



Article

Understanding Mary in Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Relation to Muslim Missionary Instruction and Christian Proclamation

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This article considers efforts at Muslim-Christian dialogue focusing on the subject of Mary in the two religions. It is important to recognize that while biographical aspects of Mary, including supernatural aspects of her motherhood, are similar in the scriptures of the two religions, her significance differs greatly in Islam and Christianity. Mary holds a position in Christianity as “Mother of God,” while in Islam Mary is the mother of Jesus, a notable prophet. These differences suggest that rather than applying a compare-and-contrast methodology a more fruitful approach to dialogue involves a need to assess the place and function of Mary in Christianity and then to determine how that role or function is carried out in Islam. Too often interfaith dialogue settles for agreement on some ostensible similarity in the two religions while pushing to the side fundamental differences. This has often been the case in Muslim-Christian dialogue about Mary. A deeper and more complex discussion that acknowledges fundamental differences can lead to a richer level of understanding. This is the case when one considers the place of Mary in fulfilling basic theological functions in Christianity and comparing this to the way these same functions are achieved in Islam through the actions of Muhammad. Finally, while there is broad agreement about the significance of Mary among Christians, there are significant dogmatic differences making it appropriate in this discussion to stress, where appropriate, the place of Mary in Roman Catholic scripture interpretation and tradition.

Before discussing the appropriate nature and purpose of discussion about the place of Mary in Islam and Christianity, it is important to consider some fundamental beliefs held by adherents to these two religions. Moreover, it is necessary, given these defining beliefs, to identify the type and purpose of dialogue appropriate for the subject of the Virgin Mary in Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Islam is founded on the belief of the one-ness (tawhid) of Allah or God along with the proposition that Muhammad is God’s Final Messenger. Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad received a revelation from God through the angel Gabriel to correct the human error that had contaminated the scripture and beliefs of Judaism and Christianity. Nevertheless, Muslims understand themselves to be the descendants of Abraham, and thus they belong to the same religious family as Jews and Christians.

It is important to recognize that two fundamental beliefs of Christianity are strongly rejected by Islam, the Trinity and the Incarnation. Muslims reject the Christian formulation of “In the name of the Father, and the Son, and

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the Holy Spirit,” which totally omits the name Allah or the Muslim name for God. The Christian doxology also suggests to Muslims worship of three gods rather than the one God of Islam. The Muslim formulation for addressing God is “In the name of God (Allah), the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful.” The Qur’an suggests there are traces of polytheism present in Judaism and in Christianity, most evident in the doctrine of the Trinity. Equally objectionable to Islam is the doctrine of the Incarnation. For a Muslim, it is inconceivable that God would descend from the divine realm to become a human person in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ also conflicts with the very oneness of God since such belief involves the assertion by Christians that Jesus has a divine nature and is the Son of God. For Christians, God is three persons. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in a unity. It is asserted that this is, in fact, the one God of Judaism known as Yahweh. For the salvation of mankind, Christians believe that God sent his Son to take on human nature and be born of the Virgin Mary. Finally, God has sent the Holy Spirit into the world to be the sanctification of humankind.

It is these two fundamental oppositional beliefs that establish the context and outer boundaries for dialogue about Mary in the respective scriptures of the two religions. These two opposing foundational beliefs affect how Christian and Muslim dialogue should occur while holding fast to their own obligations of mission or proclamation and Da’wah which will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

Interreligious Dialogue and Theological Discourse in Relation to Mission

There are different forms of interreligious dialogue. For example, an exploration of shared experiences of prayer and about spirituality can be a focus of dialogue, as was the case reported by John Kiser in *The Monks of Tibhirine*, where an exchange between Sufis and Christians is reported: “We feel called by god to do something together with you,” one of the Sufis told the Christian when they met. “But we are not interested in theology. Theology raises barriers between people. Let God invent something new between us. Love is what brings people together.”² However, for others, while dialogue about theology may reveal differences, such dialogue can lead to understanding and appreciation of differences as well as commonalities in religious belief and experience.

A valuable resource for identifying some of the important kinds of dialogue that can take place is set out in the “Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” issued by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.³ Four forms of dialogue are identified:

- (i) The dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
- (ii) The dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
- (iii) The dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to develop their understanding of their respective religious heritage and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.

² John Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love and Terror in Algeria*. New York: St. Martin’s Grifftin (2002), 32.

³ Francesco Giola, *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963-2005)* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 1156-1189.

- (iv) The dialogue of religious experiences, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance, with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith, and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.⁴

This paper examines dialogue of theological exchange. Recognition of this type of dialogue, however, raises the issue of the relation of dialogue with proclamation or the mission of the church. The pontifical document quoted above addressed the issue of the relation of proclamation of the gospel and dialogue; both were viewed, each in its own place, as component elements and authentic forms of one evangelizing mission of the church. “They are both oriented towards the communication for salvific truth.”⁵

The issue of the relation of mission or proclamation to Christian participation in interreligious dialogue naturally leads to a consideration of the extent to which a comparable association exists in Islam. Such a relationship is suggested by some contemporary commentators who have identified the Islamic concept of “*da wa*” [or “Da’wah”] as a basis for establishing a relationship similar to mission and dialogue. *Da wa* is an Arabic word with the meaning of “to call” or “invitation” [It comes from the verb *da’a*, “to call,” of which *da’i* is the active principle, “one who calls or invites”].⁶

Commentators sharing the premise of this article maintain that Christianity and Islam have in common the fact that “they are missionary religions.”⁷ As missionary religions the “common theme between the two religions is the urgency to reach others in order to offer something precious which the other needs to have.”⁸

A sense of mission is central to Christians who respond to the command of Christ to go into the world and make disciples of all nations (Mt 28: 19-20 and Jn 17:18), just as “*da wa*” is central to Muslims, who are directed to “Invite [all] to the way of the Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching. And argue with them in ways that are best and more gracious.” (Sura 16: 125).⁹ Mission and *da’wa* should be viewed inseparable from Christian-Muslim dialogue. According to this view, dialogue “is not possible unless a partner has a genuine point of view and something to offer.”¹⁰

Christian–Muslim Dialogue on Mary: Discourse of Convergence

Perhaps the initial reason for selecting the Virgin Mary as a subject for Christian-Muslim dialogue is the observed veneration and honor given to the person of Mary in the Scriptures and tradition of the two religions. However, it is very important to recognize the difference between Mary of the Qur’an and Mary of the New Testament. Underlying the difference is the Christian belief in the Incarnation, that Jesus is divine and the second person of the Triune God. By contrast, the Islamic view is that Mary is the mother of Jesus (*Isa*), a holy man and prophet but most certainly not divine, not God.

Mary (*Mariam*) is the only woman named in the Qur’an and is recognized as one of the four perfect examples of womanhood (Sura 66:12). The Qur’an provides extensive biographical information about Mary.¹¹ An account is given of the pregnancy of Mary’s mother, as well as Mary’s birth and the annunciation of the coming of John the

4 Giola, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 1171.

5 Giola, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 1157.

6 David Kerr, “Islamic DA’WA and Christian Mission: Towards a Comparative Analysis,” *International Review of Mission*, 89 (2000): 151.

7 Kerr, “Islamic DA’WA and Christian Mission,” 150.

8 Atallah Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997), 70.

9 Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 70.

10 Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 76.

11 Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad, “The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary,” *The Muslim World* 79 (1989): 161-187.

Baptist and Jesus, along with an affirmation of the virgin conception and the birth of Jesus. The Qur'an exhorts, "Remember her who preserved her chastity, into whom we breathed a new life from us and made her and her son a token for mankind" (Sura 21:91).

The Qur'an teaches reverence for Mary because she completely submitted herself to the will of God. Most of the narrative about Mary in the Qur'an is found in Suras 3:35-47 and 19:16-34; other references are made to Mary, usually identifying her as the mother of Jesus with the effect of negating the divinity of Jesus ["This was Jesus, son of Mary.... It does not behove God to have a son. Too immaculate is He!... (Jesus only said) 'Surely god is my Lord and your Lord, we worship Him. This is the straight path'" (Sura 19:34-36)]. Muslims believe the virgin conception and birth of Jesus occurred through the action of god's spirit, but they do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God. In Islam, Jesus is one of the many righteous prophets. For Muslims, the Christian foundational belief in the Trinity and the related doctrine of the Incarnation represent a form of polytheism seemingly recognizing three gods rather than the one God alone. Moreover, a belief that God would descend to take the lowly form of man is inconsistent with God's exalted status. "O people of the Book, do not be fanatical in your faith, and say nothing but the truth about God. The Messiah who is Jesus, son of Mary, was only an apostle of God, and a command of his which He sent to Mary as a mercy from Him. So believe in god and His apostles, and do not call Him 'Trinity.' Abstain from this for your own good; for God is only one God, and far from His glory is it to beget a Son." (Sura 4:171)

Despite these differences in belief about Mary, the common veneration of Mary is seen by some commentators and theologians as a basis for a commonality that should be pursued in dialogue. In a published address entitled "How Mary Holds Christians and Muslims in Conversation," Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore, while acknowledging differences in belief about Mary, strongly maintained that as a shared subject of veneration, Mary can provide a bridge for Christian-Muslim dialogue.¹²

Keeler reported that Catholics are delighted to learn of the significant attention given to Mary in the Qur'an. According to Keeler, it was no surprise in 1965 that the fathers of the Second Vatican Council in *Nostra Aetate*, the historic document that initiated official contemporary Catholic interreligious dialogue, stated: "The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth who has spoken to man... Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet, his virgin Mother they also honor and even at times devoutly invoke."¹³ Keeler went on to suggest that the common subject of the Virgin Mary, despite different beliefs about her significance and meaning, can provide a "bridge" for dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Keeler contended that Muslims can find such a bridge in the text of the Qur'an itself: "It is plausible to maintain that in the very person of Mary there is a meeting point, or at least a stepping stone, between Christianity and Islam. Indeed, as the Qur'an itself says: "To those who believe, god has set an example ("mathalan")...in Mary, who preserved her chastity..., who put her trust in the words of her Lord and her scriptures and was one of the truly devout. (Prohibition LXVI, 12)."¹⁴

For Christians, Keeler argued the example of Mary's compliance with God's desires provides an example for dialogue and cooperation in the calling of Jesus. According to Keeler, Mary, the mother of Jesus, the Messiah, was always ready to do the will of God. The cardinal pointed out that in Catholic spirituality, believers recall the words she spoke to the angel who brought her the news of God's proposal for her. Keeler notes that Mary responded, "Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). "This is the attitude of every true believer in the living God, the Lord of the universe."¹⁵

12 Cardinal William Keeler, "How Mary Holds Christians and Muslims in Conversation," *Origins* 25 (n. 26) (February 29, 1996): 610-612.

13 Keeler, "How Mary Holds Christians and Muslims in Conversation," citing Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate* in Gioia, *Interreligious Dialogue*, 43-49.

14 Keeler, "How Mary Holds Christians and Muslims in Conversation," 611.

15 Keeler, "How Mary Holds Christians and Muslims in Conversation," 612.

An example of Keeler's suggestion of a Muslim incorporation of veneration of the Virgin Mary as a significant part of Islamic spiritual life was provided a few years earlier by Sheik Muzaffan Ozak al-Jerrahi, the Turkish Sheik of the Halveti-Jerrahi Order of Dervishes, in his monograph *Blessed Virgin Mary*.¹⁶ Ozak suggests elevation of both Mary and Jesus to an extremely high status in Islamic spirituality (which is not granted by most Muslims); he wrote, "As Muslims, we believe in the miraculous birth and the sublime spirituality of Jesus. The holy Qur'an bears witness to the sanctity of Maryam as the blessed recipient of Divine Revelation and as the Virgin Mother of the great Prophet whom she conceived and bore through the Power of Allah alone."¹⁷

While Ozak's discourse is supported by the Qur'an in a proof texting type of scriptural hermeneutic, Ozak seems to cross the "bridge" of dialogue to embrace Christian discourse on the significance of Mary in the plan of salvation. Ozak maintains that "Those faithful to Allah and to all His Messengers express their gratitude, affection and respect for the blessed Virgin by bestowing her sanctified name, Maryam, upon their daughters. Her pregnancy through the breath of the Holy spirit, and the exalted miracle of the manner in which she gave birth to the Messiah is perceived by people of faith everywhere as a wondrous sign of Divine Mercy."¹⁸ Ozak seems to have crossed the bridge of dialogue in his assertion of the need for Muslim acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah.

A similar extreme yearning of some Christians for religious unity between Christians and Muslims has been expressed in the hope that Mary might serve to lead Muslims to Christian belief. This perspective was suggested in Bishop Fulton Sheen's comment in *The World's First Love* when he opined, "I believe that the Blessed Virgin chose to be known as 'our Lady of Fatima' as a pledge and sign of hope to the Muslim people, and as an assurance that they, who show her so much respect will one day accept her divine Son, too."¹⁹ The reference here is to the coincidence of the Virgin's appearance in the Portuguese village of Fatima, which is the same name as the Prophet's daughter, who was known as Fatima. Of course, historic rule of Muslims in Portugal might explain the name of the place where Mary was said to have appeared.

A more theologically based approach to employ Mary as a means to overcoming differences between Islam and Christianity was provided by the Lebanon-born Christian theologian Nilo Geagea in his monograph *Mary of the Koran: A Meeting Point Between Christianity and Islam*.²⁰ Geagea provides a theological commentary on passages of the Qur'an dealing with Mary in which he attempts to establish that references to Mary in the Qur'an can be interpreted to establish the same understanding of Mary developed in Catholic Christianity. Ultimately, Geagea's thesis is that Mary in the Qur'an is derived from Christian literature and traditional beliefs known by Muhammad. According to Geagea, "[T]he Marian literature in the Koran came into it from Christian sources – the Apocryphal Gospels mainly the *Proto-evangelium of James*. From this as a premise, the conclusion logically follows that the 'historic' elements relative to Mary in the Koran reflect Christian beliefs which were alive and circulating throughout the distant Arabian Peninsula in the first decades of the 6th Century A.D. They were Christian, or Judeo-Christian items of faith; not always clear in terms of technical formulas, but always orthodox."²¹ Rather than denigrating the Qur'an because of its derivative historical foundations, Geagea extols it as divine

truth: "Islam's greatest merit as a whole was first of all, to have been structured spiritually upon Abraham and the profession of his monotheistic faith" and it therefore "ought to be acknowledged as a religion basically 'revealed'" since it contains objectively the truths that came down from God by revelation.²²

16 Sheik Muzaffan Ozak Al-Jerrahi, *Blessed Virgin Mary* (Westport, CT: Pir Publications, 1991).

17 Ozak, *Blessed Virgin Mary*, 56.

18 Ozak, *Blessed Virgin Mary*, 56-57.

19 Bishop Fulton Sheen, *The World's First Love*, cited in Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad, "The Virgin Mary" 185.

20 Nilo Geagea, *Mary of the Koran: A Meeting Point Between Christianity and Islam* (New York: Philosophized Library, 1984).

21 Geagea, *Mary of the Koran*, 252-253.

22 Geagea, *Mary of the Koran*, 258.

As Geagea turns to the subject of Mary, he finds significant agreement in belief and practice shared by Muslims and Catholic Christians: “The average Muslim nurtures for Mary a deep and honest cult of veneration. For them, Mary is the *Sa’yidat* (Our Lady) just as she is for the Christians. To worship her, he too resorts to devotional practices with a congruent equivalence in Christianity – such as the *tasbih* (rosary) and the *khirga* (scapular). Apart from these popular instances, and if we limit ourselves to the theoretical creeds and dogmas, we find with joy in Islam what we sorrowfully do not find in the various Protestant confessions, i.e., Mary’s spotless virginity, her supreme holiness, her sovereign dignity, her intimate unity with Christ; and at the base of these excellent prerogatives, God’s preferential, intense and boundless love for her.”²³

Geagea’s view of the influence on the Qur’an of early Christian texts and tradition dealing with Mary has received contemporary support from Cornelia Horn, a theology professor at St. Louis University.²⁴ In her article “Mary between Bible and Qur’an,” Horn establishes that the non-canonical scripture *The Protoevangelium of James* provides extensive treatment of Mary which was received into the Copto-Arabic Christian community of Egypt.²⁵ Contacts between the Egyptian Christian community and the emerging religious tradition of Islam were significant. Horn maintains that “examining the literary representations of Mary in both traditions, separately as well as with a view towards possible influences of one tradition’s heritage upon that of the other, ultimately provides a valuable test-case for elucidating the relative density or openness of said boundaries between the Muslim and Christian communities.”²⁶ Further dialogues among scripture scholars from both traditions could contribute to increased understanding by scholars who share a common scriptural hermeneutical method.

Authentic Christian-Muslim Dialogue about Service to God Provided by Mary and Muhammad

A strong objection to the convergence approach to Mary discussed in the previous section of this article is that Mary is not the same or homogenous person in Christianity and Islam, but rather a discrepantly shared symbol. Tim Winter, a Muslim and lecturer in Islamic Studies on the Divinity Faculty of the University of Cambridge, has argued against the suppression of difference in Christian-Muslim ideologies about Mary in his article “*Pulchra Ut Luna. Some Reflections on the Marian Theme in Muslim-Catholic Dialogue.*”²⁷ Winter maintains there has been a “skewing of the mutual regard by missionary urges” which leads him to challenge Cardinal Keeler’s metaphor for Mary of “bridge” or “stepping stone”. According to Winter, study of the “other’s Virgin has commonly been pursued not for straightforwardly scholarly reasons, or even in order to find possible grounds for understanding and dialogue, but as a ‘bridge’, or even more frankly, as a ‘stepping stone’” for establishing shared religious belief and practice.²⁸

Winter maintains that Christian, in particular Roman Catholic, proclamation or mission and Islamic Da’wa have been sacrificed in the name of dialogue (or in some cases, dialogue has been abandoned in pursuit of conversion). According to Winter, “[T]he Virgin Mary has conventionally appeared as an emblem of what Islam and Catholicism find superficially recognizable in each other, but which investigation discloses as alienating.”²⁹ Winter goes on to suggest a dilemma that questions implicit concessions by adherents of each faith: “Should Catholics

23 Geagea, *Mary of the Koran*, 262.

24 Cornelia Horn, “Mary between Bible and Qur’an: Sounding into the Transmission and Reception. History of the Protoevangelium of James in the Basis of Selected Literary Sources in Coptic and Coptic-Arabic and of Art-Historical Evidence Pertaining to Egypt,” *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 1:8 (2007): 509-538.

25 Horn, “Mary between Bible and Qur’an,” 510.

26 Horn, “Mary between Bible and Qur’an,” 510.

27 Tim Winter, *Pulchra Ut Luna: Some Reflections on the Marian Theme in Muslim-Catholic Dialogue*,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 36 (1999): 439-469.

28 Winter, *Pulchra Ut Luna*, 441.

29 Winter, *Pulchra Ut Luna*, 440.

rejoice to find Mary venerated in the Qur'an, even though she is stripped of her glory as Mother of God? Should Muslims regard what in their eyes is the risky *hyperdulia* accorded her by Catholicism as on balance preferable to a [Protestant] Christianity that hardly acknowledges *Maryam* at all?³⁰ Winter decried what he saw as a "[d]iminution of difference by both sides for well-intentioned dialogical purposes, or no less frequently for purposes of mission."³¹

There has been a proclivity for compromising the integrity of one pole of inter-relationship or the other, i.e., failing to engage in actual dialogue or abandoning mission. This tendency has been explained by Lesley Mathias, a lecture in Religious Studies at Petersborough, to be the result of employment of a "comparative" academic approach in interreligious dialogue which draws comparisons or develops analysis based on the founding figures of religions (Christ and the Prophet Mohammed) or on principal scriptures (the Bible and the Qur'an).³² Such an approach is reflected, for example, in the comparisons between explicit passages dealing with Mary in the Qur'an and passages or narratives in the Christian scriptures and traditions which comparisons often seems to aim at a synthesis.

Instead a method more conducive to dialogue "involves passing over into another religious tradition, entering as far as possible into the other '*weltanschauung*' and observing it through the eyes of its adherents."³³ It is easy to see the value of the relationship between dialogue and this proposed method of discussing religious belief for those in dialogue: "It provides valuable insights into the nature of one's own faith (if they have one) and also into the nature of religion itself, the role it plays for the adherent."³⁴

The Christian theologian Gerald O'Collins, in his monograph *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, suggests that the understanding of dialogue urged by *Nostra Aetate* had characteristics of the nature of exchange recommended by Mathias.³⁵ O'Collins reports that "*Nostra Aetate* exhorted all Catholics (and not merely experts in "other" religions), while acting 'with prudence and charity' and witnessing to Christian faith and life 'to take up dialogue in collaboration with followers of other religions. Such dialogue and collaboration will involve Catholics in recognizing, and promoting these material spiritual and moral goods, as well as those socio-cultural values found in the lives of the followers of other religions."³⁶ It is the mutuality of dialogue that is recognized as important that leads to obtaining insights about the other religion while preserving and enriching one's own. O'Collins clarifies the nature and significance of dialogue that is being explored in the latter part of this article. By engaging with other religious perspectives, Christians in dialogue become learners who are ready to receive for their well-being the insights of confident teachers who are witnesses to their faith. Besides providing our insights that others can gain from us, the others have insights or spiritual and moral goods that they can share with us. "Dialogue must be reciprocal, a matter of receiving and giving."³⁷

Mathias recognized the possibility of fruitful interreligious dialogue by identifying the profound fact that the two religions have problems and issues in common: "When viewed 'from the inside', it is found that what the two religions have in common is by and large, their theological problems-not their solutions."³⁸ Thus, the approach to dialogue using the academic comparative method used the wrong categories of comparison. Focus shifts

30 Winter, *Pulchra Ut Luna*, 440-41.

31 Winter, *Pulchra Ut Luna*, 443.

32 Lesley Mathias, "Of What Use is the Comparison Between the Doctrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the ____ Muhammed?" *Modern Believing* 39 (1996): 25-31.

33 Mathias, "Of What Use is the Comparison," 25.

34 Mathias, "Of What Use is the Comparison," 25.

35 Gerald O'Collins, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 198-201.

36 O'Collins, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, 198-99 citing *Nostra Aetate* No. 2.

37 O'Collins, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, 199.

38 Mathias, "Of what Use is the Comparison," 26.

from religious topics or items such as Mary and Jesus or passages from the Qur'an or New Testament to useful formulations of religious belief. For example, the way in which two apparently unrelated doctrines or subjects are a response to a common problem such as the process of transmission of God's word to humankind. Mathias examines the way in which two apparently unrelated doctrines seem to respond to a common problem by comparing the doctrine of the "virginity" of Mary (God bearer or "*theotokos*") and the "unlettered" or "*ummi*" prophet (Bearer of the Qur'an). Dialogue here focuses on the function or meaning of specific doctrines or subject matter of the respective faiths, the means of God revealing himself.

The doctrine of the "ummi" Prophet Muhammed, according to Mathias, parallels that of the Virgin birth: "The Prophet's religious experience in the cave on Mount Hira were believed by the Prophet himself, and by his followers, to be a literal verbal revelation from God" (it was necessary to distinguish those revelations [received by Muhammed] from the messages delivered by soothsayers); consequently; "It was necessary to both prove the Qur'an a superior work in quality to all else that was circulating but also that it was not the work of Mohammed."³⁹ To strengthen the claim that the Qur'an was the literal word of God, it was important to establish that the scripture was revealed through the medium of the Angel Gabriel to the unlettered Prophet who lacked the capacity of literacy needed for him to have composed the scripture.

In Christianity, Mary functions as the means of facilitating the Incarnation. The virgin birth is a divine birth not tainted by sexuality or original sin. An approach to understanding the function of Mary in Christianity as comparable to the role of Muhammad avoids the clash of understanding when the virginity of Mary is compared in the two religions. As Mathias points out, "The virginity of Mary in Islam as a concept seems to have a different use [than in Christianity]. Jesus in the Qur'an is portrayed as being a spiritual teacher and a worker of miracles. Muslims do not question that a miraculous birth was a fitting start to such a ministry."⁴⁰ In Islam, the doctrine of the virginity of Mary has the function of enhancing the powerfulness of God, breaching the laws of creation (in this case natural reproduction) as He wills.

For the Christian, however, the virginity of Mary serves to preserve the purity of God's revelation in the Incarnation. Within a world view that considered sexuality tainted, the virgin birth made understandable how God could become man without compromising his divine nature. This leads to the suggestion implicit in Mathias's analysis about the proper focus of interreligious dialogue. Rather than an explicit religious subject, such as the virginity of Mary or an effort at reconciling scriptural texts dealing with the virgin birth, dialogue involving Mary most usefully focuses on comparisons of problems the religions share. The lesson for dialogue provided by Mathias is that "the problems which arise in religious traditions do themselves tell us more about mankind's faith and God, than the doctrines religious systems produce."⁴¹

Alex Takacs, while a doctoral student at Harvard Divinity School, undertook a similar consideration of the relation of Mary and Muhammad in Christian Muslim inter-religious dialogue. Her approach is not limited to the "virginity" of Mary or the "ummi" of the Prophet Muhammad; instead she focused on the common roles of Mary and Muhammad in their respective faiths.⁴² Takacs reflects the methodological discussion that began this article. She is committed to "the dialogue of theological exchange." Explicitly she declares, "I have remained within the confines of Catholic-Muslim dialogue and theological comparison."⁴³ Consequently, Takacs exhibits a sensitivity

39 Mathias, "Of what Use is the Comparison," 26-7.

40 Mathias, "Of what Use is the Comparison," 28.

41 Mathias, "Of what Use is the Comparison," 29.

42 Axel Takacs, "Mary and Muhammad: Bearers of the Word – Their Roles in Divine Revelation," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 48 (2013): 220-243.

43 Takacs, "Mary and Muhammad," 243

recognizing the tension between dialogue and mission and da'wa. She views her work as an example of "how real theological dialogue and comparison can take place without sacrificing fundamental beliefs."⁴⁴

Takacs begins by identifying the fact that the two religions recognize Revelation of the Word of God and God's use of a human intermediary to send down the word of God. Islam recognizes the Prophet Muhammad as the transmitter of the Divine Word (rasul Allah; "messenger of God) and Christianity identifies the Virgin Mary as the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh (Theotakos, God-bearer). In Christianity, the Word of God becomes Flesh (Incarnation), while in Islam the Word of God becomes the Arabic Qur'an (Revelation).

Takacs rejects the mere equation of scripture that would view the Bible and Qur'an as equivalent expressions of the Word of God. With the Qur'an we have "revelation" which is a direct disclosure by divinity of textual truth, but with the Bible we have an "inspired" text which is composed by individuals under the influence of the Divine. According to Takacs, "Comparing the Qur'an to the Bible either relegates the Qur'an to something less than the Word of God, or it will elevate the status of the Bible to something more than a divinely inspired text written by individuals."⁴⁵ Similarly, Takacs rejects any comparison between Jesus and Muhammad: "[G]rounds for comparing Christ (the word made flesh) with Muhammad (the Messenger of the Word) are equally theologically dubious at best and completely improper at worst."⁴⁶

Instead, Takacs argues for such a comparison as she makes of Mary and Muhammad. In Christianity, Mary transmits the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. In Islam, Muhammad transmits the Word of God made Arabic Qur'an. This comparison is offered as a basis for theological dialogue with the objective of meeting the relevant question posed by Islamic and Christian partners to dialogue: "How can one understand the position of Muhammad in Islamic thought through the lens of Mariology? (2) How can one come to appreciate better the significance of Mary in Catholic thought through the lens of the Islamic perception of Muhammad?"⁴⁷ In both traditions, one can observe the use of human intermediaries by God in order to achieve divine objectives.

Takacs developed significant insight that follows from the role of Mary and Muhammad in transmitting the "word of God" to the faithful, that is their reciprocal role as mediaries for the prayers of the faithful to God. According to the foundational theological beliefs of Christianity and Islam, the Absolute Word (the Word of God) has employed a human intermediary in order to enter the created world. Takacs reasons that Mary and Muhammad are the vessels through which the Word descends upon the world, then the world can also ascend to the Word through some vessels.⁴⁸

The Qur'an provides a foundation for the role of mediatory by Muhammad. In the Qur'an, the Divine declares, "We have prescribed in the Book of Psalms after the reminder and admonition, that those of our creatures who are good will in the end rule the earth. Verily there is a message in there for the people who are devout. We have sent you as a benevolence to the creatures of the world. Say: 'This is what has been revealed to me; Your God is one and only God.' So you will bow in homage to Him." (Sura 21:105-108). Takacs quotes a *hadith* of the Prophet that attests to his role as mediator: "I am the messenger of God, without boasting, I shall bear the banner and (be) the first whose inter-cession will be granted. I am the first to move the knocker at the gate of Paradise. God will open it for me and will lead me into it, and with me the poor among the faithful. Thus I am the most honored one among the bodies of the earlier and later [generations]."⁴⁹

44 Takacs, "Mary and Muhammad," 243 (emphasis added).

45 Takacs, "Mary and Muhammad, 222.

46 Takacs, "Mary and Muhammad, 222.

47 Takacs, "Mary and Muhammad, 223.

48 Takacs, "Mary and Muhammad, 224.

49 Takacs, "Mary and Muhammad, 231 citing

Mary and Muhammad serve as primary intercessors and deliverers of God's mercy. According to Takacs, "Muhammad becomes the intermediate principle between humanity and God, the barzakh, or 'isthmus' believer the Absolute and the relative, the Infinite and finite, the Eternal and the temporal."⁵⁰ Takacs observes that Mary has long been recognized as an intermediary between petitioners and her son Jesus; accordingly Mary plays no less a role than mediator for as John Damascene (d.ca. 750) is concerned, "So you [Mary] have been assigned the role of a mediatrix, having become the ladder by which God comes down to us, assuming the weakness of our nature, embracing it and united himself to it, and thus making man into a mind that can see God. This [O Mary] you have reunited what had been divided."⁵¹

Takacs offers her conclusions about Mary and Muhammad as bearers of the Word of God and their role of intercessors in each of their respective religions. This is offered as a response to the questions she asked about what the two religions could learn from each other in a dialogue about the comparison of Mary and Muhammad. Perhaps her broad conclusion summarizes the trajectory of this article: "The theological comparison [of Mary] with the Prophet of Islam, furthermore shows a sublime and transcendent connection between these two sacred founts. To be sure, there exist many contradictions between these two faith traditions, even within the purview of this comparison, there are as many dissimilarities between Mary and Muhammed as there are similarities."⁵² But most significantly this discussion of Mary and Muhammad illustrates how Christian and Catholic-Muslim theological dialogue can take place without sacrificing fundamental beliefs expressed in mission and da'wa.

CONCLUSION

Authentic interreligious dialogue involves parties in honest conversation about a subject of belief or practice in search for understanding and illumination against a background of acknowledged differences. Those engaged in Christian-Muslim dialogue need to recognize the constraints of Christian commitment to proclamations and the Muslim duty to call or invite non-believers to Islam.

Inter-religious dialogue is not limited to a single convention or a specific area of practice or belief. Dialogue can involve activity and reflections on shared experience, collaboration in social or community action, religious experience of prayer and spirituality, or theological exchanges.

There are fundamental differences in belief that affect Christian-Muslim theological dialogue. These include the understanding of the oneness of God on the part of Islam, and the Trinity and Incarnation on the part of Christianity. A discussion of the place of Mary in each religion is directly affected by these contrasting foundational theological beliefs.

While acknowledging these differences, one approach to Christian-Muslim dialogue about Mary is to seek convergence in belief. This approach has viewed Mary as a "bridge" or "stepping stone" between the two religions. This position, however, is subject to the criticism that it compromises proclamation and da'wa. Catholics risk Mary being stripped of her role as the Mother of God, while Muslims risk elevation of Mary to a role beyond any contemplated in the Qur'an.

Authentic Catholic-Muslim dialogue on Mary remains cognizant of the limits imposed by mission and da'wa. Rather than convergence into a single understanding of Mary or a Mary identified by similarities and differences, effective and authentic dialogue takes the subject of Mary as the basis for a discussion of problems or issues common and significant to both religions.

50 Anne Marie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985): 62.

51 Takacs, "Mary and Muhammad," 231.

52 Takacs, "Mary and Muhammad," 233.

An example of the way dialogue about Mary may lead to significant interreligious understanding is provided by consideration of particular characteristics of Mary and Muhammed and the role of each in their respective faiths. One approach has been to examine the role of Mary's virginity in her giving birth to Jesus in the Christian belief of the Incarnation and the role of "ummi" or unletteredness in Muhammad's receipt of the Qur'an as the revealed word of God. Another approach is to pursue an understanding of Mary as the human bearer of the Word of God (the logos) and Muhammed as the human recipient of God's word as revealed in the form of the Arabic Qur'an. The significance of a discussion of Mary in relation to Muhammed as the subject of Christian-Muslim dialogue can serve as the establishment of an example of authentic dialogue consistent with the Christian mission of proclamation and the Islamic direction to engage in da'wa.