

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Reclaiming Mary : a Task for Feminist Theology

MARIOLGY IS CERTAINLY the area in which angels and feminists alike fear to tread.¹ Yet the very integrity of the feminist theological enterprise itself, which is deeply committed to the uncovering of theological truth forces us to put 'an end to running'.² However, when faced with the Marian tradition, the danger of drowning in themes, motifs, uncovering layer after layer of doctrinal/devotional/sociological and cultural connections, psychological undercurrents, ecumenical battlefields, stereotypical role-models, the novelist's flights of fantasy, the feminist wishful thinking, is very real. Is there such a thing as Mariological truth? Is there any way of cutting through the undergrowth, the accretions of centuries? This paper will attempt, first, to summarize the different approaches to Mariology within the Christian tradition; secondly, to work out a feminist critical principle to Mariology, and thirdly, to suggest guidelines towards one possible contemporary feminist theology of Mary.

Part 1 : Who is Mary in the Christian tradition?

In his recent book *The maternal face of God*³ Leonardo Boff gives seven key positions on Mary, (his own being an eighth). I will briefly summarize these, to give an idea, not just of their complexity, but to show the issues which feminist theology must face.

1. The Marian scholar, René Laurentin, suggests that,

We cannot know God's secret plan for Mary. We can only set out humbly all the events of salvation. Mary is, then, the bridge of the Old and New Testaments. Her virginity, motherhood, participation in Jesus's life and death, her own death and assumption into heaven and continuing presence among God's people are all part of God's mysterious plan.⁴

But, we have to ask, are we to have no reflection on what this means?

2. This is the position adopted by the Second Vatican Council, (*Lumen gentium*). Mary is the woman in the service of others—of God, Christ, the Church, redemption—and the ultimate meaning of history. She has no theological meaning of her own: she is co-redemptrix, co-mediatrix, prototype of Church, full of grace *after* Christ; she is the *symbol* of new being, she recapitulates eschatological history inaugurated by Christ. Boff

himself regards this as *impoverished theology*. As women we know how harmful this interpretation has been for us. As the inferior 'other', so well described by Simone de Beauvoir, autonomous personhood has been beyond our grasp and Mary has been used to justify this view.

3. What we know as the classic Mariological approach: the *motherhood of Mary* is the classic unifying principle of all the Marian events. All her mysteries revolve around this. Her motherhood is also *virginal* and as Virgin Mother she is part of the salvific process of *all* humanity.

4. Mariology follows Christology: Christ's whole salvific reality will be Mary's, by participation and derivation. This is *part* of the justification of the Immaculate Conception tradition—it also prohibits us from knowing, 'Who is Mary for herself?'

5. Mary is the prototype of the Church.⁵ She is co-redemptrix *par excellence*, total sacrament of salvation—just as the Church is called to unity with Christ, so Mary is one body, one life, one love with Christ. Eventually Mary becomes spouse of the Spirit. This, as Boff points out, idealizes and de-historicizes Church as well as blurring Mary's function in relation to Church.

6. This sees Mary in the context of the Nicene Creed—Mary is the believer. This is a popular approach for ecumenism. All the dogmas of faith are placed on the lips of Mary and are a reflection of *her* place in God's salvific plan. This is a useful starting point for dialogue, but does not address the core of Mariology.

7. Mary is the way to study salvation history. (This is again an approach favoured by Vatican II). How is Mary part of the divine economy of salvation? But this view of salvation history ignores the arena of world-history, inter-faith dialogue that is Mary's significance *outside* the Judaeo-Christian background.

8. Boff's own approach is based on his understanding of human nature as the reciprocity between masculine and feminine, on Mary as representative of the feminine principle, as being ontologically connected with the Holy Spirit, just as, he says, the masculine principle is connected with Christ.⁶ The feminist difficulties with this position are enormous.

Part II: Towards a feminist critical principle

First, the question must be faced as to why women experience such difficulties with Mariology. Clearly, the principal difficulty is because Mary has been used in Christian spirituality as icon, ideal and role-model

for *all* women: the ideal has been that of virgin-mother, which is an impossible one for ordinary women to follow.

Secondly, the patriarchal interpretation of the virginal motherhood of Mary has been inadequate—even disastrous—for the understanding of woman's sexuality: it has encouraged the understanding of sexuality's purpose as principally procreative and has glorified the vocation of woman as that of motherhood in both biological and spiritual senses. Not only that, but Mary's motherhood is described as 'The one spotless womb wherein Jesus was laid', as an extremely well-known hymn puts it. Although this belongs to the mediaeval symbolizing of Mary as receptacle, as Holy Grail of God's redeeming grace, it has had its de-personalizing consequences in much of gynaecological practice today, as Adrienne Rich has so brilliantly described.⁷ Thirdly, when we combine this with the notion of Eternal Woman, (immortalized by Goethe's *Faust*), of whom Mary, Queen of Heaven is the quintessence, the Jungian archetype of the idealized feminine, we can see that Mariology has served as a stumbling block towards the discovery and achievement of self-affirmation for real women.

Many of us can recount similar convent girlhood experiences to the struggles of, for example, Antonia White, Marina Warner, Mary McCarthy, to emulate the purity of Immaculate Mary, and to serve unseen, as supposedly Mary did, in the hidden Nazareth years. How, then, do we reclaim Mary?

The danger is that we, too, will fall into the hermeneutical trap. Filled with the desire to reclaim Mary for the feminist liberation process, imbued with our slogans 'sisterhood is powerful', 'the person is political', we return to the gospel narratives and tradition, moulding them to our own purpose, seeing in them what we want to find. Thus the Annunciation and conception of Jesus could become prototypical of lesbian motherhood, ('Alone I did it'), the lack of a need for a man in the whole conception and birthing process; the visitation with Elizabeth becomes an illustration of 'Sisterhood is powerful'. If we do this we fall into exactly the same trap as everyone else, using Mary and Marian symbols to suit our particular needs. Is there a way out of the circle? Bearing in mind that, just as we have Jesus and Christology, so we have Mary and Mariology, I will sketch some modest aims.

Our hope is, first, to discover who is Mary for herself. So we push aside such approaches as Mary, symbol of the Church, redeemed humanity, ideal woman, perfection of motherhood, and so on. Relational language about Mary, as Catherine Halkes has pointed out,⁸ will forever keep woman as the passive, inferior other! We have to reclaim relational language itself. Seen from the perspective of right relation, of justice in relationship, we know that relationships must respect two poles—the integrity and self-affirmation of the person, as well as that of interdependence and intersubjectivity.

Secondly, we have to resist the temptation to fantasize with the texts; so, in what sense can androcentric texts be used for Marian truth? How can we relate *positively* to the very rich symbols given by the tradition—for example, of Mother, *Mater Dolorosa*, Virgin, Queen of Heaven, mediatrix, defender of oppressed women, Mary, delight of creation? Our foundational principle sees the God of Jesus Christ as creating, saving and liberating both men and women. As Rosemary Ruether has said, 'Whatever diminishes the full personhood of women is rejected as not redemptive'.⁹ That must be our starting point.

Thirdly, our feminist critical scholarship has done much to reclaim female language and image for *God*. Wisdom language, Spirit language, Goddess language, female experiences *all* contribute to our God image. This is very liberating for Mary. It removes the whole burden of history from her if she does not have to be the symbol of female divinity excluded by the characterization of God as male. This does not mean that she cannot function symbolically as the evocation of the divine female present in every woman.

Fourthly, the whole wisdom of Christian feminist spirituality must be brought into play. Because we know spirituality is about whole persons we reject any interpretation of Mary which *de-personalizes* her, either as passive receptacle, or sees her within the dualistic split between body/soul/spirit. The qualities of openness, receptivity, sensitivity and attentiveness are qualities of the whole person, qualities of Christian discipleship, of believing men and women. Spirituality is about wholeness, connectedness, our affirmation and celebration of ourselves as God's good creation, with a corresponding denunciation of anything which blocks this.

Part III: Towards a contemporary Marian theology

This will be sketched both within the context of liberation theology as developed by Fiorenza, Ruether and Halkes, and also within the context of Process Philosophy.¹⁰ This, briefly, means that God and world are mutually affected by each other: each contributes to the becoming of the other. The first insight gained from looking at the texts from a feminist critical liberationist hermeneutic is that Mary is a woman of strength, independence, of integrity, of autonomous action. (This has already been developed by Mary Daly, in *Beyond God the Father*).

Secondly, because of the particular strengths of women's spirituality, which believes in solidarity, mutuality and power-in-sharing, we see Mary *together with* other women who were also open to the divine, participators in creating/saving action. It is normal to associate Mary with Elizabeth, mother of a special child, Hannah, chosen to be mother of a child of promise. But Mary is also linked with Miriam, who led the dance of liberation, not only with the wives of patriarchs, (Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel), but with Hagar, rejected and thrown into the wilderness, the

first mother of a promised child, with Leah, the rejected sister, with Ruth, a woman independent of patriarchy in her sense of relating. The issue forces itself upon us: whom has God chosen? Not the powerful, the status-conscious, but again and again, the woman whose power is of a very different nature, often woman whose distinguishing characteristic is to be from a despised race—Hagar the Egyptian, Ruth the Moabitess, the Samaritan woman at the well, the Syro-Phoenician woman. What is the significance in God's eyes of being the outcast, the marginalized and on the fringes?

Thirdly, we can reclaim the motherhood of Mary from unworthy patriarchal connotations. As I have explained, the reason for our anxiety are the implications that *all* women should be mothers, that femaleness is defined by motherhood, that women have been degraded as breeding-machines, that female sexuality is similarly defined as geared solely to child-bearing, or ordered for women to be the play object for men, and that childbirth, too, has been manipulated by modern medicine—'our birthing energies have been taken from us', as Mary Daly says. The question is, can we see the motherhood of Mary as free, active cooperation in redemption?

If we can view the whole action of redemption as relational and creative, (as the Process model allows us), creation and redemption as one action, then *birthing* energies are *saving* energies. Openness and vulnerability are the pre-requisites. 'Compassion', says Carter Heyward,¹¹ 'begins in the soil of our vulnerability'. But it is vulnerability seen as *strength, not weakness*,—it is strength to 'bear up God in the world', as the literal meaning of compassion tells us. And this is exactly what Mary does: Mary is open and vulnerable, the essential prerequisites for divine creative/redemptive action—which is why she is so inspirational for us. 'Bearing up the divine in the world' is the task of all Christians, the creative, redemptive and transforming task. And God is vulnerable too: God needs the openness, the vulnerability of God-bearers to achieve fullness, delight and happiness—which is God's justice for the world. It is possible that both the evangelists, and the writers of the Christian tradition have seen the force that motherhood has in symbolizing the redemptive task. I think that this is the truth behind the language of Jesus, of Anselm of Canterbury and of Julian of Norwich on the motherhood of Jesus, (although this also has special Eucharistic significance). This is the reason for texts such as that of Jeremiah 31, where the motherhood of Rachel (which failed), is contrasted with the motherhood of Jahweh which will succeed. Witness the triumphant line, 'Behold a woman shall encompass a man' (Jer 31,22b), which would seem to imply, in the Messianic times, that initiative shall be taken by a woman. It is significant that it is the failed motherhood of Rachel which is quoted by Matthew in the context of the Flight into Egypt. Through Rachel's child Israel

comes to Egypt and is saved from famine, but eventually saved: for Mary's child Egypt is also a refuge, but Mary's child is the true liberator.

It is motherhood as symbolizing creativity, birthing energies, redeeming and saving, active nurturing, which we want to reclaim for humanity through Mary. Mary is the corrective we need in order not to see the redemptive/atoning action as over and finished with in the past with the cross of Jesus. She recalls us to the mutuality of redemption—to the need to be 'mutually messianic', redeemers of each other. I think that this is the truth hinted at by words like 'co-redemptrix', 'co-mediatrix'. And there are ecumenical implications in this: Catholicism has had authentic insight in seeing Mary so deeply involved with redemptive events: it is an unnecessary polarization to set Mary against her son, as versions of Protestantism did and some 'progressive' Catholic writers do, seeing the importance of one as detracting from the centrality of the other. The fact of Incarnation means that God stands in solidarity with the human race. We have seen how historically within Christian tradition, the divine Christ triumphed over the human Jesus. Even now, it is a struggle for us to see in Christ the potential of our humanity: yet Mary stands as proof of Christ's humanity, as corrective to a spiritualizing away of this. Nor should we see Christ and Mary in competition—where Mary seems central, as the argument goes, this represents a distortion of Jesus's role. No, redemption is relational in its nature—God is in relationship with humanity. The whole Christ event was and is relational. Hence Mary had family, friends: God worked and still works through the myriad interdependencies with which we are interlinked.

With this understanding, we can see why Mary has assumed such importance for liberation theology: it is indisputable that devotion to Mary flourishes among many poor people of both first and third world cultures. For example, the devotion to our Lady of Guadeloupe originated in the apparitions of 1531, ten years after the Indian culture in Mexico was overrun by white Europeans. Our Lady of Guadeloupe represents an identity figure for the Mexican people alienated from its deepest roots. It is not just that Mary speaks for the little people, oppressed and marginalized by a dominant culture, but that through her 'Fiat', (that is, *active* cooperation), and her 'Magnificat', (that is, through protest and struggle against injustice), she calls to participation in the redemptive process. If her Son was Man of Sorrow, acquainted with grief, how much is this due to Mary, Mater Dolorosa, who lived out her life actively in the shadow of the cross? As the developmental psychologist Eric Erikson once said, 'Children can face life, if their parents can face death'. The challenge for feminist theology is, now that motherhood is freed from a purely biological interpretation, to discover how—within the context of the developmental framework, as this applies to women as well as men—the mother/son relationship contributed to the development of Jesus's

Messianic consciousness. Furthermore, if we can see the redemptive process, not simply as Cross/Resurrection, but as Creation/Incarnation/Redemption/New Jerusalem—all as unified process, then we can see Mary both as symbolizing redeemed creation, and as summoning women to contribute both to our own and to the world's redemption.

We have seen how Goddess language, (the Isis traditions, for example), has been applied to Mary, and we have attempted to restore these female attributes to the Godhead. But the Goddess movement also has the function—and this is most significant—of recalling us to the immanent divine female. I do not believe that Mary should assume all the qualities of Isis, Astarte and Demeter, but I do believe she calls us to energize and bring to birth our powers; she calls us to rediscover our affinity and connectedness with nature and createdness as women. It is customary, within the Goddess movement, to refer to the three faces of the Goddess—as maiden, mother and wise woman (crone). In a society which permits the abuse of young girls, the sufferings of mothers and the rejection of old women, Mary as symbol of the immanent divine female in us all is a summons to the redemptive path of self-affirmation which we must tread at every stage of the life-cycle. Finally, she calls us to incarnate for our own times, to give voice to the pain of those who cannot articulate, both the protest and the hope of her own Magnificat.

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NOTES

¹ The substance of this paper was first given at the AGM of the St Joan's Alliance, 6th February, 1988.

² Banks, Lynne Reid: *An end to running*, (London, 1962).

³ Boff, Leonardo: *The maternal face of God*, (Petropolis: Brazil, 1979).

⁴ Laurentin, René: *Court traité sur la Vierge Marie*, (Paris, 1968).

⁵ Semmelroth, Otto: *Mary, archetype of the Church*, (Dublin, 1964).

⁶ There are solid precedents for Boff's position, namely, certain theologians of the Russian Orthodox tradition—Boulgakov and Soloviev—and more recently, Cardinal Suenens. See 'The relation that exists between the Holy Spirit and Mary', in *Mary's place in Christian dialogue*, (St Paul Publications, 1982), ed Alberic Stacpoole OSB, pp 69-78.

⁷ Rich, Adrienne: *Of woman born: motherhood as experience and institution*, (London, 1976). See also the recent novel of Margaret Atwood, *The handmaid's tale*, (Picador, 1985).

⁸ Halkes, Catherine: *Maria beelden—Vrouw beelden*, in *Zoekend naar wat verloren ging*, (Baarn, 1985), pp 82-98.

⁹ Ruether, Rosemary Radford: *Sexism and God-Talk*, (London, 1983).

¹⁰ The only feminist writer who has developed Process Philosophy to any extent at the moment is Marjorie Suchocki. See *God, Christ and Church*, (New York, 1982).

¹¹ Heyward, Carter: *Our passion for justice*, (New York, 1984), p 207.