purely human origin. The Quran here sets down the foundations for Islam's veneration of Mary. Many scholars believe that Muhammad confirmed this reverence toward her, when after finally defeating the Meccans, he entered the Kaba to destroy the idols but left the images of Mary and Jesus untouched.³⁰ She, like Jesus, is a human person and not divine.

Remember the words of Imrān's wife. 'Lord,' she said, 'I dedicate to Your service that which is in my womb. Accept it from me. You alone hear all and know all.'

³⁰ See FARELL, 59, "Perhaps aware of Muhammad's gesture in retaining an image of Mary and Jesus... Muslim women frequent Christian shrines." Massimo CAMPANINI, *Islam*, La Scuola, Milano 2013, 46. Giuseppe RIZZARDI, *'Īsā ibn Maryam. Lo sguardo dell'Islam su Gesù*, Centro Ambrosiano, Milano 2007, 70.

And when she was delivered of the child, she said: 'Lord, I have given birth to a daughter' – God well knew of what she was delivered: the male is not like the female – 'and have called her Mary. Protect her and all her descendants from Satan, The Accursed One.'

The Lord graciously accepted her. He made her grow a goodly child and entrusted her to the care of Zacharias.

Whenever Zacharias visited her in the Shrine he found that she had food with her. 'Mary,' he said, 'where is this food from?'

'It is from God,' she answered. 'God gives without measure to whom He will.'

"Thereupon Zacharias prayed to his Lord, saying, 'Lord, give me of Your own grace upright descendants. You hear all prayers.'

And as he stood praying at the Shrine, the angels called out to him saying: 'God bids you rejoice in the birth of John, who will confirm the Word of God. He shall be princely and chaste, a prophet and a righteous man.'

'Lord,' said Zacharias, 'how shall I have a son when I am now overtaken with old age and my wife is barren?'

'Such is the will of God,' He replied. 'He does what He pleases.'

'Lord' he said, 'vouchsafe me a sign!

'For three days and three nights,' He replied, 'you shall not speak to people except by signs. Remember your Lord always; give glory to Him evening and morning.'

And remember the angels' words to Mary. They said: 'God has chosen you. He has made you pure and exalted you above womankind. Mary, be obedient to your Lord: bow down and worship with the worshippers.'

This is the account of a divine secret. We reveal it to you. You were not present when they cast lots to see which of them should have charge of Mary, nor were you present when they argued about her.

The angels said to Mary: 'God bids you rejoice in a Word from Him. His name is the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary. He shall be noble in this world and in the world to come, and shall be one of those who is favoured. He shall preach to the people in his cradle and in the prime of manhood, and shall lead a righteous life.'

'Lord,' she said, 'how can I bear a child when no man has touched me?'

He replied: 'Even thus. God creates whom He will. When He decrees a thing He need only say: 'Be,' and it is. He will instruct him in the Scriptures and in wisdom, in the Torah and the Gospel, and send him forth as an apostle to the Israelites. He will

say: 'I bring you a sign from your Lord. From clay I will make for you the likeness of a bird. I will breath into it, and by God's leave, it shall become a living bird. By God's leave I shall heal the blind man and the leper, and raise the dead to life. I shall tell you what to eat and what to store up in your houses. Surely that will be a sign for you, if you are true believers. I will come to confirm the Torah which preceded me and to make lawful for you some of the things you are forbidden. I bring you a sign from your Lord: therefore fear God and obey him. God is my Lord your Lord: therefore serve Him. That is a straight path.'

15. – *Christianity and the History of the Islamic Theology of Mary*

The Islamic "Ave Maria" runs this way: "God has chosen you. He has made you pure and exalted above womankind" (3: 42). Christians experience mixed emotions hearing this verse. They rejoice that the Quran acknowledges the mother of Jesus the Messiah, but are saddened by the limits and restrictions it places on her and her Son's identity, mission and ultimate destiny.

Islam ascribes Mary a privileged dignity above all woman.³¹ She is honoured under the title of *siddiqa*, "the woman of truth." she who is holy because of her submission to God when he revealed that she was to become a mother without male intervention. A number of conspicuous medieval Muslim theologians, for instance Qurtubi and Ibn Hazan in Andalusia, and Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani in Palestine, considered her a prophet. This is also true in many *hadith*, that is, traditions concerning Muhammad's life. Not all scholars shared this opinion, but they did agree that she was God's "friend" because of her closeness and intimacy with him. She is the model of the ideal Muslim woman because her submission recalls the significance of the word "Islam".³² Scholars underline her dedication to prayer. Mary, therefore, in the Quran, in the theology, spirituality and popular piety of Islam is the model of what every believing women should be, not

³¹ Maurizio BORRMANS, *Islam e cristianesimo*, Edizioni Paoline, Milano 1993, 75-84 on Mary.

³² See Lejla DEMIRI, "Maryam nel Corano", in *Donne, Chiesa, Mondo, Mensile dell'Osservatore Romano*, no. 57, maggio 2017, 14-18, especially 14.

because she is *Theotòkos* but because she is the mother of Jesus, the Messiah.³³

A venerable tradition spanning centuries celebrates Mary in visual art, in shrines constructed in her honour, and in poetry and song.³⁴ The Quran uses the word “election,” exclusively regarding Mary, twice: first, for her conception that, however, does not correspond with our “Immaculate Conception”: second, for her mission as mother of the Messiah. Under Zacharias’ care, she retreated to the Temple to “a solitary place to the east”, suggesting the niche where the Quran is housed in a mosque. She became the model of faith for Muslim women. They aspire to imitate her dedication and modesty as in liturgical prayer they face toward Mecca. The “Annunciation” takes a dialogical form. God brought about Jesus’ conception directly in Mary’s virginal womb by the very power he used at the Creation. There is no hint of Incarnation here. Jesus is not the Word made flesh, but a mere man destined to be the prophet foreshadowing Muhammad. The Quran defends Mary’s perpetual virginity against the calumnies of the Jews, for example. Christians ask what the Quran might intend by “Word” and “Spirit” while denying the Trinity. The Quranic account of Jesus and Mary’s life just does not fit into the Judeo-Christian notion of the history of salvation. This can become a real tripping stone for those who try to read the Quran through Christian eyes.

Islam has a “blind spot” regarding redemption. It cannot make sense of a just man dying for sinners. God spared Jesus the humiliation of crucifixion, elevating him to himself only to return on Judgment Day. “We made the son of Mary and his mother a sign to mankind” (23: 50; 21: 91). A sign demonstrates God’s providence, the abundance of his blessings. The legitimacy of Jesus’ birth depends totally on Mary’s virginity. Jesus and Mary together constitute the greatest sign of God’s blessing upon humanity. For Christians this sign points to divine filiation, the mystery of “the Mother of God”, a title that Islam can never dare to pronounce.

³³ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁴ Susan SERED, “Rachel, Mary, and Fatima”, in *The Routledge Reader in Christian-Muslim Relations*, Mona Siddiqui (ed.), London 2013, 428-440.

16. – *Islamic Devotion to Mary*

This leaves a spiritual vacuum at the heart of Islam³⁵. Muslims pray five times a day with words and gestures that demand not personal devotion, but only rightly performed ritual. For fourteen hundred years the Virgin Mother of God has been present to and accompanied Islam. And over a thousand million Muslims can be said to know her today. Women in particular seek her intercession for a safe confinement and childbirth. Muslims seek healing through her intercession and flood to Christian shrines in the Middle East and elsewhere that offer exorcism against physical and spiritual afflictions. Still their popular devotion and feeling for Mary is not than that of Catholics. Christ's Mother can fill the "piety void" that many Muslims experience. That is why Muslims flock in such crowds to the Perpetual Novena and to Marian shrines throughout the world in their every need and necessity. They share their sorrow, suffering and agony with Our Lady of the Passion who leads them along the Way of the Cross meet Christ her Son, the Redeemer they seek in their deepest heart.

History linked the fortune of our icon to Islam, first in Cyprus with the invention of this icon type in 1192 AD, and then in Crete where Andrea Rizzo gave the final configuration to this type of icon in the fifteenth century. The type is associated not with Byzantine power but with moments of agony in the life of simple, down trodden folk.³⁶ That really explains why the image of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour has spread in both East and west. Today God's grace touches the hearts of Christians and Muslim alike as they pray before her image. Mary is a "sign" to both religions directing them to Christ, her Son. Muslims too share in the benefits of eternal salvation even while "invincibly ignorant" of his identity and mission. Mary, the Mother of the most abandoned, will never forsake her children.

³⁵ Samil KHAMIL SAMIR, "Miloni di musulmani devoti alla Madonna e desiderosi di esorcismi," in *AsiaNews*, Agosto-settembre 2013, 29-32.

³⁶ For this history see Matthew John MILLINER's dissertation, *The Virgin of the Passion: Development, Dissemination, and Afterlife of a Byzantine Icon Type*, Princeton University, November 2011. This dissertation may be consulted at [http://www.academia.edu/3614025/The Virgin of the Passion Development Dissemination and Afterlife of a Byzantine Icon Type](http://www.academia.edu/3614025/The_Virgin_of_the_Passion_Development_Dissemination_and_Afterlife_of_a_Byzantine_Icon_Type).

SUMMARY

It is most of all after the Second World War that the Redemptorists propagated the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Asia. To their great surprise, Muslims were not indifferent when novenas in honour of Maria were organized, remembering that her name is mentioned several times in the Koran. What is more, since *Lumen Gentium*, the attitude of the Church toward Muslims has changed. The rigour of their monotheism and their high moral standards have been recognized. Which does not mean that one does not recognize the differences. For a Muslim the Jews have betrayed the Torah and the Christians have betrayed the Gospel, both of which show their slight knowledge of Holy Scriptures. One fact is little known: the rejection by Byzance of the Copts and the Nestorians favoured the number of conversions to Islam. As for Maria, Louis Massignon thinks that she has become a bridge between Christians and Muslims.

The article then cites and compares the text of Mecca on Mary and that of Medina. Still this Islamic "devotion" toward the *Theotokos* does not hide their total incomprehension of the "Word made flesh", the very heart of Christianity.

RÉSUMÉ

C'est surtout après la seconde Guerre Mondiale que les missionnaires Rédemptoristes ont propagé la dévotion à Notre-Dame du Perpétuel Secours en Asie. À leur grande surprise, les Musulmans ne sont pas restés insensibles lors des Neuvaines organisées en l'honneur de Marie, se souvenant que son nom apparaît plusieurs fois dans le Coran. En outre depuis *Lumen Gentium*, le regard de l'Église a changé vis-à-vis des Musulmans. On reconnaît la rigueur de leur monothéisme et leurs standards de vie morale. Ce qui n'empêche pas de souligner les différences. Pour un Musulman les Juifs ont trahi la Torah et les Chrétiens l'Évangile, ce qui montre leur peu de connaissances des Livres Saints. Un fait peu connu: le rejet par Byzance des Coptes et des Nestoriens a favorisé nombre de conversions à l'Islam. Quant à Marie, Louis Massignon estime qu'elle est devenue un pont entre Chrétiens et Musulmans.

L'article continue en citant et comparant le texte de La Mecque sur Marie, puis celui de Médine. Cependant cette «dévotion» islamique envers la *Theotokos* ne parvient pas à cacher l'incompréhension totale devant le «Verbe fait chair», le cœur même du Christianisme.