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## MARY AND THE KORAN

William Paul Haas

November 2006

On May 14, 1999, Pope John Paul II hosted a meeting at the Vatican with a delegation of Muslims from Iraq. They presented the Pope with a copy of the Koran which the Pope bowed before and then lifted up and kissed. The Catholic Patriarch present explained that he did this to show his compassion for the suffering of the Iraqi people and to show his great respect for Islam.

The photo of this event was shown widely on Arab Television, but was also the source of severe criticism of the Pope from various Christian groups. The question persists, Why would the Pope show such profound respect for a book which over the centuries has been condemned as diabolical.

And one might ask why I am proposing to you tonight that you follow me in trying to understand something very mysterious about the Koran. I offer you, not the last word on Islam, but my personal reflections, indeed meditation, on what I find intriguing in the Koran. I am guided, as I am sure the Pope was, by the admonition of the Second Vatican Council concerning non-Christian religions, which says:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions (of course, including Islam) She has high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflects a ray of that truth which enlightens all men...Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also in their social life and culture.”

The Vatican Council also notes:

“The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself: merciful and all-powerful, creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to man: they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even his inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere him as prophet. They also honor Mary, his Virgin Mother; at times they even call upon her with devotion. (no. 3)

Sometimes Islam is blamed for portraying God as infinitely remote and inaccessible, yet Mary is seen as intimately aware of God’s presence \_ of “the secret of the Godhead” (Hearden, p. 9) In reflecting on the words of St. Augustine: “God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves” I was delighted to find in the Koran the more robust statement (50:16) We created the human, and we know what he whispers to himself. We are closer to him than his jugular vein. In Islam there is no separation between the sacred and the profane. God pervades all of reality – all is sacred. In politics that presents problems.

I take the exhortation of the Council to be addressed to all of us, not just hierarchy and theologians, because the world is profoundly transformed by the way all human beings see each other. It is remarkable how a single word of understanding can dispel mean and careless comments. And so I propose that we take a brief look at the critical presence of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, in the Koran.

There are more than thirty references to Mary in the Koran, where she is the only woman named. There is even an entire chapter, Sura 19, named for her.

She is spoken of with the highest reverence and love, and Jesus is almost always called “Jesus, son of Mary.”

About the year 600 AD Muhammad was a caravan leader in Western Arabia where he came into frequent contact with merchants from all over that part of the world. Mecca was a prosperous trading center where there was a kind of shrine, called the Ka’ba the Cube, which housed the images of the various gods and goddesses of the traders from Syria, Egypt and Greece, including one of Jesus and his mother, Mary. One time when Muhammad came upon the scene at the Ka’ba he entered the shrine and “carried out the images before the assembled crowd, raising them over his head, he smashed them to the ground, except the image of Jesus and Mary.” (R. Aslan, *No God But God*.) Muhammad’s action was as dramatic as the Pope lifting the Koran and kissing it.

The Koran is the sacred scriptures of the religion, Islam, believed to be communicated by the Angel Gabriel to Muhammad over several years and to be the final revelation of God completing the Old Testament and the New Testament. Muhammad shows real respect for people of the Book, Jews and Christians. However, what Muhammad knew of Judaism and Christianity he gathered from advisors, from the apocryphal scriptures and the general beliefs of the people around him. He was not familiar with the total content and history of Judeo-Christian beliefs. What he encountered in his travels was very different from the actual teaching of the Gospels or of the Hebrew scriptures. Remember, Vatican II respects “all that is true and holy” in other religions and urges us to preserve that ray of that truth which enlightens all men.” Indeed much of what Muhammad thought of Jesus and Mary was distorted by the ravages of 600 years, still it is remarkable how he struggled to find the truth within the confusion. For us it is one thing to identify and condemn an error, it is much more difficult to find the grain of truth in every error that others seek as best they can.

I am saddened by the vicious accusations that Muhammad deliberately misrepresented the teaching of the Gospels, especially made by those who show little evidence that they tried to understand those elements of the truth which sustained the faith of Muhammad and his followers in the midst of chaos they did not cause.

It must be admitted that many teachings of Islam on the surface contradict Catholic beliefs:

Jesus is not divine, not God

Jesus is only a prophet, a messenger.  
God is not a Trinity.  
Jesus was not crucified.  
Jesus was not the redeemer  
There is no original sin

On the other hand Mary is recognized as the virgin Mother of Jesus –as the holiest of women- as chaste and obedient to God – as uniquely free from sin – and as the partner with Jesus in bringing God’s message to all mankind.

Muslims believe that God’s revelation to mankind begins with Abraham and moves through Moses and Jesus up to Muhammad who is the last of the prophets. There is one very important part of the beginning of this dramatic interaction between God and mankind, which is often overlooked.

Let us consider it briefly.

The text of Genesis clearly establishes that Abraham’s first son, begotten of Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian servant, was named Ishmael. Although Sarah originally urged Abraham to have this child by Hagar, later she demanded that Hagar and Ishmael be abandoned in the desert. However, God promised more than once that Ishmael would not be forgotten. God told Abraham:” Behold I will bless him, and increase and multiply him exceedingly: he shall beget twelve chiefs and I will make him a great nation” (Gen.17,20) Before Isaac was born, when Ishmael was thirteen years old, Abraham and Ishmael were circumcised on the same day in fulfillment of the covenant with Yahweh. Read Genesis, Chapter 12 to 25, about 12 pages)

We cannot forget this when we weigh the words of Mary addressed to her cousin Elizabeth in the Magnificat: “He has given help to his servant Israel, mindful of his mercy – even as he has spoken to our fathers – to Abraham and to his posterity forever.” Abraham’s posterity included his first son, Ishmael, whom Yahweh promised to care for, as well as to Isaac.

Muslims have not forgotten that and insist that they are the descendants of Ishmael and share in God’ promises from the very beginning. Indeed it is believed that Abraham and Ishmael journeyed to Mecca and built a shrine to the holiness of God on the very place where Adam built the first shrine ever.

And this place, in the Muslim view, is the very Cube where Muhammad destroyed all the pagan gods, but spared the image of Jesus and Mary. In other words, Jesus and Mary belonged where it all began.

To understand Islam one must grasp this sense of identity with the very beginning of God’s revelation to mankind and Islam’s acknowledgement of Mary’s role in it from the start. Let the Koran speak to this; S. 21:91. Remember her who preserved her chastity, into whom we breathed a life from us, and made her and her son a token for mankind.

Unlike the Gospels, which do not elaborate on the conception, birth and childhood of Mary, the Koran goes into considerable details, tracing Mary origin back through Abraham to Adam. (3:33)

Of haunting implications is another text, which places Mary as a major participant in Allah's design for all mankind: And we gave the book to Moses so that they may be guided. And we made the son of Mary and his mother a sign and gave them a shelter on an elevated ground, sequestered, watered by a spring, (S. 23, 50) Which implies their blessed state.

Here Mary is portrayed with Jesus as essential to the unveiling which flows from the Hebrew scriptures. Both the descendants of Ishmael and of Isaac are equally seen as the beneficiaries of Jesus and Mary. The unique role of Jesus and Mary is further developed in the Koran( s.3,42) The angel said: "O Mary, indeed God has favored you and made you immaculate, chosen you from all the women in the world....O Mary, God gives news of a thing from him, for rejoicing, whose name will be Messiah, Jesus, Son of Mary, illustrious in this world and the next. Note that Muhammad places the names Messiah and Son of Mary as equivalents

Mary's response will be familiar to us Catholics." How can I have a son, O Lord, when no man has touched me? The angel replied: This is how God creates what he wills. When he decrees a thing, He says, Be, and it is."

The sense here is that Jesus was created absolutely as Adam was. There is no question of Mary's consent, though unmentioned.

Is there a hint of the doctrine of the immaculate Conception here?

There is a very strong tradition among Muslim scholars that "Satan touches every son of Adam the day his mother bears him, and this contact makes him cry, save only Mary and her son" (G. Finazzo) This sounds like the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, except that Islam does not believe in original sin. (Hearden, n. 52) But Islam does profess that every child from birth is touched by Satan, including Muhammad himself. How much closer could one get to the precise doctrine of the immaculate conception, in 600 AD. More importantly, in the Koran Jesus and Mary are clearly made radically unique among all mankind for their absolute innocence.

There are several difficulties a Catholic encounters in the Koran. Let me mention a few of them.

Muhammad totally rejected the idea of the Trinity because to him it meant that God was divided into lesser gods. The Koran claims (5:116) God will say, O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to the people "Worship me and my mother besides God? He will say, Be you glorified. I could not utter what was not the truth. Muhammad obviously did not want Jesus to be blamed for planting the strange notion that he and Mary were competing with Almighty God. Where did Muhammad get the notion that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity necessarily implied that Jesus, the human son of Mary and Mary herself were two

lesser gods of the Triune Godhead? (5:17) Pagans indeed are those who say that God is the Messiah, son of Mary. Say, Who could prevent God if he willed to annihilate the Messiah, son of Mary, and his mother, and everyone on earth.” Muhammad appears to believe that God is compromised by the idea that there is a son god and a mother god like so many of the pagan gods he rejected. As far as I can discover, Muhammad may have been reacting to a strange heresy of a fourth century

Sect of women, called the Collyridians, who worshiped Mary as a divine person.

The group is condemned by Epiphanius and by John Damascene, but how could Muhammad know that? I know of no evidence that Muhammad had any idea of the true theology of the Trinity. He fought to keep the Reality of God uncompromised. What he rejected, we Christians would also reject – because it was not the true doctrine of the Trinity.

One other difficulty deserves some attention. The Koran claims that Jesus was never actually crucified. In typical language, (4:156, 157) it condemns the Jews “for disbelieving and uttering about Mary a gross lie. And for saying “We killed the Messiah, Son of Mary, the messenger of God. They never killed him, they never crucified him – they were made to think they did”. In another text we read (3:54,55) They schemed, but so did God, and God is the best schemer. Thus God said “O Jesus, I am terminating your life on earth, raising you to me and ridding you of the disbelievers. The notes to this passage explain “We learn that Jesus’ soul, the real person, was raised: i.e. Jesus life on earth was terminated, and his enemies crucified his body, an empty shell. “Thus, the Jews thought they got away with killing Jesus, and therefore made a fool of Mary, but God tricked them. This seems totally strange, even bizarre to Christian ears, yet one can see Muhammad doing the best he could to preserve what he believed of the Godhead and of the most holy son of Mary, and of Mary herself. I imagine Muhammad asking, How could the enemies of Jesus think they could kill Mary’s son, when God Almighty planned Jesus’ mission from the beginning? And do you detect a hint in the text of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead? God took Jesus life to himself so that his enemies could not really kill him. Totally different from our Catholic faith. Missing is any concept of sacrifice, death and redemption.

I realize that I have taken you on a mysterious journey. No one could expect you to penetrate and retain everything I presented. But try to grasp the vision of Muhammad trying to make sense of the world of religious beliefs that he actually encountered in the severely confused Arabian world of 600 AD. To me the holy presence of Mary, stands at every crisis casting some light into the darkness. In Islam she and her son, always spoken of in the same breath, appear from the beginning as the central focus of God’s plan for all mankind. She is not just a bit player in the larger drama. Where the basic doctrines of Christianity, the Trinity, the crucifixion, the resurrection, are misunderstood, Mary is still the one constant point of references to the fuller truth. God had a plan, and Mary’s son and she herself were always part of it.

Jaroslav Pelikan makes a telling point that “Mary occupied a special place” among the connections between Judaism, Christianity and Islam”. He assigns to Mary the priestly vocation of bridge building. At a time when the whole world struggles to understand the heart of Islam, it is incumbent upon Catholics especially to ponder the depth, the sensitivity and the implications of Muhammad’s reverence for the most remarkable woman in God’s dealings with the human race. Isn’t it timely to reflect on this?

I do not blame Muhammad for the misrepresentations of the New Testament that crossed his path, so much as I commend him for hanging on to as much of the truth as fell within his reach. This is what I think the Church asks of us – to reject nothing that is true and holy in these religions...to acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among them. If we Christians cannot find the precious gems of the truth in the confusion of history, who can? The easy alternative is to hate one another. Remember that the next time you read something about Islam or watch something on TV, or talk to your friends and relatives. Amidst all the confusion, hatred and ignorance, there is that beautiful soft light of Jesus, the son of Mary and his mother pointing to the Presence of God in every moment of history, including our own. Those who are confused, misled and misunderstood are not less loved by God and served by the son of Mary.

Note

The Arab Gospel of the Childhood, The Protogospel of James, and the Gospel of Pseudo Matthew

1994, JP II, ‘The Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and the Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the value of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counter-witness and scandal.’(Tertio Millenio Adveniente)... even to the use of violence in the service of the truth.

Immaculate Conception- denied by Thomas Aquinas if it meant Mary was not redeemed.  
– defined 1854.