

St. Mary

erved from the attacks of the devil (3/35-36). She was presented to the Temple and welcomed by God Who helps her grow, confides her to Zachary and feeds her miraculously (3/37 & 44). An angel appears to her and announces the miraculous birth of a child, the Word of God, and she accepts (19/17-21 & 3/45-47). She gives birth to Jesus at the foot of a palm tree, returns home to her family, is unjustly accused and is defended by the Child Jesus Himself (19/27-34).

As for her virtues, the *Koran* gives the following details: She was chosen by God and purified (3/42). She is the virgin *par excellence* and forever (21/91 & 66/12). God breathes in her (2/91) and He has "thrown" his "word" into her (21/91). As a true believer she has faith in the words of the Annunciation (5/75 & 66/12). She is a sign for all mankind (21/91 & 23/50). She is above all, the "Mother of Jesus," who is almost always called the "Son of Mary" and He owes her filial piety (19/32). The two together form one sign: but Mary is only a mortal being who must eat to live, she is not a goddess (5/116).

As far as tradition is concerned, Moslem tradition speaks very little about Mary. But when it does, it leans heavily upon the Apocryphal Books and even upon Christian Tradition. Thus for instance some of their writers say that Mary is Queen of all women here on earth and even that she is the Queen of Paradise. She is even greater than the women Mohammed loved most, (Khadija and Ayesha), and even greater than his own daughter Fatima. Mary is the only woman in the *Koran* who is thus glorified.

It is interesting to note that to this day many Moslem girls bear the name Mary. It has also been noted that at their wakes where the "holy Moslem women" are presented to them as a subject for their meditation, when the name of Mary is mentioned, a staggering upsurge of fervor runs through the entire assembly.

At this point one might be tempted to believe that the Moslems think pretty much the same way as we Christians do, when it comes to honoring Mary. Yet, out of respect for the beliefs of our Moslem brothers and sisters, we must avoid attributing a Chris-

tian meaning to their thought. All points to the fact that it remains typically Moslem. And here is why.

It is true that because the *Koran* speaks of Mary's faith and absolute confidence in God (3/37), the individual Moslem may be led to imitate her in his prayer-life which, as we know, must always be accompanied by an absolute confidence in God. On the other hand, because the *Koran* (19/22-24) also stresses Mary's cooperation with God, the Moslem will be inclined to take her as a model in his efforts towards total submission to God's will. A certain presence of Mary must therefore be acknowledged in the prayer-life of many Moslems.

Beyond this, however, the Moslem is not allowed to go. The reason being that at the very core of all Islamic teaching is that all cult and all veneration is reserved to God alone. The very thought that a creature can intercede for us with God is contrary to all Islamic thought—and that goes for the Virgin Mary as well.

Despite all this, one has to admit that the Moslems definitely do have their own shrines dedicated to the Virgin. A well-known case in point is the Church of the Dormition, in Jerusalem, where the Moslems have their own prayer-chapel facing in the direction of Mecca and where the pilgrims come to venerate the Virgin on their return from Mecca. Another is the House of Our Lady, at Ephesus, to which more than one hundred thousand Moslems come yearly to venerate and to seek the help of *Meriem Ana*, "Our Mother Mary."

Just what the Moslems' understanding of Mary is, one finds it difficult to explain. All we can say is that, at this point in time, it certainly is not the Christian's understanding. Our belief is based on Christ's divinity and in Mary's divine Motherhood. The Moslem is told that Christ was a great prophet, but not the Son of God; and Mary is the Virgin Mother of that prophet.

On the other hand, even though our own Christian understanding of Mary and her role in salvation history may differ from that of the Moslems, may we not see in Mary herself a symbol of peace and reconciliation between the Moslems and the Christians? Is this



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not what the Eastern Rite Christians have been promoting all along by their discreet yet thoroughly orthodox veneration of Mary, at the very heart of the Mystery of Salvation re-enacted in their Liturgy? Could it not be this intimate association between the prophet Jesus and His Virgin Mother, Mary, that is attracting the Moslems to "Our Mother Mary," as they affectionately call her?

Whatever it is that draws so many Moslems to Mary and to her powerful intercession, we may never know. Of one thing we can be sure: it can only be the work of the Holy Spirit Who breathes where He wills. And to all appearances, He is drawing Christians and Moslems closer together through Mary—all of which can only lead to a better knowledge of Christ, her Divine Son.

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