

## Christians, Muslims, and Mary: A History

Rita George-Tvrtković

New York: Paulist Press, 2018. 272 pages.

Since 1965, the declaration *Nostra Aetate* has been the primary point of departure for the Roman Catholic Church in its interactions with non-Christians. This Vatican II document is also the starting point for Rita George-Tvrtković in her latest book, a historical survey of Mary's role in encounters between Christians and Muslims. Noting that the Council spoke respectfully of Muslims, who "honor Mary, [Jesus's] virgin Mother," and "at times...even call on her with devotion," George-Tvrtković interrogates her own assumptions as a Catholic formed by this ecclesiastical context. *Christians, Muslims, and Mary* is the result, a book that speaks to both scholarly and popular audiences and blends thorough historical scholarship with the author's religiously informed perspective. It covers ground similar to Mona Siddiqui's *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus*, but as both authors acknowledge, Mary is more likely to be viewed as a "bridge" between the religions, while intense debates over Christology can make Jesus more of a "barrier."

The historical scope of the book is broad, reaching back to the Qur'anic revelation and even beyond, to the New Testament and the non-canonical *Protevangelium of James*. However, George-Tvrtković is primarily interested in analyzing Christian sources and perspectives, so apart from chapter three (on which see below), the book focuses on Christian statements about Muslims that interact in some way with the two religions' claims about Mary. George-Tvrtković finds that over the course of this complex history, Mary has often been as much barrier as bridge. Even the term "bridge" can mask questionable interreligious dynamics, as in many cases the desired end result of the Marian bridge is that Muslims convert to Christianity.

The book's first chapter discusses similarities and differences among the scriptural and quasi-scriptural sources that I have already mentioned, including a table comparing discussions of Mary in the canonical Gospels, the *Protevangelium of James*, and the Qur'an. George-Tvrtković makes the case that even if most Christians are unfamiliar with the *Protevangelium* itself, much of its content has become commonly accepted tradition, such as the names Joachim and Anna for Mary's parents. This gives the text an impact that reaches far beyond its name recognition and allows George-Tvrtković to discuss its illuminating parallels with the Qur'anic narrative. She notes that from relatively sparse information in the scriptural texts, both

Christianity and Islam have developed robust traditions of Mariology, proposing four key topics as potential sites of interreligious dialogue: Mary's chosenness, her response to God's call, her purity, and her relationship with Jesus.

The earliest theological speculations on these topics in Christianity and Islam, respectively, are discussed in chapters two and three. Chapter two covers Christian Mariology both before and after the rise of Islam, focusing primarily on the Greek and Syriac cultural spheres. One of George-Tvrtković's key interests in this chapter is to establish the idea that popular devotion to Mary preceded the explicit articulation of Church doctrine on the topic, thus arguing for the existence of widespread devotion to Mary well before the Council of Ephesus and the other major developments of the fifth century. Another theme that makes its first appearance here is the use of Mary as a bridge between Christians and Muslims in order to attack a third group—in this case, by Jacob of Edessa, who criticizes Jews by referencing Muslim respect for Mary. This pattern recurs throughout the book, especially in the context of modern debates between Catholics and Protestants.

Chapter three takes a slight detour from the book's focus on Christianity in order to discuss the history of Muslim Mariology. At the level of theological debate, one key issue is Mary's potential claim to prophethood, but George-Tvrtković is also interested in the history of Mary in Muslims' popular devotion and artistic endeavors. She mentions several major Marian shrines that attract both Muslim and Christian devotees, emphasizing again the primacy of devotional practice in shaping theological speculation. In this light, she is hopeful that shared devotion might encourage interreligious respect.

Returning from the Islamic tradition, the fourth chapter of the book discusses the views of medieval Latin Christians, the focus of most of George-Tvrtković's earlier published research. Riccoldo da Montecroce and Nicholas of Cusa—the subjects of her two prior books—make appearances, along with William of Tripoli. All of these authors wrote Latin polemics against Islam, yet all nevertheless praise Muslims for their respect for Mary. George-Tvrtković suggests that even if they were hoping for Mary to become a bridge leading Muslims to convert to Christianity, at some level they were truly amazed and impressed by Muslims' love for Mary.

At the end of chapter four, George-Tvrtković claims that "it would be many centuries before Christians would see Mary as an interfaith bridge

once again” (70). This sets the stage for her discussion of Our Lady of Victory and other Marian devotions formed in the context of anti-Ottoman conflict, the topic of chapter five. She describes the pivotal 1571 Battle of Lepanto and its place in the context of Catholic responses to the Protestant Reformation. For Catholic struggles against both Muslims and Protestants, Mary was key, and new devotional methods such as the rosary and the Marian sodality helped to bridge the gap between Church authorities and the Catholic masses. Both Catholics and Protestants argued that similarities between Muslim and Catholic views of Mary supported their side of the conflict, and Catholic appeals to Mary often took on a strikingly martial tone as she became their helper against all enemies.

The chronological progression of the book is interrupted briefly as chapter six returns to medieval Europe to discuss Mary’s role in converting Muslims in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*. The chapter focuses on Christian attempts to use Mary as a “tool for mission,” building a bridge to Islam so that Muslims can more easily cross over to Christianity. This includes the stories of the *Cantigas*, medieval visits to shared shrines, Jesuits at the Mughal court in India, and the “White Fathers” (Missionaries of Africa) in North Africa. As a contrast, George-Tvrtković discusses Protestant missionaries’ rejection of Mary as an obstacle to evangelism.

In many ways, the book comes full circle in chapter seven, which returns to Vatican II and *Nostra Aetate*. George-Tvrtković analyzes the uses of Mary by Catholic figures such as Fulton Sheen, who thought she was a potential bridge to the conversion of Muslims, and Louis Massignon, who came to view her as an impetus to truly respectful interreligious dialogue. The book also returns to the topic of popular devotion, focusing on the recent history of Meryem Ana Evi, a shared Marian shrine in Turkey. These trends, both at the level of high theology and at the level of popular devotion, bore fruit in *Nostra Aetate*, and George-Tvrtković is keen to re-emphasize the importance of devotional phenomena in shaping religious doctrine.

George-Tvrtković concludes in chapter eight with the four central questions of the book: In what ways is Mary shared? In which contexts is she a bridge, and in which is she a barrier? How has popular devotion to Mary impacted the Christian theology of Islam? How can knowing this history shape interreligious encounters today? As the book has already indicated, she sees more hope for interreligious coexistence in shared devotion than in theological debates. She sees several potential barriers to

Mary's role in interfaith dialogue, including feminist critiques of Mary's role in Christianity, the reluctance of some Christians to invoke Mary for ecumenical reasons, and Mary's long connection to triumphalist violence against Muslims and other non-Christians.

In *Christians, Muslims, and Mary*, we see the power that popular devotion can wield in shaping the doctrine and practices approved by powerful institutions, resonating with Jack Tannous's recent call to focus our attention on Christian and Muslim "simple believers." George-Tvrtković reminds the reader of the Latin saying that captures this dynamic: *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of belief). She is hopeful that shared devotions might lead to more irenic relations between Christians and Muslims, with Mary serving as a bridge instead of a barrier.

In further discussion of this topic, it would be helpful to see more explicit analysis of the ways that political and other circumstances generally shape Christians' and Muslims' interactions with Mary. George-Tvrtković's historical account makes it clear that Mary has frequently played the roles of both bridge and barrier over the long history of Christian-Muslim interactions, but we might wonder if there are certain factors that generally lead to one outcome or the other. Furthermore, George-Tvrtković uses the term "bridge" in cases where the desired endpoint is conversion to Christianity as well as in cases where Christians choose to respect the Islamic tradition on its own terms, so the question remains open whether a bridge is always better than a barrier after all. The complex history of Christians, Muslims, and Mary continues to be written today, and George-Tvrtković's book is a significant intervention, both as a record of what has come before and as a constructive statement for the future.

Joshua Mugler

Postdoctoral Fellow in Eastern Christian Manuscript Cataloging  
Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, Collegetown, MN