

Mary, Jesus and Christianity:

An Islamic Perspective



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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

*In the Name of God,
the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful*

Foreword

Islam, like other Abrahamic faiths, believes in the unity of God. God is One, He has no partner and there is nothing like Him. God is Simple, He has no parts or constituents. He is the Beginning and the End. He is the only Creator and He is the only true object of worship. The obvious result of this concept of God is that the universe must be harmonious and consistent. Indeed, one of the signs of the unity of God is the fact that there is no separation or gap in any part of the world. The Qur'an says: "Had there been in them [the heavens and the earth] gods other than God, they both would have been in disorder." (21:22)

This harmony and consistency in divine creation extends to His revelations. Divine messages communicated to people through His messengers must also be harmonious. If they are revealed by the same God to recipients (human beings) who have the same nature and the same fundamental needs in order to show them the path towards the best possible perfection and happiness, then they must be similar in nature and identical in essence. Of course, depending on varying circumstances and factors some details may change.

Thus, Muslims believe in the consistency of all divine revelations and prophecies. They confirm and believe in all the Prophets and consider all believers in God to be members of the same community of faith. The Unity of God manifests in

the unity of His revelations and must be echoed in the unity of all believers in God. Islam brought unity and solidarity for those who were suffering greatly from enmity and hostility (3:103). This act of uniting people is highly esteemed as a divine act (8:63). On the contrary, the action of some people such as Pharaoh was to disunite people (28:4). The Qur'an warns believers that if they start disputing with each other they will weaken and as a consequence they will be defeated (8:46). In fact, the call for unity is not limited to Muslims. The Qur'an invites all people of faith such as Christians and Jews to unite their efforts and concentrate on the common ground between them (3:64).

One of the best means of achieving this unity and brotherhood is to know each other, to overcome the historical prejudices that prevent objective understanding between people and to build upon commonalities. According to what Imam Ali has said: "People are enemies of what they do not know".

In this spirit, the following essay has been written. It was first published in *Catholics and Shi'a in Dialogue: Studies in Theology and Spirituality* edited by Anthony O'Mahony, Wulstan Peterburs and Mohammad Ali Shomali (London: Melisende, 2004) and then, with slight changes, was published by the Institute of Islamic Studies, affiliated to Islamic Centre of England. It is hoped that this publication may serve as a humble means to bring even closer the followers of two great world religions: Islam and Christianity who constitute half of the world's population. To this end, efforts have been made to present a brief and precise picture of Mary and Jesus in Islam and to explain why Muslims and Christians should engage in genuine and productive dialogue.

Let us hope and pray that day by day this sense of unity and solidarity intensifies and helps us to achieve the purpose of religion: to know God and to establish a just and equitable society in this world.

Mohammad Ali Shomali

November 2007, Shawwal 1428

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It is very difficult to write about people to whom one is personally attached. As someone who has been brought up in an Islamic culture, for me, Mary and Jesus have always been two of those heroic figures whose lives are to be taken as great examples and role models. I remember that when I was living in Tehran as a teenager I used to attend a local mosque for congregational prayers. After congregational prayers in mosques, someone usually recites some verses of the Qur'an or some supplications. As recommended in some hadiths, in our mosque the last two verses of the second chapter of the Qur'an were very frequently recited and day after day I would listen to them and reflect on them. The first of these two verses reads as follows:

The Messenger believes in that which has been revealed unto him from his Lord and (so do) the believers. Each one believes in God and His angels and His scriptures and His messengers—
“We make no distinction between any of His messengers” - and they say: “We hear, and we obey. (Grant us) Your forgiveness, our Lord. Unto You is the journeying”. (2:285)

Like many other verses of the Qur'an this verse places great emphasis on the uniformity of the Prophets, their scriptures and their missions. It makes one think that one belongs to a great community of faith which includes all believers throughout the history of mankind who have followed the same path. Therefore, for me, all the champions of this path are very much respected. Among them some are more outstanding. Jesus was one of the five greatest Prophets¹ and Mary was chosen above all the women of the world (3:42) and introduced as an example for those who believe (66:12). In this paper I will firstly try to briefly address some aspects of the personalities of Mary and Jesus from an Islamic perspective and then I will refer to Muslim – Christian relations.

Perhaps more than any other mother and child, Mary and Jesus were very much interrelated and connected to one another. It is very interesting that whilst talking about the Prophets in Chapter 21 ("the Prophets"), when it comes to Jesus the Qur'an talks about Mary and then, through her, about Jesus and says:

And (remember) her who guarded her chastity:
We breathed into her of Our Spirit and We
made her and her son *a sign* for all peoples.
(21:91)

Here the Qur'an refers to Mary and her son as "*a sign for all peoples*".² Why? A typical interpretation of this verse is given by 'Allamah Sayyid M H Tabataba'i who holds that the sign here is the birth of Jesus from Mary. Therefore, Jesus and Mary are two sides of the same sign. He adds that the fact that Mary is mentioned in the first place alongside the Prophets (although she was not a prophet) and then that she and her son are introduced as "a sign", is a great honour for Mary.³

I think it is true that this birth was very special and can definitely be considered as “a sign” of God. As we know, the Qur’an confirms the virgin birth of Jesus as follows:

‘O Mary, God gives you good news of a word from Him, whose name shall be the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, honoured in this world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near to God. He shall speak to the people from his cradle and in maturity, and shall be of the righteous.’

She said: ‘O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man has touched me?’ He said: ‘Even so; God creates what He will. When He decrees a thing He says to it, “Be!” and it is.’ (3: 43-47)

Certainly Jesus was born miraculously through the same power which had brought Adam into being without a father:

Truly, the likeness of Jesus with God is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, and then said to him, ‘Be!’ and he was. (3:59)

However, verse (21:91) seems to refer to something more, since it indicates that God “made *her and her son* a sign” and not just the birth. It is striking that elsewhere the Qur’an again refers to Mary and Jesus as “a sign”:

And We made the son of Mary and his mother as a Sign: We gave them both shelter on high ground affording rest and security and furnished with springs. (23.50)

Mary and Jesus were very close to each other. It was not accidental that Mary could have a son like Jesus. Therefore, let us discover who Mary was.

Mary

Mary is the only woman who is mentioned by name in the Qur'an. There is an entire chapter in the Qur'an entitled "Maryam". She is mentioned 34 times in the Qur'an, much more than in the Bible. Mary's birth was very special. Her parents Imran (Joachim in Christian tradition) and Hannah were old and a long time after their marriage had still not had a child. God revealed to Imran that they would be given a blessed son who would be able to heal the sick, revive the dead and who would be an apostle for the Israelites. Imran informed Hannah about this son and therefore everyone was expecting a son to be born.⁴ When Hannah became pregnant, she wanted to make her son a special devotee of God.⁵ Let us follow the story from the Qur'an:

Behold! The wife of Imran said: "O my Lord! I do dedicate unto You what is in my womb for Your special service, so accept this of me for You hear and know all things."

When she was delivered she said: "O my Lord! behold! I am delivered of a female child!" And God knew best what she brought forth, "and nowise is the male like the female. I have named her Mary and I commend her and her offspring to Your protection from the Evil One the Rejected."

Right graciously did her Lord accept her: He made her grow in purity and beauty; to the care

of Zachariah was she assigned. Every time that he entered (her) chamber to see her he found her supplied with sustenance. He said: "O Mary! whence (comes) this to you?" She said: "From God: for God provides sustenance to whom He pleases without measure."⁶ (3:35-37)

For me, one of the interesting points in this story is that Imran and Hannah were told that they would have a son, the Messiah. Instead, they had Mary, the mother of that son. Whilst it is true that the son of one's daughter is sometimes considered as one's own son, however I think this is yet another indication of the close relationship between Mary and Jesus as if Mary is the beginning of Jesus. It is also interesting that, to the surprise of many if not all, Hannah's promise of making her son a devotee of God was accepted by God in Mary and for the very first time a girl was allowed to stay in the Temple.⁷

Not only was Mary born into a pious family but she was also brought up under the care of Prophet Zachariah in such a pure and holy place as the Temple.⁸ She herself tried to attain purity and piety by wholeheartedly serving God. In what follows, I will try to refer briefly to some of the merits or achievements of Mary that have made her an example:

- a. Chastity;⁹
- b. Obedience;¹⁰
- c. Truthfulness;¹¹
- d. Being purified by God;¹²
- e. Being chosen by God above all women;¹³
- f. Being addressed by angels;¹⁴
- g. Receiving food from God;¹⁵
- h. Annunciation of Jesus.¹⁶

From amongst the above merits, I think that two are the most important and encompass the rest, these being to be most truthful and to be purified. Indeed, these are two signs of perfect people.

According to the Qur'an, there are four groups of people who stand above all others. These are the people upon whom God has bestowed His blessings and at least ten times a day in his prayers every Muslim asks God to guide them towards the path that they are on, the Right Path (1:6 & 7). The Qur'an says:

And whosoever obeys God and His Apostle will be in the company of those upon whom God has bestowed blessings, of the Prophets, the most truthful, the witnesses, and the righteous: ah! what a beautiful fellowship! (4:69)

Thus, the most truthful (*al-siddiqin*) come immediately after the Prophets in rank.¹⁷ In fact, to be most truthful is so important that sometimes Prophets are praised as being most truthful.¹⁸ The truthfulness alluded to here is much more than truthfulness in one's speech. In this case truthfulness requires truthfulness in speech, in intentions and beliefs and in actions. In other words, it involves correlation and compliance between one's heart, mind, tongue and deeds.¹⁹ Mary is the only lady who is mentioned in the Qur'an as being the most truthful (*siddiqah*) although of course, Islamic hadiths mention other ladies, especially Fatimah the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, as being of the most truthful.

Regarding purification, one should note that the whole point of the spiritual journey is to purify one's self. All the Prophets have come to teach and purify human beings.²⁰ Since God is the Purest of the pure whoever aspires to gain proximity to

Him must purify themselves. This purification must start with one's own determination to follow the right path. After having done their best and thus having proved their true determination to purify their soul, God will then guide and send His favours to such a servant in a special way and purify them. Thus, there are two stages: one is the stage of purifying oneself (this is for *mutatahhirūn* or *muttahharūn*) and the other is the stage of being purified by God (this is for *mutahharūn*). One of the qualities of the purified (*mutahharūn*) is that they have access to the secrets of divine revelation.

For example, we read in the Qur'an:

That this is indeed a Qur'an most honourable

In a Book well-guarded

Which none shall touch but those who are pure.

A Revelation from the Lord of the Worlds.²¹
(56:77-80)

It is in this sense that the Qur'an tells us about the purification of Mary (3:41) and the purification of the Household of the Prophet (*Ahlul Bayt*) by God.²²

Now let us refer briefly to some aspects of the Islamic view about Jesus.

Jesus

Jesus is mentioned in the Qur'an more than ninety times and there is a rich literature in Islamic hadith on Jesus, including references to his sayings and his conduct.^{23 24} We have already discussed his virgin birth and that he was one of the five greatest Prophets who are known as "*Ulu al-ʿAz̄m*" meaning those of great determination. According to Islamic tradition,

each of these five had a universal mission.²⁵ To be a prophet and, indeed, to be one of the five greatest Prophets, implies very lofty qualities, such as sinlessness, being purified, and even infallibility.²⁶ Not only was his birth miraculous as a sign of the omnipotence of God, but so too was his childhood. He was able to speak when only newborn:²⁷

He shall speak to the people from his cradle and in maturity, and shall be of the righteous. (3:46)

During his mission, Jesus was able to work miracles as a sign of the truth of his mission and that he was supported by God. The Qur'an refers to this fact in several verses, such as:

Behold! the disciples said: "O Jesus the son of Mary! Can your Lord send down to us a table spread with food from heaven?" Said Jesus: "Fear God if you have faith."

They said: "We only wish to eat thereof and satisfy our hearts and to know that you have indeed told us the truth; and that we ourselves may be witnesses to the miracle.

Said Jesus the son of Mary: "O God our Lord! send us from heaven a table set (with viands) that there may be for us for the first and the last of us a solemn festival and a sign from You; and provide for our sustenance for You are the best Sustainer (of our needs).

God said: "I will send it down unto you: but if any of you after that resists faith I will punish him with a penalty such as I have not inflicted on anyone among all the peoples. (5:112-115)

Elsewhere the Qur'an refers to some other miracles of Jesus:

I have come to you with a sign from your Lord:
I make for you out of clay, as it were, the figure
of a bird, and breathe into it and it becomes a
bird by God's leave. And I heal the blind, and
the lepers, and I raise the dead by God's leave.
(3:49)

Then will God: "O Jesus the son of Mary!
Recount my favour to you and to your mother.
Behold! I strengthened you with the Holy Spirit
so that you did speak to the people in childhood
and in maturity. Behold! I taught you the Book
and Wisdom the Law and the Gospel. And
behold! You make out of clay as it were the
figure of a bird by My leave and you breath into
it and it becomes a bird by My leave and you
heal those born blind and the lepers by My
leave. And behold! You bring forth the dead by
My leave. And behold! I did restrain the
Children of Israel from (violence to) you when
you did show them the Clear Signs and the
unbelievers among them said: "This is nothing
but evident magic". (5:110)

The Qur'an also says that Jesus was the promised Messiah:

Behold! the angels said "O Mary! God gives you
good news of a word from Him, whose name
shall be the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary,
honoured in this world and in the Hereafter, and
one of those brought near to God. (3:45)

The above verse also indicates that Jesus was “a Word of God,” honoured in this world and in the Hereafter, and of those who are nearest to God (*muqarrabin*). Since the only way to become near to God is to worship and serve Him, Jesus was a true “servant of God” (*‘abdullāh*) (19:30), “blessed” or “a source of blessing” (*mubārak*) (19:31), and “a statement of truth” (*qawl al-Haqq*) (19:34). In verse (4:171), Jesus is described as “an Apostle of God”, “His Word” which He bestowed on Mary and “a Spirit (proceeding) from Him” (*rūh-an minh*). Jesus was also given clear signs and “aided with the Holy Spirit”:

Those apostles, We have exalted some of them above others: of them are some unto whom God has spoken and some he has raised in degrees (of honour); And we gave Jesus the son of Mary clear Signs and aided him with the Holy Spirit...(2:253)

Muslim – Christian Relations

Having referred to some aspects of the personalities of Mary and Jesus, now it is the time to address Muslim-Christian relations. There are different ways to handle this increasingly important issue. In what follows, I would like to address the issue in an indirect way, which is by explaining what I frequently tell my Christian friends about how I, as a Muslim, am very comfortable and pleased with dialogue and solidarity between Muslims and Christians. The reason for such a statement lies in the following facts:

1. We both believe in and worship the same God who is the One, the Merciful, the Benevolent, the Omnipotent, the Omniscient and the Omnipresent. Muslims and Christians love God immensely and try to devote themselves to Him and gain

proximity to Him. We read in the Psalms (42:2), “My soul thirsts for God, the God of life; when shall I go to seek the face of God?” and in the Qur’an (2:115), “To God belong the East and the West; wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God.” There is a very rich and significantly similar spirituality in both religions.

2. We both believe in human freewill and their responsibility and accountability before God and share the same understanding of key basic moral values.²⁸

3. We both believe in Resurrection and God’s treatment of human beings with justice and mercy on the Day of Judgement.

4. We both have high esteem for the gift of reason and conscience and at the same time recognise our need for divine revelation on our path towards happiness in this world and hereafter.

5. We both believe that all human beings come from the same father and mother, that is, Adam and Eve. We have a great sense of fellowship and deny any sort of racism.²⁹ We believe in the dignity of all human beings and reject any unjust treatment of mankind.³⁰ We appreciate the value of human life as a great divine gift.

6. We both believe in Prophethood and share a long history of Prophecy, right from the very beginning of the history of mankind.

7. We both have great respect for Prophet Abraham and we take him as a role model and, indeed, as “the father of all who believe.”

8. We both have great reverence and love for Mary and her son, Jesus, upon them be peace. We believe in his virgin birth and await his second coming.

9. We both share great concerns about the challenges of living a life of faith in today's world, caused by the contemporary culture of materialism and secularism.³¹

10. I believe in a complete harmony between all divine revelations and prophecies. There has never been any rivalry or enmity between the Prophets or between their true followers. Indeed, Islam, which is in essence entire submission to God, is the religion of all Prophets. Prophet Muhammad confirmed all previous Prophets including Jesus and he himself was prophesised by them.

11. As a Muslim I have no need to deny Jesus or his mission. Indeed, to be faithful to my own religion, I must believe in all Prophets and revelations. The Qur'an asks Muslims to declare their faith in previous Prophets and revelations:

Say: "We believe in God and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes and in (Books) given to Moses, Jesus and the Prophets from their Lord; we make no distinction between one and another among them and to Allah do we bow our will (in Islam)". (3:84)

12. To me, there is no need to deny or cover up the gifts of Jesus or the valuable qualities of Christianity. These are all signs of the greatness of the same God. These are all divine

blessings that increase my sense of richness and for which I must be very thankful.

13. I have no need to compromise my faith in order to enter into a genuine, sustainable and fruitful dialogue with Christians. Indeed, it is the Qur'an itself which calls for such dialogue with all adherents of Abrahamic faiths. Thus, for me, entering into such a dialogue and building upon commonalities is rooted in the Qur'an and is not just a fashion or a formality.

14. The Qur'an shows great affection for Christians because of their humility, their search for truth and their sympathy with Muslims. For example, we read in the Qur'an:

... and you will find the nearest among men in love to the believers (to be) those who say: "We are Christians:" because there are among them priests and monks, and because they are not arrogant. When they listen to that which has been revealed unto the Messenger, you see their eyes overflow with tears because of their recognition of the Truth. (5:82 & 83)

15. Through my close and intimate relationships with many Christians I have come to the conclusion that the Qur'anic description and praise of the Christians at the time of Prophet Muhammad can be witnessed in Christendom today. There are sincere, truth-seeking, humble and sympathetic Christians who have devoted their lives to God and I see no reason why I should not take these people as real representatives of Christianity instead of those who call for separation, enmity and fighting between believers and who are far removed from the practice of the commandment to love. Unfortunately today it is very easy to be deceived. There are people who are called "Muslims" or "Jews" or "Christians", but by no means can one

judge about their faiths by looking at their behaviour. And this becomes worse if there is a deliberate attempt to misrepresent the life of faith in general and certain religions in particular.

16. It helps me very much to see that my partners in dialogue reciprocate the love and respect that I have for them and their faith. Here I would like to refer briefly to the Christian understanding of Islam and illustrate the fact that these relationships of respect and love are already established.³² Since this work is specifically concerned with the dialogue between Shi'i Islam and Roman Catholicism, I will refer to Catholic sources below.³³

Attitudes of the Roman Catholic Church towards Islam and Muslims can be summed up as follows:

A. Willingness for dialogue and cooperation with Muslims:

There has been an openness in the Church in general and especially in the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican Council II towards non-Christian religions, especially Abrahamic religions.³⁴ Many attempts have been made, especially in the last few decades, towards productive dialogue between Muslims and Christians in order to reach mutual understanding and in order to build bridges between the two parties for working together to meet the challenges that threaten the faith community and humanity as a whole.

On the significance of this dialogue, Pope John Paul II says:

The Catholic Church wishes to pursue a sincere and fruitful interreligious dialogue with the members of the Jewish faith and the followers of Islam. Such a dialogue is not an attempt to impose our views upon others. What it demands of all of us is that, holding to what we believe,

we listen respectfully to one another, seek to discern all that is good and *holy* in each other's teachings, and cooperate in supporting everything that favours mutual understanding and peace. (Pope John Paul II, To Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders, Jerusalem, 23 March 2000)

B. High regard for Muslims: Regarding the high regard and respect of the Church for Muslims, one may refer to the following documents:

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth,(5) who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. (*NOSTRA AETATE*)

C. Recognizing salvation for Muslims: The Church believes that there is no monopoly over salvation:

The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 841 from *Lumen Gentium*, No. 16)

D. Recognizing Islam as a sister faith and Muslims as sisters and brothers in faith: Not only does the Church allow for the salvation of Muslims, but it also regards Islam as a genuine expression of the faith of Abraham:

They have, like you, the faith of Abraham in the one, almighty, and *merciful* God. (Pope John Paul II, To the Catholic community in Ankara, No. 2, 29 November 1979)

Your God and ours is the same, and we are brothers and sisters in the faith of *Abraham*. (Pope John Paul II, To the participants in the Colloquium on "Holiness in Christianity and Islam," 9 May 1985)

E. Respect for Prophet Muhammad: Naturally the respect of the Church for Islam is not limited to its followers, the Muslims. It also extends to Prophet Muhammad and the values about which he preached. As Cardinal Tarancon, President of the Spanish Bishop's Conference at the 1977 International Muslim-Christian Conference in Cordoba has put it:

How is it possible to appreciate Islam and Muslims without showing appreciation for the Prophet of Islam and the values he promoted? Not to do this would not only be a lack of

respect to which the [Vatican] Council exhorts Christians, but also neglect of a religious factor of which account must be taken in theological reflection and religious awareness.³⁵

I think that now it is clear that Christians and Muslims are very close to one another, they share a great deal in common and there is no reason why there cannot be a strong sense of unity between them. Indeed, as we saw above, there are many reasons that call on them to come together and work together for the betterment of mankind.

Note:

¹ For example, see *Usūl al-Kāfi*, Vol. 1, p. 175, Hadith Number 3. Elsewhere I have written: "The Qur'an mentions twenty-five of the Prophets and states that there were many more.(40:78) Through the indications of hadiths, Muslims believe that there have been 124,000 Prophets. Amongst those mentioned in the Qur'an are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Aaron, Ezekiel, David, Solomon, Jonah, Zachariah, John the Baptist, Jesus and Muhammad. Among them, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad had universal mission and brought new codes of law. They are called, "*Ulu al-'Azm*" meaning those of great determination". [M A Shomali (2003), *Discovering Shi'i Islam*,(Qum: Jami'at al-Zahra), p. 43]

² This does not mean that from another perspective each of them independently cannot be considered as a sign of God. For example, in the verse (19:21) God says that He wishes to appoint Mary's son as a sign for mankind and a mercy.

³ See *Al-Mizan fī Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Vol. 14 (Qum: Isma'iliyan, 1972), p. 317.

⁴ Ayatollah Nasir Makarim Shirazi, *Qissihā-ye Qur'an* (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, 2001), p. 323.

⁵ The Arabic term which is used in the Qur'an is 'mu^oarrar', which means freed (from all worldly affairs and especially dedicated to God's service).

⁶ It was this statement from Mary that inspired the elderly Zachariah to pray to God and ask for a child. Immediately after the above verses the Qur'an says:

There did Zakariya pray to his Lord saying: "O my Lord! grant unto me from You a progeny that is pure; for You are He that hears prayer!"

While he was standing in prayer in the chamber the angels called unto him: "God does give you glad tidings of Yahyā (John) witnessing the truth of a Word from God and (be besides) noble chaste and a Prophet of the (goodly) company of the righteous."

He said: "O my Lord! how shall I have a son seeing I am very old and my wife is barren?" "Thus" was the answer "God does accomplish what He wills." (3: 38-40)

⁷ Some exegetes of the Qur'an have said that a sign of God's acceptance of Mary was that she was freed from menstruation so that she did not have to leave the Temple. Cited in Makarim Shirazi, p. 324.

⁸ According to Islamic tradition, Imran had died before the birth of Maryam.

⁹ In addition to the verse (21:91) that was mentioned before, one may refer to the following verse:

And God sets forth as an example to those who believe the wife of Pharaoh ...

And Mary the daughter of Imran who guarded her chastity; and We breathed into her (body) of Our spirit; and she testified faithfully to the truth of the words of her Lord and of His scriptures, and was of the obedient. (66:11 & 12)

¹⁰ "she ...was of the obedient." (cf. 66:12)

¹¹ "she Mary testified faithfully to the truth of the words of her Lord and of His scriptures" (Ibid.)

“Christ the son of Mary was no more than an Apostle; many were the Apostles that passed away before him. His mother was a truthful woman. They had both to eat their (daily) food. See how God makes His Signs clear to them; yet see in what ways they are deluded away from the truth!” (5:75)

¹² “ ‘Behold!’ the Angel said, ‘God has chosen you, and purified you, and chosen you above the women of all nations’.” (3:42)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Every time that he entered (her) chamber to see her he found her supplied with sustenance. He said: ‘O Mary! whence (comes) this to you?’ She said: ‘From God: for God provides sustenance to whom He pleases without measure.’ (cf. 3:37)

¹⁶ We have already mentioned some of the verses of the Qur’an about the Annunciation of Jesus. Here I would like to refer to a more detailed account of his birth from the Chapter Mary:

And make mention of Mary in the Scripture, when she had withdrawn from her people to a chamber looking East,

And had chosen seclusion from them. Then We sent unto her Our spirit and it assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man.

She said: Lo! I seek refuge in the Beneficent One from you, if you are God fearing.

He said: I am only a messenger of your Lord, that I may bestow on you a pure son.

She said: How can I have a son when no mortal has touched me, neither have I been unchaste!

He said: So (it will be). Your Lord says: It is easy for Me. And (it will be) that We may make of him a sign for mankind and a mercy from Us, and it is a thing ordained.

And she conceived him, and she withdrew with him to a place.

And the pangs of childbirth drove her unto the trunk of the palm tree. She said: Oh, would that I had died before this and had become a thing of naught, forgotten!

Then (one) cried unto her from below her, saying: Grieve not! Your Lord has placed a rivulet beneath you,

And shake the trunk of the palm tree toward you, you will cause ripe dates to fall upon you.

So eat and drink and be consoled. And if you meet any mortal, say: Lo! I have vowed a fast unto the Beneficent, and may not speak this day to any mortal.

Then she brought him to her own folk, carrying him. They said: O Mary! You have come with an amazing thing.

Oh sister of Aaron! Your father was not a wicked man nor was your mother a harlot.

Then she pointed to him. They said: How can we talk to one who is in the cradle, a young boy?

He spoke: Lo! I am the servant of God. He has given me the Scripture and has appointed me a Prophet,

And has made me blessed wheresoever I may be, and has enjoined upon me prayer and almsgiving so long as I remain alive,

And (has made me) dutiful toward my mother, and has not made me arrogant, miserable.

Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive!

Such was Jesus, son of Mary: (this is) a statement of the truth concerning which they doubt. (19: 16-34)

¹⁷ Members of each category enjoy all the merits of the lower categories.

¹⁸ For example, the Qur'an says: "Also mention in the Book (the story of) Abraham: he was a truthful man a prophet". (19:41)

¹⁹ For example, see verse 2:177.

²⁰ For example, see verse 62:2.

²¹ Commenting on the above verse, A. Yusuf Ali writes:

It is a Revelation described by four characteristics. (1) It is most honourable, karim, which implies, besides the fact that it is worthy of receiving honour, that it confers great favours on those who receive it. (2) It is well-guarded, maknun; precious in itself, and well-preserved in its purity... (3) None but the clean shall touch it, -dean in body, mind, thought, intention, and soul; only such can achieve real contact with its full meaning. (4) It is a Revelation from the Lord of the Worlds, and therefore universal for all.

²² “God’s wish is but to keep away the uncleanness from you, O people of the House! And to purify you a (thorough) purification” (33:33)

²³ Jesus is mentioned in the Qur’an in different ways, sometimes by his proper name, sometimes by his titles or attributes. For example, the term ‘Isā (Jesus) is mentioned 25 times, al-Masīh 11 times, son of Mary 33 times, al-Nabí (the Prophet) once, Rasūl (the Apostle) 3 times.

²⁴ For example regarding Jesus’ life of simplicity see *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermon 159, p. 324:

“If you desire I will tell you about Jesus son of Mary. He used a stone for his pillow, put on coarse clothes and ate rough food. His condiment was hunger. His lamp at night was the moon. His shade during the winter was just the expanse of earth eastward and westward. His fruits and flowers were only what grows from the earth for the cattle.”

²⁵ For example, Sayyid M H Tabataba’i writes: “Verily, Jesus was one of Ulu al-‘Azm like Moses and they were sent for all people of the world.” (Tabataba’i, Vol. 3, p. 216)

²⁶ According to Shi’i theology, infallibility of the Prophets encompasses both their activities surrounding their mission and their personal life.

²⁷ We have referred in footnote 16 to the verses of Chapter 19 indicating the actual words spoken by him as a newborn baby.

²⁸ “We think that all people, but especially Muslims, can share with us the values that we have received from Jesus: total obedience to the will of God,

witness given to the truth, humility in behaviour, control of one's speech, justice in one's actions, mercy shown in deeds, love towards all, pardon granted for wrong done, maintaining peace with all brothers and sisters." (Cardinal Francis Arinze, Message to Muslims for the End of Ramadan 2000, No. 4)

²⁹ "This means that religion is the enemy of exclusion and discrimination, of hatred and rivalry, of violence and conflict." (Pope John Paul II, To Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders, Jerusalem, No. 4, 23 March 2000) See also *Catechism of the Roman catholic Church*, No 842.

³⁰ Dr George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury:

In neither of our faiths is God a subject of idle intellectual curiosity. We are concerned with the living, loving God who brought all things into being and who seeks to bring his creation to its proper fulfilment, with the human family living together in justice and peace. It is this God whose guidance we seek and whose glory we serve. (*The Road Ahead: A Christian Muslim Dialogue*, p. X)

³¹ "They [Christians] must look at the profound transformation which is taking place among nations and work hard so that modern man is not turned away from the things of God by an excessive preoccupation with modern science and technology..." (Second Vatican Council, Decree on the church's missionary activity, *Ad Gentes*, 7 December 1965, No. 11, 13.)

"As believers, we do not deny or reject any of the real benefits which modern developments have brought, but we are convinced nevertheless that without reference to God modern society is unable to lead men and women to the goal for which they have been created. It is here too that Christians and Muslims can work together, bearing witness before modern civilisation to the divine presence and loving Providence which guide our steps. Together we can proclaim that he who has made us has called us to live in harmony and justice. May the blessing of the Most High accompany you in your endeavours on behalf of dialogue and peace." (Pope John Paul II, To the delegation of the World Islamic Call Society, Rome, 15 February 1990)

³² It is true that there have been sad moments in the history of the encounter between Christians and Muslims. However, there have also been many cases of happiness in their life together. Unfortunately this side of the coin is rarely noticed. For example, right at the beginning of Islam, Muslims who

had emigrated to Ethiopia were supported by Najjashi (the word 'negus' is also used), who was a Christian king. The Canadian Jesuit Ovey N Mohammed writes: "In keeping with the example of Muhammad in dealing with the Christians of Najran and the teaching of the Qur'an that 'there is no compulsion in religion' (Q 2:256), Christians were permitted to remain in the territory of Islam through the making of treaties with the Muslim authorities. Many chose to do so rather than migrate to Christian lands where persecution in the name of orthodoxy was widespread." (p. 32) He also adds later: "It should be noted that before the rise of colonialism, Christians living in Muslim countries enjoyed, on the whole, a measure of toleration the like of which cannot be found in Europe until quite modern times." (p. 41)

³³ It has been noted by many writers that in addition to general similarities between Islam and Christianity there are more similarities between Shi'i Islam and Roman Catholicism. For example, see James A. Bill and John Alden Williams, "Shi'i Islam and Roman Catholicism: An Ecclesial and Political Analysis," in *The Vatican, Islam, and the Middle East*, ed. Kail C. Ellis (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1987) and Ovey N. Mohammed, S.J., *Muslim-Christian Relations: Past, Present, Future* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999). Among the similarities, the following can be listed:

- a. The religious hierarchy of the Shi'a has its parallel in Roman Catholicism
- b. The emphasis on the concept of "martyrdom" and the similarity between the death of Imam Husayn and Jesus. Bill and Williams point out: "In both cases, the drama of suffering and the legend of martyrdom have been institutionalized and remain living, integral parts of the system of faith."
- c. The similarity between the personality of Mary and Fatimah, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad, as a sorrowful mother figure at the heart of a holy family
- d. "The importance of mystical movements"
- e. "The recognition of legal systems based on the premise that all power derives from God"
- f. "the drive for the establishment of social and political systems that will provide justice, liberty, and security".

In a recent work, Bill and Williams write: "Few in the Western world understand the many fascinating linkages between Catholicism and Shi'ism. For example, in the Qur'an, Jesus is mentioned in over ninety verses. There are more references to Mary in the Qur'an than in the Bible; in fact, Mary is mentioned far more than any other woman. There are twelve Imams (charismatic leaders) according to Shi'i beliefs and twelve disciples in Christianity. The first eleven Imams are believed to have died as martyrs; with the exception of Judas Iscariot and St. John, the apostles were also reportedly martyred. Interestingly, the number 72 appears repeatedly in both traditions..." [*Roman Catholics and Shi'i Muslims: Prayer, Passion, & Politics*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2002), p. 3]

³⁴ For example, Pope John Paul II on the place of Islam in this dialogue says: "In this dialogue, the Jews and the Muslims ought to have a pre-eminent place. (Pope John Paul II, Apostolic letter on preparation for the jubilee year 2000, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 10 November 1994, no. 53)

³⁵ In that speech, Cardinal Tarancon reminded/informed/ told Christians, as did the Patriarch Timothy of Baghdad (d. 823), that "Muhammad walked in the path of the Prophets". (Cited in Mohammed, p. 64) It is interesting to know that there are many faithful Christians, who along with the teaching of Paul that there will be authentic Prophets after Jesus (1 Cor. 14:29, 39; 12:10, 28; Rom 12:6), recognize Muhammad as a genuine prophet. For a sample list of Catholic and Protestant thinkers who have written in support of this idea, see Mohammed, p. 119, Notes 65 & 66. J. M Gaskell in his *Explaining Islam: Islam from a Catholic Perspective* (p. 29) writes: "Many Christians tend to think of Prophets as essentially Old Testament figures alternately uttering dire warnings and promising a Messianic age of peace, overlooking the fact that the gift of prophecy is one of the Gifts of the Spirit listed by St Paul..."

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Muslims believe in conformity of all divine revelations and prophecies. They confirm and believe in all the Prophets and consider all believers in God members of the same community of faith. Unity of God manifests in unity of His revelations and must be echoed in unity of all believers in God. The Qur'an invites all people of faith such as Christians and Jews to unify their efforts and concentrate on their common grounds (3:64). One of the best means of achieving this unity and brotherhood is to know each other, to overcome historical prejudices that prevent objective understanding between each other and to build upon commonalities.

In this spirit, this essay has been written. Efforts have been made to present a brief and precise picture of Mary and Jesus in the Qur'an and to explain why Muslims and Christians should engage in a genuine and fertile dialogue. (from Foreword)

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140
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