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Sittinā Maryam of the Muslims. Honouring the Virgin Mary in Islam

Caius Cuțaru

Caius Cuțaru

„Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad
E-mail: c.caius@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study aims to present a few of the aspects regarding the honouring of the Virgin Mary in the Christian theology and in the Islamic world, honour which, even if lacking the coordinates of Christianity, still has its importance, especially among Muslim women. This honour was based on the Qur'an, in the honour showed by Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, but it is confirmed in practice, in the daily lives of the Muslims, in the true wonders that the Mother of God is doing in their lives.

Keywords

Honouring the Virgin Mary, history of religions, Islam and Christianity, Islamic Mariology

MOTTO:

“Meet is it in very truth to call thee blessed who didst bring forth God, ever blessed and most pure, and Mother of God. More honourable than the cherubim and past compare more glorious than the seraphim, who inviolate didst bear God the Word, very Mother of God, thee we magnify.”

Prayer “Meet is it”

I. Introduction

The Mother of God has a place and a privileged role in the hierarchy of beings of this world, belonging to humanity due to the human nature she possessed, but being honoured, more than the angels, due her gift, that of giving birth to the Son of God in this world, in time and in the Jewish law, becoming, thus, an intermediary for His Incarnation. Or, the Incarnation is one of the great mysteries of Christianity (cf. I. Timothy 3, 16)¹, Our Lady entering this sacrament of the true faith. Thus, she becomes the first of God's creatures, the most brilliant representative of humanity before the Throne of God, as specified by the psalmist: "The state has the queen of your right hand, clothed in gold and too embellished" (Psalm 44, 11).

I.1. Honouring the Virgin Mary in Christianity

Of all the saints, the Virgin deserves the highest honour, being "holy, most pure, most blessed, our mistress Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary", as we say in one of the litanies. The Church calls her "Empress and Lady", "Ever-happy", "Too innocent", "consecrated Church", "speaking Heaven", "heavenly door", "the Praise of virginity" and in prayers we say that she is "more honourable than the cherubim and past compare more glorious than the seraphim" The honouring that the Orthodox Church gives the Theotokos is called over veneration or over honouring (υπερδουλεία), unlike that given to the saints, which is called worship (δουλεία).

"The Virgin Mary is given such an honour because she was worthy to be chosen by God to be the Mother of his Son, Who took human flesh in her for our salvation. Therefore, she occupies a prominent place in the economy of salvation of the human race, being the chosen vessel that carried in her womb and bore the Saviour of the world"²

There are numerous reasons for the veneration of the Virgin Mother, but we'll mention only a few. After the fall of the first parents Adam and

¹ The quotations are from *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*, printed with the blessing of His Beatitude Father Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the approval of the Holy Synod, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2008.

² Arhid. Prof. Dr. Ioan Zăgorean, Pr. Prof. Dr. Isidor Todoran, *Dogmatica Ortodoxă. Manual pentru Seminariile Teologice*, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2009^o, p. 237.

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Eve, God made a promise, that salvation would come through a woman: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Genesis 3, 15). If sin came into the world through old Eva, salvation would come into the world through the new Eve, the Mother of God. The prophet Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be born of a virgin: “Therefore my Lord will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel“ (Isaiah 7, 14). Another Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel, in a plastic image, presents the supernatural birth of the Saviour that keeps the seals of virginity of His Mother untouched, suggesting a perpetual virginity:

“Then the man took me back to the outer gate of the temple toward the east, and it was closed. And the Lord said to me: This gate will be closed, not open and no man shall enter by it, for the Lord God of Israel has entered by it. Therefore it will be closed. As king, he will sit there to eat bread before the Lord; the way of the gate He will enter and exit the same way“ (Ezekiel 44, 1-3).

“The Church honours the perpetual virginity of the Mother of God and invokes the Virgin in prayer every day.”³

But, at the same time, the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of the Mother of God to other Christians is a real stumbling block, of doubt and confusion, losing their way because they can not accept the wonderful mystery of the Saviour’s supernatural birth and the mystery of the exit from the logic of the flesh and entering into a logic of the power of the spirit for the one that begat the Son of God incarnate.

God Himself honoured the Virgin Mary by choosing her, out of all the women of the earth, to carry in her womb His only begotten Son. Archangel Gabriel honoured her with the words: “And the angel entered her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women. And she saw him, was troubled by his word, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this might be?” (Luke 1, 28-29). Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist and Mary’s cousin, greeted her this way: “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to come to me the mother of my Lord?” (Luke 1, 42-43). In the answer to Elizabeth’s greeting originates fact that Mary

³ Father professor Alexander Schmemmann, *Preasfânta Fecioară Maria*, Trad. de Florin Caragiu, Basilica, Bucureşti, 2014, p. 18.

was aware of the mission she had to fulfil and the honour that she will have over time, “Behold, now all nations will call me blessed. He did that to me is mighty and holy is his name” (Luke 1, 48-49). Some of the people who listened to the words of Jesus called her happy and committed to honour the one who carried in her womb: “And when He said this, a woman in the crowd, raising his voice, said to him: Blessed is the womb that bore You and happy breasts are that you’ve sucked! And he said: Right, but blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11, 27-28).

The name of Mary “means *lady, mistress, the chosen one*, and she was in the spirit”: the Lord’s chosen” and “queen” who sits at His right, dressed in a gold robe and too embellished (Ps 44, 11)”.⁴

1.2. Mary in Islam – general considerations

Beyond the visible Church, more than a billion faithful Muslims believe, as we Orthodox do, that the Mother of God is the Virgin and that her destiny is closely linked to that of his Son, Jesus Christ, the Prophet. But, unlike us, the Muslim believers do not think that Virgin Mary (*Maryam* in Arabic) is the Mother of God (*Theotokos*) because they do not consider Christ as the Son of God, but a great Prophet. However, for us Christians, it is a great joy to know that the Virgin Mary, in Islam, enjoys a high regard, we could say, even veneration within certain limits, for her virtues and gifts that are unequalled.

Mary exerts a powerful fascination throughout the Islamic world, so far. Addressing the figure of Maryam and deepening of Mariological issues⁵ in Islamic revelation for Muslim believers is a duty of honour until today, especially for those who live in Europe and can put together such a dialogical relationship with Christians here. Honouring the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Prophet Isa, has its importance, even nowadays. Honouring one’s Mother, like in Christianity, is due to the bond with her son, Isa, or Jesus, considered in Islam one of the greatest prophets, as He is among those who brought the Revelation (the Gospel) and a precursor to Muham-

⁴ I. Zăgorean, I. Todoran, *Dogmatica Ortodoxă...*, p. 238.

⁵ We must be very cautious when we speak about an Islamic Mariology. Its content can create great problems for the Muslim theologians, who, did not avoid to give some answers in this case. On the contrary, they proved an extraordinary probity using even those texts referring to Virgin Mary that are not favorable to them or those that oppose their doctrinal tendencies.

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mad, that becomes, in Islam, the seal of the prophets and the last of the prophets. So, “Mariology” in Islam is also connected with the person of Christ, just like in Christianity, the over veneration of the Virgin draws its substance from the worship we give to Jesus Christ, but also to her quality of Mother of God (Theotokos), one of the consequences of the hypostatic union of the two natures in the divine-human person of Christ.

The Muslims call the Virgin Mary with the Qur’anic name “Maryam” and often call also “Sayyida”, a name which means Lady, Mistress and corresponds perfectly with the name in Christianity.⁶

The love and honour enjoyed by the Mother of God in Islam is the consequence of the esteem, admiration and veneration that even Muhammad had for her and that he sent to the Muslims. The Prophet of Islam reserves her a unique position in the Quran, a position that no other woman has, not even his favourite wives (Khadija and Aisha) nor his much loved daughter: Fatima or the wife of the Pharaoh of Egypt.⁷ When he entered Mecca with his friends, in the year 630 d. AD., Muhammad destroyed all pagan idols that surrounded the temple of the One God raised by Abraham and his son Ishmael, according to Islamic tradition, but did not touch the icon of the Virgin Mary and her Son, painted inside the Ka’bah.⁸ This shows how much the founder of Islam honoured the Mother of God.

Maryam’s immaculate conception and virginity are two of the fundamental characteristics of Islamic tradition, Maryam being located among those people chosen by God that the devil was never touched⁹ and who have kept their whole life their original integrity and purity. In fact, staying away from the evil touch of Satan is only for Christ and His Mother Mary, of the whole human race. ‘*Isma*’ is the Muslim doctrine about the immu-

⁶ See Yahya Pallavicini, *La Sura di Maria. Traduzione e commento del capitolo XIX del Corano*, Editrice Morcelliana, Brescia, 2010, p. 8.

⁷ See Y. Pallavicini, *La Sura di Maria. Traduzione e commento del capitolo XIX del Corano*, p. 8.

⁸ See Y. Pallavicini, *La Sura di Maria. Traduzione e commento del capitolo XIX del Corano*, p. 8.

⁹ C.M. Guzzetti, *Cristo e Allah, Convergenze e divergenze tra Cristianesimo e islam nella fede e nella vita*, Elle Di Ci, Torino-Leuman, 1983, p. 116. A se consulta și *Evangheliile apocrife*, Trad., introductive essay, notes and commentaries by Cristian Bădăliță, Editura Humanitas, București, 1996, pp. 45-75 (Protoevanghelia lui Iacob), pp. 149-189 (Evanghelia lui Pseudo-Matei) și pp. 103-117 (Evanghelia lui Pseudo-Toma).

nity when facing error and sin, that necessarily accompany the charisma of prophecy, provide these things.¹⁰ Mary is “the only woman who lived the miracle of motherhood without the help of man”.¹¹

The sources from which Muhammad has obtained his information about the Mother of God are the same sources which offered him information on Christianity: the four canonical Gospels, some stories and legends of the apocryphal gospels, such as The Protoevangelion of James, the Pseudo-Matthew Gospel and especially the Pseudo-Thomas Gospel.¹²

I.3. Virgin Mary in the prophetic Islamic genealogy

In the Gospels, the Virgin Mary and her mission of intermediary between God and man (Matthew 1, 18, Luke 1, 26-27) was prepared before hand, being included in the line of those men of God who have received the messianic promises, as Abraham, David, Isaiah, etc. The two genealogies of the New Testament, one from Matthew (1, 1-17) and one of Luke (3, 23-38) are meant to show how, in Jesus, is fulfilled the promise of salvation of the human race, made by God to the first people after the fall (Genesis 3, 15). The promise is put to work with the *fiat* of Mary (Luke 1, 38). These reflections lead us to ask whether there is something similar in the Qur'an, if it can be identified as a reason for the presence of the Virgin in the pages of Islam's holy book.¹³

¹⁰ C.M. Guzzetti, *Cristo e Allah, Convergenze e divergenze tra Cristianesimo e islam nella fede e nella vita*, Elle Di Ci, Torino-Leuman, 1983, p. 116. See *Evangelii apocrife*, Trad., introductive study, notes and commentaries by Cristian Bădăliță, Editura Humanitas, București, 1996, pp. 45-75 (Protoevanghelia lui Iacob), pp. 149-189 (Evanghelia lui Pseudo-Matei) și pp. 103-117 (Evanghelia lui Pseudo-Toma).

¹¹ C.M. Guzzetti, *Cristo e Allah, Convergenze e divergenze tra Cristianesimo e islam nella fede e nella vita*, Elle Di Ci, Torino-Leuman, 1983, p. 116. See *Evangelii apocrife*, Trad., introductive study, notes and commentaries by Cristian Bădăliță, Editura Humanitas, București, 1996, pp. 45-75 (Protoevanghelia lui Iacob), pp. 149-189 (Evanghelia lui Pseudo-Matei) și pp. 103-117 (Evanghelia lui Pseudo-Toma).

¹² C.M. Guzzetti, *Cristo e Allah, Convergenze e divergenze tra Cristianesimo e islam nella fede e nella vita*, Elle Di Ci, Torino-Leuman, 1983, p. 116. See *Evangelii apocrife*, Trad., introductive study, notes and commentaries by Cristian Bădăliță, Editura Humanitas, București, 1996, pp. 45-75 (Protoevanghelia lui Iacob), pp. 149-189 (Evanghelia lui Pseudo-Matei) și pp. 103-117 (Evanghelia lui Pseudo-Toma).

¹³ Gino Ragozzino, *La Madonna dei musulmani. Sittinā Maryam*, Edizioni Messaggero Padova, Padova, 2012, p. 41.

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From reading the Koran, sura 3, 33-34, we learn that: “(33) God chose before the worlds, Adam, Noah, Abraham’s offspring, the family of Imran (34) and their tribes, some of outgoing others. God is Hearer and Knower.” Thus, the Qur’an indicates a prophetic genealogy, a string of some of the Old Testament prophets who were the main landmarks of the Revelation of the Old Testament: the revelation of the primordial Adam, the Noahitic, the Abrahamic and the Mosaic ones, Imran or Amran being the father of Moses. In the prophetic sense, some descended from others and at the end of the line being the prophetic Virgin Mary, from the family of Imran (Sura 3 being called the *Sura of the Imran’s Family*). In a reversed manner, in sura 19, entitled *Sura Maryam*, the story of Jesus’ birth and the following considerations about His nature, are linked in some way with the Qur’anic account of the successive verses: 41-58, which list Abraham, Moses Aaron Ishmael, and Idris, with the clear intention of inserting Jesus, Son of Mary, in the line of prophets. We can identify the same intention in the Sura 21 called *Prophets*, when in verse 91 the mention of the one that “kept virginity” is preceded and prepared logically by verses 74-90, remembering the prophets after Abraham that succeeded Lot Dhul-kifli from Jonah to Zechariah, from Ishmael and Idris to David and Solomon.¹⁴ And if we read other Quranic texts we can draw the same conclusion: the name of the Virgin Mary is preceded or followed by the memory of the mission entrusted by God to the prophets. However, the Qur’an does not want to insert Mary among the prophets, it does not want to suggest that she had a prophetic mission.

Kalām, that is the Muslim theology, asked if Mary did not receive the dignity of the prophets. It distinguishes between *nabi* (the prophet who received the charisma of discoveries) and *rasūl* (“sent” beyond the charisma of discoveries, the mission to tell people about God). “Muslim theologians wonder if Mary was not a *nabiya* (*nabi*’s feminine). In general, they respond negatively; Mary was only a *ualiya*, endowed with holiness and friendship for God”.¹⁵ There are some exceptions in this respect. The first exception is the Muslim theologian Ibn Hazm (d. 1064)¹⁶, who is in

¹⁴ G. Ragozzino, *La Madonna dei musulmani...*, p. 42.

¹⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Le perle del Corano*, introduzione, traduzione e note di M. Capanini, Milano, 2000, p. 95.

¹⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Le perle del Corano*, p. 95.

favour that women should receive the charisma of *nabiya*; He cites several women who were beneficiaries of such charisma and insists particularly on the case of the Virgin Mary.

Another case is the great Muslim theologian al-Ghazali, who included the Mother of God among “the prophets and the saints”¹⁷. In the Qur’anic vision, Mary, Mother of the Prophet Isa, is one of those people to whom God has provided, protecting them from the evil work and helping them to carry out the mission entrusted. In this way we must understand the Qur’anic verse: “O Mary! God [...] chose you before the women of the worlds” (Qur’an 3, 42), the choice and the divine protection being the two essential features that Mary was individualized among the women of the world.

II. About honouring the Virgin Mary in Islam

Although the ordinary Muslim believer knows that Maryam is the mother of Prophet Isa, he knows too little about her. He surely knows about her, because the Koran often speaks about her and he hears her name several times in the daily Qur’anic readings. But we can say that he has no interest in being informed about her or in becoming a scholar in the religious issues raised by her person.¹⁸

In the following, we want to present some of the forms taken by the honouring of the Mother of God in Islam. We are surprised to find how diverse is this honour, starting with the names given to her, and continuing with the Qur’anic readings, prayers, promises, fasting, animal sacrifices, pilgrimages to the Marian shrines in the East etc. All come to confirm, once more, the words of Our Lady, transmitted by Luke the Evangelist: “Behold, now all nations will call me blessed” (Luke 1, 48).

II.1. About the names of the Mother of God Virgin

The ordinary Muslim “sees Mary as a nice person, venerable, right (*siddīqah*); he knows she is a person “chosen by God” (*mukhtārah min*

¹⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Le perle del Corano*, p. 95.

¹⁸ See G. Ragazzino, *La Madonna dei musulmani...*, p. 93.

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Allāh), but is reluctant to ascribe her the quality of “holy” (*qiddīs*), used by the Arabic-speaking Christians”.¹⁹

The Muslims believers assign the Virgin, as a sign of respect and veneration, many names: “the Virgin Lady” (*as-Sitt al-’Adra*), “Mother of the Saviour – the Redeemer” (*Umm al- Mukhallis*), especially when they speak to a Christian even “Lady Mother of Light” (*al-Sitt Umm al-nur*). But, the name most often used is “Our Lady Mary” (*Sittin Maryam*). As we can see, these names that go beyond the ones recommended by the teachings of Kalam in this regard. More caution manifests media when referring to the Theotokos, generally using only nickname “the Chosen Maria” (*Maryam al-Mustafa and Maryam al-Mukhtārah*).

In the Islamic world, the faithful have great respect for Mary, so great that none could afford to make jokes on the person or on her name. This respect is manifested in different ways. First, when talking about her, believers are very careful about the correctness of language, the terms chosen. They show their respect by giving their daughters the name of Maryam and by respecting her images and icons that they consider as carrying blessings. In written works, on radio or television, when in dispute with Christians, they avoid any argument, due to their respect and veneration.²⁰ She is often invoked by women. They use this formula: “For the love of God, oh, Virgin!”

II.2. Readings from the suras dedicated to Mary

The respect and the honouring of the Mother of God can be observed when reading the the well known Mary’s Sura. Fragments of this sura are recited during the Muslim funeral during the moment of condolences, especially if one of the participants is a Christian, as a gesture of friendship, and other times, when Christians with Muslims are together, or in the inter-religious meetings and dialogues.²¹ Even the children know her, because it is often read about her on television. For example, in Iraq, in 1985 a television has transmitted a series of mostly about Jesus and Maria, the two characters being totally Islamized.²²

¹⁹ See G. Ragozzino, *La Madonna dei musulmani...*, pp. 94-95

²⁰ See G. Ragozzino, *La Madonna dei musulmani...*, pp. 94-95.

²¹ Y. Pallavicini, *La Sura di Maria. Traduzione e commento del capitolo XIX del Corano*, pp. 7-8.

²² Y. Pallavicini, *La Sura di Maria. Traduzione e commento del capitolo XIX del Corano*, pp. 7-8.

Muslims' consideration for this Surah is due to an event of the early history of Islam, when the recitation of Mary's Surah saved the Muslims refugees in Abyssinia from the king Negus. Forced to leave Mecca, the first Islamic community took refuge in Abyssinia, where the Muslims are followed by their relatives in Mecca and accused, before King Negus, of a Christian affiliation, an affiliation to the new religion. While being accused, a Muslim, called Ja'far thirty episodes decided to recite Mary's Surah before the king. It is said that King Negus was thrilled to hear the recitation, but was even more impressed when the content of the Sura was translated, so he decided to ban the heathen Meccans and continue to protect the Muslims. Therefore, "the recitation and translation of Mary's Surah has, from this historical precedent, a value of protection and recognition of the new identities and spiritual forms of the Islamic civilization."²³ Thus, we can say that during its birth, Islam owes much to Christianity who offered protection.

For centuries, the Muslim sages studied and commented on verses of Mary's Surah and developed a theology (reflections and comments) on the pattern of spiritual devotion, "deepening and recognizing the pattern of piety and virtue of Mary. The first of all was the very Prophet Muhammad."²⁴

II.3. Prayers addressed to holy Virgin Mary and the veneration of her images (icons)

Muslim women strongly believe that Our Lady can do wonders and remember this especially in moments of trouble in life when they have to face trials. Although Muslim believer does not use images, which are considered forms of idolatry, recommended by the hidden God (Allah), except for the image-Ka'ba, in sign of gratitude for a healing demanded and obtained, women do not disdain the image of the Virgin Mary.²⁵ They hide the image of the Virgin in a handkerchief where they keep the money. It is interesting to mention the fact that the image or icon of the Virgin Mary is without the baby Jesus, as we are accustomed to see in the Christian icons, the Virgin Mary not being separated from her son, except some rare situa-

²³ Y. Pallavicini, *La Sura di Maria. Traduzione e commento del capitolo XIX del Corano*, pp. 7-8.

²⁴ Y. Pallavicini, *La Sura di Maria. Traduzione e commento del capitolo XIX del Corano*, pp. 7-8.

²⁵ See G. Ragazzino, *La Madonna dei musulmani...*, pp. 95-96.

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tions. Or, as the Christians in the East do not use such icons of the Virgin Mary, there are Muslim printers that print only this type of images. The Muslim believers seldom use statues of the Virgin Mary similar to those in the Catholic Church's liturgical use.

II.4. The fasting dedicated to the Virgin Mary

Older women in Egypt use to associate to the Coptic Christians in the fasting days preceding the feast of the Assumption. Their fasting is not the Muslim one, but the Coptic Christian, abstaining from meat and dairy products and according to their rules. More than that, in Iraq there are Muslim women who go to church before the start of the office, when there are not many Christians and they pray the Virgin.

II.5. Pilgrimages to churches dedicated to the Mother of God

Mary is one of the most honoured people in the history of Islam, most Muslims see her as one of the righteous women that have lived on earth, and a minority of them see her as a true prophetess.²⁶ Given the veneration enjoyed by the Mother of God, it is no wonder that, whenever they meet a Christian church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Muslim women enter and pray for a boy gift or not be repudiated by their husbands. And when their prayers are answered, they return to church to thank her, leaving the handkerchief used previously to touch the holy objects in church or other gifts. Muslim women see her as a model and are known to worship at Christian and Muslim shrines.

Muslims visit Mary's bath in Jerusalem by the St. Stephen's Gate, where the Muslim tradition says that the Virgin Mary once bathed and this place was often visited by women who were in search of a cure for infertility.²⁷ Here are brought candles, oil and flowers, but the custom is dying out nowadays.²⁸ Some plants were also named after Mary, like Maryammiah, which, as tradition says, has acquired the sweet smell when Mary wiped her forehead with its leaves. Another plant is Kaff Maryam (Anastatic),

²⁶ *Beyond The Exotic: Women's Histories In Islamic Societies*, Ed. Amira El-Azhary Sonbol. Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2005, p. 402.

²⁷ Taufik Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine*, Luzac & Co., London, 1927, p. 66.

²⁸ T. Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine*, nota 2, pp. 66.

which was used by some Muslim women to help them during pregnancy, and women were given to drink the water of this plant while praying.

Muslim and Christian tradition honour Mary's memory at Matariyyah, near Cairo and throughout Egypt, a country where the Christian tradition of the past and present are stronger presence, it is a custom that many Muslims go on pilgrimage to Marian shrines. And because in these pilgrimages Christians, especially the Coptic Christians, commit the Holy Baptism, sometimes, a Muslim believer asks for his child to be baptized in the Christian tradition. For these requests, the Christian priests use some springs reserved for the Muslim baptism, such as those from Abwān, Mansafis, Dayr Dayr Balayrah or Dronkah, etc.²⁹

In Algeria, for example, there are many Muslims who come to pray in the church of Notre-Dame of Africa in the capital of Algeria. By 1833, in Algeria, there was a mosque dedicated to Mary, called *Masjid sayydat us Meriem*.

In Jerusalem, at the tomb of Virgin Mary in the Virgin Mary Ascension Church, along the Syrian and Armenian altars we can see, in the south-east angle, a niche in front of which the Muslims stop to pray.

Another famous Marian place of pilgrimage is the church called "The House of the Mother of God" (*Meryem Ana*) located 9 km from Ephesus in Turkey, the destination for millions of pilgrims, Muslims and Christians. In Ephesus, as we know, in 431 d. AD., The Synod III Ecumenical solemnly proclaimed the divine motherhood of Mary, calling her Theotokos, meaning "Mother of God". The Virgin Mary lived for a period, being cared for by the Apostle and Evangelist John, who applied this way Christ's words on the cross: "When Jesus therefore saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said His mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then he said to the disciple: Behold thy mother! And from that hour the disciple took her to his house." (John 19, 26-27).

We can easily see that the places where the Mother of God lived or went through in her life troubled, became places of pilgrimage for the faithful Christians but also for Muslims, representing, at the same time, opportunities for encounter and dialogue for believers belonging to the two religious traditions.³⁰

²⁹ G. Ragozzino, *La Madona dei musulmani...*, p. 99

³⁰ See Y. Pallavicini, *La Sura di Maria...*, p. 8.

II.6. The Offerings to the Virgin Mary. Sacrifices

In the Muslim world, it is a custom for women to make promises, oaths and bring offerings to the Virgin, which are of two kinds: the offering (*nadr*) of a thing and the sacrifice (*dabīhah*) of an animal. The things offered can be incense, candles, money, and satin curtains bearing the name, carpets and gold jewellery. The sacrifices consisted in the offering of a sheep or a goat, a turkey, a hen etc. In this case, the animals are not purchased in the market, the animals reared on the own farm and brought to church on the fixed date. The animal is slaughtered and offered, a quarter to the church, and the rest is offered to acquaintances and relatives as a blessing.³¹

II.7. Virgin Mary -model in the education of young Muslim girls

The dissidents or the heterodox of Islam as Shiites are sometimes called, are mostly in Iran and manifest two tendencies in their girls' education. There is a moderate trend, taking as model, two characters, Mary and Fátima, but without confusing them. From this point of view, there are Iranian families that in the education of their daughters, partly under the influence of the Christian West, emphasis a kind of "imitation of Mary". A little girl is often said: "Do not do it because Hazrat Maryam did not do that." We can notice that the Virgin Mary is a model of education for some Muslim families.³² Women like to have statues of the Virgin Mary, even in their homes, believing in its protection. The other trend of the Shiites, the extremist one, goes further, arguing that Fátima, whom they give the male name Fatir (creator) is the incarnation of the spirit of Mary in the Muhammad cycle, the same that in Jesus's cycle was His Mother. Fatima, in some stories, appears as Mary's consort in Paradise.³³

This is the way in which the Islamic world understands the honouring of the Virgin, in many respects being closer to the veneration give to the Theotokos by the Orthodox and the Catholics. These are just some aspects of the Theotokos in the social and religious life of the Muslims, which help us understand the degree of diffusion of the Marian phenomenon in a different religion.

³¹ See G. Ragozzino, *La Madonna dei musulmani...*, p. 99.

³² Cf. Y. Pallavicini, *La Sura di Maria...*, pp. 73-74.

³³ Cf. Y. Pallavicini, *La Sura di Maria...*, pp. 73-74.

However, the honouring of the Virgin Mary in the Islamic world has its limits; we should not deceive us, because it does not compare with the honour showed to her by Christians. Whenever the Muslims invoke her, they do it for her intercession for the cause of Islam, asking her to make Islam prevail in the world. G. Ragozzino shows that

“The Islamic attitudes on Mary the mother of Jesus can be summed up as follows: on the doctrinal level, whose depositories and guardians are the lovers of *kalām*, there is a rigidity of positions that emphasizes and defends the differences from Christianity; in the Muslim religiosity, especially of the people and of women, there are ideas and feelings which, without putting into question the doctrinal principles, are certainly more flexible.”³⁴

III. Conclusion

A synthetic exposition of the main Mariological elements present in the text of the Qur’an, which brings closer the two monotheisms, leads us to conclude that, the luminous figure of the Virgin Mary, professed by Christianity and assumed by the Islamic doctrine, can be a solid point for the Christian-Islamic inter-religious dialogue and a supporting element in the quest of the straight path that leads us to God.

Honouring the Virgin Mary takes many forms in Islam, ranging from the readings of Mary’s Sura, prayers addressed to her and the veneration of icons or images that depict at stations and pilgrimages to churches dedicated to her and to take the Virgin Mary as model of education for young Muslim girls.

All these forms of veneration of the Mother of Jesus confirm the prophetic words uttered by the Virgin Mary, “Behold now all nations will call me blessed”.

³⁴ G. Ragozzino, *La Madona dei musulmani...*, p. 102.