

Jesus, Mary and Islam

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The central figure of Christianity and his mother are important to Muslims

By GARY SOULSMAN
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If Humza and Maryam Javed Ismail had their way, they would ride by the big display of Christmas lights every day on Yeatmans Station Road that's near their Landenberg, Pa., home.

The lights remind the children, who are 11 and 9, about the importance of Jesus and Mary in Islam.

"We believe in the goodness and purity of Mary," says their mother, Dr. Sheerin Javed. "And sometimes we talk about this -- that Jesus is a special prophet for Muslims so it makes us feel good to see him honored this time of year."

Mary -- or Maryam as she is known in the Quran -- is held in such high esteem that Javed and her husband, Dr. Hummayun Ismail, named their daughter for the mother of Jesus.

At a time when the birth of Jesus is on the minds of Christians, he is also revered by Muslims. And while they do not celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday, there are many similarities between what the Bible and the Quran say concerning the birth of Jesus.

These are so striking that a former Michigan congressman believes that a better understanding of the Muslim and Christian scriptures would be a healing force in the world.

"The similarities are mind-blowing," says former U.S. Rep. Mark Siljander, an evangelical Christian now living in Great Falls, Va.

"But years ago when someone told me Jesus was in the Quran I wouldn't believe it until I read it. I was shocked to learn that Jesus is in the Quran as the Messiah.

"He's talked about as the word of truth. It's said that he can heal the sick and has authority to raise the dead. By my count Jesus is mentioned 110 times."

Scholars also lament that so much emphasis has been given to the differences between the faiths when there are so many similarities to unite them. This is especially true when it comes to Jesus and Mary, they say.

"Mary is highly regarded in the Islamic tradition, and the story of her birth, her dedication to the temple and the miraculous birth of her son, who is also regarded highly, are told in the Quran," says Umeyye Isra Yazicioglu, assistant professor of theology at St. Joseph's University, in Philadelphia.

Yet most Americans don't know how much there is in the Quran about the goodness of Mary and Jesus, says Vivienne Angeles, a religion professor at La Salle University, in Philadelphia. She often teaches Islam to Christian students who are surprised to find central figures of their faith mentioned in the Islamic scriptures.

Mary is one of the most mentioned figures in the Quran. She is revered for her purity, her devout faith and her virgin conception of Jesus -- brought into being by the power and mystery of God, says Asma Barlas, director of the center for the study of culture, race, and ethnicity at Ithaca (N.Y.) College.

Mary is important because she shows how much spiritual individuality can be achieved by Muslim women, she says. "She shows an equality to men that attracts women to her story," Barlas says.

In the Muslim scriptures, chapter 19 is called "Maryam" and tells her story -- how an angel appeared to her as a man to announce that God was giving her a pure and faultless son.

Mary asked how this could happen to a virgin. The angel said: It is easy for God, who has chosen to make the baby's birth a sign to the world.

But while aspects of this are familiar to Christians, there are differences with the Christmas story. Some of the nativity cast are missing -- such as Joseph, the wise men and King Herod.

In the Quran, Mary does not marry Joseph. Instead, she travels alone to a remote place where she feels such painful childbirth she wishes for death.

But God shows mercy and she rests under a palm tree. There, she is miraculously fed by water and dates.

After the baby's birth, she comes back to her people who marvel at the baby, not knowing Mary was pregnant.

Rather than speak, Mary points to her baby. "I am a servant of God," says Jesus. "He's given me a revelation and made me a prophet."

It's the first of his miracles. Jesus later raises the dead and is also resurrected at his death.

"Jesus brings teachings about how to live well and devote oneself to a holy life," says Faheem Akil, a member of the Masjid on Philadelphia Pike.

"His message is to worship almighty God and abstain from evil."

Muslims also believe that Jesus will return one day to set everything right, says Farhanna Muhammad, of Wilmington.

However, Jesus is not talked about as the son of God. In Islam, God is spoken of as a unity, rather than a trinity of father, son and holy ghost, says Dawud Muhammad, of the Masjid.

And for many Christians, that is a stumbling block to embracing the teachings of Islam, says the Rev. Bo Matthews, senior pastor of Brandywine Valley Baptist Church. For most Christians, a core belief is that Jesus was born as God's son to die for mankind's sins. "In our traditions, it's important that we don't blur the differences, but we shouldn't let it drive us apart as people," Matthews says.

The Rev. Tom Flowers, of St. Polycarp Catholic Church in Smyrna, says he's impressed by how much regard Islam has for Jesus and Mary. He wishes more people appreciated the similarities. He believes it would lead to greater respect.

Siljander agrees, saying he once felt there were irreconcilable differences between Muslims and Christians. He now thinks otherwise. And he writes in a new book -- "A Deadly Misunderstanding: A Congressman's Quest to Bridge the Muslim-Christian Divide" -- that 1,400 years of scriptural translations are at the heart of differences in speaking of Jesus.

Muslims object to describing Jesus as the son of God, he says. Yet, scriptures written in Aramaic suggest that it's proper to refer to Jesus as "the spirit of God."

When that phrase is used, Muslims agree: Jesus is the spirit of God, given that Jesus was supernaturally conceived by God. Jesus is also the son of Mary, the word of God and the word of truth, Siljander says.

"I pray with both groups in this language and it's perfectly fine," he says. "It shakes people up to realize how much we actually agree."

And, in the name of peace, he travels the world showing the hidden agreement between Christianity and Islam.

Additional Facts

SIMILAR STORIES

The New Testament nativity story is well-known, but how many of us know that the Quran tells a remarkably similar story?

It speaks of an angelic visitation to Mary, her virginity, and the conception of a holy son who will be the Messiah (Christ) and a sign to the world.

Mark Siljander, author of "A Deadly Misunderstanding: A Congressman's Quest To Bridge the Muslim-Christian Divide," (HarperOne \$24.95) asks people to compare sections of the Quran with scriptures in Luke.

From "Maryam" in the Quran (3:42-45, 19:19-21 & 21:91):

"O Mary! God gives you glad tidings from a Word from Him ... God has chosen you from above the women ... to announce a gift of a Holy son ... his name will be Christ Jesus ... held in honor in this world and the hereafter." "How shall I have a son seeing that no man has touched me?... We (God) breathed into her our Spirit and made her and her son a Sign ..."

And verses from the New Testament (Luke 1 & 2):

"The angel said to her fear not Mary you have found grace with God ... O blessed one among women ... you will give birth to a son you will call his name Jesus ... He will be great ... How can this be as no man has touched me. The angel answered ... the Holy Spirit will come and the power of the Most High will rest upon you ... the one who is to be born from you will be Holy."

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