

***Christians, Muslims, and Mary: A History.* By Rita George-Tvrtković. New York: Paulist Press, 2018. xviii + 254 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8091-5328-2. \$27.95, paper.**

Suspicion, fear, and hatred have long been wielded against the religious “other.” For centuries, history has witnessed the beautiful, ambiguous, and macabre dance of interreligious interaction, ever shaped by the polity, customs, and social institutions of each society. Though strides have been made to mend historical misunderstandings and traumas, the very technology and media that allows for such healing also stunts it. Such is the case for the relationship between Christianity and Islam. Though there are many new barriers to this dialogical junction that arise from an increasingly sensitive, and yet, blurry awareness of the “other,” there are also many fruitful meeting places for Christians and Muslims. Moreover, cultivating respect and amity becomes imperative to not only mitigating emergent discord and misunderstanding, but at mending past hurts, and working towards a hopeful, pluralistic future.

In *Christians, Muslims, and Mary: A History*, George-Tvrtković endeavors to uncover one such meeting place for Christians and Muslims. She does this by both generously and critically surveying historical moments of the sharing and abusing of Mary. Her interrogative method is fourfold. In the first place, George-Tvrtković asks, do Christian and Islamic sacred scriptures paint a similar portrait of the mother of Jesus, and thereby is this woman “shared?” Second, when, and how has Mary been both bridge and barrier for these religions? Third, how have these conceptions of Mary shaped their respective theologies? Finally, what is the impact of this nuanced Marian history on modern relations between Christians and Muslims? George-Tvrtković works to answer these questions in eight chapters.

In her first chapter, “Scriptural Prelude,” George-Tvrtković presents the primary texts within Christianity and Islam that offer details about Mary’s adolescent life, the annunciation and her birthing of Jesus, and her life postpartum (3). George-Tvrtković offers a comparative analysis of the Bible, Protoevangelium of James, and the Qur’an, noting key distinctions and similitudes relating to Mary’s chosenness, responsiveness, purity, and relationship to Jesus. Chapter two, “Early Eastern Christian Views,” is framed by George-Tvrtković’s question: “which came first, doctrine [of Mary] or devotion [to Mary]?” (19). She parses this out by examining the beginnings of Marian devotion, and how this devotion began to define itself against a burgeoning Islam. Early images (such as Mary as protector and military leader) and texts (such as the *Apology of Timothy* and *Risalat al-Kīndī*) act as a window into ancient Eastern perception of and engagement with Islam. Often, and unsurprisingly, Mary functioned more as a bridge to those living near and actually interacting with the “other.”

In the third chapter, “Muslims on Mary: Prophet or Idol,” George-Tvrtković moves her attention to Mary’s “status in Islam” (37). Here, George-Tvrtković nuances Mary’s place in Muslim thought, devotion, and practice. Mary is mentioned in the Qur’an in Suras 3, 19, and 21 (40). Most Muslims consider Mary to be especially righteous and holy, but her status as prophet is widely, and even contentiously, debated. Thereby, this chapter enunciates the intra-religious complexity of Mary. The fourth chapter, “Medieval Praise of the Muslim Maryam,” highlights George-Tvrtković’s expertise: two medieval figures, William of Tripoli and Nicholas of Cusa, who both in their own ways “praised the Mary they discovered in the Qur’an, not because they could affirm her perfect alignment with the biblical Mary... [but] because they realized that a shared and truly beloved figure like Mary could perhaps serve as a useful aid in the conversion of

Muslims to Christianity” (68-69). Though their engagement with Islam was motivated by anticipated conversion, George-Tvrtković suggests nonetheless, “their ‘dialogue’ was not focused on error, but commonality” (70).

Chapter five traces the battle of Lepanto and the subsequent new face of a fully militant Mary: Our Lady of Victory. This Mary was used against both the “infidel” Muslims and the “heretic” Protestants. The symbolism of Mary, George-Tvrtković argues, is “flexible” as she ceaselessly moves from being a barrier to being a bridge. This motion is reinforced in the sixth chapter, where George-Tvrtković locates Mary in modern mission endeavors. Various cantigas and shared shrines hint at a “shared” iteration of Mary, but often this “sharing” stipulated eventual conversion of the religious “other.” Other efforts were even more conspicuous in their objectives, like the missionary projects of the Jesuits from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. George-Tvrtković concludes that Mary is an ineffective tool for conversion (119).

In chapter seven, “Meryem Ana Evi, Popular Devotion, and Vatican II,” George-Tvrtković examines the House of Mary which is a frequented Marian shrine in Turkey as one meeting place that promotes amity between the faithful of Christianity and Islam. Further, Muslim-Christian relations were expressly broached in Magisterial teaching through the development of *Nostra Aetate*. Catholic figures like Bishop Fulton Sheen and Louis Massignon reinforce, still, the nuances of Mary understood as a “bridge to conversion” (127) and Mary as a “bridge to dialogue” (129). Finally, in chapter eight, “Model of Dialogue? Contemporary Challenges,” George-Tvrtković recalls the four questions that have shaped her inquiry; each question and its replies suggest to the reader that resolute answers are only ostensibly satisfying. Perhaps the most pronounced feeling that the reader walks away with is that Mary has been and is both bridge and barrier, shared and withheld, totally and fascinatingly ambivalent. Modern barriers to approaching Mary as a dialogical figure are feminist critiques, ecumenical concerns, and questions of Mary’s relationship to violence; however, says George-Tvrtković, “in the end, believers must recognize that they have agency over religious symbols that are fundamentally ambiguous. The Virgin Mary has always been a flexible tool with the potential to be a bridge in Christian-Muslim relations, but only when and where believers choose to embrace her as such” (163).

George-Tvrtković’s work labors to excavate the origins of Marian conflict and sharing, and to trace its complicated and unruly history into the present century. While George-Tvrtković strength lies in her attention to Medieval Marian expressions, her treatment of Marian devotion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries wanes. Though Vatican II was paramount for Catholics in giving them new methods of theological interaction with Muslims, the reverberations of the council are deep and wide-reaching. This book would benefit from a closer examination of post-Vatican II Mariology and spirituality. Additionally, though George-Tvrtković considers some Protestant approaches and uses of Mary more favorably (like that of Presbyterian pastor Giulian Lansing), her Catholic biases are pronounced as the reader observes her go to great lengths to nuance Catholic renderings of Mary vis-à-vis Muslims and does not appear to give Protestant figures the same careful attention. The potential risk of this disparity is the conflation of “Christian” with “Catholic.”

Notwithstanding these omissions, *Christians, Muslims, and Mary: A History* is a compelling investigation into the deep well of Marian devotion—a well that Muslims and Christians have both drawn from for centuries. George-Tvrtković provides the reader with a critical survey of

how Mary was used by Christians and Muslims alike as pawn, weapon, and fertile junction. The history of Marian veneration and devotion for Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims is neither inter-homogeneous nor intra-homogeneous, and George-Tvrtković lucidly teases out its tangled web of nuances. This work is a profound contribution to the wider Christian-Muslim interfaith conversation. In this work, George-Tvrtković cleans out the attic, dusts off the furniture, and welcomes people of faith in to relearn and re-encounter the wonder of Mary as she beckons us—Christians and Muslims alike—to be drawn into and participate in the will and ways of God.

*Hannah Grubbs-Oechsle  
Marquette University  
Indianapolis*



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