

**Catholic-Islamic Interreligious Dialogue Since Vatican II:
Mary, the Mother of Jesus, A Case-Study**

by

Jae Koo Ji

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
The University of Manitoba
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Religion
Joint Master's Program
University of Manitoba/University of Winnipeg
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

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ABSTRACT

As nations and individuals draw ever closer together, there is a greater awareness of the wide variety of religions and philosophies in a multi-cultural world. Furthermore, rapid scientific advances, while providing many opportunities for a better life, threaten the very existence of humanity. As a result, interreligious dialogue for the sake of justice, peace and harmonious living has become increasingly important. The Roman Catholic Church has encouraged dialogue with other religions especially since the Second Vatican Council, held approximately fifty years ago. Since then, there have been many encounters between members of two major world religions, Catholicism and Islam. Throughout the history of these two religious groups, there have been contacts particularly at the grassroots level surrounding popular devotions mostly involving Mary the mother of Jesus. After examining the progress of the last decades, this thesis entitled: *Catholic-Islamic Interreligious Dialogue since Vatican II: Mary the Mother of Jesus, a Case-Study* explores the possibility of further interreligious dialogue including the theme of Mariology.

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Other professors who have played a significant role in my academic development throughout their courses, are Dr. Egil Grislis, Dr. Ian Wicher, Dr. Laurence Broadhurst, and Dr. Johannes Wolfart. For their help and that of many others, I am grateful.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Mary the mother of Jesus
and my mother

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THESIS INTRODUCTION

In a world where technology allows instantaneous communication as well as increased travel opportunities, humanity has become more aware that this world includes a variety of religions and philosophies. Simultaneously, rapid scientific advances present new challenges. Humanity now has the power to destroy itself and the world through weapons of mass destruction. Catholics and Muslims, each claiming more than a billion adherents, have been attempting to face these modern challenges through interreligious dialogue especially since the latter half of the twentieth century.¹ Since Mary, the mother of Jesus occupies a prominent place in the scriptures and devotion of both Catholicism and Islam, this case-study proposes introducing the Virgin Mary as a topic for further interreligious encounters.

Thesis Purpose and Aims

The main purpose of this thesis, *Catholic-Islamic Interreligious Dialogue since Vatican II: Mary, the Mother of Jesus, a Case-Study*, is to research attempts of the last half century for greater understanding and cooperation between Catholics and Muslims and to study the place of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue.

Therefore, the aim of this thesis is threefold: (1) to define interreligious dialogue and describe Catholic-Islamic dialogical attempts since Vatican Council II; (2) to

¹ The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) opened the Catholic Church to interreligious dialogue through its document "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*)," in *The Documents of Vatican II*, eds Walter M. Abbott and Joseph Gallagher (New York: America Press, 1966). A general Council is an international gathering of Roman Catholic leaders: the Bishops under the primacy of the Pope.

research how popular Marian devotions are a meeting-ground for Catholics and Muslims; and (3) to present a case-study introducing Mary, the mother of Jesus for the purpose of Catholic-Islamic dialogue.

Thesis Structure

Chapter 1, "From Confrontation to Dialogue in Catholic-Islamic Encounters," defines dialogue including issues relevant to Catholics and Muslims. The subsequent section explores various attempts at Catholic-Islamic interreligious encounters at local, national, and international levels. The structure follows four dialogical approaches: dialogue of life, of action, of theological exchange and of religious experience. Examples chosen are those which might be broadly acceptable for this study concerned with promoting interreligious dialogue between Catholics and Muslims.

Chapter 2, "Popular Marian Devotions: a Meeting Ground," describes traditional and popular Marian devotions and practices that bring Catholics and Muslims together in a variety of places and situations. Meeting places such as pilgrimage spots might encourage further encounters where both Catholics and Muslims participate together and therefore build relationships based on their mutual devotion to Mary.

Chapter 3, "Mary in Catholicism and Islam: A Case-Study," is a comparative study relying mainly on corresponding narratives involving Mary in the Bible and in the Qur'an. A first section briefly discusses literary aspects of the narrative as it is interpreted in modern Catholic and Islamic scriptural hermeneutics. This chapter then shifts to a theological overview based on four Catholic Marian dogmas: Mary's Immaculate

Conception, her Perpetual Virginity and her Assumption into Heaven.² Comparison of these three dogmatic doctrines through a variety of Catholic and Islamic scriptural and literary sources might reveal points of convergence on doctrinal aspects concerning Mary. The fourth dogma discussed in this chapter deals with Mary's divine maternity. The title "Mother of God" that Catholics give to Mary seems to be more controversial in encounters with Muslims. Contrary to Catholic teaching, the Qur'an, the basic scripture in Islam, maintains that Jesus is not God. This case-study then, while discussing similarities as well as differences in Marian doctrine, proposes introducing Mary in the context of interreligious dialogue

Thesis Methodology

In this thesis, different methodological approaches are introduced, illustrating the complexity of its subject matter as well as the content and aim of each chapter and section. Translations and transliterations of the few Arabic words used in this thesis, follow the standardized version proposed by Mary F. Thurlkill.³ Arabic and Latin terms are cited in italics unless written otherwise in a citation. The special Arabic marks (macron and underdot) are not used in this text. Common words and names such as those of Muhammad and members of his family are rendered according to most English translations of Islamic works. The standard Gregorian dating system is used throughout in its modern form CE.

² A dogma is an official doctrine of the Catholic Church. A dogma is "definitive" and requires "an irrevocable adherence of faith," in *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Popular and Definitive Edition* (London, U. K.: Geoffrey Chapman, 2000), 26, # 88.

³ Mary F. Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women: Mary and Fatima in Medieval Christianity and Shi'ite Islam* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), xi-xii. Thurlkill is Assistant Professor of Religion at the University of Mississippi.

The literature review found in Chapter 1.1 offers theoretical background information as a means of clarifying aspects of Catholic-Islamic dialogue in a pluralistic world. Just as there are a variety of religions, diversity exists also within Christianity and Islam. In order to avoid confusion, there ought to be sufficient knowledge of one's own religion and agreement among its members before engaging in dialogue with a different religious group.

As far as Catholicism is concerned, this study avoids internal or external conflicts that might be a deterrent to interreligious dialogue with Islam. For this purpose, the doctrinal approach used is dogmatic, one that seeks to follow the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Some references are also taken from non-Catholic sources in as much as they do not contradict these basic Catholic doctrines. For this theoretical discussion, a choice has been made among texts and scholars whose philosophies are considered appropriate for Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue.

Chapter 1.2 is mainly descriptive. It outlines various types of contacts between Catholics and Muslims since Vatican II, giving priority to more recent events. To specify the variety and quality of the many encounters observed, this study proposes the following subdivisions: the dialogue of life, of action, of theological exchange and of religious experience. Historically, there has always been communication and sharing of knowledge between Catholics and Muslims. However, by limiting the scope of this study to the last fifty years and by exposing concrete dialogical projects, this research draws attention to the present momentum in Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue so that one might claim the possibility of further progress in the future.

Following the theoretical and practical overview of Catholic-Islamic dialogue in general, Chapter 2 observes concrete examples of popular Marian devotions common to both Catholics and Muslims in order to establish a tentative hypothesis as to their effectiveness as a means of dialogue. Within this chapter there is an emphasis on religious practices in both Catholic and Islamic devotional environments revealing a certain importance given to symbolical elements in the spiritual sphere.

Chapter 3 presents a case-study comparing Mary in both Catholicism and Islam. In this project, the choice of Mary as subject of a case-study in view of interreligious dialogue is based on what appears to be convergences of Marian elements in Catholic and Islamic scriptures. There are a variety of ways of approaching a case-study. It often involves a concrete event or story. Since the major texts concerning Mary, the mother of Jesus in both the Bible and the Qur'an are presented in narrative form, a case-study seems appropriate for this research. Therefore, Chapter 3.1 investigates some of the similarities and contradictions in interpreting these scriptural narratives.

In Chapter 3.2, where the narratives chosen are introduced directly from the Bible and the Qur'an, a theoretical study follows. A comparative-interpretive approach to religious doctrines is introduced within the framework of Catholic Marian dogmas. Catholic biblical traditional interpretation considers the literal and spiritual sense. Then there are modern hermeneutical approaches including critical methods. The scriptural aspect of this study is based mainly on a historical-critical methodology. However, the scriptural material will at times be used literally, at times critically.

It is to be expected that in textual analysis, there will be varying and multiple interpretations. Rather than a simple exposition of the various scholarly interpretations of

a scriptural text, a choice will be made among them on the basis of the dialogical aim proposed in this thesis. This choice of scriptural texts then is made focusing mostly on common elements observed in Catholicism and Islam, those that might be conducive to interreligious dialogue. Since Catholicism and Islam originated and developed in different geographical and historical contexts, this case-study on Mary does not ignore the inherent differences between these two global religions. Therefore, in interreligious dialogue, cultural sensitivity is advocated within cultural diversity. A comparative study on Mary in Catholicism and Islam also reveals divergences in doctrinal content.

Controversial issues concerning Mary arise from the basic dogmatic differences in Christology: the doctrines of the incarnation and redemption. However, this research does not aim at reducing the analysis to a discussion of theological differences, nor does it intend to set up a wall of separation between the two religious groups under observation; rather, it is a means of drawing attention to a few of the difficulties involved in such an enterprise as interreligious dialogue on the subject of Mary. This theoretical perspective proposes new possibilities for mutual understanding without closing off discussion on the complexity of the subject matter and without reducing the conversation to an examination of theological differences. The focus is on Mary as a possible link between these two religious groups. Through description and comparison therefore, this case-study reveals parallels as well as contradictions between Catholics and Muslims view of Mary which might both prove useful for future interreligious encounters.

The theoretical methodology of this case-study is first and foremost an attempt at objective definitions of the Marian doctrines of Catholicism as basis for a comparison with Islamic texts and commentaries. However, in this investigative and interpretive

process, the object under investigation might be distorted. This is especially true in a theological discussion starting from a Catholic point of view where the investigator lacks knowledge especially concerning Islam. Moreover, on the one hand, scholarly literature comparing Mary in Catholicism and Islam is limited. On the other hand, there is recent literature comparing Mary in Catholicism with Fatima, the beloved daughter of Muhammad. Islamic traditional literature describes Fatima in a language similar to that of Catholic traditional expressions concerning Mary. Although there are similarities in the way Mary is portrayed in Catholicism and Islam, a closer reading of the scriptures also reveals contradictions that cannot be ignored.

The broader purpose of this thesis, as stated earlier, is to offer a new look at the existing state of Catholic-Islamic dialogue, from a theoretical and practical perspective, as a means of stimulating further encounters based on a deeper understanding and devotion to Mary.

Major Sources

Primary sources for the Catholic and Islamic perspectives are presented first. They are chosen from those used throughout this research or those more influential for the subject matter and/or methodology of each chapter or section. Secondary sources are then introduced as the discussion unfolds. Moreover, due to the nature of this thesis often involved with recent events, especially in Chapter 1, this research includes published and non-published works, as well as numerous articles and internet references

Primary Catholic Sources

The Biblical references for this study are from *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*.⁴ For the case-study of Chapter 3, the research focuses mainly on the Gospel narratives of Matthew 1 and Luke 1 and 2. The Roman Catholic Church has been involved in interreligious dialogue especially since the Second Vatican Council's, "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*), published in 1965.⁵ A further document from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation,"⁶ defines dialogue as a response to religious diversity. This text widens the perspective of interreligious relationships to include the four dialogical forms: the dialogue of life, of action, of theological exchange and religious experience. This wider view of dialogue was adopted for the structure of Chapter 1 in this thesis. Through dialogue, the Catholic Church aims at establishing relationships with other religious groups for the purpose of peaceful and harmonious living in a multi-cultural and multi-religious world. These documents maintain that such encounters foster understanding and cooperation based on a respect for freedom and a search for truth.

Among Catholic authors involved in interreligious dialogue, Michael L. Fitzgerald and John Borelli⁷ describe the Catholic view of dialogue as it concerns Islam.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* (Toronto, Ontario: Canadian Bible Society, 1993).

⁵ Abbott and Gallagher, "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*)."

⁶ Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," 19 May 1991, http://vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg... (accessed 19 March 2009). The PCID is the central office of the Catholic Church for the promotion of interreligious dialogue.

⁷ Michael L. Fitzgerald and John Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006). Fitzgerald is an Arabic scholar who was secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious

These scholars maintain that Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue aims not only at establishing a culture of peace in the face of increasing violence and injustice, but also a mutual deepening of conversion to God. Moreover, Fitzgerald and Borelli speak of the importance of the Virgin Mary not only in the Catholic Bible but also in the Qur'an. They specify that Mary is the title of Qur'an 19, that she is the only woman whose name is mentioned, and that she is named thirty-four times in the Qur'an which is more often than in the Bible. They compare Mary in the Bible and in the Qur'an, showing the common elements as well as the differences that exist between the two. Fitzgerald and Borelli are therefore the main literary source for this research concerning interreligious dialogue and the Virgin Mary.

Major references for popular Marian devotions of Chapter 2 are taken from the Egyptian author of the Coptic rite, Otto F. A. Meinardus (1925-2005). This scholar was an expert in Christian-Muslim relations. As a member of a minority group in the midst of a majority Muslim population, he was well situated for this study. While describing certain elements of popular devotions, his writings claim that there are enough similarities between the Coptic and the Islamic Mary to see in her "the golden bridge" between Christians and Muslims.⁸

The dogmatic definitions of Catholic Mariology in the case-study of Chapter 3 are taken from Henry Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: The Sources of Catholic*

Dialogue. Borelli is special assistant for interreligious affairs to the President of Georgetown University, Washington DC.

⁸ Otto F. A. Meinardus, *Coptic Saints and Pilgrimages* (Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 2002), 6; "The Virgin Mary as Mediatrix between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East," in *Marian Spirituality and the Interreligious Dialogue*, Marian Studies v. XLVII, ed. Thomas A. Thompson (Dayton, Ohio: University of Dayton, 1996). Meinardus was Professor of Philosophy at the American University in Cairo, Egypt.

Dogma.⁹ This classical work is the main source for understanding the historical background of Catholic Marian doctrine.

Primary Muslim Sources

Qur'anic references are taken from *The Holy Qur'an*, mainly from the translation and commentaries of S. V. Mir Ahmed Ali, 2004. Commentaries from *The Holy Qur'an* translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1973¹⁰ are also included in sections concerning Mary, mainly from Qur'an 3 and 19.

As members of a world religion, contemporary Muslim scholars, like their Catholic counterparts, are experimenting with modern scriptural hermeneutics. Among these, Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988)¹¹ was one of the pioneers in this area. Author of numerous books and articles, Rahman has influenced Muslim scholars in favor of adopting modern approaches for Qur'anic studies and has therefore paved the way for dialogue with Christians. His more scientific approach to the study of Islamic scriptures is therefore useful in this discussion on hermeneutics for the purpose of interreligious dialogue.

Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub is a Muslim scholar influenced by Rahman's approach to scriptural interpretation.¹² This allowed Ayoub to engage in and write extensively on

⁹ Henry Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 30th ed., trans. Roy J. Deferrari, rev. Karl Rahner (Powers Lake, North Dakota: Marian House, 1957).

¹⁰ *The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text, with English Translation and Commentary*, trans. S. V. Mir Ahmad 'Ali (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2004). *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, trans. Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali (Lahore, Pakistan: Ashraf Press, 1973).

¹¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982); *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994); *Revival and Reform in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism*, ed. Ebrahim Moosa (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2000). As Professor of Islamic Thought at the University of Chicago, Rahman was recognized as a major Muslim scholar both of Islamic and Western philosophy.

¹² Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub, "Muslim-Christian Dialogue in the Modern World: Nearest in Amity," in *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, ed. Irfan A. Omar

interreligious dialogue. *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, edited by Iran A. Omar,¹³ maintains Ayoub's acknowledgement of the positive aspects in the relationship between Muslims and Christians including Catholics. Ayoub also underlines the difficulties that still exist in the search for better understanding between Catholics and Muslims. Ayoub's scholarly essays are therefore a major source for this thesis.

Primary sources for the study of Mary are those of Jane I. Smith and Yvonne H. Haddad, in their article, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," published in *The Muslim World*.¹⁴ This article has provided many details concerning the person and role of Mary in both the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition or *hadith* useful for this study. These authors explain the outstanding position Mary occupies in the Qur'an specifying the seventy references to her especially the twenty-four speaking of Jesus, son of Mary. Their findings include common elements as well as differences Catholics and Muslims face when comparing the Biblical and Qur'anic Mary. Their insights might be useful for the purpose of this research.

Similarly, Mary F. Thurkill's book *Chosen among Women: Mary and Fatima in Medieval Christianity and Shi'ite Islam*¹⁵ is a major source for the investigation on Mary. This recent monograph is useful for a comparison between Mary in Catholicism

(Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 2007), 200. Ayoub is Professor of Islamic Studies and Comparative Religion at Temple University, Philadelphia.

¹³ Irfan A. Omar, ed., *A Muslim view of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007). Omar is Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies at Marquette University.

¹⁴ Jane I. Smith and Yvonne H. Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," *The Muslim World*, 79, July-October 1989. Smith is Professor of Islamic Studies and Co-director of the Center for Christian-Muslim Relations, Hartford Seminary, Connecticut. Haddad is Professor of the History of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Georgetown University.

¹⁵ Thurkill, *Chosen among Women*.

and Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. Fatima, a Mary-like figure, occupies a prominent position in Islam, especially in the Shi'ite tradition.¹⁶

Secondary Sources

This thesis also refers to numerous secondary sources useful for a better understanding of Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue and for this study on Mary. The more prominent secondary sources are mentioned here. Other minor sources are introduced in footnotes as they appear in the text.

A classical scholar setting the stage for Qur'anic exegesis is al-Tabari, (839-923), one of the earliest and most renowned among the historians and commentators of the Qur'an.¹⁷ His *Commentary on the Qur'an* presents a variety of scholarly Qur'anic interpretations including those based on his own personal opinion.¹⁸ Moreover, this study includes Smith and Haddad's reference to al-Tabari's commentaries in their discussion on Mary.¹⁹

A contemporary issue relevant to interreligious dialogue in the modern world is that of multiple religious and secular worldviews. Authors who tend to deny or ignore the transcendental or spiritual aspect of human life have been avoided in this investigation for two reasons. First, the topic of this study includes spiritual elements that are inherent to Catholicism and Islam. Second, certain secular trends might be unacceptable to Catholics and Muslims.

¹⁶ The main Islamic traditional groups are the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. Shi'ism bases its authority on the Prophet Muhammad's descendents, that is through his daughter Fatima, her husband and two sons.

¹⁷ Al-Tabari, Abu Ja'far Muhammad B. Jarir, *The Commentary on the Qur'an*, v. 1, ed. W. F. Madelung and A. Jones (Oxford, U. K.: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁸ Norman Calder, Jawid Mojaddedi and Andrew Rippin, eds. and trans. *Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 114.

¹⁹ Smith and Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," 167.

Moreover, the concept of pluralism adopted for this thesis is not one that encourages relativism or mere tolerance of differences. For the purpose of this thesis, the paradigm of pluralism proposed in Chapter 1 is that of Diana L. Eck, director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University.²⁰ This project, while speaking of pluralism in general, encourages dynamic interreligious involvement through dialogue. Among Muslim scholars, John L. Esposito and John O. Voll discuss the role of Islamic intellectuals in a pluralistic world.²¹ Reza Shah-Kazemi²² is a source for the study of interreligious dialogue from the more mystical Sufi point of view.

A further issue is that of modern scriptural hermeneutics. Without going into detail, this thesis mentions Joyce Ann Zimmerman's overview of a variety of modern approaches used in Catholic Biblical and liturgical studies, including critical methods. Zimmerman describes various types of historical as well as literary critical methods, their gains and their limitations. Among critical methods, she describes "narrative criticism" useful for the case-study of Chapter 3.²³

As a Catholic pioneer of the historical-critical approach, including narrative criticism in biblical studies, Raymond E. Brown (1928-1998) is important for his research on the infancy narratives of the Gospels where Mary appears most frequently. Brown's close reading of the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke uncovered

²⁰ Diana L. Eck, "What Is Pluralism," The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, http://pluralism.org/pluralism/what_is_pluralism.php (accessed 28 November 2008). Eck is a Professor of Comparative Religion at Harvard University.

²¹ Esposito, John L. and John O. Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Esposito is University Professor and Founding Director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. Voll is Professor of Islamic History at Georgetown University.

²² Reza Shah-Kazemi, *The Other in the Light of the One: The Universality of the Qur'an and Interfaith Dialogue* (Cambridge, U. K.: The Islamic Texts Society, 2006). Shah-Kazemi is a Research Associate at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London and the Founding Editor of the *Islamic World Report*.

²³ Joyce Ann Zimmerman, *Liturgy and Hermeneutics* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999). Zimmerman is Director of the Institute for Liturgical Ministry in Dayton, Ohio.

certain marked conventional structures found in other biblical texts. His research also pointed out essential differences in the Gospel narratives which reveal their unique and original theme.²⁴ The introduction to the narratives in the case-study on Mary owes much to Brown for the Catholic perspective.

Influential Catholic and Muslim leaders have been increasingly involved in interreligious dialogue. Chapter 1 mentions how Pope John Paul II and his successor, Pope Benedict XVI, promoted interreligious dialogue in word and deed.²⁵ The same chapter describes events where Islamic leaders are involved in promoting interreligious dialogue for the sake of peace and justice. Prominent among these are King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and King Abdullah II of Jordan.²⁶

John Paul II was influential in the modern resurgence of devotion to Mary, particularly through his Encyclical Letter “Mother of the Redeemer (*Redemptoris Mater*).”²⁷ Often called ‘Mary’s Pope’²⁸ John Paul II was the major inspiration for the choice of Mary as subject for this thesis. A Muslim scholar, Timothy John Winter, also discusses interreligious dialogue on the topic of the Virgin Mary. In spite of his

²⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, updated edition (New York: Doubleday, 1999); “Luke’s Method in the Annunciation Narrative of Chapter One,” in *Perspectives on Luke—Acts*, ed. Charles H. Talbert (Virginia, U.S.A.: Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, 1978); *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1973). Brown, a Roman Catholic Priest was 23 years professor emeritus at the Protestant Union Theological Seminary in New York. He was appointed to the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1972 and in 1996.

²⁵ Pope John Paul II organized the first international gathering of religious leaders in Assisi, Italy. He also greatly encouraged Catholic-Islamic encounters. His successor, Pope Benedict XVI continues this trend for greater understanding and cooperation through Catholic-Islamic dialogue.

²⁶ In 2008, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, of Saudi Arabia, initiated the historic conference of religious leaders of different faiths in Madrid, Spain. King of Jordan since 1999, Abdullah II bin al-Hussein, met John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI to discuss how Muslims and Christians can live and work together for world peace. This thesis describes the Jordanian King’s welcome of Benedict XVI during the Pope’s visit to Jordan.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Mary: God’s Yes to Man - Encyclical Redemptoris Mater* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

²⁸ Antoine Nacheff, *Mary’s Pope: John Paul II, Mary, and the Church since Vatican II* (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed and Ward, 2000). Doctor in Sacred Theology, Nacheff teaches at the International Marian Research Institute.

hesitations with regards to introducing the historical Mary in interreligious dialogue between Catholics and Muslims, Winter provides material on Mary in Islam useful for this research.²⁹

The *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, is a research tool giving a modern overview of Islamic history, doctrine, and scriptural exegesis. Moreover, McAuliffe's lecture at Georgetown University is a source for interreligious dialogue involving the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The numerous Abrahamic encounters might also pave the way for further contacts involving Mary in Catholicism and Islam. In an article where she discusses Marian texts in the Qur'an and classical *hadith*, McAuliffe compares the Qur'anic Mary with Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad.³⁰

Barbara Freyer Stowasser³¹ and Margaret Smith³² present scholarly works concerning outstanding women in Islam. Some of these are included in the discussion

²⁹ Timothy John Winter, "Mary in Islam," in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); "Pulchra Ut Luna: Some Reflections on the Marian Theme in Muslim-Catholic Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 22 June 1999, <http://by120w.bay120.mail.live.com/mail/InboxLight.aspx?FolderID=> (accessed 5 September 2008). Tim Winter, also known as Abdul Hakim Murad, is a British convert to Islam. He is lecturer of Islamic Studies at Cambridge University. His scholarly contributions include among other areas, Muslim-Christian relations, Sufism and the Virgin Mary in Islam.

³⁰ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed. *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, v. .3-4 (Leiden: Brill, 2003-4); "Abraham and the Culture of Dialogue," Lecture at Georgetown University, 28 October 2007; "Chosen of All Women: Mary and Fatima in the Qur'anic Exegesis," *Islamochristiana*, 7, 1981. McAuliffe served as Dean of Georgetown College at Georgetown University from 1999. At Georgetown, she was Professor of the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies. She is President of Bryn Mawr College since 2008.

³¹ Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Stowasser is Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Georgetown University.

³² Margaret Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics: The Life and Work of Rabi'a and Other Women Mystics in Islam* (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2001). Smith is a scholar of Sufism and author of several books on Islamic mysticism, including works concerning exceptional Muslim women mystics.

concerning Mary. In his study on Mary, George H. Tavard (1922-2007) claims that it is important to know the place Mary occupies in both Catholicism and Islam.³³

Conclusion of Introduction

Through a variety of sources, Chapter 1 of this thesis provides evidence for the trajectory of Catholic-Islamic interreligious encounters since Vatican II. This momentum in Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue aims at mutual understanding and cooperation in order to safeguard and foster social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom in the world today. Furthermore, the description of popular Marian devotions past and present of Chapter 2 investigates the claim that Mary is already playing a role in Catholic-Muslim encounters. The comparative case-study of Chapter 3 with its theological approach seeks to discover the possibility and usefulness of introducing Mary further in formal and informal gatherings involving Catholics and Muslims.

This thesis presents theoretical information and practical experiences in order to validate the claim that Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue is not only possible but is increasingly producing results for mutual understanding and building relationships. The momentum is such that, as this research suggests, Mary might help reduce the gap that exists between Catholics and Muslims. May this research be a small contribution towards this goal.

³³ George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996). Tavard was Professor of Theology at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

CHAPTER 1

FROM CONFRONTATION TO DIALOGUE IN CATHOLIC-ISLAMIC ENCOUNTERS

The main aim of this chapter is to define interreligious dialogue and explore various attempts at encounters between Catholics and Muslims. The first section explains the move from a confrontational attitude to one of dialogue considered more conducive to a better understanding and cooperation among persons of different religions for the betterment of society and of the world.

The second section describes certain Catholic-Islamic encounters at local, national, and international levels since Vatican Council II, giving priority to more recent events. The Vatican document “Dialogue and Proclamation” maintains that there are a variety of forms of dialogue. Since “all are called to dialogue,”³⁴ encounters cannot be limited to theological exchange among specialists. Therefore, this section follows the four dialogical approaches suggested in the document: dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange, and dialogue of religious experience.³⁵ While keeping in mind that these different approaches are often interconnected, this research examines concrete events for each type of encounter.

1.1 Interreligious Dialogue in a Global Setting

Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue is taking place in the midst of a variety of cultures and religions. In John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter “At the Beginning of the New Millenium,” the Pope spoke of the importance of dialogue in a pluralistic world:

³⁴ Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation,” 11, # 43.

³⁵ Pontifical Council, *ibid.*, 11, # 42.

“In the climate of increased cultural and religious pluralism which is expected to mark the society of the new millennium, it is obvious that this dialogue will be especially important in establishing a sure basis for peace.”³⁶

1.1.1 Confrontation versus Dialogue

Interreligious encounters bringing together persons belonging to different religions is not something entirely new. However, according to Leonard Swidler, often, in the past, the main purpose of such encounters “was to overcome an opponent, because each was completely convinced that it alone knew the secret of human life.”³⁷

One classic example of interreligious encounters of this type is that of “John of Damascus: A Dialogue between a Saracen and a Christian.”³⁸ This text of the eighth century was more a work of one-sided debate rather than a true dialogue as it is understood today. The aim was to convince an opponent that the Christian had all the answers or at least compel “the antagonist to admit that he had ‘nothing more to say.’”³⁹ In modern times, interreligious dialogue must include reciprocity and respect.

An article by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops mentions that although Catholics and Muslims have experienced times of controversy and conflict, there have also been attempts for the promotion of peace:

³⁶ John Paul II, “At the Beginning of the New Millennium (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*),” 6 January 2001, http://vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_2001... (accessed 9 December 2008), 6, # 55. Cited in Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 56.

³⁷ Leonard Swidler, “Islam and the Trialogue of Abrahamic Religions” in *Cross Currents*, Winter 92/93, v. 42, Issue 4, <http://crosscurrents.org/swidler.htm> (accessed 28 June 2008), 1. Swidler is Professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University, Philadelphia.

³⁸ M. S. Seale, *Qur'an and Bible: Studies in Interpretation and Dialogue* (London, U.K.: Croom Helm, 1978), 63. A Saracen was an Arab, a member of a nomadic people of the deserts between Syria and Arabia. Saracens were mainly of the Muslim religion.

³⁹ M. S. Seale, *ibid.*

Throughout our history, valiant and generous rulers and politicians, pious and brave saints, sincere teachers dedicated to the pursuit of God's message for all humanity, and many, many others among us have promoted cooperation, dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims instead of the negative alternatives which have so often characterized the history of our relations.⁴⁰

In 1991, Pope John Paul II, in his message to Muslims at the end of the month of Ramadan, gave one example of such attempts at a peaceful encounter almost a thousand years ago. In 1076, Pope Gregory VII, wrote to Al-Nasir, the Muslim Ruler of Bijaya, present-day Algeria:

Almighty God, who wishes that all should be saved and none lost, approves nothing in us so much as that after loving him one should love his fellow man, and that one should not do to others, what one does not want done to oneself. You and we owe this charity to ourselves especially because we believe in and confess one God, admittedly in a different way, and daily praise and venerate him, the Creator of the world and ruler of this world.⁴¹

Interreligious dialogue then aims at peaceful co-existence through mutual love of the one God and of other human beings. However, there are obstacles facing such an endeavor.

1.1.2 Catholic and Islamic Exclusivism

Both Catholicism and Islam maintain that their own religious beliefs are the ultimate and final divine revelation for humankind. Furthermore, according to Mahmoud Ayoub, both Catholicism and Islam "are intensely missionary oriented. Each claims to have exclusively a universal message of truth and salvation for all of

⁴⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Friends and Not Adversaries: A Catholic-Muslim Spiritual Journey," 23 December 2003, <http://uscbb.org/seia/friends.shtml> (accessed 23 July 2008), 1.

⁴¹ John Paul II, "Message to the Faithful of Islam at the End of the Month of Ramadan (Rome, April 3, 1991)," in *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds Byron L. Sherwin and Harold Kasimow (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press, 1999), 66.

humankind.”⁴² The Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, upholds the traditional Catholic stance that only in Jesus Christ and in the Catholic Church is the fullness of revelation and redemption.⁴³ According to Philip Jenkins, this document emphasizes the “exclusive role of Christ and Catholic Christianity as vehicles of salvation.”⁴⁴ However, the Church’s position includes within that salvation “all persons of good will.”⁴⁵

Generally, Muslims consider their sacred text, the Qur’an, a record of God’s revelation recited to Muhammad. Islamic doctrines are also based on the words and deeds of the Prophet not included in the Qur’an but recorded by his companions and followers in what is called the *hadith*.⁴⁶ The Qur’an venerates both Jesus and his mother Mary. However, Muslims consider Muhammad the last and the greatest of the Prophets, the confirmation and fulfillment of the prophecies contained in both Jewish and Christian scriptures. Fazlur Rahman argues that if “Muhammad and his followers believe in all prophets, all people must also and equally believe in him. Disbelief in him would be equivalent to disbelief in all, for this would arbitrarily upset the line of prophetic succession.”⁴⁷

⁴² Mahmoud Ayoub, “John Paul II on Islam,” in *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue* by Mahmoud Ayoub, ed. Irfan A. Omar (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 232.

⁴³ Joseph Ratzinger, “On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church (*Dominus Iesus*),” Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 6 August 2000, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20 (accessed 17 February 2009). Ratzinger is now Pope Benedict XVI.

⁴⁴ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 230. Jenkins is a Professor at Pennsylvania State University.

⁴⁵ Abbott, Walter M. and Joseph Gallagher, eds. “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*),” in *The Documents of Vatican II*, (New York: America Press, 1966), 221, # 22. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: “Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved,” 285, # 1260. The grace of salvation consists in attaining justification and obtaining eternal life.

⁴⁶ Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin Press, 1995), 5.

⁴⁷ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 164.

1.1.3 Islamic Traditional Religious Groups

Another aspect to be considered in Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue is that in Islam there are divergences in beliefs and in scriptural interpretation stemming from different traditions within Islam itself. Following the Prophet Muhammad's death, the two major Islamic groups are the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. The Shi'ites comprise about ten percent of the Islamic community. The others are Sunnis. The differences between these two groups concern leadership and interpretation of the Qur'an.⁴⁸

According to the Shi'ites, true leadership of the community must be from the Prophet Muhammad's family and must reside in the imams. Rahman explains the Shi'ite position: "they all hold that Imamate is established by a clear designation or text (*nass*) alone on the part of a predecessor in favor of his successor and not by election or consensus of the people as the Sunnis do."⁴⁹ The Sunni majority interprets the Qur'an according to the consensus of the community. They claim that the Prophet "conferred on his community the very infallibility that the Shi'is ascribe to their Imams."⁵⁰

Another trend associated with Islam is that of Sufism. Gerhard Bowering explains the specificity of Sufi interpretation of the Qur'an. "Sufism, Islamic mysticism, developed its own approach to qur'anic exegesis and formed its own body of Qur'an commentary." Sufi "interpretation includes *zahir*, the outer literal meaning, and *batin*, the inner hidden meaning of the qur'anic text."⁵¹

⁴⁸ Meir M. Bar-Asher, "Shi'ism and the Qur'an," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, v. 4, 593 ff..

⁴⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism*, ed. Ebrahim Moosa (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 63. The Fatima imagery discussed in Chapter III was developed mostly through Shi'ism. See Thurlkill, 3.

⁵⁰ Hamid Enayat, "Shi'ism and Sunnism," in *Shi'ism: Doctrines, Thought, and Spirituality*, eds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 66.

⁵¹ Gerhard Bowering, "The Scriptural 'Senses' in Medieval Sufi Qur'an Exegesis," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, eds. Jane

William C. Chittick in “Sufism: A Short Introduction” mentions two outstanding classical Sufi authors he considers “literary high points of the Sufi tradition, Ibn al-‘Arabi and Jalal ad-Din Rumi.”⁵² Though these writers differ on many points, they both also “share numerous common themes, especially on the issue of love.”⁵³ In describing Sufism, Chittick reveals that God’s love is very much an aspect of the Qur’an: “He loves them, and they love Him” (Q 5:54). God’s love comes first.⁵⁴ Therefore, the Sufis “have always claimed to speak for the heart and marrow of the Islamic tradition.”⁵⁵

Scott Kugle then compares Sufi mysticism to that of other religions: “Sufism is Islamic mysticism, comparable to the mystical substreams of other religious traditions but also distinct from them in many ways. It aims not just to understand God, like theological discourse, or to obey God, like legal discourse, but also to love and be loved by God.”⁵⁶ The Sufis emphasize the devotional aspect and Jesus might have been an influence in this trend. Philip Jenkins claims that “Jesus was the primary inspiration for Islamic mysticism, the beloved model and mentor of the Sufis.”⁵⁷

According to Shah-Kazemi, in a world prone to violence, the Sufi interpretation of “the Qur’anic discourse, appreciated in its most profound and spiritually transforming aspect, can and does function as an antidote to fanaticism parading as

Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 346.

⁵² William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 28. Chittick is Professor at the State University of New York.

⁵³ Chittick, *ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁴ Chittick, *ibid.*, 62.

⁵⁵ Chittick, *ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁶ Scott Kugle, *Sufis & Saint’s Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, & Sacred Power in Islam* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1.

⁵⁷ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 196.

Muslim piety.”⁵⁸ Shah-Kazemi maintains that it might be mainly on the basis of the traditional Sufi spiritual exegesis that the universality of the Qur’anic message can be exposed for the purpose of interreligious dialogue.⁵⁹

1.1.4 Scriptural Hermeneutics

Especially in more formal types of interreligious encounters, Fitzgerald and Borelli consider it necessary “to learn about other traditions and acquire better knowledge of one’s own,” in order to engage in dialogue.⁶⁰ This might include the study of Catholic and Islamic scriptural hermeneutics for mutual understanding.

In the context of Catholic liturgy, Joyce Ann Zimmerman explains the origin and development of modern biblical hermeneutics. Since the 18th century, there has been an attempt “to place the methods of human sciences on a scientific par with the methods of the natural sciences.”⁶¹ Zimmerman speaks of historical critical methods maintaining that “every text that is produced in some enduring form is produced in some historical context, and that context conditions the final content.”⁶²

However, until recently, the Catholic Church was hesitant to adopt a more critical approach to scripture studies for fear this might lead to skepticism.⁶³ There was the fear of “*historicism*, a theory that denies revelation,” or “*materialism*, the theory that denies anything spiritual.”⁶⁴ Catholic scholars who tried to apply these scientific methods to Biblical studies have had to struggle against the more conservative

⁵⁸ Shah-Kazemi, *The Other in the Light of the One*, viii.

⁵⁹ Shah-Kazemi, *ibid.*, vii.

⁶⁰ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 91.

⁶¹ Zimmerman, *Liturgy and Hermeneutics*, 28.

⁶² Zimmerman, *ibid.*, 54.

⁶³ Peter Funk, “What Is Biblical Criticism—and Should We Trust It?” in *This Rock*, April 2005, <http://catholic.com/thisrock/2005/0504fea1.asp> (accessed 11 July 2008), 1.

⁶⁴ Funk, *ibid.*, 3. Emphasis in original.

members of their Church.⁶⁵ In time, documents of the Magisterium, have “given Catholic scholars the proper tools for the purification and incorporation of critical methods into the Church’s reading of Scripture.”⁶⁶

Concerning scriptural hermeneutics in Islam, Claude Gilliot and Pierre Larcher speak of two different approaches to the study of the Qur’an. The first adopts a more literal attitude. From this point of view, the Qur’an is the eternal, dogmatic word of God directly recited to Muhammad. It is therefore “an original work that owes nothing to an external influence, be it local or foreign.”⁶⁷ The second approach tends towards a historical method: “the Qur’an is a text which has a history.”⁶⁸

According to Majid Fakhry, “there were from the earliest times vast differences of opinion among Muslim exegetes, jurists and other scholars, on the justifiability of applying rational discourse, the paramount expression of philosophical methodology, to the text of the Qur’an.” To prove this point Fakhry speaks of al-Tabari (839-923 CE), who, as mentioned, was one of the earliest and most renowned commentators of the Qur’an. Al-Tabari “refers to those scholars who were reluctant to engage in exegesis ‘out of fear of error, inadequacy or liability to sin’ (Tabari, *Tafsir*, I, 42k).” While condemning exegetical opinions that are “reprehensible” and “not praiseworthy,” al-Tabari does allow interpretation of the Qur’an based on deeper exegetical research.⁶⁹ In *The Commentary on the Qur’an*, al-Tabari quotes Ibn ‘Abbas’ explanation of Qur’anic

⁶⁵ Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 6.

⁶⁶ Funk, “What Is Biblical Criticism,” 3. Documents concerning Catholic Biblical interpretation are found in Pope Pius XII’s “On Biblical Studies (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*)” and Vatican II’s “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*).”

⁶⁷ Claude Gilliot and Pierre Larcher, “Language and Style,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, v. 3, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 127.

⁶⁸ Gilliot and Larcher, *ibid.*, 111.

⁶⁹ Majid Fakhry, “Philosophy and the Qur’an” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, v. 4, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 69. Fakhry is Professor of Philosophy at the American University of Beirut and Georgetown University.

exegesis. "There are four aspects to exegesis: an aspect which the Arabs know through their language, an exegesis which no one may be excused from not knowing, an exegesis which the learned know, and an exegesis known only to God, exalted is His mention. [71]"⁷⁰ According to McAuliffe, "al-Tabari was clearly aware of methodological issues" and "touches upon a number of hermeneutical considerations."⁷¹

Following these guidelines from classical Qur'anic exegesis, there is a movement towards more "critical thinking among Muslim Islamicists."⁷² According to Swidler, Muhammad M. Arkoun, Professor of Arabic Language and Islamic Culture at the University of Paris expresses the need to introduce modern critical scriptural scholarship: "I demand in what concerns me a critically new reading of the Scripture (Bible, Gospels, Qur'an) and a philosophical critique of exegetical and theological reason."⁷³

Similarly, Rahman is one who advocates a historical approach for the study of the Qur'an and of Islam in general. According to Abdullah Saeed, Rahman truly believes that "the Qur'an is the Word of God (*kalam Allah*)" and that the Prophet Muhammad "was the recipient of the final, verbal revelation of God." However, he "critiques the 'dictation theory' of revelation" where the Prophet's role is reduced to that of "a tape-recorder."⁷⁴ Rahman explains his hermeneutical approach as follows:

⁷⁰ Ibn 'Abbas, cited in al-Tabari, *The Commentary on the Qur'an*, 34.

⁷¹ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Quranic Hermeneutics: The View of Al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press, 1988), 48.

⁷² Swidler, "Islam and the Trialogue of Abrahamic Religions," 2.

⁷³ Muhammad M. Arkoun, Cited in Swidler, "Islam and the Trialogue of Abrahamic Religions," 3.

⁷⁴ Abdullah Saeed, "Fuzlur Rahman: A Framework for Interpreting the Ethico-Legal Content of the Qur'an," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed Suha Taji-Farouki (London U.K.: Oxford University Press with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2004), 45.

The process of interpretation proposed here consists of a double movement, from the present situation to Qur'anic times, then back to the present.

We see, then, that the Qur'an and the genesis of the Islamic community occurred in the light of history and against a social-historical background. The Qur'an is a response to that situation, and for the most part it consists of moral, religious, and social pronouncements that respond to specific problems confronted in concrete historical situations.⁷⁵

However, just as in Catholicism, this historical-critical approach has encountered difficulties from traditional elements in Islam. According to Fakhry, Rahman and other Islamic exegetes who tried to apply more scientific and literary norms in their interpretation of the Qur'anic text "have been either reprimanded or declared infidel."⁷⁶

These controversies have not deterred Muslim scholars such as Ayoub who has "invested heavily in interreligious dialogue," and has done so "from within a historical-critical framework."⁷⁷ Most of his writings concern dialogue with other religions especially with Christianity. Ayoub writes: "Men and women of faith in both communities must learn to listen to the divine voice speaking through revelation and history, and together seek to understand what God is saying to Muslims through Christianity and to Christians through Islam."⁷⁸ Where scientific hermeneutical methods are used for the purpose of interreligious dialogue, the official dogmatic beliefs of Catholicism or Islam need not be set aside.

⁷⁵ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 5.

⁷⁶ Fakhry, "Philosophy and the Qur'an," 89.

⁷⁷ Omar, *A Muslim View of Christianity*, xi.

⁷⁸ Mahmoud Ayoub, "Muslim Views of Christianity: Some Modern Examples," in *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, ed. Irfan A. Omar (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 229.

1.1.5 The Pluralist Paradigm

Catholics and Muslims are also involved in dialogue with other religions. The Second Vatican Council set the stage for further interreligious dialogue in the Catholic Church. Vatican II's document "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*)," encouraged greater openness with persons of other religions in order to share the values different religious traditions offer to the world.

Fitzgerald and Borelli note that *Nostra Aetate* focuses on what Catholic beliefs have in common with other religions; they therefore consider openness to the other as necessary for interreligious dialogue between Catholics and Muslims. However, this includes respect for differences:

Dialogue will be impossible, or at least extremely difficult, where minds are closed. If there is a conviction that only I have the truth, and that the other person is completely in error, then there can be no true meeting of minds. Such a closed mentality will have to be overcome. This does not mean that I have to give up my own convictions. The Christian will believe that the fullness of revelation is given in Jesus Christ, but this does not exclude the presence of 'rays of the Truth,' of what the early Christian Fathers have called 'seeds of the Word,' in other religions. The Muslim will believe that the Qur'an is the final revelation, superseding all others. Yet this does not prevent the recognition of earlier revelations, which, in some measure at least, can still be valid.⁷⁹

Shah-Kazemi mentions that members of certain religious traditions consider that their own religion as revealed by God is fully true, authentic and valid. However, they need not deny that in other "divinely revealed, not humanly constructed" religions, there are also elements of truth, authenticity and validity.⁸⁰ The purpose of dialogue then is to delve into that "human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which

⁷⁹ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 59, 90-91.

⁸⁰ Shah-Kazemi, *The Other in the Light of the One*, xxiv.

man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute.”⁸¹

For interreligious dialogue in general, this study is in agreement with the pluralist paradigm proposed by Diana L. Eck summarized in four points as follows

- First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but *the energetic engagement with diversity*. [...]
- Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but *the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*. [...]
- Third, pluralism is not relativism, but *the encounter of commitments*. [...]
- Fourth, pluralism is *based on dialogue*. [...]⁸²

Ultimately, it is perhaps impossible to reach total comprehension of the other.

Shah-Kazemi speaks of “‘a transcendently-ordained tolerance,’ a tolerance that is not simply the outcome of a sentimental desire for peaceful relations between adherents of different religions, but one which is deeply rooted in a recognition of, and respect for, the holiness that lies at the core of all revealed religious traditions.”⁸³ Interreligious dialogue then is the honest proclamation of the truth as seen through different prisms based on respect for each person involved.

1.1.6 Religious Freedom

Pope Benedict XVI places his belief in the sacredness of each human being as a necessary basis for any interreligious dialogue: “Christians and Muslims, following their respective religions, point to the truth of the sacred character and dignity of the person. This is the basis of our mutual respect and esteem; this is the basis for cooperation in the service of peace between nations and peoples, the dearest wish of all

⁸¹ Ratzinger, “On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church (*Dominus Iesus*),” 4, # 7.

⁸² Eck, “What Is Pluralism,” 1. Emphasis in the original.

⁸³ Shah-Kazemi, *The Other in the Light of the One*, xii.

believers and all people of good will.”⁸⁴ This respect for the dignity of each human person is basic to the notion of freedom of religion.

According to Fitzgerald and Borelli, two complementary documents of the Second Vatican Council, the “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*)” and the “Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*)”⁸⁵ insist on the rights of persons and communities to freedom in religious matters. The document on religious freedom claims that to deny “the free exercise of religion in society, when the just requirements of public order are observed, is to do an injustice to the human person and to the very order established by God for humankind.”⁸⁶ Therefore, “the right to religious freedom is based on the very dignity of the human person.”⁸⁷ For the first time in the Church’s history, religious freedom and freedom of conscience were declared as basic human rights.

The Catholic Church does not exclude the importance for everyone to search for the truth. However, as Fitzgerald and Borelli maintain, “the individual has the right to be free from coercion and to be respected with regard to individual choice concerning religious matters.”⁸⁸ Where religious freedom is denied and where one cannot practice one’s religion openly, it is extremely difficult to engage in dialogue.

Contemporary Muslim scholars such as Rahman, also consider freedom as necessary for intellectual pursuits. He emphasizes this aspect of freedom when he says that “free thought and thought are synonymous, and one cannot hope that thought will

⁸⁴ Benedict XVI, cited in Matthew Bunson, “Pope Benedict Speaks to Muslims,” *This Rock*, <http://catholic.com/thisrock/2007/0702fea3.asp> (accessed 11 July 2008), 1.

⁸⁵ Walter M. Abbott and Joseph Gallagher, eds., “Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*),” in *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966).

⁸⁶ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 61. Citation from “Declaration on Religious Freedom, (*Dignitatis Humanae*), # 3.

⁸⁷ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *ibid.*, 60. Citation from “Declaration on Religious Freedom,” # 2.

⁸⁸ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 60.

survive without freedom.”⁸⁹ In the area of religious and interreligious matters, Ayoub maintains that the concept of freedom of religion is clearly expressed in the Qur’an, the text that is binding on all Muslims regardless of their specific tradition. The Qur’an is “the only foundational source on which all Muslims agree.”⁹⁰ In his discussion on conversion and the freedom of religion, Ayoub quotes the Qur’anic verses affirming this freedom: “Let there be no compulsion in religion.” (Q 2:256) Further Qur’anic verses stress the idea of religious freedom: “Had your Lord so wished, all the people of the earth would have accepted faith. Would you [Muhammad] then compel people to be people of faith?” (Q. 10:99), and “Truth is of your Lord. Let him then who so wills have faith, and let him who so wills reject faith” (Q. 18:29). Ayoub then concludes: “The idea of divine revelation of the truth and the human freedom to accept or reject it is fundamental to the Islamic view of revelation and human responsibility.”⁹¹ According to Ayoub, “the Qur’an accepts with approval both religious pluralism and diversity.”⁹² However, Ayoub maintains that interreligious encounters have so far failed in achieving unity of faith between Jews, Christians, and Muslims which involves acceptance of Muhammad and the Qur’an: “the Qur’an has been calling Muslims, Jews, and Christians to what we have still in vain been trying to achieve for the last half century or so, namely interreligious ecumenism based on a sincere dialogue of faith.”⁹³

⁸⁹ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 125.

⁹⁰ Mahmoud Ayoub, “Introduction,” in *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, ed. Irfan A. Omar (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 3.

⁹¹ Mahmoud Ayoub, “The Islamic Context of Muslim-Christian Relations,” in *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, 17-31, ed. Irfan A. Omar (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 29

⁹² Ayoub, “Introduction,” 3.

⁹³ Ayoub, *ibid.*, 4.

Whereas Ayoub considers conversion by coercion as useless, he encourages the spread of Islam based on “wisdom and fair exhortation.”⁹⁴

Similarly, according to documents of the Catholic Church, the proclamation of belief in Jesus Christ and his Church is a necessary component of interreligious dialogue. The “Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*)” states that “all men are bound to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and His Church, and to embrace the truth they come to know, and to hold fast to it.”⁹⁵ Moreover, “the truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power. Religious freedom, in turn, which men demand as necessary to fulfill their duty to worship God, has to do with immunity from coercion in civil society.”⁹⁶ In a pluralistic world, Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue will keep in mind “the importance of truth being the goal of all dialogue and charity being the motivation behind all dialogue.”⁹⁷

For both Catholics and Muslims, “in the context of religious plurality, dialogue means ‘all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment’, in obedience to truth and respect for freedom.”⁹⁸ In the same spirit, the following investigates a variety of dialogical contacts between Catholics and Muslims.

⁹⁴ Ayoub, “The Islamic Context of Muslim-Christian Relations,” 30.

⁹⁵ Abbott and Gallagher, “Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*),” 677, # 1.

⁹⁶ Abbott and Gallagher, *ibid.*

⁹⁷ Benedict XVI, “Truth is Goal of Inter-Religious Dialogue, Pope Benedict Teaches,” *Catholic News Agency*, 10 June 2008, <http://ewtn.com/vnews/getstory.asp?number=89108> (accessed 10 June 2008), 1.

⁹⁸ Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation,” 3, # 9.

1.2 Concrete Examples of Catholic-Islamic Dialogue

However, interreligious dialogue can take many forms and include everyone. According to Fitzgerald and Borelli, “the term chosen to define dialogue is ‘relations’, showing that dialogue does not only mean verbal exchange but includes many kinds of human interaction.”⁹⁹ For this purpose, they present the four forms of encounter found in “Dialogue and Proclamation.” as follows:

- a) The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.
- b) The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
- c) The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.
- d) The *dialogue of religious experience*, 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.¹⁰⁰

Although expressed in different terms, Ayoub proposes a similar structure for interreligious dialogue. He speaks of the dialogue of life which includes action, coming together “to face the problems of the modern world.” A second type is that of “dialogue of beliefs, theological doctrines and philosophical ideas,” which Ayoub says “tends to be restricted to the academy.” Another type is that of “the dialogue of witnessing to one’s faith.” According to Ayoub, the purpose of this dialogical approach is to convert the other and therefore, the term dialogue might be used “to cover up a nondialogical

⁹⁹ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 27. In the broader sense proposed by “Dialogue and Proclamation, the “spirit of dialogue” is more than interpersonal communication; it includes “all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment.” 3, # 9.

¹⁰⁰ Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation,” 11, # 42.

agenda.” The final type Ayoub calls “the dialogue of faith,” which aims at deepening one’s own faith by sharing spiritual experiences with the other.¹⁰¹

In conclusion, as Catholics and Muslims come together for dialogue, even one small sincere step towards the other can already be beneficial. Furthermore, Shah-Kazemi claims that dialogue based on scripture can offer “precious keys to those who are seeking to unlock the depths and the mysteries of the revealed text, and to do so in a way that includes all that is sacred, in whatever religious tradition it is to be found.”¹⁰²

Interreligious dialogue is ongoing in spite of cultural and religious differences. While Catholics pursue their mission to convert the whole world to Catholicism, and Muslims to Islam, there are many formal and informal encounters between them at local, national and international levels. The subsequent section describes some of these following the four forms of dialogical encounters described above.

1.2.1 Dialogue of Life

Ayoub explains the widespread nature of both Christianity and Islam “whose adherents comprise over half of the world’s population.”¹⁰³ In many countries, Catholics and Muslims live side by side. Therefore, “the most concrete, widespread, and basic type of dialogue is the dialogue of life.”¹⁰⁴ This “is the dialogue of concerned neighbors with their adjacent churches and mosques, who work together and live on the same street.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Mahmoud Ayoub, “Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Goals and Obstacles,” in *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, ed. Irfan A. Omar (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 68.

¹⁰² Shah-Kazemi, *The Other in the Light of the One*, ix.

¹⁰³ Ayoub, “Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” 67.

¹⁰⁴ Ayoub, *ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰⁵ Ayoub, *ibid.*

Similarly, Fitzgerald and Borelli maintain that the dialogue of life “requires openness, a desire to enter into relations with others. Its aim is to establish good neighbourly relations, to ensure that people live in peace and harmony.”¹⁰⁶ They also mention visits to one another’s homes, sharing joys and sorrows, helping when needed.

The dialogue of life between Catholics and Muslims includes participating in each other’s special feasts. For example, Muslims invite others to enjoy their evening meal at the conclusion of the month of Ramadan. Since 1967, the Catholic Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has been sending messages to Muslims on this occasion. In 2003, Michael L. Fitzgerald, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, wrote a message for the end of Ramadan as follows:

During this special month the communal meal, *iftar*, which breaks the fast at the end of the day, brings family members and friends together in an atmosphere of joy. Quite often people of other religions are invited to share in this moment of conviviality, and there is a growing custom of Christians organizing an *iftar* for their Muslim friends. Such signs of friendship are appreciable, especially at this time when there is so much unrest and tension in the world.¹⁰⁷

Such friendly encounters give way to shared life experiences, customs, and rituals. For example, the dialogue of life among persons of different faith backgrounds leads to interfaith activities such as the “Pilgrimage of Peace,” organized by the Catholic Archdiocese of Westminster, London. U.K. As the pilgrims walk through the streets of London, they go from one place of worship to another, regardless of the religious affiliation.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 29.

¹⁰⁷ Michael L. Fitzgerald, “Constructing Peace Today: Message for the End of Ramadan ‘Id al-Fitr 1424 A.H./2003 A.D.,” http://vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_... (accessed 6 April 2009), 1.

¹⁰⁸ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 29.

A similar activity recently held in Canada provides a concrete example of interreligious dialogue of life and action. Calgary's Imam Syed Soharwardy's was a participant of a Multi-Faith Walk against Violence. He was surprised by the welcome he received everywhere. He said: "Canadians of all races, colours, religions, and ages have welcomed me, a Muslim man with brown skin, into their homes, their neighbourhood and their communities."¹⁰⁹

Furthermore, this event might serve as an example of the power of friendship between members of different religions. Imam Soharwardy had originally filed a complaint to the Alberta Human Rights Commission against those who had portrayed the Prophet Muhammad in a negative light. At that time, he thought these commissions were a non-violent means of resolving differences among Canadians. "I was not aware, he said, of the controversies between the commissions and Canada's faith communities,"¹¹⁰ including accusations brought against his friend, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Calgary. Mr. Soharwardy revoked his complaint at the Human Rights Commission saying. "I realized how precious religious freedom is to our country and how easily freedom is lost."¹¹¹ To conclude, Imam Soharwardy suggested dialogue as a better solution: "The best way to dispel misconceptions between our various cultures and communities is for us to meet face to face and learn from each other's similarities and differences."¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Pete Vere, "A Muslim Canadian Responds to Canada's Human Rights Tribunals," 11 July 2008, <http://sootoday.com/content/editorials/details.asp?c=23988> (accessed 20 November 2008), 3.

¹¹⁰ Vere, *ibid.*, 2.

¹¹¹ Vere, *ibid.*

¹¹² Vere, *ibid.*, 3.

According to Fitzgerald and Borelli, it is possible then that by building up friendships “greater understanding can be built up, and possible tensions overcome.”¹¹³ The experience of Imam Soharwardy is one example of the dialogue of life laying the foundations for further cooperation in social and political situations.

1.2.2 Dialogue of Action

“Dialogue and Proclamation” explains the need for different religious groups “to stand up for human rights, proclaim the demands of justice, denounce injustice not only when their own members are victimized, but independently of the religious allegiance of the victims. There is need also to join together in trying to solve the great problems facing society and the world, as well as to education for justice and peace.”¹¹⁴

One example of interreligious respect and cooperation is that of the United States Catholic Church support given to Muslims in Tampa, Florida, when their Mosque was destroyed by arson. Francis Tiso, representing the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Interreligious Affairs, said: “The Catholic Church is standing with any house of worship that is being damaged or burned or smeared with graffiti.” Tiso added, “It’s an attack on something spiritual, which for a priest, is horrifying.”¹¹⁵

On an international level, in the face of prejudice leading to violence, Islamic political leaders are active in the new dynamic of interreligious dialogue. Outstanding in his support is Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan who appeals for greater openness as necessary for peace: “He has been a bridge builder across existing political and

¹¹³ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 30.

¹¹⁴ Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation,” 12, # 44.

¹¹⁵ Catholic News Agency, “Catholic Church Supports Recovering Muslim Community,” 24 April 2007, <http://catholicnewsagency.com/new.php?n=9183> (accessed 18 June 2008), 1.

religious divides and he has been fighting all forms of religious extremism and terrorism.”¹¹⁶ Furthermore, Prince Hassan calls for encounters with other religions: “I call upon Muslims to reaffirm our humanity through dialogue.”¹¹⁷

Another strong voice is that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia calling “for dialogue among the leaders of the world’s great monotheistic faiths,” since all three “reject treason, crime, and terrorism.”¹¹⁸ He also extends invitations to dialogue with other religions of the world, which led to the historic conference in Madrid, Spain from 16-18 July 2008. This gathering sponsored by the Mecca-based Muslim World League and convoked by King Abdullah was held in the presence of “King Juan Carlos of Spain and spiritual representatives of virtually all religions.”¹¹⁹

Leaders in the Catholic Church highly support the King’s efforts at interreligious dialogue. The convocation in Spain was seen as a positive sign in growing Islamic-Catholic solidarity. Cardinal Tauran praised the King’s courage in calling for this gathering of religious leaders and for good reasons. On July 28, 2008, the King received threats against his life by a “top leader of the international terrorist group Al Qaida” as a result of his efforts to bring peace through dialogue: “Referring to the Saudi king as a ‘tyrant,’ al Libi said that Abdullah—who recently sponsored an inter-religious forum in Madrid—has joined in an ‘open crusade against Islam and

¹¹⁶ Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, “Niwno Peace Prize: Prince Hassan Wins 2008 Niwno Peace Prize,” 12 May 2008, http://riifs.org/index_misc/HRH_wins_Niwno_Prize_2_eng.htm (accessed 28 June 2008), 1.

¹¹⁷ Hassan bin Talal, “The Muslim Gift of Peace,” 3 August 2007, Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, http://riifs.org/Appeal/The%20Muslim%20gift%20of%20peace_Guardian.htm (accessed 28 June 2008), 1.

¹¹⁸ Catholic World News, “Saudi King Pushes Inter-faith Dialogue,” 6 June 2008, <http://ewtn.com/vnews/getstory.asp?number=89040> (accessed 8 June 2008), 1.

¹¹⁹ Zenit News Agency, “Pope Sends Message to Saudi-Organized Conference,” 24 July 2008, <http://zenit.org/article-23328?l=english> (accessed 25 July 2008), 1.

Muslims.””¹²⁰ Tauran considers those who carry on striving for peace under such threats as indeed courageous and to be admired.

While commending this very promising event in Spain, Tauran warned: “It can in fact happen that as we witness this act of courage carried out with wisdom by the king of Saudi Arabia, in some mosques the talk may be of an entirely different kind.”¹²¹ Further examples of the difficulties involved in fighting religious extremism were expressed by Prince Naif, Saudi Arabia’s interior minister speaking in Al-Qura University in Mecca. As reported in *Asia News*, Naif explains that “the more than 15,000 mosques in the country constitute the best forums for guidance, but the imams have failed miserably in discharging their duties.”¹²² Naif states that universities have an important role to play in order to keep young people away from “ideas that distort religion and defame the nation.”¹²³ He spoke about Saudi Arabia’s official commitment to the fight against extremism which is contrary to Islam¹²⁴

There is among Muslims a striving for the freedom from violence and intolerance contrary to authentic Islamic beliefs. Sara Hassan, a Muslim reporter, was shocked while investigating the most respected Mosque in Britain. There she “came face to face with hardline female preachers of separatism.”¹²⁵ She said: “These are

¹²⁰ Catholic World News, “Al Qaida Condemns Saudi Ruler for Interreligious Dialogue,” 29 July 2008, <http://cwnews.com/news/viewstory.cfm?recnum=59931> (accessed 30 July 2008), 1.

¹²¹ Sandro Magister, “In Mecca, a King Is Giving Lessons in Peace,” 27 July 2008, <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/205913?eng=y> (accessed 22 July 2008), 1.

¹²² Prince Naif, “Saudi Arabia,” *Asia News*, 17 October 2008, <http://asianews.it/index.php?1=en&art=13512&size=A> (accessed 21 October 2008), 1.

¹²³ Prince Naif, *ibid.*, 2.

¹²⁴ Prince Naif, *ibid.*

¹²⁵ Sara Hassan, “Preachers of Separatism at Work Inside Britain’s Mosques,” 31 August 2008, <http://telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2653266/Preachers-of-separatism-at-work-inside-...> (accessed 5 September 2008), 1. Sara Hassan is not the reporter’s real name.

teachings I never expected to hear.”¹²⁶ Among them, she noticed the difference in language before and after a visit by persons of different faiths: “When the interfaith group wasn’t there, the preacher attacked other faiths, and the very concept of interfaith dialogue.”¹²⁷ Sara Hassan commented: “Their teachings shocked me. This was not the Islam that I and many other Muslims in the UK were taught as youngsters, nor is it a version that most Muslims follow.”¹²⁸

Perhaps one of the most important events signaling progress in efforts at dialogue between Catholic and Muslim leaders is that of Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to Jordan in May 2009. An article of Zenit News Agency, under the title: “King Abdullah Gives Surprise Papal Tour, Joins Pope on the Banks of the Jordan,” explains the trip to the site of Christ’s baptism at Bethany, in Jordan: Though not part of the original program, King of Jordan, Abdullah II and Queen Rania accompanied the Pope in a private “motorcade of elongated golf carts.” Along the way, the king explained to his guest the results of the archeological excavations being carried out by the Jordanian Commission: More than 20 ancient Christian churches, grottos and baptismal fonts have been discovered revealing that this might have been a popular pilgrimage spot in early Christianity. King Abdullah also mentioned that he is planning to build five Christian churches in the area. During his trip, the Pope was invited to bless the cornerstones of two Catholic churches to be built near the historic site of the Baptism of Jesus.¹²⁹ This gesture on the part of the King of Jordan towards the leader of the

¹²⁶ Hassan, *ibid.*

¹²⁷ Hassan, *ibid.*, 2.

¹²⁸ Hassan, *ibid.*

¹²⁹ Zenit News Agency, “King Abdullah Gives Surprise Papal Tour, Joins Pope on the Banks of the Jordan.” 11 May 2009, <http://ewtn.com/vnews/getstory.asp?number=95466> (accessed 12 May 2009), 1.

Catholic Church might be signaling a warmer relationship between Catholics and Muslims in these times.

Interreligious dialogue of action, involving political and social issues has often avoided theological discussion. It seems from more recent encounters, this is about to change.

1.2.3 Dialogue of Theological Exchange

Mahmoud Ayoub explains one type of dialogue as “the dialogue of beliefs, theological doctrines, and philosophical ideas.” Although this type of interreligious dialogue is often avoided, Ayoub considers encounters for the purpose of theological discussion as “vitally important, as it engages the minds and hearts of the people of faith of both traditions in their common search for the truth.”¹³⁰

However, in this search, Cardinal Tauran warns that one aspect of interreligious dialogue is that it cannot be used as a platform for proselytism. While in Nairobi, Tauran, President of the Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue at the Vatican, explained to Catholics, “True interreligious dialogue is not a ruse to convert the other, but honest bridge-building.”¹³¹ This does not mean that one avoids speaking of those things that divide and might offend the other. The Cardinal insisted that interreligious dialogue “goes beyond the niceties of polite conversation which encourages people to stay where they are and avoid talking about the grey areas of disagreement. It is a journey in search

¹³⁰ Ayoub, “Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” 68.

¹³¹ Jean-Louis Tauran, Conference to Catholic Bishops in Nairobi, cited in Henry Makori, “Africa: Muslim-Christian Dialogue Is Noble and Urgent for Continent,” 22 April 2008, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200804220877.html> (accessed 23 July 2008), 2.

of the truth.”¹³² Through this process of communicative dialogue, the aim is not so much to reach a consensus but rather to establish closer relationships through mutual understanding.

Formal encounters between Catholics and Muslims have increased in recent times. Whereas many Catholic-Muslim encounters aim more at social and political issues, a meeting with the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization of Tehran is one event that included discussions on the link between faith and reason. The following describes some of the results of the last gathering of “a group of Iranian Muslims who have been meeting biannually for the last 12 years with the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue.” The meeting in June 2008 had as its theme: “Faith and Reason in Christianity and Islam.” Catholic and Muslim delegates agreed on the topics of faith and reason, violence and religion as well as methods for dialogue. Some points agreed upon are summarized as follows. There is no contradiction between faith and reason although in some cases, faith is above reason. Neither reason nor faith should be used for violence. Both agreed to cooperate in the promotion of true religiosity and moral values, as well as respect for sacred symbols. While thanking God for what they have in common, they must accept differences. Furthermore, “historical contexts are important factors to be considered.” Finally, “an adequate hermeneutical method” is needed for a better understanding of scripture and tradition.¹³³

Alexander J. Brunett, co-chairman of the West Coast Dialogue of Muslims and Catholics explains, “In interreligious dialogue we are compelled to make our language understandable, acceptable and well chosen so that we can be both truthful and

¹³² Tauran, *ibid.*

¹³³ Catholic News Agency, “Pope Meets with Iran-Based Muslim Group, Method for Dialogue Agreed on,” 18 June 2008, <http://catholicnewsagency.com/new.php?n=12503> (accessed 18 June 2008), 1.

charitable to one another.”¹³⁴ The surprising encounter between two intellectual “antipodes,” that is, “the most important contemporary philosophers,” Jurgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, the then Prefect of the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, now Pope Benedict XVI, was an attempt to explain religious beliefs to an unbelieving secular world and vice-versa. This encounter “attracted worldwide attention.” Reactions also came from Muslims “from as far away as Morocco and Iran.”¹³⁵ From this meeting, it might be surmised that it is necessary and possible for persons with different worldviews to dialogue in order to promote understanding and break down barriers.

Whereas John Paul II seemed to be more accommodating in his teaching and encounters with others, Benedict XVI has at times adopted a more confrontational approach. One event that aroused controversy was his famous or infamous Regensburg Address where the Pope in his insistence on the fact that faith and reason are inseparable, quotes the negative view of a fourteenth century Byzantine emperor concerning Muhammad.¹³⁶ This created a furor around the world, including some acts of violence and death-threats against the Pope.

Some critics claim that in his Regensburg Address Benedict XVI made a serious mistake out of ignorance of Islam. Among these Daniel Martin Varisco explains that the Pope’s Address was not so much an insult against the Prophet Muhammad as a condemnation of Islam itself. The Pope accuses Islam of being violent and therefore of

¹³⁴ Alexander J. Brunett, “What Dialogue Means for Catholics and Muslims,” 13 February 2001, <http://usccb.org/seia/brunett.shtml> (accessed 6 July 2008), 1. Archbishop Brunett is the co-chairman of the U.S. West Coast Interreligious Dialogue of Muslims and Catholics.

¹³⁵ Florian Schuller, ed., “Foreword,” in Jurgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 7.

¹³⁶ Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections,” Address at the University of Regensburg, Germany, 12 September 2006, <http://guardian.co.uk/world/2006/sep/15/religion.uk> (accessed 5 November 2008), 2.

acting against reason. However, Varisco admits that Pope Benedict's "talk is not really about Islam but about the need for reasonable people not to rule out the role of faith."¹³⁷ In his defense of the Pope's address, Timothy R. Furnish claims that the Regensburg address was to challenge everyone, Christians and Muslims, to dialogue on the basis of faith and reason.¹³⁸ The Pope illustrated the fact that interreligious dialogue must also be based on free speech and religious freedom as essential for world peace.

This controversy stemming from Pope Benedict's address at Regensburg University did not dampen the enthusiasm for interreligious dialogue between Muslims and Catholics. A landmark of Islamic-Catholic interreligious encounter was reached when in October 2007, 138 Muslim scholars wrote a letter to Pope Benedict XVI entitled "A Common Word Between Us and You" proposing love of God and love of neighbor as subjects for inter-religious dialogue.¹³⁹ These scholars represented over 43 nations with members from Sunni, Shiite and Sufi groups as well as smaller sects.¹⁴⁰ The Pope welcomed this initiative and suggested that the discussion also include human dignity, religious freedom and rejection of violence.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Daniel Martin Varisco, "Holy War over Papal Bull," 15 September 2006, <http://hnn.us/roundup/entries/29932.html> (accessed 11 May 2008), 3. Varisco is Chair of the Anthropology Department at Hofstra University.

¹³⁸ Timothy R. Furnish, "Was the Pope Wrong?" 18 September 2006, <http://hnn.us/articles/29989.html> (accessed 5 November 2008). Furnish, Ph.D in Islamic History, is Assistant Professor of History at Georgia Perimeter College, Dunwoody, Georgia.

¹³⁹ Catholic News Agency, "Muslim Delegation Meets with Vatican to Prepare Interfaith Conference," 5 March 2008, <http://catholicnewsagency.com/new.php?n=11977> (accessed 18 June 2008), 1.

¹⁴⁰ Samir Khalil Samir, "The Letter of 138 Muslim Scholars to the Pope and Christian Leaders," <http://acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=14> (accessed 13 December 2008), 2. Born in Cairo, Samir is a Jesuit philosopher and scholar of Islam. He was an advisor at the Second Vatican Council.

¹⁴¹ Catholics on the Net, "Pontifical Institute's Response to Muslim Letter," 29 October 2007, <http://catholic.net/index.php?option=dedestaca&id=255&category=Think&Learn~Islam...> (accessed 22 September 2008), 1. See also. 11 October 2006: "Open Letter of 38 Muslim Scholars to H.H. Pope Benedict XVI;" 11 October 2006 and "An Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders," 11 October 2007: This letter from Muslim scholars from different continents was addressed to different Christian churches, including twenty-eight named explicitly.

As a result of this open letter to the Pope, a Catholic-Islamic interreligious encounter took place in Rome from 4-6 November 2008. Sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, twenty-four participants and five advisors from each religion took part in this First Catholic-Islamic Forum, where similarities and differences in theological beliefs were also discussed¹⁴² According to the text of the Final Declaration, the Proposition 1 reveals “the distinctive specific genius of the two religions” on the theme ‘Love of God, Love of Neighbor’:

For Christians the source and example of love of God and neighbour is the love of Christ for his Father, for humanity and for each person. “God is Love” (1 Jn 4,16) and “God so loved the world that He gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3,16). God’s love is placed in the human heart through the Holy Spirit. It is God who first loves us thereby enabling us to love Him in return. Love does not harm one’s neighbour but rather seeks to do to the other what one would want done to oneself (Cf. 1 Cor 13, 4-7). Love is the foundation and sum of all the commandments (Cf. Gal 5, 14). Love of neighbour cannot be separated from love of God, because it is an expression of our love for God. This is the new commandment, “Love one another as I have loved you.” (Jn 15, 12) Grounded in Christ’s sacrificial love, Christian love is forgiving and excludes no one; it therefore includes one’s enemies. It should be not just words but deeds (Cf. 1 Jn, 4, 18). This is the sign of its genuineness.

For Muslims, as set out in *A Common Word*, love is a timeless transcendent power which guides and transforms human mutual regard. This love, as indicated by the Holy and Beloved Prophet Muhammad, is prior to the human love for the One True God. A Hadith indicates that God’s loving compassion for humanity is even greater than that of a mother for her child (Muslim, Bab al-Tawba: 21); it therefore exists before and independently of the human response to the One who is ‘The Loving’. So immense is this love and compassion that God has intervened to guide and save humanity in a perfect way many times and in many places, by sending prophets and scriptures. The last of these books, the Qur’an, portrays a world of signs, a marvellous cosmos of Divine artistry, which calls forth our utter love and devotion, so that ‘those who have faith, have most love of God’ (2:165), and ‘those that believe, and do good works, the Merciful shall engender love among them.’ (19:96) In a Hadith we read that

¹⁴² The Catholic-Muslim Forum, “First Seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum (Rome, 4-6 November 2008) - Final Declaration,” 6 November 2008, http://212.77.1.245/news_services/bulletin/news/22869.php?index=22869&po_date=06.1 (accessed 10 November 2008).

‘Not one of you has faith until he loves for his neighbour what he loves for himself’ (Bukhari, Bab al-Iman: 13).¹⁴³

Whereas Catholic and Muslim participants wrote (1) the first theological section separately, they all agreed together on fourteen other propositions which are summarized as follows in this study: (2) to respect human life in all its stages; (3) to ensure that dignity and freedom of every human person created by God be recognized by all and protected by law; (4) to foster the dignity and respect on an equal basis for both men and women; (5) to respect freedom of conscience as well as religious beliefs and practices; (6) to allow places of worship for religious minorities and avoid mocking or ridiculing sacred figures and symbols; (7) to be witnesses of the transcendent dimension in a secularized and materialistic world; (8) to encourage all believers to make their indispensable contribution to society; (9) to accept cultural and religious pluralism as a value in God’s creation; (10) to promote sound education in civic, religious and moral values as well as accurate information about other religions; (11) to become as Catholics and Muslims instruments of love, harmony and justice, while renouncing oppression, violence and terrorism “in the name of religion;” (12) to develop with all persons of good will an ethical financial system with special concern for disadvantaged persons and nations. (13) to educate young people increasingly living in pluralistic societies to know their own religion and those of others; (14) to establish a permanent Catholic-Muslim committee to respond to emergencies; (15) to plan a second Seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum in two years held in a Muslim-majority country.¹⁴⁴ This Final Declaration to the first seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum

¹⁴³ The Catholic Muslim Forum, “First Seminar,” *ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴⁴ The Catholic-Muslim Forum “First Seminar,” *ibid.* 1-2.

might be considered the summit of past interreligious endeavors between Catholics and Muslims as well as a blueprint for the future.

Besides encounters between Catholics and Muslims, interreligious dialogue on religious and theological matters is more frequent among members of worldwide monotheistic religions, Jews, Christians and Muslims. In February 2008, an interreligious encounter organized jointly by the Committee of Al-Azhar for Dialogue among the Monotheistic Religions with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, was held in Cairo. This gathering had as its theme: "Faith in God and Love of Neighbour as the Foundations for Interreligious dialogue." The committee recognized the importance "of mutual knowledge and of the search for common ground," as well as "an encouragement to continue to engage in dialogue."¹⁴⁵

In recent years, there have been an increasing number of interreligious encounters involving members of the three monotheistic religions claiming the Patriarch Abraham as their common ancestor,¹⁴⁶ One of these is the "week-long program entitled *The Children of Abraham: A Festival of Interfaith Arts* held at Georgetown University held in October 2007. McAuliffe who gave a lecture on that occasion, mentioned the "veritable explosion of Abraham motifs in interreligious initiatives."¹⁴⁷

However, as McAuliffe herself admits, "Perhaps Abraham is not a useful figure around which to build a dialogue."¹⁴⁸ The main obstacle comes from the fact that each monotheistic religion claims Abraham for itself. Muslims trace their ancestry to

¹⁴⁵ "Final Declaration of the Annual Meeting of the Joint Committee for Dialogue of the Permanent Committee of Al-Azhar for Dialogue among the Monotheistic Religions and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (Vatican) (Cairo, 25-26 February 2008)," http://212.77.1.245/news_services/bulletin/news/21750.php?index=21750&po_date=28.02... (accessed 26 May 2008), 1.

¹⁴⁶ McAuliffe, "Abraham and the Culture of Dialogue," 2-3.

¹⁴⁷ McAuliffe, *ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴⁸ McAuliffe, *ibid.* 13. Emphasis in original.

Ishmael, Abraham's first born, whereas Jews claim Isaac as their ancestor and son of the promise made to Abraham. On the other hand, Christians argue that "Jesus Christ is the true heir of Abraham and that the command to sacrifice Isaac was a prototype of the crucifixion."¹⁴⁹ Then there is the controversial Qur'anic text, "Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian, but he was an upright man (*hanif*) who had surrendered (to God), and he was not of the idolaters." The term (*hanif*) also means 'Muslim.' The theme of Abraham then might not be the most helpful for interreligious dialogue.

However, if dissent is a welcome part of dialogue, differences should not be an issue, McAuliffe maintains that these differences and tensions make shared communication all the more important. "It will surprise no one to hear that all participants in any form of dialogue bring multiple identities to the table."¹⁵⁰ If all think the same, is there any need for dialogue? Therefore, "Abraham exemplifies both the concord and the discord that interreligious and intercultural dialogue can create."¹⁵¹ Relationships might be established on the basis of both similarities and differences becoming known through the dialogical process.

From this, it might be possible to conclude that, if in spite of differences in beliefs, Abraham can be a meeting-ground for interreligious dialogue, the same might be said of Mary, the mother of Jesus. McAuliffe describes the Abrahamic aspects important in all three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Catholicism and Islam, "qualities that I would pair as faith and fidelity, family and fruitfulness."¹⁵² These qualities could blend in as well on the theme of Mary. Theological discussions such as those

¹⁴⁹ McAuliffe, *ibid.*.

¹⁵⁰ McAuliffe, *ibid.*, 13-14.

¹⁵¹ McAuliffe, *ibid.*, 15.

¹⁵² McAuliffe, *ibid.*, 11. Emphasis in original.

concerning Abraham might open the door for similar Catholic-Islamic encounters on the theme of Mariology, which will be the subject of the case-study in Chapter 3.

Besides interreligious dialogue on theological matters, Catholics and Muslims have also met and shared with each other their spiritual experiences.

1.2.4 Dialogue of Religious Experience

There are two aspects to dialogue on religious experience. It is first and foremost a verbal sharing with others of one's own religious practice and spiritual life. In this specific form of dialogue, "the topics for discussion are selected from the realm of spirituality." Fitzgerald and Borelli give the example of the Christian-Muslim seminar on holiness held at the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies in 1985. This seminar included "teaching on the paths to holiness and concrete examples of holy people, in the two religions." A second type of dialogue based on religious experience encourages persons of different faith backgrounds "to come together to pray."¹⁵³ Again, Fitzgerald and Borelli maintain that it is not always "possible to find forms of prayer that can be shared. Yet, provided the participants are attentive and listen with respect to another tradition's prayers, this can be a true form of dialogue."¹⁵⁴ From this point of view, interreligious dialogue can include non-verbal spiritual exchange.

Concerning the first type of dialogue of religious experience, in "Dialogue and Mission," Pope John Paul II wrote:

This type of dialogue can be a (source of) mutual enrichment and fruitful cooperation for promoting and preserving the highest values and spiritual ideals.

¹⁵³ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 33.

¹⁵⁴ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *ibid.*, 33-34.

It leads naturally to each partner communicating to the other the reasons for his own faith. The sometimes profound differences between the faiths do not prevent this dialogue. Those differences, rather, must be referred back in humility and confidence to God who 'is greater than our heart' (1 John 3:20).¹⁵⁵

There is among Muslims the desire for dialogue on spiritual matters. According to Shah-Kazemi, the search for understanding through dialogue has become somewhat more problematic today because of recent terrorist attacks in various parts of the world often carried out in the name of Islam. He argues that these conflicts are possibly perpetrated by extremist groups, whose violent interpretation of Islam is contrary to the true spirit of this religion: "For it is precisely when the spiritual appreciation of Revelation is weak, that its message becomes susceptible to ideological distortion. There is a clear relationship between the decline of spirituality and the rise of ideology, in Islam as in other religions."¹⁵⁶ Shah-Kazemi claims that the Qur'anic discourse can be "appreciated in its most profound and spiritually transforming aspect,"¹⁵⁷ especially through Sufism, a more mystical branch of Islam: He argues that "Sufi commentaries on the Qur'an are thus particularly relevant to the contemporary intellectual and 'dialogical' situation."¹⁵⁸

There is also in Catholicism an awareness of the importance of dialogue of a prayerful nature. There have been international prayer gatherings of religious leaders held in Assisi, Italy, under the patronage of the Pope in Rome.¹⁵⁹ In the first encounter in 1986, members of different religions from around the world gathered around Pope

¹⁵⁵ John Paul II, "Dialogue and Mission," 1984, # 35, cited in Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 34.

¹⁵⁶ Shah-Kazemi, *The Other in the Light of the One*, viii-ix.

¹⁵⁷ Shah-Kazemi, *ibid.*, viii. See also ix.

¹⁵⁸ Shah-Kazemi, *ibid.*, ix.

¹⁵⁹ Michael L. Fitzgerald, "Pope John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue: A Catholic Assessment," in *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, eds. Byron L. Sherwin and Harold Kasimow (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 208.

John Paul II “in a spirit of friendship, united both in fasting and in a final fraternal meal.”¹⁶⁰

In 2002, Pope John Paul II again organized a day of prayer for peace in the world. Representatives of various religions attended this pilgrimage in Assisi, Italy. In his address to the gathering, the Pope mentioned how persons can build “bridges that lead us to come together and walk with one another on the paths of peace.” He explained that to “build the peace of order, justice and freedom requires, therefore, *a priority commitment to prayer*, which is openness, listening, dialogue and finally union with God, the prime wellspring of true peace.” During this encounter the Pope then invited the assembly “to go to the arranged places in order to beg from God the gift of peace for all humanity.” He explained, “*We have a single goal and a shared intention*, but we will pray in different ways, respecting one another’s religious traditions.” This spiritual exercise is meant to lead to “constructive dialogue, a dialogue in which each one, without relativism or syncretism of any kind, becomes more deeply aware of the duty to bear witness and to proclaim.” John Paul II believes that “prayer has the power to bring peace.”¹⁶¹ He explained that hostility shows a “profoundly immature face of religion,” whereas true religion is “the chief antidote to violence and conflict.”¹⁶² The Pope also spoke of Francis of Assisi whose shrine hosted this international religious gathering. Francis was a man loved not only by Christians, but by many other believers as well as non-believers.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Fitzgerald, *ibid.*, 209.

¹⁶¹ John Paul II, “Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Representatives of the World Religions,” Day of Prayer for Peace in the World, Assisi, 24 January 2002. http://vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2002/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_... (accessed 6 April 2009), 4. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶² John Paul II, *ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶³ John Paul II, *ibid.*, 1.

The visits of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI to various countries also provided opportunities for Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue. However, the presence of Pope Benedict XVI in Turkey in 2006 had a mixed reaction. He was viewed by some Muslims with apprehension because of the negative reaction to his Regensburg Address. However, when the Pope went to the most important Mosque in Istanbul, he was received warmly. Giuseppe DeCarli explains this visit: “Shortly after the Regensburg controversy, the pope flew to Turkey, where, among other things, he prayed in Istanbul’s Blue Mosque. Afterward, the grand mufti, Mustafa Cagrici, the highest spiritual authority for Turkey’s Muslims, said to the Pope: ‘Your prayer is more powerful than your apologies.’ Cagrici was right: Benedict’s visit to the Blue Mosque will go down in the history of the papacy and of Muslim-Christian relations.”¹⁶⁴ It seems that such prayerful contacts might ease tensions between these two religious groups.

However, questions arise concerning the possibility not only of dialogue on spiritual and religious experience but of members of different religions actually praying together. In 2003, Joseph Ratzinger spoke of the difference between “multireligious and interreligious prayer.” He explained that the prayer gatherings for peace such as those in Assisi, called by John Paul II, “are multireligious, as all participants pray at the same time but in different places.” On the other hand, interreligious prayers are those where “people of diverse religious traditions pray together.” In such cases, Ratzinger stressed that for prayer encounters to be truthful and honest, there are conditions. It

¹⁶⁴ Giuseppe De Carli in Tarcisio Bertone, *The Last Secret of Fatima: My Conversations with Sister Lucia* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 123. Cardinal Bertone was sent by Pope John Paul II to interview the last survivor of the apparitions at Fatima. This book is the result of DeCarli’s interview with Bertone.

must be made clear that each participant is praying in faithfulness to his particular beliefs and in the way that is appropriate to it.¹⁶⁵

True to these principles that can apply to both Catholics and Muslims in dialogue, Fitzgerald and Borelli list certain conditions to be met in encounters on religious experience. There is a need for “integrity,” where “there should be no compromise of one’s own religious convictions.” Then, “respect,” for others’ way of praying which involves avoiding “embarrassing people by inviting them to say words or perform gestures with which they are not comfortable.” Finally, “humility,” when faced with human symbols and signs of God’s presence beyond one’s comprehension.¹⁶⁶

However, it is possible to share religious experiences in the context of interreligious events where participants coordinate their activities together. One example is that of the fourth meeting of the U.S Mid-Atlantic Muslim Catholic Dialogue in 2003, where both groups share their communal prayer. In the context of Muslim *Maghrib* prayer Ms. El-Haq, a Muslim woman, “read a translation of a Qur’anic version of the Annunciation (3:42-51), a passage extolling the virtues of Mary, the mother of Jesus.”¹⁶⁷ There is a corresponding narrative in the Gospel of Luke 1:26-37.

In conclusion to this chapter on interreligious dialogue, Fitzgerald and Borelli mention the general dispositions one must have in any type of interreligious encounters. In the face of delays and obstacles, patience and perseverance are necessary. Openness

¹⁶⁵ Zenit, “Cardinal Ratzinger Asks: Are Interreligious Prayers Possible?” 28 September 2003, <http://zenit.org>. ZEO3092820.

¹⁶⁶ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 34.

¹⁶⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Friends and Not Adversaries,” 7.

and receptivity to the other must be accompanied by discernment. This requires knowledge of one's own religious beliefs which allows "a respectful and receptive approach to the convictions and values of the other." In this way, interreligious dialogue becomes "a true learning process."¹⁶⁸

Cardinal Francis Arinze, former President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, summarizes the importance and the final goal of interreligious encounters in his message for the end of Ramadan: "Dialogue and collaboration are to be pursued at all levels, local, regional, national and world-wide. All are called to make a contribution, according to their particular responsibilities and capacities. The common action to which we are invited concerns the whole of humanity, considered as one large family, having God as its origin and end."¹⁶⁹

Catholic and Muslim communities are already in touch with each other establishing friendships and working together for the common good. Therefore, "Shadows from the past cannot obscure the light radiating from the daily 'dialogue of life,' the 'dialogue of charity,' and the 'dialogue of religious experiences' which has marked relations here between Christians and Muslims."¹⁷⁰

Subsequent chapters of this thesis are centered on Mary. Chapter 2 describes various facets of popular Marian devotions, where shared religious practices might provide opportunities for future dialogical events between Catholics and Muslims.

¹⁶⁸ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 34.

¹⁶⁹ Francis Arinze, "Promoting Human Values in an Era of Technology: Message for the End of Ramadan: 'Id al-Fitr 1422 A.H./2001 A.D.," Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, http://vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_ (accessed 6 April 2009), 2.

¹⁷⁰ Office of Papal Liturgical Celebrations, "Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Turkey (November 28 – December 1, 2006)," http://vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/2006/documents/ns_lit_doc_20061128_prese (accessed 26 May 2008), 2.

CHAPTER 2

POPULAR MARIAN DEVOTIONS: A MEETING GROUND

Mary, mother of Jesus, occupies a privileged place in Catholicism. In the Bible, there are references to Mary occasionally throughout the Gospels. However, the figure of Mary appears most frequently in the infancy narratives of Luke 1-2 and indirectly in Matthew 1. In modern Catholic theology, “The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*)” of the Second Vatican Council has one chapter specifically devoted to Mary.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, the Council mentioned the place of Mary in Islam: “Though they (Muslims) do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, his virgin mother, at times they call on her, too, with devotion.”¹⁷² Since Catholicism and Islam do not claim for Mary a divine status, she might be included for the purpose of interreligious dialogue.

Similarly, according to Stowasser, “the figure of Mary, mother of Jesus, looms very large in Qur’anic scripture, scripturalist exegesis, and popular Muslim piety.”¹⁷³ Smith and Haddad are of the same opinion. In their article “The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary,” they state: “There is no question that Mary is the female figure to whom the greatest attention is given in the Qur’an.”¹⁷⁴ Jenkins in his book *The Next Christendom*, claims that “The Quran has far more to say about the Virgin

¹⁷¹ Abbott, Walter M. and Joseph Gallagher, eds. “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” in *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966).

¹⁷² Abbott and Gallagher, eds. “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” 663, #3.

¹⁷³ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, 67.

¹⁷⁴ Smith and Haddad, “The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary,” 162.

Mary than does the New Testament, and Jesus is, apart from Muhammad, the greatest prophet of Islam.”¹⁷⁵

Meanwhile, the advent of John Paul II has been an encouragement in the area of popular devotions, particularly surrounding Mary. While speaking in the Umayyad Great Mosque in Syria, Pope John Paul II ended his message by mentioning how Christians and Muslims can benefit from their shared appreciation for Mary:

As we make our way through life toward our heavenly destiny, Christians feel the company of Mary, the mother of Jesus; and Islam too pays tribute to Mary and hails her as ‘chosen above the women of the world’ (Qur’an, 3:42). The virgin of Nazareth, the Lady of Saydnaya, has taught us that God protects the humble and ‘scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts’ (Lk. 1:52). May the hearts of Christians and Muslims turn to one another with feelings of brotherhood and friendship, so that the Almighty may bless us with the peace which heaven alone can give to the one, merciful God be praise and glory forever. Amen.¹⁷⁶

In this address to a Muslim audience, the Pope brings out elements of Mariology common to both Muslims and Catholics. She is the mother of Jesus; she is a virgin, the chosen above all women and a prophetic teacher. Mary might therefore be introduced as a topic for Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue.

Brunett claims that “every interreligious dialogue has a spiritual character.”¹⁷⁷ In many places Muslims honor Mary through popular devotional practices that seem to foster closer relationships between Catholics and Muslims and open doors for further theological discussion. Encounters between these two groups are not new. Perhaps the most frequent of these arise from popular Marian devotions.

¹⁷⁵ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 196.

¹⁷⁶ John Paul II, “Address on His Visit to the Umayyad Great Mosque,” May 6, 2001, <http://uscbb.org/seia/textislam.shtml> (accessed 7 June 2008), 8-9.

¹⁷⁷ Brunett, “What Dialogue Means for Catholics and Muslims,” 3.

2.1 Popular Marian Devotions in Catholicism and Islam

In describing various forms of gatherings centered on Mary, it is important to keep in mind that there can be some objections and disbelief surrounding certain phenomena such as visions, healings, miracles, exorcisms, etc. Among Catholics, there are some who doubt whether such practices can be considered true religion. However, Philip Jenkins describes how this attitude has changed in recent years particularly concerning devotion to Mary:

In modern Catholicism, the figure of the Virgin has usually been associated with more conservative and traditional forms of religious practice, so the veneration of Mary has played a significantly smaller role in devotion in liberal Northern countries. This tendency was reversed somewhat under the conservative papacy of John Paul II, and during his reign, remarkable attention was paid to Marian shrines and visions.¹⁷⁸

A major contributor to modern Mariology in the Catholic Church is John Paul II. Throughout his papacy, John Paul II emphasized the role of Mary in the life and mission of individuals and the Church.¹⁷⁹ Without denying the inseparable connection between Jesus and his mother, John Paul II, took a more direct approach in his devotion to Mary. He chose "*Totus Tuus* (I am wholly yours, O Mary!) as the motto for his papacy."¹⁸⁰ He explained his choice as follows: "At first, it had seemed to me that I should distance myself a bit from the Marian devotion of my childhood, in order to focus more on Christ. Thanks to Saint Louis of Montfort, I came to understand that true devotion to the mother of God is actually Christocentric."¹⁸¹ According to Nachev, John Paul II's numerous mariological writings, the most outstanding being "The Mother of

¹⁷⁸ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 137.

¹⁷⁹ Nachev, *Mary's Pope*, 7.

¹⁸⁰ Nachev, *ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸¹ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 212-213. St Louis de Montfort's classical work, *True Devotion to Mary* was a major influence in the Pope's life.

the Redeemer (*Redemptoris Mater*),” are based “on the most secure exegetical and theological works of recent scholarship.” Moreover, the Pope’s new scriptural insight “constitutes a fresh doctrinal development in postconciliar Mariology.”¹⁸² With his insistence on the once popular Marian devotion such as the Rosary and pilgrimages to her shrines worldwide, John Paul II claimed Mary as an influential means of intrafaith and interreligious dialogue.

The article “Popular and Talismanic” in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an* mentions that among Muslims, there is a tendency “to elevate textual/institutional religion and the hierarchy of religious professionals,” and devalue “the religion of ordinary believers and everyday life.”¹⁸³ However, miracles and visions including that of Mary are not contrary to Islam. For example, Smith and Haddad report the tradition claiming that at Muhammad’s birth, his mother was helped by three “maidens of Paradise affirmed by the Qur’an as companions of the faithful.” They are Eve, Asiya, wife of Pharaoh, and Mary.¹⁸⁴

Without denying the importance of religious authorities in exercising a certain control over popular religious expressions, perhaps the most effective means of bringing people together are those involving certain popular devotions. Popular religious beliefs and practices, including devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, might offer opportunities for persons of various religious backgrounds to come together.

¹⁸² Nachev, *Mary’s Pope*, 12.

¹⁸³ Kathleen Malone O’Connor, “Popular and Talismanic,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, v. 4, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 168.

¹⁸⁴ Smith and Haddad, “The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary,” 174.

2.2 Sacred Places and Natural Elements in Popular Marian Devotions

In his article “The Virgin Mary as Mediatrix between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East,” Otto Meinardus shows that popular devotional practices “sometimes have roots in pre-Christian forms of devotion and piety.”¹⁸⁵ A concrete example of this is the account reported by the Aztec Indian Juan Diego in 1531, of visions of the Virgin Mary on Tepeyac hill in Mexico. This site is now known as the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe: Within a few years, this event triggered mass conversions of South American natives to Catholicism. Philip Jenkins mentions the link between this phenomenon with that of pre-Christian beliefs:

In explaining her phenomenal popularity, scholars believe that she was initially identified not as the Virgin worshiped at the Spanish shrine of Guadalupe but as *Coatlaxopeuh*, ‘she who crushes the serpent.’ This was a title of the pre-Christian Aztec goddess Tonantzin, who was appearing on ground that had been sacred to her long before the coming of Christianity.¹⁸⁶

In his book on Our Lady of Guadalupe, D. A. Brading reveals the practice of adapting pre-Christian beliefs and practices in Catholicism. He explains that the temple dedicated to the goddess “called Tonan, which is to say, Our Mother,” was replaced by “a chapel ‘in Tonantzin, close to Mexico, to the Most Sacred Virgin, who is Our Lady and Mother’, which was to say, at Tepeyac.”¹⁸⁷ Moreover, like the name Fatima in Portugal, the town of Guadalupe in Spain is a Muslim name from the time when “most of the peninsula was occupied by Muslim rulers.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ Meinardus, “The Virgin Mary as Mediatrix between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East,” 90.

¹⁸⁶ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 129-130.

¹⁸⁷ D. A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe, Image and Tradition across Five Centuries* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 43.

¹⁸⁸ Brading, *ibid.*, 19.

Meinardus notes the importance of special places of pre-Christian worship in Egypt as well, where for “several thousand years, the *fellahin* of the Nile Delta and Valley venerated the presence of their deities in caves, grottoes, springs and trees.”¹⁸⁹ He explains that these special places of divine intervention “have played important roles in Abrahamic religions.”¹⁹⁰ There are numerous examples of such sacred places both from the Hebrew, Christian and Islamic scriptures. Among these, Moses had an experience of the divine at the burning bush (Exodus. 3:2) and in a cleft of a rock (33:22). A cave was the site of Elijah’s encounter with God (1 Kings 19:9), of Muhammad’s call “in the night of power,” (Q. 97: 1-5) and possibly of Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:7). Meinardus concludes, “It is not surprising then, that the Virgin Mary, prototypical mother and virgin, should also be remembered in these same places.”¹⁹¹

Similar sites have served as pilgrimage spots for Muslims and Christians particularly where Mary is venerated. Women “irrespective of their religious identity,” are seen in different Marian grottoes and caves, such as “in Saiyidah ad Darr near Biarre in northern Lebanon or in the Magharat as Saiyidah, the well-known Franciscan ‘Milk Grotto’ in Bethlehem.”¹⁹²

Different verses of the Qur’an speak of waterways in connection with Jesus and Mary: “And made We the Son of Mary and his Mother a Sign, and We gave them a refuge for both on a high land, quiet, secure and watered with springs” (Q. 23:50). For Muslims, water, rivers and springs as well as hills and trees are a sign of life and life-giving. An article of the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an* explains the importance of the

¹⁸⁹ Meinardus, “The Virgin Mary as Mediatrix,” 88. Emphasis in the original. A *fellahin* is a peasant or agricultural laborer in an Arab country.

¹⁹⁰ Meinardus, *ibid.*, 93.

¹⁹¹ Meinardus, *ibid.*, 88.

¹⁹² Meinardus, *ibid.*, 93.

symbolism attached to these natural elements: “As symbols for paradise on earth, springs are considered signs of God’s blessings for humankind. Time and again, the Qur’an admonishes people to be thankful for this (Q 2:74; 26:134, 147; 36:33-5; 39:21).”¹⁹³ In the Qur’an, after the birth of Jesus, Mary hears the words: “Grieve not! For thy Lord hath provided a rivulet beneath thee and shake towards thyself the trunk of the palm-tree: it will let fall fresh ripe dates upon thee. So eat and drink and cool (thine) eye (Q. 19:24-25).” In another passage of the Qur’an, Jesus and Mary are again found in a high place near water: “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” (Q. 23:50). This verse is closely connected to Q. 19:22-26 in the following commentary: “It was the place to which she (Mary) withdrew to be delivered when the time drew near. There was a fruitful palm-tree, evidently on high ground, for beneath it flowed a spring.”¹⁹⁴ Mir Ahmed Ali links it to Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem (Luke 2:4). This commentary suggests that Mary “was directed by God to take refuge in Bethlehem....on the heights of Palestine nearby Jerusalem, surrounded by vineyards and fruit gardens and meadows with herds of cattle grazing in them.”¹⁹⁵ Therefore, natural elements such as springs “are associated in one way or another with saints and holy men, whether Christian or Muslim.”¹⁹⁶

Water, trees, and high places are symbols of spiritual life for Christians as well. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:16) and the Gospel of John claims that at a wedding feast, he changed water into wine at Mary’s request (John 2:7). Jesus

¹⁹³ Matthias Radscheit, “Springs and Fountains” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*. v. 4, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 127.

¹⁹⁴ *The Holy Qur’an*, trans. Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali, 883.

¹⁹⁵ *The Holy Qur’an*, trans. Mir Ahmad ‘Ali, 1061. (Q. 23:50; note 1551)

¹⁹⁶ Radscheit, “Springs and Fountains,” 122.

prophetically saw his future apostle Nathanael under a fig-tree (John1:48) and Matthew has Jesus going up on a mountainside to speak to the crowds in what is called the “sermon on the mount” (Matthew 5-7).

Special isolated trees have also become the object of pilgrimages. For example, there is a popular pilgrimage and tourist attraction around the Tree of Ntariyah in Egypt. The tree is watered by the “well of the Holy Virgin.” The tradition links this spot to the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. On their flight into Egypt, the tree “miraculously opened to conceal them.”¹⁹⁷

Moreover, for both Muslims and Christians, these visible symbols of grottoes, caves, water, trees and mountains are also found in traditional and modern Marian pilgrimage sites. “In the Kidron Valley, outside the city walls of Jerusalem, Muslims and Christians visit St Mary’s spring, following a medieval Christian tradition.” However, as an example of “cult-transfer,”¹⁹⁸ Muslims named this same site after a descendant of ‘Ali. A more recent example is that of the grotto built in 1963 by three Muslims. Built above a spring next to the Franciscan Church in Bensi Suef, Upper Egypt, they “dedicated the grotto to the Virgin Mary and pilgrims, both Muslims and Christians, from near and far gather there to pray and to be healed through the intercession of the Virgin Mary.”¹⁹⁹

2.3 Pilgrimages to Marian Apparitions

A modern Catholic version of grotto and spring as a place of spiritual encounter is found in Lourdes, France. In the 19th Century, it is claimed that Mary appeared to a

¹⁹⁷ Meinardus, “The Virgin Mary as Mediatrix,” 95.

¹⁹⁸ Meinardus, *ibid.*, 94.

¹⁹⁹ Meinardus, *ibid.*, 97.

young girl in a cleft of the rock. On this site, a spring of water is said to have flowed out from the ground after the visionary, a young peasant girl, went to the spot to eat of the grass and mud there at the request of Mary. Through the years, millions of pilgrims have visited Lourdes and some have claimed healing as a result of being plunged in this water. Ruth Harris' critical study of the phenomenon of Lourdes mentions this Marian "sanctuary's capacity to attract so many people of divergent spiritual inclinations."²⁰⁰

Similarly, a modern Catholic pilgrimage spot is that of Fatima in Portugal. In 1917, three shepherd children claim to have seen the Blessed Virgin on the top of a small tree. This spot is special not only because Mary would have announced the rise and fall of Communism in Russia, but also because this small town carries the name of the beloved daughter of Muhammad. The place where Mary appeared in Fatima is considered sacred and visited by both Muslims and Catholics: "Fatima continues to attract and intrigue people from wildly different backgrounds."²⁰¹ John Paul II considered Fatima his favorite pilgrimage spot to the point where he "identified himself with Fatima and thus with the devotional practices of popular piety."²⁰² Mary F. Thurlkill mentions that "the Polish Pope John Paul II later credited Mary with Communism's defeat in the late 1980s and encouraged the church to continue its Marian piety."²⁰³

Concerning the fusion of popular and learned devotion surrounding the Fatima event, Tarcisio Bertone maintains that religious symbolism is "an essential ingredient

²⁰⁰ Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Penguin Publishers, 1999), 566.

²⁰¹ De Carli, "In Defense of Popular Piety," in Tarcisio Bertone, *The Last Secret of Fatima: My Conversations with Sister Lucia* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 97.

²⁰² De Carli, *ibid.*

²⁰³ Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women*, 122.

of human rationality. While rationalism extinguishes the longing for the absolute, genuine human rationality both feeds on symbols and naturally expresses itself in them.”²⁰⁴

The daily apparitions of Mary to six children in Medjugorje (Bosnia Hercegovina) began in 1981 when Yugoslavia was still a communist country. It is claimed that Mary encouraged openness and interreligious dialogue. “At an undefined date, she said: ‘We must respect every man in his faith. It is never right to look down on a man because of his convictions.’” The events in Medjugorje that still attract millions of pilgrims every year “are also a bond with the Muslims of the country who come to ‘the apparitions of Our Lady.’”²⁰⁵

Another pilgrimage spot of Marian devotion is the Church of Mary in Cairo. In 1968, two Muslim workmen spotted on the dome of the Church a “lady dressed in white.” Fearful for her safety, they shouted, “Take care, you may fall down.” This was the first of a number of “mariophanies” in this area, sometimes lasting for hours and experienced by thousands of visitors both Muslim and Christian. Some of these apparitions have been studied and officially attested by the Coptic hierarchy.²⁰⁶

In an article of *The Muslim World*, Smith and Haddad, give the following description of the same event:

This description of the appearance of the Virgin Mary, published in Cairo’s widely-read *al-Ahram* newspaper on May 5, 1968, was newsworthy precisely because Mary (Arabic, Maryam) is a figure with great and lasting appeal to Muslims as well as to Christians in the Middle East. Copts and Muslims flocked to witness these visions of the Virgin of Zeituna, many of them reporting

²⁰⁴ Bertone, *The Last Secret of Fatima*, 97. Emphasis in original.

²⁰⁵ Rene Laurentin and Ljudevit Rupcic, *Is the Virgin Mary Appearing at Medjugorje? An Urgent Message for the World Given in a Marxist Country*, trans. Francis Martin (Washington, D.C.: The Word Among Us Press, 1984), 120.

²⁰⁶ Meinardus, “The Virgin Mary as Mediatrix, 99-100.

miraculous healings and other spiritual experiences. Such occurrences are part of an ongoing tradition and Middle East folk religion in which the figure of Mary has continued to play a prominent role. Muslims over the centuries have looked to Mary, the pure one, as an exemplar of obedience and fidelity, a model of piety and, according to many, the first to attain paradise.²⁰⁷

Speaking of the same Marian apparitions, Jenkins also mentions the influence of Mary in bringing Christians and Muslims together. After speaking of the “spectacular Marian visions and miracles” in Zaytoun, near Cairo, Jenkins claims that “the shrine attracted millions of seekers, Muslim as well as Christian (the Virgin Mary is a prominent and beloved figure in the *Quran*).”²⁰⁸

In his recent trip to Turkey, Pope Benedict XVI celebrated Mass at the national Marian shrine of Meryen Aria Evi (the House of Mother Mary) in Ephesus. “According to an ancient local tradition (and the visions of the nineteenth-century Augustinian Sister Catherine Emmerich), the Virgin Mary had followed the Apostle St. John to Ephesus.”²⁰⁹ Mary might have spent the last days of her life there. Some seventy years ago, a two-room chapel was built where Roman Catholics and Muslims are able to pray each in their own way.²¹⁰ The Pope said, “The shrine is a point of encounter and prayer for Christians and Muslims, who acknowledge in Mary the ever-virgin mother of Jesus, the woman chosen by God for the good of humanity.”²¹¹

Smith and Haddad maintain that as Muslims and Christians come together as witnesses of the visions of Mary, “dividing lines between the two faith traditions often are blurred in the veneration of Mary.”²¹² Popular Marian devotional practices then

²⁰⁷ Smith and Haddad, “The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary,” 161.

²⁰⁸ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 138.

²⁰⁹ Meinardus, “The Virgin Mary as Mediatrix,” 96.

²¹⁰ Meinardus, *ibid.*, 96-97.

²¹¹ Office of Papal Liturgical Celebrations, “Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Turkey,” 2.

²¹² Smith and Haddad, “The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary,” 184.

might be encouraged in the context of Catholic-Islamic encounters. If the topic includes Mary, it might even be held in one or other approved Marian shrine.

Meinardus mentions that there are special images or icons of Mary that are honored by Catholics and Muslims. In fact, “there are icons of the Virgin Mary which are believed by Christians and by Muslims—despite Islamic iconoclastic teachings—to have miraculous powers.”²¹³ One example is that of the “*Mater Dolorosa*” in the church of St George in Egypt, a famous icon believed to shed tears of blood. “There are numerous other Coptic churches with miraculous icons, especially in Upper Egypt, to which Christians and Muslims alike turn in time of trial.”²¹⁴

2.4 Popular Marian Devotions in Sufism

The Sufi tradition is perhaps closer to the deep mystical experiences both Muslims and Catholics encounter in their devotion to Mary. Smith and Haddad mention this in the context of Sufism. Mary “has been a much revered figure in popular piety.” It is noted that there are “frequent images of Mary in Sufi poetry and writing.”²¹⁵ Outstanding among Sufi authors is Jalal al-Din Rumi whose “images of Mary and Jesus are more frequent” than in any other Muslim poetry.²¹⁶

Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil (1904-1979),²¹⁷ wrote about the Sufi mystics who “have meditated on the texts that speak of Mary; a special study would be required,

²¹³ Meinardus, “The Virgin Mary as Mediatrix,” 95.

²¹⁴ Meinardus, *ibid.*, 96.

²¹⁵ Smith and Haddad, “The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary,” 177.

²¹⁶ Smith and Haddad, *ibid.*

²¹⁷ Jean-Mohammed Abd-el-Jalil, *Marie et l'Islam*. Paris: Beauchesne, 1950, cited in George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 41. Abd-el-Jalil was born in Morocco, converted to Catholicism and became a Franciscan Priest and Professor of Arabic language and literature as well as Islamology at the Catholic Institute of Paris. He wrote a report on Islam for the Second Vatican Council.

which is often quite beautiful and sometimes disconcerting.” Abd-el-Jalil cites the medieval Sufi poet Al-Baqli (d. 1209 CE) in his commentary of Q. 19:5:

‘When she withdrew from her people to an eastern place. . .’ the substance of Mariyam is the very substance of original holiness . . . She watched at each moment the sunrise of the Power in the east of the Reign. She withdrew far from all created beings through her elevated aspiration filled with the light of the hidden mystery. She turned toward the horizon where the rays of the Essence and the Attributes were shining, breathing in the breezes of union that blow from the world of eternity. Toward her there came one of the breezes of the sun of the contemplation of holiness . . . Her soul conceived by the breath of the hidden mystery. She became the carrier of the most high Word and the most elevated light of the Spirit.²¹⁸

Besides Sufi devotion to Mary, according to Scott Kugle, Sufi communities build shrines that “serve as gathering places and ritual sites for Sufis.”²¹⁹ Kugle claims that pilgrim sites devoted to saints’ bodies were carried out in spite of the objections of certain scholars:

Muslim theologians denounced the visitation of tombs, the building of shrines over them, the association of mosques with them, and the mixing of classes and genders that happened around them. However, even when their critique was bitter, these theologians had to admit that the practice of building tombs, visiting them, and considering the dead as present in them was an authentic part of the Prophet Muhammad’s teachings.²²⁰

Similarly, concerning devotional practices surrounding Mary among Muslims, Winter mentions that the Catholic Jesuit Khalil Samir “provides profuse illustrations of modern Arab Muslim veneration of the Virgin and the widespread incidence of Muslim pilgrimages to Marian churches, suggesting that the masses simply disregard the scruples of the theologians and insist on celebrating her as a shared figure.”²²¹

²¹⁸ Al-Bakli, “Commentary on Sura 19:5,” 12-13 CE, cited in George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 41. Tavard’s English translation is taken from the French version in Abd-el-Jalil, *Marie et l’Islam*, 80.

²¹⁹ Kugle, *Sufis and Saints’ Bodies*, 46. See note 5, p. 297.

²²⁰ Kugle, *ibid.*, 47-48.

²²¹ Winter “Pulchra Ut Luna,” 2.

From the above, it might be possible to conclude that Marian popular devotions can “encourage closer contacts” and therefore allow further interreligious encounters following the four types of dialogue described in Chapter 1. Although there are a variety of forms and content of interreligious encounters, they are interconnected. According to “Dialogue and Proclamation,” all believers are called to dialogue though not necessarily in the same manner:

Contacts in daily life and common commitment to action will normally open the door for cooperation in promoting human and spiritual values; they may also eventually lead to the dialogue of religious experience in response to the great questions which the circumstances of life do not fail to arouse in the minds of people. Exchanges at the level of religious experience can give more life to theological discussion. These in turn can enlighten experience and encourage closer contacts.²²²

After describing how Marian popular devotions encourage encounters between Catholics and Muslims, this study now examines theological content for further interreligious dialogue through a comparison between Marian beliefs in Catholicism and Islam.

In view of the present momentum in the area of Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue where peaceful relationships are developed, the following chapter presents a case-study on Mary, the mother of Jesus as a possible topic that might open doors for further dialogue.

²²² Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation,” 11-12, # 43.

CHAPTER 3

MARY IN CATHOLICISM AND ISLAM: A CASE-STUDY

The overview of Marian popular devotional practices bringing Catholics and Muslims together leads to further theological discussion on how Mary might play a greater role in Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue. The framework for this chapter is that of four Catholic dogmas: Mary's Immaculate Conception, her Perpetual Virginity, her Assumption into Heaven, and her Divine Maternity. Since Catholic dogmas are binding on all Catholics, the choice of these official Marian doctrines that define Catholic Mariology seems appropriate for this research.

According to Winter, since the 1980's there are more serious attempts "to use a historical understanding of Mary's role in Islamic spirituality as a foundation for dialogue."²²³ Winter discerns "a willingness to confer upon the Prophet the female and celestial attributes that in Christian piety have typically been reserved for the Virgin."²²⁴ Smith and Haddad's article and Thurlkill's book reveal a similar transfer from Mary to Fatima, the Prophet Muhammad's beloved daughter.²²⁵ Therefore, in view of Mary's place in Islam and Catholicism, this chapter presents a comparative case-study on the Virgin Mary which might suggest further study by Catholics and Muslims in dialogue.²²⁶ Since the Bible and the Qur'an present Mary mainly through narratives, this chapter introduces these scriptural stories and others in the discussion.

²²³ Winter, "Pulchra Ut Luna," 2. Winter mentions among other contributions, Barbara Freyer Stowasser's *Women in the Qur'an*.

²²⁴ Winter, *ibid.*, 6.

²²⁵ Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women*.

²²⁶ Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Miracle of Jesus: Muslim Reflections on the Divine Word," in *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, ed. Irfan A. Omar (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 113.

3.1 Mary in Catholic and Islamic Narratives

The case-study in this chapter is based mainly on the Biblical and Qur'anic narratives concerning Mary. Like the Gospel texts of Matthew 1 and Luke 1-2, the Qur'anic Mary is portrayed mostly in narrative contexts, with Q. 19 named after her: "Most of the Qur'anic texts specific to Mary are found in Q. 3:35-47 and 19:16-34; occasional references are found throughout the Qur'an, usually specifying her as the mother of Jesus."²²⁷ Although the comparison between Mary in the Bible and in the Qur'an involves various scriptural narratives, this case-study itself is not presented in a narrative or storytelling form. Wherever useful, traditional and contemporary documents as well as scholarly works and commentaries are included.

In spite of similarities in essentials, there are numerous differences in the details concerning the Islamic and Catholic Marian narratives. One must keep in mind the historical, linguistic, cultural and geographical contexts where these were written. However, when comparing corresponding narratives from the Bible and the Qur'an, there is a danger of emphasizing differences in the details rather than focusing on the more spiritual elements in the text. In an attempt to avoid losing touch with the essential messages of the scriptural narratives that might be useful for interreligious dialogue, this case-study adopts modern historical and critical hermeneutical methods.

However, certain scholars tend to reject any historical truth to the infancy narratives treating them as myths, legends, or mere fairy tales of no particular theological value. One example of this tendency is that of the scripture scholar Francois Bovon. In his Commentary, Bovon considers Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 "form-

²²⁷ Smith and Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," 162.

critically late legends.”²²⁸ Therefore, Mariology in the infancy narratives is often overlooked by scholars as being of no real historical and theological importance.

Contrary to the above position, others claim that modern hermeneutical approaches have shed light upon the Church’s teaching on Mariology. One of the pioneers of the historical-critical approach in the Catholic Church was Raymond E. Brown who insisted on a scientific study of language, culture, history and archeology, etc. as necessary for a better understanding of scripture. In his major work on the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, Brown notes that the material where Mary appears most frequently “has an origin and a historical quality quite different from that of the rest of the Gospels.”²²⁹ However, while following historical as well as narrative criticism, Brown claims that these approaches do not necessarily contradict the official doctrines of the Catholic Church.

It might be important to note in the context of this case-study on Mary that narrative style and purpose in the Qur’an are somewhat different from those of the Bible. The Qur’anic narratives do not follow a chronological order as in the Gospel texts. Furthermore, Angelika Neuwirth explains that “qur’anic narrating pursues complex ‘para-narrative’ aims.” Contrary to Biblical narratives, there is in the Qur’an “an explicit presentation of the moral or theological implications for the community [...] that can be deduced from the narrated facts or speeches.”²³⁰

²²⁸ Francois Bovon, *Luke I: A commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. Christine M. Thomas (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 44.

²²⁹ Brown, *the Birth of the Messiah*, 6.

²³⁰ Angelika Neuwirth, “Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 106-7.

According to Peter Funk, “we can see that the development of doctrines such as the Immaculate Conception and Assumption do indeed have biblical roots, even though they are not explicitly stated in the Bible.”²³¹ Keeping this in mind, this case-study has as its framework the Catholic Marian dogmas: her Immaculate Conception, her Perpetual Virginity, Mary’s Assumption into Heaven and her Divine Maternity. Since there seems to be similarities between Catholic Mariological dogmas and corresponding Islamic texts it might be possible through a more scientific approach to the study of scriptures, to include Mary as a link between Catholics and Muslims in dialogue.

3.2 Four Catholic Marian Dogmas

The aim of this comparative case-study is to search for common ground as well as points of divergence in theological Marian beliefs. Without compromise or rejection of one’s own beliefs, this research examines the possibility of fostering mutual understanding between Catholics and Muslims through interreligious dialogue on the topic of Mary. Therefore, facing the basic Marian doctrines of the Catholic Church concerning Mary is meant to serve as a call to both Catholics and Muslims to freely express their own religious convictions. In this way, these two religious groups might face their theological similarities and differences in an honest, sincere and sensitive manner.

²³¹ Funk, “What Is Biblical Criticism?” 3.

3.2.1 Mary's Immaculate Conception

In 1995, on December 8 which is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception in the Catholic Church, an interreligious banquet was given by the American Muslim Council in honor of Cardinal William Keeler, at the end of his term as President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Keeler spoke of the “growing relationship between Catholics and Muslims.” He also took this opportunity to speak about Mary: “It is certainly true that in her very person there is a meeting point, or at least a stepping stone, between Christianity and Islam.”²³² Keeler took the opportunity of this feast to speak about the Catholic dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception, a dogma that was defined in the 19th century.

It is a fact that the official declaration of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, based upon both oral and written Tradition was a late addition by the Catholic Church in 1854. Pope Pius IX gave the following definition of this dogma: “We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine, which holds that the most blessed Virgin Mary at the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and on this account must be firmly and constantly by all the faithful.”²³³

The “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” of Vatican II, claims that the early Church Fathers considered Mary “entirely holy and free from all stain of sin, fashioned

²³² William Keeler, “How Mary Holds Christians and Muslims in Conversation,” 8 December 1995, <http://uscbb.org/seia/keeler.shtml> (accessed 26 May 2008), 2.

²³³ Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus* (Dec. 8, 1854), cited in “Definition of the Immaculate Conception of the B.V.M.” from English translation of Henry Denzinger *Enchiridion Symbolorum: The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, rev Karl Rahner, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, (St Louis, Missouri: B. Herder Book Co., 1957), 413, # 1641.

by the Holy Spirit into a kind of new substance and new creature. Adorned from the first instant of her conception with the splendors of an entirely unique holiness, the Virgin of Nazareth, is, on God's command, greeted by an angel messenger as 'full of grace' (cf. Lk. 1:28)."²³⁴

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, mentions that Eastern Catholic and Orthodox Christians also strongly believe in the special protection Mary received from the beginning of her earthly life. They "celebrate her as 'free from any stain of sin, as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature.' By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long."²³⁵

The Qur'anic narrative concerning the birth of Mary (3:35-36) and the Annunciation of the birth of Jesus in Luke 1:26-38 and Q. 3:42, 45-47 and 19:16-22 have been chosen for a comparative analysis based on this Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

Q. 3:35-36 relates the circumstances surrounding the birth of Mary and how her mother consecrated the child in her womb as an offering to God. When she realized that her child was female, she named her Mary and prayed for protection from Satan for her and her offspring.

Qur'an 3:

- 3:35 When said (*Hanna*) the wife of Imran "My Lord! I have vowed unto Thee what is in my womb to be (*dedicated*) for Thee (*exclusively for Thy service*) freed (*from all worldly responsibilities*) therefore accept (*it*) from me; Verily thou art the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.
- 3:36 And when she delivered her, she said "My Lord! I have delivered a female (*child*); and God knew best what she delivered; and the male is not like the

²³⁴ Abbott and Gallagher, eds., "The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*)," 88, #56.

²³⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 110, # 493.

female; and I have named it Mary and commend her to Thy protection and also her offspring from Satan the castaway (*accursed*).”

The canonical Bible has no equivalent text for this passage. These verses from the Qur'an have been used by Islamic scholars on the topic of Mary's immaculate purity. In his address at the interreligious banquet sponsored by the American Muslim Council, Keeler states that the traditional and dogmatic teaching of the Catholic Church also finds support in the Qur'an:

The Qur'an recalls that Mary's mother, before she gave birth to the daughter she hardly expected, had prayed: "O Lord, I dedicate to your service that which is within my womb, one totally free ("muharraran") accept it from me" ("The Imrans" III:35). Indeed, to Mary herself, according to the Qur'an, the angel said, "God has chosen you and made you pure ("tahharaki"), and he has chosen you above the women of the universe" ("the Imrans," III:42). For according to the "Qur'an", Mary, "a saintly woman ("siddigh") (the Table V:75) was destined, together with Jesus, her son, to be "a sign ("ayah") to the universe" ("The Prophets" XXI:91), to play a unique role in the history of salvation.²³⁶

In Q. 3:35-36, the Qur'an speaks not only of the consecration of Mary in her mother's womb; but these verses also speak of Mary's protection from the evil one.

According to Stowasser, Islamic exegesis has proposed freedom from sin for Mary, as well as for her son, Jesus and other prophets:

Before birth, Mary's mother consecrated her to God's service. After the baby was born, she invoked God's protection for her and her progeny from Satan: According to authenticated tradition, both Mary and her son Jesus thereby escaped 'the pricking of the devil' at birth, which tradition is said to have played a role in the formation of the later Islamic doctrine of prophetic '*isma* (innate quality of 'impeccability,' 'immunity from sin and error' of prophets).²³⁷

Although the Qur'an does not specify that Mary was conceived free from any stain of sin, still the special dedication in her mother's womb and the protection from Satan prayed for, place Mary apart from any other person described in the Qur'anic

²³⁶ Keeler, "How Mary Holds Christians and Muslims in Conversation," 2.

²³⁷ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 69.

scriptures. There is therefore in Islam freedom from Satan for Mary. A passage from a great Sufi mystic and poet of the 12th century, Ibn al'Arabi's *The Bezels of Wisdom*, indicates a similar notion in the conception of Jesus:

From the water of Mary or from the breath of Gabriel,
In the form of a mortal fashioned of clay,
The Spirit came into existence in an essence
Purged of Nature's taint, which is called *Sijjin*.²³⁸

According to Tavard, R.W.J. Austin, the editor and translator of *The Bezels of Wisdom*, "identifies *Sijjin* as another name for hell; the reference is to the belief that Satan touches all humans at their birth (this is why a newborn baby cries) with the two exceptions of Mariyam and of her son."²³⁹

Moreover, Tavard links the Qur'anic text of Mary's protection from Satan as somewhat akin to the Catholic Mary's Immaculate Conception.

In the later Islamic tradition this will be interpreted by some commentaries as indicating that, unlike the generality of humankind, Imran's daughter, Mariyam, was born without being touched by Satan. This belief that all humans are touched by Satan at their birth can be interpreted by Christian theology as a diminutive version of original sin. In keeping with the dedication that was made of Mary to Allah, this privilege is also attributed to her Son Issa, and no other humans have received it.²⁴⁰

In his exegetical explanation of certain verses in the Qur'an, Kenneth Cragg specifies that the words of the sacred text "God knows well what she had given birth to" (Q. 3:36) refer to "Mary, mother of Jesus and herself child of the wife of 'Imran, that is to say, a progeny (or subject) of wonderful significance."²⁴¹ The Biblical narrative mentions nothing of Mary's childhood. However, following traditional beliefs

²³⁸ Ibn al'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 174.

²³⁹ Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 45.

²⁴⁰ Tavard, *ibid.*, 36.

²⁴¹ Kenneth Cragg, *The Mind of the Qur'an: Chapters in Reflection* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1973.), 67.

of the Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II speaks of the central place and dignity given to Mary, the mother of Jesus as well as of her freedom from evil. He maintains that “this grace determines the extraordinary greatness and beauty of her whole being.”²⁴²

Further Biblical and Qur’anic verses also seem to favor the Catholic belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The following narratives of the Annunciation of the birth of Jesus are given in full here for the purpose of clarity, although some of the verses will also serve in the following section on the Perpetual Virginity of Mary.

Luke 1:

- 1:26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,
1:27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.
1:28 And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”
1:29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.
1:30 The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.
1:31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.
1:32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.
1:33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”
1:34 Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”
1:35 The angel said to her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.
1:36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.
1:37 For nothing will be impossible with God.”
1:38 Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Brown explains that this account of the Annunciation of the angel to Mary is written according to the “stereotyped pattern for the annunciations of the forthcoming

²⁴² John Paul II, *Mary, God’s Yes to Man (Redemptoris Mater)*,” 63, # 11.

births of famous figures in salvation history.” Examples are the narratives announcing the birth of Isaac in Genesis 17 and that of Samson in Judges 13, etc. Luke’s account follows the five features usually found in these narratives: (1) appearance of an angel and the greeting by title; (2) the reaction of fear; (3) the message: concerning the birth of a child, the child’s name, an interpretation of the child’s name, and the child’s future; (4) an objection; and (5) a promised sign. However, according to Brown, there are three major and important differences between the narrative in Luke and other similarly structured narratives: (1) the description of the child and his future; (2) the virginal conception; and (3) Mary’s objection.²⁴³ Through this traditional narrative structure then, it seems that Luke reveals in a subtle but profound way, the core of his message concerning both Jesus and Mary: the virginal conception of Jesus and his mother’s purity.

The above Gospel narrative of the Annunciation to Mary translates the Greek word *kecharitomene*, the title given to Mary by the angel in Luke 1:28, as “favored one.” However, Karl Keating defends Jerome’s Latin Vulgate translation of “*gratia plena*” that is, ‘full of grace.’ Keating explains:

This grace...is at once permanent and of a singular kind. The Greek indicates a perfection of grace. A perfection must be perfect not only intensively, but extensively. The grace Mary enjoyed must not only have been as ‘full’ or strong, as complete as possible at any given time, but it must have extended over the whole of her life, from conception. That is, she must have been in a state of sanctifying grace from the first moment of her existence to have been called ‘full of grace’ or to have been filled with divine favor in a singular way. This is just what the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception holds.²⁴⁴

There are two Qur’anic narratives concerning the annunciation of the angel to Mary (Q. 3:42, 45-47; 19:16-22). In these narratives, Mary was greeted by an angel(s)

²⁴³ Brown, “Luke’s Method in the Annunciation Narrative of Chapter One,” 131,

²⁴⁴ Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 269.

who explained how God purified her and chose her above all women.²⁴⁵ She was told that she would have a son named Jesus. In the two Qur'anic accounts, Mary "questioned how she, a virgin, could conceive."²⁴⁶

Qur'an 3:

- 3:42 "And (*recall O' Our Apostle Muhammad!*) when said the Angels "O'Mary! Verily, God hath chosen thee and purified thee and chosen thee above the women of the worlds."
- 3:45 (*Recall*) (*O'Our Apostle Muhammad!*) when said the Angels "O' Mary! Verily, God giveth thee the glad tidings of a Word from Him; whose name shall be Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary; illustrious in this world and in the Hereafter and (*shall be*) of those near (*to God*)".
- 3:46 "And he shall speak to men (*alike when*) in cradle and when aged; and (*he shall be*) of the righteous ones."
- 3:47 Said she "O' My Lord! How can I have a son when, hath not touched me (*any*) man?" He said "Even so doth God create whatsoever He willeth; When He decreeth a thing then He only saith unto it BE and it IS."

Qur'an 19:

- 19:16 And mention in the Book (*Qur'an*) about Mary (*also*) when she withdrew herself from her family (*in the house*) eastward,
- 19:17 Then she took a veil (*cover herself*) from them; then sent We unto her Our Spirit, then he (*the Spirit*) appeared unto her a man sound (*in form*).
- 19:18 Said she: "Verily I fly for refuge in The Beneficent (*God*) from thee, (*be gone from me*) if thou art God-fearing"
- 19:19 Said he; "I am only a messenger (*Angel*) of thy Lord: so that I give to thee a son purified."
- 19:20 Said she: "How can there be unto me a son while hath not touched me (*any*) man and nor was I unchaste!"
- 19:21 Said he: "So shall it be; thy Lord sayeth, It is easy for Me, and that We will make him a Sign (*miracle*) (*of Ours*) unto the people and a Mercy from Us; It is a matter (*already*) decreed."
- 19:22 So she conceived him and retired with him (*away from her people*) to a remote place.

²⁴⁵ The term 'purity' has been interpreted in a variety of ways in Islamic tradition e.g. women needed purification after childbirth, etc. On this topic see Smith and Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," 172-4.

²⁴⁶ Smith and Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," 166.

According to the Qur'anic revelation to Muhammad, God's special choice of Mary is expressed as follows: "And (*recall O' Our Apostle Muhammad!*) when said the Angel "O' Mary! Verily, God hath chosen thee and purified thee and chosen thee above the women of the world" (Q. 3:42).²⁴⁷ In Luke 1:28, Mary is addressed as "blessed among women" by her cousin Elizabeth.

Some modern Muslim scholars view certain privileges given to Mary as parallel to those of the Prophet Muhammad. Q. 3:42 states: "Remember when the angels said, 'O Mary, God has surely chosen you and purified you; He has chosen you above the women of humankind.'" Commenting on this verse, Ayoub writes: "We cannot fully appreciate the meaning of Jesus' birth without studying it in the context of the sanctified life of his mother. Mary was, according to the Qur'an, purified and chosen by God for God's special favor." Further he notes: "Only as an unblemished virgin could she serve as a receptacle of the divine Word. The parallel of Mary's sanctity and election with Muhammad's status as the recipient of the Word of God in Muslim piety deserves further study."²⁴⁸

In his analysis of a Sufi poem to the Queen of Heaven by Ibn al-Farid, Winter discerns "a willingness to confer upon the Prophet the female and celestial attributes that in Christian piety have typically been reserved for the Virgin." The moon, a

²⁴⁷ There is controversy among Muslim scholars concerning the notion of purification stemming from this Qur'anic text. Smith and Haddad doubt McAuliffe's conclusion that al-Tabari considers Mary's purification as strictly non-physical. Smith and Haddad conclude from their study of this matter, "that purity is understood by many to be both spiritual, in terms of her own religious acts and responses (*din*), and physical, as mentioned specifically in relation to bleeding and secondarily to other female conditions considered to be defiling as well as to physical contact with men." Therefore, following the hadith, Mary's purity would involve freedom from every type of defilement common to women and therefore, "because of the perfection that God has apportioned to you, you are counted among the men!" See Smith and Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition," 172-3. To take these commentaries literally is to place women in an inferior position, one difficult to maintain in modern society.

²⁴⁸ Ayoub, "The Miracle of Jesus," 113.

Christian symbol of Mary, is also the image used of Muhammad in Islamic poetry:

“The moon, to which the poet compares his beloved, is a stock symbol of the Prophet, in whose immaculate purity the light of the divine sun is mirrored and shines upon the world.”²⁴⁹ In Islamic literature, some elements of the Prophet Muhammad’s life and attributes are described in terms similar to those Catholics use concerning the Virgin Mary.

Winters is not convinced of the usefulness of the historical Mary as “a potentially shared theme for dialogue.” He considers the “images of the feminine, for which she frequently becomes the preeminent figure, can be read to show that the two religions are much closer in their mystical and devotional practices than their theologies might suggest.”²⁵⁰ Winter gives examples of such practices that link Mary to the Prophet Muhammad: “The Catholic virgin and the Muslim Prophet are both celebrated as ‘full of grace,’ which the devotee hopes to tap through a piety of direct address and salutation.”²⁵¹ The Catholic rosary with its repetition of the Hail Mary is similar to that of “the Muslim salat wasalam (prayers and salutations of peace), methodically invoked upon the Prophet.”²⁵² In Catholicism, this mystical symbolism is closely linked to the historical figure of Mary.

Smith and Haddad also take up this theme of Mary’s “freedom from defilement,” generally termed her Immaculate Conception. “It is interesting to note in this connection that Muslim popular piety affirms the notion of the immaculate conception in relation to both the Prophet and his parents as being very much like that

²⁴⁹ Winter, “Pulchra Ut Luna,” 6.

²⁵⁰ Winter, *ibid.*, 1.

²⁵¹ Winter, *ibid.*, 7.

²⁵² Winter, *ibid.*

attributed to Mary.”²⁵³ This same quality is attributed to Muhammad’s daughter, Fatima. According to Thurlkill, “Fatima, like Mary’s immaculate conception and Jesus’ virgin birth, is conceived free from sin, pollutants, or impurities.”²⁵⁴

Although there are differences in interpretation of terms used in both Catholicism and Islam, there does not seem to be any major contradiction as far as the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception is concerned. Roman Catholics and the world of Islam, all proclaim the holiness of Mary even in her mother’s womb. In fact, this aspect of the beginning of Mary’s life is exposed more clearly in the Qur’an than in the Bible, revealing that it stems from a very ancient tradition.

The above study detecting similarities in Catholic and Islamic scriptural, traditional and scholarly works suggests the possibility of including Mary’s Immaculate Conception as a topic for interreligious dialogue.²⁵⁵ Carrying on the method of a case-study based on Biblical and Qur’anic narratives, another Catholic dogma that might also provide material for dialogue with Islam is that of Mary’s perpetual virginity.

3.2.2 Mary’s Perpetual Virginity

In the framework of a case-study, the question in this section is whether the Catholic dogma of the Perpetual Virginity of Mary might be useful for Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue. The comparison on this topic is between Mary in the scriptures and traditions of Catholicism and Islam.

A first sub-section will refer to the Biblical and Qur’anic narratives of the annunciation to Mary cited in the preceding section. This will be followed by the

²⁵³ Smith and Haddad, “The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary,” 174.

²⁵⁴ Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women*, 60.

²⁵⁵ Keeler, “How Mary Holds Muslims and Christians in Conversation,” 2.

account of the annunciation to Joseph in Matthew 1:18-25. Although there is no corresponding Qur'anic text to the narrative in Matthew, the comparison will be based on an extract of a modern historical novel entitled *al-Masih 'Isa ibn Maryam*, (*Jesus Christ, Mary's Son*) by 'Abd al-Hamid Jawda al-Sahhar. This text of an Egyptian novelist might be useful for the topic of Mary's virginity in interreligious dialogue since, according to Winter, al-Sahhar's "novel about Christ weaves elements from biblical and Qur'anic narratives to provide a lyrical modern expression of Islamic piety."²⁵⁶ Further discussion flows from the narratives of the birth of Jesus in Luke 2:1-7 and Qur'an 19:22-33. Sub-sections on post-scriptural Catholic and Islamic theology lead to a brief comparison between Mary and Fatima.

Biblical and Qur'anic Narratives of the Annunciation to Mary

This case-study refers to the annunciation narratives of Luke 1:26-38 as well as those of Qur'an 3:45-47 and 19:16-22. These verses maintain the virginity of Mary in the conception of Jesus.

In the annunciation narrative of Luke 1:26-38 (see 3.2.1 above) the angel said to Mary: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." (1:30-31) Mary questioned: "How can this be since I am a virgin." (1:34) The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God." (1:35) This is one of the biblical proof-texts used as basis for the dogmatic belief in the virginity of Mary.

²⁵⁶ Winter, "Mary in Islam," 496.

The two Annunciation narratives in the Qur'an also confirm the Islamic belief in the virginal conception of Jesus. In the first narrative, an angel explained to Mary that she would have a son, "whose name shall be Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in this world and in the Hereafter and (*shall be*) of those near (*to God*)."

(Q. 3:45) Mary's son would speak even in the cradle (Q. 3:46). Similar to Luke 1:34, Mary asks: "O' My Lord! How can I have a son when, hath not touched me (*any*) man? He said 'Even so doth God create whatsoever He willeth. When He decreeth a thing then He only saith unto it BE and it IS.'" (Q. 3:47)

The following is a second longer Qur'anic version of the Annunciation to Mary:

Qur'an 19:

- 19:16 And mention in the Book (*Qur'an*) about Mary (*also*) when she withdrew herself from her family (*in the house*) eastward,
- 19:17 Then she took a veil (*cover herself*) from them; then sent We unto her Our Spirit, then he (*the Spirit*) appeared unto her a man sound (*in form*).
- 19:18 Said she: "Verily I fly for refuge in The Beneficent (*God*) from thee, (*be gone from me*) if thou art God-fearing"
- 19:19 Said he; "I am only a messenger (*Angel*) of thy Lord: so that I give to thee a son purified."
- 19:20 Said she: "How can there be unto me a son while hath not touched me (*any*) man and nor was I unchaste!"
- 19:21 Said he: "So shall it be; thy Lord sayeth, It is easy for Me, and that We will make him a Sign (*miracle*) (*of Ours*) unto the people and a Mercy from Us; It is a matter (*already*) decreed."
- 19:22 So she conceived him and retired with him (*away from her people*) to a remote place.

In the annunciation narratives of both the Bible and the Qur'an cited above, Mary is afraid at the sight of an angel. In the Bible, the angel called Gabriel explains to Mary how she will conceive: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." (Luke 1: 35) Qur'an 21:91 describes this miraculous event as follows: "And (*O' Our Apostle Muhammad! Remember*) her

(Mary) who guarded her chastity We breathed into her Our spirit, and We made her and her son a sign unto all peoples.”

A striking similarity between the narratives of the Annunciation to Mary is that of Mary’s question to the Angel in Qur’an 3: 47, 19:20 and Luke 1:34. Catholics and Muslims have used this text to maintain Mary’s virginity. Smith and Haddad quote Marina Warner, who “for example, identifies Mary’s questioning of the angel Gabriel concerning her pregnancy as the ‘most precious speech in Mariology, for it implies her innocence and virginity.’”²⁵⁷

Many Islamic commentaries discuss the matter of how an angel can take the form of a human being and how the conception of Jesus actually took place. According to Smith and Haddad, “contemporary commentators generally agree that Gabriel came in the form of a handsome man so that Mary would not be repulsed by him.”²⁵⁸ Moreover, the “discussion of angelic possibilities in this context has to do not only with what an angel can and cannot do, but with a further defense of Mary’s purity in not having lain with a real man.”²⁵⁹ The Qur’anic commentary in note 1462 of the above verse 21:91 gives this explanation: “The reference is to Virgin Mary being made to bear Jesus, without any male partner in the parentage—See 19:16-35; 3:44; 4:171).”

The narratives of the Annunciation to Mary in the Bible and the Qur’an stress the belief that “Jesus was conceived in the womb of a virgin without the intervention of

²⁵⁷ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Picador, 1990), 8, in Jane I. Smith and Yvonne H. Haddad, “The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary,” *The Muslim World*, v. LXXIX, July/October 1989, 186.

²⁵⁸ Smith and Haddad, “The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary,” 167.

²⁵⁹ Smith and Haddad, *ibid.*, 168.

a human father, i.e., without male seed.”²⁶⁰ The biblical Annunciation to Joseph in Matthew 1:18-25, confirms this belief.

Narrative of the Annunciation to Joseph

The Biblical narrative concerned with the virginal conception of Jesus is that of Matthew 1:18-25. The focus of Matthew 1 is on Joseph, Mary’s husband and legal father of Jesus. Matthew’s genealogy (1:1-17) traces the lineage from Abraham to Joseph. However, in verse 16-17, there is a change from the usual genealogical language: “and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.” According to Raymond E. Brown, this “shift of pattern implies that Matthew did not want to say that Joseph was the biological father of Jesus.”²⁶¹ Matthew insists on this fact in the narrative that follows (1:18-25); this text describes Joseph’s dilemma on learning of Mary’s pregnancy and the appearance of an angel explaining the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit:

Matthew 1:

- 1:18-24 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.
- 1:19 Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.
- 1:20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.
- 1:21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”
- 1:22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:
- 1:23 Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’u-el,” which means, “God is with us.”

²⁶⁰ Brown, *The Virginal Conception*, 27.

²⁶¹ Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 62.

- 1:24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him;
he took her as his wife,
1:25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named
him Jesus.

According to the custom of the time, marriage was held in two stages: the first is the ceremony of consent after which the bride and groom were legally married.

However, the bride continued to live with her family until her husband took her into his own home, usually within a year's time. At the time of the Annunciation to Mary, she was Joseph's wife (Matthew 1:20,24) and therefore her pregnancy might be construed as adultery punished by stoning.²⁶² Divorce was also an option: "While Joseph's sense of obedience to the Law forced him in conscience to divorce Mary, his unwillingness to expose her to public disgrace led him to proceed without accusation of serious crime."²⁶³

The above narrative of Matthew implies the belief in Mary's virginity at the conception of Jesus. Moreover, based on Matthew one might conclude that Joseph and Mary knew that their son had no biological father.²⁶⁴ However, a problem arises in the last verse 1:24 where the English word "until" seems to contradict the virginity of Mary after the birth of Jesus. Concerning this problem, Raymond E. Brown explains: "In Greek and Semitic such a negation often has no implication at all about what happened after the limit of the 'until' was reached."²⁶⁵ Brown concludes from this discussion as well as from Biblical passages concerning the brothers and sisters of Jesus—for example Mark 6:3-- that the Catholic belief in Mary's perpetual virginity cannot be

²⁶² Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 123. The law of stoning as a result of adultery is explained in Deuteronomy 22:20ff.

²⁶³ Brown, *ibid.*, 127.

²⁶⁴ Brown, *ibid.*, 46.

²⁶⁵ Brown, *ibid.*, 132.

based on the Bible alone but also on tradition especially concerning her *post-partum* virginity: “The question of Mary’s remaining a virgin for the rest of her life belongs to post-biblical theology.”²⁶⁶

Narratives of the Birth of Jesus

Among the infancy narratives of the Bible and the Qur’an are those of Luke 2:1-7 and Qur’an 19:22-33. There are ethnical and geographical differences in these two accounts. However, the Qur’anic narrative is one that again maintains the virginal innocence of Mary in the conception of her son.

The birth of Jesus is the subject of the narrative in Luke 2:1-7. A census brings Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, the city of David, where the Hebrew Bible states Jesus was to be born.²⁶⁷ Finding no dwelling place, Jesus was possibly born in a stable for the text mentions that his first crib was a manger.

Luke 2:

- 2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.
- 2:2 This was the first registration and was taken while Qui-rin’i-us was governor of Syria.
- 2:3 All went to their own towns to be registered.
- 2:4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.
- 2:5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.
- 2:6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.
- 2:7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

²⁶⁶ Brown, *ibid.*

²⁶⁷ See Micah 5:2: “But you, O Bethlehem of Eph’ra-thah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”

Whereas Matthew uses the terms ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ in describing the relationship between Mary and Joseph, Luke prefers the term ‘engaged’ rather than ‘husband’ and ‘wife.’ The term used in Luke may have “reflected the sensitivities of later scribes that such a designation might compromise Mary’s virginity.”²⁶⁸ There is therefore a hint in Luke of the special character of Mary and Joseph’s relationship throughout their married life.

It is noteworthy that in a corresponding narrative concerning the birth of Jesus, as well as in the Qur’an in general, Joseph is absent; this seems to indicate an emphasis on Mary’s virginity throughout her life. The account of the birth of Jesus shows Mary retiring to a remote and desolate place. Contrary to the Biblical account no time or place is mentioned. The setting is that of a palm tree and a stream, similar to that of an oasis. Mary experiences the pain of child-birth and expresses sadness, even a death wish. What follows has no corresponding text in the Biblical narrative. Mary returns to her family and her baby, speaking miraculously, defends his mother against those who would accuse her of being unchaste. The narrative is as follows:

Qur’an 19:

- 19:22 So she conceived him and retired with him (*away from her people*) to a remote place.
- 19:23 And the throes (*of child-birth*) forced her to betake herself unto the trunk of a palm-tree. She said: “Oh! Had I died ere this, and had been lost in oblivion totally forgotten!”
- 19:24 Then (*a voice*) called out unto her from beneath her; “Grieve not thou, verily thy Lord hath caused from beneath thee, (*to flow*) a stream!”
- 19:25 And shake towards thee the trunk of the palm-tree, it will drop on thee dates fresh (*and*) ripe.
- 19:26 Then eat and drink and refresh the eye. Then if thou seest any man say: “Verily I have vowed unto the Beneficent (*God*) a fast so never shall I speak today unto any man.”

²⁶⁸ Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 125.

- 19:27 And she came with him unto her people carrying him (*with her*). Said they: "O' Mary! Indeed thou hath come with an unusual thing!"
- 19:28 "O' sister of Aaron! Thy father was not a bad man, nor was thy mother an unchaste woman!"
- 19:29 But she pointed unto him. They said: "How can we speak unto one who is (*yet*) a child in the cradle"
- 19:30 He (*Jesus miraculously*) said: "Verily I am a servant of God' He hath given me a Book (*Evangel*) and made me a Prophet!"
- 19:31 "And He hath made me blessed wherever I be and He hath enjoined on me prayer and poor-rate so long as I live!"
- 19:32 "And (*to be*) duteous to my mother, and He hath not made me insolent unblest!"
- 19:33 "And peace be on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised alive"

This Qur'anic narrative of the birth of Jesus and its aftermath, is a strong claim for Mary's virginity. The absence of Joseph throughout the Qur'an as well as the miraculous speech from Mary's baby, seems to affirm this Islamic belief in line with the Biblical narratives of Matthew and Luke.

From the Bible and the Qur'an, the narratives concerning the virginal conception of Jesus show this event as "an act of divine power."²⁶⁹ God was not acting in an ordinary way. Ayoub stresses the main purpose surrounding the Biblical and Qur'anic accounts of the virginal conception and birth of Jesus and therefore the complementarity of these scriptural narratives:

While the Gospels stress the poor and humble circumstances of Jesus' birth, the Qur'an emphasizes Mary's loneliness and total dependence on God's succor. The nativity story in both scriptures, however, is one of celebration of a unique event of God's intervention in human history. If read carefully, the Qur'anic and Gospel accounts may be seen to complete and complement, rather than oppose or contradict, each other. See Matt 1:18-2:11; Luke 1:26-2:20; and Q 19:16-34.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Brown, *The Virginal Conception*, 29.

²⁷⁰ Ayoub, "The Miracle of Jesus," 116.

Mary in a Modern Muslim Novel

In his article "Mary in Islam," Winter presents an extract from a modern Muslim novel based on the life of Jesus, son of Mary. Among other elements from the Qur'an is the role of the priest Zachariah, Mary's guardian. Mary's pregnancy is made public and she is to be tried and possibly executed. However, Joseph hears a voice in the night telling him to escape with Mary. In this narrative, Joseph plays the role of guardian and protector of the Virgin Mary. They make their way to Jerusalem and to Bethlehem where Herod is collecting taxes for the Romans. This novel includes elements from the narratives of both the Bible and the Qur'an "to provide a lyrical modern expression of Islamic piety."²⁷¹

Extract from *Jesus Christ, Mary's Son*, a historical novel by 'Abd al-Hamid Jawda al-Sahhar (Cairo: Dar Misr, n.d.) 20-21.

The temple priests noticed the signs of pregnancy appear in her, and were appalled. (...) they met to take counsel, to reach a final decision; and they came to the view that she must stand trial. If it emerged that she had been unchaste, they would stone her to death, in faithfulness to Moses's law.

Zacharias intervened to remind them of what he had witnessed in her prayer-niche, and of the fair predictions of the Christ that the prophets had made. The one they were unjustly accusing was his promised mother, whose offspring all Israel had been awaiting. (...)

Darkness descended; and Jerusalem donned her black robes. The priests slept, awaiting the dawn of the day when they would place Mary on trial, and stone her. Joseph too went to bed, but no sooner had he surrendered his body to sleep than he heard a voice calling out to him:

'Joseph, get up! Bring Mary out, for the people are scheming against her'

He awoke with a start, and prepared his donkey. Cautiously he made his way to the place where Mary dwelt, and there he told her of the revelation that he had received. He set her upon the donkey, and in the still night they made their way along the narrow alleys which lay between the immense, awe-inspiring walls which David had built around the holy city. (...)

They came to the white road which leads to Bethlehem, and they joined it. (...)

They reached the city gate, beneath the Roman eagle. Roman legionaries stood about, collecting the taxes which Herod was imposing throughout his dominions, and which would be forwarded to his masters in Rome. He was complying with all their

²⁷¹ Winter, "Mary in Islam," 496.

wishes, whatever the exactions this imposed upon his people; his only desire was to give satisfaction to his lord Caesar Augustus.²⁷²

Whereas the Biblical Joseph was absent in the Qur'anic narratives, he found his way into Muslim literature as protector and guardian of the Virgin Mary. The virginal conception of Jesus is maintained in the extract quoted above. Fictional works seem to have few scruples in mixing elements of Biblical and Qur'anic infancy narratives.

Therefore, when comparing these narratives in the context of interreligious dialogue details might not present major obstacles as far as the question of Mary's perpetual virginity is concerned. However, the Catholic claim for the dogma of the Perpetual Virginity of Mary is found mainly in post-scriptural Catholic theology.

Catholic Theology on the Perpetual Virginity of Mary

In Catholic theology, Mary's perpetual virginity, involves three periods of her life: "In classical Mariology a threefold virginity has been attributed to Mary: *ante partum, in partu, et post partum*."²⁷³ This dogmatic teaching claims that Mary was a virgin before during and after the birth of Jesus, as well as throughout her whole life.

This Catholic belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary is an ancient one. One source of this belief is found in the *Protevangelium of James*, an apocryphal gospel "probably originating in the middle of the second century."²⁷⁴ Although not included in the canonical Bible, this text contains what "was probably the earliest articulation of the

²⁷² 'Abd al-Hamid Jawda al-Sahhar, *al-Masih 'Isa ibn Maryam* (Cairo: Dar Misr, n.d.), 20-21, cited in Winter, "Mary in Islam," 496-7.

²⁷³ Brown, *The Virginal Conception*, 27.

²⁷⁴ Chris Maunder, "Mary in the New Testament and Apocrypha," in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 39.

view that Mary was in the physical sense, in a virginal state during and after the birth of Jesus.”²⁷⁵

This doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary is also found in old creedal traditions. The earliest Western (Roman) form of the Apostolic Creed states that Jesus “was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.”²⁷⁶ Mary’s Perpetual Virginity is clearly stated in a later Eastern form of the Nicene Creed, the “Creed of Epiphanius” (374 c.e.) stating that Jesus Christ “was completely born of holy Mary ever-virgin by the Holy Spirit.”²⁷⁷ A further document of the 4th century defends the virginity of Mary after the birth of Jesus against the error that “from the same virginal womb, from which according to the flesh Christ was born, another offspring was brought forth.”²⁷⁸

Raymond E. Brown claims that “there can be no doubt that those who formulated these creedal affirmations believed in the bodily virginity of Mary.”²⁷⁹

Among theologians of the early Western Church, Augustine (354-430 c.e.) helped in the development of Catholic Marian doctrine, including that of Mary’s perpetual virginity. According to Tina Beattie, Augustine “consolidated a number of Marian themes – Mary’s perpetual virginity, her personal sinlessness and her relationship with the Church. Augustine also emphasized the importance of both sexes being involved in the work of redemption, since both had played an active role in the fall.”²⁸⁰ Beattie then quotes Bertrand Buby who describes Augustine’s Marian doctrine as “the crowning synthesis of what had been handed down from the Scriptures and

²⁷⁵ Maunder, *ibid.*, 40.

²⁷⁶ Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 4, # 2.

²⁷⁷ Denzinger, *ibid.*, 9, # 13.

²⁷⁸ Denzinger, *ibid.*, 39, # 91.

²⁷⁹ Brown, *The Virginal Conception*, 32.

²⁸⁰ Tina Beattie, “Mary in Patristic Theology,” in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 79-80.

what had been expounded, preached, and defended by the sub-apostolic writers and the theologians of the West and Alexandria who have preceded him.”²⁸¹ Buby maintains that Augustine was building his Marian doctrine on a number of Scriptural and traditional sources, including those of his contemporaries Ambrose (339-97 c.e.) and Jerome (342-420 c.e.). Finally, “The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” of Vatican II declares that faithful Catholics honor the memory “above all of the glorious and perpetual virgin Mary.”²⁸²

Islamic Teaching on Mary's Perpetual Virginity

For Roman Catholics, the dogma of the perpetual virginity of Mary as a physical or biological reality is unquestionable. In her study on Mary and Fatima, Thurlkill mentions Catholic authors of late antiquity as having “absorbed, for example, the precept of Mary’s perpetual virginity (both before, during, and after Christ’s birth).”²⁸³ This teaching finds an echo in the Qur’an especially concerning Mary’s virginity in conceiving Jesus.

In both Qur’anic and Biblical verses, the Virgin Mary receives the visit of a messenger of the Lord who announces to her that she will conceive a son not in the natural way but mystically by the Spirit of God. Through Gabriel’s revelation to Joseph in a dream, Mary’s honor is preserved. In the Qur’anic account (Sura19:27-32), Mary’s innocence is revealed to her relatives through the miraculous words of the baby Jesus.

²⁸¹ Bertrand Buby, *Mary of Galilee, Vol III: The Marian Heritage of the Early Church* (New York: Alba House, 1996), cited in Tina Beattie, “Mary in Patristic Theology,” in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 80.

²⁸² Abbott and Gallagher, eds. “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*),” 86, # 52.

²⁸³ Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women*, 37.

Therefore, the Catholic belief in a “virginal conception without a human father”²⁸⁴ finds confirmation in the Qur’an.

Matthew’s narrative defends the virginal conception of Jesus through Joseph’s doubt and his dream vision. In Qur’an 19, Mary is alone when she gives birth. Then she brings her son to her relatives. “It could be noted in passing that it would normally be the father’s task to present the child to the family, but in this case there is no father; the fact of the virgin birth is once again emphasized.”²⁸⁵ Mary’s son, still a baby, miraculously defends his mother against the direct criticisms of her family. Mary is silent. She does not defend herself. Yusuf Ali says: “What could Mary do? How could she explain? Would they, in their censorious mood, accept her explanation? All she could do was to point to the child, who, she knew, was no ordinary child. And the child came to her rescue. By a miracle he spoke, defended his mother, and preached—to an unbelieving audience.”²⁸⁶

In both Scriptures, Mary’s virginity is extolled. Throughout the Qur’an, many passages speak of Mary as the “mother of Jesus.” The biblical Joseph, husband of Mary, is left out of the picture. This is not the case in the Bible. More strongly than in the Bible, the fact of the virginal conception of Jesus shows up Mary’s virginity before during and after the birth of Jesus.

In fact, there is in the Qur’an a verse which, according to the commentary, defends Mary against accusations of adultery arising from unbelief in the virginal conception of Jesus: “And for their disbelief and for their utterance against Mary a grievous calumny.” (Q. 4.156) This might be an echo of condemnations from Jewish

²⁸⁴ Brown, *The Virginal Conception*, 1.

²⁸⁵ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 156.

²⁸⁶ *The Holy Qur’an*, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 773. Q.19:29, note 2482.

quarters: "that Jesus was the child of prostitution was part of Jewish polemic against Christians"²⁸⁷ The Qur'anic commentary of Mir Ahmed Ali, note 633 explains: "The calumny referred to here is the Jewish accusation of Mary, of fornication—According to 'the Jewish Life of Jesus' the man about whom the Jews accused Mary, was a Jew named Panther." Mary is blamed and her chastity questioned.

A modern Muslim author, Muhammad Majid Mirjan, holds a strong view on the issue of Mary's innocence when in his book *Al-Masih: Insan am Ilah* he writes: "He who denies the birth of Jesus from Mary while a virgin is on the same level as an apostate; his faith is of no use to him, nor will his religion or Islam vouchsafe for him Whoever [questions Mary's honor] deserves the suffering of hell."²⁸⁸

Smith and Haddad conclude from their discussion on Mary's virginity in Islamic commentary as follows: "Clearly the vast majority of commentators feel that this means that Jesus was born without a human father, and the consensus is that Mary retained her virginity throughout her life."²⁸⁹ The similarity of this view with the Catholic dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity might pave the way for Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue.

Further discussion deals with the link between this emphasis on Mary's perpetual virginity and celibacy.

²⁸⁷ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 155.

²⁸⁸ Muhammad Majdi Mirjan, *Al-Masih: Insan am Ilah* (Cairo, 1970), 28-29, in Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," *The Muslim World*, v. LXXIX, July/October 1989, 175.

²⁸⁹ Smith and Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," 175.

Virginity and Celibacy

There is a possible link between the emphasis on the perpetual virginity of Mary and the practice of consecrated virginity, celibacy and monastic life in Catholicism. The Catholic Church has kept the tradition of Mary's upbringing in the Temple of Jerusalem in its liturgy, possibly influenced by the *Protevangelium of James*.²⁹⁰ On 21st of November, the Catholic Church celebrates the feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple. This feast is based on a tradition claiming that Mary when she was three years old was presented by her parents to live and to be brought up in the Temple of Jerusalem.

Although the choice of celibacy does not seem to be as important in Islam, it can be found especially in Sufism. The Qur'anic account of Mary's consecration and dedication to God from early childhood (Q 3:35-37) stems possibly from a passage of the apocryphal Gospel of James: "And Mary was in the temple of the Lord as a dove that is nurtured: and she received food from the hand of an angel."²⁹¹ In his commentary on Qur'an 3:37, Yusuf Ali mentions the influence of this text: "Some apocryphal Christian writings say that she was brought up in the Temple to the age of twelve like a dove, and that she was fed by angels."²⁹²

The Qur'an describes in positive terms Mary's seclusion and the miracles that accompanied her: "So accepted her Lord with a gracious acceptance and made her grow up a graceful growing and trusted her into the charge of Zachariah; Whenever Zachariah entered (*to see*) her in the Sanctuary, (*he*) found her with a sustenance; He

²⁹⁰ Maunder, "Mary in the New Testament and Apocrypha," 44.

²⁹¹ Global Library Online, "Gospel of James," http://global.org/Pub/NH_Gospel_of_James.asp (accessed 10 October 2008), 4.

²⁹² *The Holy Qur'an*, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 132, note 379.

said “O’ Mary! whence (*cometh*) this to thee?” Said she “It is from God; Verily God provideth whomsoever He liketh without measure” (Q. 3:37).

There is another indirect indication of the tradition concerning Mary’s seclusion in the Temple: “And mention in the book (*Qur’an*) about Mary (*also*) when she withdrew herself from her family (*in the house*) eastward.” (Q. 19:16) According to Angelika Neuwirth “a clear reference to Jerusalem, and specifically its temple, is found in sura 19 (“Mary”), which is ordinarily dated to the middle Meccan period. Zachary is presented as receiving a divine message in *mihrab* unanimously understood as the Temple (Q 19:11). That the continuation of the episode, Mary’s seclusion at ‘an eastern place’ (Q 19:16), should also be located in the Temple is suggested by the later Medinan account (Q 3:37,39).”²⁹³

More clearly, the commentary of S. V. Mir Ahmed Ali in Qur’an 3:35-36 appears to follow the Catholic tradition concerning Mary’s presentation in the Temple of Jerusalem:

Devotees to the temple in the Jewish creed, remained as recluses, cut off from worldly life and practiced celibacy. Imran the father of Mary (the mother of Jesus) seems evidently to be of priestly descent. This factor is born out from the vow which his wife makes about her issue in her womb to dedicate it to the service of God. It is reasonably considered that it is possible that because of the vowful will of his grand-mother that her issue be dedicated to God’s service, i.e., as a devotee to the temple, Jesus adopted the ascetic mode of life.²⁹⁴

According to the above statement, Jesus and Mary adopted a celibate way of life which confirms the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary in the Catholic Church.

Perhaps the highest praise of Mary virginal holiness is found in Sufi writings and others. Mary’s example in Qur’an 19:16, “When she withdrew from her people to

²⁹³ Angelika Neuwirth, “From the Sacred Mosque,” 382.

²⁹⁴ *The Holy Qur’an*, trans. Mir Ahmed Ali, 278, note 355.

an eastern place..." is considered "an invitation to prayer, faith and silent contemplation." In a note to his commentary, Abdullah Yusuf Ali explains that Mary went "to a private eastern chamber, perhaps in the Temple. She went into privacy, from her people and from people in general, for prayer and devotion. It was in this state of purity that the angel appeared to her in the shape of a man. She thought it *was* a man. She was frightened, and she adjured him not to invade her privacy."²⁹⁵ Through this passage and others, Mary's virtue is extolled. Al-Baqli (d. 1209) wrote: "the substance of Mariyam is the very substance of original holiness...She became the carrier of the most high Word and the most elevated light of the Spirit."²⁹⁶ Mary holds a very high place in the Qur'an and in mystical Islamic writings, especially in Sufism. In its literature, Sufism describes Mary as "the perfect model of the sufi. For in her one finds the example of active personal effort (*dhikr*) and that of passive waiting for God (*faqr*), of invocation and of poverty of spirit. She is therefore the embodiment of all the virtues."²⁹⁷

Elevating the Virgin Mary as the highest model of holy womanhood in Islam might have given rise to the ideal of celibacy, consecrated virginity, and monastic life especially in Sufism. Margaret Smith claims that the celibate and monastic life were adopted by both men and women, in certain Sufi communities. "Though the greater number of these monasteries were for men, yet we also find convents for women from an early period."²⁹⁸ Quoting Al Hujwiri, Smith mentions that celibacy was favored among the Sufis as a better way: "Sufism 'was founded on celibacy; the introduction of

²⁹⁵ *The Holy Qur'an*, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 771, note 2471.

²⁹⁶ Tavad, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 41.

²⁹⁷ Tavad, *ibid.*, 42.

²⁹⁸ Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, 201.

marriage brought about change' (not for the better), and he says that desire can be removed by self-restraint, but still better by the force of a rival love (the love of God) which extends its empire over the whole body and its senses."²⁹⁹ Kugle also mentions that although there are some scholars who have a negative view of the celibate, contemplative, and monastic life style, this is not entirely absent from Islam.³⁰⁰

It is possible that the example of Mary's life as described in the Qur'an was a major inspiration for some women mystics in Islam in their choice of celibacy. Smith gives the example of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 801 c.e.), a woman who "received many offers of marriage, but rejected them all, feeling that in the celibate life only could she pursue her quest unhindered."³⁰¹ In rejecting one of her suitors, Rabi'a spoke of her mystical alliance with the Divine: "My existence is in Him, and I am altogether His."³⁰² Like the Italian lay woman mystic, Catherine of Sienna, Rabi'a was influential among persons of high rank: "Rabi'a had many disciples and associates, who resorted to her house day and night to seek her counsel or her prayers or to listen to her teaching."³⁰³ These two women mystics might have found inspiration in Mary's total dedication to God and in the example of her perpetual virginity taught in both Catholicism and Islam.

The Qur'an exalts the virtue of chastity in Mary. She is the one "who guarded her chastity We breathed into her Our spirit, and We made her and her son a sign unto all peoples." (Q. 21:91) In the commentary to his translation of the Qur'an, Abdullah Yusuf Ali wrote, "Chastity was her special virtue: with a son of virgin birth, she and

²⁹⁹ Smith, *ibid.*, 198.

³⁰⁰ Kugle, *Sufis & Saints' Bodies*, 184.

³⁰¹ Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, 29.

³⁰² Smith, *ibid.*, 32.

³⁰³ Smith, *ibid.*

Jesus became a miracle in all nations. That was the virtue with which they (both Mary and Jesus) resisted evil.”³⁰⁴

Similarly, Shi’ite tradition describes Fatima, the beloved daughter of Muhammad, in terms Catholics use in their devotion to the mother of Jesus. Like Mary in Catholic tradition, Fatima is described as a virgin although she was married and had two sons and two daughters. “Fatima is a Mary-like figure, thought by some to have been a virgin when she conceived Husayn. Fatima is imaged as a quiet and obedient wife who achieves motherhood through piety – not sexuality.”³⁰⁵ According to Thurkill, Fatima is described as being in the state of the righteous who “for example, consume food without digestion and excretion and experience sex without pollution (the emission of semen or other fluids), and women cease to menstruate. From this paradisiacal state, Fatima or al-Batul (the Virgin) originates.” Therefore, “unlike the Virgin Mary, al-Batul need not indicate corporal integrity.” Rather does this term imply purity from a ritual point of view that one also finds in certain Judaic traditions.³⁰⁶

In spite of divergences in textual interpretation, this case-study proposes the narratives where Mary’s virginity in the conception of Jesus is extolled as a possible topic for Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue. Besides the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Perpetual Virginity of Mary, the most recent dogma of the Catholic faith is that of the Assumption of Mary into heaven at the end of her life on earth. This might also serve as a theological item in interreligious dialogue between Catholics and Muslims.

³⁰⁴ *The Holy Qur’an*, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 183, Q. 21:91, note 2748.

³⁰⁵ M. E. Combs-Schilling, *Sacred Performances: Islam, Sexuality, and Sacrifice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 90.

³⁰⁶ Thurkill, *Chosen among Women*, 59.

3.2.3 Mary's Assumption into Heaven

Catholic teaching includes the dogma of Mary's Assumption into Heaven at the end of her life on earth. This dogma is closely connected to the belief in Mary's mediation and the communion of saints. In Islam, there is no mention of Mary's position after her death but she is given a special status at the Resurrection of the end times.

Following Catholic tradition through the centuries, the Dogma of the Assumption of Mary into heaven body and soul was declared by Pope Pius XII in 1950. "We pronounce, declare, and define that the dogma was revealed by God, that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, after completing her course of life upon earth, was assumed to the glory of heaven both in body and soul."³⁰⁷

Thurkill speaks of the origins of this dogma in the Catholic Church. She mentions Gregory of Tours (540-94) "noted as the first Western hagiographer to describe Mary's corporal assumption into heaven just before her death."³⁰⁸ Moreover, at the First Vatican Council (1869-70), a large number of bishops and theologians demanded a dogmatic definition concerning the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. These Catholic leaders maintained that "it should be most firmly held, that it (the Assumption) has its origin from the divine-apostolic tradition, i.e., revelation."³⁰⁹

In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council, Mary's Assumption into heaven is expressed as follows: "Finally, preserved free from

³⁰⁷ Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1 November 1950), cited in "The Definition of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary," from English translation of Henry Denzinger *Enchiridion Symbolorum: The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, rev. Karl Rahner, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (St Louis, Missouri: B. Herder Book Co., 1957), 648, # 2333.

³⁰⁸ Thurkill, *Chosen among Women*, 16.

³⁰⁹ Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 413, # 1641, note 1.

all guilt of original sin, the Immaculate Virgin was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory upon the completion of her earthly sojourn. She was exalted by the Lord as Queen of all.”³¹⁰

Furthermore, Vatican II maintains the tradition of Mary’s mediation: “by her manifold acts of intercession, Mary continues to win for us gifts of eternal salvation.”³¹¹ More recently, Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Mater*, claimed that “by her maternal charity, Mary cares for the brethren of her son who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until they are led to their happy homeland.”³¹²

The dogma of the Assumption reveals the closeness between Mary and her son, Jesus, not only in this life but also in the next: “In the mystery of the Assumption is expressed the faith of the Church, according to which Mary is ‘united by a close and indissoluble bond’ to Christ.”³¹³ Furthermore, Mary is also closely linked with the Communion of Saints in her role of maternal mediation.³¹⁴

Islamic tradition seems to confirm the idea of the supremacy of Mary at the Resurrection of the end times: “So also ‘Abbas of Tus said that when on the Day of Resurrection the summons goes forth, ‘O men’, the first person to set foot in that class of men (i.e. those who are to enter Paradise) will be Mary, upon whom be peace.”³¹⁵ Among the highest and noblest of women saints is the Virgin Mother of Jesus according to the Sufi tradition: “It is noteworthy that the Sufi writers honour Our Lady

59. ³¹⁰ Abbott and Gallagher, eds., “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*),” 90, #

³¹¹ Abbott and Gallagher, eds., *ibid*, 91, # 62.

³¹² John Paul II, *Mary, God’s Yes to Man: Redemptoris Mater*, 130, # 40.

³¹³ John Paul II, *ibid.*, 132, # 41.

³¹⁴ John Paul II, *ibid.*, 131, # 41.

³¹⁵ Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*, 20.

Maryam, the spotless Mother of Jesus, above all women, above men too, and acknowledge that she reached perfection.”³¹⁶

According to Margaret Smith, both Muslims and Catholics not only believe in the immortality of the soul, but also in the Communion of Saints where the believers on earth are in contact with those who have already passed away.³¹⁷ In both Islam and Catholicism, Mary is not only a model of womanhood but also from her lofty position in heaven, a mediator for the living. They also pray through Mary and other women saints in times of difficulty.

R. W. J. Austin in his book on the Sophianic Feminine refers to Fatima’s importance in Shi’ite Islam similar to that of Mary in Catholicism:

Especially among Shi’ite Muslims, (Fatima herself was to acquire) a status and role very similar to that of Mary in Christendom. She would be called ‘the Virgin’, ‘Mother of her father’ and the ‘Lady of Sorrows’. Indeed, the development of her cult of veneration not only came to resemble that of Mary but also to have very interesting contacts with it [...] Perhaps the most curious of these contacts is the recent association of Marian cult with the name of Fatima in the shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal.³¹⁸

Both Mary and Fatima are described in the Sufism of Ibn’al-Arabi and others as models of the “Sophianic Feminine or Creative Feminine.” This Sophianic figure “is manifested in varying degrees and ways in actual human females.” Mary and Fatima, are “human bearers of the revelation of Sophianic Beauty and Wisdom.”³¹⁹ They are portrayed as models of perfect womanhood. The root of the word *Sophia* means “to

³¹⁶ Smith, *ibid.*, 206.

³¹⁷ Smith, *ibid.*, 207.

³¹⁸ R.W.J.Austin, “The Sophianic Feminine in Ibn ‘Arabi and Rumi,” in *The Heritage of Sufism: The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150-1500)* v. II, edited by Leonard Lewisohn (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 237.

³¹⁹ Austin, *ibid.*, 236.

craft, to design, to be skilful.”³²⁰ This Sophianic Feminine “has been, in various guises, manifest in the life and consciousness of Islam from the very beginning, especially in Shi’ite Islam.”³²¹

Qur’an 3:42 states: “O’ Mary! Verily, God hath chosen thee and purified thee and chosen thee above the women of the worlds.” However, some “hadith rank Fatima as superior to women not only of her own generation but also of all time.”³²² She is known as ‘*Maryam al-kubra*’ that is, the greater Mary: “For Shi’ites God chose both women for a sublime purpose, mothers of an exalted progeny; yet Fatima, as *Maryam al-kubra*, surpasses Mary in both purity and divine favor.”³²³ In the Commentary of Qur’an 3:42, S. V. Mir Ahmaed Ali writes:

The distinction conferred upon Mary, referred to in this verse, applies to her position among the women of only her own age. It is universally acknowledged by all Muslim scholars that the Holy Prophet had said that Mary was the most blessed or the choicest of the women of her own age, but my daughter Fatema is the most blessed and the choicest of the women of all ages. None of the non-Shia commentators has touched this point in his notes.³²⁴

Winter explains this shift from Mary in the Qur’an to Fatima in Shi’ite tradition:

Devotion to Fatima recalls many of the characteristic themes of Christian Marian spirituality. She is celebrated for her poverty, for her miracles, her ceaseless prayer for sinners, her retiring and submissive nature, and for intuiting, during her lifetime, the glorious yet tragic martyrdom of her son, al-Husayn. Her titles, such as ‘Mother of Sorrow’ (*Umm al-Ahzan*), the ‘Pure’ (*al-Batul*), and the ‘Lady of the People of Heaven’ (*sayyidat ahl al-janna*), also bear clear Marian resemblances; indeed, her title is sometimes *Maryam al-Kubra*, the Greater Mary.³²⁵

³²⁰ Austin, *ibid.*, 235.

³²¹ Austin, *ibid.*, 237.

³²² Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women*, 60.

³²³ Thurlkill, *ibid.*, 1.

³²⁴ *The Holy Qur’an*, trans. Mir Ahmed Ali, 284.

³²⁵ Winter, *Mary in Islam*, 491.

Although Fatima is not named in the Qur'an, the importance given to Muhammad's daughter, might be explained by the fact that Shi'ites base their leadership and exegesis of the Qur'an on the descendents of Muhammad.³²⁶ Fatima's two sons, Hasan Ibn 'Ali and Husayn Ibn 'Ali were among the first Islamic Imams. According to Thurkill, especially for Shi'ite Muslims, Muhammad's daughter Fatima "manages to bridge the great chasm between Allah and humanity just as the Christian saints and Mary do."³²⁷

Muslims might give priority to Fatima over Mary, the mother of Jesus, whereas Catholics consider Mary chosen and blessed above all other women. Although Catholics as well as Muslims of other traditions challenge "the notion of the infallible Imamate as well as Fatima's unique status,"³²⁸ the qualities of Mary attributed to Fatima show the deep devotion and respect Muslims have for Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary and Fatima might be studied together in the context of Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue since both are viewed as "figures of incorruptible purity and virtue pregnant with spiritual deeds and piety. Both women personify ideals of feminine chastity."³²⁹

Belief in Mary's Immaculate Conception, her Perpetual Virginity, her Assumption body and soul into heaven, as well as her mediation in favor of the living, do not seem to present major obstacles to a better understanding of Mariology through Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue. These might be included in future encounters between Muslims and Catholics. However, another dogma of the Catholic Church that

³²⁶ Enayat, "Shi'ism and Sunnism," 66-67.

³²⁷ Thurkill, *Chosen among Women*, 23.

³²⁸ Thurkill, *ibid.*, 22.

³²⁹ Thurkill, *ibid.*, 64.

of Mary's Divine Maternity with the underlining meaning that Jesus is God has proven to be a major obstacle to deeper understanding between Catholics and Muslims.

3.2.4 Mary's Divine Maternity

In spite of many common elements between Islam and Catholicism, there remain serious obstacles to dialogue stemming from the Catholic dogmatic belief in Mary's divine maternity. While Islam venerates both Jesus and Mary, the main objection to Catholicism is based on the dogmas of the Trinity, of the divinity of Jesus, and the title given to Mary, 'mother of God.' (Q. 4:171; 5:116)

The Catholic belief in the Trinity and the divinity of Christ finds its origin in ancient creeds and writings. One ancient formula that of "The Merciful Trinity," expresses these doctrines as follows: "The merciful Trinity is one divine Godhead. Consequently the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are one source, one substance, one virtue, and one power. We say that God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are not three gods, but we very piously confess one God. For although we name three persons, we publicly declare with the catholic and apostolic voice that they are one substance."³³⁰

The dogma of the Trinity and the Incarnation of the Son of God, led to the official dogmatic declaration concerning the divine motherhood of Mary at the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE. The letter of St. Cyril of Alexandria in answer to Nestorius, was approved at this Council. He wrote: "Thus [the holy Fathers] did not hesitate to speak

³³⁰ Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 11-12, # 17.

of the holy Virgin as the Mother of God.”³³¹ Canon 1 of the Council of Ephesus defined this dogma in the strongest terms: “If anyone does not confess that God is truly Emmanuel, and that on this account the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God (for according to the flesh she gave birth to the Word of God become flesh by birth), let him be anathema.”³³²

In *Redemptoris Mater*, Pope John Paul II reaffirmed the Church’s teaching concerning Mary’s divine motherhood:

The mystery of the Incarnation has enabled her (the Church) to penetrate and to make ever clearer the mystery of the Mother of the Incarnate word. The council of Ephesus (431) was of decisive importance in clarifying this, for during that council, to the great joy of Christians, the truth of the divine motherhood of Mary was solemnly confirmed as a truth of the Church’s faith. Mary is the Mother of God (=Theotokos), since by the power of the Holy Spirit she conceived in her virginal womb and brought into the world Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is of one being with the Father.³³³

In this one passage, the mystical aspects of Catholic doctrine are reaffirmed: the mystery of the Trinity--one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,-- the Incarnation of the son of God, and Mary’s divine maternity. Although not herself a god or goddess, she is considered by Catholics as the mother of the Son of God.

For Islam, the Qur’an often speaks of Jesus and Mary in positive terms.

“(Recall) (O’ Our apostle Muhammad!) when said the angels ‘O’ Mary! Verily, God giveth thee the glad tidings of a Word from Him; whose name shall be Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary; illustrious in this world and in the Hereafter and (*shall be*) of those near to

³³¹ Cyril of Alexandria, “Letter to Nestorius: The Incarnation” approved at the Council of Ephesus, 431 CE, in Henry Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, rev. Karl Rahner, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (St Louis, Missouri: B. Herder Book Co., 1957), 49, # 111a. Nestorius maintained that in Jesus Christ there were two distinct persons, the Person of the Son of God and the Person of the Man, Jesus. Only Christ’s human person died on the cross.

³³² Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 50, # 113. The term ‘anathema’ refers to excommunication which is exclusion from the reception of the sacraments in the Catholic Church.

³³³ John Paul II, *Mary: God’s Yes to Man (Redemptoris Mater)*, 49, # 4.

God).” (Sura 3:45) In the Qur’an, the name of Jesus is usually associated with the phrase: ‘son of Mary.’ While emphasizing the role of Mary as the mother of Jesus, it seems that it also stresses the Islamic belief that both Mary and Jesus are merely human.

According to McAuliffe, some Qur’anic passages concerning Jesus and Mary “have fueled the long-standing quarrel of Muslim-Christian polemic.”³³⁴ In professing a strict monotheism, the Qur’an strikes hard especially against Christian beliefs of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. Islamic believers condemn these Catholic dogmas as “blasphemies of divine reproduction and tritheism.”³³⁵ Their objections are clearly expressed in Q 19:88-93: “And say they: ‘The Beneficent (*God*) hath taken unto Him a son!’ Indeed have ye put forth a thing (*most*) monstrous! Might the heavens be almost rent thereat, and the earth cleaveth asunder, and the mountains fall down in fragments. That they should ascribe unto the Beneficent (*God*) a son. None there is in the heavens and the earth but must come unto the Beneficent (*God*) as a servant”

This Islamic rejection of the Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus is also found in the following Qur’anic verses:

Qur’an 4:

4:171 O’ People of the Book! Overstep not in your religion, and say not upon God except the Truth; Verily, Verily, the Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, is only an apostle of God and His Word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a Spirit (*Proceeding*) from Him; Believe therefore in God, and His apostles, and say not (*that there are*) Three (*gods*); Desist! It is good for you; Verily, Verily, God! (*there is*) Only One God! Far be it from His (*Absolute*)-Purity that there be for Him a son.

³³⁴ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur’anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2.

³³⁵ McAuliffe, *ibid*.

In Q. 5:19, the Qur'an again insists that Mary and Jesus are merely human: "Unbelieving are those who say that God is Christ the son of Mary." Here lies the main obstacle to a better understanding between Christians and Muslims. Although Catholics maintain the belief in one God and do not claim for Mary a divine nature, one obstacle on the subject of Mariology lies in the dogma of the incarnation as expressed in Mary's title 'Mother of God.'

Faithful to the Qur'an, throughout history, Islam has generally rejected 'incarnationist' beliefs. Among those professing the more mystical Sufi tradition, is the medieval author Ibn al- 'Arabi, who is considered "the most prolific of all, having contributed significantly to every aspect of Sufi thought, both qualitatively and quantitatively."³³⁶ In his *Bezels of Wisdom* Ibn al- 'Arabi condemns those who claim divinity for Jesus. He wrote:

This matter has led certain people to speak of incarnation and to say that, in reviving the dead, he is God. Therefore, they are called unbelievers [concealers], being a form of concealment, since they conceal God, Who in reality revives the dead, in the human form of Jesus. He has said, *They are concealers [unbelievers] who say that God is the Messiah, son of Mary.* The real error and unbelief in the full sense of the word is not in their saying "He is God' nor 'the son of Mary,' but in their having turned aside from God.³³⁷

According to Henry Corbin, Ibn al- 'Arabi upholds the Islamic strict monotheism and rejects the divinity of Christ. Against the 'incarnationist position,' he suggests that Jesus is but the theophany or epiphany of God; however, he is not God: "It is in this sense that Christ 'is God,' that is, he is a theophany, but not as if God could say: 'I am Christ (*Masih*), son of Maryam.'" From this, Corbin concludes: "that is why

³³⁶ R.W.J. Austin, "Introduction," in Ibn al'Arabi: *The Bezels of Wisdom* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 12.

³³⁷ Ibn al'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 177.

Ibn ‘Arabi accuses the Christians of impiety.”³³⁸ Ibn al-‘Arabi’s explanation keeps intact the deep appreciation shown in the Qur’an for the Prophet Jesus and for Mary his mother while upholding Islam’s strict monotheism and rejection of the Christian’s trinitarian doctrine.

Recently, the monograph entitled *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub* presents a study of this Islamic-Christian controversy from a modern point of view. Ayoub compares the virginal conception of Jesus to the creation of Adam. Since the father of humanity was created without a human father or mother, the fact that Jesus did not have a human father does not give him a divine nature.³³⁹

Therefore, as already discussed, Qur’anic and Biblical differences in details might not present major obstacles as far as the question of Mary’s perpetual virginity is concerned. However, seemingly insurmountable difficulties for Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue have arisen especially with regards to belief in the divinity of Jesus. From a Muslim point of view, “doctrines such as the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity have been the subject of sharp debate between Muslims and Christians, a debate that transcends the plane of human history and that will finally be decided between God and Jesus on the Day of Resurrection (Q. 5:116-19).”³⁴⁰

³³⁸ Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 313, note 65.

³³⁹ Mahmoud Ayoub, “Toward an Islamic Christology II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion—A Study of the Death of Jesus in *Tafsir* Literature,” in *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, ed. Irfan A. Omar (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 158.

³⁴⁰ Mahmoud Ayoub, “Jesus the Son of God: A Study of the Terms *Ibn* and *Walad* in the Qur’an and *Tafsir* Tradition,” in *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, ed. Irfan A. Omar (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 117.

Qur'an 5:

5:116 And when God will say (*asking*) "O' Jesus son of Mary! Didst thou say to the people, take me and my mother two gods beside God?" he will say (*in reply*) "Glory be to thee, it was not for me to say that which I had no right to say; If I had said it Thou wouldst have indeed known it;

While maintaining the Catholic belief in the divinity of Jesus, Pope John Paul II reminded everyone concerned that Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue is "a difficult way, where failure may occur, but where hope is even stronger."³⁴¹ This hope is based on God's faithfulness: "I am certain God will one day enlighten us."³⁴²

In spite of what appear to be major barriers, there is space for optimism as far as Catholic-Islamic dialogue based on Mariology is concerned. Keeler maintains that although Mary is at times an obstacle in the way of a closer relationship, since she is highly honored by both Muslims and Catholics, she may also be considered a 'stepping stone' between them:

"It is true, of course, that for all of the esteem and honor which Muslims and Christians have for Mary, the mother of Jesus, in her role in our separate ways of prayer, she is also the symbol of what radically divides us and what challenges us to dialogue. For Christians she is the all-holy "Theotokos," the mother of God, the mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate. For Muslims she is the mother of Jesus, the Messiah, 'who was no more than God's apostle and his Word, which he cast to Mary: a spirit from him' ("Women" IV:171). While this radical difference in faith forever separates us, it paradoxically also holds us forever in conversation with one another. And this conversation can, and should be, as the Second Vatican Council taught Catholics, a 'jihad', a 'striving for mutual understanding.'"³⁴³

It becomes all the more important for interreligious dialogue on Mariology to narrow the gap between Catholics and Muslims especially concerning Trinitarian

³⁴¹ John Paul II, "Address to Bishops of North Africa," 23 November 1981, <http://uscgb.org/seia/textislam.shtml> (accessed 7 June 2008), 2.

³⁴² John Paul II, "Address to the Young Muslims of Morocco," 19 August 1985, in Vatican Council and Papal Statement on Islam, <http://uscgb.org/seia/textislam.shtml> (accessed 7 June 2008), 4.

³⁴³ Keeler, "How Mary Holds Christians and Muslims in Conversation," 2.

doctrine. According to Stowasser, “Muslim exegetes have consistently seen the affirmation of God’s Oneness as central issue and purpose of all of the revelations on Mary. Mary, God’s handmaiden, and Jesus, God’s slave and prophet, are not ‘gods’ (5:78; cf. 5:19). The refutation of the notion of ‘three’ (trinity) (4:171) is interpreted as divine correction of blasphemous Christian association of Mary, ‘the female consort’ and Jesus ‘the son’ with God in a ‘family setting.’”³⁴⁴ However, it is possible that these and similar Qur’anic passages on Mary and Jesus are linked to “early Christian heresies and heretical practices, (...) whose tenets are ‘as heretical to Christianity as they are to Islam.’”³⁴⁵ There are perhaps fewer differences between the beliefs of Muslims and Christians than the individual texts suggest.

Therefore, “it is better to be sober and accept the difference that exists between Christianity and Islam.”³⁴⁶ This does not mean however that one must avoid aiming at deeper theological understanding through interreligious dialogue including discussion on the Catholic dogma of the divine motherhood of Mary. In fact, it might be preferable to approach dialogue from the point of view of Mariology rather than Christology because although Catholics strongly believe in the divinity of Jesus, they just as strongly teach that Mary is not a goddess. Being called the ‘mother of God’ does not in any way change her nature. She is merely human as is proclaimed in the Qur’an.

On the other hand, Mary’s many virtues are a reflection of her total union with God. As such she is a model for everyone. In Sufi mysticism, the one who is united to God sees the Word in himself and in others. He therefore “becomes Mariyam, the mother of the Word. Every one of the faithful who sees Jesus in another is Mariyam.

³⁴⁴ Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an*, 80.

³⁴⁵ Stowasser, *ibid.*

³⁴⁶ Fitzgerald and Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue*, 158.

This insight of a Muslim mystic tallies with what Jesus himself said, according to the Gospels of Mark and of Matthew: ‘Who is my mother and who are my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and my sister and my mother’ (Mark 3:33-35).”³⁴⁷

Further comparison between Mary and Fatima might be useful especially for dialogue with those who follow the Shi’ite tradition that “illustrate Fatima’s unique status as divine matriarch.”³⁴⁸ She is also the mother of “their community’s infallible leaders (called Imams).”³⁴⁹ Furthermore, her title ‘Mother of Sorrows’³⁵⁰ sets a close kinship between the Biblical Mary and Fatima. Similar to Fatima’s sorrow at the martyrdom of her son, in Luke’s narrative of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple forty days after his birth, Mary is warned of her Son’s future martyrdom.

Luke 2:

2:33-35 And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Simeon’s prophecy to Mary was fulfilled at the foot of the Cross:

John 19:

19:25-27 Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

³⁴⁷ Tavad, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 42-43.

³⁴⁸ Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women*, 62.

³⁴⁹ Thurlkill, *ibid.*, 1-2.

³⁵⁰ Winter, “Mary in Islam,” 491. See also note 51.

As mentioned, Catholics and Muslims reject any claim that Mary or Fatima are goddesses. However these two women are elevated as women favored by God. As such, according to Mary F. Thurlkill, Mary and Fatima give to scholars involved with “gender studies an opportunity to examine feminine imagery in sacred traditions.”³⁵¹ Also from John Paul II’s writings, it becomes obvious that his deep concern for women’s issues stems from his devotion and love for Mary.

According to Jean-Pierre Prevost, “feminist movements cannot find themselves within the Marian model.” He claims that a certain traditional teaching has tended to make “Mary a model for all Christian women, by recognizing her ‘virtues’ as ‘feminine’: modest, humble, submissive, passive. This no longer corresponds to the ideal or to the way of life of women today. It also does not reflect the true image of Mary in the Gospel: free, daring, strong, autonomous, passionate and supportive of the destiny of her people.”³⁵²

There is perhaps no contradiction between these two traditional and modern points of view. Therefore, further research on the topic of Mary might include gender issues for Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue. Mary as a historical as well as a symbolic figure has much to offer for ongoing interreligious dialogue where Catholic and Muslim men and women might be fully involved.

As a result of this case-study of Chapter 3, it might be possible to conclude that Mary cannot be ignored without shutting the door to an important aspect of Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue. Mary might prove to be effective in attempts to reduce the gap in understanding between Catholics and Muslims and encourage further

³⁵¹ Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women*, 1.

³⁵² Jean-Pierre Prevost, *Mother of Jesus*, trans. Raymond ven der Buhs (Ottawa: Novalis, Saint Paul University, 1988), 60. Prevost has taught at Saint Paul University, Ottawa since 1980.

cooperation for the benefit of everyone. For those who are attempting to break down barriers and build bridges bringing together persons of faith, Pope John Paul II suggests that we turn to Mary “who ‘precedes’ us all at the head of the long line of witnesses of faith in the one Lord.”³⁵³

³⁵³ John Paul II, *Mary, God's Yes to Man: Redemptoris Mater*, 110, # 30.

THESIS CONCLUSION

This thesis began with an investigation of Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue in the post-Vatican era. Within the framework of four dialogical expressions, dialogue of life, of action, of theological exchange and religious experience, there have been numerous contacts between Catholics and Muslims. Current endeavors by these two religious groups might allow one to conclude that dialogue from grassroots to intellectual and political levels has grown and therefore, in spite of current difficulties, it seems that there is no stopping this momentum.

Furthermore, the increase in gatherings of Catholics and Muslims surrounding popular Marian devotions and shrines, might also present an opportunity for further interreligious dialogue including theological discussions on the topic of the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. This thesis then outlines the possibility of further dialogue through a comparative case-study structured on the four Catholic Marian Dogmas: Mary's Immaculate Conception, her Perpetual Virginity, her Assumption into Heaven, and her Divine Maternity. Based on corresponding scriptural narratives, this research reveals obvious similarities as well as differences between Catholic and Islamic Marian doctrines. Furthermore, by introducing Islamic traditions, this comparative case-study includes Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, whose virtues and titles resemble those attributed to Mary in Catholicism.

As a result of this research, it is hoped that future encounters might more easily approach the topic of Mariology as a means of deepening understanding and building relationships. Since Mary is an important figure in both Catholicism and Islam, this

thesis proposes Mariology as a useful topic for peaceful collaboration in social, moral and gender issues through interreligious dialogue.

However, it seems that women have generally been underrepresented in interreligious encounters. Khalil Samir, in his analysis of the Madrid inter-faith conference (16-18 July 2008), deplores the fact that “few women took part in the event.”³⁵⁴ The absence of women in interreligious dialogue and encounters risks ignoring half of the human race. According to Pope John Paul II, true feminism and the dignity of women can be understood especially through the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Therefore, in Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue, by introducing the topic of Mary, more women could be involved so that their concerns might be fully recognized. Gender issues ought to be included in future research on the topic of Mariology in Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue. Men and women together have much to offer for the benefit of the human family.

This research leads to the conclusion that Catholic-Islamic interreligious dialogue is in progress in spite of difficulties. Pope Benedict suggests that “we must not yield to fear or pessimism. Rather, we must cultivate optimism and hope. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is in fact a vital necessity on which in large measure our future depends.”³⁵⁵

³⁵⁴ Samir Khalil Samir, “Islam and Saudi Arabia, Champions of Dialogue?” 30 July 2008, <http://asianews.it/index/php?l=en&art=12889&geo=&theme=&size=A> (accessed 11 October 2008), 1.

³⁵⁵ Bunson, “Pope Benedict Speaks to Muslims,” 1.

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