

2017

## Interpretations of Jesus and the Virgin Mary in the Quran and the Bible: A Possible Contribution to Muslim-Christian Cooperation?

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### Recommended Citation

Armajani, Jon (2017) "Interpretations of Jesus and the Virgin Mary in the Quran and the Bible: A Possible Contribution to Muslim-Christian Cooperation?," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, 63-79. Available at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters/vol1/iss1/7](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol1/iss1/7)

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**“Interpretations of Jesus and the Virgin Mary in the Quran and the Bible:  
A Possible Contribution to Muslim-Christian Cooperation?”**

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*This essay explores Muslim and Christian understandings of Jesus and his mother Mary, which may provide a basis for possible cooperation between the two religious communities. The similarities and differences in views are discussed, with an understanding that there are differences in views not only between but also within the two religious communities. The essay concludes with a discussion of seven types of interreligious dialogue as articulated by Sallie B. King, and how they apply to Muslim-Christian dialogue related to Jesus and Mary.*

**Introduction**

The purpose of this essay is to examine some of the similarities and differences in the ways which Muslims and Christians view Jesus and the Virgin Mary, in view of the fact that increased knowledge on the part of Muslims and Christians, with respect to each other’s religions could create possibilities for dialogue and peacebuilding between at least some Muslims and Christians (Smock, 2002; Huda, 2010; Irvin-Erickson & Phan, 2016; Bolton, 2017).<sup>1</sup> The reasons for conflict and intergroup tensions between Muslims and Christians, depending on the specific context, can be caused by a variety of factors, where religious differences could play widely varying roles, or no roles, in such conflicts. At the same time, it is conceivable that greater understanding between Muslims and Christians could help build positive intergroup relations, and develop environments that may guarantee rights, prevent violence, sustain human flourishing, establish positive peace, and at least some measure of social justice, all of which are significant topics in this special issue of *Journal of Social Encounters*, whose theme is peacebuilding (Smock, 2002; Huda, 2010; Irvin-Erickson & Phan, 2016; Bolton, 2017).

With these themes in mind, this essay has, as one of its areas of focus, the similarities and differences in the ways which Christians and Muslims interpret the Virgin Mary, a person whom Christians and Muslims both believe was the mother of Jesus. This essay analyzes the Virgin Mary as an important figure to consider because (1) she is a woman, and I am interested in discussing a female in the context of gender relations in Christianity and Islam and (2) she is a very important figure in both Christianity and Islam. For all Christians, whether they are Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, Mary is important for many reasons, including the fact that she gave birth to the most important individual in Christianity, namely Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christians often call “Jesus Christ.” The essay will also provide significant attention to some Muslims’ and Christians’ understandings of Jesus also. Most Christians believe that Jesus was fully God and fully human, and that he lived a perfect life in (accordance with what Christians believe to be the Old Testament’s predictions about him), taught love and forgiveness, performed miracles, was crucified, died, was buried, and rose from the dead in order to create a situation for human beings, where they could have eternal life in heaven (McGrath, 2007).

For Muslims, Jesus was an important prophet who taught love and forgiveness, forecast the coming of the Prophet Muhammad (which would occur approximately six hundred years after Jesus's earthly life), and became the founder of one of the world's most important religions that predated the life of Muhammad (Khalidi, 2001). According to both Christians and Muslims, Jesus' mother – the Virgin Mary – was important because she gave birth to Jesus. Yet, at the same time, she possessed several characteristics, which are enormously significant to Christians and Muslims. Both Christians and Muslims believe that Mary was obedient to God, righteous, moral, upstanding, faithful, chaste, pure, and a positive role model for both faith and action.

Before this essay discusses, in greater depth, Muslim understandings of Mary, it is important to describe at least two significant differences of opinion that two types of Christians -- Roman Catholics and Protestants -- have with respect to Mary. These differences of opinion relate to the topics of Mary's Immaculate Conception and her perpetual virginity.

### **Mary in Roman Catholicism**

Mary's Immaculate Conception is the Roman Catholic idea that when Mary's mother's ovum and her father's sperm came together, she was conceived without any sin whatsoever. In this regard, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which contains some of the official teachings of the Catholic Church states, "through the centuries the [Catholic] Church has become ever more aware that Mary, 'full of grace' through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception. That is what the dogma of the Immaculate Conception confesses, as Pope Pius IX proclaimed in 1854: 'The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin'" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1995, para. 491).

One of the most important principles with respect to the idea of the Immaculate Conception is that in order for Mary's son Jesus to be sinless and perfect, it was necessary for his mother to be sinless and perfect. According to this line of thinking, if Mary had not been sinless, she would have transmitted her sinfulness to her son Jesus, which would have meant that he would have born with sin, and thus Jesus would not have been in a position to redeem human beings of their sins through his perfect life, crucifixion, and resurrection (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1995, para. 491).

### **Mary in Eastern Orthodox Christianity**

Churches in the Eastern Orthodox traditions express teachings, which in several respects are similar to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, although it is important to note that because there is no single central authority in the Eastern Orthodox traditions, such as the Pope in Roman Catholicism, there is no single source for theological teachings within the Eastern Orthodox traditions (Corbett-Hemeyer, 2016). In terms of similarities with respect to the Virgin Mary in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox tradition, in both traditions, she is considered the "All-Holy" ("Panagia") Virgin, "the

Second Eve,” intercessor or intermediary, “the Mother of God,” and the “Birth-giver of God” (“Theotokos”) (Cunningham, 2015, p. 14; Leo XII, 1891; Pius XII, 1943; Paul VI, 1966; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1995, paras. 493 and 495). She also plays a significant role in Roman Catholic and Orthodox iconography (Hamling, 2017; Cunningham, 2015). At the same time, one of the main areas, where the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Churches disagree with respect to Mary relates to her Immaculate Conception, with the Eastern Orthodox Churches largely rejecting that idea (Fastiggi, 2009; Cunningham, 2015).

One of several reasons that Eastern Orthodox Christians reject the immaculate conception of Mary is that “preserving [her] from the normal human condition results in her separation from the rest of humanity,” which contradicts Eastern Orthodox Christological doctrine emphasizing her and Christ’s full participation in the human condition (Cunningham, 2015, p. 182). According to this argument, Mary provided Christ with the human nature “in which he fully experienced every aspect of human life including death” (Cunningham, 2015, p.183). In this vein, if Mary “is removed entirely from the sphere of the fallen world in which [human beings] live, then the link between creation and divine being in the mystery of the Incarnation is lost” (Cunningham, 2015, p. 183).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, many Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that the Pope should not express new dogmas, which relate to Christianity, without the convening of an ecumenical council. Eastern Orthodox Christians express these kinds of criticisms with respect to such documents as *Ineffabilis Deus: Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius IX on the Immaculate Conception*, which was released on December 8, 1854 and the *Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII: Munificentissimus Deus; Defining the Dogma of the Assumption*, which was released on November 1, 1950, for example (Cunningham, 2015).

With respect to Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox ideas about the assumption, which is the belief that the Virgin Mary was taken directly into heaven at the end of her life, both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches accept the traditional narratives which underpin the doctrine of the Assumption, even if the specific stories that they accept are different with respect to specific details (Cunningham, 2015; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1995, para. 966). For many Eastern Orthodox Christians, at least one Roman Catholic document about the Assumption of Mary which caused dismay is *Munificentissimus Deus* (Cunningham, 2015). There are at least two reasons that Eastern Orthodox Christians have a tendency to disapprove of such documents: (1) Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that the Pope should not express doctrinal statements without the authority of an ecumenical council and (2) *Munificentissimus Deus* and similar papal pronouncements reduce a topic, such as the assumption, that is shrouded in mystery, for Eastern Orthodox Christians, to a formulaic statement (Cunningham, 2015).

### **Mary in Protestantism**

For their part, most Protestants reject the Immaculate Conception of Mary because they typically view themselves as believing that their theological perspectives are based largely or exclusively on the Bible, and because the Bible says nothing about the Immaculate Conception, this idea, from the perspective of most Protestants, should be

rejected. Most Protestants believe that the Immaculate Conception was unnecessary for Jesus' sinlessness because the powerful, cleansing nature of the Holy Spirit, through whom Mary conceived Jesus, was more than adequate to overcome any of Mary's sin and to enable Jesus to be sinless (Waller, 2016).

Another theological idea about Mary that is embraced by Catholics, and rejected by most Protestants, is the perpetual virginity of Mary, which is the idea that Mary was always a virgin, even after Jesus' birth. According to the Catholic idea of Mary's perpetual virginity, even after Mary gave birth to Jesus, she never had sexual relations with anybody, including her husband Joseph, and thus maintained her virginal purity throughout her entire life. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man. In fact, Christ's birth 'did not diminish his mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it.' And so the liturgy of the Catholic Church celebrates Mary as . . . the Ever-virgin" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1995, para. 499). While most Protestants accept the idea that Mary was a virgin until and including the time of Jesus' birth, they believe that Mary and her husband, Joseph, did engage in sexual relations after Jesus' birth, in view of the fact that the New Testament states that Jesus had sisters and brothers (Lester, 2005).<sup>3</sup>

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refutes the idea that Mary had sexual relations with Joseph and gave birth to children after Jesus by stating, "The [Catholic] Church has always understood these passages [in the New Testament] as not referring to other children of the Virgin Mary. In fact James and Joseph, 'brothers of Jesus,' are the sons of another Mary, a disciple of Christ, whom St. Matthew significantly calls 'the other Mary.' They are close relations of Jesus, according to an Old Testament expression" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1995, para. 500).

### **Mary in Anglicanism**

Historically and in contemporary times, Anglicans hold an intriguing position in the midst of Protestantism and its relationship to Roman Catholicism in that some high-church Anglicans and some other Anglicans, for example, gravitate strongly to certain aspects of Roman Catholicism. While Anglicans have diverse views regarding a variety of theological matters, including the Virgin Mary, the Agreed Statement by the Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) entitled, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ; An Agreed Statement; The Seattle Statement* which is dated February 2, 2004 and is the culmination of a process of five years of study and reflection by that Commission, is worth noting here. (This essay will refer to that statement as *The Seattle Statement*.) According to Father Donald Bolen (who is a Catholic priest, a staff member of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and the Catholic Co-Secretary of the ARCIC and the International Anglican Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM)) and Canon Gregory K. Cameron (who is an Anglican Priest, Deputy General Secretary of the Anglican Communion, Director of Ecumenical Affairs and the Anglican Co-Secretary of the ARCIC and IARCCUM), that document is not an official statement of the Anglican Communion or the Catholic Church, but it does represent the sustained thinking of significant Roman

Catholic and Anglican theologians as they studied together an important aspect of Christian faith down through the centuries. The statement registers a large measure of agreement between them on the place and understanding of Mary in Christian faith and devotion, and it has been published for consideration and assessment by the churches of the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church (Bolen and Cameron, 2006, p. vii).

The document also elucidates the similarities and differences in Roman Catholic and Anglican beliefs about the Virgin Mary. For example, in terms of areas of agreement between Roman Catholic and Anglican leaders about the Virgin Mary, the *Seattle Statement* expresses several points, including the following, which that statement quotes directly from the ARCIC's statement entitled *Authority in the Church II* (1981):

We agree that there can be but one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, and reject any interpretation of the role of Mary which obscures this affirmation. We agree in recognizing that Christian understanding of Mary is inseparably linked with the doctrines of Christ and of the Church. We agree in recognizing the grace and unique vocation of Mary, Mother of God Incarnate (*Theotokos*), in observing her festivals, and in according her honour in the communion of saints. We agree that she was prepared by divine grace to be the mother of our Redeemer, by whom she herself was redeemed and received into glory. We further agree in recognizing in Mary a model of holiness, obedience and faith for all Christians. We accept that it is possible to regard her as a prophetic figure of the Church of God before as well as after the Incarnation. (Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC); *Agreed Statement, Authority in the Church II*, 1981, "Infallibility," point 30; Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ; An Agreed Statement; The Seattle Statement*, 2004, "Introduction," point 2).

Yet, both the First Anglican / Roman Catholic International Commission's statement entitled "Authority in The Church II (1981)" and the *Seattle Statement* of 2004 express the same ideas regarding the Anglicans' and the Roman Catholics "remaining differences" about the Virgin Mary,

The dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption raise a special problem for those Anglicans who do not consider that the precise definitions given by these dogmas are sufficiently supported by Scripture. For many Anglicans the teaching authority of the bishop of Rome, independent of a council, is not recommended by the fact that through it these Marian doctrines were proclaimed as dogmas binding on all the faithful. Anglicans would also ask whether, in any future union between our two Churches, they would be required to subscribe to such dogmatic statements (Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC); *Agreed Statement, Authority in the Church II*, 1981, "Infallibility," point 30; Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ; An Agreed Statement; The Seattle Statement*, 2004, "Introduction," point 2).

According to Rev. Dr. Timothy Bradshaw, who is an Anglican and a distinguished doctrinal theologian at the University of Oxford in England, neither the dogmas about the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption of Mary can be accepted by Anglicans because neither of those teachings can be found in the New Testament, and “both teachings were made binding on the faithful by decree of the Pope, independently of any church council” (Bradshaw, 2006, p. 136). Thus, Anglicans and Eastern Orthodox Christians have some similar reasons for their criticisms of Roman Catholic teachings about the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary (Bradshaw, 2006; Cunningham, 2015).

### **Mary in Islam**

At this point, it would be helpful to discuss some Muslim understandings of the Virgin Mary. However, before one can grasp the Virgin Mary’s significance in Islam, one must first understand the role of the Quran and prophets in this religion. Muslims believe in a line of prophets from Adam to Muhammad. According to Muslims, the people to whom God proclaimed God’s message, and lived their lives according to that message can be considered prophets. Thus, for Muslims, all -- or almost all -- of the figures to whom God spoke in the Quran and Bible are prophets. This includes a wide range of figures who appear in the Quran and the Bible, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (Tottoli, 2002).

Thus, one reason that Muslims consider Jews and Christians among “People of the Book” (that is, people who have a special status as monotheists, according to Muslims) is because the prophets of Judaism and Christianity received messages from God.<sup>4</sup> From a Muslim perspective, while God provided all these prophets before Muhammad perfect messages to proclaim, the Jews and Christians surrounding these prophets made serious mistakes in (1) writing down the messages; (2) practicing the messages’ edicts; and/or (3) believing the correct ideas, which God had given to the prophets, after those prophets had received the messages (Peters, 2004).<sup>5</sup>

From a Muslim perspective, with respect to the Jews, after their prophets received messages from God, the Jews made several mistakes. For example, (1) the Jews worshipped idols; (2) the Jews mistakenly thought God’s holiest city was Jerusalem instead of Mecca; and (3) in the seventh century, the Jews of Arabia rejected Muhammad as a prophet (Meddeb & Stora, 2013).

While much like the Jews, the Christians were a People of the Book, from a Muslim perspective, Christians made several mistakes also:

- (1) Christians mistakenly believe that Jesus is God. Muslims believe it is absolutely impossible for any human being to be God, because only God is God.<sup>6</sup> For Muslims, human flesh is too weak, sinful, and finite to contain any divine qualities.
- (2) While Muslims accept the idea that Christians are monotheists, Muslims reject the trinity (which is the Christian idea that God is comprised of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) because Muslims believe that the trinity comes dangerously close to polytheism, which Muslims emphatically reject.

(3) Muslims also reject the idea that Jesus was crucified because the Quran categorically rejects the crucifixion of Jesus and, at the same time, Muslims believe that execution is far too humiliating for any prophet (Winkler, 2011).

Yet, from a Muslim perspective, while Jews and Christians made some mistakes, they still hold a very special place in history -- because Jews and Christians were among the world's first monotheists and their religions have taught humanity some important lessons. Thus, Mary's appearances in the Quran are not the least bit unusual, since there are numerous other figures who appear in the Quran and the Bible; much like these other figures, there are similarities and dissimilarities between the Quran's and Bible's depictions of stories related to Mary (Tottoli, 2002). With respect to Mary's role in Islam, several verses from one of many passages about Mary, which appear in the Quran, are relevant. The following passage is from the Quran 19:16-36, which is from the Quran's chapter entitled "Mary."

And mention, [O Muhammad], in the Book [the story of] Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place toward the east. And she took, in seclusion from them, a screen. Then We sent to her Our Angel, and he represented himself to her as a well-proportioned man. She said, 'Indeed, I seek refuge in the Most Merciful from you, [so leave me], if you should be fearing of God.' He said, 'I am only the messenger of your Lord to give you [news of] a pure boy.' She said, 'How can I have a boy while no man has touched me and I have not been unchaste?' He said, 'Thus [it will be]; your Lord says, 'It is easy for Me, and We will make him a sign to the people and a mercy from Us. And it is a matter [already] decreed.' So she conceived him, and she withdrew with him to a remote place. And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, 'Oh, I wish I had died before this and was in oblivion, forgotten.' But he called her from below her, 'Do not grieve; your Lord has provided beneath you a stream. And shake toward you the trunk of the palm tree; it will drop upon you ripe, fresh dates. So eat and drink and be contented. And if you see from among humanity anyone, say, 'Indeed, I have vowed to the Most Merciful abstention, so I will not speak today to [any] man.' Then she brought him to her people, carrying him. They said, 'O Mary, you have certainly done a thing unprecedented. O sister of Aaron, your father was not a man of evil, nor was your mother unchaste.' So she pointed to him. They said, 'How can we speak to one who is in the cradle a child?' [Jesus] said, 'Indeed, I am the servant of God. He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet. And He has made me blessed wherever I am and has enjoined upon me prayer and zakat as long as I remain alive. And [made me] dutiful to my mother, and He has not made me a wretched tyrant. And peace is on me the day I was born and the day I will die and the day I am raised alive.' That is Jesus, the son of Mary - the word of truth about which they are in dispute. It is not [befitting] for God to take a son; exalted is He! When He decrees an affair, He only says to it, 'Be,' and it is. [Jesus said], 'And indeed, God is my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him. That is a straight path.'<sup>7</sup>

All Muslims affirm the Virgin Mary's devout submission to God, her steadfastness, and chastity, yet they have disagreed, historically, as to whether she was a prophet



(Stowasser, 1994). While Muslims' shared belief that the Virgin Mary had many virtues is one of many threads that binds them, understanding debates among Muslims about Mary's prophethood can illuminate some matters about unity and diversity, within Islam's history.

In this section, this essay examines some Muslim arguments, which state that Mary was a prophet, and then it examines other Muslim arguments, which state that she was not. Many of these debates about Mary's prophethood took place during various times in the early and medieval history of Islam. According to the late scholar of Islam, Barbara Freyer Stowasser,

Classical Islamic theology debated the issue [as to whether or not Mary was a prophet], especially after it had been championed by the Zahirite school, a relatively . . . short-lived medieval . . . school of scriptural interpretation and religious law, whose focus on the literal (*zahiri*) meaning of the sacred text found proof for Mary's prophethood in the fact that God's angels had informed her of things to come. Neither consensus-based mainstream doctrine nor public piety, however, came to recognize Mary's prophethood. [Muslim interpreters] have consistently [praised] Mary's high Quranic rank; but their images of Mary have also reflected the fact that she differs from other Quranic women figures in nature and life experiences and also, at least in part, from the Islamic ideal of womanhood as elaborated in Islamic law (Stowasser, 1994, p. 69).

For the Zahirites and those who agreed with them in the ninth century and afterwards, the most persuasive argument in favor of Mary being a prophet is that she received messages directly from God and that she acted in a manner that was, in large part, obedient to this message. Mary heeded God's message by doing as God instructed, and bearing Jesus. Another sign of Mary's prophetic status was that God provided her with nourishment and protection, in the form of dates and water, so that she could sustain herself in difficult times (Stowasser, 1994).

According to this argument, God's protection of Mary followed a pre-existing pattern. God had also repeatedly protected other prophets when they were in danger. For example, God protected Adam from Satan, he protected Noah from the unrighteous unbelievers, and he protected Moses from the hostility of the ancient Israelites when they distrusted him in the desert as they worshipped idols. Also, according to Muslims who believe in Mary's prophethood, every prophet to whom God gave his message, obeyed God -- and Mary was no exception (Stowasser, 1994).

Muslims who believe that Mary was not a prophet, still affirm her many noble qualities. Yet, they reject her role as a prophet for what they believe are two persuasive reasons: first, they believe that because Mary was a woman, it would have been impossible for God to have called her as a prophet. For these Muslims, both women and men have very important, yet very different, roles to play in society. Also, for these Muslims, no woman -- including Mary -- would have the requisite inborn characteristics to be a prophet. Second, for these Muslims, one of Mary's most significant accomplishments was not that she proclaimed God's message -- as prophets are supposed to do -- but that she gave

birth. For these Muslims, giving birth to a person -- even if he is as extraordinary as Jesus -- does not help qualify that person as a prophet. Yet, no matter which position Muslims have taken regarding Mary, they all agree that she is an exceptional model for Muslims and for other people of faith (Stowasser, 1994).

In any event, much like other Quranic narratives, the stories about Mary teach Muslims a great deal about God. For example, these stories exult God's ultimate power, because they invoke the Muslim belief that God brought the universe and Jesus into existence by proclaiming a single word -- 'Be!' For example, in Quran 3:47 when Mary asks, "My Lord, how shall I have a son when no human has touched me?" God's response is "I only need to say: 'Be!' and it is." The notion that God created both the universe and Jesus through the utterance of a single word are, for Muslims, persuasive indications, among many others, of God's ultimate and everlasting power (Kheirabadi, 2004).

The Quranic stories about Mary also reflect God's generosity and love for humanity. For Muslims, God's compassion for human beings is so great that he called Jesus into existence to be a significant example of compassion and mercy (Siddiqui, 2012). The Quran -- utilizing "we" as the first person pronoun for God -- states: "Then, after Noah and Abraham, we sent more prophets, and after them, we sent Jesus son of Mary and gave him the Gospel, and put into the hearts of his followers compassion and kindness" (Quran 57:27). The Quran continues, "Jesus was a human being whom we favored and made the highest example for the children of Israel" (Quran 43:59). Thus, for Muslims, by empowering the Virgin Mary to give birth to Jesus, God blessed humanity with one remarkable example of love, compassion, and generosity, which Muslims take seriously (Stowasser, 1994).

### **Mary and Muslim-Christian Dialogue**

These matters can lead to the following question: which possibilities do these perspectives raise for Muslim-Christian dialogue? As for those Muslims and Christians who may engage in Muslim-Christian dialogue, they must always keep their differences in mind. Thus, Muslims and Christians find themselves disagreeing on such topics as the divinity of Jesus, the trinity, Jesus' crucifixion, the specifics of certain Quranic and Biblical narratives as well as other crucial subjects. While these topics may pose difficulties in terms of interreligious dialogue, Muslims and Christians share certain commonalities. For example, among other ideas, they believe in one God; they believe in the significance of many of the same prophets; they believe that Jesus was a tremendously important figure, and they believe in the special place of Mary within God's activity in history (Smith, 2007).

### **Jesus and Muslim-Christian Dialogue**

Interestingly, Muslims and Christians may find more agreement in their ideas about the Virgin Mary than in their ideas about Jesus. Muslims and Christians both affirm Mary's virginity, obedience, faith, love, generosity, kindness, and benevolence. Together, Muslims and Christians can also remember the Bible's and Quran's emphasis on Mary's peacefulness and the serene tranquility of her relationship with her son Jesus. Indeed, both religions -- when understood in their most positive manifestations -- emphasize

peace. According to John's Gospel, which is in the Christian Bible, the pre-Islamic Middle Easterner named Jesus is believed to have said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you" (John 14:27). In much the same way, the Quran states, "As for those who believe and do good works, God will guide them through their faith. Rivers will run beneath their feet in the Gardens of Bliss. Their prayer will be 'Glory to You, Lord!' and their greeting to one another, 'Peace!'" (Quran 10:9-10). Although it is naïve to believe that interreligious dialogue can prevent or end wars, conflicts, and/or tensions wherever they exist between Muslims and Christians, at minimum it is better for persons of different religions to understand each other, than it is for them to misunderstand each other.

### **Seven Types of Interreligious Dialogue**

Along these lines, Dr. Sallie B. King, who is Emerita Professor of Religious Studies at James Madison University in Virginia in the United States, describes in her chapter on interreligious dialogue in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, seven types of interreligious dialogue (King, 2011). These types of dialogue are worth considering and describing in the special issue of this journal, which is devoted to peacebuilding.

The first type of dialogue, which King explains, is official or institutional dialogue between or among elites, who are chosen as official representatives by persons within their respective religions. This kind of dialogue has many of the features of diplomacy and is often intended to resolve points of friction among people in various religions in order to avoid or mitigate practical conflicts (King, 2011).

A second type of dialogue is parliamentary style dialogue in which religious leaders speak in an open forum with the main objective of making their views widely known. This kind of dialogue can seem more like a series of monologues, at least within the official program, but the individual presentations can generate a great deal of potentially meaningful dialogical exchange during question-and-answer sessions and off-stage. Dialogue of this type can potentially promote mutual understanding and better interreligious and intercommunity relations (King, 2011).

The third type of dialogue is verbal dialogue, in which the objective is to come to a better understanding of another religion through a focus on a religion's doctrines, philosophy, theology, or worldview. Verbal dialogue is the prototypical form of dialogue in many people's minds. Verbal dialogue might initially be fairly shallow, involving merely making the intellectual acquaintance of a person of another religion. However, if this form dialogue progresses to the point at which one learns something startling that forces a shift in one's own worldview, such dialogue can lead to profound spiritual understandings (King, 2011).

A fourth form of dialogue is often called "intervisitation." In this form of dialogue, members of one religious community visit the people of another religious community. Sometimes such visits involve members of one or several religious communities being present at a religious service of another religious community. Sometimes a religious leader is invited to visit a religious community in its place of worship, practice or

learning, and to address them. For example, members of one monastic community may live with members of another monastic community for short or long periods. This kind of dialogue may have intellectual, emotional, and/or spiritual aspects (King, 2011, p. 102).

A fifth type of dialogue is spiritual dialogue, in which one learns and engages in the spiritual practices of another religion, such as the other religion's form of prayer, meditation, and/or worship. Another subcategory within this type of dialogue could involve one person or group of people participating in a common ritual with members of another religion (King, 2011).

A sixth form of dialogue is practical dialogue, in which the objective is to work on a concrete project in the community or in the world. Within this form of dialogue, in the community, for example, one would work side-by-side with members of another religious community on the same project. In this framework, the primary goal is to promote harmony within a community through people of different religions becoming acquainted with each other in a non-threatening way. Examples of this type of dialogue could involve people of different religious communities building homes together, or digging wells together, or picking up trash together, among many other examples (King, 2011).

A seventh type of dialogue is, what King calls, "internal dialogue," in which a single individual could possibly have an informal or formal conversation or conversations with members of two different religions, about which that first person has deep knowledge. For example, this form of dialogue could involve this person bringing together several different people of different religions and mediating between them or trying to create understanding between them, among many other possibilities (King, 2011, p. 102).

### **Interreligious Dialogue and Participants' Levels of Knowledge**

With a desire for peacebuilding in mind, one or more of these forms of dialogue could form a basis for understanding among some Muslims and some Christians, depending on the context in which the Muslims and Christians find themselves. Yet, persons who facilitate these forms of dialogue must be aware of the levels of knowledge about Islam and/or Christianity which the participants in the dialogue may or may not possess. For example, one cannot assume that all Muslims, who are participating in a given form of dialogue, are equally knowledgeable about their own religion. Much the same holds true with respect to Christians. Depending on the type of dialogue, which would take place, it would be helpful if the facilitator or facilitators of the dialogue were to obtain some idea of the levels of knowledge that the participants have of their own religion, and of the religion of their dialogue partners. One of several ways that the dialogue-facilitators could arrive at an understanding of the participants' level of knowledge about Islam and Christianity could be by means of holding conversations with them and listening to them speak about topics related to Islam and Christianity, and ascertaining the participants' relative level of knowledge through this process. If the dialogue is to take place within a classroom setting (either in an online or brick-and-mortar course, for example), then the

facilitator, teacher, or professor could potentially find one or more forms of assessment to be helpful (American Academy of Religion, 2009).

### **Interreligious Dialogue and Bloom's Taxonomy**

Along these lines, Benjamin Bloom's and his collaborators' "Taxonomy of Educational Objectives" could be helpful (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). This taxonomy is commonly called "Bloom's taxonomy."<sup>8</sup> In this context, the facilitator of Muslim-Christian dialogue, could decide whether or not to adapt and/or modify Bloom's taxonomy to her or his context. If she or he decides to apply and/or adapt a version of that taxonomy to her or his context, she or he could move the participants from the most basic goal, which would be knowledge of the specifics aspects of their own religion and that of the dialogue partners, step-by-step to comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). This process of examining a specific topic or topics related to Islam and/or Christianity with which participants in the dialogue are familiar (as they go through a step-by-step process, inspired by Bloom's taxonomy) could help the participants become more familiar with their own religion, and some of the similarities and differences between their religion and the religion of their dialogue partners. At the same time, such a process could encourage the dialogue participants to develop ways that they could *practically implement* what they have learned about their own religion and their dialogue partners' religion in such a way as to continue to promote understanding and peace between one another and other persons within their own religions, thus building on Bloom's taxonomy (and/or revised versions of it) and moving beyond it (Castelli, 2012).<sup>9</sup>

### **Possible Goals of Muslim-Christian Dialogue**

The type of dialogue, with which the ideas in this essay may most readily lend themselves, would be verbal dialogue between Muslims and Christians, in view of the fact that the ideas in this essay examine some of the similarities and differences with respect to some key themes within those religions. The ideas in this essay could be adapted to several other forms of dialogue also. The *results* of dialogues between Christians and Muslim about Jesus and Mary would depend on the specific contexts, where those dialogues would take place, and the specific Muslims and Christians, who may be involved in those dialogues (Borelli, 2003). At the same time, Muslims and Christians who engage in such dialogues (where they would use ideas about Mary and Jesus as a basis, for example) could aspire to reach certain goals, which could include their understanding (1) the diverse roles that gender play in Islam and Christianity; (2) similarities and differences in their beliefs about God, sacred scriptures, and prophets within and between their respective religions; and (3) some of the personal virtues including faith, steadfastness, and righteousness, which Jesus and Mary exhibit in the Quran and Bible, and the ways that these virtues are important to Muslims and Christians (Borelli, 2003).

### **Conclusion**

Within this framework, such dialogues could possibly remove stereotypes and lead to joint action, such as the Catholic Relief Service's joint Muslim-Christian efforts related to promoting peace, reconciliation, and justice in such places as Bosnia-Herzegovina,

Egypt, Kenya, and Mindanao, as well as the Catholic Medical Mission Board's joint Muslim-Christian efforts related to mobilizing one million faith leaders to improve child and maternal health in countries with high child mortality rates (Bamat, et al., 2017; Catholic Medical Mission Board, 2015). While Muslim-Christian dialogue may not necessarily lead to or facilitate that kind of joint action, it could create an environment which could be conducive to that form of joint action. In conclusion, while it may be impossible to imagine Christians and Muslims finding complete peace, the examples of Mary and Jesus in the sacred texts of Muslims and Christians could be guideposts on a shared pilgrimage of reconciliation.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Jon Armajani presented an earlier version of this essay, as a scholarly paper, under the title "Christians' and Muslims' Theological Approaches to One Another," at a conference entitled "Interreligious and Intercultural Relations in a Time of Conflict and Migration in the MENA Region: Comparative Perspectives," which took place on May 30 and 31, 2016 at Haigazian University in Beirut, Lebanon. That conference was sponsored by Haigazian University and the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University in Minnesota, U.S.A.

<sup>2</sup>These ideas are further elucidated in Cunningham, 2015 and Fastiggi, 2009.

<sup>3</sup>Matthew 12:46-50 and 13:55-56 are two passages which suggest that Jesus had brothers and sisters. For Protestants' rejection of the perpetual virginity of Mary, see, for example, Rebecca J. Lester, *Jesus in Our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 297.

<sup>4</sup>Historically, Muslims have also accepted Zoroastrians, who are members of the monotheistic religion of Zoroastrianism, as people of the book (who are called "ahl al-kitab" in Arabic) also (Orlin, Fried, Kunst, Satlow, & Pregill, 2016).

<sup>5</sup>For Muslims, the prophets of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are perfect, or virtually perfect, and made no mistakes. According to Muslims, one of the reasons there have been some mistakes with respect to some of the beliefs within Judaism and Christianity is because some of the persons who *lived around the time* or *sometime after* the prophets of those religions made mistakes about the perfect revelations or messages, which those prophets received from God.

<sup>6</sup>"Allah" is the Arabic word for God.

<sup>7</sup>Quran 19:16-36. This and the other translations of the Quran, which appear in this essay, are largely the author's own, and are based primarily on the original Arabic text of the Quran, with consideration given to some English translations of that sacred text.

<sup>8</sup>The following constitutes a portion of Bloom's, Engelhart's, Furst's, Hill's, and Krathwohl's explanations of their taxonomy of educational objectives from their book *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives; The Classification of Educational Goals; Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*, pp. 201 - 207. Knowledge, which is the first major step in the taxonomy, "involves the recall of specifics and universals, the recall of methods and processes, or the recall of a pattern, structure, or setting" (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956, p. 201). Comprehension, which is the second major step in the taxonomy, "refers to a type of understanding or apprehension such that the individual knows what is being communicated and can make use of the material or idea being communicated without necessarily relating it to other material or seeing its fullest implications" (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956, p. 204). Application, which is the third major step in the taxonomy, refers to the "use of abstractions in particular and concrete situations" (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956, p. 205). Analysis, which is the fourth major step in the taxonomy, represents the "breakdown of a communication into its constituent elements or parts such that the relative hierarchy of ideas is made clear and/or the relations between ideas expressed are made explicit" (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956, p. 205). Synthesis, which is the fifth major step in Bloom's taxonomy, involves the "putting together of elements and parts so as to form a whole" (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956, p. 206). Evaluation, which is the sixth major step in the taxonomy, engenders "judgments about the value of material and methods for given purposes" (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956, p. 207). One of several helpful sources of information about Bloom's taxonomy, which in addition to other significant ideas, provides an overview of scholarly discussions about and revisions to that taxonomy is Patricia Armstrong's "Bloom's Taxonomy," which appears on the website of Vanderbilt University's Center for Teaching at <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/> (accessed July 19, 2017). In this context, the following books are also worth noting: Anderson, L. W., Sosniak, L. A., Bloom, B. S., & National Society for the Study of Education. (1994). *Bloom's Taxonomy: A Forty-Year Retrospective*. Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, as well as Anderson, L.W. and Krathwohl, D.R. (2001). *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives; Complete Edition*. New York: Longman.

<sup>9</sup>In my over twenty years of college and university teaching and engaging in interreligious dialogue, including Muslim-Christian dialogue, in religiously and ethnically diverse contexts, I have used Bloom's taxonomy and modifications of it, as one set of frameworks for teaching and trying to build understanding and reconciliation. While I have usually not explicitly mentioned that taxonomy and my modifications of it in those settings, I have found it to be one of several beneficial frameworks for my work.

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