

promised that she would dedicate her child to Him. When she gave birth to a girl, she named her **Maryam, which means to abide, in other words someone who incessantly worships the Creator.** God reveals her prayer in this verse: “Remember when the wife of Imran said: “My Lord, I have vowed to You whatever is in my womb, to be devoted to Your service. Please accept it from me. You are the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.” When she gave birth, she said: ‘My Lord! I have given birth to a girl’ – and Allah knew very well what she had given birth to, the male and female are not the same – and I have named her Maryam & placed her and her children in Your safekeeping from Satan, the accursed.” (35-36)

David Burrell, Professor of Theology, University of Notre Dame. “Christians often find it curious that Mary figures so prominently in the Quran & in Muslim spiritual life. She is seen as the faithful servant of the Lord who allows God’s Word to bring Jesus to life in her miraculously, and so give the world a prophet whom Muslims revere. This shows in inspiring detail the manner in which Muslim life & practice brings Mary to life as a faithful servant of the one God.”

The Quran recalls that Maryam’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” (Quran 3:35). Indeed, to Maryam herself, the angel said, “God has chosen you and made you pure (tahharaki), and he has chosen you above the women of the universe” (Quran, 3:42). For according to the Quran, Maryam, a saintly woman (siddigh) (Quran 5:75) was destined, together with Jesus, her son, to be “a sign (ayyah) to the universe” (Quran 21:91), to play a unique role in the history of salvation.

Catholics are delighted to learn that there are more verses in the Quran (34 of them) which name the Blessed Virgin Mary than there are in the whole New Testament! They speak of her presentation in the temple in Jerusalem, which Christian tradition also records, of her purification, of the annunciation, of her virginal conception of Jesus and of the birth of her son, the Messiah. It is no surprise then that just over 30 years ago the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, in their historic document "Nostra Aetate" (Oct. 28, 1965), wrote: **Upon the Muslims too the church looks with esteem. They adore One God, living & enduring, merciful & all-powerful, maker of heaven & earth. They also honor Mary, his virgin mother.** (No. 3).

What a propitious moment it is, therefore, that finds Christians & Muslims together on a major feast of the Virgin Mary to celebrate the mutual esteem for one another which befits men & women in the faith tradition of Abraham, “God’s friend” (Is. 41:8; Jas. 2:23; Quran 4:125). It is certainly true that in her very person there is a meeting point, or at least a stepping stone, between Christianity & Islam. Indeed, as the Quran says: “To those who believe, God has set an example in Maryam, who preserved her chastity, who put her trust in the words of her Lord & His scriptures & was one of the truly devout”.

It is true, of course, that for all of the esteem and honor which Muslims and Christians have for Maryam, 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 Maryam: a spirit from him” (Quran 4:171). 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.’ And the council fathers went on to say of the Christians and Muslims together, “On behalf of all peoples, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom” (Nostra Aetate, 3).

Maryam is presented as 'the Virgin who listens', 'the Virgin who prays', 'the Virgin in dialogue with God'. ... But there is also the image of a model of dialogue of seeking when, addressing the Archangel Gabriel, she asks, 'How is it possible?'. Maryam, a model for Muslims and Christians, is also a model of dialogue, teaching us to believe, not to close ourselves up in certainties, but rather to remain open and available to others”.

The real **Maryam**, is a young Palestinian woman.
 Every time an American/Israeli/British bomb obliterates a young girl in Palestine...**every single time**... the skies scream, **Maryam**.
 Every time a Palestinian woman is raped...**every single time**...the skies cry out in anguish, **Maryam**.
 Every time a Palestinian woman is hurt...**every single time**...the skies holler, **Maryam**.
 Every time a Palestinian woman’s home is demolished... **every single time**...the skies shriek, **Maryam**.



THE ANGELS SAID: “MARYAM,
 GOD HAS CHOSEN YOU & PURIFIED YOU.
 HE HAS CHOSEN YOU OVER ALL OTHER WOMEN.
 MARYAM, OBEY YOUR LORD
 & PROSTRATE & BOW WITH THOSE WHO BOW.”
 (Quran Al 'Imran: 42-43)

The language she speaks is Aramaic – the lingua franca of the whole of the eastern Mediterranean for well over a millennium, in a wide arc from what is now Iran all the way to North Africa. The Aramaic name is important – the Middle Eastern name – for Maryam’s is a Middle Eastern story. Where **Mary** floats to Westernized people on a cloud of incense, a delicate European draped in silk, **Maryam** carries the scent of heat & dust clinging to her skin & her linen shift. The European Mary is the legend, the other, the real woman, Maryam. And if we are to reach beyond the legend, we must surely start with the most basic gesture of respect.

Let us do “Mary” the honour, then, of calling her by her **real name, Maryam** – the name she recognized & responded to.

The name she thought of as hers. She is from Palestine, with dark, olive skin.

She was NOT that elusive, light-skinned blonde icon in a long blue scarf, idealized on altars, in alcoves & adorning shelves throughout the Christian culture?

Pick up the Quran, turn to Chapter 19. It bears the beautiful name “Maryam.” Sort out legend & myth from truth.

**Maryam, who guarded her chastity.
We breathed Our Spirit into her.
She confirmed the Words
of her Lord & His Book,
& was one of the obedient.**

Maryam must be seen as a symbol of mediation between Christianity, Judaism & Islam. “As a Catholic priest **it quite surprised me to find that it was the sacred words found in the Quran that provided me with what I was yearning to know about the Blessed Mary.** As one who seeks to make the role of the Blessed Mary better known, the Quran brought home to me the gifts of this amazing creature. It is very beautiful to know that when any Muslim mentions Mary, he or she always refers to her as, ‘Our Lady Mary – May the peace of God be upon her.’ Mary has been described as possessing ‘the perfection of human spiritual attainment’ & as being ‘amongst the first group to enter Paradise.’ She is ‘preferred above the women of all nations & all times & of those in Paradise.’ The book emphasizes that she is ‘a spiritual example for mankind.’” – Fr. Vernon Robertson, The Oratory of Our Lady & Saint Phillip. Muslims should give a hearty “Ameen” to such a clear-sighted view.

To those who insist that the Mary of the institutional Church is the only possible Mary, welcome to ideas that are closer to reality. It is time to deliver Maryam from the hands of ecclesiastical patriarchy. It is not meant to rob anyone of their faith & to threaten the devout, but only to strengthen belief & understanding. The Bible doesn’t say much about Maryam, except that she lived in Nazareth & gave birth in the year 4 BC. She gets only cameo appearances in the gospels, and only once is she seen “grieving at the foot of the cross.”

Biographies of Mary, even more so than those of her son, require leaps of faith....for Christians but not Muslims. The New Testament – itself compiled many years after she lived and died – offers surprisingly little information on the woman eventually hailed within the church as “Queen of Heaven” & “Mother of God.” Paul, Mark & even Matthew generally ignore her; Luke – after recording some splendid material concerning Mary’s encounters with the Angel Gabriel and her cousin Elizabeth – contributes little else. Even in John’s Gospel,

where Mary prompts Jesus to help cater a wedding and where she is explicitly present at the cross, she remains a shadowy figure.

How then does one create a biography of Maryam? One approach is to turn to other sources like the Quran to find the definitive Maryam. Let’s resurrect her of whom the Prophet (p) said is guaranteed Paradise. This Mary isn’t the blue-robed icon painted by Fra Angelico or the young mother carved by Michelangelo, but a Quranic Maryam full of grace. It’s not meant to kick up some biblical dust. But to present the Quranic view. Readers who believe in the literal truth of the iconic Mary may have trouble with the Quranic view. Those who are willing to suspend their disbelief may meet a woman even more admirable (because she’s more human & real) than the statuette model of the Virgin Mother.

Some two thousand years have passed since Maryam was on this planet, and yet the date she gave birth is deeply embedded in our consciousness. We number years by AD & BC – Anno Domini & Before Christ – a system conceived by the Scythian bishop Dionysius Exiguus in the sixth century, formulated by Isidore of Seville in the seventh, popularized by the Venerable Bede in the eighth, and now universal. Whether in Jewish or Arab Jerusalem, in Cairo or Damascus, in New York or London or Paris or Tokyo, we measure time this way. We do it so easily, so automatically, that we rarely if ever pause to ask where it began. The twenty-first century since what? The year 1776 or 2012 since when?

No matter what faith we profess – or abjure – we date our checks, invoices, e-mails, newspapers, history books, birthdays, anniversaries by this one event that took place in the Middle East two thousand years ago. That year in Maryam’s life is seamlessly integrated into everyday twenty-first-century life. It makes no difference if we substitute the political correctness of CE and BCE (Current Era & Before the Current Era), since the ‘current era’ dates from that same moment. Maryam gave birth, and even the strongest atheist cannot conceive of time without acknowledging her.

Everything else we think we know – even who her parents were – is legend accrued over the centuries, far removed from her in both time and place. And though these legends are magnificent, they work as perhaps all legends do: they obscure any idea of who the real person was. Each successive image of Mary has taken her progressively further from the reality of Maryam. She has been used, **as all those who are venerated are inevitably**

used, to further individual, social, theological, even political causes. She has been garbed in silver & pearls, crowned with gold & girded with angels. In the process, she has disappeared. She has become all image & no reality: a virtual Mary. Or rather, an infinite number of virtual Marys.

Many Christians do not even care to entertain the fact that she was a Jew. And Jews tend to respond in kind. In Israel, she is called Maria ha-kedusha: the holy Maria. The use of the Latin Maria instead of the Hebrew Miriam is a means of distancing her, keeping her at arm’s length as though to say “No, not one of ours.” Another way, that is, of stripping her reality from her.

What was that reality, then? Who was she? Who must she have been? Who could she have been? Let’s turn our intellectual vision to the Quran. Legend disappears & truth appears. Two thousand years may have passed, but Maryam is still very much alive in this land...the Holy Land of Palestine.

Let’s not spin tales out of thin air – far more than enough of that has already been done in the case of Mary, both by those Christians who worship her and those Jews who seek to tear her down – but taking what can be known and examining it, following the strands of the story until they begin to intertwine & establish a thick braid of reality.

Let’s explore Maryam’s character, whom God raised above all other women, and thereby define the ideal Muslim woman’s character. As a result of this analysis, we will see that this superiority is only in terms of faith, fear and respect of Allah, and fine character. Any woman who adopts this character will have the strongest and the most solid personality possible. And by implementing it in her life, she will win Allah’s good pleasure and love, instead of striving to attain status or superiority in her society.

Women looking for the truth about a way of life & morality that will lead them toward honour, respectability & superiority on Earth & in the Hereafter will do well to follow Maryam. Hollywood/Bollywood will lead in the opposite direction to destruction.

Maryam’s Birth: When Imran’s wife, a sincere believer, found out that she was pregnant with Maryam, she immediately prayed to God. She praised Him and

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