

Research Article

Jenny Ponzio*

The model of Mary between Islam and Catholicism: The figurativization of normative principles in the intercultural exchange

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ijld-2020-2038>

Abstract: In the Catholic tradition, saintly characters work as figurativizations or narrative representations of underlying values and normative principles and therefore represent strategic communication media to disseminate particular models of behavior among the faithful. This paper tests the efficacy of the representation of saintly figures in the case of the interreligious dialogue by focusing on the case study of the construction and communication of the figure of the Virgin Mary in the encounter between Catholics and Muslims. What emerges from an analysis of scholarly and institutional texts, as well as from some reflections on ecumenical practices in Marian shrines, is that the representation of Mary as the figurativization of abstract values and norms mostly concerns a cultivated elite and that the dialogue on the respective representations of Mary is quite limited and concerns especially Mary as the model of the perfect pious and devout person.

Keywords: Catholicism, ecumenism, figurativization, Islam, thematic roles, virgin Mary

“the substance of Mary is the very substance of original sanctity”
al-Baqli (11th cen.).¹

¹ Quoted in Smith and Haddad (1989: 183).

1 Introduction

The translation of a normative system entailing behavioral codes, values and beliefs from one culture into another is a key issue in a globalizing world, and especially in contexts where people with different cultures and religions have to learn to live together. The process of reciprocal comprehension is necessary to make dialogue possible, but it is complex at every level: while people have to face and interpret a different culture in their everyday life, specialists and institutions are required an effort of translation of concepts specifically belonging to the other culture and not perfectly overlapping with the ones already known and considered normal or normative, and, moreover, they are called to make a work of dissemination and education.

In Western culture, it is a widespread idea that heroes and saints embody systems of social, moral or religious values and represent therefore models of behavior.² They play this function by making abstract notions more comprehensible, by materializing them in a narrative structure and by giving them a more human shape that awakens a response which is not only intellectual, but also emotional.³ In particular, in the Catholic tradition, saints are proposed as models to millions of faithful,⁴ thus constituting effective and strategic communication media to disseminate a certain worldview (Leone 2010: 1; Ponzo 2020).

This paper tests this idea in relation to the intercultural dialogue: the efficacy of saintly figures as figurativizations of religious and normative principles has been widely proved inside the framework of Catholic tradition, but can these figures play a key role also in the intercultural translation of normative and religious systems? An excellent case study for trying to find an answer to this question is the comparison between the Catholic and the Islamic figure of the Virgin Mary, which both traditions venerate. After briefly presenting in what senses Mary is proposed as a model in the Islamic and in the Catholic traditions,

² This idea can be detected for instance in Lévi-Strauss's analysis of Greek mythology, see in particular his analysis of the myth of Oedipus, where he outlines the cultural and religious values and normative principles expressed in the story of the character (Lévi-Strauss 1958).

³ Indeed, as literary theory has widely proved, characters stimulate processes of identification, for a further reflection and some bibliographic references on this topic, see Ponzo (2019: 210–214).

⁴ This is evident, for instance, in the canonization ceremonies both of the past (see e.g. Leone 2010 for the canonization of the great saints of the Counter-Reformation period) and of the present (consider e.g. the global mediatic diffusion of the ceremonies of canonization of important contemporary saints such as Pio of Pietralcina in 2002 and Mother Teresa of Calcutta in 2016). The strategic value of key figures of masters, heroes and leaders for transmitting values and models of behavior can be detected in many other cultures, consider e.g. the role of the master of oriental traditions such as Confucianism, or the role of the Buddha for Buddhism.

I will point out how Catholics shape the meaning of the figure of the Virgin in relation to Muslims. Finally, I will also reflect on how different interpretations of the figure of the Virgin are connected with social and ritual practices, with particular attention to contemporary Italy, a country with a strong Catholic historical and cultural background interested in recent years by a considerable immigration of Muslims.⁵ My analysis has no pretension of exhaustiveness: the systematic exploration of the discourse about Mary in all its facets and from all the different orientations of both Catholicism and Islam goes well beyond the scope of this paper, as well as a systematic analysis of religious practices in Marian shrines. What I propose is rather a preliminary enquiry, the result of which will be questioning the efficacy of the use of the figure of Mary, which both religions consider a prototype of sanctity, in the framework of the inter-cultural translation and dissemination of normative principles and values.

2 Mary: What kind of model for Islam?

The Virgin Mary is referred to in 70 verses of the Quran, and her name recurs 34 times: she is the only woman whose name is mentioned in the sacred book, and she is mentioned more than her son Jesus and even more times than in the Bible (Rezazadeh 2017: 45; Smith and Haddad 1989: 162). A whole chapter of the Quran (Sura 19) is named after her. The Islamic religion considers Mary and Jesus as human beings, even though exceptional ones: Mary is considered the most pure and pious woman, elected, fed and protected by God throughout her life, and Jesus is respected as a great prophet. So, even though Muslims do not venerate Mary as the “Mother of God”, like Catholics do, they share with Catholics the idea of the virginal birth of Jesus, consider her at the top of the hierarchy of human beings and sometimes invoke her as a helper (Heo 2013: 2).

Even though there are no doubts about the importance of Mary in the Quran and in Muslim piety, it is quite complex to define what kind of model she provides. For instance, Turkish author Koçin (2017: 283), affiliated to the Turkish National Assemblée, claims that “the life of Virgin Mary is valuable enough to show all chaste women and young girls as a role model in our age”. Morteza Rezazadeh, from Iran, claims that Mary is a model for her own characteristics and not for the fact of being the mother of Jesus:

⁵ For an overview on the Muslim community in Italy, see Paolucci and Eid (2016: 205–210) and Pacini (2004).

Assigning a person as a role model indicates that she must be looked at in everyday life in order to get practical lessons from her. In Islam, Mary's significance is mainly because of her own traits and not because of her being the mother of Jesus. Because she can never be an exemplar for others in that. (Rezazadeh 2017: 50–51)

According to Rezazadeh, Mary receives the honor of being the mother of Jesus because of her purity and chastity, but she would be equally important even without this miraculous maternity. Rezazadeh (2017: 50) sees in this the main difference between Mary's image in Islam and in Christianity, since "in Christian sources [...] she is almost always being posed in relation to her son Jesus."⁶ So, according to Rezazadeh, Mary's model in Islam is connected to her personality, to her actions proving her devotion and purity. Smith and Haddad (1989: 187), however, claim that:

With the exception of some mystical writings and practice, Mary is not and by definition cannot be a model for human aspiration in Islam because she is clearly recognized, and treated, as unlike anyone else. Whether or not one acknowledges that she had miraculous abilities or even was in a state of perpetual purity (i.e., lack of menstrual or post-partum bleeding), Mary was virginal and thus in fact categorically opposed to the ideal of a Muslim woman whose virginity is prized but ultimately sacrificed to allow her to play the role for which she was created, i.e., wife and mother. [...] Women can, however, be admonished through reference to Mary's virtue in two limited but very significant ways. While ultimately not pure as she was, they are expected to aspire to this ideal to the extent to which they reserve themselves for their husbands and come to them untouched and undefiled. And as Mary was the embodiment of perfect obedience, Muslim women are enjoined to be obedient not only directly to God, but indirectly through the obedience that they show to the men to whom they are unquestionably responsible.

Contrary to Rezazadeh, Smith and Haddad hold that Mary is not important as a "person":

it seems fair to say that unlike what is true of Roman Catholic Christianity, Mary as a person really has not played an extremely significant part in the history of Islamic thought or, with the exception of Sufi devotion, even in Islamic piety. If it can be granted that Christians have valued Mary specifically for herself, there seems to be a difference to the extent that Islamic tradition has often used her as a kind of foil for making points about human behavior and individual response to God. [...] It is clear that whatever role she may or may not have played in the lives of Muslims, Mary has proved quite useful for contemporary commentators as they prescribe the proper task and role for women. (Smith and Haddad 1989: 186)

Even in her Islamic representation, the figure of Mary is subject to the typical paradox concerning saints, which places them in a delicate balance between norm and exception. On the one hand, they work as models of behavior proposed to

⁶ However, it could be noted that, of the 34 occurrences of Mary's name in the Quran, 24 qualify her as the mother of Jesus.

faithful to be imitated, and in this sense they represent a normative model. On the other hand, however, they are exceptional individuals, whose perfection is unreachable and even not imitable by ordinary people, and who often are endowed with supernatural qualities (e.g. the capacity of performing miracles), and in this sense they break and go beyond the norm.⁷

Leaving aside her exceptional nature, in the Islamic interpretation Mary works as a model embodying a normative behavior both in the social and in the spiritual and religious sphere. Concerning the latter, Mary's figure is used to define the characteristics of the perfect pious and devout person, since the traits that recur most often in the discourse about her are her total devotion, faith and obedience towards God (Heo 2013:2; Koçin 2017: 291; Schleifer 2008: 55–61; Smith and Haddad 1989: 161). Concerning the role of Mary as a model of social behavior, this is most often interpreted in terms of gender roles in the traditional society and in the family, as the above-mentioned comment by Rezazadeh well exposes: Mary represents a sort of sublimation of the purity expected from women in the framework of the family and in their relationship with men sanctioned by the Islamic sacred law (the Quran, the Sunna, and especially the Shari'a).

Nevertheless, the role of the women is the subject of a lively debate in the modern Muslim world, in which there is a wide spectrum of positions. Even though a wide current of interpretation of her figure continues to stress her traditional virtues, the story of Mary also presents several themes that are developed by more progressivist wings, such as her brave return in her village after the birth of her son, facing the heavy critiques of her community, and particularly her role in the temple. Indeed, in the Islamic tradition, her mother consecrated her to the service of God since she was in her womb, and this consecration remained valid even if she was a girl. Thus, when she was very young, she was sent to live in the temple, where she spent her time in pious practices in a way which was exceptional for a woman. For this reason, as well as for the fact that Mary, through the angel Gabriel, was the receiver of divine Revelation, there is a minority current of interpretation that uses the figure of Mary to affirm that women should be allowed to play the role of prayer leaders.⁸

7 For further reflections on this subject, see Ponzo (2020) and Ponzo and Rai (2019).

8 This topic is connected to the controversial issue of Mary's qualification as a prophetess. See Smith and Haddad (1989: 173, 177–179) and Schleifer (2008: 73–94).

3 Mary: What kind of model for the Catholic Church?

As it is well known, Mary is a central figure in Catholicism, even though she is neatly subordinated to Jesus Christ. The most effective summary of the Church's doctrine concerning her can be found in the eighth chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, issued in Paul (1964) in the framework of the Second Vatican Council.⁹ This document, signed by pope Paul VI, constitutes an official and normative statement with which the authority of the Church clarifies the terms of its interpretation and cult in relation to the figure of Mary. *Lumen Gentium* underlines that the Church recognizes and honors the Virgin Mary “as being truly the Mother of God and Mother of the Redeemer” (*Lumen Gentium* Paul 1964: n. 53), and that she “far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth. At the same time, however, because she belongs to the offspring of Adam she is one with all those who are to be saved. [...] She] is hailed as a pre-eminent and singular member of the Church, and as its type and excellent exemplar in faith and charity. The Catholic Church, taught by the Holy Spirit, honors her with filial affection and piety as a most beloved mother” (*Lumen Gentium* Paul 1964: n. 53).

The Church is careful in underlying the importance of Mary's spontaneous, active and free acceptance of God's plan for her (i.e. Mary was not just a passive object in the hands of God), as well as her purity, her perfect sanctity and her exceptionality. Mary is thus a model of “obedience, faith, hope and burning charity” (*Lumen Gentium* Paul 1964: n. 61). Her maternal charity continues to be active even after her assumption in heaven: “By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and cultics, until they are led into the happiness of their true home. Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church under the titles of Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix” (*Lumen Gentium* Paul 1964: n. 62).

Interestingly, in the Catholic discourse the Virgin serves as a model not only for individual faithful, but also for the Church as a collective and institutional subject. The Church as a collective body has reached a much higher level of perfection in the imitation of the Virgin than the single faithful have; in this sense, the Virgin is seen as a “figure” or a “type” of the Church:

⁹ Other important official documents on Mary issued by the Catholic Church are the encyclical letter *Redemptoris Mater*, issued by John Paul II in 1987) and the letter of the Congregation for the Catholic Education *La Vergine Maria nella formazione intellettuale e spirituale* issued in 1988.

By reason of the gift and role of divine maternity, by which she is united with her Son, the Redeemer, and with His singular graces and functions, the Blessed Virgin is also intimately united with the Church. As St. Ambrose taught, the Mother of God is a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ. For in the mystery of the Church, which is itself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar both of virgin and mother. (*Lumen Gentium* Paul 1964: n. 63)

The Church indeed, contemplating her hidden sanctity, imitating her charity and faithfully fulfilling the Father's will, by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By her preaching she brings forth to a new and immortal life the sons who are born to her in baptism, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God. She herself is a virgin, who keeps the faith given to her by her Spouse whole and entire. Imitating the mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, she keeps with virginal purity an entire faith, a firm hope and a sincere charity. (*Lumen Gentium* Paul 1964: n. 64)

But while in the most holy Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she is without spot or wrinkle, the followers of Christ still strive to increase in holiness by conquering sin. And so they turn their eyes to Mary who shines forth to the whole community of the elect as the model of virtues. (*Lumen Gentium* Paul 1964: n. 65)

4 The Catholic figurativization of Mary in relation to Muslims: Two thematic roles

One of the peculiar characteristics of Catholic piety concerning the Virgin is the fact that Catholics tend to identify her with different attributes, which are often connected to specific cults and confer particular meanings and values upon her figure: the same *Lumen Gentium* (Paul 1964) mentions some of her attributes (see above), and many others can be found in the litanies,¹⁰ the dedications of Marian shrines and the traditional iconography (e.g. Our Lady of Graces, Our Lady of Consolation, Saint Mary of the Snows, etc.). In semiotic terms, the attribution of these appellatives coincides with the association of specific “thematic roles” (Greimas and Courtès 1982: 343) to the character of the Virgin. Concerning specifically the discourse about the encounter with Muslims, in the course of time Catholics have elaborated two distinct figures of the Virgin, with quite opposed thematic roles.

As Tvrtković (2020) demonstrates, this double thematization of the Virgin Mary dates back to the early modern period, when Europe was menaced by Ottoman incursions and the Church promoted a missionary policy aiming at the

¹⁰ On this particular kind of prayer, see Sadowski and Marsciani (2020).

evangelization of non-Christians.¹¹ In this framework, different religious groups and orders inside the Church (in particular Jesuits and Dominicans) referred to the Virgin Mary as a shared figure between Islam and Catholicism, even though they thematized her in a very different way and with different aims:

By the early seventeenth century, the Dominicans and Jesuits shared another strategy for evangelizing Muslims: the Virgin Mary, an honored figure in both Christianity and Islam. [...] With increasing Ottoman incursions into Europe, some early modern Dominicans went on the defensive by promoting Our Lady of Victory, who they hoped would assist them in conquering Muslims through compulsion. Some Jesuits went on the offensive by taking visual and verbal images of Mary with them throughout the world, hoping she would assist them in converting Muslims through beauty and shared devotion. Not only were these two images used differently (defensively vs. offensively), but their intended audiences were also distinct. The Victory image was inward-facing, while the Beauty image was outward-facing. In other words, Our Lady of Victory was meant for internal consumption, to shore up Catholic resolve in fighting a Muslim foe, while Our Lady of Beauty was meant for a Muslim audience, to attract them to Christianity. (Tvrtković 2020: 404)

A particularly strong impulse to invoke Mary as the protector against Muslims came from pope Pius V (1504–1972), who associated this connotation of the Virgin to the practice of reciting the rosary to ask her help against the Muslim menace. The invocation of the Virgin, especially through the recitation of the rosary, was considered fundamental for the defeat of the Muslims during the battle of Lepanto in 1571, and indeed Mary is present in a number of artworks depicting the battle (Tvrtković 2020: 405–406). In 1572 Pius V introduced the feast of Our Lady of Victory, to be celebrated on October 7, anniversary of the battle of Lepanto. In 1573 Gregory XIII (Tvrtković 2020: 406–407) changed the name of the feast in Our Lady of the Rosary, which is still celebrated today.

Tvrtković (2020) observes that neither of the two Madonnas were very successful in realizing the goals of their Catholic promoters.¹² However, traces of the invocation of the Virgin in both the senses (defensive vs inclusive with regard to Muslim) can be detected even in the contemporary Catholic discourse. While Catholic traditionalists sometimes still evoke the Virgin as a protector against Muslims – especially against extremist and terrorist groups (Tvrtković 2020: 416) –, the mainstream and

¹¹ Actually, references and invocations to Mary as the protector against Muslim invasion can be found even in the Middle-Ages, for instance in the framework of the Saracen domination in Spain. The invocation of the Virgin as a military sentinel and more generally as a protector against all the enemies of Catholicism, from Muslims to Protestants, from Liberals to Communists, is widespread in both space and time (see in this regard Tvrtković 2020: 405, 407, 409).

¹² On the contrary, this strategy provoked the secondary effect of triggering the reaction of the Protestants, exacerbating their critique and the conflict with the Catholics about the role and the figure of the Virgin (Tvrtković 2020: 413).

institutional discourse of the Church in several occasions has mentioned the Muslims' devotion to the Virgin as a point of contact between Islam and Catholicism, even though nowadays the emphasis is put more on the interreligious dialogue and on the reciprocal respect than on the conversion of the faithful of other religions. However, these mentions to Mary in official documents are generally short and not deepened, as the declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965), a document issued during the Second Vatican Council, well exemplifies:

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. (*Nostra Aetate*: n. 3)

Even the educational literature proposed by Catholic publishing houses (for instance Elledici) and aiming at explaining the Islamic doctrine to a Catholic audience generally only offers quite short references with regard the Muslims' veneration for Mary (Arduino 2004: 154; Borrmans 2007: 51; Scaranari 2017: 74; Scaranari Introvigne 2000: 34–35), while more attention is devoted to the social and legal aspects of Islam (e.g. organization of the family, role of the women, food prescriptions) and to the so-called “pillars of the faith”, like prayer, fasting, and charity.

At a more specialistic level, on the contrary, it is easy to find essays devoted to in-depth comparisons of the figure of the Virgin in Catholicism and Islam and critical reflections about the plausibility of her role as a “bridge” between the two cultures. This is the case for instance of *Maria nel messaggio coranico* (“Mary in the Quranic message”) by the Carmelite theologian Nilo Geagea (1973)¹³ and of *Mary, Bridge to Islam* by James Kroeger (1988), professor of systematic theology and mission studies.

5 Interreligious practices in Marian shrines

At the level of ritual and popular piety, many scholars point out the fact that Muslims sometimes pay homage to the Virgin Mary in Christian shrines – even though it seems that this practice only involves a small minority of faithful – and play a more or less active part in the testimonies concerning phenomena interpreted as Marian

¹³ But see also Geagea and Fares (1984).

apparitions.¹⁴ In the case of Italy, ecumenical events aiming at bringing together Catholics and Muslims have been organized in important shrines as the one devoted to Our Lady of Loreto and the Santuario della Consolata in Turin. No traces of ecumenic events, on the contrary, can be found in the shrine of Pompei, in which a famous icon of the Virgin of the Rosary is venerated. A web research verifying the occurrences of the word “Muslims” in relation to the shrine of Pompei reveals that the only references to Muslims concern, on the one hand, the historical reflection about the affirmation of the cult of Our Lady of the Rosary in relation to the Ottoman menace and, on the other hand, an event which took place in 2018, when a young Algerian expelled from both France and Italy launched a terrorist attack on the shrine.¹⁵ This may indicate that some traces of the opposition between the thematization of the Virgin as a bridge or as a protector against the other still persist in contemporary culture.

In the cases of documented ecumenical moments in Marian shrines, what is particularly significant is that participants are mostly authorities and cultivated people. For instance, on July 31, 2016, a delegation of Imam of the Associazione Islamica delle Alpi (Islamic Association of the Alps) took part in Sunday Mass at the Santuario della Consolata, in sign of solidarity of the murder of Father Jacques Hamel by the IS in France. Among the public, there were Catholic faithful, Italian politicians and public officers, but the Muslim participation was limited to the institutional delegation of Imam.¹⁶ On May 19, 2020 the shrine also hosted a conference entitled “Perché i musulmani onorano Maria Madre di Gesù” (“Why Muslims honor Mary the Mother of Jesus”) animated by the journalist Alberto Riccadonna and the Imam Yusuf Abd Al-Hakim Carrara, founder of the Co.re.is,

¹⁴ See e.g. Heo (2013) on Marian apparitions in Egypt in the framework of the complex relationship between Copts and Muslims and the reluctance of the latter to acknowledge the authenticity of the apparitions. Smith and Haddad (1989: 184) claim that “dividing lines between the two faith traditions often are blurred in the veneration of Mary. Many Muslim women pray to the Virgin in Christian churches and sanctuaries. Devotion to Mary is evident at shrines visited by members of the two communities in various parts of the Middle East. Muslims and Christians have even referred in recent times to their reverence for Mary as a means of affirming common ground in the effort to oppose godless Communism.” Nevertheless, “The role that Mary plays in the Islamic tradition is, in fact, so particular to that tradition that attempts to draw out commonality actually could put in jeopardy the very understanding for which they claim to be seeking” (Smith and Haddad 1989: 186).

¹⁵ See e.g. the following web pages: <https://www.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/l-anticlericale-che-divenne-apostolo-del-rosario.aspx>; https://corrieredelmezzogiorno.corriere.it/napoli/cronaca/18_marzo_28/algerino-si-lancia-un-auto-il-santuario-pompei-l-ho-fatto-nome-allah-8f6a6d04-32b4-11e8-838c-89ab153d803a.shtml.

¹⁶ See this article in the online website of the newspaper La Stampa, which also hosts a video of the event: <https://www.lastampa.it/torino/2016/07/31/news/santuario-della-consolata-a-messa-anche-gli-imam-di-torino-1.34843429>.

Comunità Religiosa Islamica Italiana (Italian Islamic Religious Community) but, once more, the participation of Muslim faithful seems very limited.¹⁷ A similar phenomenon is documented for the shrine of Our Lady of Loreto. In May 2009, the Egyptian-Italian journalist and politician Magdi Allam was invited to deliver a speech in the occasion of the traditional Catholic pilgrimage at the shrine of Our Lady of Loreto. He later published his discourse, which specifies that he was invited by the Church representatives and that his speech was held in front of thousands of Catholic faithful, but apparently without a significant Muslim participation in the event, apart from his institutional presence.¹⁸

It should be noted that Magdi Allam publicly converted to Catholicism in 2008.¹⁹ In general he has been very critical against Islam, especially in some of its forms tending toward extremism, and at the time he was particularly close to the Catholic milieu: about in the same period of his participation to the pilgrimage he converted to Catholicism. However, five years after receiving the baptism in Saint Peter's basilica in Rome, he "considered concluded" his conversion and dissociated himself from the Catholic Church. One of the main critiques he advanced against the Church was its excessive legitimation of and weakness toward Islam.²⁰ Once more, therefore, the participation of ordinary Muslim people in events presented as "ecumenical" by the Church and the media, is quite questionable.

6 Conclusion

Can the figure of Mary work as a bridge between Catholicism and Islam? The considerations exposed above show that the reply to this question requires to take into consideration two different ranges of issues. The first range regards the plurality of thematic roles and normative principles associated to the Virgin. In this sense, what emerges clearly is that the only thematic role and normative model

¹⁷ See the texts and pictures in these web pages: <https://www.diocesi.torino.it/site/s-photogallery/perche-i-musulmani-onorano-maria-madre-di-gesu-incontro-ai-lunedì-della-consolata-13-maggio-2019/>; <https://www.vocetempo.it/folla-alla-consolata-al-dibattito-con-limam-carrara/>.

¹⁸ "Per la prima volta sono stato invitato, quale musulmano, a presenziare al pellegrinaggio mariano di Loreto. Mi è stato chiesto di tenere questa sera, davanti a decine di migliaia di fedeli cristiani riuniti nello stadio di Macerata prima della marcia che li condurrà al santuario della Madonna, un discorso sulla «possibilità del dialogo fra tutti gli uomini di ogni razza e religione a partire da quel valore che è in ogni cosa e che è l'esigenza di verità e bellezza presente in ognuno di noi" https://www.corriere.it/Primo_Piano/Cronache/2006/06_Giugno/10/magd.shtml.

¹⁹ https://www.corriere.it/cronache/08_marzo_23/conversione_magdi_allam_34d0da06-f8ac-11dc-8874-0003ba99c667.shtml.

²⁰ <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/interni/bersani-ora-basta-899699.html>.

that can work for both cultures and that therefore can be the subject of an intercultural translation without conflict is the one presenting Mary as the exemplar of the faithful and pious person, as the figure embodying the right behavior that human beings must observe in relation to God. She thus embodies universal values such as faith, charity and obedience, which both religions see as realized in their maximum perfection by her. All the other thematic roles attributed to Mary are more problematic: the interpretation of her figure as the embodiment of the social norm governing the organization of the family, or the role of women in society and in ritual is much more controversial, both inside each religion and in the interreligious dialogue. Of course, moreover, there cannot be an articulated and definitive mediation concerning dogmatic matters, namely principles that each religion's law (in the form of sacred texts, of magisterium or official doctrine) prescribes to believe as true, like for instance the belief in the fact that Mary was or was not the Mother of God.

The second range of issues concerns the effectiveness of Mary's model in fostering the reciprocal understanding of the two cultures and religions. The short overview proposed herein shows that the reflection on Mary from an interreligious angle principally involves, on the one hand, specialists and intellectuals like theologians and scholars²¹ and, on the other hand, religious and/or political authorities and institutional representatives. Ordinary believers seem less directly involved in this debate, in the case of Catholics in quality of the audience of ecumenical masses and conferences, and in the case of Muslims with limited and minority cases of devotion in Christian Marian shrines. It seems therefore that the interreligious effort of reflecting on the figure of Mary and thereby to get to a better understanding of the values and normative codes of the others mainly has an elitist character. The intellectual and institutional discourses do not have many points of contact with popular culture and piety. The latter appears more linked to well-established figurativizations of the Virgin Marin, crystallized in the respective traditions and often directly connected to specific iconographic and geographic references (e.g. the icon of the Virgin of Pompei, the shrine of Loreto) and most of all to specific attributes, often referring to specific capacities of the Virgin as a

21 The intellectual and scholarly nature on the interreligious enquiries about Mary is well described by Geagea in the opening of his book: "Il binomio *Maria e mondo islamico*, nella tematica odierna, non sta di certo all'avanguardia dell'attualità; né registra una pletorica produzione, analoga, per esempio, a quella ispirata dal sacerdozio. Tuttavia, uno spoglio anche superficiale della bibliografia mariana di quest'ultimo ventennio segnala, a proposito di tale binomio, un interesse non spregevole da parte di un discreto manipolo di studiosi. Essi ne hanno scrutato il fondo, con maggior o minor impegno; ne hanno esposto il contenuto, con maggior o minor ampiezza; e ne hanno individuato le fonti, con maggior o minor competenza" (Geagea 1973: *Preliminari*).

supernatural and miraculous helper. The specialist/institutional and the popular discourse and practices seem therefore to belong to two distinct “semiospheres” (Lotman 1984), which only have limited spaces of reciprocal “accessibility”²² and permeability. Tvrtković (2020) observes that the historical attempts of using the figure of the Virgin in the Catholic discourse about and toward Islam was not very successful: this tendency seems to know a new vitality with the ecumenic policy adopted by the Catholic Church especially since the Second Vatican Council and due to the phenomenon of immigration of Muslims in countries with a Catholic background. However, once again the success of the contemporary tentative of fostering the reciprocal knowledge and acceptance through the materialization of normative principles through the presentation of the Virgin Mary seems somehow utopic: even though she represents a key figure in both cultures, the exposition and translation of her features seem to be destined to be confined to a discourse which does not reach the majority of the believers and that only provides a limited set of unproblematically sharable principles and values, thus proving to be difficult to be used in ecumenical initiatives and discourses reaching big and multicultural masses. Therefore, in the case of Mary, the proposal of her saintly model as the figurativization of religious values proves to be highly significant and pervasive inside each tradition, but its effectiveness results more limited in the framework of the interreligious dialogue.

References

- Arduino, Liliana. 2004. La donna. In Centro Federico Peirone (ed.), *Islàm. Storia, dottrina, rapporti con il Cristianesimo*, 151–177. Turin: Elledici.
- Borrmans, Maurice. 2007. *ABC per capire i musulmani*. Cinisello Balsamo: Edizioni San Paolo.
- Congregation for the Catholic Education. 1988. Lettera della congregazione per l’Educazione Cattolica. La vergine Maria nella formazione intellettuale e spirituale. Retrieved from: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19880325_vergine-maria_it.html.
- Geagea, Nilo. 1973. *Maria nel messaggio coranico*. Rome: Teresianum.
- Geagea, Nilo & Lawrence T. Fares. 1984. *Mary of the Koran: A meeting point between Christianity and Islam*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Greimas, Algirdas Julien & Joseph Courtès. 1982. *Semiotics and language. An analytical dictionary*. Transl. from French by Larry Crist, Daniel Patte, James Lee, Edward McMahon II, Gary Phillips & Michael Rengstorf. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Heo, Angie. 2013. The virgin between Christianity and Islam: Sainthood, media, and modernity in Egypt. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81(4). 1–22.

²² Francesco Galofaro, personal communication.

- Koçin, Abdulhekim. 2017. Virgin Mary's importance in Islam and its reflection on classical Turkish literature and Turkish language. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 6(6). 281–302.
- Kroeger, James. 1988. *Mary, bridge to Islam*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press.
- Leone, Massimo. 2010. *Saints and signs. A semiotic reading of conversion in early modern Catholicism*. Berlin & New York: De Gruyter.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1958. *Anthropologie structurale*. Paris: Plon.
- Lotman, Jurij. 1984. *Osemiosfere*. Tartu: Trudyopoznakovysistemam.
- Pacini, A. 2004. I musulmani in Italia. In Centro Federico Peirone (eds.), *Islàm. Storia, dottrina, rapporti con il Cristianesimo*, 231–248. Turin: Elledici.
- Paolucci, Giorgio & Eid, Camille (eds.). 2016. *Cento domande sull'Islam. Intervista a Samir Khalil Samir*. Genova: Marietti.
- Paul VI. 1964. Dogmatic constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium solemnly promulgated by his holiness pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964. Retrieved from: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.
- Paul, John II. 1987. Redemptoris mater. On the blessed virgin Mary in the life of the pilgrim church. Retrieved from: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html.
- Ponzo, Jenny. 2019. Adamo ladro a Ferragosto. Rielaborazione di un personaggio biblico in un romanzo contemporaneo. In Jenny Ponzio & Francesco Galofaro (eds.), *Semiotica e santità. Prospettive interdisciplinari*, 203–219. Turin: CIRCe. Retrieved from: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/18ukajodFWWhNPQGX5agSCJ-nH9pGAwJXl/view>.
- Ponzo, Jenny. 2020. The case of the “offering of life” in the causes for canonization of Catholic Saints: The threshold of self-sacrifice. *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law – Revue internationale de Sémiotique Juridique*. Retrieved from: https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s11196-020-09713-w?sharing_token=e1Nsgg8g19hHsCKYWAXBSfe4RwIQNchNByi7wbcMAY5S7_gNteWgvVC8ZxD4D2WuCk8LU1tF_WwumwVCokjXwSFTyDo2gsUDQMNIk48_Ra3vx16iLXGv7_PTKhc0kFW9BFqnc5CfoP1TfdLOs6iC-OeTg3n87SVZ19_JTjLSmw%3D.
- Ponzo, Jenny & Eleonora Rai. 2019. Heroicity and sanctity in Catholic thought from early modern to contemporary age. *Ocula 20*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ocula.it/files/OCULA-FluxSaggi-PONZO-RAI-Heroicity-and-sanctity-in-catholic-thought-from-early-modern-to.pdf>.
- Rezazadeh, Morteza. 2017. Mary in early Christianity and Islam. *Religious Inquiries* 6(11). 37–49.
- Sadowski, Witold & Francesco Marsciani (eds.). 2020. *The litany in arts and cultures*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Scaranari, Silvia. 2017. *Islam. 100 e più domande. Scuola, ospedale, famiglia, oratorio e ... come comportarsi?* Turin: Elledici.
- Scaranari Introvigne Silvia. 1998. *L'Islam*. Turin: Elledici.
- Schleifer, Aliah. 2008. *Mary the blessed virgin of Islam*, 3rd edn. Louisville: Fons Vitae.
- Smith Jane I. & Yvonne Y. Haddad. 1989. The virgin Mary in Islamic tradition and commentary. *The Muslim World* LXXIX(3–4). 161–187.
- Tvrčković, Rita G. 2020. Our lady of victory or our lady of beauty? The virgin Mary in early modern dominican and jesuit approaches to Islam. *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 7. 403–146.

Bionote

Jenny Ponzo

University of Turin, Turin, Italy

jenny.ponzo@unito.it

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4952-8933>

Jenny Ponzo is Associate Professor of Semiotics at the University of Turin (Italy), Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences. She is the Principal Investigator of the ERC research project NeMoSanctI – New Models of Sanctity in Italy (grant agreement No 757314, nemosancti.eu). She is the Director of the Interdepartmental Research Center on Communication (CIRCe) and the President of the Master's Degree Program in Communication and Media Cultures of the University of Turin. She holds a Ph.D. in Arts from the University of Lausanne (Switzerland) and a Ph.D. in Language and Communication Sciences from the University of Turin; she formerly worked at the University of Lausanne, Faculty of Arts, and at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich (Germany), Interfaculty Programme for the Study of Religion. She is the author of three monographs, the latest of which is entitled *Religious Narratives in Italian Literature after the Second Vatican Council: a Semiotic Analysis* (De Gruyter 2019).