

Reflections on the Virgin Mary from an Islamic Perspective

By Naz Ahmed Georgas

The piety, devotion, and mystery surrounding the story of the Virgin Mary, or Maryam as she is known in the Islamic tradition, has inspired many faithful practitioners, scholars, and mystics to delve into a deeper understanding of the meaning and essence of her person. In order to cultivate this understanding, there are four key points that should be discussed.

First, the story of Virgin Mary needs to be studied together with the account of Jesus (peace be upon them both) and in the context of the entirety of the message of the Qur'an. Second, while there are discrepancies between the qur'anic and biblical historical accounts of Jesus and Mary that shape their respective paradigms, we find upon closer scrutiny that there is much more consistency in the esoteric dimensions of the two narratives. Third, this esoteric narrative contains deep metaphysical wisdom and is effectively revealed by comparing the spiritual life and evolution of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) with that of Virgin Mary. And finally, the inner nature of their mission is one of a dynamic presence found within the word of God that has a transformative value for humanity.

The Virgin Mary's account is of extraordinary significance from both the outward exoteric perspective and from an inward mystical one. From the onset of her birth, the Qur'an honors her with the assertion that "no male child could have ever been like this female" (Q 3:36). Maryam is the only woman named in the Qur'an with a chapter dedicated to her and entitled after her name. Moreover, the Qur'an not only validates the miraculous virgin birth of Jesus, but Mary herself is also celebrated as an example for all believers.

Despite this reverence accorded to Mary, the richness of her account does not stem solely from these praiseworthy facts of her history and personality. Rather, a fuller picture of Mary's life comes into view when it is studied together with the account of Jesus. The Qur'an uses the word "sign" (*ayah*) in its singular form to refer to both Jesus and Mary. Together they are a sign of "grace and mercy unto all people" (Q 21:91).

Similarly, the story of Mary and Jesus cannot be isolated from the overall core message and teachings of the Qur'an. The purpose of religion from an Islamic perspective is to intimately bind human beings to their journey with God, who longs to be known and worshipped. He achieves this by sending prophets and revelation to humanity. Though there are said to be 124,000 prophets, only 25 are named in the Qur'an. Each prophet comes with a unique path that guides humanity back "home" to their Creator. Jesus and

Mary are both regarded as examples of the manifestation of such guidance. Through their life, work, acts of worship, and service, they are tasked among other prophets to be an embodiment of divine grace and providence upon humanity.

An important observation in studying the life of Mary is that comparing the narrative of her spiritual evolution with that of the Prophet Muhammad reveals extraordinary similarities, some of which have profound esoteric and metaphysical value that may provide a basis for interreligious exchange. For a start, like Jesus and Mary, Prophet Muhammad is also known in the Qur'an as "a mercy to the worlds" (Q 21:107). The Virgin Mary and the Prophet Muhammad were both instruments selected by God and purified for His service. While she was still a virgin, the angel Gabriel appeared before her to inform her that she would give birth to a son, Jesus, who would be known as the Word (*kalimah*) and the Spirit (*ruh*) of God (*Allah*). The astonished young woman answered, "how can I have a son when no man has ever touched me?" (Q 19:21)

Similarly, the angel Gabriel appeared to the prophet Muhammad at the inception of his mission and commanded him three times to read. Not being able to read or write, the astonished Muhammad responded saying, "I cannot read." Angel Gabriel was commanding the prophet Muhammad to manifest "the word of God," or the Qur'an, which was already placed within his soul and to "read" or articulate its message from within him. Virgin Mary was also told that she would manifest and give birth to "the word of God" that was placed inside her womb.¹

continued on page 16

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In each case, giving birth to the word of God is associated with purity. Mary was untouched by any man and was therefore physically pure. The prophet Muhammad, being unlettered, had a clean soul that was free from acquired knowledge and dogmatic religious ideas and concepts. It is in the backdrop of this physical purity that Mary was able to give birth to the word and spirit of God. Similarly, the prophet Muhammad articulated the unadulterated speech of God, whose verses were collected and put together in what is now known as the Holy Qur'an. This is why the Prophet's wife Aisha described him to be like a "walking Qur'an." However, the more significant resonance between these narratives is that Jesus, Mary, and the Prophet Muhammad were all instruments of the same God, delivering His guidance to the world.

It is worth reflecting briefly on the meaning of the "Word of God" which is a sign of mercy and therefore of tremendous significance in both Christianity and Islam, differences in interpretation notwithstanding. While it is challenging and difficult, if not impossible, to grasp and describe the meaning and nature of both the Word and Spirit of God, two worthwhile observations should be made. First, one thing that cannot be denied is that the life, teachings, and the presence of the Prophet Muhammad, Jesus, and Mary have transformed human existence. Moreover, the Word is also a lived presence that is bestowed upon those who are purified.

In the Qur'an, the followers of Jesus are known as *al hawariyyun*, which translates as "the white-garbed ones" (Q 3:52). In his exegesis, Muhammad Asad points out that the "white garb" was a direct reference to a group "distinguished by their strong insistence on moral purity and unselfish conduct [who] always wore white garments as the outward mark of their convictions." It is no surprise, then, that these purified white-garbed ones were entrusted with the "Word" that transformed nations. Twentieth-century Egyptian playwright Abdul Rehman al-Sharqawi expresses this transformative nature of God's Word through the following verses:

*The Word is a light and a sign guiding a nation
Jesus was a Word
He lit the world by Words
He taught them to poor fisherman
They went out directing the World.*


According to chapter 48 of the Qur'an, the "word" is described as a gift of faith which God bestows on His believers. The "word" that Jesus taught the fishermen (as referred to in Sharqawi's text) cannot be acquired except by being transmitted with the permission of God. The "word" of faith described in the Qur'an that the fishermen used to direct the world is analogous to the faith that Jesus proclaimed could move mountains.

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Second, insofar as Mary, Jesus, and Muhammad are all revered figures known to be a mercy unto humanity, there is a connection to be explored between the meaning and nature of the Word of God and its relationship to how God's mercy is manifested with it. And perhaps this is what is exemplified by Christians like Mother Teresa, who manifested grace and mercy by becoming a divine mirror of God's Word to the homeless in Kolkata. Describing one who is deeply distressed and comparing taking care of his needs akin to taking care of Jesus, Mother Teresa writes:

*Hungry for love, he looks at you
Thirsty for kindness he begs you
Homeless, he asks you for shelter in your heart
Will you be that for him?*²

To summarize, the role of the Virgin Mary from an Islamic perspective is best understood when it is situated in the context of the overall message of the Qur'an. From this perspective, Mary and Jesus were both instruments of God and a mercy to the world, as was the Prophet Muhammad. In all three cases, the point of their existence was to manifest God's guidance to humanity, in their respective missions.

The Virgin Mary carried and gave birth to Jesus – the Word of God – while the Prophet Muhammad carried the speech of God to humanity. The Word of God is to be lived, experienced, and inhabited as a source of personal transformation. Such a transformation occurs for those who are purified and when the Word penetrates our beings and our consciousness, enabling us to act with humility and mercy – as exemplified even today in the service of such saints as Mother Teresa but paradigmatically known in the life and character of the Virgin Mary. 

Notes:

1. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 2000).
2. See Mother Teresa, *In the Heart of the World* (Novato: New World Library, 2007).