THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

On Mary: Constructive Ambivalence?

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT MARY is a significant symbol in the ecumenical context.[1] This is for the simple reason that whatever it is that is symbolized by her has been and remains central to the vitality of Christianity in many parts of the world, though some are still vigorous in their protest that this is the case.[2] A relatively new feature of ecumenical dialogue, however, is the contribution made by women to it, and some of them are alert to feminist theological concerns. So long as these women continue to make the effort to participate in Christian institutions or societies, their voices are bound, one hopes, to make a difference to the way theology is done, and to how it comes out. And it can require a considerable effort to stay, in the face of reproaches that one is betraying other women and their needs by so doing, since there exists some justifiable criticism of what the Christian tradition has had and still does have on offer for women.

Much depends on whether one thinks that a tradition is or can be alive enough to change for the better – it is not change just for the sake of it. And there are signs of hope, as for instance in *Marialis cultus (To honour Mary)* of 1974. So in paragraph 34 Pope Paul VI maintains:

> Devotion to the Blessed Virgin must also pay close attention to certain findings of the human sciences. This will help to eliminate one of the causes of the difficulties experienced in devotion to the Mother of the Lord, namely, the discrepancy existing between some aspects of this devotion and modern anthropological discoveries and the profound changes which have occurred in the psycho-sociological field in which modern man lives and works. The picture of the Blessed Virgin presented in a certain type of devotional literature cannot easily be reconciled with today's life style, especially with the way women live today. In the home, woman's equality and co-responsibility with man in the running of the family are being justly recognized by laws and the evolution of customs. In the sphere of politics women have in many countries gained a position in public life equal to that of men. In the social field women are at work in a whole range of different employments, getting further away every day from the restricted surroundings of the home. In the cultural field new possibilities are opening up for women in scientific research and intellectual activities.

In some ways, one might say that the papal sketch needs to be more sharply drawn. For instance, it needs to advert quite clearly to the massive double work burden most women have always carried, inside their homes in 'unpaid' work

and outside their homes in paid employment, necessary if their families are not to fall into poverty. In societies where the family is still the economic unit, at least half of the so-called Third World's food is produced by women, including their work at the heavy agricultural labour involved. In so-called First-World cultures women can suffer in different ways if restricted to the 'private' as distinct from the public and political realms, reinforced by suburban housing patterns; and, as we know, home can be hell for other reasons. What could the symbolization of Mary have to do with all this? Not simply, one hopes, what another papal document, *Redemptoris Mater (Mother of the Redeemer)* calls 'limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work',[3] since these are not unambiguously praiseworthy qualities in many contexts.

Marialis cultus goes on to point up Mary as a disciple (para 35) which in the Gospels at least (as distinct from other parts of the New Testament) even for women has little to do with domesticity. The women associated with Jesus of Nazareth are an unconventional group, to put it mildly. Paragraph 36 of *Marialis cultus* also comments that:

> It should be considered quite normal for succeeding generations of Christians in differing socio-cultural contexts to have expressed their sentiments about the Mother of Jesus in a way and manner which reflected their own age.

And further:

> When the Church considers the long history of Marian devotion she rejoices at the continuity of the element of cult which it shows, but she does not bind herself to any particular expression of an individual cultural epoch or to the particular anthropological ideas underlying such expressions. The Church understands that certain outward religious expressions, while perfectly valid in themselves, may be less suitable to men and women of different ages and cultures.

Various scriptural reflections follow, which offer us a Mary taken into dialogue with God, giving her active and responsible consent to what was to happen, a woman of courageous choice, a woman who proclaims God's vindication of those who need it, who survived poverty, flight and exile, who presumably brought her family through it, but was far from being exclusively concerned with her own family (any more than were other women in the Gospels, we might add).

We need not minimize the difficulties men as well as women may have with traditions about Mary. For instance, *Under the heel of Mary*[4] is a fascinating but sorry story about Marianism, which includes reference to Mary as 'exterminator of all heresies', as a symbol for cold war warriors and for some of those who promoted the dogma of the Assumption, as well as 'Our Lady of National Security'. And Mary of the Magnificat may be an uncomfortable figure of a

different kind for a church producing an indigenous theology in South America (liberation theology), requiring primarily liberation from the thugs and torturers of that continent, but also from possibly inappropriate hierarchical structures in the Church itself. For women, in the first instance, but also for men, if we are to be serious about a humanly inclusive theology, we need to think about feminist theology and Mary as a significant figure in the tradition. As it happens, the 1986 conference papers included one from Donal Flanagan[5] entitled 'Mary: some problems in ambivalence' which he concluded by asking: 'Are we then doomed to choose between an ecclesiastical Mary unrelated to twentieth century woman and a theory of woman, feminism, which has no place for the greatest woman who ever lived?' He held out the possibility that 'these rock-hard certainties which now clash so destructively will slowly mature towards a constructive ambivalence, and through that stage to a new vision'. Only a few years later, we may have arrived at that stage of 'constructive ambivalence', with even some elements of the new vision in the sight lines, which is what feminist theology in the end is all about, assuming that to be feminist and to be a feminist theologian is not a contradiction in terms, of course.

One fundamental problem highlighted by feminist theology is the gap between the *proclamation* of full personhood for women (associated in some parts of the tradition with the 'new Eve-Mary') and the *practice* of associating them with the 'old Eve'. On the one hand, male-and-female together 'image' God (Gen1); and Galatians signals that in the Christian community one abandons supposed privileges of race, social status and sex. Some of this has been conveyed by the symbol of Mary as a symbol of honour for women, not just for Mary, in the sense that honour for one is honour for all those like her. A woman who will quiz an archangel, give her (rapturous? enthusiastic?) assent, or agreement to the divine spirit working within her, risk scandal and single parenthood is, one might think, something of a risk-taker, and by no means a model of submission, subordination and passivity. To hail her (in Traherne's version, in the Ecumenical Office of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary) as 'Daughter of the Eternal Father, Mother of the Eternal Son, Spouse of the Eternal Spirit, Tabernacle of the most glorious Trinity' is at one level absurdly extravagant, but in so far as women have been allied with her, Mary is thus a symbol of affirmation for them. Even so hostile a critic of the tradition as Mary Daly acknowledges that very problematical dogmas, such as the Immaculate Conception, *can* signal to women the negation of the myth of feminine evil, that is, the association of women with the sacred and the good. And the Assumption too can represent a categorical 'no' to the peculiar association of women with sin-flesh-matter[6] in the context of a religion which proclaims incarnation but which is sometimes anti-incarnational, anti-sacramental, and in which grace may be treated as a denial of the creature instead of its blessing. The Assumption helps to redress the balance in a dramatic way, giving some sense to Cornelius Ernst's remark that 'grace is not faceless'[7] that is, the face can be female as well as male.

The trouble is, that women have all too consistently been allied with the old Eve, rather than with the new one, and this has been done by undercutting the ideal of whole personhood. This can be illustrated in the first instance by attending to an example given by Nelle Morton in her book, *The journey is home.*[8] In one of her essays, she describes a sculpture in wood outside a church building, a sculpture on the theme of vocation taken from 1 Cor 10:31, 'Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God'. The sculpture shows thirty individual forms representing nineteen different kinds of work. Only seven of the thirty figures are women, represented as nursing a baby, on knees scrubbing a floor, serving a man seated at table, assisting a male doctor, feeding chickens, pounding a typewriter, and teaching children. All these figures represent tasks that arguably need doing, but it is absurd to associate that necessity with women alone, and absurd to exclude them from connection with the other twenty-three figures representing nineteen kinds of work. It needs little imagination to think out the likely roles of the male figures in the sculpture. The point is that as well as at one level honouring women and teaching them new aspirations, the Christian tradition has also undercut that honour and aspiration by teaching women a disabling gender construction, and this is why it has by no means always fostered whole personhood in women. Not surprisingly, it is now regarded as one of the sources of 'sexism', that is, the belief that persons are superior or inferior to one another on the basis of their sex.

It might be better to refer to the problem as gender-stereotyping. For we can distinguish between 'sex' and 'gender' in the following way. Sex has to do with basic biological differences which develop in a human embryo at about the sixth week of development. 'Gender' refers to what a particular society makes of relationships between males and females, and no society lives free of gender constructs in all their astonishing variability. What one can do at the least is to attend to them and evaluate them, especially as these are conveyed by religious symbols, as realities which may help us to lay hold of or be laid hold of by realities beyond those which we see or think about. The object is not to obliterate differences, but to value them appropriately, and this need not mean that all those associated with males or masculinity are put at the top of some hierarchy of value, with those associated with females or femininity put at the bottom. It can be argued that notwithstanding some of the meanings associated with the symbol of Mary, the dominant gender construction of Christian culture for woman has been that they are passive, dependent, bodily, emotional, weak, peculiarly responsible for evil and sin, are childlike in the worst senses, and bear the image of God only derivatively. Men, on the other hand, are active, independent, intelligent, brave, strong, good, bear the image of God in their own right, and are of course godlike. Males are always more godlike than females could ever be, even when the latter try religiously sanctioned experiments of trying to approximate to males.[9]

To claim that 'in the whole of human instinct and understanding it is the masculine which is associated with giving and the feminine with receiving' (to

cite words of one of the patrons of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary) is as intolerable and bad for men as it is dishonest about women. Human beings each need to give and receive from one another in as open and reciprocal ways as they can. Women who internalize the dominant gender construction have to engage in a very painful process of giving it up. As with the tasks represented by the sculpture, and giving and receiving, so passivity, dependence, bodiliness, emotion, acknowledging weakness etc. are arguably as important aspects of being human as being active, independent, intelligent, brave, strong and so on, and it is damaging to associate these possibilities primarily with one sex rather than another, regardless of time, place and circumstance. Yet it is probably harder to give up playing Cinderella, Snow White or Sleeping Beauty, than to give up playing Prince Charming, since this involves taking responsibility for oneself, rather than continuing with the symptoms of what is sometimes called co-dependence: low self-esteem, an inability to take care of oneself, wasting time thinking about what other people want, deluding oneself into thinking oneself responsible for its delivery, and that whatever goes wrong is one's personal responsibility to put right. Women, like men, need boundaries, permeable indeed, but secure, knowing what they think and feel from the inside, which is part of what feminist praxis is about. Once the boundaries are found, women can move through the limitations set for them by those who may not have their interests at heart.

One illustration of how this could work, drawing on the symbol of Mary, was given in a recent essay by Lavinia Byrne,[10] a good example of someone who wants to make constructive use of some of the paradoxes of the tradition. The paradoxes are well set out by Peter Canisius in the sixteenth century:[11]

> A virgin not sterile, but fertile; married to a man, but made fruitful by God; bearing a son, but knowing not a man; forever inviolate, yet not deprived of progeny. A virgin pregnant but incorrupt, and intact even in childbirth. A virgin before marriage and in marriage, a pregnant virgin, a virgin giving suck, a perpetual virgin. A virgin without concupiscence conceiving the saviour. A virgin bearing a child in the womb without hardship, giving birth to God without pain.

Lavinia Byrne must, as with others dealing with the legacy of the symbol, be both selective, and a translator, re-interpreter of the tradition, because Mary, as in the quotation from Canisius, is otherwise an impossible ideal for women. To be true to her tradition, she has to allow 'virginity' and 'motherhood' both to stand as reality, but *also* use them as metaphor for the experience of all women. Virginity as metaphor is about separation, and motherhood as metaphor is about integration.

> A woman who holds both of these in balance demonstrates the sanctifying power of differentiation. She is both apart from and part of the human condition. The virgin is the reserved figure who does not

> define herself in terms of her relationships with men. She is autonomous. The mother, meanwhile, is essentially in relationship. The virgin is barren through choice or misfortune. Her energy is inner-directed. The mother is fecund. She is creative of life and ongoing nurture.

Then she argues that women are entitled to space both in the domestic context and in the public domain, but 'space' means something different in each place, as it were. First, where some women are free to make vows of chastity, we are reminded that all women should be free to refuse men access to them. Second, space in the public domain means that 'women are entitled to the freedom to engage with and be part of all the creative, nurturing processes with which we organize human reality'. Women should be allowed to differentiate, enabled to experience desires they do not ordinarily give themselves credit for, and to exercise choices society is reluctant to admit.

Quite a different example of constructive reinterpretation can be found in the work of two Latin American religious, Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, in their *Mary, Mother of God, mother of the poor.*[12] Although the book attempts a near impossible task of exercising a method of interpretation alien to those who constructed Roman Catholic dogmas about Mary in relation to those dogmas, the main thrust of the book is intelligible enough, and makes clear why those concerned with women's lives will associate Mary with them in so far as they can, in order to mobilize for change. It is not simply, though it is essential in the Latin American context, that whereas to invading Spaniards, Mary represented the triumph of conquest, to the despairing Indians lamenting the destruction of their religion and culture, she represented the promise of a new life.[13] It is also that women across national boundaries are becoming alert to their predicament, in the words of the UN in 1980, that 'Women constitute half the world's population, perform nearly two thirds of its work hours, receive one tenth of the world's income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property'. Central to their predicament is that they are poor not because they bear children, but because they also have to do most of the work in raising them. Women experience in an acute form the conflict between the public-economic and the domestic which simply does not allow for support for the next generation, of the fragile and of the aging, and sentimentality about Mary should in no circumstances render their plight worse.

This is certainly not the intention of the authors of this book. For them, above all, Mary is one who 'lives in God', who expresses or embodies an unlimited yearning for life. She participates wholly and fully in the glory of the living God, rescued from humiliation, but has to do with saving life in the here and now. So the authors write that life is such a tough battle, that the relationship with Mary, she who is 'alive in God', full of affection and power, is direct. It is connected to people's immediate and vital needs, 'since the life of the poor unfolds basically at this level'.[14] So too Anne Carr, in *Transforming grace*[15] writes of Mary as the poor one in whom God does great things:

> Mary as virgin and mother need not be understood as an impossible double bind, an inimitable ideal, but as a central Christian symbol that signifies autonomy *and* relationship, strength *and* tenderness, struggle *and* victory, God's power *and* human agency – not in competition but co-operation, Mary *is* a utopian figure, a mystery. Her intimate place in the Christian pattern enables us to imagine a healed, reconciled, finally transformed world.

These writers are all alert to some of the dangers associated with the symbol of Mary, including idealized femininity from a male viewpoint, and Mary as 'mother' of the Church strengthening the religious and cultural foundations of androcentrism which has not attended to women, heard their voices, or been humanly inclusive in a consistent way in its institutions or its theology. James Mackey has shrewdly pointed out[16] (referring as it happens to the book by Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer) that images, metaphors and symbols are based on some actual state of affairs from which the range of significance is extended to bring to light a greater range of actual or possible experience. The authors quoted in this essay are engaged in that process of extension. However, as Mackey goes on:

> Virginity, as an image or symbol, has its base in a genital sexual state, and it symbolizes closedness, if anything at all, certainly not openness; and the failure so far to realize any possibilities whatsoever. It forces imagery beyond the range of intelligibility to suggest otherwise; and it borders on the perverse to choose the virgin rather than the married woman as a symbol of fidelity.

Be that as it may (and Peter Brown for one shows us how in the fourth century, for instance, virginal integrity represented sacralized culture, and literacy)[17] Mackey makes effectively some of the points women have been making about the use and abuse of the symbol to keep women in their place, particularly within the Church, though he, like others, remains hopeful that our symbols of divine, effective and saving power can have a transforming impact on us. We need a renewed vision of goodness, to be given and to gain access to it, in both Church and society, a new sense of coinherence between women and men, so that each actualizes the dignity and worth of the other, and the symbol of Mary may help us to achieve this. Preoccupation with the symbol may also help us not to attend to one central issue for the tradition, however, that is, its failure to take seriously a point made from time to time. We may pick up the point in some words of Elaine Storkey's, where she writes that:

> there is nothing demeaning in the notion of Mary bearing her own Saviour. It is not an assertion of the supremacy of maleness or the arrogance of patriarchy. It is simply a statement of the humility of a non-gendered God who was prepared to come in human, sexual form.[18]

The crucial phrase is 'the humility of a non-gendered God', for the main goal of feminist theology is a humanly inclusive theology, and the hope and necessity that we can envision the mystery of God in gender-inclusive ways. As Elizabeth Johnson properly insists[19] this is not a matter of adding a female-related or feminine dimension to a God imaged as male or masculine, but the claim that the female and feminine can of and by itself image God, *in as full and in as limited a way* as God is imaged by the male and masculine. Both sexes and genders are as capable or incapable of imaging the mystery of God. In Elizabeth Johnson's reflections on Mary as symbol, therefore, she retrieves the creativity and caring intrinsic to good mothering; compassion as primordially divine; saving and protective power; the immanence and living presence of God – Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'Wild air, world mothering air'. We might add what Hannah Arendt in her political philosophy called natality, the capacity for new beginnings, so closely related to the capacity for forgiveness.[20] For Elizabeth Johnson, ways of referring to the mystery of God which could be received within a believing community include maternity with its nurturing and warmth; unbounded compassion; power that protects, heals and liberates; all-embracing immanence; and recreative energy.

Mary then is one way of referring to the mystery of God, but that she does, or in so far as she does, should not be allowed to shift our focus from this central task, and unless it is achieved, it is at least arguable that the future vitality of the tradition is at stake. Concentrating on the symbol of Mary to the exclusion of this task will not save it, or at least, it may not be as good as it could be, for men as well as women.

Ann Loades

NOTES

[1] See also Ann Loades, 'The Virgin Mary and the feminist quest' in Janet Martin Soskice (ed), *After Eve* (Collins, 1990), pp 156–178 (a paper for the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and other similar groups).

[2] D. Wright (ed), *Chosen by God: Mary in evangelical perspective* (Marshall Pickering, 1989), provides some recent examples.

[3] *Redemptoris Mater*, para 46.

[4] N. Perry and L. Echeverria, *Under the heel of Mary* (Routledge, 1988).

[5] Donal Flanagan, 'Mary: some problems in ambivalence' in A. Stacpoole (ed), *Mary and the Churches* (Columba, 1987), pp 73–84.

[6] See the references in the paper listed in note 1 above.

[7] C. Ernst, *Multiple echo* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), p 124.

[8] Nelle Morton, *The journey is home* (Beacon, 1985), pp 21–22.

[9] See, for instance, Averil Cameron, 'Virginity as metaphor: women and the rhetoric of early Christianity' in A. Cameron (ed), *History as text: the writing of ancient history* (Duckworth, 1989), pp 181–205; Elizabeth Castelli, 'Virginity and its meaning for women's sexuality in early Christianity' in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2:1 (1986), pp 61–88.

[10] Lavinia Byrne, 'Apart from or a part of: the place of celibacy' in Alison Joseph (ed), *Through the devil's gateway* (SPCK, 1990).

[11] I. MacLean, *The Renaissance notion of woman* (CUP, 1980), p 29.
[12] Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer (trans P. Berryman), *Mary, Mother of God, mother of the poor* (Burns & Oates, 1989).
[13] Patricia Harrington, 'Mother of death, mother of rebirth: the Mexican Virgin of Guadelupe', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56:1 (1988), pp 25–50.
[14] Gebara and Bingemer, pp 23, 119, 126.
[15] Anne Carr, *Transforming grace* (Harper & Row, 1988), p 193.
[16] J. Mackey, 'The use and abuse of Mary in Roman Catholicism' in R. Holloway (ed), *Who needs feminism?* (SPCK, 1991), pp 99–116.
[17] Peter Brown, *The body and society* (Faber 1989), especially pp 259–284.
[18] Elaine Storkey, 'The significance of Mary for feminist theology' in D. Wright (ed), *op. cit.* (note 2), pp 184–199, especially p 198.
[19] Elizabeth Johnson, 'Mary and the image of God' and 'Reconstructing a theology of Mary' in Doris Donnelly (ed), *Mary: woman of Nazareth* (Paulist, 1989), pp 25–68 and 69–91. See also Elizabeth Johnson, 'The incomprehensibility of God and the image of God male and female' in Joann Wolski Conn, *Women's spirituality* (Paulist, 1986), pp 243–260.
[20] Hannah Arendt, *The human condition* (Doubleday, 1958), pp 10–11 and 221–222.