

1-4-2022

Thomas O'Shaughnessy, SJ & Fazlur Rahman: The Incarnation in the Qur'ān

Renato T. Oliveros PhD

Follow this and additional works at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/apms>

Recommended Citation

Oliveros, Renato T. PhD (2022) "Thomas O'Shaughnessy, SJ & Fazlur Rahman: The Incarnation in the Qur'ān," *Asia Pacific Mission Studies*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/apms/vol4/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Ateneo Journals at Archium Ateneo. It has been accepted for inclusion in Asia Pacific Mission Studies by an authorized editor of Archium Ateneo.

THOMAS O'SHAUGHNESSY, SJ¹ & FAZLUR RAHMAN²: THE INCARNATION IN THE QUR'ĀN

Renato T. Oliveros, PhD

ABSTRACT

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ (Eisa al-Masih), a central Christian doctrine that the eternal “Word became flesh” is confirmed in the Qur'ān as the Logos named the Christ (Q. 3:45). The Spirit (Ruh) in Surah 19, and the Word (Christ) in Surah 3 confirm the Incarnation narrative in the Gospels of Luke 1 and John 1. In the spirit of Ignatius’ openness to extra-

1. Thomas O'Shaughnessy, SJ (1913-2000) entered the Society of Jesus on 30 July 1931. After his studies in Philosophy at West Baden College in Indiana, USA (1935-1938), he was sent to Lebanon where he first encountered the Muslim world while staying at Notre Dame de la Deliverance, Bikfaya, Lebanon from 1938-1940. After which, he was assigned to Ateneo de Zamboanga for his Regency, from 1940-1941, where he encountered Muslim-Filipinos from the different Moro tribes in the Sulu Zone. After his ordination to the priesthood in 1944, he studied Arabic Language and Classical and Modern Islamic History and Institutions at the Pontificia Università Gregoriana in Rome, from 1946-1947, and pursued Dogmatic Theology & Islamic Studies in Missiology where he earned his doctorate in Sacred Theology (STD). He went for further studies in Arabic Language & Islam at the Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth in Beirut, Lebanon from 1951-1952. During this period, he published what is considered a classic in Islamic Studies: *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran* (1953). He continued his studies in Islam at the Université Saint-Joseph from 1967-1968.
2. Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), born in Pakistan, acquired an M.A. from Punjab University in Lahore, and a Ph.D. from Oxford University. His teaching career started at Durham University where he taught Persian and Islamic philosophy. He then taught at McGill University until 1961 before returning to Pakistan to head the Central Institute of Islamic Research in Karachi. Although his works were respected by Islamic reformers, ultra-orthodox ulama were opposed to his modernist interpretations. They denounced Rahman as an apostate and called for his death. He was exiled to the United States in 1968 where he taught at the University of California and the University of Chicago.

Biblical sources in the Spiritual Exercises (SPEX), Qur'ānic sources can be integrated in the Ignatian contemplation on the Incarnation. O'Shaughnessy and F. Rahman argue that the *Rūh al-qudus* (القدس روح, "Holy Spirit") is not the angel Gabriel contrary to the early commentators that Gabriel and the Spirit are the same being. The mere task of Gabriel is to announce (Q. 3:42, 45-46) the conception of the Word by the Spirit of Holiness. The Qur'an not only confirms Luke 1 and John 1, but enriches the Incarnation narrative—a new annotation befitting Ignatian contemplation.

Keywords: *Interreligious dialogue, Digital Age, Church Mission*

Introduction

The Qur'ān (القرآن the recitation) is the holy book (*al-kitāb*) of 1.9 billion Muslims, approximately a quarter of the world's population. It is the second most read book next to the Bible, yet it is the most recited book given that Islamic prayer is centered on the recitation of verses from the Qur'ān, which Muslims believe is the verbatim Word of Allah. The Qur'ān says Christians and Jews are People of the Book (Arabic: أهل الكتاب, *ahl al-kitāb*, Q. 3:64) since their scriptures, the Torah and the Gospels, are earlier revelations confirmed in the Qur'ān. Most Christians, however, hesitate to read the Qur'ān. *Nostra Aetate* (Vatican II, 1965) mentions Islam and Muslims but is silent with respect to the Qur'ān. Yet without the Qur'ān there is neither Islam as a religion nor Muslims that we can speak of. The Qur'ān where Allah is revealed is the source of the Muslims' belief.

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ (Eisa al-Masih), a central Christian doctrine that the eternal "Word became flesh" (Logos: Koine Greek for "Word") is confirmed in the Qur'ān as the *Logos* named the Christ (Q. 3:45). The Spirit (*Rūh*) in Surah 19, and the Word (Christ) in Surah 3 confirm and contribute to the Incarnation narrative in the Gospels of Luke 1 and John 1.

Inspired by Ignatius' openness to extra-Biblical sources in the Spiritual Exercises (SPEX), I integrate Qur'ānic sources to enrich Ignatian contemplation on the Incarnation known to Muslims as the "Virgin Birth."

In the SPEX, contemplation on the Incarnation begins with God deciding to send Gabriel to the Virgin to announce that she has been chosen by God to be the mother of the Word whose name shall be Jesus. Luke is silent about the presence of the Holy Spirit, however, he implies that the Holy Spirit breathed into Mary at the very instance when she submits with a *yes*: "Let it be done according to Thy will" and she conceives the Christ.

Extra-Biblical Source in the SPEX

The Incarnation in the SPEX is the 1st Contemplation for the 2nd Week (nos. 102-109). Ignatius adds a prelude to it that is not found in the Gospels. Here the Trinity looks at the world where men are going down to hell, and decides to send the second Person to earth to be con-substantial with man for their salvation (no. 102). Another clear use of an extra-Biblical source in the SPEX is the contemplation on the Resurrection when at early Easter dawn the Risen Christ appears first to his mother. One will not find this in the Gospels but it is in the SPEX (nos. 218-219; no. 299).

In the Philippines, this contemplation is popularly celebrated as the *Salubong* (meeting). On the dawn of Easter Sunday, men accompany the statue of the risen Christ while women accompany the statue of the sorrowful Mother Mary. They converge at the entrance of the church as a child dressed as an angel unveils Mary, and the choir breaks into song, *Magalak ka Maria alleluia* (Rejoice O Mary). Spanish Jesuit missionaries in the Philippines first told the story to the Filipinos. It has since then become a part of the Easter Sunday religious tradition in the Philippines.

One can deduce that Ignatius, in his contemplation of the Resurrection, applied extra-Biblical sources from tradition. Pope John Paul II resurrected this powerful contemplation when at his General Audience on 21 May 1997 he quoted a fifth-century author named Sedulius who

wrote that the risen Christ first showed himself to his mother: “Before her eyes the Lord first stood.” The Qur’ān as an extra-Biblical source can enrich the Ignatian contemplation of the Incarnation.

The Qur’ān as an Extra-Biblical Source

The Qur’ān was revealed in the milieu when Christianity faced heresies and excesses in religious practices, such as the Collyridianism, a Christian heretical movement in pre-Islamic Arabia whose adherents worshipped Mary as god. The Qur’ān mentions this excess in Surah 5:116. Even though there may be differences in revealed Scriptures, close readings of specific Qur’ānic passages can still be interpreted in the light of Judeo-Christian tradition.

Thomas O’Shaughnessy, SJ writes that

...[in] truths found also in Christ’s teaching can arise outside the Church (Nostra Aetate, 2-3)... If this is true of world religions in general, it is even more valid for Islam, which arose in surroundings already influenced for centuries by Judaism and Christianity...(thus) the Qur’ān does not set itself in opposition to any Biblical teaching.³

The Annunciation of Gabriel (*Jibril*) to Maryam in Luke 1: 28-30 and in Qur’ān 3: 42-47 are essentially identical. The Incarnation in the Qur’ān is found in three Surahs (Surah 3, 19, 21 and 66). If merged into a single narrative the details are explicit and add to the Incarnation that we know of from Luke 1 and John 1. It begins with Luke 1 and Qur’ān 3, and segues to Qur’ān 19 where Maryam submits to Allah’s will and consequently the Spirit blows (Surahs 21 and 66) into her generative part and the “Word” named Messiah is conceived.

It is in Surah 19 when the Holy Spirit appears to Maryam as a perfect man who speaks and is spoken to. A dialogue between Him and Mary ensues

3. Thomas O’Shaughnessy, *Word of God in the Qur’an*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1984), Foreword.

leading to the Spirit breathing into Maryam's womb (66:12 and 21:91) to conceive the eternal Word named Christ (3:45). Despite her essential role in the economy of salvation, Maryam is not a prophet in Islam for the Qur'ān does not mention any female as prophet. Clearly, God includes Mary among the prophets and the righteous, those who call upon Him in fervent devotion and righteous fear.⁴ If God directly addressed Abraham and Moses, why would He not directly address Mary whom He chose, and by her obedience changed the course of Divine economy?

If the Spiritual Exercises as proposed by Ignatius should be oriented to placing each person directly in the presence of God by making him (her) take part in this divine-human dialogue through which salvation history is brought about, have the Gospels themselves – in the meeting between God and Mary – not given us the very prototype of this dialogue? (Simon Decloux)⁵

Mary's dialogue with the Holy Spirit in Surah 19 is akin to Moses arguing with *Yahweh*. How can he be the one for he is not eloquent? For Mary, it is that she has not been with any man. Like *Yahweh* of old the Spirit in the Qur'ān speaks to Mary with authority, and intervenes into her being — “And she who guarded well her chastity (lit. generative organ), and thus We breathed into her of our Spirit” (66:12/21:91), and in Surah 19:21: “[The Holy Spirit] said: ‘So shall it be. ...Your Lord says, it is easy for Me. ... And it is a matter [already] decided’ and (thus) Maryam conceived Jesus, the eternal Word.” (Q. 19:21)⁶

4. Ayoub, Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity*, ed. Irfan A. Omar, (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), p. 119.

5. Simon Decloux, “Our Lady in Ignatian Spirituality,” *Centrium Ignatianum Spiritualitatis*, 19 (1988): 123.

6. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, 2nd edition, (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), p. 66. (Note: This book is a Systematic Theology of the Qur'ān. He arranged it in 8 Major Themes in 8 Chapters: God, Man (Individual and in Society), Nature, Prophethood and Revelation, Eschatology, Satan and Evil, and Emergence of the Muslim Community).

The Incarnation: A Harmony of the Gospels and the Qur'ān

God in the fullness of time sent the Angel Gabriel to Mary at her house and room in Galilee. Mary was a faithful virgin (*al-batul*)⁷ from the obscure village of Nazareth in the obscure fishing and farming region of Galilee stricken by poverty due to Roman occupation.

The angel Gabriel appeared and greeted her: Hail, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you; blessed are you among women! (Lk 1:28). Maryam, surely God has chosen you and made you pure. He has truly chosen you above all women (Q. 3:42). Maryam was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel assured her, you have nothing to fear, for you have found favor with God. You will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. (Lk 1: 29-31)

The angel said, “O Mary verily Allah gives you good news of a Word (*bi-Kalimatīn*) from Him (*minhu*-Allah) whose name is Messiah (*smuhu l-Masih*), Jesus son of Mary (*Eisa ibn Maryam*) (Q. 3:45a, see Lk1:31). And the angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the child will be Holy, and will be called the Son of God.” (Lk 1:35)

Then We sent to her Our Spirit, and he became incarnate⁸ for her as a perfect man.⁹ She said, ‘I seek the protection of the All-beneficent from you, if you fear Him (do not come near)!’ (Q. 19:16-18) He (the Spirit) said, “I am only a

7. *Al-batul*: perpetual virginity even after the birth of Jesus.

8. *Holy Qur'an*, translated by Ali Quli Qara'i, (UK edition, 2005).

9. Fazlur Rahman describes the Spirit as one with powerful sinews or one with muscular power and strength. (*Major Themes of the Qur'an*, Chapter 5, p. 64.). *Basharan sawiyya* also means a righteous man.

messenger¹⁰ of your Lord (*Rasuulu Rabbiki*) that I may give you a pure son.¹¹ (Q. 19:19)

Maryam asked: “She said, how can I have a son when no man has touched me; nor have I been unchaste? (Q. 3:47a, 19:20b) How can this be since I am a virgin? (Lk. 1:34)” Thus God create at will: when God decides on something, God simply says to it ‘Be!’ and it is. (3:47b)

He said: “So shall it be. Your Lord says (*qaala Rabbuki*), ‘It is simple for Me;¹² and We intend to make Him a sign for humankind, and a mercy from Us. It is a matter (already) decided.’” (Q. 19:21) And Mary submits, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done unto me according to your word.” (Lk. 2:38)

And Mary...who guarded well her generative organ¹³ (*farjaha*), and thus We breathed into it of our Spirit (Q. 66:12-Medina)¹⁴ (*ah-sanat farjahaa fanafakhna fihi mir-ruhinaa*)/into her 21:91 (*fiha mir-Ruhinaa.*) (Q. 21:91/Mecca)

...what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. (Mt. 1:20b)

So she conceived him (Jesus), then withdrew with him to a remote place.¹⁵ Then labor pains impelled her (Mary) to the trunk of a palm tree. She cried in pain: I wish I had died

10. The Spirit is on a mission to blow into Maryam.

11. *Gulaaman-Sakiyya* also means an intelligent son, not just a pure son.

12. This is reminiscent of “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (Genesis 19:14)—an implied anthropomorphism when Abraham, like Mary, are speaking directly to God.

13. Ibn Kathir interpretation of *farjaha*.

14. Actually, Meccan based on style and similarity. (O’Shaughnessy, p. 25)

15. The delivery took place in Bethlehem about 6 miles south of Jerusalem. It was a remote place ... Bethlehem itself ... the birth was in an obscure corner under a palm tree ... afterwards it moved to a manger in a stable. (Yusuf Ali, footnote 2475, 1989, 748.)

before this and been completely forgotten.¹⁶ (19:22-23) And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.” (John 1: 6-7) “... Allah gives you good news of *Yahya* (John the Baptist), witnessing¹⁷ the truth of a Word from Allah....” (Yusuf Ali, 3:39) John testified to him (Jesus) and cried out: “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’” (John 1: 15)

The WORD from Allah whose name is Messiah (3:45)

The angels said, “O Mary verily Allah announces to you of a Word ‘*Bi-kalimat-in min-hu*’ (of a Word from Him [Allah]) — *ismu-hul Masiihu ‘Eisa-ibnu-Maryama*” (whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary.)” (Q. 3:45)

This Qur’anic verse affirms Christian theology that the “Word” (*Kalimat*) or the *Logos* that became flesh is named Messiah, the Son of Mary (*Maryam um Eisa*). The confirmation of the shared affirmation of the identity of the “Word” is in the Preface of the Holy Mass: “He [Jesus Christ] is the Word through whom you made the universe.”

For Christians, *Logos* (Word) is the name of Jesus Christ in John 1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh.” The Word conceals His Glory in becoming flesh. “Now that John has definitely reached the climax of his

16. She may have recourse to the trunk of a palm tree to find support in the pains of childbirth. It was so severe for the young virgin to bear, and hence she cried such words. (Maulana Muhammad Ali, footnotes on verse Q. 19:23, 617).

17. To confirm and reaffirm a Word who is Christ.

introduction in speaking of the Word become flesh, he never calls him the Word: The Gospel is testimony not to the eternal Word but to the Word become flesh, Jesus Christ, the Son of God (cf. G. Kittel in ThDNT 4, 132). The glory to which Jn testifies is now specified: it is the glory of the only-begotten of the Father.”¹⁸ Clearly, the Word who was there from the very beginning is made finite and human in Jesus. He is the same Word who is not created but became flesh. Be-came meaning to come into existence. The Word becoming flesh in the Messiah is that tremendous mystery of the Incarnation.

A Muslim interpretation aligned with Christian theology is that of Tabarsi following the authority of Qatādah. The meaning of the designation of Jesus as “a word” from God, Tabari reports...on the authority of Qatādah: “The word to which God refers as “a word from Him” is His word “Be.” God thus called Jesus His word because he came into being through God’s word.”¹⁹ A Word from Him (Allāh) means the Word is part of Allāh—inseparable. This is seconded by Ibn Abbas who declares that “Jesus is the Word of God,”²⁰ in Arabic “*Bi-kalimat-in min-hu*” (of a Word (kalima) from Him).”(3:45) God thus called Jesus His word because he came into being through God’s word. As part of Allah, he is inseparable. This is seconded by Ibn Abbas who declared that, “Jesus is the Word of God” implying that Jesus as “a word” from God.

Logos is both a proper noun and an imperative verbal command. God created with the Word “Let there Be.” In Biblical theology, “Be!” (*kun*) is God’s creative “Word” as can be read in Genesis 1:3 and 1:6: “God said ‘Let there Be’ (*allahu sayakūnu hunāka*).”²¹ Allah’s divine command “*kun*” (Be!) is the response of the angel when Mary asked: “My Lord, how shall I have a son seeing no man has touched me?” Even so, God said, God wills

18. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Bruce Vawter, C.M., in G. Kittel in ThDNT 4, 132, 423.

19. Ayoub, *The House of Imran*, 131.

20. Ayoub, *The House of Imran*, 131.

21. Ayoub, *The House of Imran*, 13.

what He wills. When He decrees a thing, He does but say to it *Be* (Kun), and it is.” (Q. 3:47)

Irenaeus of Lyon (c 130–202), a student of the Apostle John's disciple, Polycarp, identifies the *Logos* as Jesus by whom all things were made. He based it on John's Prologue:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” (John1: 1-3) And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (Jn. 1:14)

Irenaeus wrote that there is one Almighty God, who made all things by His Word, both visible and invisible, showing at the same time through whom God made creation.²² “In the beginning” in John 1:1 is an allusion to Gen 1:1 as John wants to show that Jesus, the *Logos*, is truly the creative Word of God who already existed at the beginning of time.²³ As *Logos*, Word of God, He is co-eternal with God from the beginning of time. The *Logos* is uncreated in the same way that Muslims believe that the Qur'ān is uncreated. In so doing, the Qur'ān places Christ as Allah's Word in a similar status as the Qur'ān is *Kalimatullah*, Word of Allah. Muslims believe that the Qur'ān is uncreated and has always existed in heaven. Then Allah sent it down to Muhammad as a revelation. The eternal *Kalimatullah* from heaven became the Arabic Qur'ān on earth for humankind. For Christians, the eternal *Logos* who is Christ, according to the Qur'ān, did not become a book but became flesh that Christians call the Incarnation.

22. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, 3.11.1 in <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103311.htm>

23. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Bruce Vawter C.M., *The Gospel According to John*, (Hoboken, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 421.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict) elucidates the *Logos* as the Creator Spirit. It is the “Creator Spiritus” from which proceeds everything that exists. This is the reason why Pope Benedict in 2005, referred to Christianity as the religion of the *Logos*. *Logos* is both a proper noun and an imperative verbal command. God created with the words, “Let there Be.” In Biblical theology “Be!” (*kun*) is God’s creative “Word” as can be read in Genesis 1:3, and 1:6: “God said, ‘Let there *Be*...’” (*allahu sayakūnu hunāka*).

***Rūḥ al-qudus* (القدس روح, “Holy Spirit”) is not the Angel Gabriel**

And John testified, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.³³ I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’³⁴ (John 1:32-33)

In the baptism of Jesus in the four Gospels, the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Holy Trinity, appears like a dove. In the Qur’ān, on the other hand, the Spirit appears as a perfect man: “Assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man.” (19:19) Muslim scholar Fazlur Rahman argues that the term “angel,” strictly speaking, is not quite accurate for the Spirit. For him the Spirit is not an angel (Gabriel) as traditionally understood by Muslims.²⁴ The Spirit is never an angel, but is the Spirit of Revelation who directly revealed to Muhammad the Qur’ān without the need of an intermediary. The Ḥadīth stories, where the angel Gabriel is depicted as directly conversing with the Prophet in the sight of his companions, must be regarded as later fictions.²⁵ Further, he describes the Spirit as a Person, and even describes the physical appearance of the Spirit as “...one of mighty powers (who) has taught him (Muhammad), one vigorous; and he grew clear to view when he was on the uppermost horizon. Then he drew near and came down till he was (distant)

24. Rahman, 97.

25. Rahman, 97.

two bows' length or even nearer...(Q. 53:5–9) Rahman paraphrases above as: "The one of powerful *sinews and strong muscles* (the Spirit) taught him (Muhammad)." Muhammad closely observed established on the highest horizon. The Spirit then drew near and descended so that he was at only two bows' lengths or even nearer to him. Fazlur Rahman describes the Spirit as one who is muscular, possessed extraordinary and almost suppressive strength.²⁶

The identity of the Spirit in Surah 19 is contrary to mainstream Islam; namely, the Spirit and the angel Gabriel are one and the same. Angels are created beings; but not the Spirit who proceeds directly from Allah, is the breath of Allah, and eternal and inseparable from Allah. In both the Gospels and the Qur'ān, it is God, and not an angel, who manifests His power directly in the conception and birth of Christ. Allah directly intervenes in the conception of the Word as Christ. It is Allah as Spirit blowing directly into Mary's generative organ.

The use of the "We" form, the Qur'ān manifests that God Himself breathed of His Spirit into Mary (21:91 and 66:12); the role of Gabriel is to announce (3:42, 45-46) the conception of the Word by the Spirit of Holiness.²⁷ It is solely God who acts, without intermediaries, as it was ordained that the Holy Spirit shall grant the pure son when He said, "I am only a messenger of your Lord (*Rasuulu Rabbiki*) that I may give you (Maryam) a pure son." (Q. 19:19) For Catholics He is the Holy Spirit who came down from heaven after Gabriel announced to Mary the good news: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

The Prophet Muhammad is aware that the Spirit is not of the same category as the angels. All seven verses (*ayatun*) cited here are revealed in Mecca at the beginning of the Prophet Muhammad's preaching and reception of

26. Rahman, 64.

27. Thomas O'Shaughnessy, SJ, *The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran*, (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1953), 54.

Qur'ānic revelation. The Spirit, however, has a distinct personality from angels. Here are four Qur'ānic verses that dispel the "Spirit = Gabriel" claim. They clearly distinguish the Spirit as different in category from angels, and that includes Gabriel: (1) 70:4 (angels and the Spirit, 1st Meccan period); (2) 78:38 (angels and the Spirit, 1st Meccan period); (3) 97:4 (angels and the Spirit, 1st Meccan period); and (4) 16:2 (angels with the Spirit, 3rd Meccan period). In verses 16:2 and 97:4, the Spirit with the angels, are ascending and descending. In five verses (16:2; 97:4; 7:85-Mecca; 40: 5-Mecca; 42:52-Mecca;) the Spirit is mentioned as descending or bringing something down. In these verses, "the Spirit is a definite person and plays, with the angels, an active part, "'standing', 'descending', and 'ascending.'"²⁸ They are all revealed in Mecca at the early period of Muhammad's preaching.

During this early Meccan period, which constitutes the first four years of Muhammad's preaching, it is improbable that Muhammad identified the Spirit with Gabriel. Accordingly, this identification was not made even as late as the third Meccan period, which is the seventh year up to Hijra.²⁹ The Spirit as Gabriel evolved through the Prophet or was taught to him in connection with the Annunciation story that he heard from Christians. According to O'Shaughnessy the prophet Muhammad only learned of the angel Gabriel from Christians after Surah 3 was revealed in Medina.³⁰ Only after hearing the details of the Annunciation story in Medina would the Prophet have made the connection between Gabriel and the Spirit. This confused association brought to him by his ill-instructed informants had Muhammad incompletely misunderstanding Gabriel, Spirit, and Jesus as linked together. By then the early commentators were unanimous in seeing Gabriel as synonymous with the Spirit.³¹ They integrated in their commentaries that Surah 3:42, 45 state that it was the *malaa'ikatu* (angels)

28. O'Shaughnessy, 17.

29. O'Shaughnessy, 23. Footnote 48.

30. O'Shaughnessy, 53 and 62.

31. O'Shaughnessy, 54 and 57.

who spoke to Maryam. But it does not mention the name Gabriel. Muhammad makes no explicit mention of Gabriel in both Surahs 3 and 19.

The Prophet Muhammad could have settled the issue on the identity of the Spirit when he was questioned by disbelievers (Quraish incited by the Jews) in Mecca. “They asked you concerning the Spirit. Say, *ar-Ruh* (the Spirit) is of the command (domain) of my Lord; so desist from probing for you have been given little knowledge about it.” (Q. 17:85, 3rd Meccan Period) Muhammad bluntly rebuked the disbelievers from such inquiry, for they knew little. Does this imply that Muhammad too, had no knowledge of the identity of the Spirit? But if he knew, it would have been the opportune time to end all doubts about the identity of the Spirit, by stating once and for all that the Spirit is Gabriel. Yet Muhammad did not. Muhammad himself does not know the identity of the Spirit. So, for any Muslim to claim with certitude that the Spirit is Gabriel is implying that they know more than their Prophet, who clearly said that we do not know much of the Spirit.

The six *ruh* verses revealed in Medina makes it impossible to substitute Gabriel for the Spirit like in this revelation: “We breathed into them [generative parts] some of our Spirit (66:12, 21:91).”³² Further, the notion that Gabriel is the Spirit would mean that Gabriel “impregnated”³³ Maryam, making it awkward and problematic. Conversely, if Gabriel is not the Spirit, who then is the Spirit? It is a dilemma for Muslims. For Christians it is easy to allude that the Spirit in Surah 19 is the Holy Spirit, the 3rd person of the Holy Trinity. However, this would not be easy for Muslims because it compromises the Tawhid, the Unity and Oneness of God. The worship of gods or anything other than Allāh is blasphemous or *shirk* – a grave sin in Islam. O’Shaughnessy puts the blame on the early commentators who were behind the push to equate the Spirit with Gabriel.

The Spirit Incarnate (Q. 19:17-18)

32. O’Shaughnessy, 53.

33. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, 2nd Edition, (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), 96 (66-67).

Mention in the Qur'an the story of Maryam. She withdrew from her family to a place to the east and secluded herself. Then We sent to her Our Spirit, and he became incarnate³⁴ for her as a perfect human. She said, 'I seek the protection of the All-beneficent from you, if you fear Him (do not come near)!' (Q. 19:16-18)

Incarnation, defined as the Word becoming flesh or human and whose name is Messiah, is a shared revelation in both the Qur'an (Surah 3) and the Gospels (Luke 2 and John 1). The Qur'an, however, applies incarnation to the Spirit who appeared to Mary as a perfect human; it took place right after the angels (pl. *mala'ika*) announced to her that she has been chosen of all women. On one hand, Ali Quli Qarai, a scholar from Iran whose major work is the translation of the Qur'an to English, adheres to tradition and equates the Spirit as Gabriel. On the other hand, Fazlur Rahman, a modernist scholar and philosopher of Islam, convincingly argued that the Spirit is not Gabriel.

Interestingly, Qarai used "incarnate" (in human form) to describe the Spirit who appeared to Mary. When I messaged him on Facebook on 14 April 2021, to ask why he had chosen the word "incarnate" in reference to the appearance of the Spirit, he replied: "I don't remember what my thoughts were at that time. But when I think about it now, it appears to me that it was somewhat a straightforward choice, as that is how 'incarnate' is defined in the dictionary: invested with bodily nature and form; embodied in human form; personified. The idea of embodiment of non-corporeal entities is replete in Shia hadith, and that might have been an influence. 'Appeared' seems to me rather vague, while 'became incarnate' seems more fitting for a spirit. Moreover 'personify and 'embody' are also among literal meanings of *tamaththul*"³⁵ (5 July 2021).³⁶ In support of this is the way the Holy Spirit is portrayed in bodily form in the Gospel of Luke 3:22 at the

34. *Holy Qur'an*, translated by Ali Quli Qarai, (UK edition, 2005).

35. Appear in the image of. In Q. 19:17, as a Perfect Man.

36. Ali Quli Qarai, Facebook direct message to author, July 5, 2021

baptism of Jesus: “The Holy Spirit came down upon him *in bodily form* like a dove.” The idea of the Holy Spirit becomes incarnate in bodily form, whether as man in the Qur’an or a dove in Luke, is how He communicates with human beings. What makes the appearance of the Holy Spirit in the Qur’an unique and extraordinary is that He spoke directly to Maryam. Maryam asked: “My Lord (*Qaalat Rabbi*), how can I have a son when no man has touched me; nor have I been unchaste? (Q. 3:47, 19:20b) How can this be since I am a virgin? (Lk. 1:34) He said: “So shall it be. Your Lord says (*qaala Rabbuki*), ‘It is simple for Me... and it is a matter (already) decided.’” (Q. 19:21) And Mary submits, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done unto me according to your word.” (Lk. 2:38)

Who then is the Spirit? The Spirit, the *Ruh al-Qudus* (Holy Spirit), is defined in Christian theology as a divine person. Although the Holy Spirit is taught as the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, the Gospels have described the Him as a Dove, a powerful Wind, or a Tongue of Fire. It is only in the Qur’an where the Holy Spirit is described as a Person who visited Mary right after the angel Gabriel announced that she will be the mother of the Messiah.

In Surah 19, the Holy Spirit dialogues with Mary and promises to grant her a child so pure. The words, “I will give you a pure son,” are the words of the Holy Spirit which He follows with, “So shall it be (for) It is easy for Me (Holy Spirit)...(for) it is a matter (already) decided” (Q. 19:21). In Luke, Mary submits to the will of God and seals the promise of the Spirit by her response: “Let it be done according to Thy will” (Lk 2:38). Then follows the incarnation of the Word as human as enacted by the Holy Spirit:

And Mary...who guarded well her generative organ³⁷ (*farjaha*), and thus We breathed into it of our Spirit (Q. 66:12-Medina)³⁸ (*ah-sanat farjahaa fanafakhna fih mir-ruhinaa*) / into her (*fih mir-Ruhinaa.*) (Q. 21:91-Mecca)

37. Ibn Kathir interpretation of *farjaha*.

38. Actually, Meccan based on style and similarity. (O’Shaughnessy, p.25)

The Messiah is conceived as earlier announced by the angels: "O Mary verily Allah gives you good news of a Word (*bi-Kalimat*) from Him (*minhu-Allah*) whose name is Messiah (*smuhu l-Masih*), Jesus son of Mary (*Eisa ibn Maryam*) (Q. 3:45a, see Lk1:31). And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk 1:35). The Incarnation mentioned in the Gospel of John 1:14, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us" is realized in the conception of the Word as human in the womb of Mary.

"And We Breathed Our Spirit into her Womb"

(Q. 66:12, 21:91).

A Preface of the Holy Mass says: "By the power of the Holy Spirit he took flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary." This is confirmed in the Qur'an: "We (Allah) breathed into her (Mary) from (of) Our Spirit." But Muslim commentators, from a desire to avoid downright anthropomorphism, make Gabriel instead of the Spirit, who is part of Allah, the one to breathe into Mary. (21:91; 66:12). The true teaching of the Qur'an is that the creative inbreathing came directly from Allah.³⁹ "We breathed Our Spirit (*min Ruhina*)..." (Q. 21:91) and in Q. 66:12: "Into whose womb we breathed of Our Spirit (*min ruhi-na*)." To breathe implies that the Spirit being breathed-out is part of Allah or is Allah Himself. It is mentioned that, "We sent to her 'Our Spirit' (*ruuhanaa*)," implying that the Spirit is part of God as God Himself. So to be consistent with their stance that the spirit is Gabriel, the commentators ended up assigning to Gabriel the authority to give Maryam a "pure boy." (19:19)⁴⁰

Qudus (Holy) combined with *Ruh* (Spirit) as *Ruh al-Qudus* (Holy Spirit) is found four times in the Qur'an; three of which (2:87, 2:253, and 5:110) describe Allah as strengthening Jesus Christ through the Spirit, and

39. O'Shaughnessy, 63.

40. O'Shaughnessy, 64.

once (16:102) in strengthening the faithful Muslims.⁴¹ The Spirit has His own essence distinct from Eisa's (Jesus) who, too, is Eternal as Word of God. The Spirit as *Ruah* (breath) is consistent with Catholic teaching of God breathing in creation, and God breathing in the womb of Mary instantaneously when Mary submitted to God's will and divine plan by her words, "Let it be done according to the Thy will." (Lk.1:38) The Spirit as *ruah* blows into Mary's generative part (*absanat farjahaa fanafakhna fih min rubinaa* [21:91]) the moment she said "yes" in her submission of "Let it be done according to Thy will." Her obedience to the will of God instantaneously inaugurated God's divine plan of salvation when she conceived the Word as a human person named Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, Abu'l-Barakat mentioned Muslim repugnance to the idea that the Word of God is found in the womb of a woman. They disliked the notion of Jesus being created in the Womb.⁴² Informants of the prophet suggested that the word of God penetrated into her by her ears. They misconstrued Saint Ephraem's metaphor that, "[t]he Word came into her ear" as a seed planted into Mary's ears. They believed in this erroneous teaching and interpreted the metaphor literally.⁴³

Yahya (John the Baptist) Witnesses to the Word

From within the same pericope of Surah 3 (Medina) is revealed the angels who greeted Zechariah (Zacharias): "Allah gives you the good news of Yahya (John the Baptist) as a Witness of a Word (Christ) of Allah." (3:39) The angels also greeted Maryam: "Allah gives you the good news of a Word from Him (Allah) whose name is Messiah...." (3:45)

The role of Jesus as savior may differ in Islam, but Surah 3's depiction of the Word, conceived in Maryam and witnessed by Yahya (John), has a strong parallelism with the Gospel according to John, Chapter 1, which

41. O'Shaughnessy, 44; Fazlur Rahman, 96.

42. O'Shaughnessy, 60. 'Abu 'L-Barakat, Kitab misbah... in *Patrologia Orientalis*, vol. 20, 663.'

43. O'Shaughnessy, 61. 'Armenian Book of the Infancy and the Proevangelium of James.'

reveals the incarnation of the Word becoming flesh. Tabari interprets the phrase, "confirming a Word of God," to refer to the al-Masih (the Messiah), Jesus the son of Mary. Neither the Qur'an nor the Hadith mentions Maryam's visit to her cousin Ilisabat (Elizabeth the wife of Zechariah). It is in al-Tabari's tafsir that it is written: "The wife of Imran said, O Mary! Truly I feel that what is in my womb is stirring before what is in thy womb." (Tafsir III, p. 157)⁴⁴ Al-Tabari reported that al-Dahhak said, "John was the first to assent to Jesus and to bear witness that he was a Word of God."⁴⁵ It first happened as Ibn Kathir reported on the authority of Ibn Abbas that, "John's mother (Ilisabat) used to say to Mary, 'I feel the child in my womb bowing down in reverence to the child in your womb.' This was the manner in which John confirmed to Jesus, while still in the womb."⁴⁶ Tabarsi argued that John was obligated by God to be a witness to the fact that Jesus is in truth the Word of God and His spirit. John has credibility and integrity that people believed John's word because of his veracity and asceticism.⁴⁷ Instead of testifying that Jesus is the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29, 1:36), the Qur'an says that Yahya testifies that the Word of God is Jesus, the Messiah.

Conclusion

The good thing about the Qur'an as an extra-Biblical source is that it affirms and contributes to the knowledge of what has been revealed in the Gospels. A case in point is the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The Qur'an highlights that Allah has made Maryam pure, immaculate. The Qur'an states it clearly with certitude that Mary is the immaculate one. Six centuries after it is revealed in Luke it is revealed again to the Arabs in the Qur'an when the angels greeted Maryam: "Yaa-

44. Victor Courtois, SJ, *Notes On Islam*, (Calcutta: Oriental Institute, St. Xavier's College, 1952), p. 62

45. Ayoub, *The House of Imran*, Tabari, VI, pp. 373-372, p.108.

46. Ayoub, *The House of Imran*, Ibn Kathir, II, 34, p. 108.

47. Ayoub, *The House of Imran*, Tabarsi, III, p.72; cf. Tabataba'i, III, pp. 176-177, p. 109.

Maryamu 'innal-laahastafaaki wa tahharaki wastafaaki 'alaa nEisaaa-'il-'aalamiin.” (O Mary, God has chosen you and made you pure, and chosen you above all women of the world.) (Q.3:42) Mary’s chosenness, which is confirmed in the Qur’ān, is revealed in Luke with “Blessed are you among women” and sang by Mary in her Magnificat: “For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed.” (Lk. 1:48b)

Integral to God’s act of choosing Maryam is the act of making her pure (made pure). As mentioned above, the Qur’ān is clear that Allāh made Maryam pure, immaculate (*mutabhar*), without sin. Her immaculateness and fullness of grace made her will perfectly aligned with the will of God. In this regard, Maryam must be sinless and immaculate (Latin: macula, without stain or sin) because she will be the mother of the child that the Qur’ān names as *Kalimatullah*—“a Word (*kalima*) from Allāh” (3:45). Maryam is “made pure” by Allāh (3.42) to be the perfect receptacle of the “Word” who is Jesus, the Christ. *Yaa Maryamu innAllahas-tafaaki—wa taharaki.* “Mary, God has chosen you, and made you pure.” (3.42) This defining Qur’ānic revelation, the reference to Allāh making Maryam pure and choosing her from all women, encapsulates the Catholic dogma that Maryam is immaculately conceived—*tahara*-clean, pure, chaste, unblemished, blameless.

In the Incarnation, the Word (*Logos*) in the Qur’ān becomes man who is the co-eternal and uncreated Word whose name is no other than the Messiah. Luke does not use Messiah in his Annunciation scene, but instead uses the name Jesus. In the Qur’ān, as early as the annunciation, the Word is identified as the Messiah, the anointed one of God. Yet there are other instances when Jesus Christ is misrepresented by Muslim interpreters or commentators of the Qur’ān: “We sent Jesus, son of Mary, giving him the Gospel” (Mecca—57:27, 19:30). The Qur’ān implies that Jesus received the book Injil (Gospel), but for Christians Jesus Christ is the Gospel Himself. What is written in the four canonical Gospels are witness accounts of the companions of Jesus. Furthermore, some Muslim commentators

intentionally downplay the centrality of the Messiah in Jewish and Christian theology. While some accept the Jewish and Christian interpretation as God's anointed one, others like Ibn Kathir and Tabari held that Jesus was called al-Masih because of his continuous journeying; *masih* derived from the verb *saha*, to roam or travel from place to place with no fixed place to stay. Others said he was so called because Jesus is flat-footed, *masih* meaning flat or smooth.⁴⁸

Whatever the earlier commentators wrote were unfairly prejudicial to Eisa al Masih and to his mother Maryam. Bear in mind that the early exegesis on the Qur'ān were written at the height of conflict between Islam and Christianity. So the commentaries were written to undermine each other. Christian polemics undermined the Qur'ān and the prophet of Islam. As expected, the Muslims did the same to undermine Christian teachings by misrepresenting the Qur'ān to achieve such a goal. The Qur'ān is hurt in the process. Clearly, the Qur'ān cannot be faulted for any misrepresentation and misinterpretation. It is in many instances the fault of interpreters. Let the Qur'ān speak for Himself. Some interpreters cloud the true meaning of the Qur'ān. At times some of them are not driven by the truth but driven more by competition to downplay Maryam and at times, Jesus.

May St. Ignatius' openness to extra-Biblical sources pave the way to the Qur'ān as a source to deepen one's contemplation on the Incarnation and other mysteries of the Catholic faith that are confirmed in the Qur'ān. In the spirit of dialogue, of prayer and contemplation, may it be an occasion for Muslims to encounter the Spirit of God in a new and meaningful light. The virgin birth narrative in the Qur'ān sheds light on the role of the Holy Spirit in Surah 19 in the incarnation of the Word. It shall serve as a bridge, not only to Qur'ānic and Gospel studies, but to a shared Muslim-Catholic spirituality as well.

48. Ayoub, *The House of Imran*, 131.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RENATO TAIB OLIVEROS, a Filipino raised by a Muslim mother and a Catholic father, teaches Catholic Catechism at Mater Dei Academy in Tagaytay. He has a Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan; Master's in Theology, Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU); Master's in Islamic Studies, Hartford Seminary, Connecticut; and a Doctorate in Islam, Temple University, Philadelphia. He is recipient of the Cardinal Sin Marian Chair (2007-2008), Loyola School of Theology, ADMU.